The Accursed
BY THE SAME AUTHOR

NOVELS
We Were the Mulvaneys
Blonde
Middle Age: A Romance
I’ll Take You There
The Tattooed Girl
The Falls
Black Girl / White Girl
The Gravedigger’s Daughter
My Sister, My Love
Little Bird of Heaven

SHORT STORY COLLECTIONS
The Assignation
What is Here?
Faithless: Tales of Transgression
I Am No One You Know

NOVELLA
I Lock My Door Upon Myself
NON-FICTION
George Bellows: American Artist
On Boxing

PLAYS
The Perfectionist and Other Plays

MEMOIR / ESSAYS
The Faith of a Writer
A Widow’s Story

CHILDREN’S BOOKS
Come Meet Muffin!
Where is Little Reynard?
for my husband and first reader, Charlie Gross;
and for my dear friends Elaine Pagels and James Cone
From an obscure little village we have become the capital of America.

—ASHBEL GREEN, SPEAKING OF PRINCETON, NEW JERSEY, 1783

All diseases of Christians are to be ascribed to demons.

—ST. AUGUSTINE
CONTENTS

Author’s Note  1
Prologue  5

Part One

DEMON BRIDEGROOM

Ash Wednesday Eve, 1905  9
Postscript: “Ash Wednesday Eve, 1905”  45
Narcissus  55
The Spectral Daughter  67
Angel Trumpet; Or, “Mr. Mayte of Virginia”  82
Author’s Note: Princeton Snobbery  92
The Unspeakable I  95
The Burning Girl  114
Author’s Note: The Historian’s Confession  132
The Spectral Wife  141
The Demon Bridegroom  159

Part Two

THE CURSE INCARNATE

The Duel  167
Postscript: The Historian’s Dilemma  180
The Unspeakable II  181
The Cruel Husband  187
The Search Cont’d  207
October 1905  218
“God’s Creation as Viewed from the Evolutionary Hypothesis”  234
The Phantom Lovers  239
The Turquoise-Marbled Book  256
The Bog Kingdom  261
Postscript: Archaeopteryx  279
The Curse Incarnate  280

Part Three

“The Brain, Within Its Groove . . .”

“Voices”  287
Bluestocking Temptress  295
The Glass Owl  301
“Ratiocination Our Salvation”  308
The Ochre-Runnered Sleigh  325
“Snake Frenzy”  328
Postscript: Nature’s Burden  333
“Defeat at Charleston”  335
“My Precious Darling . . .”  341
“A Narrow Fellow in the Grass . . .”  370
Dr. Schuyler Skaats Wheeler’s Novelty Machine  386
Quatre Face  389
“Angel Trumpet” Elucidated  424
“Armageddon”  427
Part Four

THE CURSE EXORCISED

Cold Spring  431
21 May 1906  452
Lieutenant Bayard by Night  468
Postscript: On the Matter of the “Unspeakable” at Princeton  476
“Here Dwells Happiness”  483
The Nordic Soul  487
Terra Incognita I  530
Terra Incognita II  535
The Wheatsheaf Enigma I  550
The Wheatsheaf Enigma II  558
“Sole Living Heir of Nothingness”  561
The Temptation of Woodrow Wilson  572
Postscript: “The Second Battle of Princeton”  596
Dr. De Sweinitz’s Prescription  597
The Curse Exorcised  600
A Game of Draughts  602
The Death of Winslow Slade  622
“Revolution Is the Hour of Laughter”  627
The Crosswicks Miracle  641
Epilogue: The Covenant  649
The Accursed
AUTHOR’S NOTE

An event enters “history” when it is recorded. But there may be multiple, and competing, histories; as there are multiple, and competing, eyewitness accounts.

In this chronicle of the mysterious, seemingly linked events occurring in, and in the vicinity of, Princeton, New Jersey, in the approximate years 1900–1910, “histories” have been condensed to a single “history” as a decade in time has been condensed, for purposes of aesthetic unity, to a period of approximately fourteen months in 1905–1906.

I know that a historian should be “objective”—but I am so passionately involved in this chronicle, and so eager to expose to a new century of readers some of the revelations regarding a tragic sequence of events occurring in the early years of the twentieth century in central New Jersey, it is very difficult for me to retain a calm, let alone a scholarly, tone. I have long been dismayed by the shoddy histories that have been written about this era in Princeton—for instance, Q. T. Hollinger’s *The Unsolved Enigma of the Crosswicks Curse: A Fresh Inquiry* (1949), a compendium of truths, half-truths, and outright falsehoods published by a local amateur historian in an effort to correct the most obvious errors of previous historians (Tite, Birdseye, Worthing, and Croft-Crooke) and the one-time best seller *The Vampire Murders of Old Princeton* (1938) by an “anonymous” author (believed to be a resident of the West End of Princeton), a notorious exploitive effort that dwells upon the superficial “sensational” aspects of the Curse, at the
expense of the more subtle and less evident—i.e., the psychological, moral, and spiritual.

I am embarrassed to state here, so bluntly, at the very start of my chronicle, my particular qualifications for taking on this challenging project. So I will mention only that, like several key individuals in this chronicle, I am a graduate of Princeton University (Class of 1927). I have long been a native Princetonian, born in February 1906, and baptized in the First Presbyterian Church of Princeton; I am descended from two of the oldest Princeton families, the Strachans and the van Dycks; my family residence was that austere old French Normandy stone mansion at 87 Hodge Road, now owned by strangers with a name ending in —stein who, it is said, have barbarously “gutted” the interior of the house and “renovated” it in a “more modern” style. (I apologize for this intercalation! It is not so much an emotional as it is an aesthetic and moral outburst I promise will not happen again.) Thus, though a very young child in the aftermath of the “accursed” era, I passed my adolescence in Princeton at a time when the tragic mysteries were often talked-of, in wonderment and dread; and when the forced resignation of Woodrow Wilson from the presidency of Princeton University, in 1910, was still a matter of both regret and malicious mirth in the community.

Through these connections, and others, I have been privy to many materials unavailable to other historians, like the shocking, secret coded journal of the invalid Mrs. Adelaide McLean Burr, and the intimate (and also rather shocking) personal letters of Woodrow Wilson to his beloved wife Ellen, as well as the hallucinatory ravings of the “accursed” grandchildren of Winslow Slade. (Todd Slade was an older classmate of mine at the Princeton Academy, whom I knew only at a distance.) Also, I have had access to many other personal documents—letters, diaries, journals—never available to outsiders. In addition, I have had the privilege of consulting the Manuscripts and Special Collections of Firestone Library at Princeton University. (Though I can’t boast of having waded through the legendary five tons of research materials like Woodrow Wilson’s early biographer Ray
Stannard Baker, I am sure that I’ve closely perused at least a full ton.) I hope it doesn’t sound boastful to claim that of all persons living—now—no one is possessed of as much information as I am concerning the private, as well as the public, nature of the Curse.

The reader, most likely a child of this century, is to be cautioned against judging too harshly these persons of a bygone era. It is naïve to imagine that, in their place, we might have better resisted the incursions of the Curse; or might have better withstood the temptation to despair. It is not difficult for us, living seven decades after the Curse, or, as it was sometimes called, the Horror, had run its course, to recognize a pattern as it emerged; but imagine the confusion, alarm, and panic suffered by the innocent, during those fourteen months of ever-increasing and totally mysterious disaster! No more than the first victims of a terrible plague can know what fate is befalling them, its depth and breadth and impersonality, could the majority of the victims of the Curse comprehend their situation—to see that, beneath the numerous evils unleashed upon them in these ironically idyllic settings, a single Evil lay.

For, consider: might mere pawns in a game of chess conceive of the fact that they are playing-pieces, and not in control of their fate; what would give them the power to lift themselves above the playing board, to a height at which the design of the game becomes clear? I’m afraid that this is not very likely, for them as for us: we cannot know if we act or are acted upon; whether we are playing pieces in the game, or are the very game ourselves.

M. W. van Dyck II
Eaglestone Manor
Princeton, New Jersey
24 June 1984
It is an afternoon in autumn, near dusk. The western sky is a spider's web of translucent gold. I am being brought by carriage—two horses—muted thunder of their hooves—along narrow country roads between hilly fields touched with the sun's slanted rays, to the village of Princeton, New Jersey. The urgent pace of the horses has a dreamlike air, like the rocking motion of the carriage; and whoever is driving the horses his face I cannot see, only his back—stiff, straight, in a tight-fitting dark coat.

Quickening of a heartbeat that must be my own yet seems to emanate from without, like a great vibration of the very earth. There is a sense of exhilaration that seems to spring, not from within me, but from the countryside. How hopeful I am! How excited! With what childlike affection, shading into wonderment, I greet this familiar yet near-forgotten landscape! Cornfields, wheat fields, pastures in which dairy cows graze like motionless figures in a landscape by Corot . . . the calls of red-winged blackbirds and starlings . . . the shallow though swift-flowing Stony Brook Creek and the narrow wood-plank bridge over which the horses' hooves and the carriage wheels thump . . . a smell of rich, moist earth, harvest . . . I see that I am being propelled along the Great Road, I am nearing home, I am nearing the mysterious origin of my birth. This journey I undertake with such anticipation is not one of geographical space but one of Time—for it is the year 1905 that is my destination.

