

All He Ever Wanted

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Extract

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for Katherine

The fire began in the kitchen and spread to the hotel dining room. Without warning, or perhaps just the one muffled cry of alarm, a ball of fire (yes, actually a ball) rolled through the arched and shuttered doorway from the kitchen, a sphere of moving color so remarkable, it was as though it had life and menace, when, of course, it did not – when, of course, it was simply a fact of science or of nature and not of God. For a moment, I felt paralyzed, and I remember in the greatest detail the way the flame climbed the long vermilion drapes with a squirrel's speed and agility and how the fire actually leapt from valance to valance, disintegrating the fabric and causing it to fall as pieces of ash onto the diners below. It was nearly impossible to witness such an event and not think a cataclysm had been visited upon the diners for their sins, past or future.

If the fact of the fire did not immediately penetrate my consciousness, the heat of the blast did and soon propelled me from my seat. All around me, there was a confusion of upended tables, overturned chairs, bodies pitched toward the door of the dining room, and the

sounds of broken glass and crockery. Fortunately, the windows toward the street, large windows through which a body might pass, had been thrown open by an enterprising diner. I remember that I rolled sideways through one of these window frames and fell onto the snow and was immediately aware that I should move aside to allow others to land as I had – and it was in that moment that my altruism was finally triggered. I rose to my feet and began to assist those who had sustained cuts and bruises and broken bones, or who had been mildly crushed in the chaos. The blaze lit up the escaped diners with a light greater than any other that could be produced in the night, so that I was able to see clearly the dazed expressions of those near to me. Many people were coughing, and some were crying, and all looked as though they had been struck by a blow to the head. A few men attempted heroics and tried to go back into the hotel to save those who remained behind, and I think one student did actually rescue an elderly woman who had succumbed to paralysis beside the buffet table; but generally there was no thought of re-entering the burning building once one had escaped. Indeed, so great was the heat that we in the crowd had to move farther and farther across the street until we all stood in the college quadrangle, surrounded by bare oaks and elms and stately sycamores.

Later we would learn that the fire had begun with a few drops of oil spilled onto a kitchen fire, and that the undercook, who stood near to the stove, had felt compelled to extinguish the fire by throwing upon it a pitcher of water and then, in her excitement, fanning the flames with a cloth she was holding. Some twenty persons in the upper stories of the hotel were trapped in their rooms and burned to death – one of these Myles Chapin

from the Chemistry faculty, and what he was doing in a hotel room when his wife and child were safely at home on Wheelock Street I should not like to speculate (perhaps it was his compromised circumstances that made the man hesitate just a second when he should not have). Surprisingly only one of the kitchen staff perished, owing to the fact that the back door had been left open, and the fire, moving with the particular drafts between door and windows, sped toward the dining room, allowing most of the staff to escape unharmed, including the hapless undercook who had started it all with her fluster.

The hotel was situated directly across from Thrupp College, where I was then engaged as the Cornish Professor of English Literature and Rhetoric. Thrupp was, and is (even now, as I set down my story), a men's school of, shall we say, modest reputation. Its buildings are a motley collection, some of them truly hideous, erected at the beginning of the last century by men who envisioned a seminary but later contented themselves with a small enclave of intellectual inquiry and classical education. There was one impressive Georgian building that housed the administration, but it was surrounded by altogether too many dark brick structures with small windows and oddly placed turrets that were emblematic of perhaps the most dismal period of American architecture, which is to say early Victorian Gothic. Some of these edifices surrounded the quadrangle; the rest spilled along the streets of a town that was all but dominated by the college. Because the school had elected to retain the flavor of a small New England village, however, the colonial clapboard houses that lined Wheelock Street had been left intact and served as residences for the more eminent figures in the various

faculties. At the outskirts of town, before the granite hills began, lay the farms: struggling enterprises that had been witness to generations of men trying to eke out a living from the rocky soil, soil that always put me in mind of thin, elderly women.

We ousted, and therefore fortunate, diners stood at the center of this universe, too stunned yet to begin to shiver in earnest from the cold and the snow that soaked our boots. Many people were squinting at the blaze or had thrown their arms over their eyes and were staggering backward from the heat. Somewhat bewildered myself, I moved aimlessly through the throng, not having the wits to walk across the quadrangle to Woram Hall, where I might have attained my bed. And so it was that my eyes were caught, in the midst of this chaos, by the sight of a woman who was standing near a lamppost.

I have always been a man who, when glancing at a woman, looks first at the face, and then at the waist (those shallow curves that so signal youth and vitality), and then thirdly at the hair, assessing in an instant its gloss and length. I know that there are men for whom the reverse is true or men whose eyes fix inevitably upon the bodice of a dress and then hope for a glimpse of calf, but on that night, I was incapable of parsing the woman in question in such a calculated manner simply because I was too riveted by the whole.

I will not say *plain*, for who of us is entirely plain in youth? But neither will I say *beautiful*, for there was about her face and person a strength of color and of feature that rendered her neither delicate nor pliant, attributes I had previously thought necessary for any consideration of true feminine beauty. She had immoderate height as well, which is often off-putting in a woman. But there was about her a quality of stillness

that was undeniably arresting. If I close my eyes now, here in this racketing compartment, I can travel back in time more than three decades and see her unmoving form amidst the nearly hysterical crowd. And even the golden brown of her eyes, a color in perfect complement to the topaz of her dress, an inspired choice of fabric.

