AN IMPERATIVE DUTY

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I

OLNEY got back to Boston about the middle of July, and found himself in the social solitude which the summer makes more noticeable in that city than in any other. The business, the hard work of life, was going on, galloping on, as it always does in America, but the pleasure of life, which he used to be part of as a younger man, was taking a rest, or if not a rest, then certainly an outing at the sea-shore. He met no one he knew, and he continued his foreign travels in his native place, after an absence so long that it made everything once so familiar bewilderingly strange.

He had sailed ten days before from Liverpool, but he felt as if he had been voyaging in a vicious circle when he landed, and had arrived in Liverpool again. In several humiliating little ways, Boston recalled the most commonplace of English cities. It was not like Liverpool in a certain civic grandiosity, a sort of lion-and-unicorn spectacularity which he had observed there. The resemblance appeared to him in the meanness and dulness of many of the streets in the older part of the town where he was lodged, and in the littleness of the houses. Then there was a curious similarity in the figures and faces of the crowd. He had been struck by the almost American look of the poorer class in Liverpool, and in Boston he was struck by its English look. He could half account for this by the fact that the average face and figure one meets in Boston in midsummer, is hardly American; but the other half of the puzzle remained. He could only conjecture an approach from all directions to a common type among those who work with their hands for a living; what he had seen in Liverpool and now saw in Boston was not the

English type or the American type, but the proletarian type. He noticed it especially in the women, and more especially in the young girls, as he met them in the street after their day's work was done, and on the first Sunday afternoon following his arrival, as he saw them in the Common. By far the greater part of those listening to the brass band which was then beginning to vex the ghost of our poor old Puritan Sabbath there, were given away by their accent for those primary and secondary Irish who abound with us. The old women were strong, sturdy, old-world peasants, but the young girls were thin and crooked, with pale, pasty complexions, and an effect of physical delicacy from their hard work and hard conditions, which might later be physical refinement. They were conjecturably out of box factories and clothier's shops; they went about in threes or fours, with their lank arms round one another's waists, or lounged upon the dry grass; and they seemed fond of wearing red jerseys, which accented every fact of their anatomy. Looking at them scientifically, Olney thought that if they survived to be mothers they might give us, with better conditions, a race as hale and handsome as the elder American race; but the transition from the Old World to the New, as represented in them, was painful. Their voices were at once coarse and weak; their walk was uncertain, now awkward and now graceful, an undeveloped gait; he found their bearing apt to be aggressive, as if from a wish to ascertain the full limits of their social freedom, rather than from ill-nature, or that bad-heartedness which most rudeness comes from.

But, in fact, Olney met nowhere the deference from beneath that his long sojourn in Europe had accustomed him to consider politeness. He was used in all public places with a kindness mixed with roughness, which is probably the real republican manner; the manner of Florence before the Medici; the manner of Venice when the Florentines were wounded by it after the Medici corrupted them; the

manner of the French when the Terror had done its work. Nobody proved unamiable, though everybody seemed so at first; not even the waiters at his hotel, where he was served by adoptive citizens who looked so much like brigands that he could not help expecting to be carried off and held somewhere for ransom when he first came into the dining-room. They wore immense black mustaches or huge whiskers, or else the American beard cut slanting from the corners of the mouth. They had a kind of short sack of alpaca, which did not support one's love of gentility like the conventional dress-coat of the world-wide waiter, or cheer one's heart like the white linen jacket and apron of the negro waiter. But Olney found them, upon what might be called personal acquaintance, neither uncivil nor unkind, though they were awkward and rather stupid. They could not hide their eagerness for fees, and they took an interest in his well-being so openly mercenary, that he could scarcely enjoy his meals. With two of those four-winged whirligigs revolving on the table before him to scare away the flies, and working him up to such a vertigo that he thought he must swoon into his soup, Olney was uncomfortably aware of the Irish waiter standing so close behind his chair that his stomach bulged against it, and he felt his breath coming and going on the bald spot on his crown. He could not put out his hand to take up a bit of bread without having a hairy paw thrust forward to anticipate his want; and he knew that his waiter considered each service of the kind worth a good deal extra, and expected to be remembered for it in our silver coinage, whose unique ugliness struck Olney afresh.

He would not have been ready to say that one of the negro waiters, whom he wished they had at his hotel, would not have been just as greedy of money; but he would have clothed his greed in such a smiling courtesy and such a childish simple-heartedness that it would have been graceful and winning. He would have used tact in his

ministrations; he would not have cumbered him with service, as from a wheelbarrow, but would have given him a touch of help here, and a little morsel of attention there; he would have kept aloof as well as alert. That is, he would have had all these charms if he were at his best, and he would have had some of them if he were at his worst.

