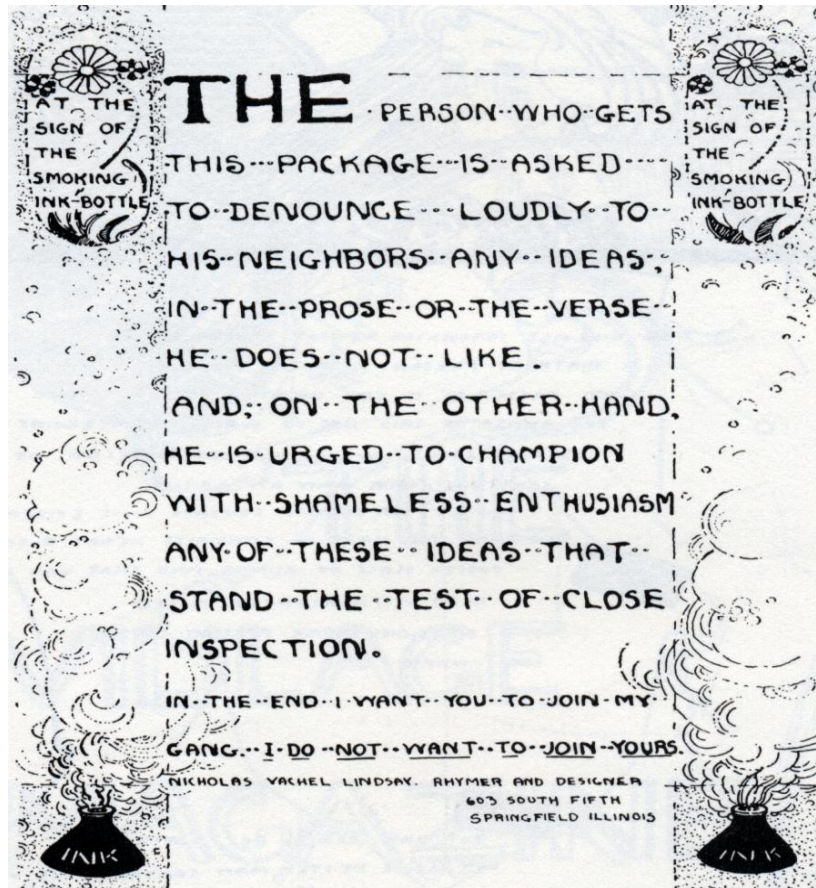


Uncle Boy

A Biography of Nicholas Vachel Lindsay: Poet

Chapter Seventeen

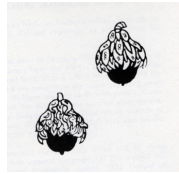


[Vachel's insert introducing his self-published *Village Magazine* (1910)]

by

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[This ongoing biography may be read online at www.VachelLindsayHome.org Choose "Biography" and then "Uncle Boy: A Biography of Nicholas Vachel Lindsay." The biography and the website are sponsored by the Vachel Lindsay Association.]



17. Tramping in the South [Early 1906]

“we would be the father of Gods.”

1

On New Year’s day, 1906, Vachel recorded another striking vision in his “Evidences of magic” notebook: “A few nights before Christmas walking past the park behind the Natural History Museum, I saw Mary, the Mother of God hovering in the air—a figure twenty cubits from the ground, twenty cubits high; her mantle was fluttering purple, her hands were open and moving as though she were shaking down an armload of flowers, her golden hair, unbound, was dim about her regal shoulders, her face was hid in the mist that moved before it. I could only see that she smiled like a mother, her eyes half closed. My soul must have painted upon the air for me some old Venetian picture I am some day to see, painted maybe by some Venetian in Paradise. It was a picture in the air, it was not the virgin herself. I knew it was only my souls^ fancy, and not one of those things where one can say ‘The Spirit Speaketh expressly’ [Cf. 1 Timothy 4:1]. . . . Nevertheless, I saw her, and I loved her, as one might love a great elder sister. I could say to her, ‘Mother of Gods—we would be the father of Gods.’”

The supplication is a dramatic restatement of the idea that fascinated Vachel during the final weeks of 1905, the idea that would continue to play a prominent role in his meditations throughout 1906. He sought to be the creator-father of a new God and a new religion. And the visionary Mary’s response to his entreaty, according to the suppliant, evidenced her sympathetic understanding: “There was the comradeship of a common task in her smile—her task done, her rest attained, and ours all to do.”

Our task, that is, his task, he thought, was to emulate the Virgin Mary and give birth to a God, or perhaps Gods. To compare himself to “the Mother of God,” though, must have seemed brazen, even in the privacy of a notebook. Upon reconsideration, Vachel crossed out his supplication, as well as his description of Mary’s tacit approval. He added an *ex post facto* prayer, as he felt he had the right to do, since visions “were inspired, but by no means infallible” (*Poetry* 928). The prayer to be “the father of Gods” was changed to read: “Mother of Gods—give us a New Christ—Mother of Gods—mother of the Christ of Bethlehem—mother of the Christ of Rome, mother of the Christ of London, Will you give us the Ivory to Carve a Christ of Art—? If we set him up—will you call him son?”

The account of the original vision then continues with a clarification of the main figure. She was: “Not Mary the Intercessor, nor Mary with the sword pierced heart, but Mary who laughed with us, in a gentle hour, in an idle hour, the more joyfully because

the hour was so brief. She sought to make us forget for a moment the weights of eternities upon us—knowing well she must [go] back to her task of her intercession, we back to our agony and our self distrust, our little humanity, our petty tasks, our weak thinking, our selfish dealing, our unkindness, our long hours of cursing and rebellion, our agony born from within, our trials from without from which our demons are to be born;—back to our moments of high resolve, of stern will, of resolute consecration, of passionate faith, of clear visions, of absolute revelation, in which the Angels are born, and all the deeds of heaven accomplished.”

Vachel then repeated his essential prayer, once again returning to his words in a deliberate mood and crossing out lines that he considered too unorthodox or, perhaps, even blasphemous: “Virgin, dim in the mist of your own hair, virgin scattering unseen flowers, again for the moment we pray to you. Give us not only our Demons and our angels, but give us a God who can laugh. Your garment is less than the thistledown before the wind, your hands are less than memory, your smile is only our drunkenness maybe, nevertheless we pray that you may be truly smiling, and from you may come a strong God, wonderful as the stars from night, as the Sun from the Deep. Let him be born of your laughter, let him be the son of your soul and the Amaranth vine, ~~if this is not you, if it was not you we I^A beheld, Oh holy virgin, may you come quickly in your likeness, for we need a new young God.~~ Will you eat of the fruit of that lost tree of Knowledge and redeem the Earth and the stars. God Grant it, God Grant it.”

At this point, Vachel drew a horizontal line across the page, and the immediate account of his vision ends. What follows is quotidian commentary, beginning with a veiled warning that was squeezed onto the page as an afterthought: “Mary, if you will not give him to us, some other woman will. . . . I tell you this new God is to be born, swallowing up and consuming all old dreams. Whether of a virgin in a new Bethlehem, or of the beautiful daughter of a singer in a noble palace, or springing from a stone hewn without hands, we have seen the coming of the god from afar. He is to be sweet as love, king of a hundred muses, pure as the prophets, white as a virgin, overflowing with the happiness of Spring, if this is not the Christ that was, it is the Christ that shall be. His hands shall be loaded with grapes and pomgranates[^], and he shall have for his bride not the Church, but [~~some~~] that daughter of the Earth who is the fairest of them all, Lady Romance—, who shall be to Him as Psyche, as Eve, or as the virgin mother to the Holy Ghost. He shall sing to her the Song of Songs, he shall find in her all grace, and be true to her forever.”

The new God, according to his creator, would establish an ideal democratic art kingdom, whereupon the long-anticipated Christian Millennium would begin. We have seen how Vachel, as a ten-year-old, depicted Jesus as a missionary “Master” issuing an invitation: “Come blessed servant, come to me, / Inherit the kingdom prepared for thee” (*Poetry* 787). In early 1906, now twenty-six years old, he envisioned what the Master’s kingdom would be like, that is, what the Millennium would be like. On January 2, 1906, he observed in his “Evidences of magic” notebook: “Now our wonder palace, the house where the best things happen, is the house made for us in the City of the Millenium[^], in the Land of Day-After-Tommorow[^]. Let us speak of that when we desire [~~would dream of~~] bright lights [~~and things most delightful~~].” On Sunday, January 7, he added additional

detail, making it clear that his Master's kingdom would be an art kingdom, a kingdom of beauty and feminine caring:

In the City of the Millenium[^], in the Land of Day-After-Tomorrow, a woman with the soul of Eve was enthroned. She stood up, she rose above her throne, she shed radiance upon me from the six white wings that sprung from her shoulders. Clouds of smoke rolled behind her head, flooding her cheeks and shoulders with light, the smoke was as though old hopes were burnt and new hopes were born in floods of gold and silver light from the smoke. And a long path of quiet shadow was cast by the throne and the body hovering above the throne, and this path came down the steps to my very feet, and shadowed my head as I laid my forehead upon the white pavement.

Everything in that great room was white, with an iridescent purple hid beneath it and moving behind it, except the smoke behind that crystal throne and that woman with the name of Eve. Her dress was the same white as the dome and the walls, the lines of it swept down enfolding her feet, till her body seemed but the inner petal of the Amaranth flower, and the beneficent wings, the outer circle. She stretched out her hands, blessing her whole court, assembled to do her reverence, and what that court was, I must say hereafter, for I have not done speaking of her.

Her wings and her hands had in them the same beneficence; as for her face, and body beneath her flower petal drapery, these were human, radiant with the blood of maidenhood, and there was the sharp blessedness of earth life in her restless breathing; a human woman bending down upon me from the land of day-after-Tomorrow[^], in the palace built for her in the City of the Millenium[^].

At this point, the imaginative vision of a twenty-six-year-old man manifests the needs and desires of the dependent boy within. The Millennial Eve is transformed into a sweetheart-mother, very much like the mother-consoler figure that Uncle Boy would beg future sweethearts to be:

Still human enough to desire to barter her whole souls[^] happiness in order to be a blessing; the whole throne room was but an alabaster casket to hold her unselfishness, and the magnificent desire to be spent was even more magnificent than her beauty. And my soul seemed to creep up the cool path of shade and rise up and cling to her skirts as a butterfly to a petal, yet all the while my forehead touched the cold pavement.

Then I rose and looked to the court around me and they faded one by one; leaving their offerings—armloads of flowers scattered upon the floor.

And I looked to her again, and she was enthroned, and her wings were furled, and she was mere woman, the light was gone from behind her head, it was sweet twilight in the room, and I crept and laid my head upon her knees and her hands were lost in my hair. [Note 1]

A few weeks later, in a lengthy notebook entry dated "February 4, 1906," Vachel attempted to describe his new religion and the new millennial kingdom. Again, romantic love and reverence for beauty play significant roles:

The day after the Millenium[^], a new Ritual was established in Heaven, one for every saint's household[^]. Every Archangel throne-room possessed a ritual, a Mass, differing according to the inner dreams of the soul of the archangel, and it was

granted to my lady and I that we should have an archangel for our priest, and that the service should be born beneath his hands, according to the whispers that came [~~welled up~~] from the unknown regions of our hearts.

Jewelled ivories [~~Ivory carvings~~] were in his hands; jade lillies with perfect carving were set up on the altar, cataracts of mist [~~flowers~~] rolled down the steep altar steps seeming to come from the innermost soul of the altar, they flowed past us, the stream dividing before our knees. The great organ trumpeted^ our pride in the beauty that encompassed us, the solemn priest chanted beneath it in a voice that was seasoned with deathless memories from the firstborn mornings of Heaven the old, and newborn because of the uplifting glory of Heaven the new. The weight of embroidered^ robes upon our shoulders made it impossible for them to stir though the rapids of flower petals hid our knees. The alabaster lamps in our hands were blown toward^ our lips as we held them up in praise, and the flame was in our mo[u]ths like honey, and we knew because it did not consume us, that we were completely divine, that our bones were of the same adamant as the bones of the Sun are made.

And we adored our holy priest who broke our lamps upon the altar, after our lips had been thrice baptized and made purple by the flame, the work of the lamps being finished.

