

Heaven's My Destination

A Novel



THORNTON WILDER



HarperCollins e-books

HEAVEN'S
my
DESTINATION

THORNTON WILDER



Perennial

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Epigraph

*George Brush is my name;
America's my nation;
Ludington's my dwelling-place
And Heaven's my destination.
(Doggerel verse which children of
the Middle West were accustomed
to write in their schoolbooks)*

Of all the forms of genius,
goodness has the longest awkward age.
—THE WOMAN OF ANDROS

Contents

[Epigraph](#)

[Foreword](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Books by Thornton Wilder](#)

[Copyright](#)

[About the Publisher](#)

Foreword

When Sigmund Freud first read *Heaven's My Destination*, he threw the book across the room. Wilder had visited Freud at his villa outside Vienna in the fall of 1935 and had given him a copy of the novel which had been published earlier that year. Freud would have none of it. "I come from an unbroke line of infidel Jews," the doctor explained; as a boy he had been lectured at by his father that "there no way that we could know there was a God; that it didn't do any good to trouble one's head about such; but to live and do one's duty among one's fellow men." But what had actually annoyed Freud about the book was, he said, the fun it made of religion. "Why should you treat of an American fanatic?" the old doctor asked. "That cannot be treated poetically."

Or so Wilder records the meeting in his journal. Of course, Freud wasn't the only reader to have been upset. Some thought it filled with an austere religious fervor, others thought it a broad satire of American Protestantism. Wilder himself, speaking with an interviewer many years later, recalled some of the public reaction to his hero, George Brush:

George, the hero of a novel of mine which I wrote when I was nearly forty, is an earnest, humorless, moralizing, preachifying, interfering product of Bible-belt evangelism. I received many letters from writers of the George Brush mentality angrily denouncing me for making fun of sacred things, and a letter from the Mother Superior of a convent in Ohio saying that she regarded the book as an allegory of the stages in the spiritual life.

In fact, the book's first reviewers were puzzled because it could be read either way, because Wilder seemed such a dispassionate narrator, because the moral scales weren't tipped to one side or the other. Again, Wilder explained that *Heaven's My Destination*

was written as objectively as it could be done and the result has been that people tell me that it has meant to them things as diverse as a Pilgrim's Progress of the religious life and an extreme sneering at sacred things, a portrait of a saint on the one hand and a ridiculous fool jeered at by the author on the other. For a while I felt that I had erred and that it was an artistic mistake to expose oneself to such misinterpretations. But more and more in harmony with the doctrine that the writer during the work should not hear in a second level of consciousness the possible comments of audiences, I feel that for good or for ill you should talk to yourself in your own private language and be willing to sink or swim on the hope that your private language has nevertheless sufficient correspondence with that of persons of some reading and some experience.

From the very beginning of his career, Wilder had been speaking his own "private language" however it may have been schooled by the example of older stylistic masters. The baroque suavities of *The Cabala*, the vividly poised moralizing of *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, the chaste decorum of *The Woman of Andros*, had all earned for their author a reputation as a writer of chiseled refinement. And because each novel was so different from what had preceded it, the range of his imagination was all

lavishly praised. Early and easy success, however, invariably pushes one's detractors front and center and in 1930 Wilder was confronted by an especially vicious attack on both his achievement and his sensibility. Writing in *The New Republic*, critic Michael Gold ignited a controversy that we must believe singed Wilder and without a doubt inflamed the magazine's letters column for weeks to come. Gold, whose ardent Communist views made Wilder the convenient embodiment of "a small, sophisticated class that has recently risen in America—our genteel bourgeoisie," dismissed the novel as "chambermaid literature" and accused Wilder's writing of "the shallow clarity and tight little good taste that remind one of nothing so much as the conversation and practice of a veteran cocotte." It was a vulgar, snide, tendentious piece, and it went on to hammer at Wilder's lack of "nativism." Why had he taken refuge in a "rootless cosmopolitanism"? Italy, Peru, Greece—remote cultures and effeminate characters—glossy high finish and etiolated aristocratic emotions. Why, in other words, wasn't Wilder a Tolstoy, or at least a Sinclair Lewis? Instead, his serenity is that of a corpse: "Prick it, and it will bleed violet ink and *apéritif*." Why won't Wilder plunge into the burly realities of American life—the world of stockbroker suicides and labor racketeers, steel mills and back streets, prairies and mesas? "Let Mr. Wilder write a book about modern America," Gold concluded. "We predict it will reveal all his fundamental silliness and superficiality."

Despite the fact his defenders rushed into print, Wilder—who never publically commented on Gold's attack—was said privately to be hurt. Though I doubt Gold's article was a direct cause, it may have started a train of thought, one that gathered considerable baggage in the years directly following when Wilder had moved on to a lively part-time teaching base at the University of Chicago and was also crisscrossing the country on the lecture circuit. He hadn't written about America before because, as he once explained, "I didn't know enough about it." He had plucked his characters from books. Now he learned firsthand the scenery and sounds of America and was ready to take advantage of them. In any case, his very next novel was distinctly "American." It set itself down in the Mississippi Valley and points west during the Depression, offered an array of social types, analyzed their living conditions and legal system, and probed both the country's beliefs and its true religion, business. It was enough to warm any Marxist's heart. In a letter to John Dos Passos, Edmund Wilson wrote, "Thornton Wilder has taken up the challenge flung down by Mike Gold and written the best book of his life. I wish you would overcome your prejudice against him and read it."

It would be inaccurate to claim that Wilder had deliberately remade himself as a novelist—had, as it were, gone native. (Though *Our Town* arrives just three years later.) The settings and characters of *Heaven's My Destination* bear subtle affinities with Wilder's fiction, both earlier and later. And in our hero, George Brush, shares the ardent loneliness of all of Wilder's protagonists. But it is fair to say that Wilder did turn from the exquisite cadences and lambent, layered textures of his first three novels. His style here is drier, flatter, jumpier. It's the effort to create an "American speech" for his book, to give its narrative the clipped, moral tone of its cast and culture. It's what might be called the Grant Wood style. Of course Wilder was not writing a satire, though he's content to skewer pretensions and injustices. Instead, he'd set out to write a comedy, and he needed a light touch to capture the incongruities of American life, at once innocent and egotistical. It is a comedy in the highest sense, and moves easily from hayseed farce to superstitious magic (Father Pasziewski's spoon) to moral argument (the concluding courtroom scene is the book's masterstroke).