(As it happened, this was a skill at which Etna had no peer – that of matching her clothing and jewels to her own idiosyncratic charms.)

The woman had almond-shaped eyes and an abundance of dark brown lashes. Her nostrils and her cheekbones were prominent, as if there were a foreign element to her blood. Her acorn-colored hair, I guessed, would unwind to her waist. She was holding a child in her arms, which I took to be her own. My desire for this unknown woman was so immediate and keen and inappropriate that it quite startled me; and I have often wondered if that punishing desire, that sense of fire within the body, that craven need to touch the skin, was not simply the result of the heightened circumstances of the fire itself. Would I have been so ravished had I seen Etna Bliss across the dining room, or turned and noted her standing behind me on a street corner? I answer myself, as I inevitably do, with the knowledge that it would not have mattered in what place or on what date I first saw the woman – my reaction would have been just as swift and as terrifying.

(In a further aside, I should just like to add here that I have observed in my sixty-four years that passion both erodes and enhances character in equal measure, and not slowly but instantly, and in such a manner that what is left is not in balance but is thrown desperately out of kilter in both directions. The erosion the result of

the willingness to do whatever is necessary to obtain the object of one's desire, even if it means engaging in lies or deception or debasing what was once treasured. The enhancement a result of the knowledge that one is capable of loving greatly, an understanding that leaves one, paradoxically, with a feeling of gratitude and pride in spite of all the carnage.)

(But, of course, I knew none of this at the time.)

When I had attended with some impatience and distraction to a man who had attached himself to my arm, an elderly gentleman with rheumy eyes looking for his wife, I turned back to the place where the woman and child had stood and saw that they were gone. With a sense of panic I can only describe as wholly uncharacteristic and quite possibly deranged – fortunately such agitation was hardly noticeable in that crowd – I searched the quadrangle as a father will for a lost child. Many people were already dispersing to their homes and to cabs (a fact that did little to ease my anxiety) while others had emerged from the surrounding houses with blankets and coats and water and cocoa and even spirits for the victims of the blaze. Some of those who had been in the dining room were now huddled in garments that were either too big or too small for them; they looked like refugees who had beached themselves upon the quadrangle. By now the fire brigade had arrived and was turning its hoses on the hotel. I am not aware that they saved a single soul that night, though they did drench the charred building with water that turned to icicles before morning.

I wiped at my cheeks and forehead with my handkerchief. Strangely, I do not remember feeling cold. I walked amongst the thinning crowd, my thoughts undisciplined. How was it that this woman had escaped my

notice all the time I had been at Thrupp? After all, the village was not so large as to produce general anonymity. And why had she been dining at the hotel? Had she been sitting behind me as I had eaten my poached sole in solitude? Had the child been with her then?

I went on in this manner for some time until I began to slow my pace. It was not that desire had ebbed but rather that fatigue was overwhelming me. I became aware that I had suffered a terrific shock: my knees grew shaky, and my hands began to tremble. I finally noticed the cold as well; it cannot have been more than twenty-five degrees Fahrenheit on that night. I decided to seek refuge and was recrossing the quadrangle for perhaps the fifth time when I heard a child's cry. I turned in the direction of the sound and saw two women standing in the darkness. The taller of the two was half hidden beneath a rug thrown over her shoulders and in which she had wrapped the child. Next to her, and clinging to her arm, was an older woman who seemed in some distress. She was coughing roughly.

When I drew closer to the threesome, I saw that the stillness I had observed in the woman with the golden brown eyes had now been replaced by concern.

'Madam,' I said, approaching swiftly (as swiftly as the fire itself?), 'are you in need of assistance?'

And whether Etna Bliss actually saw me then, or not until the following day, I cannot say, for she was understandably distracted.

'Please, I must get my aunt home,' she said. 'I'd be grateful if you could find us transportation, for she has inhaled a great deal of smoke and cannot walk the necessary distance to her house even under the best of circumstances.'

'Yes, of course,' I said. 'Will you stay put?'

‘Yes,’ she said simply, thus placing the utmost trust, and perhaps even the well-being of her aunt, in my person.

I discovered that night that a man is never so capable and alert as when in the service of a woman he hopes to please. Almost at once, I was in the street with paper dollars in my hand, which caught the eye of a cabdriver who already had a fare, but who doubtless saw an opportunity to squeeze more bodies onto his frayed upholstered seats. I completed his calculation by leaping onto the carriage and giving immediate instructions.

‘Sir, this is irregular,’ he said, looking for the extra tip.

But I, and rightly so, dressed him down. ‘A disaster has occurred of the most serious proportions, and people all about are in dire need. You should be lending your aid for no pennies at all,’ I said.

Astonishingly, for I had in the interim begun to doubt the reality of my encounter with the arresting woman under the tree, the two women with the child were where I had left them. I helped the older woman, who was by now shivering badly, into the carriage first, and then gave my hand to the woman with the child – the hand surprisingly warm in my frozen one. The other passengers could barely suppress their annoyance at being delayed to their hot baths, but they nevertheless moved so that my party could fit.

‘Madam, I shall need an address,’ I said.