And we adored the God of beauty, in whose name he gave us a new communion, all our own, never given to mortal or immortal since the beginning of time. The blood in the chalice was as new a thing in the universe as the blood of the first rose, when the first rose was made, as new as the red of the first dawn, when the sun first came [~~dawned~~] upon the Earth, as new as the heart of God from which it was born [~~eame~~]; that innermost heart which was kept invulnerable from the beginning, and which gave up its blood, not for love, nor yet for the redemption of the universe; reserved for those who should love beauty [~~most~~] supremely; the blood of that most inner heart was to be saved for them in the first communion after the Millenium^. And in that hour, my lady was the first to lay hold upon it, because in all the New Heaven she loved Beauty most [~~supremely~~], and the communion was hers, to share with any unworthy, who loved her best. Therefore we were joined in the service upon our Altar Steps. (“Evidences of magic”)

Vachel’s daydream-vision continues for several more pages, but the character of his envisioned kingdom is clear. It is a place prepared by a neo-artistic God of Beauty for the benefit of innocent and spiritual romantic love.

Indeed, about the time summer, 1906, ended, as we shall see, Vachel’s prayers would seemingly be answered. He would behold his millennial artist-Christ, and would hear Him sing. The vision would confirm his expectations: he would see himself as the father of a new concept of God, if not exactly the father of a new God. The ethereal experience would also give him the subject for a poem: “I Heard Immanuel Singing,” a work that biographer Eleanor Ruggles proclaims as “one of the most beautiful of his religious poems” (123). First, though, Vachel would leave New York City, at least temporarily, in pursuit of another dream, a dream that he described to Susan Wilcox as his search for “Aladdin’s lamp” (February 28, 1906, Lindsay Home—cf. Chénétier 19). He wanted to discover what ordinary Americans expected of an artist, not in a vague general way but in their own homes, when confronted by an artist up close and personal, when confronted by an artist face to face.

In early 1906, Vachel's letters to his conservative parents also manifest a dream-like quality, although nothing as drastic as the dream of fathering a God. On January 20, he wrote to reassure "Dear Papa" that he had enough funds to keep himself in New York City "till June first, but will probably have no money ahead. I do not owe a cent, and my prospects are reasonably good." In fact, later communications reveal that his "prospects" were very, very poor. The YMCA classes were nearly over, and there was little chance of additional YMCA work until autumn, when West Side's religion director Powlison suggested he might fund another lecture series. Vachel thought about teaching a class on American art, and he seized the occasion to hint that he dreamed of enough money to study "two or three days" in Boston or Philadelphia, "preferably Boston, in order to round out my American Art lectures." He also hinted that he needed money for carfare, as Papa had asked that he make travel arrangements for the family's summer trip to Europe. This second hint proved profitable, and a compliant son scribbled in his "January 19, 1903" notebook: "Passage secured on the [S.S.] Merian—American line, Philadelphia, June 23." The first hint, namely that Papa fund a research trip to Boston or Philadelphia, was denied or ignored.

Two weeks after the above letter, Vachel informed his parents of another dream: "I have an idea. If we go to Europe, I would like so much to have a situation in London for six months or a year. If I do so, we could spend the big part of our visit elsewhere. There are enough collections in London to keep me busy a long time digesting them at odd times. I don't much care what kind of work it is, if I can keep myself there. While I have no consuming zeal to do Yurup in the conventional way, since I am going, I ought to get a little something out of it; a year in England is really something." This particular letter contains news, as well as dreams. With his friend Edward "Brod" Broderick, Vachel reported, he had gone "to the Manhattan Liberal Club, to hear Michael Monahan on 'Heinrich Heine'. . . . Broderick being an irishman^ by descent, has a great pride in smart Irishmen of any denomination. . . . I do not know whether I have mentioned him before or not. He is a member of the Club [NAHEGO], a man of fixed literary ambitions, which have been heretofore thwarted. He is a successful advertisement^ writer, and draws about as large a salary as any member here, with Presby, one of the most conservative Ad. houses in New York. He is rather short in matters artistic, but long on literature, and in that matter George [Richards] and I and Blaisidell^ [Arthur Blaisdell] find him very interesting. The club is divided in half, the literary men and the gentlemen of fashion. Bill Wheeler stands on the borderline and cheers for both." [Note 2]

The literary men, Vachel continued, were currently "in the ascendancy," thanks to "several brilliant guests," one of whom was Joseph Garvin, a friend from Hiram. Garvin was "close to a big degree from Union Theological Seminary," and Vachel expressed frank (but impolitic) admiration for his friend's unorthodox orientation: "We are hoping a great deal from Joe. He has an intensely religious^ nature, a pure soul, a real consecration and a hankering for martyrdom from the beginning. I can remember his chapel orations at Hiram were chuck full of the names of fanatics who stood out against the world, the flesh and the churches. If I had a little more energy, and took to religion^, I would be that kind myself. In the presence of a high class, unselfish religious^ intellect, my soul rises with the same admiration which the Catholic Church accords her saints" (February 4).

The ultra-orthodox Lindsay parents were likely unimpressed with their son's reference to Catholic saints; and, apparently, they offered no encouragement in regard to his proposed London "situation." It was with some pique, therefore, but with heartfelt desperation that Vachel turned to one of his earlier dreams. He knew what his parents thought of this particular dream, and he wisely resolved not to tell them, not until he was underway. Instead, on February 28, he announced his plan to favored confidante Susan Wilcox: "I am going to hunt Aladdin's lamp day after tomorrow [actually, he left on March 3]. We have no old magician in our company, only Broderick, a literary man of my age. We two take a boat to Jacksonville Florida, then start across the country afoot, west and north. I shall devote till June 23 to walking. . . . My people do not know of this expedition. I shall write to them after I am well on the road. I meet them in Philadelphia, June 23, to start to Europe. . . . We will have no money when we reach Florida. We will be armed with several letters of introduction and carry one clean shirt and collar, for use in emergencies. Otherwise the open road and the hand-out for ours."

In Mama Kate Lindsay's February 1916 memoir, written a decade after the fact, there is a brief and somewhat inaccurate acknowledgement of her son's vagabond adventures: "From New York City he made his long tramp through the mountain districts of North Carolina, Georgia, Tennessee, and Kentucky;—then home, writing up his experiences for the Outlook." (In fact, Vachel did not return home until summer, 1907. In 1906, he ended his tramp in Kentucky, in time to make the trip to Philadelphia to meet his family for the summer European tour.) As Kate continued her account, she could not resist inserting an ironic question mark: "He early wrote a number of booklets, published at his own (?) expense, and distributed among his friends." Nonetheless, in 1916, Kate Lindsay was proud to report that the tramping stories "will soon be published in a volume called 'A Handy Guide for Beggars,' McMillan^ Co." (Blair). [Note 3]

Conversely, in 1906, there was no pride in Springfield when Uncle Boy's parents learned that he had taken to the road without any funds. Joy Lindsay-Blair, who was living home at the time, recalled: "Well do I remember when Vachel wrote home from New York saying he was going to walk from Florida to Kentucky and that he did not want Papa to send any money for the trip because he was going to use his poems instead of money—well I remember the storm. Papa wrote him that he must take money. Vachel replied that he would not. Papa wrote again saying that people would call him a tramp and that the whole family would be disgraced forever" (Blair). Whether Vachel wrote from New York, as Joy claims, or whether he wrote from the road, as he informed Susan Wilcox, family consternation certainly transpired. Vachel referred to the disagreement on a number of occasions, usually with patent exaggeration, such as his 1927 letter to Kentucky cousin, Ethelind South Coblin:

All my dreams and ideas of Kentucky turn on my beautiful talks with Aunt Eudora [South] in 1906, her very motherly way and her deep sympathy with my struggle to make a place for my songs. It was, indeed, timely, I had had very little response anywhere and very little understanding. No one cared for my pictures, no one cared for my verse, and I turned beggar in sheer desperation. Many people try to gloss this over now and make out it was a merry little spring excursion and I didn't really mean it. They are dead wrong. It was a life and death struggle, nothing less. I was entirely prepared to die for my work, if necessary, by the side of the road, and was almost on

the point of it at times. I would not be surprised if the invitation to go to Europe with my father and mother was the result of my Aunt Eudora's letters to Springfield. They were certainly at this time intensely hostile to everything I did, said, wrote, thought or drew. Things were in a state where it was infinitely easier to beg from door to door than to go home, or even die by the ditch on the highway. (See Chénétier 385-388)

In point of fact, as Vachel related to Susan Wilcox, he intended to join his parents in traveling to Europe even before he set out on his tramp. Indeed, he planned his tramping itinerary, knowing all along that he was to be in Philadelphia on June 23. Dr. Lindsay did not approve of his son's search for Aladdin's lamp, and he said so. But Vachel's belated claim that his parents were "at this time intensely hostile to everything I did, said, wrote, thought or drew" is obvious hyperbole.

As years passed, Dr. Lindsay's son suggested a variety of reasons for the decision to plunge into vagabondia, and there is validity (and some exaggeration) in all of them. We have already noted that he was considering a walking tour of the United States. He told his parents as much, but then claimed to have abandoned the idea when his father expressed strong disapproval. Where did the thought of a walking tour originate? likely from Vachel's love for literature. The "vagabond theme" is a favorite subject with many writers at or before the turn of the twentieth-century. On April 2, 1906, when Vachel mailed three "tramping poems" to Susan Wilcox, he commented on the lack of originality in his endeavor. He also revealed what he had been reading:

I do not consider these [the enclosed poems] especially marked utterances along the tramp-line, however. Richard Hovey and Bliss Carman's "Songs from Vagabondia," William Vaughn Moody's "Road Hymn for the Start"; Anna Hempstead Branch's "The Heart of the Road" and "The Keeper of the Half-Way House"; Kipling's "For to Enjoy" and many another by the excellent Rudyard—expound the wanderlove better than I.

He also mentioned "the redoubtable Whitman"; and, in later interviews, he claimed that Robert Louis Stevenson's poem, "A Song of the Road," had been a favorite since "high school." [Note 4]

The literary world offered a second justification for Vachel's tramping venture. From the beginning, he planned a book on his experiences, as well as a series of human-interest essays for the New York City newspapers and for a possible YMCA lecture series. (He carried with him a letter of introduction and recommendation signed by Charles Powlison of New York's West Side YMCA.) After itemizing his reading in vagabond literature, Vachel advised Wilcox: "I will venture however, few of these people have done as much walking as your servant, and this time I may be able to outwrite them on the theme" (Lindsay Home—cf. Chénétier 20). Indeed, his tramping notebooks (three were kept on this 1906 tramp) contain numerous references to future publication, including speculation on possible titles for the finished work: "A Pilgrim's Message—would be a possible title. Or I Prophecy the New Earth, or The Songs of a Dreaming Tramp, or ~~A Beggar from Fairyland~~ Sermons—by a Beggar from Fairyland. (If not Sermons—Dreams of a Beggar. But the more I think, the better I like Sermons by a Beggar from Fairyland. Sermons by a Beggar—sounds pretty good, too)" (from the notebook entitled "From Macon, Georgia, to Asheville, North Carolina"). Grandiose

titles, though, were left to the future. On the road, the author simply referred to his planned “Wanderlust book.” [Note 5]

Uncle Boy’s emphasis on “Message” and “Sermons” reveals his ongoing plan to use literature for apostolic purposes. He considered himself one of the missionary angels, wandering among the stars, bringing salvation to the neglected souls of the universe. He was unsure as to whether or not he would be accepted, but there is no evidence he expected the ultimate fate of a missionary angel (according to his own cosmogony), namely, crucifixion. “We will probably have a great many adventures of a disagreeable or sordid kind,” the angel advised Susan Wilcox, “but we have made up our minds to stand the racket” (Lindsay Home, February 28, 1906—cf. Chénétier 19).

In point of fact, the 1906 tramp notebooks suggest that the enterprise was not entirely the author’s idea. “This book on the Wanderlust was Broderick’s idea,” Vachel averred; and from other notebook entries we know that he regularly mailed letter-essays to Broderick, in hopes of publication. (Broderick “lost his nerve” early in this venture, to use Vachel’s expression, and shipped back to the relative security of New York City.) The focus of the letter-essays was vintage Vachel, especially the Vachel who prayed to be the father of Gods, the father of a “New Christ”: “I must put into it [the “Wanderlust” book] my sermons on the New Christ, and all other things I would wish to say, as a Priest of Art, and cannot say well by word of mouth. My only chance is to write them. That is my only chance to evangelize forcefully.” A few days later, he added: “My book should contain the form of my gospel for each type of man I am to meet, a little sermon for each man—scholar, poet, editor, teacher. I can preach as hard as Prexie Zollars ever wanted me to, this way.”

