Chapter Twenty

[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.]
20. From New York to Springfield (1908)

“What you sellin’, boy?”

In April 1907, as we saw in the last chapter, Vachel advised Aunt Fannie that he was planning a second “walking expedition,” if he could find a magazine to sponsor him. Wisely, he decided not to inform his parents, as “it is so little likely to be a go.” Still, he promised his favorite aunt, “I will be doing it sooner or later, though it may not be this Spring.” In late April 1908, Fannie’s nephew was as good as his word. He packed his few clothes and toiletries in a bag, tossed in copies of three privately printed poems, and set out on foot for New York City’s 23rd Street docks, where he boarded a ferry to Hoboken, New Jersey. The time was approximately 3:30, Tuesday afternoon, April 28. Although he had no sponsor and less than two dollars cash in his pocket, he did have three booklets to barter for bread and lodging. And, as we may suspect, he carried a new notebook, this one entitled “The Adventures of an Amateur^ Mendicant” (Virginia).

Two of the poem booklets, we know, had been printed this 1908 spring, with monies earned from YMCA activities and with nominal assistance from George Becker, ostensibly in payment for advertising. Four hundred copies of God Help Us to Be Brave (pictured at the end of the last chapter) had been available for distribution the past few months at Becker’s Pig and Goose restaurant. (The author retained one hundred copies.) The Last Song of Lucifer, the poem largely written during Hiram days, was likely produced especially for this tramp. After all, The Last Song highlights, in part, the divine importance of missionary journeys “among the stars,” the angelic effort to save souls. Meanwhile, the third poem for the journey was The Tree of Laughing Bells, as several booklets remained following the 1906 tramp. [Note 1]

April 28 was something of a warm-up day for Vachel, as he walked only five or so miles before opting to stay overnight at the Salvation Army shelter in Newark. Although surroundings this first night were less than satisfactory, the experience proved to be warm-up for the mind, just as the day had been warm-up for the body. Conditions at Newark were irritating but negligible, at least when compared with conditions at the next stop, the Presbyterian Mission at Morristown, New Jersey. On April 29, now in stride, Vachel arrived in Morristown, walking some eighteen miles due west from Newark. Along the way, he “had eaten four slices of bread and butter on merciful doorsteps,” that is, at rural homes. Although he believed that he had entered the richest village in New Jersey,” he had disturbing second thoughts: “I should have walked through green fields before I looked for hospitality. I knew that the well-meant deeds of the city cannot equal the kindness of the most commonplace farm-hand” (115). [Note 2]

Still, the day was too far gone: “The rule of the country is—one must ask for his night’s lodging before five o’clock. After that, things are growing dark, and people may be afraid of you.” Dead tired, he treated himself to beefsteak and onions “at an obscure Jewish restaurant,” after which he was directed to the Presbyterian Mission, since he explained that he had only
twenty-five cents left to his name. Typically, this amateur mendicant wished for less, not more: “I am satisfied that the extra money, over and above all paid debts, brought me some of the ill-luck of the night. As I have before observed, money is a hoodoo on the road. Until a man is penniless he is not stripped for action” (115-116).

Thus, the initial story of the second half of A Handy Guide begins. The epigraph poem is a selection from God Help Us to Be Brave, a selection entitled “In Lost Jerusalem”: “Behold the Pharisees, proud, rich, and damned, / Boasting themselves in lost Jerusalem.” With the title “A Temple Made with Hands,” this opening story obviously focuses on religious hypocrisy. After all, an earlier missionary mendicant warned the ancient Athenians that the “Lord of heaven and earth dwelleth not in temples made with hands” (Acts 17:24, King James translation). Indeed, the story’s theme appears to be what would happen to St. Paul or to St. Francis, or even to Jesus Christ himself, should he stumble into a Christian mission in “the richest village” in any state of the union. What ought to be “The Dwelling-place of Faith, Hope, and Charity” (Section I) turns out to be civilization’s version of hell on earth. Section III of the story, “The Sermon on the Mount,” pictures “the gulf” between the moneyed haves and the penniless have-nots. Paradoxically, it is the impoverished visitor who understands genuine wealth:

I presume this clergyman imagined Christ wore a white tie and was on a salary promptly paid by some of our oldest families. But I share with the followers of St. Francis the vision of Christ as a man of the open road, improvident as the sparrow. I share with the followers of Tolstoi the opinion that when Christ proclaimed those uncomfortable social doctrines, he meant what he said. (121)

True wealth can be found, but never in a temple made with hands. When the self-respecting Presbyterian parishioners exit the mission, “A Screaming Farce” begins (124-130). True wealth, in contrast, exists on “The Highway of Our God,” the closing section of this story (130-132).

We may be tempted to believe that the account of the Morristown experience is exaggerated; but Professor Owen Hawley has published a personal letter that Vachel wrote on June 2, 1908, “To the Holy Person or Persons / In Charge of the Mission at Morristown.” Apparently never mailed, and labeled “The letter of the roaring lion,” this missive confirms nearly every detail of the Handy Guide story. The roaring lion’s conclusion is:

Shame! Shame, shame! I was a stranger, and ye took me in. I was naked, and ye clothed me (in vile pajamas). And all this grotesque folly, this Devil’s comedy was done in the Ineffable Name. I wish for you the worst—that some day you may be a penniless literary person, and that you may be forced to use the hospitality of your own Mission.

Yours in the Name of the Devil,
Who is after all—a gentleman—

Very sincerely
Nicholas Vachel Lindsay,
Gentleman Adventurer

The letter is written on stationery with the printed address, “223 South 6th St., Springfield, Illinois,” the site of Dr. Lindsay’s downtown office.

Interestingly, the Morristown Pharisees are not the only targets of Vachel’s wrath. He also has nothing positive to say about his contemporary itinerants:
The modern tramp is not a tramp, he is a speed-maniac. Being unable to afford luxuries, he must still be near something mechanical and hasty, so he uses a dirty box-car to whirl from one railroad-yard to another. He has no destination but the cinder-pile by the water-tank. The landscape hurrying by in one indistinguishable mass and the roaring of the car-wheels in his ears are the ends of life to him. He is no back-to-nature crank.

He runs fewer risks in the country, yet his aversion to the country is profound. He knows all that I know about country hospitality, that it can be purchased by the merest grain of courtesy. Yet most of the farm-people that entertained me had not seen a tramp for months. (119-120)

In fact, contempt for the common mendicant is likely the reason for the subtitle of Vachel’s book: *A Handy Guide for Beggars: Especially Those of the Poetic Fraternity*. After all, the author maintains, “a speed-maniac at either end of the social scale is not necessarily a hustler, personally. But in one way or another he is sure to be shallow and artificial, the grotesque, nervous victim of machinery. And a ‘Mission,’ an institution built by speed-maniacs who use automobiles for speed-maniacs who use box-cars, is bound to be absurd beyond words to tell it” (120).

Morristown did accomplish one thing for its visitor this April 29-30, 1908. Uncle Boy shied away from professional shelters for the rest of his life, not only on the remaining legs of this 1908 tramp, but also for much of his 1912 tramp. “I went forth from that place into the highway of our God, who dwelleth not in temples made with hands, neither is worshipped with men’s hands, as though He needed anything, seeing He giveth to all men life and breath and all things. . . . I said in my heart: ‘I shall walk on and on and find a better, a far holier shrine than this at the ends of the infinite earth’” (132). In the real world, though, this amateur mendicant did not have to travel to the ends of the infinite earth to find a holier shrine. All he had to do was walk to the home of the nearest agricultural laborer, the nearest “dirt-eater’s” farm. From the very first experience of his 1906 tramp, the experience related in “The Man under the Yoke,” Vachel had learned that poor people—farmers, laborers, dirt-eaters, miners—were rich in hospitality: “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” (13).