The ride cannot have lasted half an hour, even though the driver took the other fare home first. I sat across from the aunt, who was still coughing, and from the couple, who might have been thinking of their lost possessions in the cloakroom (a dyed fox coat? an alligator case?), but I was aware only of a slight pressure against my elbow,

a pressure that increased or decreased as the woman beside me attended to the child or leaned forward to put a hand upon her elderly aunt's arm. And just that slight pressure, of which the woman beside me was doubtless completely unaware, was, I believe, the most intensely physical moment of my life to date – so much so that I can recreate its delicate promise and, yes, its eroticism merely by closing my eyes here in my moving compartment, even with all that came after, all that might reasonably have blotted out such a tender memory.

We traveled the length of Wheelock Street until we came to an antique house of beeswax-colored clapboards. It was an unadorned residence, like so many of the houses of that street. These I much preferred to the frippery that passed for architecture on adjacent Gill Street: large, rambling structures with gables and porches and seemingly no symmetry, although these newer houses did have better accommodations for indoor plumbing, for which one might have been willing to trade aesthetics. The Bliss house had seven bedrooms, not counting attic rooms for servants, and two parlors, a dining room, and a study. It also had, as of a year previous, steam heat, which hissed and bubbled up in silver radiators. I sometimes used to think the appliances might explode and scald us to death as we played backgammon or took tea or dined of an evening in those overly furnished and fussily papered rooms.

‘But, Madam, I know this house,’ I said. ‘It is the home of William Bliss.’

‘My uncle.’

I then realized that the woman sitting across from me was not elderly at all, but rather was the middle-aged wife of the Physics Professor, a woman I had met on at least three occasions at the college.

‘Mrs. Bliss,’ I said, addressing her, ‘forgive me. I did not realize . . .’

But she, unable to speak, waved my apology away with a flutter of her hand.

I walked the two women to the front door, which was almost immediately opened by William Bliss himself.

‘Van Tassel, what is this?’ he asked.

‘A fire at the hotel,’ I explained quickly. ‘We are all lucky to have escaped with our lives.’

‘Dear God,’ he said, embracing his wife and leading her farther into the house. ‘We wondered what all the bells and horns were for.’

A housemaid took the child from the woman with the golden brown eyes, who then turned in my direction, simultaneously slipping the blanket from her shoulders and giving it to me to wear.

‘Please take this for your journey home,’ she said. ‘My aunt and I are very much in your debt.’

‘Nicholas Van Tassel,’ I said.

‘Etna Bliss.’

Once again, she put her warm hand in mine. ‘How cold you are!’ she said, looking down and withdrawing her hand almost immediately. ‘Will you come in to warm up?’

And though I dearly wanted to enter that house, with its promise of warmth and its possibility of love (the mind leaps forward with hope in an instant, does it not?), one knew that such was not appropriate under the circumstances.

‘Thank you very much, but no,’ I said. ‘You must go inside now.’

‘Thank you, Mr. Van Tassel,’ she said. And I think already her mind was on her aunt and the child and

the hot bath that would be waiting, for with that, she closed the door.

Perhaps a brief word here about my own circumstances at that time, which was December of 1899, for I believe it is important to pass on to subsequent generations the facts of one's heritage, information that is often neglected in the need to attend to the day-to-day and, as a consequence, drifts off into the ether of time past. My father, Thomas Van Tassel, fought in the War Between the States with the Sixty-fourth Regiment of New York and sacrificed a leg to that conflict at Antietam, a calamity that in no way hindered his manhood, as I was but one of eleven children he subsequently sired off a succession of three wives. My mother, his first wife, perished in childbirth – my own – so that I never knew her, but only the other two. My father, clearly a productive man, was enterprising as well, and built three sizable businesses in his lifetime: a print shop to which I was apprenticed at a young age; a carriage shop; and then, as horses quite thoroughly gave way to motors, an automobile showroom. My memories of my father exist primarily in the print shop, for I hardly knew him otherwise. I often sought refuge in those rooms of paper and ink and type from my overly populated house in Tarrytown, New York, with its second and third wives: one cold, the other melancholy, and in neither case well disposed to me, who had issued from the first wife, the only woman my father had ever loved, a fact he did not shrink from announcing at frequent intervals, despite the impolitic nature of the sentiment and the subsequent sadness and frigidity that resulted. I was not altogether bereft of feminine warmth during my childhood, however, for I was close to one sibling, my sister

Meritable, the very same sister whose funeral I am even now journeying toward.

Perhaps because I was so engaged in the world of ink and broadsides, I developed an early and passionate appetite for learning and was sent off to Dartmouth College at the age of sixteen. I can still remember the exquisite joy of discovering that I should have a room to myself, for I had always had to share a room with at least three of my siblings. The college has an estimable reputation and is widely known, so I shall not linger upon it here, except to say that it was there that I briefly entertained the ministry, later abandoning it for want of piety.

After obtaining my degree, by which time I was twenty, I traveled abroad for two years and then was offered and accepted the post of Associate Professor of English Literature and Rhetoric at Thrupp College, which is located some thirty-five miles southeast of my alma mater. I took this post with the idea that in a smaller and less well known institution I might rise more quickly and perhaps one day secure for myself the post of a Senior Professor or even of Dean of the Faculty, positions that might not have been open to me had I remained at Dartmouth. I had not thought of taking a post outside of New England, though there were opportunities to do so, the reason being that I had adopted the manners and customs of a New Englander so thoroughly that I no longer considered myself a New Yorker. Indeed, I had occasionally taken great pains to present myself as a New Englander, once even, I am a bit chagrined to admit, falsifying my history during my early months at Dartmouth, a pretense that was difficult in the extreme to maintain and hence was abandoned before I had completed my first year. (It was at

Dartmouth that I dropped the second ‘a’ from Nicholaas.)