The self-appointed preacher-tramp then attempted to assess his situation in the light of other wanderers, both real and imagined: “There have been many pilgrims, Christian in Pilgrim’s Progress wandered in one way—Lucifer wander[ed] the other. Dante had occasion to remember on what ill bread he fares, who clammers up and down another’s stairs—Whitman has gone afoot through America, the Angels have gone on their pilgrimages to the stars. There have been wanderers with and without destinations. Tennyson followed a moving light, the Gleam. I have searched for the hidden treasure of Aladdin’s lamp.” At least half his book, he speculated, could be entitled: “[T]he Song of Lucifer the Wanderer.”

The wanderer’s missionary purpose should also be viewed in the light of his particular views on democratic equality. After all, he had brought art to the common people of New York; bringing art to the commoners of the South was the same idea—only on a broader scale. And in later years, when Vachel’s tramps had become part of American literary mythology, friends like Charles Wharton Stork liked to interview the wanderer and paraphrase his proclaimed democratic purpose. Lindsay left his position in New York City because, Stork reports, “his ideals were too democratic to leave him in peace anywhere so far removed from that part of the American people who were farthest from the influence of art and therefore most in need of it. For this reason he gave up his position and began the tramps which were to bring him close to the mind and feelings of the common man” (46). Indeed, in the climactic tale of *A Handy Guide*, “Lady Iron-Heels,” the author emphasizes the significance of his effort: “Democracy has the ways of a jackdaw. Democracy hides jewels in the ash-heap. Democracy is infinitely whimsical.

Every once in a while a changeling appears, not like any of the people around, a changeling whose real ancestors are aristocratic souls forgotten for centuries” (*Handy Guide* 108). Thomas Gray (“Elegy Written in a Country Church-Yard”) speculated on aristocratic souls buried in rural cemeteries; Vachel Lindsay believed aristocratic souls were alive and well, waiting to be discovered on American farms and in American villages.

Some of the literary-missionary-democratic purpose, on the other hand, was little more than impassioned retrospect. As we know, Vachel did not leave his YMCA job: the job, so to speak, left him. With the loss of income, he faced the loss of independence. He also faced the embarrassment of having to admit to “the old folks” that he had again failed, that he would again need support from Springfield. His pride was too intense for such a confession, and the tramping notebooks bristle with defiance: “I will do without everything, for the sake of being my own master. I had better be a Beggar than a trader, tied to the machinery of his task. In his world he finds no pity. But the Beggar’s world is full of Brotherly-kindness.” A few days later, also in his notebook, he speculated on “Poems of Individualism: if I cannot beat the system, I can die protesting, I can give things away, and keep ragged.”

Even defiance, though, was largely hind sight. We know that Broderick was the man with the original idea. Before leaving New York City, Vachel advised Susan Wilcox that, after Florida, Broderick intended “to do the orange groves, and the Tennessee mountains this month.” And this aspect of Broderick’s plan was not to Vachel’s liking: “I don’t know what I will do then, maybe work into Kentucky and into Indiana, and visit my kin” (Lindsay Home—cf. Chénétier 19). As we know, Vachel is the man who visited “the Tennessee mountains”; Broderick hightailed his way back to New York City civilization.

Finally, the 1906 tramp seems to have been, in part, Vachel’s response to an intellectual challenge issued by another New York City friend. In his notebook, he recounts an evening (April 10, 1906) at Atlanta’s Hexagon Club with a local literary man, “William Hurd [Hillyer].” Hillyer quoted “a splendid poem—the Castle of Elf Kennig”; and the evening reminded Vachel of an earlier night, the night in New York City when he finally decided to take to the road:

We looked out the windows of mist-hung Atlanta. I saw at one and the same time the castles in the mist and also that room of Clifton Wheeler’s where I resolved definitely upon this Southern trip when my Art Class plans fell. Wheeler challenged the possibility of moving from town to town and finding the men of intellect on short notice and having a communion of soul with them.

And here a man, an utter stranger, quotes a great poem splendidly after half an hour’s talk. It can be done, I say.

Take that, Mr. Clifton Wheeler: you were wrong and I was right, thanks to my meeting William Hurd Hillyer and enjoying his poems. What young man could not identify with such a challenge? [Note 6]

In brief, literary traditions, an idealistic moral philosophy, a personal challenge, and financial exigency—all lay behind Vachel’s first visit to vagabondia, not to mention

the chance to share an adventure with a beloved comrade. Uncle Boy set out walking in step with his time, with his beliefs, and with his pride.

3

At 3:00 p.m., March 3, 1906, “Brod” and “Vach” left New York’s Pier 36 on the Clyde Line’s *Iroquois*, arriving in Charleston, South Carolina, on March 6. Here Vachel went ashore and used the opportunity to practice human-interest writing, recording several observations in the first of his tramp notebooks (“from departure to Macon, Georgia”). As in earlier journalistic attempts, the would-be feature writer focused on contrasts: “The City of Charleston is South Carolina, warm, grey, and stooped and beautiful. And the old slave market is like the core in a grey apple of knowledge. There are packed in those long stalls the ghosts of a wonderful civilization. I felt as though I were being stifled in bloody tiger lilies. Think of the luxury this market bought and sold—the beauty, the happiness, the glory, the dreams. Yet there is a clanking of chains and a rattle of angry skeletons. When we step from the slave market to the streets again, all is serene, the door of the sepulchre is closed again, Charleston turns to old gold, Charleston is a happy tomb, overhung with magnolia, haunted by the cricket and the mocking bird^.” [Note 7]

On March 7, enshrouded in dense fog, the *Iroquois* sailed into Florida’s St. Johns River, passing Jacksonville and landing at Sanford on the morning of March 8. Leaving Sanford the same day, Broderick and Lindsay walked approximately 15 miles to Winter Park, starting at 1:00 and arriving at 7:00 p.m.—“in excellent condition and hungry, after a splendid walk through the Jungles^ of Florida, finishing with a golden sunset and a great walk under the moon.” The immediate goal was Rollins College, where the two friends had made arrangements to stay at Ingram Cottage, a campus boarding house. They were too late for supper, not only at the boarding house but also at any of the local inns or restaurants. “Therefore,” Vachel reported, “we took lemonade at the combination grocery and soda fountain. Then 1 can Van Camps pork and beans, next 1 can of sardines and a package of Uneeda biscuits, all eaten with soda spoons at the soda table.” It was Vachel’s kind of a meal, as he himself observed: “Broderick blushing picturesquely, Lindsay unmoved. Finally root beers. Total for the banquet, including service, etc.—thirty cents.”

With permission from Dr. William Blackman, Rollins College President, and with support from the campus YMCA, Vachel lectured on Edgar Allan Poe in Knowles Hall on March 9, from 6:30 to 7:30 p.m. He managed to attract nineteen students, and he found the youthfulness of his audience electrifying (as he would during many college lecture-recitals to come): “It was a glorious experience. . . . The audience was most lovable. Clean, clear-eyed boys. Young gods, and girls with kindly hearts and the sort of youth that departs when college days are over. There was a tender confidence in the attitude of the audience. I loved them. . . . These [the boys] helped to make vivid the opening of ‘The Raven.’ There were enough child-lovers to make plain the meaning of ‘Annabel Lee,’ God bless them.” After speaking, Uncle Boy passed the hat—and was rewarded with \$2.85.

Saturday, March 10, Lindsay and Broderick walked four miles to Orlando, where, after a two-hour wait, the YMCA secretary agreed to open the organization's hall for an 8:00 p.m. lecture. To celebrate their success, the two friends shared another Lindsay meal: "a can of baked beans and four doughnuts." After lunch, according to Vachel, "Broderick spent the early afternoon about the Reporter-Star office, and was offered the Editorship in two hours." Brod's companion, meanwhile, walked the streets of Orlando, inviting people to his evening lecture and meeting with the same civility he experienced from New York City publishers: "Everyone promised, but hinted Saturday was a bad night." However, "at the foot of an ancient stairway," Vachel exulted, "I came near to Aladdin's lamp": "Ranged in a semicircle stood three confederate veterans wearing the aspect of Job when Prosperity had at last returned. They quoted Edgar Poe to me. They gave me my lecture, in brief, in the shadow of the stairway. The tallest wore his overcoat with slouchy gallantry—there was a swashbuckler flourish to his hat as he quoted with clear-eyed patronage of poor me "Then, methought the air grew denser" etc. ["The Raven," l. 79]."

One veteran argued "how Burns was a greater man than Poe, and how more and more he turned to Burns as he grew older. And how Burns was not to blame for his genius, he just couldn't help it, he picked up his pen, and the poetry rolled off." None of the three attended the evening lecture, but Vachel was not deterred: "I would have been too much honored. But their kindness was unforgettable. And they were not ashamed to confess the faith that was in them in regard to the poets—to set aside politics and the orange crop to take off their hats to the dreamers, though it was three o'clock in the afternoon. This is the thing I came out to see. There may be yet forty thousand in Israel who have not bowed to Mammon, though they may not come to my lectures." He felt vindicated. He had been in an American city for only a few hours; and, in spite of Clifton Wheeler's skepticism, he had already met "men of intellect" and had experienced "a communion of soul."

Seven people did attend Vachel's lecture: three old men, "two eminently respectable old ladies and . . . one beautiful young lady," and "a brash Northern drummer who happened in." When Broderick passed the hat, one old man put in a quarter, another a dime, but the drummer put in fifty cents. The women contributed nothing, although, Vachel averred: "their presence was an honor." After the lecture, he added, "the brash drummer made friends in the reading room and told me all about his business from A to Z and I listened fifty cents worth and he assured me of the obvious fact that he wasn't much for poetry but liked to help out a man that seemed to want to go to the bottom of his subject and told how he gave a quarter to a slight^ of hand performer in the hotel the night before. Blessed be the Brash drummer who came to the lecture," Vachel concluded; "blessed also the three gentlemen who did not come."

The next day, Sunday, March 11, Broderick boarded a train to Tampa. Vachel followed shank's mare, via Kissimmee. At 8:30 p.m., after walking 29 miles in 9 hours, he purchased a night's rest at a lumber camp in Loughman: "Lodging and a breakfast 50 cents. The proprietor told me if I stayed till Monday night I could make \$10 on a lecture sure, every man in the camp would go. He was the foreman. But I wanted to make a record on 100 miles of walking." Meanwhile, the lecturer was jotting down titles for "Little Stories," mostly concerning women or birds: "What the Red Clay Lady said,"

“What the White Sand Lady said,” “What the Turpentine Tree Lady said,” “What the Fire Lady said,” “What the Orange and Tangerine and Grape-fruit[^] Lady said,” “Cardinal Birds and Mocking Birds,” “Buzzards,” etc. Most of these seem to have been forgotten, probably from the moment they were recorded. One title, however, with a subtitle, engaged Vachel’s attention for several days, likely because he associated the theme with his story of Lucifer: “The Blood of the Mocking Bird[^]. (Without the shedding of blood there is no music.)”

Monday night, March 12, he tramped into Lakeland: 30 miles, by his own reckoning from Loughman. He paid a dollar for lodging and tried to arrange a lecture “at the leading hotel,” but “the proprietor was obdurate.” The next morning he lost his way, walked four miles north to Knights, and had to retrace his steps. Still, he reached Tampa at 10:00 p.m., proudly having met his one-hundred-mile goal: “The total being one hundred miles for the three days[^] journey, from ten o’clock Sunday morning to ten o’clock Tuesday evening, from Orlando to Tampa. Arriving at Tampa I put up at the Commercial Hotel, having the bath of my life in their small tub. Then I slept like a stone.” The next morning a message arrived from Broderick, advising that he had already gone on to Englewood. Vachel decided to remain in Tampa and seek employment. He exchanged three *Tree of Laughing Bells* booklets for breakfast (the first time, apparently, that he traded rhymes for bread). His beneficiary was “a travelling man from Mobile—a Mr. J.A. Carney.” And on a blank page in the “January 19, 1903” notebook, Vachel started a “Roll of Honor: Those who have been good Samaritans: and others not so good.” The first name on the “Roll” is “J.A. Carver—611 City bank[^] Building—Mobile, Alabama—(Gave me my first meal in Tampa).”