1905!—the very year of the Curse.

Now, almost too soon, I am approaching the outskirts of Princeton. It is a small country town of only a few thousand inhabitants, its population swollen by university...
students during the school term. Spires of churches appear in the near distance—for there are numerous churches in Princeton. Modest farmhouses have given way to more substantial homes. As the Great Road advances, very substantial homes.

How strange, I am thinking—there are no human figures. No other carriages, or motorcars. A stable, a lengthy expanse of a wrought iron fence along Elm Road, behind which Crosswicks Manse is hidden by tall splendid elms, oaks, and evergreens; here is a pasture bordering the redbrick Princeton Theological Seminary where more trees grow, quite gigantic trees they seem, whose gnarled roots are exposed. Now, on Nassau Street, I am passing the wrought iron gate that leads into the university—to fabled Nassau Hall, where once the Continental Congress met, in 1783. Yet, there are no figures on the Princeton campus—all is empty, deserted. Badly I would like to be taken along Bayard Lane to Hodge Road—to my family home; how my heart yearns, to turn up the drive, and to be brought to the very door at the side of the house, through which I might enter with a wild elated shout—I am here! I am home! But the driver does not seem to hear me. Or perhaps I am too shy to call to him, to countermand the directions he has been given. We are passing a church with a glaring white facade, and a high gleaming cross that flashes light in the sun; the carriage swerves, as if one of the horses had caught a pebble in his hoof; I am staring at the churchyard, for now we are on Witherspoon Street, very nearly in the Negro quarter, and the thought comes to me sharp as a knife-blade entering my flesh, Why, they are all dead, now—that is why no one is here. Except me.
PART I

Demon Bridegroom
ASH WEDNESDAY EVE, 1905

1.

Fellow historians will be shocked, dismayed, and perhaps incredulous—I am daring to suggest that the Curse did not first manifest itself on June 4, 1905, which was the disastrous morning of Annabel Slade’s wedding, and generally acknowledged to be the initial public manifestation of the Curse, but rather earlier, in the late winter of the year, on the eve of Ash Wednesday in early March.

This was the evening of Woodrow Wilson’s (clandestine) visit to his longtime mentor Winslow Slade, but also the evening of the day when Woodrow Wilson experienced a considerable shock to his sense of family, indeed racial identity.

Innocently it began: at Nassau Hall, in the president’s office, with a visit from a young seminarian named Yaeger Washington Ruggles who had also been employed as Latin preceptor at the university, to assist in the instruction of undergraduates. (Intent upon reforming the quality of education at Princeton, with its reputation as a Southern-biased, largely Presbyterian boys’ school set beside which its rival Harvard University was a paradigm of academic excellence, Woodrow Wilson had initiated...
a new pedagogy in which bright young men were hired to assist older professors in their lecture courses; Yaeger Ruggles was one of these young preceptors, popular in the better homes of Princeton as at the university, as eligible bachelors are likely to be in a university town.) Yaeger Ruggles was a slender, slight, soft-spoken fellow Virginian, a distant cousin of Wilson’s who had introduced himself to the university president after he’d enrolled in his first year at the Princeton Theological Seminary; Wilson had personally hired him to be a preceptor, impressed with his courtesy, bearing, and intelligence. At their first meeting, Yaeger Ruggles had brought with him a letter from an elderly aunt, living in Roanoke, herself a cousin of Wilson’s father’s aunt. This web of intricate connections was very Southern; despite the fact that Woodrow Wilson’s branch of the family was clearly more affluent, and more socially prominent than Yaeger Ruggles’s family, who dwelt largely in the mountainous area west of Roanoke, Woodrow Wilson had made an effort to befriend the young man, inviting him to the larger receptions and soirees at his home, and introducing him to the sons and daughters of his well-to-do Princeton associates and neighbors. Though older than Ruggles by more than twenty years, Woodrow Wilson saw in his young kinsman something of himself, at an earlier age when he’d been a law student in Virginia with an abiding interest in theology. (Woodrow Wilson was the son of a preeminent Presbyterian minister who’d been a chaplain for the Confederate Army; his maternal grandfather was a Presbyterian minister in Rome, Georgia, also a staunch religious and political conservative.) At the time of Yaeger Ruggles’s visit to President Wilson, in his office in Nassau Hall, the two had been acquainted for more than two years. Woodrow Wilson had not seen so much of his young relative as he’d wished, for his Princeton social life had to be spent in cultivating the rich and influential. “A private college requires donors. Tuition alone is inadequate”—so Woodrow Wilson said often, in speeches as in private conversations. He did regret not seeing more of Yaeger, for he had but three daughters and no son; and now, with his wife’s chronic ill health, that had become a sort of malaise
of the spirit, as well as her advancing age, it was not likely that Woodrow would ever have a son. Yaeger's warm dark intelligent eyes invariably moved Woodrow to an indefinable emotion, with the intensity of memory. His hair was very dark, as Woodrow's had once been, but thick and springy, where Woodrow's was rather thin, combed flat against his head. And there was something thrilling about the young man's softly modulated baritone voice also, that seemed to remind Wilson of a beloved voice or voices of his childhood in Virginia and Georgia. It had been a wild impulse of Woodrow's—(since childhood in his rigid Presbyterian household, Woodrow had been prone to near-irresistible urges and impulses of every kind, to which he'd rarely given in)—to begin singing in Yaeger's presence, that the younger man might join him; for Woodrow had loved his college glee clubs, and liked to think that he had a passably fair tenor voice, if untrained and, in recent years, unused.

But it would be a Protestant hymn Woodrow would sing with Yaeger, something melancholy, mournful, yearning, and deliciously submissive—Rock of Ages, cleft for me! Let me hide myself in Thee! Let the water and the blood, that thy wounded side did flow...

Woodrow had not yet heard Yaeger speak in public, but he'd predicted, in Princeton circles, and to the very dean of the seminary himself, that his young "Virginian cousin" would one day be an excellent minister—at which time, Woodrow wryly thought, Yaeger too would understand the value of cultivating the wealthy at the expense of one's own predilections.

But this afternoon, Yaeger Washington Ruggles was not so composed as he usually was. He appeared to be short of breath, as if he'd bounded up the stone steps of Nassau Hall; he did not smile so readily and so sympathetically as he usually did. Nor was his hurried handshake so firm, or so warm. Woodrow saw with a pang of displeasure—(for it pained him, to feel even an inward rebuke of anyone whom he liked)—that the seminarian's shirt collar was open at his throat, as if, in an effort to breathe, he'd unconsciously tugged at it; he had not shaved fastidiously and his skin,
ordinarily of a more healthy tone than Woodrow’s own, seemed darkened as by a shadow.

“Woodrow! I must speak with you.”

“But of course, Yaeger—we are speaking.”

Woodrow half-rose from his chair, behind his massive desk; then remained seated, in his rather formal posture. The office of the president was booklined, floor to ceiling; windows opened out onto the cultivated green of Nassau Hall’s large and picturesque front lawn, that swept to Nassau Street and the wrought iron gates of the university; and, to the rear, another grassy knoll, that led to Clio and Whig Halls, stately Greek temples of startling if somewhat incongruous Attic beauty amid the darker, Gothic university architecture. Behind Woodrow on the wall was a bewigged portrait of Aaron Burr, Sr., Princeton University’s first president to take office in Nassau Hall.

“Yaeger, what is it? You seem troubled.”

“You have heard, Woodrow? The terrible thing that happened yesterday in Camden?”

“Why, I think that I—I have not ‘heard’ . . . What is it?”

Woodrow smiled, puzzled. His polished eyeglasses winked.

In fact, Woodrow had been hearing, or half-hearing, of something very ugly through the day, at the Nassau Club where he had had lunch with several trustees and near the front steps of Nassau Hall where he’d overheard several preceptors talking together in lowered voices. (It was a disadvantage of the presidency, as it had not been when Woodrow was a popular professor at the university, that, sighting him, the younger faculty in particular seemed to freeze, and to smile at him with expressions of forced courtesy and affability.) And it seemed to him too, that morning at breakfast, in his home at Prospect, that their Negro servant Clytie had been unusually silent, and had barely responded when Woodrow greeted her with his customary warm bright smile—“Good morning, Clytie! What have you prepared for us today?” (For Clytie, though born in Newark, New Jersey, had Southern forebears and could prepare breakfasts of the
sort Woodrow had had as a boy in Augusta, Georgia, and elsewhere in
the South; she was wonderfully talented, and often prepared a surprise
treat for the Wilson family—butternut corn bread, sausage gravy and bis-
cuits, blueberry pancakes with maple syrup, creamy cheese grits and ham-
scrambled eggs of which Woodrow, with his sensitive stomach, could eat
only a sampling, but which was very pleasing to him as a way of beginning
what would likely be one of his complicated, exhausting, and even hazard-
ous days in Nassau Hall.)

Though Woodrow invited Yaeger Ruggles to sit down, the young
seminarian seemed scarcely to hear and remained standing; in fact, ner-
vously pacing about in a way that grated on his elder kinsman’s nerves,
as Yaeger spoke in a rambling and incoherent manner of—(the term
was so vulgar, Woodrow held himself stiff as if in opposition to the very
sound)—an incident that had occurred the previous night in Camden,
New Jersey—lynching.