Because my father was, by the time I had returned from Europe, modestly well off, I could easily have afforded to have my own house in the village of Thrupp. I chose instead, however, to take rooms in Woram Hall, a Greek Revival structure affectionately known as Worms, for the reason that I did not particularly wish to live entirely alone. I had as well a somewhat misguided idea that boarding nearer to the students would allow me to come to know them intimately, and that this would, in turn, make me a better teacher. In fact, I rather think the reverse was true: more often than not, I discovered, close proximity gave birth to a thinly veiled antagonism that sometimes baffled me. My rooms consisted of a library, a bedroom, and a sitting room in which to receive guests and preside over tutorials. In adopting New England ways, born two centuries earlier in Calvinistic discipline, I had furnished these rooms with sturdy yet unadorned pieces – five ladder-back chairs, a four-poster bed, a dresser, a cedar chest, a tall stool and a writing desk in which I kept my papers – eschewing the more ornate and oversized furnishings of the era that were so fashionable and so much in abundance elsewhere. (I think now of Moxon’s rooms: one could hardly move for the settees and hassocks and English desks and velvet drapes and ornate marble clocks and fire screens and mahogany side tables.) And as form may dictate content, I fit my daily habits to suit my austere surroundings, rising early, taking exercise, arriving promptly to class, disciplining when necessary with a firm hand and requiring much of my students in the way of intellectual progress. Though I should not like to think I was regarded as severe by my students

and colleagues, I am quite certain I was considered stern. I think now, with the forgiveness that comes with reflection in later years, that I often tried too hard to show myself the spiritual if not the physical progeny of my adopted forebears, even though what I imagined to be the license of my New York heritage, as evidenced in my father's excessive procreativity, would occasionally cause me to stray from this narrow and spartan path, albeit seldom in public and never at Thrupp. For my parenthetical pleasure, I traveled down to Springfield, Massachusetts, as did many of my unmarried, and not a few married, colleagues. I remember well those furtive weekends, boarding the train at White River Junction and hoping one would not encounter a colleague in the dining car, either coming or going, but always ready with a fabricated excuse should an encounter present itself. Over time, as a result of such encounters, perhaps five or seven or ten, I had to develop a 'sister' in Springfield whom I had twice monthly to visit, even though said 'sister' actually resided in Virginia, prior to moving to Florida, and wrote to me upon occasion, the envelopes with the return address a source of some anxiety to me. I shall not here set forth in detail my activities while in Springfield, though I can say that even in that city I proved to be, during my visits to its less savory neighborhoods, as much a man of loyalty and habit as within the brick and granite halls of Thrupp.

More dazed than sensible, I took the cab back to the hotel, which was by now beginning to form its fantastical icicles as a result of the sprays of water from the fire hoses. I lingered only briefly, however, due to the combination of penetrating cold and shock, which had begun to make me shiver in earnest. I went back to my

rooms at Worms, where I directed the head boy to make a good fire and to draw a hot bath.

Worms did not then, nor does it now, have private bathrooms within its suites, and so I locked the door to the common bath as I customarily did. The steam had made a cloud upon the cheval mirror, and I wiped away a circle of condensation so that I could just make out my bewildered face. There was a bloody scratch on my cheek I had not known about. I was not accustomed to spending any time in front of the glass, for I did not like to think myself vain, even in private, but that night I tried to imagine how I, as a man, might appear to a woman who had just met me. At that time – I was thirty – I had a considerable thicket of light brown hair, undistinguished in its color (this will surprise my son, for he has known me for a decade now as only bald), and what is commonly called a barrel chest. That is, I had strength in my body, a body quite out of keeping with my sedentary and intellectual occupations, a strength I could not refine but instead had learned to live with. I do not know that I had ever been called handsome, my excursions to Springfield notwithstanding, for my lips were thickish in the way of my Dutch forebears, and the bone structure of my face was all but lost within the stolid flesh bequeathed to me by generations of burghers. To dispel that somewhat unpleasant image, and to appear more academic, I had cultivated spectacles I did not actually need.

After my inspection, which taught me nothing I did not already know, except perhaps that one cannot hide one's naked emotions as well as one might wish, I lowered myself into water so hot that my submerged skin immediately turned bright pink, as though I had been scalded. The boy, who I knew was angling for an A in

‘Logic and Rhetoric’, had set out a cup of hot cocoa, and I indulged in these innocent pleasures, all the while seeing in my mind’s eye the form and face of Etna Bliss and feeling anew the exquisite pressure of her arm against my own. Happily, the bath, as a hot soak will often do, produced a drowsiness sufficient to send me off to my bed.

In the morning, I woke in a state of agitation and was forced to complete my toilet in haste and miss breakfast altogether in order not to be late for my first class of the day, ‘The Romantic Lyric Poets’ (Landon and Moore and Clare and so forth). When I arrived at the classroom, I saw that the fire in the stove had gone out for want of tending and that the students sat with their coats still on, their mufflers wrapped round their necks. Though cold, my classroom was not an unpleasant one. The wainscoting had recently been painted white, an inspired touch that lent an illusion of light and air previously denied by the dark walnut paneling so ubiquitous in those rooms. Above the wainscoting were large windows that looked out over the quadrangle’s elms and sycamores. As one could take in this view only while standing, I often laid my arm upon the deep sills and gazed out as the students wrote their exercises and examinations. That day, of course, the view was severely compromised by the black maw of the hotel fire and the soot-dirty snow; in any event, I was too distraught to appreciate a view of any kind – beautiful or not.