It's said there are only two stories, two basic situations which all novels weave variations on. In one, our hero leaves home and is beset by adventures. In the other, a stranger comes to town and occasion

adventures. *Heaven's My Destination* combines the two patterns. Its premise is an old joke—did you hear the one about the traveling salesman and the farmer's daughter?—and its plot has put readers in mind of the perilous progress of Bunyan's Christian pilgrim or of the chivalric quest of Cervante's Don Quixote. It's clear from his own testimony that, indeed, Wilder had such figures in the back of his mind as he worked. Candide or Tom Jones, Pip or Stephen Dedalus—literature abounds in innocents and their "education." The hero of Wilder's novel, George Brush, seems a familiar enough figure. (His name too is familiar, and calls up the once ubiquitous door-to-door Fuller Brush man, as well as a more recent teetotaling, fundamentalist president.) In the movies he might have been played by Tom Hanks or James Stewart—or even, as Wilder apparently hoped, Gary Cooper. But, though we know he was born in Michigan and graduated from Shiloh Baptist College in South Dakota, he still seems a mysterious presence, and that's because Wilder intended to portray a saint—the sort of person who is always more than a little unworldly. He appears and disappears faster than mortals ought. "I'm the happiest man I've ever met," he boasts while assuming the sorrows of others. Even saints have to live in the world, however, and the novel's epigraph, taken from *The Woman of Andros*, tells us about the narrative shape of this book: "Of all forms of genius, goodness has the longest awkward age." As he brushes up against the world, with its warehouses and seedy hotels, its newspapermen and thieves, he does not *learn* the ways of the world, the world learns his ways. Still, battered and defeated, unloved and lonely at the end of the novel as he was at its start, exactly a year earlier, he changes less in his own eyes than in ours. We witness his awkward age with an amazement that tempers to pity. "I may be cuckoo," he says at the end, in a way that any reader may both admire and deplore, "perhaps I am: but I'd rather be crazy all alone than be sensible like you fellows are sensible. I'm glad I'm nuts. I don't want to be different. Tell the fellows I'll never change—." The only thing to do with Gandhi—George's own particular patron saint—is to follow him or shoot him. All saints are first fallen men, and the women men fall for have a lot to answer for. George was converted by a drug-addled sixteen-year-old tent evangelist named Marian Truby, and his one roll in the hay loft with Robert Weyerhauser drove him to seek and marry her—with disastrous results. He is drawn to these women and to older matronly women as well, like Queenie and Mrs. Crofut, because he longs for love. His head is filled with ideas, his heart is empty. He wants "an American home," a Norman Rockwell family image, but saints aren't allowed wives and kids. Instead, as George says, and it is a meat substitute, "I have the truth."

Heaven's My Destination was written in the midst of the Great Depression, a time when all Americans were called on to redefine themselves. The national upheaval was a time of private soul-searching as well as of government programs. It was Wilder's genius to have made George's idealism seem like a solution that solves nothing. So cannily has Wilder drawn his portrait that his picaresque hero, in adventure after adventure, erodes the very sympathy he builds in us. George is annoying in part because we live—now as then—in a culture of Meddlers and Experts, a culture of tireless self-improvement, in which, from television spot or bumper sticker, we are constantly urged to get right with God, lose fifty pounds, quit smoking, discover the ultimate stain remover, and accept Jesus as our personal savior. No one wants to be goaded into goodness or exasperated to salvation. Above all, we loathe logic, and George Brush is not a romantic but a logician. Creatures of satisfying habits, we resent change, resent thinking about our comforts; we prefer the bromides and slogans, the sheer unselfconsciousness of animal life. "You'll learn in time," George is told. "I guess you'll find your place in time, see? Only don't come around us any more. We got our own ideas and our own lives all arranged, see? and we don't like to be interrupted."

But George is also annoying because he is a saint. "Isn't the principle of a thing more important

than the people that live under the principle?" he asks, and wonders why his marriage collapses. "It's not important if Roberta and I are different, as she calls it. It's not important if we don't get on like some couples do. We're married, and it's for the good of society and morals that we stay together until we die." This is his devastating innocence. It causes him to despair, and only a miracle can save him. The brilliance of Wilder's technique in this novel is to reenact in the reader the same drama that the characters who encounter George face. We are asked to think, to see the light—and then watch the realistic shadows fall.

Wilder's brother Amos, in his 1980 book *Thornton Wilder and His Public*, tried to trace the lineage of George Brush, and he put it most accurately when he noted that Brush's ancestor is less a specific literary character than a mythological type: "the American Adam." This is a figure central both to our literature and to our imaginings of ourselves. Thoreau and Whitman, Hemingway and Fitzgerald—our writers have tried continually to embody this innocent, vital ideal. Wilder was fond of Thoreau, whose own annoyingly soulful self-righteousness could have been a model for Brush's. But in fact, it was Emerson (who couldn't see the poison snake in the grass, in Wilder's skeptical reckoning) who, in his clarion 1837 oration "The American Scholar," most notably defined the American Adam, whom he calls "the scholar":

The office of the scholar is to cheer, to raise, and to guide men by showing them facts amidst appearances. . . . He must accept . . . the state of virtual hostility in which he seems to stand to society, and especially to educated society. For all this loss and scorn, what offset? He is to find consolation in exercising the highest function of human nature. He is one, who raises himself from private considerations, and breathes and lives on public and illustrious thought. . . . Whatsoever oracles the human heart, in all emergencies, in all solemn hours, has uttered as its commentary on the world of actions—these he shall receive and impart. And whatsoever new verdict Reason from her inviolable seat pronounces on the passing men and events of to-day,—this he shall hear and promulgate.

This moves to the heart of what has been called the American Religion as both our greatest prophet, Emerson, and our subtlest analyst, William James, have seen it. George Brush is less a Baptist than a believer in this hybrid religion that doesn't much resemble historical Christianity. The Christian asks, "Who will save me?" The American asks, "What will make me free?" And because the American strives for individuality and the pragmatism of feelings and experiences (rather than desires and memories), he lives as a solitary, his inner loneliness at home in an outer loneliness of wilderness or urban enormity. Salvation for the American comes not through the congregation or community but through a singular confrontation, an exclusive reliance on the empowered self. The American is known not by his pious submission but by his radical innocence. Here again is Emerson, with his scholar:

In silence, in steadiness, in severe abstraction, let him hold by himself; add observation to observation, patient of neglect, patient of reproach; and bide his own time—happy enough, if he can satisfy himself alone, that this day he has seen something truly. Success treads on every right step. For the instinct is sure, that prompts him to tell his brother what he thinks. He then learns, that in going down into the secrets of his own mind, he has descended into the secrets of all minds.

In 1930, two years before he started working on *Heaven's My Destination*, Wilder wrote to a friend

about his earlier three novels, and saw in them a common theme. “It seems to me that my books are about: What is the worst thing that the world can do to you, and what are the last resources one has oppose to it?” The best of those novels, *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, asked whether “the intuitions that lie behind love are enough to justify the desperation of living.” There is, finally, a shimmering ambivalence in Wilder’s answer. In *Heaven’s My Destination* he asks if the honest man’s pursuit of truth is enough to sustain him in a deceitful world. I’m not entirely convinced Wilder could answer his own question, and neither was he. The ending of the novel seems rushed, substituting a crisis for a conclusion. Wilder admitted as much, both in his journal and in letters to friends. “Sure, I made a lot of mistakes,” he wrote to one. “As you say, at the close especially.” Twenty years later, he blamed himself on a sense of “procrastination, the inability to call my wits together for a deep concentration” that forced him to rush toward the last page.

He was being too harsh on himself. It may be that, though the plot conforms to its circular mythic pattern, Wilder had so identified with Brush that he couldn’t in the end see the emotional ramifications of his protagonist’s decisions. Asked by an interviewer if, as a young man, he resembled George Brush, Wilder answered:

Very much so. I came from a very strict Calvinistic father, was brought up partly among the missionaries of China, and went to that splendid college at Oberlin at a time when the classrooms and student life carried a good deal of the pious didacticism which would now be called narrow Protestantism. And that book is, as it were, an effort to come to terms with those influences. The comic spirit is given to us in order that we may analyze, weigh, and clarify things in us which irritate and nettle us, or which we are outgrowing, or trying to escape. That is a very autobiographical book.