And another ugly term which made Woodrow very uneasy, as par-
ents and his Virginian and Georgian relatives were not unsympathetic to
the Protestant organization’s goals if not its specific methods—Ku Klux
Klan.

“There were two victims, Woodrow! Ordinarily, there is just one—a
helpless man—a helpless black man—but last night, in Camden, in that
hellish place, which is a center of ‘white supremacy’—there was a male vic-
tim, and a female. A nineteen-year-old boy and his twenty-three-year-old
sister, who was pregnant. You won’t find their names in the newspapers—
the Trenton paper hasn’t reported the lynching at all, and the Newark paper
placed a brief article on an inside page. The Klan led a mob of people—not
just men but women, and young children—who were looking for a young
black man who’d allegedly insulted a white man on the street—whoever
the young black man was, no one was sure—but they came across another
young man named Pryde who was returning home from work, attacked
him and beat him and dragged him to be hanged, and his sister tried to
stop them, tried to attack some of them and was arrested by the sheriff
of Camden County and handcuffed, then turned over to the mob. By this time—"

"Yaeger, please! Don’t talk so loudly, my office staff will hear. And please—if you can—stop your nervous pacing."

Woodrow removed a handkerchief from his pocket, and dabbed at his warm forehead. How faint-headed he was feeling! This ugly story was not something Woodrow had expected to hear, amid a succession of afternoon appointments in the president’s office in Nassau Hall.

And Woodrow was seriously concerned that his office staff, his secretary Matilde and her assistants, might overhear the seminarian’s raised voice and something of his words, which could not fail to appall them.

Yaeger protested, “But, Woodrow—the Klan murdered two innocent people last night, hardly more than fifty miles from Princeton—from this very office! That they are ‘Negroes’ does not make their suffering and their deaths any less horrible. Our students are talking of it—some of them, Southerners, are joking of it—your faculty colleagues are talking of it—every Negro in Princeton knows of it, or something of it—the most hideous part being, after the Klan leaders hanged the young man, and doused his body with gasoline and lighted it, his sister was brought to the same site, to be murdered beside him. And the sheriff of Camden County did nothing to prevent the murders and made no attempt to arrest or even question anyone afterward. There were said to have been more than seven hundred people gathered at the outskirts of Camden, to witness the lynchings. Some were said to have crossed the bridge from Philadelphia—the lynching must have been planned beforehand. The bodies burned for some time—some of the mob was taking pictures. What a nightmare! In our Christian nation, forty years after the Civil War! It makes me ill—sick to death . . . These lynchings are common in the South, and the murderers never brought to justice, and now they have increased in New Jersey, there was a lynching in Zarephath only a year ago—where the ‘white supremacists’ have their own church—the Pillar of Fire—and in the Pine Barrens, and in Cape May . . ."
“These are terrible events, Yaeger, but—why are you telling me about them, at such a time? I am upset too, of course—as a Christian, I cannot countenance murder—or any sort of mob violence—we must have a ‘rule of law’—not passion—but—if law enforcement officers refuse to arrest the guilty, and local sentiment makes a criminal indictment and a trial unlikely—what are we, here in Princeton, to do? There are barbarous places in this country, as in the world—at times, a spirit of infamy—evil . . .”

Woodrow was speaking rapidly. By now he was on his feet, agitated. It was not good for him, his physician had warned him, to become excited, upset, or even emotional—since childhood, Woodrow had been an oversensitive child, and had suffered ill health well into his teens; he could not bear it, if anyone spoke loudly or emotionally in his presence, his heart beat rapidly and erratically bearing an insufficient amount of blood to his brain, that began to “faint”—and so now Woodrow found himself leaning forward, resting the palms of his hands on his desk blotter, his eyesight blotched and a ringing in his ears; his physician had warned him, too, of high blood pressure, which was shared by many in his father’s family, that might lead to a stroke; even as his inconsiderate young kinsman dared to interrupt him with more of the lurid story, more ugly and unfairly accusatory words—“You, Woodrow, with the authority of your office, can speak out against these atrocities. You might join with other Princeton leaders—Winslow Slade, for instance—you are a good friend of Reverend Slade’s, he would listen to you—and others in Princeton, among your influential friends. The horror of lynching is that no one stops it; among influential Christians like yourself, no one speaks against it.”

Woodrow objected, this was not true: “Many have spoken against—that terrible mob violence—‘lynchings.’ I have spoken against—’l-lynchings.’ I hope that my example as a Christian has been—is—a model of—Christian belief—’Love thy neighbor as thyself’—it is the lynchpin of our religion . . .” (Damn!—he had not meant to say lynchpin: a kind of demon had tripped his tongue, as Yaeger stared at him blankly. ) “You should know, Yaeger—of course you know—it has been
my effort here, at Princeton, to reform the university—to transform the undergraduate curriculum, for instance—and to instill more *democracy* wherever I can. The eating clubs, the entrenched ‘aristocracy’—I have been battling them, you must know, since I took office. And this enemy of mine—Dean West! *He* is a nemesis I must defeat, or render less powerful—before I can take on the responsibility of—of—” Woodrow stammered, not knowing what he meant to say. It was often that his thoughts flew ahead of his words, when he was in an emotional mood; which was why, as he’d been warned, and had warned himself, he must not be *carried away* by any rush of emotion. “—of confronting the Klan, and their myriad supporters in the state, who are not so many as in the South and yet—and yet—they are many . . .”

“ ‘Supporters’ in the state? Do you mean, ‘law-abiding Christian hypocrites’? The hell with them! *You* must speak out.”

“I—I must—‘speak’—? But—the issue is not so—simple . . .”

It had been a shock to Woodrow, though not exactly a surprise, that, of the twenty-five trustees of Princeton University, who had hired him out of the ranks of the faculty, and whose bidding he was expected to exercise, to a degree, were not, on the whole, as one soon gathered, unsympathetic to the *white supremacist* doctrine, though surely appalled, as any civilized person would be, by the Klan’s strategies of terror. *Keeping the Negroes in their place* was the purpose of the Klan’s vigilante activities, and not violence for its own sake—as the Klan’s supporters argued.

*Keeping the purity of the white race from mongrelization*—this was a yet more basic tenet, with which very few Caucasians were likely to disagree.

But Woodrow could not hope to reason with Yaeger Ruggles, in the seminarian’s excitable mood.

Nor could Woodrow pursue this conversation at the present time, for he had a pressing appointment within a few minutes, with one of his (sadly few) *confidants* among the Princeton faculty; more urgently, he was feeling unmistakably nauseated, a warning signal of more extreme nausea to come if he didn’t soon take a teaspoonful of the “calming” medicine
prescribed to him by Dr. Hatch, kept in a drawer in the president’s desk.

“Well, Yaeger. It is a terrible, terrible thing—as you have reported to me—a ‘lynching’—alleged . . . We may expect this in south Jersey but not in Camden, so near Philadelphia! But I’m afraid I can’t speak with you much longer, as I have an appointment at . . . Yaeger, what on earth is wrong?”

Woodrow was shocked to see that his young kinsman, who had always regarded Woodrow Wilson with the utmost respect and admiration, was now glaring at him, as a sulky and self-righteous adolescent might glare at a parent.

The carelessly shaven jaws were trembling with disdain, or frank dislike. The nostrils were widened, very dark. And the eyes were not so attractive now but somewhat protuberant, like the eyes of a wild beast about to leap.

Yaeger’s voice was not so gently modulated now but frankly insolent: “What is wrong with—who, Woodrow? Me? Or you?”

Woodrow protested angrily, “Yaeger, that’s enough. You may be a distant relation of mine, through my father’s family, but that—that does not—give you the right to be disrespectful to me, and to speak in a loud voice to upset my staff. This ‘ugly episode’—as you have reported it to me—is a good example of why we must not allow our emotions to govern us. We must have a—a civilization of law—and not—not—anarchy.”

Stubbornly Yaeger persisted: “Will you talk to Winslow Slade, at least? If he could preach from his pulpit, this Sunday—that would be a good, brave thing for Princeton; and maybe it would get into the newspapers. And if the president of Princeton, Woodrow Wilson, could give a public comment also—”

“Yaeger, I’ve told you! I can’t discuss this now. I have an appointment at three-fifteen, and I—I am not feeling altogether well, as a consequence of our exchange.”

“Well, I’m sorry for that. Very sorry to hear that.”

(Was Yaeger speaking sarcastically? Woodrow could not bring himself to believe so.)
Woodrow wanted to protest: he was a friend to the Negro race, surely!

He was a Democrat. In every public utterance, he spoke of equality.

Though he did not believe in women’s suffrage—certainly. Very few persons of his close acquaintance, including his dear wife, Ellen, believed in so radical and unnatural a notion.

Woodrow would have liked to explain to Yaeger how systematically and explicitly he was fair-minded toward Negroes. Over the protests of certain of the trustees and faculty, he saw to it that Booker T. Washington was not only invited to his Princeton inauguration, as a sensible, educated Negro promoting a “gradualism” of racial reform, unlike the radical W. E. B. DuBois, but that the Negro educator was asked to give one of the speeches at the ceremony, alongside several of the most distinguished white persons of the day.