After breakfast, Vachel left to hunt for a job. At 11:00 a.m., thanks to a local strike, he was hired as a sign painter by one Mr. Eckland, although the job did not begin until the following morning. “And being strapped,” the new employee wrote, “I walk the streets asking in every store for odd jobs for the day, and being refused in a neighborly sort of way everywhere, till I strike Mr. W.Y. Reynolds, Wholesale Produce, who on discovering I am hungry, takes me across the street for a meal, on discovering I am lame and blistered on my hobbling feet, gives me a cot for the afternoon in the room behind his office, and promises me a meal tonight.” Reynolds also paid for a night’s lodging “in the rear of a saloon,” and a grateful Vachel (who would have much to say against saloons in future years) declared that the name Reynolds “stands second on the roll of the merciful for today.” Indeed, on the “Roll of Honor,” following Carver’s name, we read: “I owe breakfast, supper & bed to W.Y. Reynolds, with Walter Willis & Co. Wholesale produce commission merchants.”

The next morning, Thursday, March 15, Eckland sent his new employee to a Mr. Smith, where, in Vachel’s words, “I printed some pen and ink signs that did not appear to be satisfactory, and I was practically dismissed for the afternoon.” With Reynolds’ continuing assistance, he stayed another night in his room at the saloon, waiting for Broderick to return. Friday morning, he sold another *Tree* booklet, this one to a lawyer for five cents, and bought rolls for breakfast. The afternoon was spent working on the new poem, “The Blood of the Mocking Bird,” still waiting for Broderick. Finally, late in the day, his fellow wanderer appeared; and the two friends took the night train back to Sanford, with both fares paid by Broderick. The next day they traveled by boat to

Jacksonville, where, at 11:00 a.m., Sunday, March 18, Broderick resigned the tramping business and boarded a steamer for New York City, the victim, his companion averred, of “industrial tyranny.”

Instead of leaving for New York City, Uncle Boy went to church: “I saw no one I knew, so spent almost the last of the \$.70 change Brod gave me on a meal, starting north on the Atlantic Coast Line railroad ties, feeling decidedly I was making a plunge.” His immediate goal was Macon, Georgia, and a visit with his old Hiram friend, Charlie Russell, now a Macon attorney. The estimated time of arrival was three weeks. At this point, *A Handy Guide for Beggars*, the storied aspect of Vachel’s tramp begins: “It was Sunday morning in the middle of March. I was stranded in Jacksonville, Florida. After breakfast I had five cents left. Joyously I purchased a sack of peanuts, then started northwest on the railway ties straight toward that part of Georgia marked ‘Swamp’ on the map.”

4

The “Swamp” is the Okefenokee, and Vachel’s story continues with a generally accurate account of his initial adventures. From his tramping notebook, for example, we know that the gracious host in “The Man under the Yoke” was not the product of Vachel’s creative imagination. He was “H.E. Edwards” of Dinsmore, Florida, and his name is faithfully recorded on the “Roll of Honor.” The night was March 18, Vachel’s first night out of Jacksonville. (In 1906, Dinsmore was approximately 10 miles northwest of Jacksonville). Edwards’ giving nature, in spite of his abject poverty, moved his impromptu guest. And he did not miss the opportunity to close his opening story with what he believed to be an important moral and religious affirmation: “This is what I came out into the wilderness to see. This man had nothing, and gave me half of it, and we both had abundance.”

Four miles down the road, on March 19, the wanderer was guest of W.J. Ryals of Crawford, the so-called “Old Testament Patriarch” in “The Man with the Apple-Green Eyes.” This time, however, historical circumstances proved not as helpful as with Mr. H.E. Edwards. Mr. Ryals’ guest arranged a poetry lecture at Crawford, and in his notebook he admitted that it was “a rather poor show: selections from Vachel’s verse that made the small boys squirm. I finally relapsed into paraphrases, which seemed more effective.” When the hat was passed, the collection amounted to eighty cents: in the performer’s own estimation, “more than the lecture was worth.”

In shaping the published version of his adventures, Vachel freely modified many details, including the circumstances of his Crawford lecture: “When I was through shouting, they passed the hat. I felt sure I had carried my point. Poetry was eighty-three cents valuable, a good deal for that place.” There is no mention of lapsing into paraphrases, no mention of making “the small boys squirm.” Literary Vachel is intent on highlighting the universal appeal of poetry, no matter the historical facts. There are similar “adjustments” to reality throughout *A Handy Guide*: the narratives are designed to have a positive impact on human nature, not to serve as ends in themselves. They are not for the sake of autobiography or for the sake of history—not even entirely for the sake of art. Vachel proclaimed his artistic credo at Hiram and it did not change. He believed, not

in art for art's sake but in art for love's sake. To that end, as we shall see, his book is interesting as literature but not wholly reliable as autobiography. The notebooks are needed for that. In Vachel's words, added as a footnote to the story "Lady Iron-Heels":

In the prose sketches in this book I have allowed myself a story-teller's license only a little. Sometimes a considerable happening is introduced that came the day before, or two days after. In some cases the events of a week are told in reverse order.

Lady Iron-Heels is obviously a story, but embodies my exact impression of that region in a more compressed form than a note-book record could have done.

The other travel-narratives are ninety-nine per cent literal fact and one per cent abbreviation. (*Handy Guide* 96)

The same caveat needs to be remembered when Vachel's other travel book is read: *Adventures While Preaching the Gospel of Beauty* (1914). We should be reminded, moreover, of the several comments the author made pertaining to the historical accuracy of his "gosh-awful" stories.

On the morning of March 20, 1906, as both notebook and book testify, Vachel purchased a railroad ticket and tried to sleep past his destination. He was awakened by a zealous conductor, however, and hustled off the train just inside the Georgia line, in the heart of the Okefenokee swamp. Feeling lonely and in some despair, he walked sixteen miles to Fargo, Georgia, where he intended to telegraph Springfield for enough money to purchase a railroad ticket to Macon. Fargo, however, did not have a money-order office. The now forlorn wanderer spent his last nickel on gingersnaps, and used his Powlison letter and *The Tree of Laughing Bells* booklet to secure a caboose ride from Fargo to Valdosta. His nameless benefactor was the fundamentalist, red-neck inspector depicted in "The Man with the Apple-Green Eyes."

At the Valdosta station, Vachel found two others waiting for the next train: a drunken, sentimental Vermont man who was returning home from Texas and an off-duty flagman who "told just why he would vote for Hoke Smith." In his published story, Vachel makes two attempts at a ride to Macon and is refused both times. First, although he displays his Powlison letter, he is refused by a general superintendent named Grady. Second, he is turned down by the man "with the apple-green eyes," a conductor Vachel arbitrarily names "Mr. Shark." Following the advice of the flagman, Vachel tries the conductor a second time, treats him "like a gentleman," and is accepted, giving Vachel the story-teller an opportunity to moralize on the usefulness of respecting our fellow human beings: "Yea, my wanderers, the cure for the broken heart is gratitude to the gentleman you would hate. . . ." [Note 8]

The moral, however, seems to have shaped the story. In the notebook version, the solicitous tramp made only one effort, not two, to persuade the conductor (whose real name was "Mr. Pope") to give him a ride. He received no "wisdom" from the flagman, since the latter fell sound asleep after announcing his intention to vote for Hoke Smith. Instead of grand politeness, Vachel employed, in his own words, "chin-music": "At one o'clock [1:00 a.m., March 21] I talked my way onto the through freight for Macon, kindness of Mr. Pope, conductor." At 2:00 p.m. the same day, having traveled all of 150 miles in only thirteen hours (!), the train pulled into Macon, Vachel having used the ride to update his notebook and to drink several pots of coffee. He marked the achievement of

his initial goal by ending his first tramping notebook and starting a second, entitling the new book: "From Macon, Georgia, to Ashville^, North Carolina." He also summarized his tramping adventures in a lengthy letter to Susan Wilcox, beginning on March 22:

My Dear Miss Wilcox:

In the pursuit of the Lamp, many diverting things have diverted me. I have written all day on an orderly report of all doings of interest since March 3 when we sailed. But the all day writing has scarcely covered half a week, my book-full^ of notes is practically untouched, and I see about five days^ work ahead of me, for I have determined to set down in my best words, every really vivid new impression. I only attain to English in one or two of the best paragraphs; I think I attain to a rough veracity of record, but the finer flavors of an impression remain unphotographed. I have had several impressions that need only the great antiseptic, style, to make them imperishably beautiful. I have encountered acts of such unexpected moral beauty that all the cynic was swept out of me as by a great sea-breeze. One man, who had nothing, gave me half of it, with such abundance that we both had everything—that is the general way of stating it, to speak to convince I must have more time and brains than I have now, to assemble all the details, and set them in the right light. (Lindsay Home)

He went on to relate his other encounters, all of which we have already discussed. Then, he set the letter aside until March 28, and we shall have occasion to return to it at the appropriate time.

"Macon," the third tale in *A Handy Guide*, is the only account of Vachel's reunion with his old friend, Charlie Russell. Having been on the road almost four days, Vachel elaborates on his new appreciation for the advantages of "CIVILIZATION" and "CULTURE" and "SOCIETY," including clothes, chairs, table cloths, silverware, food, beds, and pillows. In contrast, the appropriate notebook entry is simply matter-of-fact: "I made headquarters with C.D. Russel^ in the law office of Joe Hill Hall, Exchange Bank Building." At Hiram, Russell had been one of the boys whose morals, especially in regard to drink, had caused Vachel grave concern, although he was not one to embarrass a friend by including any such references in a published story. Instead, he remarked in his notebook, with great satisfaction, that Charlie was "on the water-wagon, quite earnest about the law; knows everybody in town and I have high hopes for him. He is high minded, a pretty big thinker, and as a host beyond compare. His nature is profoundly rich, but the study of law has hardened and sharpened his edges to his betterment."

Russell introduced his itinerant friend to several people, including reporter William Cole Jones, who published a short notice of Vachel's arrival in the *Macon News*. Jones likely was the first, but by no means the last journalist who recognized the newsworthiness of a literary tramp. Russell also introduced Vachel to a Professor Mosley of Mercer University and a Dr. Clark, formerly a professor of Mercer University, where Russell had attended law school. Professor Clark reminded Vachel of a "typical scholar," with "the same air" as his friends John Kenyon and Edward Scribner Ames. Clark had published an edition of Bacon's essays, and Vachel attended a Clark lecture on Browning versus Tennyson. "When I called at his home," Vachel wrote in retrospect, "Prof. Clark welcomed me with freedom and grace, and in three minutes had said something about 'following the gleam' that covered the whole case." Clark went on to relate how he had

lost his position at Mercer, “on account of liberal views,” according to his guest: “a typical heresy-hunt. He told it with the scholar’s polite arrogance, the gentle air of finality that is the proud possession of the scholar alone, his mail of proof in the face of all stupidity or fanaticism.”

Professor Mosley is reported to have been “agressively^ kind.” He had just published an essay on Christian Science, and willingly traded religious views with his guest. “The thing I most appreciate in the man,” Vachel wrote later (after having left Macon), “is that he caused me to respect one more religion. . . . The world is full of fine people. The half has not been told. I could make character-sketches of dozens more, of really big people. And the dubs show up with unexpected credit. Consider the number of dubs who have bought my book [*The Tree of Laughing Bells*]. I could write an essay on ‘The Search for the Elect.’” Mosley earned Vachel’s appreciation in another important way: “He took me driving over beautiful hills and introduced me to the really wonderful Miss Davis, a student of Pratt, Brooklyn, yet an enticing gentle Southern girl in every rounded line, in every step. She went with us to gather the yellow Jasmine^.” Miss Davis, Vachel exulted, was “the most beautiful girl in the world,” the cynosure of a Macon social set that included several noteworthy girls: a violinist named Fliss Matthews and a girl with a “gleam in her proud eye,” Retta Etheredge or Etheridge.

