

LUCIO MARGHERITA

THE RISING SUN CHAIR

A PICARESQUE NOVEL



The Rising Sun Chair: A Picaresque Novel

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www.scritturaatuttotondo.it

info@scritturaatuttotondo.it

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FOREWORD

How I came across this incredible story.

ONE MORE TIME I HAD gone back to New England for no reason. I had followed my nose to Boston. From there I wandered aimlessly up the coast of Maine to the Canadian border purposely missing neither an inlet nor a fishing hamlet. In Millbridge, I turned West through New Hampshire and Vermont and, eventually, drove south into Massachusetts' Shaker country. I reached Williamstown's long tree lined avenues on a beautiful early summer afternoon. Past the Chapin library was the Museum of Arts and Williams College. The Clark Art Institute's façade was half covered by an enormous red sign extolling a John S. Sargent exhibition that, open during those days, was attracting crowds; Williams-town size crowds. However, what impressed me most in this tranquil city, as I strolled after dinner through the college greens, was its indolent air. Few cars, few buses, no lorries. People were either sitting on park benches reading in the summer sunset or, unhurriedly, going about their business at their own pace. This was, to me, a novel aspect of this land that, predictable as America can be, one never ceases to discover. Williamstown was not an opulent Western oil city, nor an impeccably

groomed Bible-belt township. Neither was it the wealthy suburbia of a metropolis of the Atlantic Coast. It did not have the rotundity of a colonial California village, or the magnolia whiff of a sleepy Old South resort. Yet it had all the visible attributes of a typically American community, plus something imperceptible that I could sense in the air and vaguely recognise: the hum and buzz of academic wit at work. I thought of Port Royal when Blaise Pascal was walking its silent cloister; of the old kingdom of Navarre whose chaste young monarch would discourse only philosophy with his coenobitic courtiers. I also thought of Cambridge, the one across the Channel by the Cam. These places shared more than a common atmosphere; their same culture and purpose were built within their same brick-walls.

I woke up early the following day. I tiptoed to the window of the hotel room and timidly parted the curtains; enough to check the colour of the weather without disturbing my wife's peaceful slumber. It was a rosy Sunday morning in the milkman's hour. A few joggers scampered the greens in patches of oblique sunlight. I could not resist their unspoken call and, brimming with festive energy, I walked out to the streets for a breath of fresh air. After a brisk stroll, I pushed the latticed door of what, at first sight, could have been a Vienna café or an old London pub such as may still be found on the Schwarzenberg Platz or by the Chelsea Embankment. Bright, wide windows, brass door handles, wooden floors and solid timber chairs and tables with leather tops and armrests. The dark oak panelling reached to shoulder height. From there on to the ceiling, the wall was papered with tiny flowers in shades of pink and grey. The smell in here was different though, no tobacco, no beer, no defiant tinge for the nostrils. This was neither zestful Austria nor tipsy England. Traditions are built to be kept and Massachusetts had been the strictest and most staunchly Puritan of the founding colonies. And this was a Sabbath morning after all. In there, and in complete observance of the Canon, I could only inhale the fragrance of thought provoking coffee. As for the patrons, none of them was chatting, scribbling

postcards, taking photographs or doing such futilities as layabouts and tourists mostly do. Some were sipping their brew reading the *Globe* or the *Herald Tribune* provided by the establishment on wooden rods; some were engrossed in a book; others were barely whispering to each other the few words of their inaudible conversations. A young man, sitting on his own and oblivious to the world and to his cold mug, compiled with a pencil reams of foolscap papers that covered his tablet and his two extra chairs. Observing him, I felt drawn back to my student days in London when, on Saturday mornings, my friends and I would drift to the College Union for breakfast or, more often, for an early beer. Our commitment for the day was to the *Observer* and to the *Manchester Guardian*. Or, should we feel less intellectually motivated during the torpid hours of the afternoon, we would resort to the televised black-and-white cops chasing villains in their sleek Z-cars. Not to forget Christine Keeler's torrid love affairs, and such other young ladies as bedecked the pages of the *News of the World*. This time, however, I wished I had my copy of *Finnegans Wake* with me. Not to read it, God forbid! I could never decipher more than a few lines of a text that I have stubbornly refused to tackle in any other form but in its author's unintelligible English; but to place it on my table as a statement and thereby mark my territory as an equal among un-aware and un-consenting peers. Having been efficient for a lifetime, I was well tempted, at least for a brief moment, to linger among these people happily thinking their own thoughts in their own time. But I was out of luck. There were no tables to be had, as they were mostly taken by single readers that I would not dream of joining or engaging in a vain conversation.

With a heavy heart I was about to turn my heels and abandon such a hospitable haven when an old fellow, a very senior and refined gentleman whom I had not noticed when I entered the premises (in fact to this day I am still in doubt whether he was there at all) beckoned from his seat by the wide bay-window, his white mane in full sunshine. He smiled gently, mostly through his eyes, as his mouth was concealed by a

well-groomed white beard. He pointed to the empty chair beside his tablet.

“Young man, may I buy you a cup of coffee?”