All of Wilder’s novels, of course, are at some level “autobiographical.” In this one, surely, there was more of a side to his own personality that Wilder projected onto Brush. He was not unaware of the overanimated intellectuality of his own social manner or of a certain emotional naïveté. In 1933, he wrote mockingly to a friend, “What a good parson I would have been. How diligent, and how I would have loved it. How anxiously I would have watched them gather; and how concerned I’d have been, visiting them in their homes. It would have played squarely into all my faults.” And behind his own manner were large shadows—above all, his father’s. Amos Parker Wilder was the embodiment of the zealous, interfering, righteous, moralizing Calvinist ethic. A letter to his children would say, for instance, that “the kingdom of Heaven is to be brought to earth, the bad fiends yielding—then it fills a youth with ardent aspirations to be in the midst of the fight—to give his fellow man the best that is in him. He knows that when he is right he is on sure ground—that the right must conquer.” Wilder, instinctively drawn to his mother’s softer, more cultivated and literary character, nonetheless inherited some of his father’s driven energies. The difference between them is that the son had a sense of irony. Late in his life, Wilder wrote to his oldest friend, Robert Maynard Hutchins, of his father’s “all too freighted, unshakeable obtuseness.”

The inward gaze alerts us to nuances of characterization, but to dwell exclusively on George Brush would be to miss most of the comic brio of this novel’s storytelling as well as its astute realism. John Steinbeck’s mighty *Grapes of Wrath* is the tragic novel of the Great Depression, then *Heaven’s My Destination* is its comic masterpiece. This was the era of “failing banks, falling businessmen,” and the touching scene of Brush’s Camp Morgan encounter with Dick Roberts, the suicidal real estate man, has an eerie edge. This was the era of an imploding economy and desperate measures, and Brush’s lectures to the bank president or the stickup man about his ingenious moral ideas have a still astonishing (because still right, still untried) poignancy to them. This was the era of crushing poverty

and odd bedfellows, and Wilder's description of Queenie Craven's derelict boarding-house in Kansas City is wonderfully evocative:

a high, narrow, blackened edifice, standing amid the similarly blackened hulks of former mansions . . . its broken windows patched with newspaper, its yard full of weeds and overturned bath-tubs, against the last invasion of negro gamblers, cats and the night quartering of tramps. Queenie's back windows overlooked a cliff strewn with bottles and automobile tires descending to a waste of railroad tracks and the sluggish soot-covered river.

This was the era too of Gandhi's call to passive resistance, and his presence in the novel—along with Tolstoy's—is an unlikely counter. But there is a side of George Brush's crusade that has all the activism of the best of the New Deal. He wouldn't think of cheating on his expense account, thinking everyone should be burdened equally by the Depression, has advanced views on child rearing and capital punishment, and in Louisiana once rode in a Jim Crow railroad car because he believes in the equality of the races.

But today we read *Heaven's My Destination* less for its anatomy of an era than for its brilliant storytelling. There are countless cameo roles to appreciate—blowsy Margie McCoy, the gaggle of giggling prostitutes at the cinema, or little Rhoda May with the placard (i am a liar) around her neck—each composed of small details with large implications. The opening scenario is ingenious. The narrative pace is exhilarating. And the big set pieces are ideally situated. The Molière in Wilder has a fine nose for hypocrisy and cant. The Marxist in Wilder (Groucho, not Karl) has a sure sense of comic timing, as when his friends get our hero drunk. Throughout the novel advanced ideas are dealt with nostalgically, and that's because, as Wilder wrote in a letter, the novel is about “all of us when young you're not supposed to notice the humor—you're supposed to look through it at a fella who not only had the impulse to think out an ethic and plan a life—but actually *does* it.” So what are we laughing at? The fella who *does* it? Or ourselves when young and filled with ambitions? The best comedies bring us smack against a contrary world and implicate both their cast of smart fools and our own tangled hearts. *Heaven's My Destination*, Wilder's funniest novel, is a comedy of American manners—a pageant of absurdities and miracles, logic and belly laughs, a truly sophisticated, at times even unsettling, corn-belt classic.

—J. D. McClatchey
Stonington, Connecticut

Chapter 1

George Brush tries to save some souls in Texas and Oklahoma. Doremus Blodgett and Margie McCoy Thoughts on arriving at the age of twenty-three. Brush draws his savings from the bank. His criminal record: Incarceration No. 2.

One morning in the late summer of 1930 the proprietor and several guests at the Union Hotel Crestrego, Texas, were annoyed to discover Biblical texts freshly written across the blotter on the public writing-desk. Two days later the guests at McCarty's Inn, Usquepaw, in the same state, were similarly irritated, and the manager of the Gem Theater nearby was surprised to discover that a poster at his door had been defaced and trampled upon. The same evening a young man passing the First Baptist Church, and seeing that the Annual Bible Question Bee was in progress, paid his fifteen cents and, taking his place against the wall, won the first prize, his particular triumph being the genealogical tables of King David. The next night, several passengers on the Pullman car "Quarritch," leaving Fort Worth, were startled to discover a young man in pajamas kneeling and saying his prayers before his berth. His concentration was not shaken when he was struck sharply on the shoulder by flying copies of the *Western Magazine* and *Screen Features*. The next morning a young lady who had retired to the platform of the car to enjoy a meditative cigarette after breakfast, returned to her seat to discover that a business card had been inserted into the corner of the window pane. It read:

George Marvin Brush, Representing the Caulkins Educational Press. New York, Boston, and Chicago. Publishers of Caulkins' Arithmetics and Algebras, and other superior textbooks for schools and college. Across the top of the card the following words had been neatly added in pencil: Women who smoke are unfit to be mothers. The young lady reddened slightly, tore the card into flakes and pretended to go to sleep. After a few moments she sat up and, assuming an expression of weary scorn, looked about the car. None of the passengers seemed capable of such a message, least of all a tall, solidly built young man whose eyes, nevertheless, were gravely resting on her.

This young man, feeling that he had made his point, picked up his briefcase and went forward to the smoking-car. There almost every seat was filled. The day was already hot and the smokers, having discarded coat and collar, lay sprawled about in the blue haze. Several card games were in progress and in one corner an excitable young man was singing an interminable ballad, alternately snapping his fingers and stamping his heel to mark the beat. An admiring group was gathered about him, supplying the refrain. Congeniality already reigned in the car and remarks were being shouted from one end of the car to the other. Brush looked about him appraisingly, and chose a seat beside a tall leather-faced man in shirt sleeves.

"Sit down, buddy," said the man. "You're rocking the car. Sit down and lend me a match."

"My name is George Brush," said the younger man, seizing the other's hand and looking him squarely and a little glassily in the eye. "I'm glad to meet you. I travel in school books. I was born in Michigan and I'm on my way to Wellington, Oklahoma."

"That's fine," said the other. "That's fine, only relax, sonny, relax. Nobody's arrested you."

Brush flushed slightly and said, with a touch of heaviness, "In beginning a conversation I like to get all the facts on the table."

"What did I tell you, buddy?" said the other, turning a cold and curious eye on him. "Relax. Light up."