On March 28, still in Macon, Vachel met C.E. Campbell and visited the home where Sidney Lanier had been born: “a little old house of no particular distinction.” In Macon, anyway, people identified Campbell as Lanier’s “most intimate friend,” the man who “bought Lanier’s first flute for \$1.25.” Vachel himself found Campbell fascinating: “He was so delightful with his memories of Lanier that he was a perpetual chuckle, a beaming enthusiasm.” Further down the road, Vachel would meet more of Lanier’s friends and collect additional stories. In time, as we may suspect, Lanier and his poetry would be added to the growing list of Lindsay lecture subjects. [Note 9]

Also on March 28, Vachel finished the letter to Susan Wilcox, the letter that he had started on March 22. In the interval, he completed the first of the journalistic essays intended for the New York City newspapers, and he was in the midst of planning his second: “I have now finished my letter north—twenty pages, ending in a Florida fantasy, all the rest a veracious account of sundry matter of fact episodes in Florida. I will write another covering my adventures in Georgia for thus far. One of them will be an interview with C.E. Campbell, Lanier’s most intimate friend, another [will] be a Sunday afternoon in the house where Lanier was born.” In closing, he indicated to Wilcox that, in spite of his parents’ alarm over his vagabond ways, there had been no change in plans as regards the coming summer: “When I am in Paris I have the chance of meeting some half a dozen friends who will have preceded me. This delightful chanciness, will add to the adventure. Write to me here, General Delivery, and it will be forwarded” (Lindsay Home).

At 10:00 a.m., Saturday, March 31, ten days after reaching Macon, Vachel walked away from 531 Georgia Avenue, the home of Mr. McAllister, Charlie Russell’s landlord. In his pocket was a dollar, the gift of Warren Roberts, a fellow attorney in Russell’s law office. In his traveling bag, he carried one of Mrs. McAllister’s sandwiches for lunch, several letters of reference from Russell and other Macon acquaintances, and twenty-five copies of *The Tree of Laughing Bells*, copies that Broderick had mailed from New York

City. The next goal was Atlanta (some 100 miles north), with Forsythe and the home of another Russell friend, one “Pearsons” or “Persons,” as the first stop.

Vachel arrived in Forsythe at 6:30 Saturday evening, having walked some twenty-five miles in eight and a half hours. Happily, he wrote, he was greeted with “the usual Southern Supper—corn cakes, waffles, rice, hominy, gravy, and the unusually good steak. . . . Hurrah for Mr. Pearsons! He talked to me of his eagerness for travel, of his plans for studying German. I told him how our dreamers were inventors rather than artists. I discovered the next village that he put half his money into a patent churn, to no avail.”

The next day, April 1, Vachel alleged, “I took it easy, walking about sixteen miles to Barnesville, reaching it at three o’clock in the afternoon. Both my hosts were away from home, so I spent till six in the post office, drawing post-cards[^] representing me in a rain-storm, walking from a miniature Macon to a miniature Atlanta. The nearest that came to fact is that we have had a cloudy sky and cold weather for two days. It looks so bright this morning I am afraid my cards are falsified.” His Barnesville host was Gaynor or Gaynard Turner, a sales executive with the Barnesville Planing Mill Co. (“Piano, Buggy Bodies a Specialty”). With an introductory letter from Charlie Russell, Turner gave Vachel “his spare room and breakfast. I wrote by his fireside a greeting to the people of Barnesville, to be published in the weekly paper.” Later the same evening, Vachel listened as his host expatiated on a favorite subject:

Mr. Gaynor Turner gave me an excellent talk on Temperance by the fireside. He said that men that were willing to drink with a salesman bought the most and did the biggest business, but lived the more intensely and went down the sooner. And the men who drank not at all were over-cautious buyers. He travelled for a wholesale buggy house. The traveller gets the patient just happy enough to convince him he is doing a big business, and talk is one-half the convincing, drink the other. (He thought I was a drinker.) After many observations after settling down in his village, with its dispensaries, he has made up his mind that liquor controls the destiny of half the human family—and after the multitude of village wrecks, he is not in favor of the dispensary, but National Prohibition.

We may suspect that we would next read “Hurrah for Mr. Turner”; but “excellent talk on Temperance” was the extent of Vachel’s enthusiasm, at least in his notebook record. [Note 10]

At some point during the evening, Gaynor Turner’s brother introduced Vachel to a Professor Smith, who taught at Barnesville’s Gordon Junior College. The Professor expressed interest in Vachel’s views and asked him to say a few words during chapel service the following morning. When the time arrived, however, Smith apparently had changed his mind, offering a lame excuse and leaving Vachel to speculate on the real reason: “The morning [April 2] of my lecture at the college, I hustled through breakfast to get there, and lo the[^] Prof. Smith insisted he had so many announcements he had no room for me. I had left a copy of the Laughing Bells with him overnight. That probably queered him.” The rejected speaker left town directly afterward and assuaged any bruised feelings with five cents worth of candy: “an enormous pile of stick candy, purporting to be half a pound. It was filling.” In a “no-name village at noon,” he lunched on “a five-

cent package of Graham wafers, and a five cent can of Libbey's[^] devilled tongue. It was filling, but pretty hot." He caught a three-mile ride "on a load [of] firewood with two crackers," after which he "walked over a patch of road just worked by the chain-gang." He was not impressed: "It was an ugly feeling to pass over it. An old trusty[^] was at the crossroads with the wagons but the gang were over the hill on a side-road. The road seemed to scream with the indignation of the gang."

By late afternoon, he reached Griffin, where he was greeted by still another of Russell's friends: "At Griffin I lodged with a rare spirit Lucien P. Goodrich, Lawyer, who had been with Charlie at Athens. He was saturated with Poetry, quoted it well, wrote it poorly, but sincerely. His hospitality was superb, his old father and mother were dears, and his village, having been spared by Sherman, crammed with old colonial houses." In fact, nearly everywhere he stopped, Vachel was confronted with the aftermath of the not-so Civil War, a war that, for Yankees anyway, had ended more than forty years earlier. At Griffin, the town spared by Sherman, the wandering Northerner brought his notebook up to date. He was still looking for human-interest stories that might appeal to New York City publishers, and one subject seemed a possibility. The calendar may have read "1906," but in Southern minds the War between the States was far from over:

Charlie's letters are introducing me to a very fine class of people, all of whom are fluent talkers, and at once begin upon the new versus the old regime in the South. Historically speaking, Winter is still here. As it is still one week till Spring, so it is one generation till the old South is hidden by the flowering of the New. Every Southerner knows the names of all the generals, is deeply versed in the lore of local engagements; they talk about these things as they were discussed in Illinois when I was six years old.

Pearsons said to me that if the old Regime had continued the South would inevitably have drifted into monarchy. One of the Turners raised the question as to whether a negro had a soul—the same question that Edwards raised.

(In *A Handy Guide for Beggars*, Edwards, "the man under the yoke," asks, according to Vachel, "whether I thought 'niggers' had souls. I answered 'Yes.' He agreed reluctantly. 'They have a soul, of course, but it's a mighty small one.'")

While staying in Griffin, Vachel answered a "General Delivery" letter from Susan Wilcox. He had received letters from other friends, and he found himself in a humble and reflective mood, speculating on the differences between himself and other poets of the road, particularly "the redoubtable Whitman—whom I neither love nor hate. No man can equal him in voicing the sentiment of the open-road; the reason he does not hold me is because my mind is over-decorative in its appetites[^] at present. Sinbad and Aladdin for mine[^]. . . I find however, a new beauty in life," he continued to Wilcox, "and in my heart, that goes beyond decoration. A new element entered my life, aside and apart from its usual formulas, in the friendship of the splendid men I have known in New York this year, and in the realization of the splendid heart strength of some of my oldest friends, like Miss Wilcox. This is an experience that comes without pictures or words, it is too new to me to have an Art form. And it has been enhanced for me walking along the road, with letters from all these in my pocket, and I feel that life can have other methods of happiness besides the search for Beauty, or mere pictorial and picturesque adventure, or intellectual adventure. Of course all these things are preached, and the preacher can

blandly remind us that he said so, and His[^] master said so, long ago. It is easy to be unctuous and orthodox. All this comes straight from my note book[^]” (April 2, 1906, Lindsay Home—cf. Chénétier 20-21)

As he professed, Vachel was quoting his notebook almost word for word, although he did omit one significant sentence: “The search for Beauty is still the only thing in which I have real faith, but the reality of Friendship promises change, in Art and Life.” Meanwhile, both notebook and letter end with a nearly identical paragraph: “Almost every day I find myself in a glow of wonder over the tenderness of the Southern Hospitality. I do not stay in any one place long enough for the people to lose the glamor of Romance. They are actors in intense little dramas—from the hour I knock on the door, to the hour I go” (April 2, 1906, Lindsay Home—cf. Chénétier 21). Enclosed with the letter, in Vachel’s hand, are copies of three poems, two with variant titles: “I Want to Go Wandering,” “The Fireflies,” and “The Breast of the Earth” (see *Poetry* 4-5, 33, 17 respectively). Two days later, on April 4, he was at the home of another poet: Mrs. John McIntosh Kell, née Blanche Monroe. He would again see that the Civil War was still pulsating in Southern minds; he would also learn new stories concerning the life and poetry of Sidney Lanier.

5

“I have had supper, bed and breakfast in the most spiritually beautiful house I ever entered,” the notebook record reads: “The hostess is a poetess.” The Kell home was located in the town of Sunny Side, then about twenty-five miles south of Atlanta (although the wanderer believed he was still forty miles from Atlanta). The life of John McIntosh Kell appealed to Vachel, and sometime after completing his tramp, he wrote a summative biography into the closing pages of his third tramping notebook. Kell had served as a naval officer in the Mexican War (1847-48) and had sailed with Commodore Matthew Perry on his first trip to Japan (1853). At the time of secession, Kell resigned his United States Navy commission and joined the Confederate forces. He was appointed commanding officer of the historic ships *Sumter*, *Alabama*, and *Richmond* (an ironclad). After the war, Kell returned to farming, and then, in 1887, he was appointed Adjutant General of Georgia.

Before his death in 1900, Kell dictated his memoirs to his wife; and in 1906, when Vachel arrived, she was writing her husband’s biography and editing his letters. The “spiritually beautiful house” was “crammed with before-the-war books and furniture,” as well as mementos from Mexico, China, and Japan. Vachel was grateful for his unusual opportunity, and he paid his ultimate compliment to Mrs. Kell. He compared her to Mama: “Charlie Russel’s[^] father seemed to have been a dear friend of this family, and for his sake I was abundantly welcome. Mrs. Kell is an invalid, having been forced to a wheel chair by a broken leg, and now reading and writing to kill the time. She is passionately devoted to her husband’s memory, has a strong face, something the type of my mother’s, and is something the same sort of woman.” The Kell home, although “spiritually beautiful,” manifested the general decline of many Southern properties: “The house of the widow of Captain Kell is at once to be noticed, it is neither cabin nor farmhouse, plainly the house of departed glory by the shrubberies. . . . It is a reminiscence of what was once a patriarchal home, dwindled to about what Grandma’s is now. Nothing

has made so plain to me the sharp tears of the Confederate Defeat. Into those walls have been packed all that I am able to realize of the South. Strength, dignity and sharp sorrow—these are the impressions.” (A picture of Grandma Frazee’s Indiana home is included at the end of Chapter 2, p. 27).

Despite her “sharp sorrow,” Mrs. Kell “talked inexhaustibly and well,” and her listener was vexed that he could make “no return, other than to listen.” One of Mrs. Kell’s favorite subjects was Sidney Lanier, and Vachel summarized her monologue in his notebook: “. . . in a little house nearby, the Lanier’s used to live, by kindness of the Kells, and Sidney, walking through the cornfield just north, got his inspiration for his poem on Corn, and came in and threw himself on the lounge, and told how he enjoyed the corn, and then in the little neighboring cottage, wrote it. . . . Mrs. Lanier edits all her husband’s papers, and allows no one to help her. . . . Mrs. Kell emphasized the religious side of Lanier’s poetry—how often his music had been played, [how] the house seemed a sacred place, how some people thought there was too much God in his poetry.” One of Sidney Lanier’s better-known poems, “Corn,” was indeed written at Sunnyside, Georgia, during July and August 1874.