It had been a long time since I had been spoken to in such terms. I had just retired from forty years of worldly business and could only justify his choice of words by his great age as compared to my, if not advanced, at least advancing years.

“You are not from here”, he added as I, thanking him, sat down beside him.

“No”, I answered “but I could be. There is a familiar atmosphere in this town. Indeed, I feel as if I have come back to this place; as if, somehow, I actually belong in Williamstown.”

“So did I when I first came to this part of the world. Hence I remained”, he stated.

We did not dwell long on banalities. Soon I was relating to him my latest voyage in terms such as I would not normally inflict on friend or foe. I told him of the emotion of returning to places that had been more than just names for me ever since my adolescence; ever since my childhood days when, with white bread and chocolate, the Allied Forces had brought to Europe their enthusiasm and the spirit of Lexington and Concord. I told him of the strong wind at Cape Cod, of my bicycle rides on Martha’s Vineyard, and of how saddened I had been seeing, everywhere, in Salem the ghastly cardboard witches that had become the city’s stock and seal. Black, dreadful and grinning, they were in all places riding their painted broomsticks and stirring their fake crucibles as pasted on every mall, shop and store window. I told him of the ocean tides forcefully overriding the Charles and how, on Nantucket, standing on a pier, I thought I could discern far distant whalers. I had sat on Luisa Alcott’s doorstep I told him. In Boston, I had even exchanged words with Esther Prynne.

“I drove past Walden”, I said “but didn’t stop.”

“Why didn’t you?”, he asked.

“After what I’d seen in Salem?” I exclaimed. “So as to be swept away

by hordes of tourists, all probably gaping at a sign, a green one if you please, where you could read that once, in this place, *birds sang around or flitted noiselessly until one is reminded of the lapse of time*⁽¹⁾? No thank-you.”

“Maybe the sign is there, maybe it isn’t. At any rate what difference would it make?” And, after a short pause,

“Did you really sight those whalers off Nantucket?” he asked.

“I think I did” I answered without thinking, while the keel of the Pequod plunged into a cloud of brine. Then, as its prow swerved up to the next wave, I realized what his question had meant, and the intimate sense of my quick reply. They both had surfaced to a weird present from the hidden closet harbouring my long lost souvenirs.

Many years ago, on a trip to Moravia, a road sign led me to the battle-field of Austerlitz. I could see no memorial when I reached the site, no stele or magniloquent eulogy to remember the thirty thousand dead of just one day. There was nothing to appeal to one’s emotions, only a metal plate with a few words to sum up the bare facts of that dismal autumn day. Before me was a vast, grim, dreary plain that anyone could drive through and ignore. It was bisected by a grey stretch of highway, seemingly going nowhere as lined by an endless streak of scrawny electric pylons. Yet, there was light in that sky, that lofty sky, clear yet immeasurably lofty, with dark clouds slowly drifting across it. All was quiet, solemn and serene, as on that 2nd of December when Prince Andrei fell wounded on that combat field. History may be as intense as a religious experience. I had been so engrossed sharing those bleak and barren grounds with no less than three Emperors and twenty regiments of cavalry that several cars and two coaches could park right behind me without disturbing my thoughts. I had been lost and forgotten in my heroic dreams of unattainable grandeur.

¹ H.D. Thoreau, *Walden*, Chapt. 4.

“I don’t believe you would have seen the sign, had one been staked by Thoreau’s timber shack” said my companion fetching me out of my reverie. “For you the impact would have been the same, regardless of noisy tourists or tasteless cardboard witches. Walden is within you, the same as Austerlitz, Naples, Calgary or Nantucket. When you needed to drop anchor, you found your haven in the most improbable places of the world. How could you have missed Walden in Walden?”

I had to agree. Sipping the last drop of my coffee I assented, and pledged to skip a stone on that pond on my next trip.

“You do that”, he said “but first you do something for me”.

He reached for a fat leather briefcase that he had kept by his feet under the table and, from it, he pulled out a thick folder tied up with a string. Inside I could see reams and reams of paper covered with scribbles. He put it on the table and calmly placed his hand on it. He then looked straight into my eyes and:

“It is my story” he said. “I just finished writing it and I have no time left, nor the energy to enact what it takes to do anything with it. But it is a good story, a fascinating one as it recounts my life of many eventful years. Take it, read it through and do with it as you think fit. Whatever you decide I will approve. Now it is all yours. I ask for nothing in return”.

I was stunned. With no inkling of who I was or of what my literary inclinations, supposing that I had any, might be the unknown gentleman was actually confiding to me what was probably his most valued treasure. I tried to tell him that I was not cut out for such a task, that I could not remain in Williamstown on a whim as he had done years ago, that I had to return to Europe in a few days. I had obligations, engagements, commitments... I could not undertake such enterprise lightly.

“I didn’t say that you should do it lightly”, he answered promptly. “I ask you to read it attentively, which shouldn’t take you more than a few hours, and then decide either to throw it to the nettles or devote to it as much of your time as you feel it deserves”.