"I don't smoke," said Brush.

The conversation did the rounds of the weather, the crops, politics, and the business situation. At last Brush said:

"Brother, can I talk to you about the most important thing in life?"

The man slowly stretched out his full lazy length on the reversed seat before him and drew his hand astutely down his long yellow face. "If it's insurance, I got too much," he said. "If it's oil wells, don't touch 'em, and if it's religion, I'm saved."

Brush had an answer even for this. He had taken a course in college entitled "How to approach strangers on the subject of Salvation"—and two and a half credits—generally followed the next semester by "Arguments in Sacred Debate"—one and a half credits. This course had listed the openings in such an encounter as this and the probable responses. One of the responses was this, that the stranger declared himself already saved. This statement might be either (1) true, or (2) untrue. In either case the evangelist's next move was to say, with Brush:

"That's fine. There is no greater pleasure than to talk over the big things with a believer."

"I'm saved," continued the other, "from making a goddam fool of myself in public places. I'm saved, you little peahen, from putting my head into other people's business. So shut your damn face and get out of here, or I'll rip your tongue out of your throat."

This attitude had also been foreseen by the strategists. "You're angry, brother," said Brush, "because you're aware of an unfulfilled life."

"Now listen," said the other, solemnly. "Now listen to what I'm saying to you. I warn you. One more peep of that stuff and I'll do something you'll be sorry for. Now wait a minute! Don't say I didn't warn you: one more peep—"

"I won't trouble you, brother," said Brush. "But if I stop, don't think it's because I'm afraid of anything you'd do."

"What did I tell you," said the man, quietly. He leaned over, and picking up the briefcase that was lying between Brush's feet, he threw it out of the window. "Go and get it, fella, and after this learn to pick your man."

Brush rose. He was smiling stiffly. "Brother," he said, "it's lucky for you I'm a pacifist. I could knock you against the roof of this car. I could swing you around here by one leg. Brother, I'm the strongest man that was ever tested in our gym back at college. But I won't touch you. You're rotted out with liquor and cigarettes."

"Haw-haw-haw!" replied the man.

"It's lucky for you I'm a pacifist," repeated Brush, mechanically, staring at the man's eyes, the yellow strings of his throat, and the blue stain his collar button had left.

By now the whole car was interested. The leather-faced man threw his arm over the back of the seat and included his neighbors in his pleasure. "He's nuts," he said.

Voices in the car began to rise in a threatening tide: "Get the hell out of here." . . . "Put him out."

Brush shouted into the man's face: "You're full of poisons—Anybody can see that. You're dying. Why don't you think about it?"

"Haw-haw-haw!" said the man.

The noise in the car rose to a roar. Brush went down the aisle and entered the toilet. He was

trembling. He put his hand on the wall and laid his forehead against it. He thought he was going to throw up. He muttered over and over again, "He's rotten with liquor and cigarettes." He gargled with a mouthful of cold water. When his breathing had become regular again, he returned to the corner of the room. "Quarritch." He walked with lowered eyes and, sitting down, he held his head in his hands and stared at the floor. "I shouldn't hate anybody," he said.

The train reached Wellington an hour later. Brush went to the hotel, engaged an automobile, and retrieved the briefcase. He spent the day calling on the department heads in the high school. Coming out of the dining-room after dinner he went to the writing-desk, printed a Bible text neatly on the blotter, and went early to bed.

The next morning brought his twenty-third birthday. He rose early and started to leave the hotel for a walk before breakfast. In one hand he held a rough draft of his resolutions for the year, along with a list of his virtues and faults. As he passed through the lobby he noticed that a fresh blotter had been placed on the writing-desk. He went up to it, took out his fountain pen, and stood a moment irresolute. Then without sitting down he printed across the top the words, "Thou, Lord, seest me."

A negro who was crouched on the floor, polishing spittoons, raised his eyes slowly and said, with guarded animosity: "You'd better not write on that blotter. Mr. Gibbs is awful mad about that. He had to change it once already and he's awful mad."

"Does it do any harm to anybody?" asked Brush, calmly, returning the pen to his pocket.

"The folks don't like it. Mr. Blodgett, who's stayin' here, 's all roused up."

"Well, tell Mr. Blodgett to speak to me about it. I'd like to meet him," replied Brush, crossing to the water-cooler and starting to draw himself a drink of water. At that moment the manager of the hotel came down the stairs, followed by a man and a woman. The man was short and fat; he had a round red face and a pair of mobile black bushy eyebrows. He crossed the room to the writing-desk and picked out a piece of stationery.

"Look't this!" he cried, suddenly, pointing at the blotter. "Look't this! Now that's the second time God! it gives me a pain."

"You can't stop'm, Mr. Blodgett," said the manager, sadly. "Why, last year, there was a fellow—"

"Well, I'd like to meet one. I'd like to tell'm what I think."

The manager whispered a few words to Blodgett and indicated Brush with his thumb.

Blodgett whistled. "You don't say!" he said.

The woman interposed loudly: "Now Reme, you're always picking up some crazy galoot or other. You'll get into trouble one of these days. Come in to breakfast and let'm be."

"Well, sister, you gotta have some fun when you're on the road, don't you?" said Blodgett. "This is a chance. Watch me now."

As Brush started to go to the street Blodgett put out his hand. "Say, buddy," he said, quietly, one eyebrow subtly raised, "where are you holding meetings?"

"I'm not holding any meetings," replied Brush, seizing his hand and looking dynamically into his eyes. "I think your name is Blodgett. Mine is George Brush. George Marvin Brush. I travel and sell textbooks. Glad to know you, Mr. Blodgett."

"Yes, sir, every time," said Blodgett. "Doremus Blodgett, Everlast Hosiery. So you travel, do you?"

"Yes."

"Well then, what's the idea of writing all over these blotters? You're young and healthy. See what you mean?"

"I'm glad to talk about it," said Brush.

"That's the way. Now look here, Brush. I'm glad to see you're a reasonable fella. We were afraid

you were going to be one of these faynatics. See what I mean? Brush, I want you to meet the fine little girl in the world, my cousin, Mrs. Margie McCoy.”

“Glad to know you,” said Brush.

Mrs. McCoy had a large puffy face heavily covered with powder. It was surmounted by a fine head of orange, brown, and black hair. She did not acknowledge the introduction.

“Fella to fella,” continued Blodgett, “What’s the idea of writing over all these blotters, eh? I don’t say it isn’t all right for preachers. They get paid for it.”

“Mr. Blodgett, I’ve found a good thing and I want to tell everybody about it.”

“Let’m be, Reme. Let’m be,” said Mrs. McCoy, beckoning her cousin toward the dining-room door with jerks of her head and the movements of her sullen eyes.

“Well, I don’t like it,” continued her cousin, suddenly belligerent.

“If you don’t like it,” continued Brush, “that’s because you’re aware of an unfulfilled life.”

Blodgett began to shout. “That’s the trouble with you stinking reformers, you think everybody—

Here Margie McCoy flung herself between them: “Have some breakfast first, for Gawd’s sake! No stop it! Stop it, I say! You’re always trying to get into a fight. Besides, the doctor told you you got to keep calm.”

“I don’t fight, Mrs. McCoy,” said Brush. “Let him say what he wants to say.”