Shaking the filth of Morristown from his shoes but not from his mind, Vachel spent a comfortable night (April 30) near Glen Gardner, at the hospitable home of Lutheran pastor John J. Hummer and his wife. The amateur mendicant had traveled some twenty-seven miles west southwest. Occasionally, he accepted a ride in a wagon, occasionally even a ride in a despised motor car, although he walked much of the way. Spring was in full bloom, and “the highway of our God” was strikingly beautiful, even in New Jersey. “In Praise of the Unexpected Beauty of the New Jersey Hills” is an unpublished typescript that Vachel originally intended for the *Handy Guide* book. It was likely omitted because it does lack narrative value, although the manuscript reveals important biographical details: “Walking through New Jersey in the Spring I was full of gratitude to God for the sight of such an endearing road. New Jersey had been to me, heretofore, a railway terminus for the person from the West, a row of ferry-landings.” Indeed, the countryside is so beautiful that the young artist feels the need to defend “the pretty”:

Artists rail against sweetness, when they should merely object to it in the wrong place. They are exasperated to a perpetual intolerance by people who never grow up, who want every day to abound in Christmas trees, and sugar plums and valentines, and every feast
to be all honey, and every art collection to be an exhibition of simpering faces and roses in a row.

“Nevertheless,” this defender of “the pretty” insists, “pretty faces are right occasionally, if there are a multitude of noble and tragic faces to balance them.” The critical key is contrast: “Sampson^ found honey in the body of the lion he had slain, and propounded the infinite riddle ‘out of the eater came forth meat, out of the strong came forth sweetness.’” Similarly, out of Morristown came forth the beauty of spring, and the wanderer summarizes his changed mood as follows: “All this to justify my admiration of a New Jersey foreground of cloying sweetness. It ravished my eyes, and made me forget the weariness of my frame.” [Note 3]

The next day (May 1), the weary frame walked only eight miles, and spent the night with J. H. Slack, Troutdale Farms, near Bloomsbury. The next afternoon he crossed the Delaware River and entered Easton, Pennsylvania, where he spent the evening and night at Lafayette College, reciting poems and listening to college yells. Uncle Boy reveled in this unsophisticated environment, remarking on “the extraordinary impression of buoyancy that came from that school. It was inspiring to a degree, a draught of the gods. Coming into that place not far from the centre of hard-faced Easton-town I realized for the first time what sheltered, nurtured boy-America was like, and what wonders may lie beneath the roofs of our cities” (136). Indeed, an important future theme commences at Lafayette College: present ills, such as hypocritical Christian missions and hard-faced commercial cities, can be corrected only by properly trained future generations. Contemporary adults are so deeply immersed in prejudices and materialism that the only missionary message with any potential is a message directed at the young.

Sandwiched between the accounts of Morristown and Lafayette College in a Handy Guide is the poem “The Town of American Visions,” a poem foreshadowing another important focus over the next twelve years of Vachel’s life, namely, what an American city can be versus what most American cities are. As for the vision of what an American city can be, “The Town of American Visions” offers an invitation:

Come enter there, and meet To-morrow’s Man,
Communing with him softly day by day.
Ah, the deep vistas he reveals, the dream
Of angel-bands in infinite array—

Bright angel-bands, that dance in paths of earth
When our despairs are gone, long overpast—
When men and maidens give fair hearts to Christ
And white streets flame in righteous peace at last.

The “when” of the poem is the American town formed by enlightened generations yet to come. Indeed, the encounters at Lafayette College confirmed Uncle Boy’s focus on the future: he witnessed firsthand “what sheltered, nurtured boy-America was like.”

At this point in the narrative, Vachel’s intellectual and emotional high was punctuated by the Pennsylvania landscape. He spent the next two days “crossing that lovely, lonely plateau called Pocono Mountain and enjoying “many delicious adventures among the Pennsylvania-German farmers.” Both the psychological and geographical highs end when the wandering missionary “descended abruptly to Wilkes-barre by a length of steep automobile road called Giant Despair” (138). Predictably, giant despair leads to the blighted land of “King Coal,” a
realm dominated by images of hell, drunkenness, and disease. “Near Shickshinny,” the third story in the 1908 tramp, takes place in a kingdom seemingly “blasted by the torch of a Cyclops and only yesterday cooled by the rain. The best grain that could have been scattered among such rocks with the hope of a crop was a seed of dragons’ teeth” (139). Such a seed, as Vachel knew from the mythological tales of Cadmus and Jason, led to armed warriors, powerful men who would have the strength to assassinate King Coal and rejuvenate his blasted country. [Note 4]

In “Near Shickshinny,” Vachel’s “seed” is a poem aimed at little “Frank and Jimmy,” the sons of his host and the so-called grandsons of King Coal. As the visitor recited his poem, “God Help Us to Be Brave,” for the host family, he knew that they knew that this poet was in earnest: “The whole circle grasped that I really expected something unusual of those boys with the black-diamond eyes, no matter what kind of perversity was in them at present. . . . I dwelt on the strong: Alexander, Caesar, Mohammed, Cromwell, Napoleon, and especially upon the lawgivers, Confucius, Moses, Justinian; and dreamed that this ungoverned strength before me, that had sprung from the loins of King Coal, might some day climb high, that these little wriggling, dirty-fisted grandsons of that monarch might yet make the world some princely reparation for his crimes.” That “some day,” of course, is the future; and as Uncle Boy prepared his performance, he knew that the children were the important members of his audience: “I said in my heart, ‘Maybe this is the one house in a hundred where the seed of these verses will be sown upon good ground’ (155-156).

Little Frank and Jimmy’s parents are sadly beyond hope. Like the “Man under the Yoke,” they are enslaved by the company, especially by the company store. Essentially, the father of the house, “big Frank,” is a tool of the company: “He looked like an enormous pickaxe” (144). He and his wife are proud of his toughness; but, in the wife’s words, “He’s too tough.” Even when blasted with poetic words as powerful as “nitro-glycerine,” big Frank is not going to change. Hope for change lies in the future, and the future is little Frank and little Jimmy, with a strong hint from missionary Uncle Boy that these sons will need to become, like Justinian, brave and strong lawgivers.

Interestingly, King Coal is not the only enslaver. Big Frank’s home features two books: “a volume of sermons, and a copy of The House of a Thousand Candles.” The sermons are purported to be by “Wood M. Smithers,” likely a play on the name of the Reverend Dr. William Smith, first Provost of the College and Academy of Philadelphia and a prolific publisher of sermons, most designed to teach discipline in the material world. Obedient human beings are destined for heaven, Smith argues, likely knowing that obedient human beings are also valuable tools for corporate taskmasters like King Coal. In brief, Smith’s treatises are further examples of Vachel’s growing understanding that organized religion had evolved into a dutiful handmaiden for modern materialism. Meanwhile, Meredith Nicholson’s The House of a Thousand Candles (1905) is a popular novel on a popular theme. The protagonist must spend one year in a haunted house in order to inherit the property from his deceased grandfather. Like Vachel’s host family, the novel depicts an individual living in life-threatening circumstances, suffering misfortune after misfortune, all in the vain hope of a better existence to come.