He stood up, left a few coins on the table for the two coffees and made for the exit as I tried to obtain from him, if not an address where I could reach him with my decision and assessment, at least, his name.

“That alone would take long to relate” he answered, “I’ve had plenty!”

At this point he had already half opened the latticed door.

“It’s all in those papers anyway”, he finally added, “it’s in the book...” and, before I could say another word, he had pulled the door behind him and was gone.

The folder contained the thick pile of loose, hand-written pages that I had half glimpsed and altogether suspected. Yellowish, creased paper covered, in faded ink, with small disorderly writing. Words or entire sections added in, struck out and rewritten diagonally on the narrowest of margins. Cross references, notes, comments, appositions everywhere. I tried to read as best as I could what was but a maze of minute script and intricate clauses of obsolete, often arcane, words of which I could make, at first glance, neither head nor tail. My first impulse was to leave the manuscript right there, on the coffee table, where some qualified intellectual, from among the several unwitting candidates present on the premises, would find it and certainly appreciate its merits better than I ever could. But I could not decently deal such a slight to the old fellow without reading at least the first few pages. Apart from J. S. Sargent, nothing was really pressing on that beautifully slow Saturday morning. So I walked to the counter for a second cup of coffee and got myself to it.

After the first few lines I found that I was already going through my task more with interest than with determination. After the first paragraph I moved my chair to find a more comfortable position, after the first page I was intrigued and captivated. I finished the first chapter out in the park in full sunshine and, before I knew it, I was engulfed in the second. For the rest of our journey, and in the plane on our way home, I spent hours ploughing through the amazing story that unfolded before my unbelieving eyes. I continually adjusted my spectacles and turned

the loose pages every each side to catch the smallest addenda to the slightest caption. I missed some of our most coveted social and cultural commitments; I overlooked unique historical sites. I finished reading the last page left in the folder just as our homebound flight landed and taxied to the terminal. I was still fussing with the list of chapters as the cab drove up to our front door. By then I was resolved. Though I had no idea of what to do and how, I knew at least that I could not let this pass. I gave myself a few days to think the project over, but I was already certain that I would take it on and do something with it.

My first step had to be the massive job of organising the manuscript and getting it into readable shape. I worked myself an acceptable schedule so as not to leave behind any of my other engagements and, on the next Monday morning, I woke up early and enthusiastically started punching the keyboard.

I had to rearrange the plot with misplaced reminiscences, anecdotes and quotations that the author had liberally inserted here and there on odd flyers and loose pages, just as they surfaced from his bubbly life and from the hidden recesses of his unflinching memory. Bits of classic literature, of Bible's maxims and of scattered ancestral wisdom nudged me everywhere demanding to be placed in chronological perspective and reinserted in the story without altering the rhythm of the narrative. Some passages I recognised; some I suspected; but most, certainly passed me over undetected, meant as they were for the amusement of a better reader. Live characters, whose names had the ring of a distant bell, sprung up from every chapter with their load of vileness and exploits. Who were they? Could they all have possibly existed? The old man had met them (or so he wrote); could history have all forgotten their names and feats?

Then, at least for the first several chapters, I had to attend to the old-fashioned vocabulary, to the outdated spelling and to the obsolete pronouns and conjugations. I did not wish to alter the manuscript's prose. I had, after all, no authority to strive to mend what there might

miss. Still, the author had spoken of divulging his opus, not of making it available to few selected scholars. Some of the idioms he had used were clear, but others would be incomprehensible to a modern, average reader. As I struggled through the worse of them, I was reminded of a wooden tray that I saw years ago exhibited in a cabinet of one of Antwerp's Museums. On it Bruegel had depicted, with simple evocative scenes, twelve Flemish proverbs fashionable in his time. Some of those maxims I readily understood as they are still in use today. Some I recognised, though we would express the same concept differently now. Others were as impenetrable for me as voiceless monuments of a distant culture. What to do of such proverbs, or of my new friend's expressions? Remove them? Replace them? Leave them intact? Museum's curators are not confronted with such dilemmas; intelligible or not, no one would dare to scrape off a chip from a Bruegel. But what was I to do with the old man's old and forgotten words?

Fortunately, as the story clock progressed from ancient to more recent times, the narrator had been careful to amend his speech and to bring it imperceptibly to a more current prose. Concurrently, it seemed to me that, as the trail of his years advanced, he had also modified the structure of his plot. From the simple account of his youthful exploits, he had imagined, for his more mature years, a complex intrigue of characters living together their intersecting lives. Finally, for his golden age, the author had turned to a stream of reflections and considerations not dissimilar from the thoughts that we had exchanged on that Williamstown Saturday morning.

I was captivated by the challenge. Still, was the story true? The old gentleman claimed to have lived longer than three centuries, as if scores of everyone else's years had simply been lustrums for him. But had he really been in all his adventures, or had he imagined every word of them? Had I dreamed the whole thing in Williamstown inspired by the evoking surroundings? How could I not doubt the absurd? Yet, I did meet the fellow. I spoke to him and, to the best of my judgement, he was no fake, no fraud, no fantasy and no ghost. True as the diapason's A, he

had placed the manuscript into my hands and there it was now, right on my desk. Should I not trust my own wit and senses?