Mrs. John McIntosh Kell was the last of many gracious people who greeted the troubadour south of Atlanta. In retrospect, he felt very fortunate: “There is one thing that comes home to me. All the people who have entertained me must be remembered substantially. I propose that I send them cards from London, Paris and Berlin.” Soon after writing his intentions in his notebook, Vachel walked out of Sunny Side toward Atlanta. After tramping all day, he decided, “no, I will not toil on till ten o’clock to reach Atlanta,” and he spent the night in the spare room of a nameless “kind farmer.” At 9:00 a.m., Saturday, April 7, he arrived at “East Point” and purchased a streetcar ticket for the final six miles. It cost him, he commented, “all but my last five cents of Warren Robert’s dollar.” What follows, now, is based on Vachel’s notebook entries, as the only mention of Atlanta and its environs in *A Handy Guide* is a brief note on the troubadour’s departure—on Easter Sunday morning, down “Peachtree road”—at the beginning of “The Gnome.” Otherwise, *A Handy Guide* skips from the civilized comforts of Macon to the natural comforts of “the falls of Tallulah,” in north Georgia.

Once in Atlanta, Vachel contacted several newspaper friends of Charlie Russell, including former Macon reporters Ed Camp and William Cole Jones, who had written the announcement of Vachel’s arrival in Macon. Jones had accepted a position with the *Atlanta Journal* while Vachel was on the road. To his chagrin, when he happened upon Jones “by accident,” Vachel weakened and asked for fifty cents for dinner, after which he headed for the YMCA reading room. Here he used the time until closing (10:30 p.m.) to read magazines and to record recent reflections in his notebook: “I believe I have arrived at a principle. A man can live on one meal a day, if he is sure of that meal, and does not wreck his nervous system worrying about it, and pays fifty cents for the meal and eats it at night. As a corollary—I suggest he need not pay for sleeping quarters. He can sleep out of doors. The stomach is the really sensitive portion of the anatomy. Tonight is my chance to sleep under the stars. If there is anything else sensitive about me I will discover it.” He was in a back parlor, behind a curtain, and therefore hidden from the other YMCA patrons. “Some gentlemen have been laboring to get religion,” he commented: “Such uncanny groanings I never heard.” The annoying moans led him to revise his

anatomical views, and he added a wry comment: “The ear is one of the sensitive points of the human anatomy.”

Sometime the next day, the homeless visitor recorded the story of his first night in Atlanta. After the YMCA closed, he wrote letters in a hotel lobby until 1:00 a.m. One epistle was addressed to his Chicago friend, Alice Cleaver. Dated “April 7, 1906, Saturday night, Eleven o’clock,” the letter reads, in part:

I hope I have remembered your address. It comes to me at this moment after a year or so of forgetting. Maybe you are in Paris. It seems to me most of my dear friends are there now. I will send you several names of men and women. Maybe you have settled down with that Presbyterian Preacher you used to write me about. My little romance has blown away.

We could have a jolly old tramp through the city tonight. I am booked to walk the streets till morning, or find a dry goods box to sleep in. I borrowed fifty cents tonight of a kind newspaper friend. It was all pride would allow me to ask. And I hate to think about paying back. Its^ worse than doing without.

Well I looked at that fifty cents, and decided that the stomach was the most sensitive part of a man’s being, having eaten nothing all day. So I got a fine fifty cent dinner, and slowly consumed all that was coming, with an extra order of bread, from 6:30 to 7:30. Then I hibernated in the Y.M.C.A. rooms till an hour ago. And I read an art-girl story in Scribners^ that reminded me of you. Then a poem by Thomas Wood Stevens in Everybody’s reminded again. The message was plain. And just as I started this letter, intending to send it to the Philadelphia School, I suddenly remembered your address [Falls City, Nebraska]. [Note 11]

Vachel asked Cleaver for “the chronicle of your triumphs,” and promised that they would meet again, “because I feel in my bones I am going to wander everywhere, before I die.” He then returned to his own history: “I left a position of some promise in the West Side Y.M.C.A. New York to take a boat down to Sanford Florida, and by freight car and by high road I have arrived in Atlanta. I have seen a pile of the South, I assure you. I look like the duce^, but have preserved my spiritual self respect and general Phariseeism all right. . . . I lecture at the school houses and the firesides, and sometimes pass the hat. But I generally neglect the latter point, with one meal a day as a result. Something will come of it though. I am the master of my fate.” (Hiram).

When the hotel lights were turned out, the master of his fate tried the railway station, first stumbling into the waiting room reserved for African Americans. “It took me a while to understand that a nigger was trying to tell me that wasn’t a white waiting room.” In the “white room,” he encountered an aggressive agent who “wanted to know what I wanted, where I was going. I answered frankly ‘nothing,’ ‘nowhere.’ He said he had run me out of there once before already, and put me out with a loud voice. But I preserved my dignity this much—I went out slowly, and assured him he had never seen me before, in tones that I hope carried conviction.” Although the occasion begged for comment, the evictee made no further notebook entry about mastering his fate.

Vachel walked a mile east and attempted to sell a copy of *The Tree of Laughing Bells* in an all-night drug store and confectionery: “Everybody was uncivil. I don’t see why. I suppose I was not prepossessing in manner.” Thus, no sale. It started to rain, and

he walked over to the post office, where he finished a letter to a New York City girl, Achsah Barlow [soon to be Brewster], and wrote letters to Mrs. Kell and to his Kentucky cousin, "N. Lindsay South." At 4:00 a.m., with no more envelopes, he "went out into the hall and half dozed on the steps near the elevator till half past five, when the birds began to sing and far off solitary roosters crow. And my theory held good—there was none of that panic that comes with an empty stomach. I had till three o'clock this afternoon to amuse myself. I am writing this in the Williams Hotel, the fifty cent hotel right by the post office I would have patronized with another fifty cents."

At 6:00 a.m., he went to Mass, "and had some comfort out of it, though I sometimes dozed on my knees." Nearby stood Atlanta's largest Christian ("Disciples") church, and the janitor gave Vachel the address of the pastor, a man named "Pendleton," according to the "Roll of Honor." The parsonage was at "167 Capitol Ave., a quarter of a mile away," and Vachel resolved "to get acquainted before Sunday School. . . . I arrived before breakfast, and told the first lie of the day. I said I had eaten. But [the pastor's wife] dragged me not unwillingly to the table, a cheerful assembly of girls grown and half grown, and a visiting youth, a sanitary engineer—that is, a plumber—evidently a friend of the oldest. I had a pleasant breakfast, but had gotten to the point where one hour of sleep was worth all the breakfasts made. . . . The pastor's wife seemed really glad to see me, and the girls were quite kind. The pastor was preoccupied with his morning's discourse. Well, they had a chapter from Daniel, and Prayers at the table right after eating. The pastor knew Prof. Wakefield and [Prexy] Zollars." The youngest daughter, age sixteen, caught Vachel's eye. She shared her mother's beautiful, "blue-berry^ black" eyes, "for which I thank the Giver of every Good and Perfect Gift."

After Sunday School, the exhausted worshipper admitted that he "slept peacefully through the service," although he gave credit to Pastor Pendleton: "He is a clean spiritual dead-in-earnest man, yet a middle of the road Campbellite." Mrs. Pendleton invited the visitor to dinner, but he excused himself and found his way back to the lobby of the Williams Hotel, where he updated his notebook and wondered if he could "resist the temptation to ask Jones for another lift" [that is, loan]. He tried unsuccessfully to sell a booklet to the hotel manager, and spent Sunday night again "sleeping under the stars."

Vachel remained in Atlanta a little more than a week, initially living off borrowed money from Ed Camp and William Jones, along with the proceeds from the sale of five copies of *The Tree of Laughing Bells* (sold at a quarter apiece). When he was unable to pay for a room at the Williams Hotel, the manager suggested the Salvation Army, where he could have a reasonably comfortable bed for 15 cents a night, with the first night's rent said to be "on credit." Vachel mused that, if he could only make such an arrangement in New York City, "my fortune would be made, providing I combined it with other things as wise." One lectureship, at \$5.00 a week, would be enough. From Ed Camp, he borrowed \$2.50 and purchased "shirts, collars, a breakfast, and a night's lodging." He owed at least one dinner to Jones, although he noted later, with pride, that he had repaid the fifty cents. Jones was "a bundle of life," Vachel observed, "with very large eager eyes. There are fine things about him. Oh for the vocabulary of Edith Wharton. My words are all in lumps, when it comes to filling out a personality."

On April 10, Vachel dined at the Hexagon Club with banker and fellow poet, William Hurd Hillyer (see above, p. 10). "He has a faculty for making money in real

estate,” the visitor noted matter-of-factly: “His poetry and his life seem to coincide.” Hillyer won Vachel’s respect when, in the latter’s words: “He re-read every line of [Poe’s] the Bells—a line at a time, commenting on each one with proper insight.” The two poets also shared a love for the sound of poetry. According to the listener, Hillyer “repeats his own verse well, and is not ashamed to be orotund.” Both poets, moreover, knew the difficulty of finding a publisher, and Hillyer had thought about ways to overcome the problem: “Before we had talked an hour, he confided his ambition to combine his business and artistic talents in a big Southern publishing house. He said that Business-men said ‘Be prepared to lose two hundred thousand dollars on the start.’” Perhaps Hillyer’s enterprise was sidetracked, though, because soon after meeting Vachel, Hillyer’s *Songs of the Steel Age* was accepted by Boston publisher Richard Badger and published the very next year, 1907.

Through Ed Camp, Vachel met other area newsmen, including Julian Harris, the *Atlanta Constitution*’s impressive 28-year-old city editor and the son of Joel Chandler Harris. In fact, as Vachel sat waiting for the introduction, he overheard Harris reciting lines from Sidney Lanier’s “The Marshes of Glynn”; and we may speculate that the eaves-dropper’s enthusiasm was at high pitch, especially since Harris went so far as to offer his new acquaintance a job. However, Vachel explained in his notebook, “they would not have me when they found I started to Europe so soon. Otherwise I would have been on the News Staff.” In turn, Vachel suggested a poetry column or a series of tramping essays, similar to those he was sending to New York, but to no avail. He tried other Atlanta newspapers as well but finally concluded: “I could not get any of the papers to listen to a correspondence scheme, though I labored in the matter.”

At some point, Vachel met Julian Harris’s brother-in-law, John Collier, another Atlanta newsman. It was Collier who arranged the most profitable event of this 1906 tramp, a private lecture/recital at the home of Atlanta socialite, Mrs. [John] Ottley (527 Peachtree Street), the wife of one of Atlanta’s major bank presidents. Before an audience of ten or so prominent citizens, Vachel lectured for an hour and a half (from 9:00 to 10:30 p.m.), taking his cue from several prints in the Ottley home: “I gave an attempt at a definition of Pre-Raphaelite Poetry and Painting, sketching the artistic history first, then quoting from Morris and Swinburne, and discussing Rossetti. Then with the Swinburne quotation ‘Pride Have all men in their fathers’ [“Athens: An Ode,” l. 8] I closed, and sat down. After a few questions I recited four short ones of my own, but nothing happened. It was a decent rather than a successful occasion. I had no fire in me.” By his own admission, he “did not say ten cents worth”; but Mrs. Ottley paid ten dollars. Moreover, the evening gave Vachel support for one of his favorite opinions: “I am assured she is the most brilliant woman in Atlanta. I have not seen such readiness and open-heartedness and education combined in my life. . . . And her husband is a beautiful illustration of the American Principle—that the wife shall carry the culture for two, and hand the boiled down results to her husband.” Indeed, he would recognize this same “Principle,” in various ways, for the rest of his life. [Note 12]

With money in hand, Vachel claimed to have used five dollars to pay his remaining Atlanta expenses and to repay the money he had borrowed from Camp and Jones. He also claimed to have left the remaining five dollars with John Collier “for safe keeping”; but, as we will see, he had some extra money during his first few days out of

Atlanta. Mrs. Ottley's handsome remuneration, though, brought guilt feelings; and her speaker was sadly reminded "that I never do well when I should. . . . It seems that there is never a fair exchange in this world. I wish I had given them as good a lecture as I gave in Winter Park for \$ two eighty five[^]. Then I would be satisfied. But it is one of the principles of life, just discovered, that one spends half the time imposing on other people and the other half doing his best work and getting nothing."

In part, the wanderer was feeling sorry for himself. He had received word from Broderick that the New York City newspapers would not buy his human-interest stories, and the disappointment expressed itself in a new resolution: "Let me henceforth walk when the walking is good, and ride when the riding is better. There seems to be no prospect of my having my letters published at this time. I might as well give that up and write them serenely for their own sake. Some of the best passages can be kept, and combined into a lecture." Typically, he accepted some of the blame but decided not to abandon totally his original intent. He felt that he understood what he needed to do in order to improve: "I need the discipline of writing better English into this notebook."