The following morning, when the visitor left this proud, hopeful family, he descended even further, “down the steeps of Avernus into Shickshinny, toward the smoke of torment that ascends forever. Underfoot was spread the same dark leprosy that yesterday had stunted flower and fruit and grass-blade” (158). The host family adults have little chance to succeed in this hellish world. Any hope for change lies with appropriate preparations and expectations for their
children and grandchildren, a hope that Uncle Boy eagerly began to adopt as one of his primary purposes in life. More and more on this 1908 tramp, he saw the young as “the chosen people”: “This is a separate race / Speaking an alien tongue— / These are the young!” (Poetry 557-559). And in a very real way, he saw himself as carrying written “seeds” designed to nurture biological seeds, poems designed to educate children about the evils of “King Coal” and his ilk.

The next five spring days, this seed-giver trudged through the Appalachians, following the Susquehanna River and trading poems for lodging and meals. Each day it rained, but he was able to hop a ride in a caboose on occasion, using the opportunity to dry his clothes. He had mail waiting for him at Williamsport; and some ninety miles west of Williamsport (thirty-five or so miles east of Du Bois), he found lodging in Dents Run, at a small hotel operated by a surly William H. Rankin. He was not prepared for a surly landlord, having spent the previous four nights with gracious hosts, as we learn from a sketch not included in A Handy Guide. This sketch, “Snared by the Susquehannah^,” was first published by Professor Hawley in his Western Illinois essay. The three-page manuscript is now collected in Springfield’s Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. On the opening page, in Vachel’s hand, several notes indicate why the tale may have been left out of the book: “omit” and “thin” and “make rich & deep.” Thin perhaps, but for biographical purposes, “Snared by the Susquehannah” is an important story:

It was a tiny hotel in a Pennsylvania lumber town. Mine host was surly. Though I was admitted to the family table, he would not let me gather his flock together for a few moments afterward for a discourse on the Holiness of Beauty. He would not let me give him my little pamphlet-poem nor present it to his wife nor his son nor his daughter nor his son-in-law nor his grandson. If I had not been dead tired I would have sought the better hospitality of the thunder-storm.

I had been walking in the rain for five days. This was the evening of the fifth. The first and second days were penetrating drizzle and mist. The third was a gentle rain with patches of sun. The fourth and fifth days it thundered and poured. This weather had cured a cough that had clung to me two months when I had been properly sheltered in the big city. But the healing of my body was not the only profit. The elements had ministered to my spirit as well. When one’s heart is ready—the rain is a Baptism. Though ones’ coat is damp and his way is through the mire—yea though the torrent pours over the breast as though that breast were bare—the chill body raises the soul to an unearthly elation. Then it is that the spirit steps firmly in the secret paths of power.

But speaking after the manner of men—I had been snared by the Susquehannah^—and in a curious way. I had set myself to walk west—and once started along that river I could not escape without returning. I could not climb those muddy hills on either bank. I could not break through to the hospitable agricultural folk among whom it had been my plan to forage, and I, and the railroad as well—clung to the river in order to progress. I walked the ties and put up at little lumber villages.

And my heart had been leaping with delight and laughter over what seemed then a most romantic discovery.

The first night I asked free accommodation at a private house as was my want. They informed me it was Pennsylvania Law that the traveler without money must be provided for by the hotel. I have never consulted a Pennsylvania legal light as to whether this is so. But for four evenings the landlords gave me free accommodation instantly: clean beds—good meals and no ugly looks and allowed me to recite for those who wanted to listen.
But there was a worm in the soul of the fifth landlord [William H. Rankin]. There was a mortgage or an old feud or a chronic indigestion or a family skeleton or a gnawing conscience to keep him from a moment’s peace. He had many blessings. He was still middle aged, young for a grandfather. His wife was comely and serene. His son in law appeared to be a likely sort. His beautiful daughter and her dear baby would have cheered up the wretchedest household. But none of these things cheered him.

He combined a village grocery with his hostelrie. In front of his counter—after supper—he was the evil genius of the scene. I had not made a speech for twenty four hours. I was eager to exhort—to quote the poets—to quote the scripture. You have had the feeling—dear reader—in Endeavor Society, in Y.M.C.A. prayer-meeting—at the free for all debating society. The loafers round the store were willing to be entertained—if not uplifted. But the Landlord, figeting with rage hurried me to my room. Once more he returned the Brochure I had thrust into his hand. He locked the door and went downstairs.

The room had two beds. I took the one with the most covers—first stretching my wet clothes on a chair.

When I was almost asleep the door was unlocked and a towering fellow I had never before seen came in with a lamp in one hand and a shot gun in the other. He was followed by a red-eyed huntingdog. The man locked the door and put the key into his trousers pocket. Then he took off his indispensables, threw them on the floor—and said to the dog “Watch them pants.” The animal tangled himself up in the suspenders and went to sleep. The man put the gun within reach of his pillow, extinguished the lamp and piled into bed. Next morning the door was open. Dog, man and gun were gone. I had my fine Italian revenge. I pinned the rejected brochure upon my pillow. On the leaves thus exposed: Respectfully presented to my host J. K ---, in gratitude for supper—lodging—a locked door and a sentinel. This book is at present worth 25 cents. In ten years it will be worth $25000. Still I do not hesitate to give it. Would I might do more.

I have no doubt breakfast was waiting for me down stairs. But I left without any more of their bread and salt. I felt on friendlier terms with rain and the railroad ties.

In an hour the sun shone. The roads began to dry. By noon I had reached the water-shed, was over the divide, was crossing a wind-swept plateau. As a matter of fact my rainy season was ended. Behind me was the Susquehannah with its dark hills and its cindery railroad and its good and bad landlords. Around me was the farm country and every farmer in the United States is my dear and intimate friend.

Thus it is always upon the road. Neither rain nor misfortune nor misunderstanding last too long. The road is a place of singing.

And so the story of Dents Run ends.

2

Back on the “Highway of Our God,” still singing, Vachel continued through Du Bois and Clarion, and on to Cranberry, Pennsylvania, arriving about noon on May 13, his 16th day on the road. He covered some one hundred miles in two and a half days, obviously riding parts of the way. The fourth sketch of the 1908 tramp, “Death, the Devil, and Human Kindness,” begins at this point, before the combined grocery store and funeral parlor of W[illiam] H[enry] Sayers and his wife Lizzie Barber. Called “Fred James” in the story, the grocer-undertaker struck Vachel’s
fancy: “At length it was revealed to me that when things have their proper rhythm Life and Death are interwoven, like willows plaited for a basket. Somewhat later in the afternoon I speculated that when times are out of joint, it is because Death reigns without Life for a partner, with the assistance of the Devil rather” (163). What also caught the visitor’s attention was a hand-made sign: “I guarantee every seed in the store. Pansy seeds a specialty. . . . Not that they all grow,” the proprietor explained, “But the guarantee keeps up the confidence of the customers” (165). Fred James and his itinerant guest dabbled in the same business: both were seedsmen.

After sharing his “point of view as a religious mendicant” (163), and after giving away a *Tree of Laughing Bells* booklet, Vachel enjoyed a lunch of “dried beef, sliced thin,” and a couple old riddles: “Why . . . is a stick of candy like a race-horse?” [Because the harder you lick it, the faster it goes.] “When was beefsteak the highest? [When the cow jumped over the moon.] After lunch, and back on the road, the religious mendicant meditates on his recent experience: “Death is not a bad fellow. Let no man cross his grey front stoop with misgiving. The honey he serves is made by noble bees. Yet do not go seeking him out. No doubt his acquaintance is most worth while when it is casual, unexpected, one of the natural accidents. And he does not always ask such simple riddles” (167).