Delusions, no matter how vividly felt, have to surrender to facts. But when the boundaries between facts and fancy are blurred together, and either is less credible than dreams, which of the two a witness should believe? Why does it matter? His was a lovely story, and here it is...

CHAPTER I

*How I came to be in the New World and how,
unwittingly, I found myself in the wilderness.*

I WAS BORN AN AQUARIUS on Saint Blaise day. That is: seven months, two weeks and one day after the “*Waardig Meid*”⁽¹⁾, a merchantman from Antwerp, dock’d at New Haven harbour and my mother, an indentured servant from Kildare, met with her German master and her new home: a bawdy hostelry by the traders’ pier. By her account I was tiny and frail at birth. As for my origin, aside my Irish ancestry which, thanks to the Canon is as certain as my mother is, I could be fully grown of English gentry or half-baked a Hessian⁽²⁾. Because mother, prior to encountering on this shore with her Teutonic master, had been but a few months at service on the other in a country home in York, when the lady of the house discovered her husband’s penchant for the young maid she was. Her Ladyship had her whipp’d, lock’d up in the scullery and, without more ado, on advice of the parson, found her a berth on the first sail *en route* for the New World.

¹ “Worthy maid” in Dutch.

² The term was extended to all Germans because of the German origin of the English Royal Family from Hannover.

The wait was a long week in such horrible a prison. She was not allowed out, nor was any male ever let in, of such danger was mother esteemed to their repute. Her only society and attendance, if attendance may be deemed her nightly ration of a quarter loaf and of a jug of water, was a peasant lady whom she referred to, later in her stories, as her benevolent good-fairy. Of her, I can only picture the smile. The sweet smile she donned as she walked into the dungeon to hand mother her victuals and gently quench her sobs with strokes and kindly words. On the one morning, mother's head reclining on her bosom, she placed her hand on her tummy and told her of the injunction: she was to be transported overseas. Two days the captive wept, dreading to be returned to Ireland and to the attentions of her beastly father. Two days of solitude and despair but for the gentle peasant who would dry her tears with talk and false pretences. Then the hard ride on the turnpike to Plymouth. Hence, any interference with my blood line during that period may be rightfully dismiss'd. For the first part, on the account of lack of male visitors to the scullery during mother's incarceration thither. And, for the second, on the score of the unpleasant effects on human backs and spines, to say nothing of more intimate manly traits well known for their reprehensible inclinations, of a horse-wagon journey through the Devon moors.

Long at last came the sailing. Mother often times recounted to me the endless weeks at sea spent in the midst of the worst winter gales. I still recall her vivid rendering of the hauling winds through the riggings, of the bleak sky and ocean as broke by fuming waves. Both her wide open eyes still full of terror, she spoke to me of the hollering mates and of the cursing sailors. The passengers spent their time on the lower deck huddled about the preacher and beseeching the Divine Providence not to abandon the sifted grain of faithful *en route* to the new Promised Land. Not did my mother. She was young, handsome, affrighted and in need of such comfort as the Scriptures too moderately dispense. She knew

when to seek mystical help and when more earthly solace was called for. Mariners too are known rarely to miss a chance. Hence, I presume, the *Warding* and the young maid from Ireland were close accomplices rocking those storms away. Yet, never did mother suggest I might be Flemish. She ought to know and I rather trust her account of my paternal filiation, erratic such as it was, than any unwarranted speculation on the thorny, and to this story quite irrelevant, issue of my correct pedigree.

Two weeks upon her arrival in New Haven, her new mistress was tipped off by a jealous groom of her husband's philandering in the servant's quarters. Again mother was whipped and locked up, save that, on this occasion, she had to share the cellar with mice and casks of ale. It may be noted that if mother's disrepute threatened the honest Yorkers to the effect that she could never leave her hopeless den from the day of her first confinement to the one of her transportation, such concern never was one for the Hessians. Their view of the very same fault that mother had committed on either side of the ocean was more liberal than it had been for the prurient Anglians, and less guided by moral than by covetous considerations. Each night mother was taken to her cellar but, at dawn, she was let out to attend to her many chores. Because indenture was indeed a costly affair and, soiled her soul as it was, her voyage had still to be reimbursed. Although her presence was cause of sin, a disgrace for the establishment and a live bait for her master's concupiscence, she still had better work to pay her passage. She took her plight with as good a demeanour as she could afford. As long as her shame and I were both growing within her, she would not jeopardise my existence to evade the infamy. She toiled and she put away every penny that her lascivious patrons might forget, lose or drop on the tavern's counter after their inebriating debaucheries. Month after month she laboured under the grin of every woman in the servant quarters and the leer of every man in the hostel. But she fidgeted, and she schemed and, the moment I was, she made away with a few rags and coins and

the linen bundle of me, whose only pacifier were the worn nipples of her empty breasts. Therefore I can verily say that, from the hour I drew my first breath in, I have been the shooting mark of Lady Fortune who, in every stage of my life where she could get at me, pelted me with more misadventures and accidents as ever a victim has sustained. But, if she did so, I trust she had her reasons. As for me, alike Odysseus, who could always count on Pallas when Neptune got out of hand, I also had my portentous protectors to shield my hazards and navigate the course. These were my saintly namesake, the Virgin Mary and my guardian angel. 'Tis with their blessing that I grew wise and old, and with their licence that this story is told.