6

On April 15, the day Vachel left Atlanta, he must have believed in the principle that "riding is better." He took the streetcar to the end of the line and only then started his walk toward Asheville. In his "bundle," he carried letters that John Collier had addressed to friends along the way, in what was clearly an attempt to alleviate the mendicant aspects of the journey. For the time being, anyway, Vachel's tentative plan was to reach Washington, D.C., where he could stay with George E. Slaybaugh, one of George Richards' friends. From Washington, he intended to walk or ride to Philadelphia, where he would join his parents in time to sail on June 23. The burden of the road, especially the begging, was beginning to take its toll on this missionary angel's idealism.

Since the New York City newspapers expressed no interest in his stories, he also meditated more and more on how he could transform his journey to reflect some practical purpose. He had grown to realize, the hard way, that the ideal had failed to anticipate the practical. He thought about writing poetry, especially poetry reflecting his experiences in the villages and hinterlands of rural America:

I must certainly turn some of this writer's experience into verse, and put the Wandering poems in the front of the book, and give them some such title as the "Songs of a Tramp." The first pages should contain my greetings to the various types of host and hostess I have met. The next should contain verses setting forth the principles of Life as I have had them forced upon me, the few undoubted things, such as when you work with a man, you love him.

Next greet the various types of creators and active minds—the scholars, the poets, the editors. Finally should come a judicious arrangement of little verses, covering the widest territory I have covered—the mountains of Colorado, Halstead[^] St. Chicago, Tampa, New York. These should be mere souvenirs of these places, four lines or so, epigrammatic records, mile posts of travel, not ostentatious.

This should be sent to all the people I have had occasion to remember as kind hosts and easily-made friends. By a judicious arrangement it might be possible to arrange

all the verses in the book that I have written, by having the middle section A Tramp in Fairyland, and the third A Tramp in Soul Land—or something of that sort.

As he walked, he speculated on other titles (many are given earlier in this chapter), all suggesting the missionary purposes of a “priest of art” who wanders so that he may preach the tenets of a new God or a new Christ to the everyday people of America. In time, these everyday people and their stories suggested another book:

My book should contain the biographies of themselves men have given me by the fireside. Why should one be eager to live first-hand, with so many biographies waiting to be digested?

Let there be a section of the book called Fireside Confessions, or what they are willing to tell a stranger—or begin with a verse to the effect that people will tell the stranger what they will not tell a friend—because he passes on and is not there to witness the inconsistency, the everydayness of tomorrow—the stranger has the same glamour for them they have for a stranger. The Gleam is on his face for them as it is on their face for him.

And with so many of my friends seeking out error for the sake of its jewels or its ashes, let me heap together the jewels of their confessions rather than hunt jewels of my own. Let me say to my soul—hold, my friends are sinning enough to learn wisdom, let me sin no more than I must, let me remain cold, that I may record their wisdom.

Except for a handful of random experiences, however, Vachel was nearly out of Georgia before he encountered a “Fireside” confession that he thought worthy of a story. The reason is revealed in his notebook. He still had money left from the Ottley lecture, and he did not have to beg for a night’s lodging: “On Easter Sunday [April 15] I left Atlanta. After several days of tramping over cotton-planters’ hills and through young peach orchards—getting all noon meals for nothing—and paying forty to seventy-five cents for supper, bed, and breakfast, I finally reached Gainesville, mid-week, and lodged at White Sulphur, a little beyond. From Gainesville on, the hills became little sharp mountains, no longer fit for cotton, generally timber hung and the railroad track begins a steady upward grade, that continues to Talulah Falls. The Blue Ridge to the West comes more plainly into sight.”

He did receive several rides in farm wagons, including one with a Georgia redneck who freely offered advice on several subjects: “The moonshiners will be a lovin’ you, just as, like as not, just so you don’t go pokin round the stills. . . . As soon as you educate a nigger, he goes to the chain gang, or gets killed.” Mercifully (justly?), however, the redneck’s name was not inscribed on the growing “Roll of Honor,” although a version of his advice is recorded in *A Handy Guide for Beggars* at the beginning of “The Gnome.”

The first name on the “Roll,” following the names and addresses of several Atlantans, is “Mrs. King—Landlady, Talulah Falls, Ga.” Vachel arrived in Tallulah Falls on Thursday night, April 19, riding in the mule cart of “an interesting chuckling old man.” At the post office, he found a letter from Collier with the remaining \$5.00 from the Ottley lecture. He bought “a pair of plough-shoes” for \$1.50 (not 75 cents, as related in *A Handy Guide*), and spent another dollar on twelve souvenir postcards, which he

mailed to his “hosts to the South.” He spent the night “in an atrocious boarding-house and wrote letters, to bed time.” The next day he dedicated to the glorious Tallulah waterfalls, relating essentially the same story in his notebook and in the rapturous fourth tale of *A Handy Guide*: “The Falls of Tallulah. Being the Story of a Wild Bath in a Mountain-Torrent, and a Conversation with the Earth.” That night, he left the “atrocious boarding-house” and moved to Mrs. King’s, “opposite the post office, and there ate a splendid supper, and had a terribly buggy bed, and an excellent breakfast.”

Saturday, April 21, Vachel walked northeast along the railroad tracks, “crossing many scary trestles in the morning.” He left the railroad for the ordinary road that afternoon, following the Tennessee Valley “past ‘passover,’ which is the watershed between East and West.” Again, he opted for riding, paying twenty-five cents for a three-mile trip in a stagecoach: “on account of feet being chewed up by new plough-shoes.” (“Though it was fairly warm weather,” Vachel claimed in *A Handy Guide*, “if ever I rested five minutes, the heavy things stiffened like cooling metal.”) By evening, he reached Mud Creek Flats and “the home of the genial [W.I.] Ledbetter,” the next name to be inscribed on the “Roll of Honor.”

Ledbetter’s is the fireside biography narrated in *A Handy Guide* under the title “The Gnome. Being the Story of a Grotesque Moonshiner, Eaten up with Drink.” Most of the details in the story are not included in Vachel’s notebook and a few, anyway, were likely invented in keeping with the author’s intent to use literature for moral teaching. In the notebook, Ledbetter is described as being “as genial a host as I ever had,” although he did confess “how he had spent some time in Atlanta in the ‘United States Hotel’ [federal prison] for making the forbidden honey-dew [moonshine].” Both notebook and story, though, agree that, when Vachel met him, Ledbetter had repented, had sworn off liquor forever, had learned to read from the Bible, and had “said he wouldn’t go fishing on Sunday, unless a visitor wanted a mess of fish.”

This particular visitor did not. The next morning, the Sunday after Easter, Vachel washed in Mud Creek (“It was clear as a diamond”) and headed toward Highlands, North Carolina. Here he would stay with one of John Collier’s friends, Thomas G. Harbison, the “Botanical Collector” described in “The House of the Loom,” the sixth story in *A Handy Guide*. Unlike most of the stories in the book, “The House of the Loom” agrees in almost every detail with the corresponding entry in the notebook. After a day and a half in Harbison’s mountain cottage, and after an unresolved discussion comparing science and art, Vachel departed with a lunch, highlighted by a “dazzling” piece of gingerbread.

It was Monday morning (April 23), when the wanderer made a wrong turn and climbed Mount Whiteside. He finally reached a sheer cliff and was forced to retrace his steps. He passed through Cashiers Valley and reached “the house of the loom” about 8:00 p.m. His host, according to the notebook, was Alex S. Bryson, whose mother was dying and whose thoughtful wife wove the family’s cloth, just as Vachel’s story relates. It was Bryson who informed Vachel that the Blue Ridge was the Blue Ridge, not “the South.”

On Tuesday, April 24, Vachel climbed Mount Toxaway, apparently just for the “great view.” Afterward, he descended to the town of Toxaway and the home of another Collier friend, “R.J. Cook.” The wanderer had been out of money for several days and

found, to his surprise, that his quality of life improved as his money disappeared. With enthusiasm, he recalled the hospitality of his hosts and determined that he would “make another tour within two years, renewing these acquaintances, and reviewing the land.” Meanwhile, he would seek other “acquaintances” as well: “I hope to establish a circuit through all parts of the land—say try the Southwest next Spring—and New England some summer, and the Northwest another summer, taking the names and addresses of the elect, who entertain me, and keeping them supplied with my goods.” Mr. R.J. Cook proved exemplary. He was, in Vachel’s words, “an erect Confederate veteran, with the typical white mustache and goatee, and the old Southern manners, striking enough after the mountaineers. He was every inch what is called Good old Southern Hospitality.” Cook shared Vachel’s love of wandering and his love for the Populist cause, especially as expressed by Thomas E. Watson. In the opinion of his guest, Cook was “as far from the newspaper type [of Populist] as one could imagine.” Indeed, Vachel had searched throughout the town before finding someone who would give him shelter; but, he concluded, “Cook was worth the hunt.” [Note 13]

The next night, Wednesday, April 25, J. Gaston Neal’s name was added to the growing “Roll of Honor.” Neal “and his interesting family” lived “two miles and a half north of Brevard” [North Carolina], and their gracious reception further encouraged Vachel that his basic purposes were worth pursuing. In his notebook, he enthused: “‘Count that day wasted in which you are not giving away the work of your hands.’ This is a good motto for an artist. I have hundreds of friends all told who would really take great care of my work if I charged them to do so and if I put undeniably my best workmanship into it. The hand designed cover for a volume of poems looks the best chance to me for uniform progress. I might hand-design a few Trees [*The Tree of Laughing Bells* booklet] this spring, for luck.” The next day, April 26, 77-year-old W.B. Allison tried to rent his visitor a cabin for \$2.00 a month. His name merited inclusion in his guest’s notebook, but it was not inscribed in the “Roll of Honor,” in spite of his bewitching soap kettle: “At night,” Vachel remembered, “I watched the faces in the foam of the soap-kettle—Lawyers in wigs, Chinamen, Witches in caps, Merlin all bearded.”

A day or two later, Vachel reached Asheville, riding the final miles with an old “quack” who had tried a variety of occupations, once going so far as to designate himself as “an Indian doctor.” When Vachel spoke of his unplanned detour up Mount Whiteside, his elderly companion related the humorous story about the man who tied his dog to an umbrella and hurled him off the mountain (see “The House of the Loom” in *A Handy Guide*). Having reached another intermediate goal, apparently in high spirits, Vachel updated his second tramping notebook, listing the names and addresses of hosts and hostesses whom he wished to remember in the end pages. “In Ashville^,” he added, “I stayed with Mary C. Needham, 273 Haywood.”

Since this second notebook was nearly filled with details of his tramp, Vachel began recording meditations on his “system” of the universe on several blank pages in the notebook he started on “January 19, 1903,” while still in Chicago. On April 23, 1906, perhaps while resting from his detour up and down Mount Whiteside, he pondered what he called his “definition of a symbol”: “It should reflect the experience of the man reading, as a pool reflects a passing cloud. It should be like a flower, the basis of many metaphors, yet always a flower in the end. It should be intricately significant for the mind

desiring meaning, it should be simple, for the mind desiring a story. It should have more thought, rather than less, in its make-up, than it appears to have. It should have not only a vigorous decorative organization, but a philosophical anatomy" (Cf. *Poetry* 850).

In Asheville, the poet continued his thoughts, and added a speculation that he could live "next winter in New York . . . on six dollars a week." The rest of the time could be spent in publishing three books: "one, Lucifer, one the Short poems, one the Sermons by a Traveller." How would he pay for these? "It might be done by getting ten friends to buy ten hand-bound copies, at ten dollars apiece, or take them in consideration of having paid the bill. I can make individual designs on leather for these men." And while he was being dreamingly optimistic, he concluded: "And I ought to get a lectureship for six dollars a week, somewhere."

Sometime later, he rethought the moral implications of "The Last Song of Lucifer," arguing that something called "the New Sociology" and "man's sense of Beauty have destroyed the old Heaven and Hell; Heaven is a desert and a Jungle, Hell a place of Remembering. The Jungles of Heaven should be a place of little Edens, of dreaming and idyl and discovery. It is the land left for the artist if he wants it." Satan, meanwhile, was part of the story: "He is. Men have the devil in them. They themselves confess it."