About two that same afternoon, the amateur mendicant emerged from green cornfields and stood on “the hill crests” above Oil City, “an ugly, confused kind of place,” like thousands of other such places across the United States. He was expecting a letter, likely one with some money, but none was waiting at the Oil City post office: “And now my blistered heels, and my breaking the rule to avoid the towns, and my detour of half a day were all in vain” (167). In addition, Oil City was ugly beyond excuse, but like so many materialistic environments, “Escape is not easy.” Even a lame cat prefers the cornfields to the “oil metropolis,” and the visitor feels that “No doubt others reach the very heart of [the city] only to find it empty as the post-office was to me.” At last outside the city, Vachel looks back in unbelief: “I wondered how many had lived and died there when they would have preferred some other place” (168).

At this point, a fat Italian fruit vendor offers a ride “in a heavily-tired wagon” loaded with green bananas. The wanderer thought the Italian was headed into the countryside: “Therefore I suffered myself to be pulled up on to the seat.” He asks to be let down a mile into the “green fields” but instead is driven into Franklin, another “ugly, confused kind of place.” The vendor soon earns his title “the Devil,” swerving a yard out of the way to drive over the lame cat (“Pussy died without a shriek”) and hurling baseball-size rocks at a barking dog. Before long, the Devil turned at right angles and drove into “the smoke and fire,” announcing: “Nice-a-town. MY town . . . I getta reech (rich) to-morrow” (170). And so, against his will, Vachel learns how difficult it is to escape a manufacturing town. Indeed, he arrives at a deep “conviction”: “These [coke] ovens are not mere works of man. Dying sinners snared and corrupted by Oil City are carried here when the city has done its work—carried in the wagon of Apollyon, under bunches of green bananas. Body and soul they are disintegrated by the venomous oil; they crumble away in the town of oil, and here in the town of ovens, the fragments are burned with unquenchable fire” (172). The Devil has carried the wayfarer back into hell, forcing him, once again, to struggle to escape.

The setting for the third sketch in “Death, the Devil, and Human Kindness,” as Professor Hawley points out, is murky as to time, character, and location. The tale begins with a vague reference to an elderly widower who lives in a farmhouse “on the edge of the second cornfield.”
The host is described as having “thick vague features and a shock of drab hair.” He is as “colorless” as his one-room house, and he begins the story as “Stupidity.” He prepares supper “with dull eyes that looked nowhere,” and we learn that he stupidly “sold his small farm and wasted his substance in speculation.” We also understand that he has not learned any fiscal lessons, because he is planning to invest in “a sure-thing scheme” that seems certain to fail, in spite of his protest “that he had learned from experience to sift the good from the bad in that realm of commerce” (175-176).

Meanwhile, as Stupidity “mumbled along, telling his tale,” his guest becomes more and more aware of his vital surroundings: “The balmy smokeless wind from the south was whistling, whistling past the window, and through the field. How much one can understand by mere whispers! The wind cried, ‘Life, life, life!’” After a lovely supper of hot, buttered potatoes, the host’s essential courtesies become more and more apparent. His guest decides to forego any sermon, because “like many a primitive man I have met, [the host] preached me a sermon.” The text is simple human kindness; and, in the eyes of the guest, the host progresses “from Stupidity and Awkwardness to Humankindness.” After assuring his host that the air from the open window is very welcome, both Vachel and Mr. Humankindness sleep the sleep of innocence. And we understand why the story is vague in details. It is meant to be a generic story, a story of what human nature is essentially like, what human nature is in KINDNESS. The material world views the loss of money as stupidity; but this wandering guest has discovered that the kindest human beings are often the least-moneyed human beings, the people like “the man under the yoke,” the people who have nothing but share half with their guests, and all have abundance. With the simple aroma of potatoes for breakfast, the revived guest parts from the primitive host and his one-room house, and “The Wind cried, ‘Life, life, life’” (177-178).

At this point in the narrative, “The Old Gentleman with the Lantern (And the People of His Household)” begins: it is the triumphant final tale of A Handy Guide. The setting is a joyous morning in western Pennsylvania: “Splendor after splendor rolled in upon the highway from the four corners of heaven.” The wanderer becomes a wonderer, speculating that farmers gain their stature and strength from “walking behind the plough in the damp soil.” Cinders “blast man and nature, but the black earth renews all.” In this positive mood, Vachel abandons the railroad track late in the day, seeking “a big unsophisticated house, the kind that is removed from this railroad.” He is unsuccessful “till near eight o’clock,” when he happens upon a turn-of-the-century house located between Franklin and Polk. From the notebook, we learn that it is the home of Courtney S. Sanford and his wife Mary Roenigk, their two children, and Courtney’s parents, William and Mary Ann Johnson Sanford. The evening is pleasant enough, as the guest discovers he is among fellow Christians, although Grandmother Sanford is more than a little testy. On the other hand, Grandfather Sanford (“the old gentleman with the lantern”) reminds Vachel of the “educated laboring man” with “a kingly prophetic manner”: “It was the sonorous agricultural holy tone that is the particular aversion of a certain pagan type of city radical who does not understand that the meeting-house is the very rock of the agricultural social system.” If such a manner is “worn by a kindly old man,” Vachel avers, “it inspires me with respect and delight.” It is, in fact, the “manner” he identified with a favorite poet, rural-born John Greenleaf Whittier (184-186).

While speaking with Grandfather Sanford, “laboring for the respect of the Patriarch,” Vachel is surprised by the woman of the next generation, the daughter-in-law, “who stepped into the golden circle of the lantern light.” Unnamed in the story, Mary Roenigk Sanford is a very
beautiful young woman with unforgettable “bashful gleaming eyes” and arms “as white as the foaming milk” she is carrying from the barn. Mary’s rural comeliness causes her visitor to speculate on the contrast between beautiful young women in the city versus the country:

In the city, among people having the status indicated by the big red barn and the enormous wind-mill and a most substantial fence, this gleaming woman would have languished in shelter. She would have played at many philanthropies, or gone to many study clubs or have had many lovers. She would have been variously adventurous according to her corner of the town. Here her paramour was WORK. He still caressed her, but would some day break her on the wheel. (189)

Grandmother Sanford, as we have already noted, was the testy member of the family, and Vachel may be hinting as to why. “I do not distinctly remember any bitter old man I have met in my travels,” he remarks later in this story. But Grandma Sanford “was the third bitter old woman. Probably with the same general experiences as her husband, she had digested them differently,” although he admits: “she was not run down” (190).

It was the third generation Sanfords that brought tears to the visitor’s eyes, as Gretchen-Cecilia, the nine-year-old daughter, waits on the guest at the dinner table. (In the notebook account, she is Jessie Cecilia Sanford, a girl who would turn twelve on July 1, 1908.) Daughter and visitor soon become close friends: “I looked at her, and my destiny was sealed forevermore—at least for an hour or so. The sight of her brought the tears to my eyes.” After supper, the two exchange fairytales, and Gretchen-Cecilia reveals that she is familiar with many of her guest’s favorites, “tales I had considered my special discoveries in youth: ‘The Amber Witch,’ ‘The Enchanted Horse,’ ‘The Two Brothers.’ She also knew that most pious narrative, Elsie Dinsmore. She approved when I told her I had found it not only sad but helpful in my spiritual life. She had found it just so in hers” (201). [Note 5]

It is youthful Gretchen-Cecilia who receives the booklet gift, The Tree of Laughing Bells, because it is Gretchen-Cecilia, the third generation, who is the hope for this family. She is the fertile earth, prepared to receive the missionary angel’s seeds of beauty and holiness. Indeed, the rest of the family is outside the room, debating as to whether or not they will leave the countryside and move into town. Sadly, from the visitor’s perspective, Gretchen’s father announces: “And I don’t want Gretchen to grow up on the farm.” The farm, however, is the locale for seeds, for growth, for “Life Transcendent.” In “Death, the Devil, and Human Kindness,” Vachel offers a brief aside about meeting life in a cornfield: “I met the lady Life, once upon a time, long ago. She had innocent blue eyes. Alone in the field I felt free to kiss the palm of her little hand, under the shadow of the corn.” Soon, “for good reason,” he tried to bid Life good-by, “but she called me back, and mischievously fed me, from the pocket of her gingham apron, crab apples and cranberries. Ever since that time those fruits have been bitter delights to my superstitious fancy” (161-162). Translation: I left the Illinois cornfields to seek my fortune in Chicago and New York City; but the taste of life is lasting and powerful, like the taste of crab apples and cranberries, and now I am headed back to the Illinois cornfields.