It was immediately obvious that the students’ attentions were not on their lessons either. The talk was all of the fire, during which I attained some slight celebrity as a result of having actually been present in that ill-fated dining room; and like all good tellers of tales, I

perhaps embellished some incidents and details to improve the narrative. I described the ball of fire and the mêlée that followed.

‘Many persons were in need of assistance,’ I said, adopting an uncharacteristically casual pose by sitting on the edge of my desk. I removed a piece of lint from my trousers.

‘And what were the injuries, sir?’

This from Edward Ferald, a slack-jawed boy with narrow eyes, who was always currying favor, but behind my back, I knew, referred to me, as did some of the other students, as ‘Scrofulous’, which is taken, of course, from the Latin, *sus scrofa*, for pig. Well, not pig exactly, but boar. Wild boar, to be precise. Why, I do not know, since I don’t think I resembled a boar, but no matter. Almost all the faculty had unflattering nicknames then: John Runciel was ‘Rancid’; Benjamin Little, as I recall, was ‘Little Man’; Jonathan Whitley was ‘Witless’. (Surely ‘Rancid’ is worse than ‘Scrofulous’?) Ferald’s pleasure came not from learning but from provoking an unattractive earnestness in his tutors that he blandly pretended not to understand. Thus a tutorial with Ferald could prove to be a wretched exercise. On the few occasions I had tried to resort to cunning to outwit him, I had failed dismally, verbal agility not being my strong suit.

‘Many cuts and bruises and broken bones,’ I said. ‘And smoke inhalation. Twenty perished.’

‘And yourself, sir?’ Ferald asked unctuously. ‘I hope you yourself were not harmed.’

‘No damage to myself, I am happy to report.’

‘Happy indeed,’ said Ferald, blinking lazily.

‘Twenty burned to death, sir?’ asked Nathan Foote, a fair-haired young man who wore on his face an

expression of genuine horror, though this cannot have been news. The college had been abuzz with the statistic since the night before.

‘One hopes . . .’ I began. But in that instant, time slowed and came altogether to a stop, and I saw, through the window, a woman with a child, a vision so vivid and visceral that I feared I was hallucinating. I put my hand to my forehead, which was clammy despite the frigid air of the classroom.

‘Sir?’ asked Foote, alarmed not only by my truncated sentence, but by my appearance.

I forced my eyes to focus on his face.

‘One hopes the unfortunate victims perished as a result of smoke inhalation and not of the flames themselves,’ I said, struggling to regain my composure.

There was a long moment of silence in the classroom.

‘I have suddenly realized,’ I said quickly, ‘that it is inappropriate to be having class on a day when we should, in fact, be honoring those wretched persons who perished – and, indeed, for whom our college flag is this morning at half-mast. And so I have determined that we shall have no more lessons now. You are dismissed to your rooms and to the chapel for contemplation upon the brevity of life, the capricious hand of fate and the necessity to remain continually in a state of grace.’

Some of the more alert students, Ferald for one, were on their feet at once, sensing the unexpected opportunity for an hour of leisure, while the others sat stunned for a moment before gathering notebooks and texts. How soon the classroom emptied I do not know, for by then I was briskly on my way to Wheelock Street.

(I did sometimes wonder if my Latin nickname wasn’t,

after all, a mistranslation, or an attempt at homonymical wit. Had the student who had invented the name meant *bore*? Wild bore?)

The ice ruin of the hotel was now beginning to melt in the bright sun of mid-morning, and as I passed that godforsaken structure, the continuous sound of dripping from a thousand icicles, a rain that glistened and sparkled as it fell, tinkled like fine crystals. I saw two young boys, clearly truant from the local grammar school, poking at the rubble, possibly for valuables that had survived the fire. I barked at them to leave the area at once, as any fool could see that the entire edifice was in danger of toppling (and would, in fact, collapse three weeks later during a particularly wet and heavy snow-fall).

The sense of urgency within me to see the woman who had captured my thoughts was such that I had to force myself to walk at a normal gait so as not to attract undue attention. I wanted to reach the beeswax-colored colonial as soon as possible, for I had an apprehension (as it happened, unwarranted) that Etna Bliss had already left the residence to return to wherever she had come from. I didn't think she lived with Professor Bliss. If she did, I reasoned, I surely would have heard of this person in their household, or, more likely, have encountered her at a college function. Thrupp had approximately fifty faculty, most of whom lived as if in glass boxes, subject to the keenest scrutiny on the part of students and fellow faculty alike; so much so that it often seemed as though one knew everything there was to know about another in that college and in that village, when, of course, one did not, secrets being the most zealously guarded of possessions.

My gait slowed somewhat as I approached the Bliss

residence, naked in December without its canopy of elms. Such a spontaneous decision as I had made to visit this house was quite out of keeping with my habits, and I felt, as a result, uncomfortably rattled and incautious. But with a momentum for which I could not easily account, I was propelled to William Bliss's front door. Thus I lifted the door knocker and tipped the hand of fate.