Blodgett began again in a calmer tone. “I don’t say it isn’t all right for preachers, but what grip me is when some . . . Goddam it! everything has its place.”

“Aw, come on and get some cawfee,” said Mrs. McCoy, adding, under her breath: “He’s just a nut. Let’m be.”

“Say, why aren’t you a preacher, anyway? Why aren’t you in a church, where you belong?”

“There’s a reason for that,” replied Brush, staring fixedly at the wall behind Blodgett.

“Couldn’t you get enough money?”

“No, that wasn’t the trouble. . . . I had a very personal reason.”

“Stop right there!” cried Blodgett. “I don’t want to hear anything that’s not my business. All I say that it looks to me like you had a still more personal reason for going in.”

Brush stared at him somberly. “I’m not afraid to tell,” he said. “I did something . . . I did something that a minister can’t do.”

“Oh, I see!” said Blodgett, out of his depths. “Well . . . of course, that makes a difference.”

“What did he say?” asked Mrs. McCoy.

“He said . . . he did something that a minister can’t do.” Then turning to Brush, Blodgett took on a conspiratorial air; lowering his voice, he inquired, “What was it?”

“I wouldn’t like to tell that with a lady here,” said Brush.

Blodgett raised his eyebrows and whistled compassionately: “Ain’t that terrible! There’s a woman in it, eh?”

“Yes.”

“Tchk-tchk-tchk! You know you ought to marry the poor girl.”

Brush looked at him sharply. “Of course I want to marry her. Only I can’t find her.”

“I gotta get out of here,” cried Margie McCoy, abruptly. “I’m going cuckoo. Let’m be, Reme. He’s crazy. He’s nuts,” and she hurried into the dining-room.

Blodgett’s manner took on the hushed and prudent manner he would have assumed had Brush informed him that he was talking to Napoleon. “Say, ain’t that terrible! How did it happen?”

“I’d rather not talk about it,” said Brush.

Blodgett asked some questions about the road and about business conditions in Texas. Then he said

“How about coming up to the room tonight, eh?—little talk?”

“I’d like to, but I’m leaving this morning for Oklahoma City.”

“What? We’ll be there tomorrow. Where do you put up, boy?”

It seemed that they both planned to stay at the McGraw House and a meeting was planned for the following evening. “Good! About eight, see? Come up to the room and have a little drink.”

“I don’t drink, but I’d like a little talk.”

“Oh, you don’t drink?”

“No.”

“Sure, I realize it’s against the law,” said Blodgett, generously.

“It undermines the nervous system and impairs the efficiency,” added Brush.

“Damn it, you’re right. You’re right. I’m going to stop it one of these days. You never said a true word. But you won’t mind if the little lady and I have something while you’re there?”

“No.”

Mrs. McCoy appeared at the door. “Reme, you come here,” she cried. “Come here. He might shoot or something.”

“Marge, what do you mean, shoot. He’s all right. He’s a fine fella.” He slapped Brush on the back, then lowering his voice, added, confidentially: “No ill-feelings, see? The little girl’s always that way when you first know her.”

Blodgett winked intimately and followed his cousin in to breakfast.

Brush left the hotel and walked down the street in the shade of the cottonwood trees. He listened enviously to the domestic sounds that came from the houses to his right and his left. Housewives were shaking rugs out of windows or shifting saucepans upon a stove. Children were heard calling in shrill voices, every sentence beginning and ending with a querulous “Ma.” A few men had taken advantage of the early coolness and were cutting the lawn; others were flinging open the doors of their garages and casting a first reassuring glance at their car. At the edge of town Brush left the road and followed a path through some deep grass; passing some rubbish-heaps and a deserted sawmill he came upon a clear stream that, flowing rapidly, seemed to carry a load of tangled weeds towards a pond. He lay down beside the pond, face downward, and gazed at the scene. Two water snakes glided by, weaving in and out of each other’s shadow. In the middle of the pond a turtle, with two small turtles on her back, climbed out upon a rotting plank. More turtles followed and, settling themselves squarely, drew their heads partly into their shells and closed their eyes. The very bird calls announced a hot day.

Brush had come out to think. This was his twenty-third birthday, and birthdays were solemn occasions for him. Two years before he had risen up from a swinging hammock on his father’s porch and had crossed the town of Ludington, Michigan, and proposed marriage to a widow ten years older than himself. He had been refused, but he never forgot the exhilaration of having done it, nor the look in her eyes as she stood drying her hands on her apron, while her children crawled about on the floor untying his shoestrings. One year before he had spent the evening in the Public Library at Abilene, Texas, reading the life of Napoleon in the *Encyclopædia Britannica*. When he finished he had taken a pencil from his pocket and written in the margin, “I am a great man, too, but for good,” and had signed his initials. The perspiration had stood out on his forehead.

And now before the pool near Wellington, Oklahoma, he prepared to examine himself on his twenty-third birthday. Tremendous were the good resolutions adopted that morning. It was to be a great year. He never forgot the solemnity of that hour, even though, at the end of it, still on an empty stomach, he fell asleep.

As a result of one of the decisions made by the pool near Wellington, Brush found himself toward

noon on the same day in Armina, forty miles away, whither he had come to draw his savings from the bank in that town. The bank consisted of one big room, high and well lighted, with a pen in the middle walled in with a show of marble and of bright steel gratings. Beside the door the president sat in his smaller pen, filled with despair. Short of a miracle his bank had little over a week to live. Banks had been failing all through these states for months, and now even this bank, which had seemed to him to be eternal, would be obliged to close its doors.

Brush glanced at the president, but, resisting the temptation to go and talk to him, went to a desk and, drawing out his bankbook, made out a slip. He presented himself at the cashier's window.

"I'm closing up my account," he said. "I'll draw out everything except the interest."

"I beg your pardon?"

"I'll take out the money," he repeated, raising his voice as though the cashier were deaf, "but I'll leave the interest here."

The cashier blinked a moment, then began fumbling among his coins. At last he said, in a low voice, "I don't think we'll be able to keep your account open for so small a sum."

"You don't understand. I'm not leaving the interest here as an account. I don't want it. Just return it back into the bank. I don't believe in interest."

The cashier began casting distraught glances to right and left. He paid out both sum and interest across the grating, mumbling: "I . . . the bank . . . you must find some other way of disposing of the money."

Brush took the five hundred dollars and pushed the rest back. He raised his voice sharply and could be heard all over the room saying, "I don't believe in interest."

The cashier hurried to the president and whispered in his ear. The president stood up in alarm, although he had been told that a thief was entering the vaults. He went to the door of the bank and stopped Brush as he was about to leave.

"Mr. Brush?"

"Yes."

"Might I speak to you for a moment, Mr. Brush? In here."

"Certainly," said Brush, and followed him through a low gate into the presidential pen. Mr. Southwick had a great unhappy sheep's head rendered ridiculous by a constant fluttering adjustment of various spectacles and pince-nez and black satin ribbons. His professional dignity reposed upon an enormous stomach supported in blue serge and bound with a gold chain. They sat down on either side of this monument and gazed at one another in considerable excitement.

"Mm . . . mm . . . ! You feel you must draw out your savings, Mr. Brush?" said the president, softly, as though he were inquiring into an intimate hygienic matter.

"Yes, Mr. Southwick," replied Brush, reading the name from a framed sign on the desk.