The poem “Life Transcendent” precedes the final tale of A Handy Guide (179) and speaks of “my lost lady, Life Transcendent: / Of her valiant way, of her pride resplendent: / For the corn swayed round, like her warrior-band / When I knelt by the blades to kiss her hand.” The winter comes and the “green corn is going”; but, magically, life transcends time, and the narrator views the gods “sowing / Stars for corn, in the star-fields new.” Translation: true life may be
picted in cornfields green, but true life actually transcends space and time. True life, like the stars, reveals eternal beauty.

After his discussion with Gretchen-Cecilia, the visitor is given a clean towel, a clean hot bath, and the best room in the house, “with white counterpane and . . . white sheets.” He sleeps under the watchful eye of “the Mother of God . . . her silvery statue near the foot of [his] bed.” He realizes he is the beneficiary of “the intrinsic generosity of God and man” and leaves with a special, personal gift: “a tiny curl from the head of [Gretchen-Cecilia’s] doll that had truly truly hair. . . . I walked on and on, toward the ends of the infinite earth, though I had found this noble temple, this shrine not altogether made with hands. I again consecrated my soul to the august and Protean Creator, maker of all religions, dweller in all clean temples, master of the perpetual road” (203-204). And thus the prose account in A Handy Guide for Beggars ends, with the humble Sanford home depicted in striking contrast to affluent Morristown’s Presbyterian Mission. The climactic poem at the very close of the work is the Milton stanza from God Help Us to Be Brave: “Would we were blind with Milton,” singing a new song so that men could see “All glorious things beyond the defeated grave” (205). Vachel was on his way home, with the intent of bringing new vision to the citizens of Springfield, Illinois, especially to the youthful citizens of Springfield, Illinois. And, as we in turn will see, Springfield, Illinois, was a city in grievous need of new vision.

Although A Handy Guide ends with Vachel’s departure from the home of Gretchen-Cecilia, the prosaic notebook-diary covers the final few days of the amateur mendicant’s journey. The seventeenth night on the road, the wanderer’s final night in Pennsylvania, was spent at the home of Englishman John Henry Rowe, just outside Greenfield. Some of the distance this day was covered while riding in the rubber-tired buggy of a glove-drummer, and the now hungry and tired itinerant enjoyed a nutritious noon meal at the home of Clara Guilinge at Henderson. The Rowes had agreed to let their guest lodge in the barn, but after he performed several of his poems, the impressed hosts allowed him to sleep in the house. The next morning Vachel entered Ohio and stayed the last night on the road at the Warren home of Hiram College friends, Dr. and Mrs. Harlan M. Page. Dr. Page was a practicing physician and Professor of Medical Science at Hiram. At 2:00 p.m., the next day, May 16, 1908, Vachel’s second tramp ended on the Hiram campus, where young sister Joy was a student. The entire journey from New York City to Hiram, Ohio, lasted some nineteen days. The rest of the trip, from Hiram to Springfield, was by train, with a side trip to Aunt Fannie’s Indiana home—after Hiram’s spring semester ended. [Note 6]

3

Many 28-year-old men who are forced to return home simply to survive are embarrassed and depressed. Nicholas Vachel Lindsay was not one of these. In the opening chapter of Adventures While Preaching the Gospel of Beauty (1914), he does admit that “There is something essentially humorous about a man walking rapidly away from his home town to tell all men they should go back to their birthplaces. It is still more humorous that, when I finally did return home, it was sooner than I intended, all through a temporary loss of nerve.” But later, in 1912, when asked by a gypsy woman—“What you sellin’, boy?”—he freely and politely hands her a copy of his “Gospel of Beauty.” Like any seedsman, he is “sellin” the future: “I hope my Gospel did them good. Its essential principle is that one should not be a gypsy forever. He should return home. Having returned, he should plant the seeds of Art and of Beauty. He should tend them till they grow” (11-12).
In his detailed discussion of “The New Localism,” the essay first published in the art periodical Vision (1912), Vachel advises the village statesman that “The person who most needs you is ten years old. He is maybe your son, or nephew or neighbor’s child. You may not understand his bent, but if he is a maker of kites or water-wheels he is a Craftsman, he has the root of that matter in him. The public opinion on which you have a professional influence should be watching for his special bent, be it song or sculpture, and even now saying to him, ‘Prepare to serve your town’ . . . Say, therefore, to the tried and proved Art-student with the divine call—‘Go to Rome, Munich, Mecca, Benares, Nikko or Kamakura, if you must, for Beauty’s sake, but bring back all your inspiration to help us here. Wherever you go, prepare to serve your town . . . Only a certain proportion will remember this call,” Vachel admits: “Yet that group of returning prodigals will be of indispensable help in bringing the place to where it can bloom.” These returning prodigals will be what the Bible calls “the saving remnant,” and Uncle Boy now viewed himself as a believing associate of the saving remnant “gang.”

This member of the remnant, moreover, was not returning home as a shrinking violet. People in Springfield may have shaken their heads and whispered comments about Dr. Lindsay’s prodigal son, but Uncle Boy was preparing to mount the soap box to preach sermons about beauty, holiness, and localism. In his words: “Let the artist climb upon the soap-box and maintain that this nation was conceived in originality, and that it was dedicated to the proposition that all men are born unique in power to create beauty, that now we are engaged in a great civil war, an epic struggle for the abolition of the slavery of ugliness, and the giving of eyes to a nation of ninety million blind, and the putting of creative power into ninety million hands” (“The New Localism” 8). In short, whatever “nerve” Vachel lost in New York City he more than recovered when he marched back into the Springfield family home.

In the privacy of his notebook-diary, however, Uncle Boy was not quite as brash, although he remained confident that he was making the correct move: “As long as I continue to do my best to write I am producing my reasonable share of this world’s goods, I should give every one as free access to my work as possible. In return I can ask of society bread, shelter and clothes. I should take pains to ask of those who can part with them easily. Be it here highly resolved that I am my own master henceforth.” But he knew that he was returning home to live under his father’s roof, and this knowledge obviously caused petulance: “If my father refuses to be reasonable I will not come back, I will not write henceforth or forevermore” (“Conclusions,” at the close of the notebook entitled: “The Adventures of an Amateur Mendicant”). One additional thought provided further assuagement: he believed at first that he would return to New York City at the beginning of 1909, once again to give art lectures at several YMCAs and at the settlement houses: “I will probably be in New York again soon—January the first—that is, to resume my Y.M.C.A. work,” he informed Richard Watson Gilder (letter dated “July 16, 1908,” in Chénetier, p. 24). In August, 1908, however, Springfield erupted; and Vachel Lindsay’s future plans, as we shall see, changed dramatically.