The Hessians did not set the law after us; mostly on account of the mistress who loathed the thought of the little brat I was to further foul her premises. "Good riddance" she snorted. But the master mourned after the silver he had invested in the vain expectation that the sinful debt that mother had contracted in the Old Country could be redeemed to his lewd advantage in the New.

Names I have had aplenty; as many as one could steal, borrow or invent in this vast land of backwoods and plantations from Chesapeake to New France and the Ohio. But I was christened one, the one I value, after Saint Patrick in the Roman Church. No God-father for me, no choir, no parson. Mother kneeled beside me in the dark cellar two nights after my birth. She kissed me and, having sprinkled my head with tears and with such water as it was meant to quench her thirst till dawn, she implored the Lord to receive me into his flock and recognise me by the name she had chosen.

"Not of his will was he conceived in sin, not of his blunder he is christened in this gaol" quoth she. "Be mild to him and he shall be a devotee, and shall deserve thy kindness. I, the shamed mother, shall insure his drill. What little I do know of the Holy Scriptures, of Martha, of the adulteress, of the sinner in the house of Pharisee, I will impart to him. I, who like the woman of Samaria had none and many a husband, shall be

thy unworthy voice. Neither in Latin as in our Roman church, nor with the Gaelic of our Irish parsons, but with this English that shall be his speech. Let him be learned not of my faulty doctrine; but seed his path with cultured scholars, conversant of thy mysteries, who will make his good knowledge swell and grow. Be good to him. Thou art his only father. Let me suffer his penance, and grant him a fair life.”

Anon, these were my unusual rites which I discovered to be quite receivable under the circumstances. Indeed God by any name, by every extravagant ceremony and by all fancy creeds, is still the same God, and just as holy. Thus Saint Patrick was to be my patron, and Paddy what mother would call me whenever there was supper on the table. Paddy she kissed good night of every night; Paddy she tucked in bed and fast asleep. Paddy is for me, for her, for both of us, whenever time is ripe and she will call me to join her joyful on the Jordan’s bank.

Mother’s clan name I ignored for most of my childhood years. I could only construe it much, much later as a young man from the few scratches on her weathered tomb. I kept it as my own. Mother was I. She was my home, my hearth, my Ireland, with all the sweetness that such words imply. As for my father, I was adopted by this vast continent of ours that shaped me tough so that I could rove its wilds, live of its riches and partake of its fortunes.

As for trades, as many as I could learn I have professed. I was a whaler in Nantucket and a gold digger in the Klondike. I have been a scout on the west frontiers speaking to Indians in their Indian tongues. I fought each battle of our many wars, learnt to read from a gentle lady and to write from such masters whose teachings came to my advantage in later years for my tenure at Yale. I preached, I logged, I served and I practised every angle of the law from bar to chancery, from notary to sheriff, within and without each county prison. Wives I’ve had aplenty and children as many as pebbles on an ocean beach. As for my politics, well they are just whims that happen with the changing moon, and the ones ye buy today ye cannot sell tomorrow. Better be both the fiddler

and the painter, and hold your swat according the fly stings. Ethics seldom are the same on either banks of the same river. In the course of my life of many years, I learnt to dispense with most such encumbrances. Principles are not for one to be proud of and then to be crushed under; but are such means as one may twirl and turn to profit.

What did mother ever gain from her adamant values? Selflessness, obedience and sacrifice clutched on her shoulders with claws of Irish lore. Toil was her life, despair her womanly burden. As she was torn from Eire and cast from England, her departure was not of her own choice. Out to these shores she took of her possessions only what she could bundle in a stretch of fabric; just enough to remind her of who she was and to where she had belonged. But the eviction was indeed her deliverance. Misery and oppression she left behind. Day by day she rid herself of ghosts of dread and hunger, of tales of shame and humiliation. Day by day the staple that she had abandoned on the old threshold faded for her away. Her sole treasure, in this New World, was the tight tangle of her faith and myths that kept her sound and sane all through her toils. This light gift she willed me together with her courage. The heavy yoke she kept for her full to her grave.

Thus I am fine and God-fearing an American as they come: free as the wind, hard as a nut and true as a keg of Irish ale. This land is the untamed horse that I learnt to ride. My past was never longer than my day, and my goals never shorter than my enterprise. I have been free to think my mind, to live where I fancied and to slip into new selves whenever vicious landlords, creditors, husbands or sheriffs signified to me that I had abused of my olden clothes. I learned to love this land roaming it over, on foot or in a carriage, fettered and unfettered, through its length and breadth. Whether I dwelt within towns or villages; whether I staked my way across un-bridged rivers or unclimbed mountain paths. This country hath no bounds. Time and exhaustion were my only foes. God gave me life, Saint Patrick gave me strength. What fair employment I made of such bequests let be the traffic of this startling tale.