It was some moments before my summons was acknowledged, and when the door was opened, it was by Etna Bliss herself.

Had I had any doubts, in the intervening hours since I had last seen her, about the reality of the thrall in which this woman held me, such uncertainty vanished in her presence. Though she must have moved, to open the door and so forth, there was again such a quality of stillness that one felt recklessly drawn to her as one who traverses a cliff occasionally feels perilously like throwing oneself over the edge. She wore a black-and-bronze striped dress with bronze lace at the collar and cuffs, a dress that was cut in such a way as to present her bosom as upon a sort of shelf, the effect of which was to make my breath tight within my own chest. Her face shone in the snow-reflected sunlight, and one could see that her hair had been freshly washed and refashioned into coiled plaits that one longed (I longed) to unravel. I was unraveling in her presence.

'Miss Bliss,' I said, removing my hat.

'Professor Van Tassel,' she said, gazing at me and failing to add the expected pleasantries.

And I felt then — what? — that already she could see through my fragile carapace? That she understood all there was to know of me? That she knew why I had come and what I would do even before I did?

'Forgive the intrusion,' I said, 'but I was passing, and

I could not help but wonder if your aunt has recovered from her ordeal. I hope I'm not disturbing you, but I was thinking this morning about the shock of the event and how it must have affected her.' I paused. 'And you as well, of course.'

'Thank you for asking,' she said. 'My aunt has had the doctor,' she added, and oddly it was not she who invited me to step inside, as good manners surely required, but rather Bliss himself, who moved into the vestibule, half spectacles perched at the end of his nose, and said, 'I thought I heard a familiar voice. Van Tassel, come in, come in, so that I may properly thank you for so safely conveying my wife and granddaughter and niece out of harm's way last night. What a fright my wife has had. And you, too, of course.'

'No fright at all,' I said, 'though others certainly did and rightfully so.'

I stepped over the threshold.

'You must stay for a hot drink,' Bliss said, removing his glasses and folding the newspaper he held in his hands. 'I should like an account of the event, if you feel up to it.'

'Of course,' I said.

Did Etna Bliss hesitate just the one second before accepting my hat and gloves? Yes, I am sure she did. I remember distinctly the sensation of holding out my things and for a moment having no taker. What did she see in me that made her pause? The vast hunger that had shaken me to the bone? And would she have recognized this hunger for having seen it before on the faces of other men, or was she merely prescient, already intuitive about human want and greed?

(And why, *why*, I have often asked myself, was it that woman and not another? Why the curve of that

particular cheek and not another? Why the gold of those eyes and not the blue of others? I have in my lifetime seen a hundred, no a thousand, beautiful women – lifting skirts to step over piles of snow, fanning long necks in restaurants, undressing in the dim electric lights of rented rooms – but none has ever had upon me the effect that Etna Bliss had: a sensation quite beyond that which can be explained by science.)

She took my coat then and hung it on a hat rack in the corner. She turned slightly toward me.

‘Etna, I wonder if you would . . .’ William Bliss began, not unkindly but perhaps suggesting the nature of Etna’s place within the household. There was no further need to elaborate, for already she had turned toward the kitchen to tell the cook that tea was needed.

What relief it was for me to see her retreating form! The respite allowed me some moments to collect my wits and speak to Bliss in the manner to which we were accustomed, the manner of men who do not know each other well but are regarded as colleagues and thus have immediately a common vocabulary that must be respected before any dislike or love can form.

I did not often encounter William Bliss at school, since he was married and therefore did not reside in college rooms; nor did we ever have occasion to work together, coming as we did from separate disciplines. Also, Bliss was older than I by a good twenty years, and thus I regarded him as from a different generation. He directed me to the front parlor.

I cannot exaggerate the feeling of claustrophobia that room produced, the claustrophobia of months spent indoors, of oxygen seemingly sucked from the air by the plethora of ornate pieces and dozens of objets, each demanding the eye’s attention, so that one felt not only

breathless and oppressed, but also as though a migraine were imminent. It was a room that with its rosewood spool turnings and carved oak trefoils, its gilded mirrors and marble-topped tables, its serpentine tendrils of overgrown plants and cast-iron lanterns, its stenciled stripes and floral motifs, its flocked wallpaper and glass curtains, its oriental rugs and Chinese vases and fringed tablecloths and its iron clock – not to mention the dozens of daguerreotypes in silver and wood and marquetry frames that seemed to cover every available surface – leached the vitality from the body. (A man's body, at least, for one deduced immediately that the room reflected a woman's taste; even Moxon's rooms, at their very worst, might have been considered spare by comparison.) Because of all the plants in the windows, only the dimmest light entered the room, and how Bliss had been able to read a newspaper there, I do not know, though perhaps he had been reading in his study. It was evidence at the very least that William Bliss must have loved his wife very much to put up with so much excess.

'Van Tassel, do sit down.'

'Thank you.'

'There might be good. Oh, let me move that for you.'

'No, I can do it.'

'You know, I cannot thank you enough. My wife says you were a hero.'

'Nonsense, it was no more than any man would have done.'

'You are too modest. Is the college abuzz?'

'I daresay. I have canceled my classes.'

'Have you indeed? What a splendid idea.'