4

In late May 1908, Vachel arrived back home in Springfield on one of six steam railroads serving the city. Boasting some fifty thousand citizens (plus many more in nearby unincorporated areas), Illinois’s capital city was, and still is, centrally located in Sangamon County, amid some of the richest farmland in the state. The city had been growing rapidly over the past few decades, not because of agriculture but because of the discovery and exploitation of King Coal. In 1908, seventeen bituminous (soft coal) mines were located within four miles of
city center, employing several thousand miners, most of them Northern European immigrants. Since Vachel’s graduation from high school in 1897, just eleven years earlier, Springfield’s population had increased more than fifty per cent, while the black population, although increasing in number, remained at about six per cent, still high for a downstate Illinois city. With roughly 170 manufacturing enterprises hiring another three to four thousand men, mining and manufacturing accounted for the highest percentage of the area’s male work force. Two of the larger factories—the Illinois Watch Company and the Roberts, Johnson, Rand Shoe Company—also employed women, although most working women were engaged in domestic and clerical work. Other large businesses were: Sangamo Electric (meters and supplies); Racine-Sattley Company (agricultural implements); Capital City Concrete Construction; the National Zinc Company (mineral mining); Lincoln Park Coal and Brick Company; Ide and Sons Engine Company (steam engines); Springfield Boiler and Manufacturing Company; and Vachel’s least favorite, the Reisch Brewing Company.

Olive Lindsay’s early memories of her Springfield home, as we saw in Chapter Three, involved “mud and books.” By summer, 1908, however, paving bricks had largely conquered the mud, and electric trolleys offered easy access to many outlying communities. King Coal was busy undermining much of the area; but the King’s surface structures were generally located on the city’s north and east sides, the latter also home to many of the poorest minorities, especially African-Americans. As Vachel had discovered in Pennsylvania, mining communities were often “wet,” vice-oriented communities, and Springfield was no exception: “The Capital had a reputation, partly justified, of being one of the most corrupt mid-western cities. Vice was a business protected by the authorities and overlooked by the respectable citizens. Staid Jacksonville, thirty-five miles to the west, believed that the capital could rival Chicago and San Francisco in the wickedness of its saloons, brothels, and narcotics dens. The Chicago Daily News agreed that ‘Vice and other forms of law breaking have been given a wide latitude here. The notoriety of Springfield’s evil resorts has been widespread’” (Crouthamel 164).

The bulk of Springfield’s “evil resorts” were located east of downtown, mainly along Washington Street between Seventh and Eleventh Streets. Known as the “Levee,” this area was surrounded on the north and on the south by predominantly black residences, residences that continued to the northeast into the “Badlands”: “Frequented by what one indignant editorialist called a ‘dissolute and criminally-inclined’ class of blacks, the Levee was a more or less permanent scandal which visitors always deplored and local people usually overlooked. Washington Street was the place where the local sporting element (and not a few visiting politicians and conventioneers) could, for a price, satisfy their less respectable appetites in no fewer than twenty-two saloons, a dozen back-room brothels, and unnumbered gambling parlors. Outbreaks of violence among the Levee’s citizens were common place—local police refused to enter the area alone—and most Springfieldians were forced to agree with the editor of the Joliet Weekly News, who called the place a ‘disgrace and stench to the civilized world’” (Krohe 2). As a practical matter, authorities tolerated the Badlands and the Levee because social vices appealing to “the local sporting element” were centralized—and removed from predominantly white areas.

Civil stench in the Levee and Badlands was matched by moral stench, and the prevailing political opinion was that black votes were for sale and ward bosses were the savvy buyers. City fathers knew better than to attempt moral reforms: ethically minded politicians were simply voted out of office. And although Springfield’s religious establishments railed against
immorality, “the preachers’ hellfire and brimstone was no match for the cold cash of the ward bosses, and the Levee remained impervious to reform. . . . The fact that most of Springfield’s nearly 3000 black citizens shared the whites’ bitter outrage at the state of public affairs did little to influence prevailing opinion on the issue. The conspicuous role played by some blacks in the unholy pageant of life on the Levee lent an ominously racist tone to the complaints of the city’s whites, and aggravated race feeling that was already dangerously strained. . . . For, beneath the soot and grime of a Northern factory town, Springfield wore a Southern face” (Krohe 2-3). Blacks who knew their “place” were tolerated; but by the turn of the century, a growing number of ante-bellum blacks were migrating north with the unabashed opinion that they were “as good as a white man.” Indeed, by the time Vachel returned to Springfield this summer of 1908, race relations in Springfield had changed from grudging tolerance to open hostility, at least among many working-class whites.

The black migration north included a young man from Birmingham, Alabama, a man with some skill and experience in construction. Not yet eighteen years old, Joe James was on the road during the spring, 1908, just like Vachel Lindsay. Joe James arrived in Springfield near the beginning of June, just like Vachel Lindsay. However, Vachel arrived aboard a passenger train, while Joe had hopped a freight in the St. Louis area, where he had been unable to find employment. Looking for a job in construction or in brick making, Joe was in Springfield only hours when he was arrested for vagrancy. Taken to the city jail at 7th and Jefferson Streets, he was questioned and finally released, although under orders to leave the city at once. When he did not comply quickly enough, he was rearrested and fined twenty-five dollars. Unable to pay anything at all, Joe was sentenced to fifty-eight days in jail, both the arrests and the sentencing accomplished within a forty-eight-hour period. Joe James’s experience, especially when viewed in the aftermath of Vachel’s 1906 and 1908 tramps, manifests the startling contrast in social attitudes toward whites and blacks at the beginning of the twentieth century. But Springfield society was not yet finished with Joe James, as we shall see shortly. [Note 7]

Meanwhile, when Joy and Vachel arrived home at the end of May, they were not the only Lindsay offspring in town. Older sister Olive Lindsay Wakefield, with her husband Paul and baby son Vachel, had returned to Springfield from China during the fall, 1907. Olive had been diagnosed with diabetes, and she came home—presumably to die—at a time when diabetes was considered to be an incurable disease. Olive was indeed diabetic, like her father before her; but far from dying, she learned that she was pregnant. Mary Churchill Wakefield was born May 18, 1908, in her parents’ apartment at 727 South 5th Street, just a block south of the Lindsay family home. The Wakefields had set up housekeeping in this apartment after their marriage in June 1904, and they would return again to the same apartment when home on furlough in 1917. In her memoir, Olive comments that she and her family lived in the apartment “in 1908 and 1909,” after which they likely lived for at least one year in Dr. Lindsay’s home. The 1910 census names Dr. V.T. Lindsay as head of household at 603 South 5th Street; and Paul, Olive, son Vachel, and daughter Mary Wakefield are listed as residents under his roof. Paul joined Dr. Lindsay in his office practice from late 1907 through 1910, and his name appears under Vachel Thomas’s on the office letterhead stationery during those years. [Note 8]

Dr. Lindsay’s son soon made use of this stationery, writing a scathing three-page letter “To the Holy Person or Persons / In Charge of the Mission at Morristown,” as we saw at the beginning of this chapter. Although the surviving letter was not mailed, Vachel would rework the Morristown material over the coming winter, assign it the title “An Adventurer Gets
Religion,” and self-publish the account in War Bulletin Number Two (August 1909: see Prose 95-102). Later, as we already have noted, the story was used to introduce the second part of A Handy Guide for Beggars (1916).