". . . And you're leaving your interest in the bank?"

"Yes."

"What would you like us to do with it?"

"I have no right to say. The money isn't mine. I didn't earn it."

"But your money, Mr. Brush—I beg your pardon—your money earned it."

"I don't believe that money has the right to earn money."

Mr. Southwick swallowed. Then in the manner he had once used while explaining to his daughter that the earth was round, he said: "But the money you deposited here, that money has been earning money for us. The interest represents those profits, which we share with you."

"I don't believe in profits like that."

Mr. Southwick edged his chair forward and asked another question: "Mm . . . mm . . . ! May I ask why you have thought it best to withdraw your money at this time?"

"Why, I'm glad to tell you, Mr. Southwick. You see, I've been thinking about money and banks a little lately. I haven't quite thought the whole matter through yet—I'll be able to do that when my vacation comes in November—but at least I see that for myself I don't believe in saving money any more. Until now I used to believe that you were allowed to save *some* money—like five hundred dollars, for instance, for your old age, you know, or for the chance your appendix burst, or for the chance you might get married suddenly—for what people call a rainy day; but now I see that's all wrong. I've taken a vow, Mr. Southwick; I've taken the vow of voluntary poverty."

"Of what?" asked Mr. Southwick, his eyes starting out of his head.

"Of voluntary poverty, like Gandhi. I've always followed it somewhat. The point is to never have any money saved up anywhere. Do you see?"

Mr. Southwick mopped his forehead.

"When my pay check comes every month," continued Brush, earnestly, "I immediately give away all money that's left over from the month before, but I always knew that at bottom that wasn't honest. Honest, with myself, I mean, because all this time I had five hundred dollars hidden away in this bank here. But from now on, Mr. Southwick, I won't need any banks. You see, the fact that I had this money here was a sign that I lived in fear."

"Fear!" cried Mr. Southwick. He rapped the bell on his desk so hard that it crashed to the floor.

"Yes," said Brush, his voice rising as the truth became clearer to him. "No one who has money saved up in a bank can really be happy. All the money locked up here is being saved because people are afraid of a rainy day. They're afraid, as they say, that worst may come to worst. Mr. Southwick, may I ask if you're a religious man?"

Mr. Southwick was deacon in the First Presbyterian Church and had passed a red velvet collection bag for twenty years, but at this question he jumped as though he had been struck sharply in the ribs. A clerk approached him. "Go out at the corner and get Mr. Gogarty at once," he commanded, hoarsely. "Get him at once!"

"Then you know what I'm talking about," continued Brush. His voice could now be heard throughout the hall. Clerks and depositors had stopped what they were doing and were listening in consternation. "There is no worst coming to worst for a good man. There's nothing to be afraid of. To save up money is a sign that you're afraid, and one fear makes another fear, and that fear makes another fear. No one who has money in banks can really be happy. It's a wonder your depositors can really sleep nights, Mr. Southwick. There they lie, wondering what'll happen to them when they get old and when they get sick and when banks have troubles—"

"Stop it! Stop what you're saying!" cried Mr. Southwick, very red in the face. A policeman entered the bank. "Mr. Gogarty, arrest this man. He's come here to make trouble. Get him out of here at once."

Brush faced the policeman. "Arrest me," he said. "Here I am. What have I done? I haven't done anything. I'll tell the judge. I'll tell everybody what I've been saying."

"Come on along. You come on quiet."

"You don't have to push me," said Brush. I'm glad to come."

He was taken to the jail.

"My name is George Marvin Brush," he said, seizing the warden's hand.

"Take your dirty hand away," said the warden. "Jerry, get the fellow's prints."

Brush was led into another room to record his fingerprints and to be photographed.

"My name's George M. Brush," he said, seizing the photographer's hand.

“How are yuh?” said the other. “Glad to see yuh. My name’s Bohardus.”

“I didn’t catch it,” said Brush, politely.

“Bohardus—Jerry Bohardus.”

Jerry Bohardus was a retired policeman with a kindly disposition and a dreamy, fumbling manner. A shock of long gray hair fell into his eyes. “Kindly step up in front of this glass table for me,” he said. “It’s fine weather we’re having.”

“Oh, fine,” said Brush. “It’s fine, outside.”

“Now put your hand down lightly on this pad, Mr. Brown. That’s the ticket. That’s right. That’s fine.” He lowered his voice and added, confidentially: “Don’t feel badly about this business, Mr. Brown. It’s just a form we gotta go through, see? It don’t mean anything. They send these here prints to Washington, where there are eighty-five thousand others; some of them belong to sheriffs and mayors, too, yes, sir. I wouldn’t be surprised if there were a few senators. Now the other hand, m—boy. That’s the ticket. So you never had this done before?”

“No,” said Brush. “The other town I was arrested in didn’t seem to care about it.”

“Probably they didn’t have the ay-paray-tus,” replied Bohardus, complacently knocking the glass table with his knuckles. “We give two thousand dollars for all this, and it’s a dandy.”

Brush earnestly examined the result. “That thumb’s not very clear, Mr. Bohardus,” he said. “I think I’d better do it over again.”

“No, that’s clear enough. You’ve got a fine thumb. See them spirals?”

“Yes.”

“They’re just about the finest spirals I ever saw. Some say they stand for character.”

“Do they?”

“That’s what they say. Now we’ll take your picture. Will you kindly put your head in this frame? . . . That’s the ticket. It’s funny about fingerprints,” continued Bohardus, placing a board of numerals against Brush’s chest. “Even if there were a trillion contrillion of them no two’d be alike.”

“Isn’t that wonderful!” replied Brush, his voice lowered in awe. Bohardus retired under a dark cloth. “Do you want me to smile now?” called Brush.

“No,” answered Bohardus, emerging and adjusting his lenses. “We don’t generally ask for a smile in this work.”

“I suppose you’ve seen lots of criminals in your day, Mr. Bohardus?”

“I? I certainly have. I’ve bertillioned people that have killed their folks and that have poisoned the wives and that have spat on the flag. You wouldn’t believe what I’ve seen. . . . Now we’ll get your side face, Mr. Brown. . . . That’s the ticket.” He came forward and turned Brush’s head. He took the occasion to ask, delicately, “May I inquire what they think you did, Mr. Brown?”

“I didn’t do anything. I just told a bank president that banks were immoral places and they arrested me.”

“You don’t say. . . . Chin up, Mr. Brown.”

“My name isn’t Brown. It’s Brush—George Brush.”

“Oh, I see. Well, what’s a name, anyway? . . . There, now I guess we got some good pictures.”

“Do you sell copies of these, Mr. Bohardus?”

“We’re not allowed to, I reckon. Leastways, there never was no great demand.”

“I was thinking I could buy some extra. I haven’t been taken for more than two years. I know my mother’d like some.”

Bohardus stared at him narrowly. “I don’t think it shows a good spirit to make fun of this work, Mr. Brown, and I can tell you I don’t like it. In fifteen years here nobody’s made fun of it, not even

murderers haven't."

"Believe me, Mr. Bohardus," said Brush, turning red, "I wasn't making fun of anything. I knew you made good photos, and that's all I thought about."

Bohardus maintained an angry silence, and when Brush was led away refused to return his greeting. The chief of police, Mr. Southwick, and other dignitaries were in earnest conference when Brush was led into the warden's office. At once he approached Mr. Southwick.