Also, Booker T. Washington had been made welcome at a commencement luncheon at Prospect, where he’d been seated among the other guests in a most relaxed manner; though an invitation to a lavish dinner at the Nassau Club, given the night before, had not been extended to him, since the Nassau Club did not admit Negroes onto its premises (except as servants). That, President Wilson had been powerless to modify, since the Nassau Club was a private club.

In addition, Professor van Dyck of the Philosophy Department often told the tale of how one Reverend Robeson, of the Witherspoon Street Presbyterian Church, had aspired to a meeting with the president of Princeton University, to suggest that his son Paul, allegedly an “outstanding” student and athlete, be admitted to the university; scarcely knowing, from the courtesy with which Woodrow Wilson greeted this remarkable request, how audacious it was; and how gentlemanly Wilson’s reply—“Reverend, I am sure that your son is indeed ‘outstanding.’ But it is not quite the right time in history for a Negro lad to enroll at Princeton—that time, I am afraid, will not be for a while.” So long as Negroes—darkies, as they were more fondly called, in Woodrow’s childhood—knew their place,
and were not derelict as servants and workers, Dr. Wilson had very little prejudice against them, in most respects.

“Yes,” Yaeger said, with a turn of the knife-blade, not unlike the cruelty of an adolescent boy with regard to his father, “it would be tragic if you were not feeling ‘altogether well’—as a consequence of my unwelcome appeal.”

In a part of Woodrow’s mind, or of his heart, which was hardly so calloused as Yaeger Ruggles seemed to be implying, Woodrow was deeply wounded, that the young man he so cared for seemed now scarcely to care for him. Stiffly he said:

“There is some mystery here, Yaeger, I think—as to why you are so very—so very concerned . . .”

‘Mystery? D’you think so, Woodrow?” Yaeger spoke with an insolent smile; all this while he had been smiling at his elder kinsman, a mirthless grin, like the grimace of a gargoyle. He too was agitated, and even trembling, but he could not resist a parting riposte as he prepared to leave the president’s office, “You have never looked at me closely enough, ‘Cousin Woodrow.’ If you had, or if you were capable of such insight, you would know exactly why I, and others like me in this accursed United States of America, are so very concerned.”

As Yaeger turned away contemptuously yet Woodrow saw, suddenly—saw the young man’s facial features, his lips, nose, the texture and tone of his skin, even the just-perceptible “kinkiness” of his hair—saw, and, in a rush of sickening horror, understood.

* * *

PRESIDENT WILSON! OH—President Wilson!

Are you all right? Did you injure yourself? Let us help you to your feet—back to your desk . . .

Shall we summon Dr. Hatch? Shall we summon—Mrs. Wilson?

* * *
NEITHER DR. HATCH nor Mrs. Wilson was summoned. For Woodrow was quite recovered, within minutes.

Yet, he had had enough of Nassau Hall, for the day.

Though unsteady on his feet, and ashen-faced, yet President Wilson insisted upon walking unassisted to the president’s mansion, Prospect, located at the heart of the university campus: an austere example of Italianate architecture built by the architect John Notman, that was the president’s home.

Something of a fishbowl, Woodrow thought the house. And Ellen and their daughters were made to feel self-conscious there—for prankish undergraduates could circle the house at will, in the dark, peeking into windows beneath blinds.

Still, Prospect was a very attractive and imposing residence. And Woodrow was unfailingly grateful that he lived in it; and not, as fate might have devised, another man.

Fortunately, Ellen was out. The girls were still at school. Clytie and Lucinda were in the cellar doing laundry—the smells of wet things, a deeper and harsher smell as of detergent and even lye soap provoked in Woodrow one of his memory pangs of childhood, that increased his sense of excited unease and dread.

It was a household of females. So often, he could not breathe.

Yet this afternoon he was allowed unimpeded to ascend to the dim-lit atmosphere of the master bedroom where, in the privacy of his step-in closet, he was free to select a pill, a second pill, and a third pill from his armamentarium of pills, medicines, and “tonics”—that rivaled his mother’s armamentarium of old.

Woodrow’s dear mother! How he missed her, in his weak moods especially.

She could guide him. She could instruct him in what course to take, in this matter of his nemesis Dean West.

As to the matter of the ugly Klan lynching—Mrs. Wilson would not have spoken of so obscene an event, if she had even heard of it.
For there are some things too ugly for women to know of. Genteel Christian women, at least.

_A man’s responsibility is to shield them. No good can come of them knowing all that we must know._

Woodrow’s Southern relatives would have pointed out that mob violence against Negroes was a consequence of the abolition of slavery—blame, if there be blame, must be laid where it is due, with the abolitionists and war-mongers among the Republicans.

The defeat of the Confederacy was the defeat of—a way of civilization that was superior to its conqueror’s.

Hideous, what Yaeger Ruggles had revealed to him!—he who had liked the young man so much, and had, precipitously perhaps, appointed him a Latin preceptor.

That appointment, Dr. Wilson would have to rethink.

And perhaps too, he must have a private conversation with Reverend Shackleton, head of the Princeton Theological Seminary.

Unfair! And very crude! The charges Yaeger Ruggles had brought against him.

In such times of distress it was Woodrow’s usual routine to soak a compress in cold water, lie on his bed and position the compress over his aching eyes. Soon then he felt a shuddering voluptuous surrender to—he knew not what.

_The Bog Kingdom. Bidding him enter! Ah, enter!_  
_There, all wishes are fulfilled. The more forbidden, the more delicious._

He had not had the energy to undress. Only his black-polished shoes had been removed. Carefully placed side by side on the carpet.

So unmoving Woodrow was in sleep, he hardly risked rumpling his white cotton shirt, his vest and neatly pressed trousers. So still did he sleep, at such times, he did not risk sweating and dampening his clothing.

Yet, his thoughts raged like hornets.

_Never can I tell Ellen. The poor woman would be distraught, appalled—the_
deceptive young “cousin” has come into our house, at my invitation; he has sat at my dining room table, as my guest; he has exchanged conversations with my dear daughters . . .

Now the full horror of the revelation washed over Woodrow—the danger in which he’d put, in all ignorance, his Margaret, his Jessie, and his Eleanor.

2.

It was a secret late-night meeting on the very eve of Ash Wednesday, recorded in no document except, in code, in the diary of Woodrow Wilson for March 1905.*

It was, one might say, a clandestine meeting. For so Woodrow Wilson, troubled in spirit, considered it.

*I will implore him. I will humble myself, and beg for help.

I am not proud—no longer!

This meeting, more than the earlier meeting between Woodrow Wilson and his impetuous young kinsman Yaeger Ruggles, marks the first true emergence of the Curse; as an early, subtle and easily overlooked symptom marks the emergence to come of a deadly disease.

As, one might say, the early symptoms of Woodrow Wilson’s breakdown, stroke and collapse of May 1906 were prefigured here, in the events of this day, unsuspected by Woodrow Wilson, his family and his most trusted friends.

For that evening, after dinner, feeling more robust, though his brain was assailed by a thousand worries, Woodrow decided to walk a windy mile to Crosswicks Manse on Elm Road, the family estate of the Slades. It had been his request to see Reverend Winslow Slade in private, and in

* Which diary, included in the Firestone Library Special Collections, was provided for my perusal by the kindly curator who had no idea, for how could he have known?—that I alone, of the numerous researchers who have contemplated five tons of Wilsonia, managed to crack the ingenious code.
secrecy, at 10 p.m. precisely; Woodrow, who had a boyish predilection for such schemes, as a way of avoiding the unwanted attention of others, was to enter the dignified old stone house by a side door that led into Reverend Slade’s library, and bypass the large rooms at the front of the house. For this was not a social meeting—there was no need to involve any of the household staff or any of Dr. Slade’s family.

The last thing Woodrow Wilson wanted was to be talked-of; to be the object of speculation, crude gossip.

His dignity was such, yes and his pride: he could not bear his name, his reputation, his motives so besmirched.

For it was beginning to be generally known in Princeton, in this fourth and most tumultuous year of his presidency of the university, that Woodrow Wilson was encountering a cunning, ruthless, and unified opposition led by the politically astute Dean Andrew Fleming West, whose administrative position at the university preceded Woodrow’s inauguration as president; and who was reputed to be deeply aggrieved that the presidency, more or less promised to him by the board of trustees, had unaccountably been offered to his younger rival Woodrow Wilson, who had not the grace to decline in his favor.

All this rankled, and was making Woodrow’s life miserable; his primary organ of discomfort was his stomach, and intestines; yet nearly so vulnerable, his poor aching brain that buzzed through day and night like a hive of maddened hornets. Yet, as a responsible administrator, and an astute politician, he was able to disguise his condition much of the time, even in the very company of West, who confronted Woodrow too with mock courtesy, like an unctuous hypocrite in a Molière comedy whose glances into the audience draw an unjust sympathy, to the detriment of the idealistic hero.

Like a large ungainly burden, a steamer trunk perhaps, stuffed with unwanted and outgrown clothing, shoes and the miscellany of an utterly ordinary and unexamined life, Woodrow Wilson sought to carry the
weight of such anxiety to his mentor, and unburden himself of it, at his astonished elder's feet.

It would not be the first time that “Tommy” Wilson had come to appeal to “Win” Slade, surreptitiously; but it would be the final time.*

“Woodrow, hello! Come inside, please.”