Morristown was not the only memory to haunt Dr. Lindsay’s son. His body was safely home in his bedroom at 603 South 5th Street, but his mind was busy tramping through the previous five years, the years in New York City, the years that began with so much hope but ended with the embarrassing request for enough money to return home. And the one figure who seems to have been conspicuous in this thinking was Richard Watson Gilder, the venerable editor-in-chief of The Century Magazine, one of the foremost publications of the day. Never one to internalize emotions, Vachel decided to beard the lion in his den, writing a personal summary of his frustrations to “My Dear Mr. Gilder.” The date is July 16, 1908, and the correspondent begins at the beginning: “In the winter of 1903 and 1904 I called at the Critic office with a bundle of verses under one arm and pictures under the other. Mr. [Ridgely] Torrence received me, and gave me such appreciation on the verses I had never yet had from mortal man.”

The art work was a different matter: “And as far as the pictures I had drawn, [Torrence] desired to submit them to a better authority. A month or so later I received an enthusiastic note from him, saying Miss Gilder had decided to print some of the poems and pictures. At the Critic office, in her name, he accepted eight of the poems, and several of the drawings. And here comes the point.” It seems that Miss Jeanette Gilder, Richard’s sister and a co-founder of The Critic literary magazine, had shared Vachel’s poems and drawings with her indisposed brother. The reaction, Vachel reminds this brother, was breathtaking: “...you had said that I was nothing less than a genius in both departments. And Mr. Torrence informed me that the Century Office was waiting to welcome me with open arms. Also that you seldom committed yourself on a youth, but had staked your reputation as a prophet in my case.” In addition, Vachel claims, he was promised that his poems and drawings would be published in the Critic, a 300-word biography would be included, fellow writer Zona Gale had approved all the work, and “the public [would] be taken by storm, bit hard.”

The youthful “genius” then expresses his primary complaint: “Now all this was uncalled for, and it made me drunk. There was a cruel morning after.” Indeed, as we have seen, “The Queen of Bubbles” (March 1904) and “At Noon on Easter Day” (April 1905) were the only works published in The Critic (which had since merged with Putnam’s Magazine in 1906). “My grand 300 word life of myself,” Vachel adds, “was cut down to a paragraph on page 211 [March 1904]. But I was young, and drunk and patient, and afraid of the grand literary Gods. ... Meanwhile, remembering the approval of the Great Gilder was not to be taken lightly I went home and from June to December wrote my best book with my best illustrations, in which all my poems were given a sort of fairy tale setting. I did all this assuming not that you were a busy editor, but a great searcher who had at last found the genius for whom he had been looking, who was willing to be patient with me a little, and learn my ways. I know now that only a person with imagination white hot could get anything out of the book whatever its merit.” [Note 9]

The book, we know, was Where Is Aladdin’s Lamp? And Vachel reminds “Dear Mr. Gilder” that, when a copy was left in his office in early 1906, “after two weeks you returned it with a chilly note. Then I awoke from my year’s trance. I realized that either Mr. Torrence and Miss Gale brought their imagination to play in every relation of life, or that you had a mighty good forgetter, for the pictures in that book were better than any you had seen before, and the poems were the same you had once praised.” Moreover, Vachel complains, “the tale is not
ended. I waited through 1906 and 1907 and into 1908 for the rest of my grand array of verses to appear in the Critic—now Putnam’s. Last fall as a sort of stimulant I illustrated the six still in their possession, since my drawings had been returned to me. I am confident these pictures were superior to anything I had before done. If my poor little scratches were worthy of praise then, so were these now. These last drawings were returned to me, and about last March or so, the poems, with a letter to the effect that the longer they were kept, the harder they were to print. . . . . So, it seems, I am through with the house, to which your word gave me entrance.” [Note 10]

Having duly established dear Mr. Gilder’s mistreatment, Vachel solicits compenation: “I feel that I still have a claim upon you till you have explained these mysteries. I know an editor’s job must be thankless at best, and I can comprehend the score of ways in which you might have been misquoted, and misunderstood. But if I have a claim, I want to know it, and do it justice.” To this end, he includes brochures advertising his West Side YMCA art lectures, along with The Last Song of Lucifer and God Help Us to Be Brave booklets. Gilder is also advised to contact Powlison at the YMCA and to investigate the decorations at the Pig and Goose restaurant on West 88th Street. For success in print, Gilder may consult The Outlook, “The Man under the Yoke” (June 1, 1907); and for success in the pulpit, Gilder should contact the Reverend Doctor Robert McKenzie, pastor of Rutgers Presbyterian Church, where Vachel delivered his sermon on the “Holiness of Beauty” (“Sunday evening a week before Easter”). If Gilder proves to be satisfied after his reconnoitering, he is advised to consider publishing “a volume of poems, with my own decorations and embellishments, leading off with the historical poem I send, and using it for the title poem. The Heroes of Time might be a better title for it. I have already a design for every stanza. The Y.M.C.A. will certify to the popular quality of the designs.”

Finally, Vachel suggests a repeat of some two years earlier, when he had returned to New York City hawking Aladdin’s Lamp. This time, however, the aspiring author does not intend to return without an invitation: “I will probably be in New York again soon—January the first—that is, to resume my Y.M.C.A. work. Meanwhile, if you are interested, and you really liked my work long ago—you will send me a word of friendship. If you are not—I may not be vexed very much after all, for sometimes, I am not interested in Nicholas Vachel Lindsay myself. . . . Hoping for a glad answer, I remain,

Very sincerely,
Nicholas Vachel Lindsay

As we noted earlier, however, Nicholas Vachel Lindsay would not return to New York City “again soon.” Tragic events in Springfield, Illinois, were to determine his immediate future, and possibly even solicit a written response to this letter from dear Mr. Gilder himself. [Note 11]

Springfield’s well-documented troubles during the summer, 1908, came to a boil on Saturday night, July 4-5, when mining engineer Clergy A. “Posey” Ballard was awakened by the screams of his sixteen-year-old daughter Blanche. Racing to her bedroom, Ballard surprised a young black man who was, in newspaper jargon, attempting to “outrage” the girl. The intruder fled, with the unfortunate Ballard in hot pursuit, not knowing the assailant was armed with a knife and a straight-edge razor. Outside, in the yard, the intruder turned suddenly and slashed his pursuer’s face and neck with the razor. Grievously wounded, Ballard fell. His sons, Homer and Charles, continued the pursuit, but to no avail. Sunday morning, July 5, Vachel and the rest of
Springfield awakened to an alarming newspaper headline, on the front page of the Illinois State Register:

BURGLAR STABS C. A. BALLARD
WELL KNOWN RESIDENT HAS TERRIBLE ENCOUNTER WITH A NEGRO THIEF

The ensuing article reports that the grievously wounded Ballard was able to describe “a negro” about 5’ 8” tall, “wearing a blue shirt and light colored trousers. A light colored hat dropped by the negro was found by the police.” In subsequent editions, we learn that the hat was found at “Lee’s tavern.”

Later this same Sunday morning, four of Blanche Ballard’s high school girlfriends discovered a young black man sleeping alongside the road, not far from the Ballard home (821 East North Grand Avenue). One of the girls phoned police but also phoned the Ballard house; and Homer and Charles Ballard, along with a few friends, rushed to the scene, grabbed the man, and thrashed him brutally. About the same time, 11:45 a.m., Clergy Ballard died and was nearly joined in death by his accused assailant. Springfield police arrived just in time to save Joe James’s life. James, it seems, had been a model prisoner and, as such, he was a trustee, doing odd jobs and running errands while serving time on his vagrancy charge. He had been asked to assist in an effort to catch and euthanize nuisance stray dogs, but he failed to return to jail afterward. Instead, he apparently found his way to the Levee, where he allegedly drank himself senseless at the Hotel Lee tavern (517 ½ E. Jefferson Street). When police attempted to question the bloodied James about the Ballard affair, he claimed that he could remember nothing from the previous night. Nonetheless, and although a straight-edge razor was not found on or near him, James was arrested and charged with the murder of Clergy Ballard.