In fact, the one aspect of our mixed humanity here which struck Olney as altogether agreeable in getting home was that of the race which vexes our social question with its servile past, and promises to keep it uncomfortable with its civic future. He had not forgotten that, so far as society in the society sense is concerned, we have always frankly simplified the matter, and no more consort with the negroes than we do with the lower animals, so that one would be quite as likely to meet a cow or a horse in an American drawing-room as a person of color. But he had forgotten how entirely the colored people keep to themselves in all public places, and how, with the same civil rights as ourselves, they have their own neighborhoods, their own churches, their own amusements, their own resorts. They were just as free to come to the music on the Common that Sunday afternoon as any of the white people he saw there. They could have walked up and down, they could have lounged upon the grass, and no one would have molested them, though the whites would have kept apart from them. But he found very few of them there. It was not till he followed a group away from the Common through Charles Street, where they have their principal church, into Cambridge Street, which is their chief promenade, that he began to see many of them. In the humbler side-hill streets, and in the alleys branching upward from either thoroughfare, they have their homes, and here he encountered them of all ages and sexes. It seemed to him that they had increased since he was last in Boston beyond the ratio of nature; and the hotel clerk

afterward told him there had been that summer an unusual influx of negroes from the South.

He would not have known the new arrivals by anything in their looks or bearing. Their environment had made as little impression on the older inhabitants, or the natives, as Time himself makes upon persons of their race, and Olney fancied that Boston did not characterize their manner, as it does that of almost every other sort of aliens. They all alike seemed shining with good-nature and good-will, and the desire of peace on earth. Their barbaric taste in color, when it flamed out in a crimson necktie or a scarlet jersey, or when it subdued itself to a sable that left no gleam of white about them but a point or rim of shirt collar, was invariably delightful to him; but he had to own that their younger people were often dressed with an innate feeling for style. Some of the young fellows were very effective dandies of the type we were then beginning to call dude, and were marked by an ultra correctness, if there is any such thing; they had that air of being clothed through and through, as to the immortal spirit as well as the perishable body, by their cloth gaiters, their light trousers, their neatly-buttoned cutaway coats, their harmonious scarfs, and their silk hats. They carried on flirtations of the eye with the young colored girls they met, or when they were walking with them they paid them a court which was far above the behavior of the common young white fellows with the girls of their class in refinement and delicacy. The negroes, if they wished to imitate the manners of our race, wished to imitate the manners of the best among us; they wished to be like ladies and gentlemen. But the young white girls and their fellows whom Olney saw during the evening in possession of most of the benches in the Common and the Public Garden, and between the lawns of Commonwealth Avenue, apparently did not wish to be like ladies and gentlemen in their behavior. The fellow in each case had his arm about the girl's waist, and she had her head at times

upon his shoulder; if the branch of a tree overhead cast the smallest rag or tatter of shadow upon them, she had her head on his shoulder most of the time. Olney was rather abashed when he passed close to one of these couples, but they seemed to suffer no embarrassment. They had apparently no concealments to make, nothing to be ashamed of; and they had really nothing to give them a sense of guilt. They were simply vulgar young people, who were publicly abusing the freedom our civilization gives their youth, without knowing any better, or meaning any worse. Olney knew this, but he could not help remarking to the advantage of the negroes, that among all these couples on the benches of the Common and the Garden and the Avenue, he never found a colored couple. He thought that some of the young colored girls, as he met them walking with their decorous beaux, were very pretty in their way. They had very thin, high, piping voices, that had an effect both of gentleness and gentility. With their brilliant complexions of lustrous black, or rich *café au lait*, or creamy white, they gave a vividness to the public spectacle which it would not otherwise have had, and the sight of these negroes in Boston some how brought back to Olney's homesick heart a sense of Italy, where he had never seen one of their race.

II

Olney was very homesick for Italy that Sunday night. After two days in Boston, mostly spent in exploring the once familiar places in it, and discovering the new and strange ones, he hardly knew which made him feel more hopelessly alien. He had been five years away, and he perceived that the effort to repatriate himself must involve wounds as sore as those of the first days of exile. The tissues then lacerated must bleed again before his life could be reunited with the stock from which it had been torn. He felt himself unable to bear the pain; and he found no attraction of novelty in the future before him. He knew the Boston of his coming years too well to have any illusions about it; and he had known too many other places to have kept the provincial superstitions of his nonage and his earlier manhood concerning its primacy. He believed he should succeed, but that it would be in a minor city, after a struggle with competitors who would be just, and who might be generous, but who would be able, thoroughly equipped, and perfectly disciplined. The fight would be long, even if it were victorious; its prizes would be hard to win, however splendid. Neither the fight nor the prizes seemed so attractive now as they had seemed at a distance. He wished he had been content to stay in Florence, where he could have had the field to himself, if the harvest could never have been so rich. But he understood, even while he called himself a fool for coming home, that he could not have been content to stay without first coming away.

When he went abroad to study, he had a good deal of money, and the income from it was enough for him to live