SEWANEE

By WILLIAM ALEXANDER PERCY

1885—1942

GRADUATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF THE SOUTH
IN NINETEEN HUNDRED AND FOUR

THE UNIVERSITY OF THE SOUTH, SEWANEE, TENNESSEE

THERE'S no way to tell of youth or of Sewanee, which is youth, directly; it must be done obliquely and by parable. I come back to the Mountain often and see with a pang, however different it may be to me, it is no different, though Huger and Sinkler and I are forgotten. Then with humility I try to blend and merge the past and the present, to reach the unchanging essence. To my heart the essence, the unbroken melodic theme, sounds something like this:

The college has about three hundred young men or inmates, or students as they are sometimes called, and besides, quite a number of old ladies, who always were old and ladies, and who never die. It's a long way away, even from Chattanooga, in the middle of woods, on top of a bastion of mountains crenelated with blue coves. It is so beautiful that people who have once been there always, one way or another, come back. For such as can detect apple green in an evening sky, it is Arcadia—not the one that never used to be, but the one that many people always live in; only this one can be shared.

In winter there is a powder of snow; the pines sag like ladies in ermine, and the other trees are glassy and given to creaking. Later, arbutus is under the dead leaves where they have drifted, but unless you look for it betimes, you'll find instead puffs of ghost caught under the higher trees, and that's dogwood, and puffs of the saddest color in the world that's tender too, and that's redbud, which some say is pink and some purple and some give up but simply must write a poem about. The rest of the flowers you shouldn't believe in if I told you, so I'll

tell you: anemones and hepatica and blood-root that troop under the cliffs, always together, too ethereal to mix with reds and yellows or even pinks; and violets everywhere, in armies. The gray and purple and blue sort you'll credit, but not the tiny yellow ones with the bronze throats, nor the jack-rabbit ones with royal purple ears and faces of pale lavender that stare without a bit of violet modesty. If you've seen azalea—and miscalled it wild honeysuckle, probably—you still don't know what it is unless you've seen it here, with its incredible range of color from white through shell pink to deep coral (and now and then a tuft of orange that doesn't match anything else in the whole woods), and its perfume actually dangerous, so pagan it is. After it you'd better hunt for a calacanthus with brown petals (what else like its petal brown?) and a little melancholy in its scent, to sober you. We call our bluets "innocence," for that's what they are. They troop near the iris, which when coarsened by gardens some call fleur-de-lis, and others, who care nothing about names, flags. Our orchids we try to make respectable by christening them "lady-slippers," but they still look as if they had been designed by D. H. Lawrence—only they're rose- and canary-colored.

After Orion has set—in other words, when the most fragile and delicate and wistful things have abandoned loveliness for fructifying—the laurel, rank and magnificent for all its tender pink, starts hanging bouquets as big as hydrangeas on its innumerable bushes. But on moonlight nights there's no use trying to say it isn't a glory and a madness! And so the summer starts—summer, when we're not seraph-eyed enough to see flowers even if there were any. In the fall, when our souls return, a little worse off, a little snivelly, there are foggy wisps of asters whose quality only a spider would hint at aloud, and in the streams where the iris forgathered there are parnassia, the snowdrop's only kin. Mountain-folk alone have seen their virginal processions, ankle-deep in water, among scarlet leaves,

each holding a round green shield and carrying at the end of a spear, no thicker than a broomstraw, a single pale green star. Last, chilly and inaccessible and sorrowful, in the damp of the woods, come the gentians, sea-blue and hushed.

Now all these delights the Arcadians not infrequently neglect. You might stroll across the campus and quadrangles of a sunny afternoon and guess from the emptiness and warm quiet there that they have gone out among the trees, lying perhaps in shadow, idly, like fauns, and whistling at the sky. Some may be so unoccupied, though not faun-like to themselves. But more I fear will be amiably and discreetly behind closed doors on the third floor, playing not flutes or even saxophones, but poker. Still others will be bowed over a table, vexed to the soul with the return of Xenophon or the fall, too long delayed, of a certain empire. A few will be off in the valley bargaining for a beverage called mountain-dew with a splendid virile old vixen who in that way has always earned a pleasant livelihood. Later they will have consumed their purchase to the last sprightly drop and will be bawling out deplorable ballads and pounding tables and putting crockery to uncouth noisy uses in the neighborhood of one or another of the old ladies, who will appear scandalized as expected, but who in the privacy of her own chamber will laugh soundlessly till her glasses fall off on her bosom and have to be wiped with a handkerchief smelling of orris-root.