A gust of wind, tinged with irony, accompanied Woodrow into the elder man's library.

Reverend Slade grasped the younger man's hand, that was rather chill, and limp; a shudder seemed to run from the one to the other, leaving the elder man slightly shaken.

“I gather that there is something troubling you, Woodrow? I hope—it isn't—anything involving your family?”

Between the two, there had sometimes been talk, anxious on Woodrow's side and consoling and comforting on Winslow's, about Woodrow's "marital relations"—(which is not to say “sexual relations”—the men would never have discussed so painfully private a matter)—and Woodrow's disappointment at being the father of only girls.

Woodrow, breathless from the wind-buffeted walk along Elm Road, where streetlights were few, and very little starlight assisted his way, and but a gauze-masked moon, stared at his friend for a moment without comprehending his question. Family? Was Winslow Slade alluding to Woodrow's distant "cousin"—Yaeger Washington Ruggles?

Then, Woodrow realized that of course Winslow was referring to his wife, Ellen, and their daughters. Family.

* In order to give shape to my massive chronicle, that has been assembled from countless sources, I intend to “leap ahead” in time whenever it seems helpful. Also, I should note here that Thomas Woodrow Wilson, born 1856, soon saw the advantage, as an ambitious young man, of a more distinctive-sounding name: Woodrow Wilson. It was a proud if somewhat fantastical claim of Woodrow’s that his lineage extended back to one "Patrik Wodro" who had crossed the English Channel with William the Conqueror; and that no one of significance had yet asserted himself in American politics who was not of Scots-English origin—a somewhat contradictory claim, it would seem.
“No, Winslow. All is well there.” (Was this so? The answer came quickly, automatically; for it was so often asked.) “It’s another matter I’ve come to discuss with you. Except—I am very ashamed.”

‘Ashamed’? Why?”

“But I must unburden my heart to you, Winslow. For I have no one else.”

“Please, Woodrow! Take a seat. Beside the fire, for you do look chilled. And would you like something to drink—to warm you?”

No, no! Woodrow rarely drank.

Out of personal disdain, or, if he gave thought to it, out of revulsion for the excess of drinking he’d had occasion to observe in certain households in the South.

Woodrow shivered, sinking into a chair by the fireplace that faced his gracious host. Out of nervousness he removed his eyeglasses to polish them vigorously, a habit that annoyed others, though Winslow Slade took little notice.

“It is so peaceful here. Thank you, Dr. Slade, for taking time to speak with me!”

“Of course, Woodrow. You know that I am here, at any time, as your friend and ‘spiritual counselor’—if you wish.”

In his heightened state of nerves Woodrow glanced about the library, which was familiar to him, yet never failed to rouse him to awe. Indeed, Winslow Slade’s library was one of the marvels of the wealthy West End of Princeton, for the part-retired Presbyterian minister was the owner of a (just slightly damaged and incomplete) copy of the legendary Gutenberg Bible of 1445, which was positioned on a stand close by Winslow’s carved mahogany desk; on another pedestal was an early, 1895 edition of the Oxford English Dictionary. And there were first editions of works by Goethe, Kant, Hegel, Fichte, Schelling, Schleiermacher, Ritschl, James Hutchinson Stirling and Thomas Carlyle among others. In his youth Dr. Slade had been something of a classics scholar, and so there were volumes by Plato, Aristotle, Epicurus, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides and others in Greek, as well
as Latin texts—Virgil, Caesar, Cicero, Seneca, Livy, Cato, and (surprisingly, considering the unmitigated pagan nature of their verse) Ovid, Catullus, and Petronius. And there were the English classics of course—the leather-bound works of Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Dryden, Pope, Swift, Samuel Johnson through the Romantics—Wordsworth and Coleridge, Byron, Shelley, Keats and, allegedly Dr. Slade’s favorite, the fated John Clare. The library was designed by the celebrated architect John McComb, Jr., famous for having designed Alexander Hamilton’s Grange: among its features were an ornate coffered ceiling, paneled walls of fifteenth-century tooled leather (reputedly taken from the home of Titian), and portraits of such distinguished Slade ancestors as General Elias Slade, the Reverend Azariah Slade, and the Reverend Jonathan Edwards (related by marriage to the original Slade family)—each rendered powerfully by John Singleton Copley. Portraits, daguerreotypes, and shadow drawings of Dr. Slade’s sons Augustus and Copplestone, and his grandchildren Josiah, Annabel, Todd, and little Oriana, also hung on the wall, just behind Dr. Slade’s desk; and should be mentioned here since all but the child Oriana will figure prominently in this chronicle.

(Is this unobtrusively done? I am a historian, and not a literary stylist; so must “intercalate” such details very consciously, that the reader will take note of them; yet not so obtrusively, that the sensitive reader is offended by over-explicitness.)

In this gracious room, commanding a position of prominence, was a fireplace of stately proportions in whose marble mantel was carved, in Gothic letters, HIC HABITAT FELICITAS—which caught Woodrow’s eye, as always it did when he visited Winslow Slade. With a morose smile Woodrow leaned over to run his fingertips over the chiseled inscription, saying, “Here, Dr. Slade, I have no doubt that happiness abides; but at my home, and in the president’s office in Nassau Hall—not likely.”

During the conversation to follow, the fire in the fireplace blazed and waned; and blazed again, and again waned; until, without either man noticing, the logs collapsed in a crumbling of smoldering coals, like distant,
dying suns, into darkness and oblivion which not even a belated poker-stirring, by the younger man, could revive.

AT THIS TIME, before the terrible incursions of the Curse would prematurely age him, Winslow Slade, partly retired from his longtime pastorship at the First Presbyterian Church of Princeton, was a vigorous gentleman of seventy-four, who looked at least a decade younger; as his visitor, not yet fifty, yet looked, with such strain in his face, and his eyes shadowed in the firelight, at least a decade older than his age.

Since the death of his second wife Tabitha some years before, Dr. Slade had remained a widower, and took what melancholy joy he could largely from his several grandchildren.

Though fallen now into quasi-oblivion, known only to historians of the era, Winslow Slade was, in the early years of the twentieth century, one of New Jersey’s most prominent citizens, who had served as a distinguished president of Princeton University, three decades before, in the troubled aftermath of the Civil War and into the early years of Reconstruction, when the academic state of the school was threatened, and Dr. Slade had brought some measure of academic excellence and discipline into the school; and, in the late 1880s, when Dr. Slade had served a term as governor of New Jersey, in a particularly tumultuous and partisan era in which a gentleman of Dr. Slade’s qualities, by nature congenial, inclined rather more to compromise than to fight, and in every way a Christian, found “politics” far too stressful to wish to run for a second term. In Princeton, a far more civilized community than the state capitol in Trenton, Winslow Slade was generally revered as a much-beloved pastor of the Presbyterian church and community leader; and how much more so, than Woodrow Wilson could ever hope to be!

Not that the younger man was jealous of the elder: he was not. But, quite consciously, he wished to learn from the elder.
Though very likely Winslow Slade knew a good deal of the animosity blooming between the university president and his most powerful dean, being the beneficiary of his wife’s network of local news, yet Winslow tactfully asked his young friend if it was a faculty matter, that was troubling him—or, an undergraduate issue?

Woodrow’s reply was reluctantly uttered: “No, Dr. Slade. I think that I have won the boys over, after some initial coolness—they like me now. This generation is more concerned with making their own worldly way than I would wish, but we understand each other.” Half-consciously Woodrow rose to his feet, to pick up, from Winslow Slade’s desk, a brass letter-opener, and to turn it in his fingers. A thin smile distended his lips. “The mischief of boys I would welcome, Dr. Slade, at this point—if it could spare me this other.”

“This other”—?

For an unsettling moment Woodrow lost the thread of his concentration: he was hearing a muted yet vehement voice daring to accuse him. The horror of lynching is, no one speaks against it. Behind the silvery glint of his glasses his eyes filled with tears of vexation. The little brass letter-opener slipped from his fingers to fall onto Winslow Slade’s desk. He said, “I’m speaking of—of certain underhanded challenges to my authority—as president of our university. You know, Dr. Slade, I take my responsibility to be—well, God-ordained; certainly I would not have had this exceptional honor bestowed upon me, if God had not wished it. And so, I am baffled by the calculated insults, malicious backbiting, and plotting among my administrative colleagues—and their secret liaisons with the trustees. Surely by now you’ve heard how my enemies conspire against me in skirmishes that have not the dignity of battle, still less of declared war.”

There followed an embarrassed silence. The elder man, regarding his friend with grave sympathy, could not think how to reply. It was kept fairly secret among Woodrow Wilson’s family and intimates that he had already suffered several mysterious collapses in his lifetime, the earliest as a young adolescent; Woodrow had even had a “mild” stroke at the premature age of thirty-nine. (At the time, Woodrow had been teaching jurisprudence...
at Princeton, preparing his lectures with great urgency and intensity, and working on the multivolume *A History of the American People* that would one day solidify his reputation.) Now, a decade later, Woodrow’s nerves were so keenly strung, he seemed at times to resemble a puppet jerked about by cruel, whimsical fingers. Yet, like any sensitive, proud man, he shrank from being comforted.