"I still don't see what was wrong in the things I said. Mr. Southwick, I can't apologize for a mistake I don't understand. I can see that you might feel hurt because I haven't a very high opinion of the banking business, but that's not a thing you can put me in prison for, and it's not a thing I can change in my mind about, either. Anyway, all I ask is a fair trial and I think I can clear myself in half an hour. And I hope there are as many people in the courtroom as possible, because in these depression times a lot of people ought to know what Gandhi thinks of money."

The chief of police came toward him threateningly. "Now stop this foolishness!" he said. "Stop right now. What's the matter with you, anyway?" He turned back to his men. "Jerry thinks this guy is screwy. Perhaps we ought to take him up to Monktown for some tests. . . . How about it, young fellows? What's the matter with you, anyway? Are you nuts?"

"No, I'm not," cried Brush, violently, "and I'm getting tired of this. You can see perfectly well I'm not crazy. Give me any old test you like—memory, dates, history, Bible. I'm an American citizen, and I'm of sound mind, and the next person that calls me crazy will have to answer for it, even if I am a pacifist. I told Mr. Southwick that his bank and every other bank is a shaky building of fear and cowardice. . . ."

"All right, dry up, pipe down," said the chief. "Now looka here, Brush, if you aren't out of this town in an hour you get the strait-jacket and a six-months' sanity test upstate. Do you hear?"

"I'd like to take it," said Brush, "but I can't spare six months."

"Gogarty," said the chief, "see him to the depot."

Gogarty was a tall man with a great bony jaw and pale blue eyes.

"Boy, are you coming along quiet?" asked Gogarty.

"Of course I'll be quiet," said Brush.

After they had gone a number of blocks in silence Gogarty stopped, turned, and putting on his forefinger on Brush's lapel, asked in a confidential tone:

"Say, boy, where did you get that idea about the Armina Savings Bank bein' shaky? Who told yuh?"

"I didn't mean that bank only. I meant all banks."

This answer did not satisfy Gogarty. Lost in thought, he continued to peer over his spectacles into Brush's face. Then he turned and stared up the street.

"Looks to me like there's a lot of people at the door of that bank now," he said. Suddenly he was roused to action. "Boy, you stick by me," he said. He dashed into the house before which they were standing. A woman was washing the dishes. "Mrs. Cowles," said Gogarty, severely, "as constable in charge of this town I am obliged to use your telephone."

"Why, certainly, Mr. Gogarty," said Mrs. Cowles, nervously.

"And I'll have to ask you, ma'am, to go out on the front porch while I'm talking here."

Mrs. Cowles obeyed. When Gogarty had received a reply he said: "Mary, put on your hat. Do what I tell you. Go down and draw out all the savings, down to the last cent. And run. Only got half an hour. And don't tell nobody what you're doing."

He left the house with Brush and allowed Mrs. Cowles to return to her work. He again peered up the street, and deciding that his duty lay there, trusted Brush to reach the railway station by himself.

Mr. Southwick went home and lay down in a darkened room. From time to time he moaned whereupon his wife, moving about on tiptoe, would rise and change the damp cloths on his forehead whispering: "Sh, Timothy dear! There's nothing to worry about. You just take a nap. Sh!"

Chapter 2

Oklahoma City. Chiefly conversation. The adventure in the barn. Margie McCoy gives some advice.

Brush arrived at the McGraw House in Oklahoma City on the same evening. The following morning he set about putting in a hard day's work. He called on all manner of school superintendents, principals, and heads of departments. He drove out to a reformatory and was persuaded to address the assembled student body.

At eight o'clock in the evening he knocked at Blodgett's door. For a moment there was the sound of voices in loud altercation, then Blodgett came out into the hall and closed the door behind him.

"Say, Brush," he said, "about tonight. I just want to ask you to be a little careful. You know. My cousin's kind of nervous. Just keep off subjects that might upset her. You get the idea."

"All right. I'll try and remember."

"Yeah. She's had a lot of fuss lately. She only got a divorce last month, and you know how it is."

"She's a . . . divorced woman?" asked Brush, softly.

"Yeah, yeah. So you see!" and Blodgett winked with fraternal complicity. Then he opened the door and announced, with nervous cordiality: "Well, Marge, look who's here."

Margie McCoy was sitting on the bed, her feet on a newspaper, her back against the iron bedstead. Her face was still sullen. She held a tall glass in one hand, and a cigarette in the other. She acknowledged Brush's greeting by only the slightest movement of her eyes, after which she continued gazing implacably at the wall before her.

The conversation proceeded with the greatest difficulty. Brush went carefully, not sure which subjects were likely to unnerve a woman who had recently passed through the harrowing experience of obtaining a divorce. After forty minutes of this discomfort he rose to go.

"Well, thank you very much for letting me come around," he said, backing to the door. "I'd better be going. I still have some reports to draw up, and . . ."

To the surprise of both the men, Mrs. McCoy spoke: "What's the hurry? What's the hurry?" she asked, irritably. "Sit down. Don't you smoke, either? No wonder you feel like a fool, just sitting around talking. Remus, give'm some ginger ale, anyway. That way he can at least hold something in his hand, my-God!"

A second attack was made on conversation. Brush let fall the news that he had been arrested and taken to jail since last he saw them. He was encouraged to tell the story and was soon recounting his conversation with Mr. Southwick. He explained the theory of voluntary poverty. Now Mrs. McCoy's eyes were resting on him in astonishment. At the end of his exposition the same question rose simultaneously to the lips of both the listeners.

"What would you do if you lost your job?" they asked.

"Well, I don't know exactly. I never really thought about it. I guess I'd find something. Leastways it doesn't seem very likely. I keep getting raises all the time. They even make me nervous."

"The raises make you nervous?" asked Mrs. McCoy.

“Yes.”

“What would you do if you got sick?” she asked.

“What are you going to do when you get old?” asked Blodgett.

“I already explained that to you,” he said.

Mrs. McCoy solemnly put her feet on the floor and, placing her hands on her hips, she leaned forward: “Listen, baby,” she said. “Let me look at you. Are you trying to kid me?”

“Why, no, Mrs. McCoy. I’m serious.”

She just as solemnly returned to her position on the bed. “Well, something’s the matter,” she muttered, looking distrustfully into her glass.

“Buddy,” said Blodgett, “why did you say that it made you nervous to get raises?”

“Because hardly anybody else’s getting raises these days. I think everybody ought to be hit by the depression equally. You see?”

Mrs. McCoy said dryly: “Sure I see. Your ideas aren’t the same as other people’s, are they?”

“No,” said Brush, “I should think not. I didn’t put myself through college for four years and go through a different religious conversion in order to have ideas like other people’s.”

“I see. Now answer me another: When you get married what are you going to use for money?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“How do you know your wife’ll be willing to throw away all your money every month, and how do you know she’ll be willing to look forward with a big thrill to the poorhouse, like you do?”

“Oh, she will,” said Brush.

“You’re engaged, are you?” asked Blodgett.

“I’m . . . I’m practically engaged. Well, I don’t know whether I’m engaged or not.”

“Is she a . . . she’s a nice girl, eh?”

“I don’t know that, either—not for sure.” Brush glanced at Blodgett. “I’d better not talk about it,” he said. “It’s all a part of that big mistake I made. You said you didn’t want me to mention things like that tonight.”