Leaving New Haven was no simple task; what with no means, no routes, no knowledge of where we were and where to go. Far, beyond the ocean laid the Old Country; that much my mother knew. As she did know that she could not go back on the few shillings that she had put away. Would she have returned me there? What she had seen of these Western shores had taught her that the English upper classes smelt sweeter than New England's publicans but, as for cuckolded wives, irrespective of class or breed, they pursued a remarkably similar conduct on either side of the Atlantic. Yet, unlike the ass staring at the carrot dangling before its eyes, she could perceive the illusions and delusions of both stables. And crystal-clear she saw that she would never sail me across the waves to raise me in England a carrot-less and obedient serf.

Clean of the forest, across the northern Indian territory, lay Massachusetts, Manahata to the South. Hence she determined to walk along the coast begging for food and for a passage on the first skiff that would take us wherever God may will. How did she make it through the wilds to Saybrook shy of the natives, 'twas her guardian angel's doing. Her determination alone could not have kept both of us alive in that bleak forest. Long at last, we incurred in a wide river and, at its mouth, she found a flat bottom headed up stream to Wethersfield.

"From there thou arst only a short hike to Massachusetts", quoth the captain." There thou shall be delivered of whatever thou arst escaping from. But beware, people up-river are harsher than downstream. They hang blasphemers; and brand those of thy sort".

His innuendo and grin were certainly kindled by little me. Yet, as a sign of his liberal good will, unblemished by the intolerance of his northern neighbours, he pocketed all of mother's ill-gotten, in his view, sweat-soaked coins and let us on board. We set sail with the rising tide and were swept beneath a green canopy of oaks and birches by the salty waters of the bay mingling with the sweet stream of the river. After three weeks of roping and rowing, loading and unloading timber, flax, pelts and grain bushels; trading with Christians and Indians at each set-

tlement on the river banks, the grinning captain dumped us cold and destitute on a forlorn pier with a heap of wares. Wethersfield was not far, he had told us. Mother could see the wooden spire piercing through the trees and, a few rods away, the first log cabins clustered about the church. To the men who were come down the path to meet the merchant vessel she asked about the vicar.

“Oh, he is a good and holy man!” was the reply.

‘Good for a night is aught we two desire, she muttered with deep thanks, and for a meal’. But of that second wish she did not dare to ask the Lord directly and addressed her request to the lower echelon of my patron Saint.

In fact the divine was as good as both, but mother had to listen all through her repast to his patronising sermon and advice. Sinning was bad enough, he would say rising his chin and pointing it on my direction. But the Lord had granted us forgiveness at the price of atonement. Hence, escaping retribution was like avoidance of God’s compassion and worse than sinning. Mother would nod submissively and eat in silence. Her concern for the time being was not her soul, but to let her blood and fluids accomplish the mysterious task of replenishing her worn out bosom for the famished me. But when the time of the night prayer came and the good parson heard her mutter such strange words that he could understand better than she,

“Whom arst thou praying?” he inquired, angrily walking up to her.

“The Virgin and Saint Patrick”, mother replied, befuddled on her knees, yet raising her head to confront him with a pious smile.

“Arst thou of the popish lot?”, than asked the vicar.

“I am of the true church”, replied my mother.

Hence we slept in the stable for the night and, without a morsel or a blessing, were on our way at the first crack of dawn.

Deserted, we sat on the pier ere to sun rise and mother sobbed away her bewilderment before the incongruities of the holy churches. Oh, she well knew that each parish in England had restricted the precept “*love*

thy neighbour” to the narrow limits of its own enclosure. She also knew that intolerance had spilled over to the New World. In New Haven, not differently than in York, she had experienced how ‘twas wise to keep one’s beliefs to oneself, lest they be strident to some local tenet. She had been warned of what to expect in bigoted Massachusetts. Yet, staring at the popish mongrel eagerly feeding of her breast, she could not see how such purple, crumpled and cranky morsel could possibly inspire repugnance to anyone. But, as God could only see his own goodness in creation, so mother only saw her own beauty in her crinkled offspring.

Such were her stories. I would laugh, and she would smile sweetly as she related to me the troubled adventures of my early years. She would stroke my red hair and she would hug me closer at each of her painful recollections.

“Tha mi bron ach⁽³⁾”, she would whisper and sigh. The rest was in the quiver of her voice.