With a wry smile Woodrow confessed to his friend that, as pressure on him lately increased, he suffered from such darting pains in his head and abdomen as he lay sleepless through much of the night, he half wondered if his enemies— (“Led by that careerist whose name I do not care to speak”)—were devouring his very soul, as a sinister species of giant water spider sucks the life out of its helpless frog prey.

Winslow responded with a wincing smile, “Woodrow, my dear friend, I wish I could banish from your vocabulary such words as *battle*, *war*, *enemy*— even, perhaps, *soul*. For your nature is to take a little too seriously matters that are only local and transient, and you see *conspiracy* where there may be little more than a healthy difference of opinion.”

Woodrow stared at his elder friend with a look of hurt and alarm.

“ ‘Healthy difference of opinion’—? I don’t understand, Winslow. This is life or death—my life or death, as president of the university.”

“When the issue is whether to build the new Graduate College at the heart of the campus or, as Dean West prefers, at the edge? *That* is a matter of your life or death?”

“Yes! Yes, it is. And the eating clubs as well—my enemies are massing against me, to defeat my plan of colleges within the university, of a democratic nature. You know, I believe that the highest executive office must centralize power—whether the chief executive is the President of the United States, or of a distinguished university. And right here at home, I am met with *mutiny*.”

“Woodrow, really! ’Mutiny.’ ” Winslow Slade smiled.

“*Mutiny, yes,*” Woodrow repeated grimly, “and I have no doubt that they are meeting in secret at this very minute, somewhere close by.”
For Woodrow had learned, from a remark of Mrs. Wilson’s when she’d returned from a luncheon at the Princeton Women’s Club two days before, that Andrew Fleming West was to be a houseguest at a dinner party at the home of the Burrs, of FitzRandolph Place, to which the Wilsons had conspicuously not been invited.

Winslow Slade murmured that none of this boded well for the university, if it was true; still less for Woodrow and his family.

“Dr. Slade, it is true,” Woodrow said irritably, “the prediction around town that I will be ‘outflanked’ by Easter, cornered like a rat and made to resign the presidency! Please don’t deny it, sir, in the interests of kindness or charity, for I know very well that Princeton whispers of nothing else—even the washerwomen, and the Negro servants, and every sort of local riffraff, gloat over my distress.”

At this, Winslow Slade leaned over to touch the younger man’s tensed arm. “Tommy—d’you mind if I call you ‘Tommy’?—I hope you remember the advice I gave you, when you accepted the trustees’ offer of the presidency: ’A wise administrator never admits to having enemies, and a yet wiser administrator never has enemies.’ ”

“A banal platitude, sir, if I may say so,” Woodrow said, with increasing vexation, “—that might have been put to the ‘enemies’ of Napoleon, as his armies swept over them and devastated them utterly. It is easy for you to think in such a way—you who have never known an enemy in your life, and have been blessed by God in all your efforts.”

“I had political enemies enough, when I was governor of the state,” Winslow said. “I think you are forgetting the vicissitudes of real life, in your airy allegorical dramas.”

Woodrow, pacing in front of the fireplace, spoke now rapidly, and heedlessly—saying that Ellen and his daughters were “sick with worry” over his health; his doctor, Melrick Hatch, had warned him that the palliative medications he’d been taking for years to steady his nerves might soon have a “reverse” effect. (One of Woodrow’s medications was the morphine-laced Mrs. Wycroff’s Soothing Syrup; another, McCormick’s
Glyco-Heroin Throat Lozenges; yet another, Boehringer & Soehne’s Antiseptique, with its high quotient of opium. Woodrow was also somewhat addicted to such home remedies as syrupy calomel, bismuth, and Oil of Olmay; cascara sagrada and Tidwell’s Purge.) Again, Woodrow picked up the brass letter-opener, to turn it restlessly in his fingers—“The dean, it’s said, boasts that he intends to drive me into an ‘early grave’ and take my place as president. And a majority of the trustees align themselves with him.”

“Woodrow, please! This isn’t worthy of you. I think that you and Dean West must meet face to face, and stop this absurd plotting. I would guess that Andrew goes about Princeton complaining of you, and declaring that you should drive him to an early grave, if you had your way.”

Woodrow stiffened at this remark. For indeed, it had frequently come to him, even when he knelt in prayer at Sunday church services, feeling himself an empty vessel to be filled with the grace of God, that, if something would happen to his enemy Andrew Fleming West: how easy then, his life would become!

“All opposition to my ideas would evaporate at once, like harmless smoke. All opposition.”

“Woodrow, what do you mean? What have you said?”

Had Woodrow spoken aloud? He was sure he had not.

Winslow Slade said, quietly, yet with feeling, “Sometimes I think you scarcely know me, Tommy. Or, indeed—anyone. You so surround yourself with fantasies of your own creation! For instance, you claim that I seem not to have known an enemy in my career, and that God has ‘blessed’ my efforts; but you must know, this was hardly the case. There was a very vocal opposition at the university, when I pushed forward my ‘reform’ of the curriculum, and insisted upon higher admissions standards; very nearly, a revolt among the trustees. And then, when I was governor of this contentious, politician-ridden state, there were days when I felt like a battered war veteran, and only the solace of my religion, and my church, kept me from despair. Yet, I tried not to complain,
even to my dear Oriana; I tried never to make careless public remarks, or denunciations. This is not in keeping with our dignity. Remember the doomed Socrates of The Crito—a public man in his seventies condemned to death by the state: it was Socrates’ position that one abides by the laws of his time and place, and that death is preferable to banishment from society. So I’ve long kept my own counsel, and not even those closest to me have known of my secret struggles. So it is, dear Tommy, in the waning years of my life, I can’t allow myself to be drawn into ‘politics’ yet again. I know that your office is a sacred trust in your eyes, very like that of the pulpit; you are your father’s son, in many ways; and you have been driving yourself these past months with a superhuman energy. But it must be remembered, Woodrow, the university is not the church; and your inauguration, however splendid, should not be interpreted as an ordination.” Winslow paused, to allow his words to sink in. It was a misunderstanding of the elder Slade, that he was without sarcasm or irony, as he was without guile; that, being by nature good-hearted and generous, he was one to suffer fools gladly. “So, my counsel to you is compromise, President Wilson—compromise.”

Woodrow reacted like a child who has been slapped. Slowly, dazedly, he sank into his chair by the fireplace, facing his host. Waning firelight played on his tight, taut features; his stricken eyes were hidden behind the wink of his eyeglasses. In a hoarse voice he said: “Compromise!—what a thing to suggest! What—weakness, cowardice! Did our Savior compromise? Did He make a deal with his enemies? My father instructed me, either one is right, and compelled to act upon it; or one is in error, and should surrender the chalice to another man. Jesus declared, ‘I bring not peace but a sword.’ Does not our Lord declare everywhere in His holy writ, that one must be either for Him or against Him? I have reason to believe that all evil begins in compromise, Dr. Slade. Our great President Lincoln did not compromise with the slavers, as our Puritan ancestors did not compromise with the native Indians whom they discovered in the New World, pagan creatures who were not to be trusted—’drasty Sauvages’ they were
called. You might not know, Winslow, but our Wilson family motto—from the time of the Campbells of Argyll until now—*God save us from compromise.*

When Winslow didn’t reply, only just shook his head, with an inscrutable expression, Woodrow said, a little sharply: “Ours is a proud heritage! And it would go hard against my father, as against my own conscience, if I weakened in this struggle.”

Winslow said, gently, “But after all, Tommy, you are not your father, however much you love and honor his memory. And you must bear in mind that he is no longer living; he has been dead this past year, and more.”

At these words the younger man stared into a corner of the room as if he had been taken by surprise: *was his father dead?*

And something else, someone else, another tormenting voice, had been beating at his thoughts, like buffeting waves—*You can speak out against these atrocities. Christians like yourself.*

Clumsily Woodrow removed his eyeglasses. His vision had never been strong; as a child, letters and numerals had “danced” in his head, making it very difficult for him to read and do arithmetic; yet, he had persevered, and had made of himself an outstanding student, as he was, in his youth, invariably the outstanding member of any class, any school, any group in which he found himself. *Destined for greatness. But you must practice humility, not pride.*

Woodrow wiped at his eyes with his shirt cuff, in manner and in expression very like a child. It seemed to be so, he did not recall that Joseph Ruggles Wilson, his father, had passed away; into the mysterious other world, into which his mother had passed away when Woodrow had been thirty-two, and his first daughter Margaret had been recently born. “You are right, Winslow—of course. Father has been dead more than two years. He has been gathered into the ‘Great Dark’—abiding now with his Creator, as we are told. Do you think that it is a realm of being contiguous with our own, if inaccessible? Or—is it accessible? I am intrigued by
these ‘spiritualists’—I’ve been reading of their exploits, in London and Boston . . . Often I think, though Father is said to be deceased, is he entirely departed? *Requiescat in pace.* But—is he in peace? Are any of the dead departed—or in peace? Or do we only wish them so, that we can imagine ourselves free of their dominion?”

To which query Winslow Slade, staring into the now-waning fire, as shadows rippled across his face, seemed to have no ready reply.