Sometimes it seems to me that all of life is a struggle to contain the natural impulses of the body and spirit

and that what we call character represents only the degree to which we are successful in this endeavor. At that time in my life, when I was a younger man, it was often a desperate struggle – to take exercise when one did not want to, to refrain from striking a student who much deserved the blow, to put aside one's naked ambition in the service of others, to conquer rampant desires that if left unchecked might manifest themselves in shocking behaviors – and as with all struggles, I was occasionally not victorious in these battles. Thus, I fear there were disturbing ruptures in my composure, as when I lost my temper and berated a student most harshly, satisfying the anger in myself but leaving the student trembling; or as when I was unable to refrain from speaking badly of a colleague to gain the favor of another; or as when the mask of impeccable deportment dropped for a moment and revealed the depth of want beneath, as must have happened, however briefly, in the silence that followed Etna's entry into the room in which her uncle and I were sitting.

Bliss and I stood politely, and already I was anxious lest the color I could feel rising at the sides of my neck and into my face (another legacy of the Dutch blood of my ancestors) betray me. My mouth trembled, a twitch I sought to hide by pressing a knuckle to my upper lip; and thus I discovered, to my deep chagrin, the blush rising all the while like a flood tide on the night of a full moon, that I had not shaved that morning and that a coarse stubble covered my cheek and jaw.

(I was never well – though often joyous, never well – in Etna's presence.)

She set the tray down and gestured for us to sit.

'Professor Van Tassel. I hope you did not suffer as a

result of your service to our family,' she said.

'Van Tassel tells me that twenty perished in the fire,' Bliss said to his niece.

Etna accepted this news with remarkable equanimity, unlike so many of her sex who might have felt it necessary to exclaim at the announcement of ill fortune.

'I am afraid our fire brigade proved itself most inadequate in the event,' I said. 'I am sure there will be an inquiry.'

'I should like to know who it was who had the foresight to open those windows in the dining room,' Etna said, offering me a cup of tea. 'I should like to thank him personally.'

And already I was jealous of this imagined man – for surely it was a man, though no one had yet stepped forward – for being the recipient of Etna's gratitude. 'One so often does not wish to be singled out for heroics,' I said inanely.

Etna Bliss had a habit, I would later discover, of smiling slightly even though her eyes were expressionless, thus giving the impression of inward thinking while not appearing to be impolite. This she did then; and I will say that when she smiled (lips not parted, only the slightest upward curving of her mouth), her face softened so thoroughly that she seemed altogether the diminutive and pliant woman one hopes for in a lover, and something else – even pretty. Yes, though she was not beautiful, she was pretty in those moments. In later years, it would sometimes be a torment to me to be shut out from the inner thoughts that produced that fleeting smile.

My fingers were slipping badly on the cup handle, causing the china to rattle in its saucer. I was forced to bend to my tea in rather boorish fashion. This

disconcerted me so much that I set the cup down and folded my trembling hands in my lap. I crossed my legs and noticed that my foot was jiggling.

‘And the little girl?’ I asked. ‘Has she recovered from her ordeal?’

‘I rather think that had it not been for the cold, she would have found the event terribly exciting,’ Etna said. ‘This morning, she could speak of little else.’

I watched Etna bring her own cup to her lips and noted that there was no trembling in those long fingers.

‘Van Tassel teaches English Literature and Rhetoric at the college,’ Bliss said.

‘An acceptable passion,’ I added, smiling in her direction. She did not smile back, but neither did she look away, and I fancy she studied me for a moment then. ‘And are you in Thrupp for an extended visit?’ I asked, unable to stifle my curiosity any longer.

‘Yes, I am,’ she said. ‘You do not like your tea?’

‘I like it very much,’ I answered, lifting the saucer and once again attempting to put the cup to my lips.

‘My niece is here,’ Bliss explained, ‘until such time as she can settle herself, though we are enjoying her company so much that I hope that moment shan’t be for a long while yet.’

‘My mother passed away recently,’ she said. ‘And unfortunately I was forced to put her house up for sale. I am staying with my aunt and uncle until such time as a settlement of the estate can be made.’

‘I am sorry about your mother,’ I said, though how could I have been at all sorry if such an event – even death – had brought Etna Bliss to Thrupp? ‘I hope it was not sudden.’

‘No, she had been ill for some time.’

‘And your father?’ I asked.

‘My father passed away some years ago,’ she said.

‘Forgive me,’ I said.

‘Not at all,’ she said. ‘I also have two sisters, who are married.’

‘I see. And where was your house?’

‘In Exeter.’

‘Etna’s arrival is most fortuitous,’ Bliss said, ‘since my daughter and her husband are in San Francisco, visiting his family for Christmas.’

‘I see,’ I said again, remembering vaguely a thin, smartly dressed young woman who had sometimes accompanied Bliss to college social occasions.

‘Evelyn and I should be quite lonely without Etna and my granddaughter in residence. I hope she shall stay on long after my daughter returns.’

I am certain it was then that I first saw a faint look of alarm pass across the features of the woman who sat opposite to me, and I believe I understood at once that the prospect of confinement within those overfurnished rooms was not one that Etna Bliss relished. Perhaps she, too, felt the oxygen being sucked from her body by the side tables and the spiky vines. At that moment, a door within me opened.

I sat forward, already a petitioner.

‘You have a most excellent escort in your uncle, I am sure,’ I said, ‘but I should be delighted to show you some of the modest treasures Thrupp has to offer, namely the Metcalf Library and the Elliot Collection. Have you been to either?’