Hence, once more hungry, forlorn and dejected, we were alone at such an early hour. Mother dangling her feet over the river, and I braying with all my lungs my half-breed voice. We both gazed down the torpid stream with wide-open eyes. Large, scarlet and gold maple leaves floated down the Connecticut river forming, with twigs and burning bushes, odd-shaped red bundles racing each other to the sea on streaks of varied hues of brown and green. Mother thoughtfully considered the greedy captain’s tale of branded women, the parson’s fury, and the rest of the frantic past fortnight. She concluded that the story of the “true church” would not go down too well with the people who might offer her assistance on this river. But she knew precious little of the false ones. Just inquiring of their existence was a cardinal sin back in Kildare. Still, she was no martyr stuff, and by no means was she going to make a one of me. What she could not apprehend from others, she would find

³ Sadness is upon me.

out by herself. She decided henceforth to ask questions instead of mumbling answers. She resolved to hearken carefully to whatever was said and make the best of it with the Lord's help. Finally, she determined that Mary, the name that had been hers from a long uninterrupted chain of mothers and of grandmothers' mothers, would possibly not do well with such Massachusetts pagans who might still bear in mind the fearsome queen. Thus on that morning, and on that very hour, she rechristened herself after her royal sister, and called herself Betty.

As she set there pleading her reasons for such name change to the most certainly piqued Virgin, a skiff came down the stream with, at the bar, a lone man singing a melodious psalm. He approached the pier and brought down the main sail holding a lead as coiled about his arm.

"Catch!" did he shout, "fasten it to the ring, come-on fair lady, give us a good hand."

"Arst thou of the popish lot?", called back my mother.

The man burst out in a thunderous laughter.

"God forbid! What if I be?" he cackled, "wouldst thou not let me onshore?"

Mother put me down and caught the lead. She took it through the ring as was instructed and smiled for the first time of that eventful year. The man jumped on the pier and gleefully approached us.

"The name is John, in the Lord's name I thank thou", quoth he with a hint of a bow. He was big, tall and broad, with long hair, large pants and a linen cloak over his hefty shoulders. Neither young nor old, a thick salt-peppered beard reached down to half his chest. A large brim hat covered his head; he raised a hand to shield his eyes from the darts of the rising sun.

"I never was addressed such question the many times I am come to Wethersfield."

"I was, and on the first one", retorted mother. "Hence I presumed 'twas their way of welcome!"

"Thou hast just arrived?"

“And we are just leaving”, she added sadly.

“After my errand so am I”, he stated. “If thou arst going up-river thou arst most welcome.”

As we waited for him, mother found an unsoiled nook on the craft to lay me down and killed her time instinctively arranging and cleaning that river-faring bedlam that, for a few days, would be our most welcomed home. Such shambled quarters, and utterly disarranged lodging, she was sure, could only be the lair of an unattended man.

“Pray, where are we going?” as we set sail she asked.

“ ‘Twas to be my question. Just short of Springfield is my home”, quoth he.

“Is that in Massachusetts?”

“Oh I don’t know Ma’am. ‘Tis a plot of land short of the rapids where the good Lord, blessed be his name, committed me. The border is somewhere there.”

“What doest thou call it?” after a while he asked nodding my way. Mother was taken aback from her daydream of gently sloshing waves against the prow. She panicked; she had not readied an answer. Yet, worse than Mary, she knew that Paddy was the wrong name for a Puritan Anglian. George, James and Andrew flashed through her mind. Would they be saintly enough? Then, anathema to the Irish blood, the Lord Protector came to her mind and to my rescue.

“Oliver” quoth she, twice signing and crossing her chest.

“Good name”, answered the man.

Thus, farewell Saint Patrick; thenceforth I was committed a *round-head*⁽⁴⁾.

We sailed, we docked, we landed, we felt welcome and we stayed.

After a few months mother married John in strict accordance with the local rites, but never changed her Canon. At Sunday Service, which

⁴ The name referred to Cromwell’s puritan soldiers.

she never could call other than Mass, she would ignore the liturgy, kneel in rapture, close her eyes and tightly hold her bosom to warm the hovel for the blessed crumb. She knew no better, nor did she want to know. To her there was one Lord, one church, one host. If faith moves mountains, as the Book implies, how easy must have been for our Lord Jesus to step each Sunday into that one church and substantiate for her just that one morsel and make it pregnant of his flesh and blood.

Mother was the life of John's life and of his farm, and he loved her dearly. He observed her, he mocked her sometimes, but stubbornly refused to acknowledge any doctrinal advantage in her devotions, nor a difference with his own prayers. In his view no religion could claim infallible knowledge, nor the Creator's partiality to its means and ways. He had moved away from England and from Boston town to this perilous upper water district because his understanding of Donne's and Bacon's preaches did not see eye to eye with the officious sermons that those self-righteous, self-appointed divines pillaged from Bunyan's homilies and from the *Pilgrim's progress*. He tilled the land, read the Scriptures as he saw fit, and devoutly prayed the Lord on his own, and in his own ways. He only occasionally attended the Service that mother never missed. As for our neighbours, baffled by the one and suspicious of the other, they knew not what to make of the odd couple. But they were far and few, and John always lent a helping hand whenever the need was to deliver a bigot's colt to this beautiful world, or build a stable to house a zealot's mare. Thus they left him alone and I grew up a toddler in an intricate ecumenical milieu, unaware if any of the many conflicting paths to salvation that my many guardians made available to me would ever meet. Nor, if they did, if they would take us up-North to Massachusetts.