*REQUIESCAT IN PACE* is the simple legend chiseled beneath the name WINSLOW ELIAS SLADE and the dates 14 DECEMBER 1831–1 JUNE 1906 on the Slade family mausoleum in the older part of the Princeton Cemetery, near the very heart of Princeton. It was said that the distressed gentleman, shortly before his death, left instructions with his family that he wished the somber inscription *Pain Was My Portion* would be engraved on his tomb; but that his son Augustus forbade it.

“We have had enough of pain, we Slades,” Augustus allegedly declared, “and now we are prepared for peace.”

This was at a time when the Crosswicks Curse, or, as it is sometimes called, the Crosswicks Horror, had at last lifted from Princeton, and peace of a kind had been restored.

I realize, the reader may be wondering: how could Reverend Winslow Slade, so beloved and revered a Princeton citizen, the only man from whom Woodrow Wilson sought advice and solace, have come to so despairing an end? *How is this possible?*  

All I have are the myriad facts I have been able to unearth and assemble, that point to a plausible explanation: the reader will have to draw his or her own conclusions, perhaps.

At the time of our present narrative in March 1905, when Woodrow Wilson sought him out surreptitiously, Winslow Slade retained much of his commanding presence—that blend of authority, manly dignity, compassion, and Christian forbearance noted by his many ad-
mirers. No doubt these qualities were inherited with his blood: for Winslow’s ancestry may be traced on his father’s side to those religiously persecuted and religiously driven Puritans who sought freedom from the tyranny of the Church of England in the late 1600s; and on his mother’s side, to Scots-English immigrants in the early 1700s to the Massachusetts Bay Colony, who soon acquired a measure of affluence through trade with England. Within two generations, a number of Slades had migrated from New England to the Philadelphia / Trenton area, as, in religious terms, they had migrated from the rigidity of belief of old-style Puritanism to the somewhat more liberal Presbyterianism of the day, tinged with Calvinist determinism as it was; these were compassionate Christians who sided with those who opposed the execution of Quakers as heretics, a Puritan obsession. Sometime later, in the Battle of Princeton of 1777, General Elias Slade famously distinguished himself, alongside his compatriot Lieutenant Colonel Aaron Burr, Jr. (Elias Slade, only thirty-two at the time of his death, had boldly surrendered his powerful positions in both the Royal Governor’s Council and the Supreme Court of the Crown Colony in order to support George Washington in the revolutionary movement—a rebellion by no means so clear-cut in the 1770s nor so seemingly inevitable as it appears to us today in our history textbooks. And what an irony it is that Aaron Burr, Jr., a hero in some quarters in his own time, has been relegated to a disreputable position scarcely more elevated than that of his former compatriot Benedict Arnold!)

It was a general characteristic of the Philadelphia / Trenton branch of the Slade family, judging by their portraits, that the men possessed unusually intense eyes, though deep-set in their sculpted-looking faces; the Slade nose tended to be long, narrow, Roman and somewhat pinched at the tip. In his youth and well into old age, Winslow Slade was considered a handsome man: above average in height, with a head of prematurely silver hair, and straight dark brows, and a studied and somber manner enlivened by a ready and sympathetic smile—in the eyes of some
detractors, a too-ready and too-sympathetic smile.

For it was Winslow Slade’s eccentric notion, he would try to embody Christian behavior in his daily—hourly!—life. In this, he often tried the patience of those close to him, still more, those who were associated with him professionally.

“It’s my considered belief that the present age will compose, through Winslow Slade, its spiritual autobiography”—so the famed Reverend Henry Ward Beecher declared on the occasion of Winslow Slade’s inauguration as president of Princeton University in 1877.

As a popular Presbyterian minister, who had studied at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, Winslow Slade had long perfected the art of pleasing—indeed, mesmerizing large audiences.

Though, in contrast to such preachers as Reverend Beecher, Winslow Slade never stooped to rhetorical tricks or empty oratorical flourishes. His Biblical texts were usually familiar ones, though not simple; he chose not to astonish, or perplex, or amuse, or, like some men of the cloth, including his formidable relative Jonathan Edwards, to terrify his congregation. His quiet message of the uniqueness of the Christian faith—as it is a “necessary outgrowth and advancement of the Jewish faith”—is that the Christian must think of himself as choosing Jesus Christ over Satan at every moment; an inheritance from his Puritan ancestors, but rendered in such a way as not to alarm or affright his sensitive followers.

It is no surprise that Reverend Slade’s grandchildren, when very young, imagined that he was God Himself—delivering his sermons in the chaste white interior of the First Presbyterian Church on Nassau Street. These were Josiah, Annabel, and Todd; and, in time, little Oriana; when these children shut their eyes in prayer, it was Grandfather Winslow’s face they saw, and Grandfather Slade to whom they appealed.

As The Accursed is a chronicle of, mostly, the Slade grandchildren, it seems fitting for the historian to note that Winslow Slade loved these children fiercely, rather more, it seems, than he had loved his own children, who had been born when Winslow was deeply engaged in his career, and
not so deeply engaged with family life, like many another successful public man. While recovering from a bout of influenza in his early sixties, watching Josiah and Annabel frolic together for hours in the garden at Crosswicks Manse, he had declared to his doctor that it was these children, and no other remedy, that had brought him back to health.

“The innocence of such children doesn’t answer our deepest questions about this vale of tears to which we are condemned, but it helps to dispel them. That is the secret of family life.”

“AND HOW IS your daughter Jessie?”

“Jessie? Why—Jessie is well, I think.”

Woodrow’s eighteen-year-old daughter, the prettiest of the Wilson daughters, was to be a bridesmaid in the wedding of Winslow Slade’s granddaughter Annabel and a young U.S. Army lieutenant named Dabney Bayard, of the Hodge Road Bayards.

Winslow had thought to divert his young friend from the thoughts that so agitated him, that seemed, to Winslow, but trivial and transient; but this new subject, unexpectedly, caused Woodrow to fret and frown; and to say, in a very careful voice, “It is always a—a surprise—to me—that my girls are growing into—women. For it seems only yesterday, they were the most delightful little girls.”

Woodrow spoke gravely, with a just perceptible frisson of dread.

For the intimate lives of females was a painful subject for a man of his sensitivity to consider, even at a little distance.

Winslow smiled, however, with grandfatherly affection. For it was the more remarkable to him, his “fairy child” Annabel was now nineteen years old, and about to take her place in society as Mrs. Dabney Bayard.

“Ah, Lieutenant Bayard!—I think I’ve glimpsed the young man once or twice,” Woodrow said, without the slightest edge of reproach in that, perhaps, his wife and he had been excluded from recent social occasions at Crosswicks Manse, “and he seems to me an upstanding Christian
youth, and a patriot as well: the grandson, isn’t he, of John Wilmington Bayard?—hearty Presbyterian stock, and most reliable."

“We shall see. I mean—yes of course. You are quite right.”

More than once, Winslow Slade had caught an unwanted glimpse of his dear granddaughter walking in the garden behind the Manse, with Lieutenant Bayard; a handsome boy, but impetuous, whose hands too frequently made their way onto Annabel’s petite body, at her waist, or lower, at her slender hips . . . It was not a vision the seventy-four-year-old wished to summon, at this awkward time.

Woodrow said, yet still gravely, “Our Margaret, you know, was born in Georgia—not in the North. My dear Ellen took it into her head, near the very end of her pregnancy, that she could not bear for our firstborn to be delivered north of the Mason-Dixon line, and so I—I humored her of course . . . And I think that, in a way, it has made a difference—Margaret is our most gracious daughter, not nearly so—emphatic—headstrong—as the younger girls, born here in the North.”

Winslow Slade, whose ancestors did not hail from the American South, but rather from the Puritan north of New England, tactfully made no reply to this peculiar remark, in its way both apologetic and boastful.

“Would you like a cigar, Tommy? I know that you don’t ‘smoke’—at home, certainly. But I have here some very fine Cuban cigars, given to me by a friend.”

“Thank you, Winslow—but no! I think that I have told you, how my dear mother cured me forever of a wish to smoke?”

Winslow Slade inclined his head politely, that Woodrow might again tell this favorite story. For Woodrow was quite practiced at the recitation of certain family tales, as if they were old tales of Aesop.

“I was seven years old when Mother called me, to enlist her in killing the aphids on her roses. It might have been that I had been watching my father and other male relatives smoking cigars, and may have appeared admiring; Mother was quick to take note of such details, and I have inherited her skill. ‘Tommy, come here: I will light one of Father’s
cigars, and you will blow smoke on the nasty aphids.’ And so—that is exactly what I did, or tried to do.” Woodrow was laughing, a wheezing sort of laugh, without evident mirth; tears shone in his eyes, of a frantic merriment. “Ah, I was so ill! Violently ill to my stomach, not only repelled by the horrific tobacco smoke, but vomiting for much of a day. And yet, Mother’s wisdom was such: I have never smoked since, nor have I had the slightest inclination. Observing the trustees lighting up their ill-smelling cigars, when we are meant to have a serious meeting, leaves me quite disgusted, though I would never betray my feelings of course.”

“A most thoughtful mother!” Winslow returned the cigars to their brass humidor.