Yet I would not have you think that the Arcadians are all or always ribald. Even those with a bacchic turn are full of grace and on occasion given to marvels. I myself have witnessed one of them in the ghastly dawn, slippered and unpantalooned, his chaplet a wet towel, sitting in the corner of his room, his feet against the wall, quite alone reading in a loud boomy voice more beautiful than chimes *Kubla Khan* and the *Ode to a Nightingale.* One afternoon of thick yellow sunshine I was audience to another who stood on an abandoned

windlass with tulip trees and a blue vista for a backdrop reciting pentameters, which though you may never have heard, we thought too rich and cadenced for the race of men ever to forget. I can remember them even now for you:

> I dreamed last night of a dome of beaten gold
> To be a counter-glory to the Sun.
> There shall the eagle blindly dash himself,
> There the first beam shall strike, and there the Moon
> Shall aim all night her argent archery;
> And it shall be the tryst of sundered stars,
> The haunt of dead and dreaming Solomon;
> Shall send a light upon the lost in hell,
> And flashings upon faces without hope—
> And I will think in gold and dream in silver,
> Imagine in marble and in bronze conceive,
> Till it shall dazzle pilgrim nations
> And stammering tribes from undiscovered lands,
> Allure the living God out of the bliss,
> And all the streaming seraphim from heaven.

Perhaps a poet whose dear words have died should be content if once, no matter how briefly, they have made two lads in a greenwood more shimmery and plumed.

Nights, spring nights in special, temper and tune the Arcadian soul to very gracious tintinnabulations. Three Arcadians on one occasion, I recall, sat through the setting of one constellation after another on a cliff in the tender moonlight with a breathing sea of gray and silver tree-tops beneath them and discussed the possibility and probability of God. One, upholding the affirmative, announced that he needed no proof of divinity beyond the amethyst smudge on the horns of the moon. This was countered by the fact that this purple lay not in the moon itself but in the observer's eye. The deist, troubled, at last concluded anyway he'd rather be a god looking out than look out at a god. Only this was all said with humor and a

glistening eagerness—a sort of speech I could once fall into, but long ago.

Myself one of these mountain dwellers for four years, I have observed them, off and on, for thirty more. It is to be marveled at that they never change. They may not be quite the same faces or the precise bodies you met a few years back, but the alterations are irrelevant—a brown eye instead of a blue one, a nose set a little more to the left. The limning is the same. Neither from experience nor observation can I quite say what they learn in their Arcadia, though they gad about freely with books and pads. Indeed, many of them attempt to assume a studious air by wearing black Oxford gowns. In this they are not wholly successful, for, no matter how new, the gowns always manage to be torn and insist on hanging from the supple shoulders with something of a dionysiac abandon. Further, even the most bookish are given to pursuing their studies out under the trees. To lie under a tree on your back, overhead a blue and green and gold pattern meddled with by the idlest of breezes, is not—despite the admirable example of Mr. Newton—conducive to the acquisition of knowledge. Flat on your stomach and propped on both elbows, you will inevitably keel and end by doting on the tint of the far shadows, or, worse, by slipping into those delightful oscillations of consciousness known as cat-naps. I cannot therefore commend them for erudition. So it is all the more surprising that in after years the world esteems many of them learned or powerful or godly, and that not infrequently they have been chosen servitors of the destinies. Yet what they do or know is always less than what they are. Once one of them appeared on the first page of the newspapers because he had climbed with amazing pluck and calculated foolhardiness a hitherto unconquered mountain peak, an Indian boy his only companion. But what we who loved him like best to recall about that exploit is an inch cube of a book he carried along with him and read through—for the hundredth

time, likely—before the climb was completed. It was *Hamlet.* Another is immortal for cleansing the world of yellow fever, but the ignorant half-breeds among whom he worked remember him now only for his gentleness, his directness without bluntness, his courtesy which robbed obedience of all humiliation. Still others I understand have amassed fortunes and—to use a word much reverenced by my temporal co-tenants—succeeded. That success I suspect was in spite of their sojourn in our greenwoods. The Arcadians learned here—and that is why I am having such difficulty telling you these things—the imponderables. Ears slightly more pointed and tawny-furred, a bit of leafiness somewhere in the eyes, a manner vaguely Apriline—such attributes though unmistakable are not to be described. When the Arcadians are fools, as they sometimes are, you do not deplore their stupidity, and when they are brilliant you do not resent their intellectuality. The reason is, their manners—the kind not learned or instilled but happening, the core being sweet—are far realer than their other qualities. Socrates and Jesus and St. Francis and Sir Philip Sidney and Lovelace and Stevenson had charm; the Arcadians are of that lineage.