Finally, there is further evidence that Vachel's idealism was beginning to be tempered by his experience. He thought about Lucifer and about Satan. "But," he concluded, "the nub of the story is the Angels in the stars, who went forth to be crucified, but to very few was it granted and they lived a very human life of struggle. The Angels are all those who do things in the name of the Church, in the stars." After all, as an angel, he himself had been out among the stars, so to speak, for almost two months. He had been barked at by dogs and by dog owners, he had been denied food and lodging, he had been forced to move on and move off. He had struggled, but he had not been crucified, not in any sense. Angels, then, were those who went forth and struggled. But who were the Demons, since Satan was real? Vachel thought he knew. They were the ones who stayed at home, collecting worldly goods and denying basic sustenance to wandering angels. In Vachel's words: "The Demons are all those who do things in the Kipling spirit, in the name of Civilization."

7

When the wandering angel at last arrived in Asheville, he found several letters waiting for him at the post office. One was from Alice Cleaver, who was still an art student in Philadelphia. On May 2, 1906, writing from Asheville, Vachel answered Cleaver's letter, demonstrating his new emphasis on the practical:

I have learned how to live since I wrote you. It is easy enough. Go to the Salvation Army. They give one a fifteen cent bed till better times come. And since I am peddling a little book for a quarter—one book sold covers a days[^] expenses. I will not starve; nor get sleepy, again. . . .

Well, I am walking on North to Washington I think, possibly to Philadelphia. I have had so many adventures already I am most gorged with them, I feel as though I wanted to rush home and lock myself in and write ten weeks without stopping.

I am going to Europe, from Philadelphia, June 23, on the *Meriam*, American Line. Papa, Mama and little sister Joy will be in the party. Joy is my size now, sixteen years old. We may come round to call if we have time. I would be tickled^ to death to have you acquainted. You might like each other.

He boasted that *The Tree of Laughing Bells* had won the approval of Fred Richardson and Robert Henri. “A friend of mine down south here [likely John Collier],” Vachel continued, “showed it to Joel Chandler Harris, after I left Atlanta, and it made a hit with him too. . . . I trade it for a night’s lodging with the moonshiners in their log cabins, and read it to them by the firelight, and the experience is great. They many of them have temperament, and understand, though they can neither read nor write. One of them offered to rent me a cabin for two dollars a month” (Hiram).

Another letter was waiting at the Asheville post office, this one posted from China. Nicholas Vachel Lindsay was now Uncle Nicholas Vachel Lindsay. Olive’s first baby had been born in Nanking, on April 17; and the new mother of a son manifested her respect for her brother, the would-be father of a God. She announced that her son’s name was Vachel Lindsay Wakefield. “Good news, Alice!” the new uncle exulted in his letter to Cleaver: “My sister and brother-in-law—Paul Wakefield are now missionaries in China. And just the other day arrived a namesake—Vachel Lindsay—Wakefield. Isn’t that fine?” (May 2, Hiram). In a few years, while home on furlough in Springfield, Illinois, the “namesake” would invent a pet name for his rambunctious playmate-relative. He would call him “Uncle Boy.”

Notes for Chapter Seventeen

[Note 1] Uncle Boy often manifested his child-like side in letters to his “inspiration” women, especially when a romantic relationship began to deteriorate. On January 18, 1910, for example, when his courtship of Nellie Vieira was about to end, Vachel pleaded: “I tell you child, to be truly serious now, loneliness eats me like a disease, and you have forgot womans^ chief glory is that she is a Consoler” (Fowler, *Annotated Letters*, p. 326). Directly after his first meeting with Sara Teasdale, Vachel explained why he was sending a flood of correspondence her way: “Sara—I just see where I am going to write to you endlessly and I hope you do not mind. By being able to get so much out of letters—you and I beat nature, and Political economy as well. It is written in the books of fate that the consoling presence of Woman is only to be had by all days^ toil, by winning her from other men, by giving her velvets, by putting her in a hut. And here I get a season of refreshment from you, evening after evening—a renewal of my spirit, the hand of Woman on my forehead, the thought of Woman in my mind . . .” (February 20, 1914, Yale 47). At another point, Vachel shows respect by metaphorically kissing the hem of Teasdale’s skirt: “I make my bow of allegiance—I kneel on one knee—I kiss your wrist and the hem of your hobble. . .” (December 18, 1913, Yale 13).

[Note 2] Michael Monahan published several books on German poet Heinrich Heine. The first, entitled *Heinrich Heine* (1902), is in the “Standard Authors’ Booklet” series: New York: Croscup & Sterling Company. The booklet was priced at ten cents, and it may be read online at Google Books. In 1911, Monahan published a longer work, also entitled *Heinrich Heine*, this by New York publisher Mitchell Kennerley, the same publisher who would issue Vachel’s first books: *General William Booth Enters into Heaven and Other*

Poems (1913) and *Adventures While Preaching the Gospel of Beauty* (1914). Finally, Monahan published an enlarged edition of his 1911 book, this one entitled *Heinrich Heine: Romance and Tragedy of the Poet's Life* (New York: N.L. Brown, 1924).

[Note 3] Kate Lindsay's pride in her son's publications was justifiable: *The Outlook* was a major New York City weekly magazine. With the overall title "Adventures of a Literary Tramp," the four stories are in separate issues of *The Outlook* (Volume 91, 1909): "The House of the Loom: A Story of Seven Aristocrats and a Soap-Kettle" (2 January, pp. 36-39); "The Man with the Apple-Green Eyes" (9 January, pp. 86-90); "The Gnome" (6 February, pp. 312-316; and "Man, in the City of Collars" (13 February, pp. 357-359). All may be read online at Google Books; all were slightly revised and published in the first half of *A Handy Guide for Beggars* (1916).

[Note 4] Vachel sent many poem manuscripts to Susan Wilcox, who edited them, made suggestions, and then returned the manuscripts to the poet. Thus, many have been lost. We do know that one poem sent to Wilcox at this time was "I Want to Go Wandering" (*Poetry* 4-5). A second was likely "Star of My Heart" (*Poetry* 3-4), a poem Vachel refers to as "my first poem of pilgrimage" (*Poetry* 927). *Songs from Vagabondia* (1894), by Richard Hovey (1864-1900) and Bliss Carman (1861-1929), may be read at Project Gutenberg. Vaughn Moody's (1869-1910) "Road-Hymn for the Start" is collected in *Gloucester Moors and Other Poems* (1901), and was likely read when Vachel was an art student in Chicago (see Chapter 11). Anna Hampstead Branch's first book of poems, *The Heart of the Road and Other Poems* (1901), features the title poem and "The Keeper of the Halfway House." Both poems may be read at Project Gutenberg. The Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936) poem Vachel has in mind is likely "For to Admire," with its refrain:

For to admire an' for to see,
For to be'old this world so wide—
It never done no good to me,
But I can't drop it if I tried!

The entire poem may be read at www.poemhunter.com

Finally, Vachel enjoyed Walt Whitman's (1819-92) "Song of the Open Road," collected in *Leaves of Grass* (1856 and subsequent editions) and Robert Louis Stevenson's (1850-94) "Song of the Road," collected in *Underwoods* (1887). For further discussion and examples of the tramping genre, see Sayre, p. 13, and Guillory, "Introduction," p. xx.

[Note 5] The published title (Macmillan, 1916) is *A Handy Guide for Beggars: Especially Those of the Poetic Fraternity*. The first edition is online at Google Books, and all quotations are from this edition. For the Powlison reference letter, which was very valuable to Vachel, see Chénétier, pp. 19-20. Ruggles quotes the pertinent passage of the letter: "To whom it may concern . . . the bearer, Mr. Nicholas V. Lindsay, proposes to make a pedestrian tour of parts of the Southland. Any courtesies extended to him through the Young Men's Christian Association will be thoroughly appreciated" (pp. 110-111). Like Vachel, Ruggles misspells the name as "Powlinson."

The three notebooks recording Vachel's 1906 tramp are organized as follows: the first covers departure, Florida, and on to Macon, Georgia; the second covers Macon and on to Asheville, North Carolina; the third, covers Asheville and on to Frankfort,

Kentucky. Unless noted otherwise, quotations that reflect Vachel's observations on this tramp are from these books.

[Note 6] Atlanta banker, journalist, biographer, and poet William Hurd Hillyer (1880-1959) had published poems in *Harper's*, *Lippincott's Magazine*, *Munsey's Magazine*, *Youth's Companion*, and the *Atlanta Journal* by the time he and Vachel met in spring, 1906. Hillyer's poems were collected and published as *Songs of the Steel Age* (Boston: Richard G. Badger, 1907). The poem recited for Vachel is entitled "The Castle of Canelf" (pp. 71-73), a poem which emphasizes fancy, mystery, and enchantment. *Songs of the Steel Age* may be read online at Google Books.

Indiana-born artist, Clifton [Alfred] Wheeler (1883-1953) was a student at Chase's New York School of Art, and not related to either of Vachel's other Wheeler friends: Ruth Wheeler's brother Willard or Springfield friend and New York City roommate Willard Wall Wheeler (see Chapter 7, p. 22).

[Note 7] What is left of Charleston's slave market may be viewed at the Old Slave Mart Museum, 6 Chalmers Street. Vachel's brief summary of his 1906 tramp may be read in his "PREFACE to *The Tramp's Excuse and Other Poems*": "It was not until March, nineteen hundred and six, that I made the plunge, being stranded in Florida with malice aforethought. I tramped. I rode freight cabooses two hundred miles, then tramped again eight hundred miles through Macon and Atlanta, Georgia; Ashville[^], North Carolina; Greenville, Tennessee; and Cumberland Gap to Frankfort, Kentucky. My baggage was a razor, tooth-brush, comb, soap, bandanna, and my poem, 'The Tree of Laughing Bells.'" I found an extraordinary responsiveness in cultured and uncultured. It seemed the only time I had ever lived. I will never forget those log houses of the Blue Ridge, those rings of faces lit only by the fire on the hearth" (*Poetry* 927).

[Note 8] [Michael] Hoke Smith (1855-1931) was an Atlanta lawyer when he purchased the *Atlanta Journal* in 1887, and openly backed the dicta of white supremacy. Smith's support for Grover Cleveland's election campaign earned him an appointment as Cleveland's Secretary of the Interior (1893-96). Later Smith was elected Governor of Georgia (1907-09, 1911) and then United States Senator (1911-21).

[Note 9] Sidney Lanier Cottage is currently a museum, open to the public and managed by the Middle Georgia Historical Society. It stands at 935 High Street, Macon, Georgia. Sidney Clopton Lanier (1842-81) and Vachel both struggled to survive in their early years, both were largely self-taught, especially in literature, and both wrote poetry with an emphasis on sound. To that end, the works of both poets need to be recited aloud, in order to appreciate fully their creative artistry.

[Note 10] In his notebook, Vachel commented that Mrs. Turner was "a kind little ex-elocution teacher at the college." He was particularly interested in the fact that she had studied one summer with Professor S.H. Clark at the University of Chicago, "the tone-color man." As we have observed, Lindsay was only a high-school boy when he heard Clark speak on the importance of sound in poetry, but Clark's theories made a lasting impression. See Chapter 5, pp. 23-24.

[Note 11] Artist, writer, teacher, and theater director, Thomas Wood Stevens (1880-1942) was the head of the Illustration Department at the Chicago Art Institute, 1903-11.

[Note 12] When I began studying Vachel, in the early 1970s, I spoke with several Springfield people who either knew him, or who at least had witnessed one of his recitals. My favorite story was told by the late Clarissa Hagler Jorgensen (1903-85), who badgered her boyfriend into joining her at a Vachel recital at Springfield's Lincoln Library, sometime in 1929-31. As it turned out, the boyfriend was the only man in a very crowded room. Vachel sauntered in, took a quick look at the audience, and began with a very exaggerated: "Good evening, ladies and gentleMAN."

[Note 13] Georgia lawyer and politician Thomas E[dward] Watson (1856-1922) began his political career as a Democrat, serving in the Georgia legislature (1882-83) and the United States House of Representatives (1890). Soon after the 1890 election, Watson joined the national Populist Party and was instrumental in founding the Georgia Populist Party. In 1893, after losing his election to the House, Watson returned to practicing law and was editor of the *People's Party Paper*. He was the Populist Party's unsuccessful candidate for the United States Presidency in 1904 and 1908. Toward the end of his life, Watson rejoined the Democratic Party and, in 1920, he was elected United States Senator from Georgia, succeeding Michael Hoke Smith (see note 7 above). Watson died before completing his term in office.