In a corner of Dr. Slade’s library an eighteenth-century German grandfather’s clock chimed a quiet but unmistakable quarter-hour: Winslow Slade was hoping that his young friend would depart soon, for Woodrow was clearly in one of his “nerve” states, and the effect upon Winslow himself was beginning to be felt; of all psychic conditions, anxiety verging upon paranoia/hysteria is perhaps the most contagious, even among men. Yet, Woodrow could not resist reverting to his subject, in an indirect way, to lament that the United States was burdened with “an insufferable buffoon” in the White House: “A self-appointed bully who fancies himself a savior, mucking about now shockingly in Panama, and swaying the jingoists to his side. The presidency of the United States is not an office to be besmirched but to be elevated—it is a sacred trust, for our nation is exceptional in the history of the world. And I, here at home, in ‘idyllic’ Princeton, must contend with Teddy Roosevelt’s twin, as it were—who pretends only to have the interest of the university at heart, while wresting my power from me.”

Winslow sighed, and could not think how to reply. He seemed to know beforehand what his young friend had come to ask of him; and did not want to encourage him; yet, inevitably, Woodrow made his plea, with the blinking simplicity of a small child, his moist eyes gleaming behind his
polished eyeglasses: “Dr. Slade, if you might indicate your support of me, or rather, your preference: Woodrow Wilson or Andrew West . . . It would be such a relief to me, as to my family.”

Pained, Winslow explained that he thought it a wiser course, for one like himself in retirement from all politics, to remain neutral.

“I am sure that, in the end, wise heads and wisdom will prevail. You will have a vote of the trustees, and that will decide it—soon, I would think?”

“Winslow, that is—that is not—this is not quite the answer I had hoped for, in coming here . . .”

Winslow persisted: “I prescribe for you, my dear friend, the simplest and most fundamental of all Christian remedies—prayer. By which I mean, Woodrow, a deep examination of your soul, your motives, and your ideals. Prayer.”

The younger man blinked at Winslow, as a tic in his left cheek seemed to mock his enfeebled smile. “Yes, you are right—of course. You are invariably right, Dr. Slade. But, I’m afraid, you are uninformed—for I have already spent countless hours on my knees, in prayer, since this hellish situation first manifested itself, months ago. Of course, it has been a gathering storm. I have enlisted prayer from the start, yet the results have been disappointing: for West continues his sorties against me, even laughing behind my back, and God has not seen fit to intervene.”

So astounded was Winslow Slade by these words, he could think of no adequate reply; and silence uneasily fell between them, as smoldering logs in the fireplace shifted, and darkened; and Woodrow reached out, in a nervous sort of curiosity, to take up a small jade snuffbox on a table, to examine closely. It was an engaging object, though hardly beautiful, covered in a patina of decades, its lid engraved with a miniature yet meticulously wrought serpent that, coiled, looked as if it were about to leap out at the observer. Strikingly, the cobra’s eyes were two inset rubies of the size of pumpkin seeds.
Fascinating to Woodrow, in his somewhat dazed state, how these rubies glittered, with the fantastical potency of an actual serpent’s eyes . . .

Now daringly Woodrow said, as he had been preparing to say, perhaps, this past half hour: “He seeks power in a very different way, you know.”

“He?”

“West.”

“Ah yes—West is still our subject?”

“It is not mere rumor, Dr. Slade, it has been whispered everywhere in town, and Ellen was reluctant to upset me by repeating it—but Andrew West has consorted with clairvoyants and mesmerists; in a pretense of ‘scientific inquiry,’ like his Harvard psychologist-friend William James, he has delved into what we must call occult practices—that fly in the face of Christian teaching.”

‘Occult practices’—? Andrew West?”

Winslow Slade laughed, for Andrew West had the solid, burly build of a wrestler; certainly an intelligent man, with degrees from Cambridge (England) as well as Harvard, yet not in any way a sensitive or inwardly-brooding person, of the kind who might take the occult seriously.

“Yes, Dr. Slade, though you may smile at the prospect—‘occult practices.’ By which he hopes to influence ‘powers’—thereby, to influence the more impressionable minds in our community, and among the trustees. I told you, it is a battle—in an undeclared war.”

“You are saying that our colleague and neighbor Andrew West, dean of the graduate school, is an—occultist?”

“Well, I am saying that it is said—it is said by many—that West dabbles in the occult, in a pretense of scientific inquiry; one of his allies is Abraham Sparhawk, in philosophy; but a newfangled sort of philosophy in which up is proved to be down, and time and history not fixed points as we know them to be, but something called—I think the term is—‘relative.’ What they are cooking up together, to defeat me, I have no way of knowing
in any detail.” Woodrow continued to examine the little jade snuffbox, as if the cobra’s glittering eyes had transfixed him. “And d’you know, as a result of his campaigning, Mr. Cleveland scarcely returns my greeting at the Nassau Club—he has become a favored crony of West’s, this past winter.”*

Winslow said, a little sharply, “It must be the lateness of the hour, Tommy—you are saying things that will have to be consciously ‘forgotten’ by us both, in the light of day. Frankly, I don’t believe for an instant that Andrew West, or anyone else at the university, is ‘delving’ into occult practices; and I ask you to reconsider what you have said.”

So speaking, Winslow lay his hands upon the younger man’s hands, that were visibly trembling; meaning to extract from his fingers, before he dropped it, or crumbled it, the little jade snuffbox, which Woodrow continued half-consciously to grip.

Yet, Woodrow would not surrender his position: for, despite his appearance of neurasthenic intensity, and the watery weakness of his blinking eyes, the man was yet endowed with a most powerful, indeed near-unshakable will. Vehemently he said, “Dr. Slade, you of all people should know that some loosening of the tongue is prudent, when Evil appears in our midst. I am not saying—I am not accusing—West of summoning the Devil, but of consorting with those who might, or do. Just last night, in my library, Professor Pearce van Dyck spoke at length with me, defining the principles of ‘mesmerism’ and ‘animal magnetism’

---

* Grover Cleveland, twenty-second President of the United States, had retired to Westland Mansion in Princeton after leaving office in 1897; a considerable presence in Princeton, both by reputation and by girth, Cleveland lived scarcely a half-block from Crosswicks Manse, on Hodge Road; he too was a trustee of the university and, as Woodrow Wilson feared, a supporter rather of Dean West than of Woodrow Wilson. It was invariably a social coup to include Grover and Frances Cleveland in any gathering, despite Grover’s uncouth manners and buffoonish laughter, and the disappointment of his second term in office; worse yet, as many knew, Grover Cleveland had, as sheriff of Erie County in upstate New York in his early career in politics, personally executed, by hanging, at least two condemned men, rather than pay a hangman ten dollars.

42 / JOYCE CAROL OATES
as best he could; for Pearce is, as you know, as much of a rationalist as any Christian might be, and professes an abhorrence of 'occult practices' as much as I—including even Spiritualism, which the ladies so extol. According to Pearce, those European scientists and physicians who have advanced such bizarre notions, like Mesmer and Charcot, that make a mockery of Christian free will, are best ranked with alchemists, sorcerers, and witches; and are held in very low esteem by true men of science. Yet, the theory that a 'magnetic fluid' might pervade the Universe, including the human body, and that this fluid might somehow be controlled, if one only knew how—this theory is not without plausibility, I think. It is like holding the key to certain chemical processes—like knowing the recipe for gunpowder! And while the ostensible aim of mesmerism is the improvement of mental health, any fool can see that the reverse can be true as well: there being a diabolical side to man, more prevalent, in some quarters, than the angelic.”

This outburst of speech left Woodrow breathless. His stiff-laundered white cotton collar, that had been spotless that morning when he had arrived in his office in Nassau Hall, was visibly wilted; a faint glisten of perspiration shone on his furrowed brow.

Winslow said, in an even voice, like one who feigns a tactful kind of deafness, “Well! Let me pour you some brandy, Woodrow, to soothe your nerves, and then I will ask Henry to drive you home. I think you’re not quite yourself—and Ellen must be awaiting you.”

Hotly Woodrow said: “Thank you, Dr. Slade, but I do not drink brandy—as you must know. And I am not in any womanish state of ‘nerves.’ My dear wife has not the slightest idea where I am—she has retired to bed by ten P.M. and would assume that I am working in my study as usual. I find it upsetting—and baffling—that you, Winslow Slade, with your thorough grounding in Calvinist theology, and the practical experience of being a Presbyterian minister, should take so lightly the possibility of ‘diabolism’ in our midst . . . I wonder whether West himself hasn’t sought you out, in this very room, to poison you against me, who has long
been your devoted friend—and to influence your thoughts!”

Woodrow spoke with such adolescent sarcasm, his friend was taken aback.

It was then, the little accident occurred.

Though the men certainly could not have been described as struggling together, in any sense of the phrase, it somehow happened that, as Winslow Slade sought to take hold of Woodrow Wilson’s (flailing) arm, to calm him, the younger man shrank from him as if in fright; causing the jade snuffbox to slip from his fingers onto a tabletop, and a cloud of aged snuff was released, of such surprising potency both men began to sneeze; very much as if a malevolent spirit had escaped from the little box.

Unexpectedly then, both Woodrow Wilson and Winslow Slade suffered fits of helpless sneezing, until they could scarcely breathe, and their eyes brimmed with tears, and their hearts pounded with a lurid beat as if eager to burst.

And the austere old grandfather clock against a farther wall softly chimed the surprising hour of one—unheard.