John would tell us at night of his old stories and ancient myths. To our astonished eyes and gaping mouths he spoke of Troy, of Pergamum and Rome. Or he would read us from the Scriptures ere our meals. A

world of heroes was my world, I was alone together with Achilles; with Scipio and David I played my lonely games. Then he would grumble endlessly of the Established church, of Calvin, Luther or the Gallic Huguenots. Puritans, Presbyterians, Quakers, Catholics, Baptists... the lot, were evil doers at the service of the devil. God had not placed half of his flock on his right side, damning the other to his left. Men had done this to themselves. There was nothing better than theological dissension to keep fine people away from the Lord's temple. Whether preaching brotherhood, or indulging in parochial bickering, his saintly neighbours were all busy together when it came to displanting the natives, burning their crop and seizing their land. John would go on and on into the night with his anti-bigotry tirades; or, until mother would lightly stroke his flowing mane and hand him his warm cup of milk and water. She would place her soft hand on his fast moving lips and gently hush him for my sleep. Then, she would quietly lead me to my chamber and tell my wide-open eyes of her own stories of her own land. Milesians and Fomorians were the first who sailed to Erin. They fought the Tuatha dé Dannans⁵ when they stormed in from the Ocean as blown with winter clouds. Wise Ohm invented human script; Midir and Etain flittered about on the wings of a butterfly. This soft and fabled Ireland she shared with me. The one she endured she kept in her nightmares. The one would quietly lull me to my sleep; the other never came to haunt my dreams. She would undress me, wash me, and pray with me my prayers for the night. These were to be recited in a language as obscure to us both as John's ecumenical ramble. Yet mother would make them plain to me with her sweet smile whilst tucking me and her Gospel in my berth.

During her flight to Saybrook she had lost the chaplet that was hers from her own mother and, like all of her rituals, from her mother's

⁵ The early legendary invaders of Ireland (Erin).

mother. John had laughed at her anguish; then, grudgingly and lovingly, he had carved a new wooden one for her which she blessed of spring water and which she hung nightly from the post of her bed before blowing off the candle lights.

“Someday you’ll have the patience to say nightly the fifty *Ave Maria* ⁽⁶⁾, each of which is a kernel of this crown”, she would say to me. Then, slipping a thin booklet under my pillow, “Someday you’ll learn to read these Gospels that I can only hold and cherish now” she would add. “Let the Rosary in your heart Paddy. And let this book be your guide and be your friend”.

For she had decided that my blazing red locks and million freckles would not be my sole Irish legacy. In spite of her lack of doctrine she would be my teacher, and I would be a real Christian. Which, by and by, did not help my comprehension of transcendence any. Why could I talk to Saint Patrick in plain English, yet had to keep indecipherable accounts of Jesus’ life under my cushion and babble my prayers to the Lord in a language that neither I, nor mother, nor anyone else about us understood? I owned in those days that God be foreign. How could he make out my ludicrous attempts to speak his language? Mother’s answer to this was that he listened to my heart, not to my Latin. But she had no answer when I asked her why could I not let my perfectly well English speaking heart do the proper talking. Thus, for ordinary matters I did as I was told, but when I had some crucial issue to submit to the heavens, I resorted to the language I knew best, and called upon Saint Patrick to translate.

John and I hunted and tilled and milked and husbanded as much as an honest young boy could ever wish for and afford. At times, on long rides, he would take me on the cart to the sawmill by the river; at times to the Long Meadow, the cool and shallow brook where in the morn-

⁶ “Hail Mary”.

ing we would spy the herons and catch the catfish for our dinner at dusk. The farm was our domain, the forest our realm, the pond was my playground live with my heroes. He taught me about the seasons and the seeds, he shewed me where to lay the traps and how to attend to the bees. I learnt from him and loved him almost as much as mother. And we were happy, praise the Lord. But I was curious of much larger fields and fretted, cooped and confined in such small a pasture. Where was the Egypt of his tales? Where the desert and the land of Pharaoh? Where was Palestine and where the Hebrews? What of the evil Romans? Was the mountain of Moses the one of Jesus' speak? The answers to my queries had to exist somewhere, perhaps they were to be found beyond the sawmill, beyond the timber that John had felled to clear his land, or even further. They were over the river, out of my bound, beyond the ninth wave, yonder for ever on the Western bank. I dreamed, I wandered, I dreaded... and of one morning, I picked up myself and strode to the beaver lodge that had been set as my ultimate limit. Oh, I did know of the dangers that had been spelt to me in horrific ways: neighbors mauled by wolves and bears, people drowned in the malicious river whirls, Indians' arrows and spears. Yet, I quietly set my gait towards the un-bridged creek.

My heart was pounding as I pricked-up my ears and ventured deeper into the forest. There was no noise, save for the leaves as shook by the warm breeze. The Connecticut breathed out his moist and stroke with vapour the indolent tree tops. Then, suddenly, I felt a tight grip about my waste. I was lifted from the ground and a callous hand muffled my mouth and nostrils. My arms and legs were roped quick and tight and I was swiftly spirited away.