‘No, I have not,’ she said, and I sensed once again that the prospect of leaving that house might not be an entirely unpleasant one to her.

‘Etna has been helpful with my granddaughter, Aurelia,’ Bliss said by way of explanation. ‘But I am

afraid we have kept her from enjoying herself with persons her own age.'

I wondered how old Etna Bliss was exactly. Surely twenty-four at the least, but not more than twenty-eight? Just off the cusp of marriageable. I thought I detected in Etna a slightly new scrutiny of me as well, one that had been summoned forth by my bold petition. I wished then I had spent the necessary minutes that morning at my toilet so as to present a more pleasing and prosperous aspect, both to her and to Bliss. He would not think a professor's salary an adequate sum on which to raise a family (and indeed it was not), and I should have to inform him, when the moment was appropriate, that in fact I was in possession of a modest fortune and could afford to keep a wife. I let my thoughts run ahead in this fantastical manner until Etna abruptly stood.

'I fear I have left my aunt too long,' she said. She put out her hand. 'Good-bye, Professor Van Tassel.'

Again, her hand was warm in my own. I could not help from glancing at the presentation of her bosom, a lovely promontory that seemingly begged to be examined, and I wondered then (how quickly thoughts of possession cause jealousy to blossom) if some other man had once put his hand there, if, in fact, this handsome and stately creature before me had had many lovers. Perhaps this thought – and certainly my wayward glance – betrayed me, for she put a hand to the very place I studied, as if to cover herself.

And then she was gone.

I exchanged some further pleasantries with Bliss, so as not to seem rude, but it was all I could do to linger even a moment longer in that fetid greenhouse, craving as I did not only a breath of fresh air but also an opportunity to think upon the person of Etna Bliss and add

to my small cache of memories, which I should continue to mine ceaselessly in her absence: a half dozen sentences, the strain of black-and-bronze silk over a bosom, and an entirely naked, if fleeting, glance of fear at the prospect of imprisonment. Armed with these precious, if fragile, possessions, I then went in search of my breakfast.

The view outside my window has deteriorated from the muted blues of the Vermont hills and the navy ribbon of the Connecticut River as we make our way south from White River Junction, where I boarded the train. I have had the good fortune to secure a compartment to myself on this, the first leg of my journey; and as I shall be taking a sleeper from New York City, I have hope of remaining secluded, which is what I wished for when I made the booking. I confess that I am somewhat nervous about the prospect of a visit to southern Florida, since I have heard worrying tales of scorpions and fire ants and malaria-ridden mosquitoes, as well as the terrible heat. Accordingly, I have packed, amongst my books and papers and Etna's tin cake box, two white linen suits, several thin cotton shirts, and a new pair of canvas shoes. My only difficulty will be my mourning clothes, which I cannot avoid, since I shall have to wear them to my sister's funeral, the point of my journey. I had these garments taken out of storage and delivered to my tailor directly for pressing, for I could not bear to have to look at them, the clothes giving off, as they must, the scent not only of death, but also of nearly annihilating guilt – not to mention the heart's ruin.

We are passing now the mill towns of Holyoke and Chicopee in Massachusetts, blights upon the New

England landscape that, however necessary, always put me in mind of the drearier essays of Hazlitt and Carlyle. But I have found, if I narrow my eyes just so, that I can blur this geography somewhat and fix my gaze upon only those attributes of these cities that are bearable: the uneven planes of glass in the windows of the abandoned mill buildings, for example; or a polished black-and-maroon automobile parked intriguingly at the end of a deserted street; or a woman in a short skirt and kerchief fighting her way against the wind toward a church. And perhaps it is this trick of willfully blurred but occasionally keen vision, or the rocking of the moving compartment, or the comforting clacking of the train wheels upon the rails, or, more likely, the idea of a desk (a table, really) on which I have set my pen and notebook, inside a moving vehicle – the sense of one's own library at speed – that invites me now to begin a personal narrative I have long wanted to write, but for which I have always lacked the necessary strength . . . (and in that ellipsis, I have just engaged in a lengthy debate with myself as to whether or not to reveal, with complete honesty, the events I wish to record, and I have decided that this document will be as worthless as a floating fragment of ash if I resort to fiction, even fiction by omission. So I will tell the entire truth on these pages, even if this causes me the greatest pain – and it will, it will!) . . . (though I must add, in a further parenthesis, that I am only too aware that I can cross out offending sentences later and recopy the text and then edit the narrative should I find the resulting truth too unbearable to read. And is this not so for every story one writes or speaks in one's lifetime? How, for example, will the death of my sister be portrayed to me when I reach my destination? Will the anecdotes of the

death watch not change radically depending on the teller of the tale and on the details *which have been left out*, such as particular physical agonies that a daughter or a cousin might deem too unseemly to reveal?)

I have some understanding of the potential benefits of committing one's thoughts – and in this case, one's memories – to paper, for I have published various monographs and essays within my field, most notably my celebrated treatise on Scott's *Marmion*, and my less well-known but no less critically well-received commentary upon the Sir Roger de Coverley Papers in the *Spectator*. Of course, such a venture as upon which I now embark this twentieth day of September 1933 is filled more with terror than with imagined reward, for I know not what feelings such a narrative may evoke; but I am determined to do so for the sake of my son, Nicodemus, who will almost certainly one day ask a question it will take all of his father's courage to answer.