“I can stand anything now,” said Mrs. McCoy. “After the big poverty idea I can stand anything. The other morning was different. I couldn’t stand it on an empty stummick, that’s all. Come on and tell me what happened.”

Again Brush looked at Blodgett.

“Sure,” said Blodgett, “Go ahead.”

“I know it’s a pretty intimate thing to tell people . . . people that I’ve only known a short time. But you’ll see how badly I need advice on it. Before I begin I think I ought to explain to you how I feel about women.”

“Just a minute, buddy,” said Blodgett, trimming a cigar. “You’re sure you can stand it, sister?”

“What did I tell you? I can stand anything.”

Brush looked up in surprise. “There’s nothing hard to stand about this. I just wanted you to know that until this thing happened I was looking everywhere for a wife. Really, everywhere. It was almost the only thing I thought about. You see, I’m twenty-three years old; in fact, that was my birthday when you met me yesterday.”

“Well, well!” said Blodgett. “Many happy returns of the day.”

“Thank you a lot . . . and I should have settled down long ago . . .”

“I see.”

“. . . and founded an American home.”

“What?”

Brush leaned forward earnestly. "You know what I think is the greatest thing in the world? It's when a man, I mean an American, sits down to Sunday dinner with his wife and six children around him. Do you know what I mean?"

"Six, eh?"

"Yes, and the more the better. Well, that's the thing I want most of all, so everywhere I go I keep looking for a wife. And every now and then I used to think I'd found her. For instance, I was singing in church one day—I guess I never told you I had a very good tenor voice—"

"No."

"Well, I have; so when I come to a town where I have to stay over Sunday I go to the minister of the church and offer to sing at the service. It makes the service more inspiring. And one day I was singing and I saw a girl in the congregation that looked perfect to me. I was singing 'The Lost Chord,' and when I came to the loud part you can imagine how I put everything into it. After service everybody came up and asked me to go home to dinner with them. That's what always happens. And the father of this girl came up and asked me to go home with them. All during dinner I sat by her and I thought she was the finest girl I'd ever seen in my life, even though she didn't say hardly a word. But all the time I was afraid something would spoil it. I brought the conversation around to evolution and I found she was all right there; they didn't believe any of that about monkeys. Well, you can guess what happened."

"No," said Blodgett, "I don't know as I can."

"We were sitting around after dinner and she asked her brother for a cigarette."

"You don't say!"

"Her mother was pretty disappointed in her and said so, but she wasn't as disappointed as I was. I guess she wanted to show off, with a singer in the house, that she wasn't just a village girl. That was in Sulphur Falls, Arkansas. Now I can never hear about Sulphur Falls without a funny feeling in my stomach."

"That's quite a story," said Blodgett. "Eh, Margie?"

"Did she ever know what she lost?" asked Mrs. McCoy.

Brush smiled. "It wasn't only me she lost, Mrs. McCoy," he said.

Blodgett broke in hurriedly. "Do they ever refuse to let you sing?"

"Sometimes they give me a test, but after a few notes they know it's all right."

"You ought to be able to pick up some handy money, that way."

"No, I don't believe in taking money for it. Once in Plata, Missouri, a man came up and offered me two hundred dollars to sing at the Elks' convention in St. Louis, but I couldn't. I would have done it for them free of charge, only my route didn't go anywhere near St. Louis at that time. That's another of my theories. A voice like mine is just a gift, that's all. It's not to anybody's credit to have a fine voice. It's just a thing of nature, like any other. Niagara Falls and the caves of Kentucky and John McCormack are just gifts to the public. It's like strength. I happen to have that, too. I'll help you move your trunk or your piano all day, but I wouldn't take money for it. Do you see?"

"Yes," said Mrs. McCoy, "I see something. Only, when are you going to get back to the other story?"

"It's a hard story to tell. It was in the vacation before my senior year at college——"

"What college was that?" asked Blodgett.

"Shiloh Baptist College, in South Dakota, a very good college. Summers I used to cover Missouri, Illinois, and some parts of Ohio, selling the Children's Encyclopedia. I walked and hitch-hiked from one place to another. And one day I got lost. I must have been about twenty miles from Kansas City,

sort of southwest. It got dark and began to rain. So I stopped at a farmhouse to ask if I could sleep in the barn. ~~The farmer and his wife took me into their kitchen and gave me some coffee and bread and butter.~~ They said they were Methodists and I could see there were three or four beautiful daughters moving around; but I couldn't see them very well because they stayed out of reach of the lamplight. But I noticed them and they all seemed to be quiet, beautiful girls. I said to myself that I'd make good note of the house in the morning and come back again some day. Then I thanked them and said good night and went to the barn and went to sleep." Here Brush took out his handkerchief and wiped his forehead. "From now on it's kind of delicate," he said, "and I don't want to hurt your feelings, but I guess you've both been married."

"Yes," said Blodgett, "we know the worst."

"I woke up in the pitch dark and heard a girl's voice laughing, and then later it was half laughing and half crying. She asked me if I wanted something to eat. Well, I can always eat something—"

"Have an apple?" asked Mrs. McCoy.

"No, thank you, not now . . . We had a long talk. She said she wasn't happy on the farm. I asked her what her name was and she said 'Roberta.' Anyway, it sounded like Roberta. And that's important because maybe it was Bertha. And one day in the newspaper I saw that there was a girl's name called Hertha. It might have been any one of those names."

"What does it matter what her name was?" cried Mrs. McCoy.

"You'll see. Anyway, she cried and I tried to comfort her. So I decided she was the person I was going to marry."

There was a pause; the others looked at him inquiringly.

He repeated with emphasis, "So I decided she was the person I was going to marry."

Blodgett leaned forward and asked in a low, shocked voice, "You mean you ruined the girl?"

Brush turned pale and nodded.

"Give him a drink!" cried Mrs. McCoy, abruptly, "Give him a drink, for Gawd's sake!"

"I don't drink," said Brush.

"Remus, you give 'm a drink," she cried, still more violently. "He's gotta take it. I can't stand seeing him act like a big baby. Now you drink that down and stop being a fool."

Brush accepted the glass and made a pretense of sipping at it. To his surprise, a weak sweetish taste lingered on his lips.

"Hurry up," said Mrs. McCoy. "How does it end?"

"That's about all," he continued. "I tried to tell this girl I'd be back the next day to marry her, but she ran back into the house. So I went down the road in the rain and walked all night. I walked for hours, planning what I'd say to her father and everything. But, you know, I've never been able to find that house again. I've been up and down every road that side of Kansas City a dozen times. I asked everybody about a farmhouse with daughters that were Methodists. I talked to all the R.F.D. postmen but it was no good. Now you know why I can't think of being a minister."

There was a pause.

"And you love the girl, huh?" asked Blodgett.

Brush was displeased with the question. "It's not important if I love her or not," he said. "All I know is that I'm her husband until she or I dies. When you've known anybody as well as that, it means that you can never know anybody else as well as that until one of the two of you dies."

Mrs. McCoy leaned out of the bed and peered at the glass in his hand vindictively. "You're not drinking that drink!" she cried. "Drink it up. Don't you fool with it. Drink it up."

"I don't drink, Mrs. McCoy."

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