What Pan and Dionysos and the old ladies dower them with is supplemented by an influence which must appear to the uninitiated incompatible. By the aid of a large bell jangled over their sleeping heads from the hands of a perambulating Negro, the Arcadians at seven each morning are driven, not without maledictions, to divine service. A minute before the chapel bell stops ringing, if you happen to be passing, you may imagine the building to be on fire, for young men are dashing to it from every corner of the campus, many struggling with a collar or tie or tightening a belt in their urgent flight. But at the opening of the first hymn you'll find them inside, seated in rows, as quiet as love-birds on a perch. More quiet, in fact: as the service progresses you might well mistake their vacuity for devotion unless you happen to notice the more nocturnal souls

here and there who, sagging decorously, have let the warm sleep in.

Nevertheless, the Arcadians add to their list of benefactors those elderly gentlemen about King James who mistranslated certain Hebrew chronicles and poems into the most magnificent music the human tongue has ever syllabled. In their litanies should be named no less those others (or were they the same?) who wrote the Book of Common Prayer. Each morning these young men hear floating across their semi-consciousness the sea-surge of their own language at its most exalted—clean and thunderous and salty. Some of the wash of that stormy splendor lodges in their gay shallows, inevitably and eternally. Who could hear each morning that phrase "the beauty of holiness" without being beguiled into starrier austerities? If someone daily wished that the peace of God and the fellowship of the Holy Ghost might be with you always, could it help sobering and comforting you, even if God to you were only a gray-bearded old gentleman and the Holy Ghost a dove? Suppose you had never rambled from the divine path farther than the wild-rose hedge along its border, still would not the tide of pity for the illness of things rise in your heart at hearing: "We have wandered and strayed from Thy ways like lost sheep"? Lusty Juventus hereabouts may reflect and forget that there was a modern spiciness in the domestic difficulties of David, but it treasures unforgettably: "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament sheweth His handiwork," and "He maketh me to lie down in green pastures, He leadeth me beside the still waters." Such glistening litter is responsible, perhaps, for the tremulous awe and reverence you find in the recesses of the Arcadian soul—at least you can find them if you are wary and part very gently the sun-spotted greenery of Pan.

Girders and foundations are fine things; and necessary, no doubt. It is stated on authority that the creaking old world would fly into bits without them. But after all what I like

best is a tower window. This hankering is an endless source of trouble to me and I like to think to myself, in defense, that it comes from having lived too long among mountain-folk. For they seem always to be leaning from the top of their tower, busy with idle things; watching the leaves shake in the sunlight, the clouds tumble their soundless bales of purple down the long slopes, the seasons eternally up to tricks of beauty, laughing at things that only distance and height reveal humor in, and talking, talking, talking—the enchanting unstained silver of their voices spilling over the bright branches down into the still and happy coves. Sometimes you of the valley may not recognize them, though without introduction they are known of each other. But if some evening a personable youth happens in on your hospitality, greets you with the not irreverent informality reserved for uncles, puts the dowager Empress of Mozambique, your house guest, at her ease, flirts with your daughter, says grace before the evening meal with unsmiling piety, consumes every variety of food and drink set before him (specializing on hot biscuits) with unabashed gusto, leaves a wake of laughter whenever he dips into the conversation, pays special and apparently delighted attention to the grandmother on his left, enchants the serving maid with two bits and a smile, offers everyone a cigarette, affable under the general disapproval, sings without art a song without merit, sits at last on the doorstep in the moonlight, utterly content, with the dreamy air of the young Hermes (which only means the sense of impending adventure is about his hair like green leaves), and then if that night you dream of a branch of crab-apple blossoms dashed with rain—pursue that youth and entreat him kindly. He hails from Arcady.