Monday morning, July 6, Springfield’s professional journalists reported the above events. The headlines and stories in the Illinois State Register (the area’s “Democratic” newspaper) are typical:

C. A. BALLARD DIES OF KNIFE WOUNDS,
AND JOE JAMES, A NEGRO,
IS HELD AS BRUTAL MURDERER

WHEN MURDERED MAN’S SONS FOUND NEGRO THEY ALMOST KILLED HIM

TAKEN TO PRISON
MASS OF WOUNDS

Maintains a Stupid and Sullen Silence,
Admitting Only That He Was Drunk—
Ballard’s Family Identify Him

Ballard Killed in Defense of Family

In the article itself, the reporter avers: “The dastardly manner in which a respected citizen was murdered while defending his home and family has aroused public sentiment. There were excited declarations ‘that it is time an example were made of some flagrant violator of the law, that the course of justice cannot be too speedy.’”

Then, on page two of this edition, next to the conclusion of the above story, the Register publishes what the editors apparently considered a related article:

**MINGLE LAST MAN HANGED**

**TEN YEARS SINCE DEATH PENALTY WAS INFLECTED HERE**

**Hangings Have Been Few and Far Between in Sangamon County—**

**Some Say Another Is Due**

Today, more than one hundred years after the fact, “some” question whether or not local newspapers played any role in causing the infamous 1908 race riot. It is hard to imagine that “someone,” or anyone, could read these papers and still have any doubt. Indeed, for the remainder of July and well into August, Springfield’s newspapers published article after article, reporting the grievous misbehavior of elements of the black community. Elements of the white community, therefore, were “prepared” to respond when they read newspaper headlines on the morning of August 14 (spelling and capitalization exactly as in the original):

**DRAGGED FROM HER BED AND OUTRAGED BY NEGRO**

**Mrs. Earl Hallam of 1153 North Fifth st.,**

**Victim of Brutal Assault**

**CARRIED FROM HOME BY NEGRO**

**Choked into Insensibility by Villian^ who Gained Entrance Through Kitchen—Deed Committed in Back Yard.**
NO CLEW REACHED
AS TO PERPETRATOR

The accompanying article begins: “One of the greatest outrages that ever happened in Springfield took place about 11:30 o’clock last night, when Mrs. Earl Hallam, 1153 North Fifth street, was dragged from her bed into the yard at the rear of her home and criminally assaulted by an unidentified negro” (Illinois State Register, front page). The reporter even offers a clue as to the “unidentified” negro’s identity: “It is thought by neighbors and by the authorities that the assault was committed by one of a number of negroes who have been working on a new house which is being erected in the block in which the Hallam home is located. These negroes have been watched by several residents in that district, and it is stated that several of them appear to be bad characters.” Later the same morning, after questioning numbers of “bad characters,” police indeed focused on three of the day laborers constructing the new home in the Hallam neighborhood. Finally, after some hesitation, twenty-one-year-old Mabel Hallam identified George Richardson as the man who had assaulted her. Richardson was arrested on the spot and transported to the police station, where Mrs. Hallam again declared his guilt, selecting him from a police lineup. George Richardson, who insisted that he had been home all evening with his wife, joined Joe James in the county jail (which, in 1908, was located directly behind the present-day Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library).

Word of Richardson’s arrest and incarceration spread quickly, and unruly crowds gathered in front of Sheriff Charles Werner’s jail. In the early afternoon hours, Werner was not unduly alarmed; but as this hot Friday afternoon wore on, and as more and more working men left the local bars, the crowd swelled to several thousand (some estimates are as high as four or even five thousand). It was too late to seek help from the state militia: the request would have to be approved by Springfield mayor Roy Reece and also by Illinois governor Charles Deneen. Instead, Werner contacted personnel at a nearby fire station and also called Harry T. Loper (telephone number 1111), proprietor of a large downtown restaurant and owner of an expensive ($5,000) touring automobile. On cue, the fire station sounded a false alarm and dispatched fire trucks down 7th Street. With the crowd distracted, Loper entered the alley behind the jail. Richardson and James, along with two policemen, hustled into the car, and Loper drove fifteen miles north to a rail spur at Williamsville. Here the prisoners and their escorts boarded a train bound for Bloomington-Normal, sixty miles north of Springfield. Sheriff Werner’s wards were booked into the McLean County Jail, safely removed from the bloodthirsty mob. [Note 12]

When Werner shouted to the crowd that the prisoners were gone, even allowing Earl Hallam and several others inside the jail to see for themselves, the sheriff expected the rioters to disperse. Harry Loper had hoped for same, but the mob reaction was ugly. Word quickly circulated concerning Loper’s involvement, and the mob surged to his restaurant (223-225 South 5th Street), across the street to the west of the Old State Capitol square. After a brief and unsuccessful attempt to defend his business, Loper and his staff fled to the basement. The rabble demolished the building’s interior, helped themselves to the bar supplies, overturned the touring car, and piled restaurant furniture on top. Someone applied a match to the gas tank, and downtown Springfield reflected a roaring yellow and orange blaze reminiscent of hellfire. The conflagration lasted several hours, as arriving firemen were not allowed to do their job.
One waiter, white teenager Louis Johnston, was killed by a stray bullet and became the riot’s first fatality. Egged on by Kate Howard, proprietress of the Howard Hotel (806 East Adams) and an unabashed hater of African-Americans, the mob raided Reuben Fishman’s Pawn Shop (717 East Washington Street), obtaining a variety of weapons and continuing to destroy other Jewish and black businesses in the Levee area. (Random white owners were spared as they marked their shops with white handkerchiefs.) Their hatred still not sated, the mob surged into the Badlands, where barber Scott Burton attempted to save his shop (9th and Jefferson Streets), actually firing a shotgun into the crowd. (Kate Howard and others proudly displayed their pellet wounds over the next few days.) In return fire, Burton was shot and killed, his body dragged down the street and hung from a tree in front of a destroyed black tavern (12th and Madison Streets). The body was then used as target practice until a Decatur militia finally arrived and ended the violence for one night. The time was well after 2:00 a.m., Saturday morning, August 15. [Note 13]

Springfield newspaper headlines, August 15, 1908, announced the drama of the preceding night. The Illinois State Register is typical, with the following emblazoned at the top of the first page:

**MORNING CLIMAX OF NIGHT’S REIGN OF TERROR**

A picture of Mrs. Earl Hallam is at the left-hand edge of the page. Next to the picture is the account of Scott Burton’s lynching:

**LYNCHING EARLY THIS MORNING**

Negro Strung Up to Tree at Corner of Twelfth and Madison Streets.

**BODY RIDDLED WITH BULLETS**

Lurid Flames From Burning Buildings Furnish Illumination for the Tragedy and Present Weird Scene.

**TROOPS ARRIVE; SEVERAL SHOT**

On the right-hand side of the Register’s first page, we read the detailed account of the early part of the night:

**LOPER’S RESTAURANT WRECKED BECAUSE HE ASSISTED THE SHERIFF**

Automobile in Which Prisoners Were Spirited Away Is Burned and Restaurant Wrecked by the Frenzied Mob.

**DISHES SMASHED, WINDOWS BROKE AND ALL THE FURNITURE DESTROYED**
Gatling Gun Section, Police and Fire Department
Mere Toys in the Hands of the Colossal Crowd
Which Revels in the Wreck and Riot.

MAYOR REECE TRIES TO INTERFERE AND
IS FORCED TO BEAT HASTY RETREAT

Springfield Mayor Roy Reece initially attempted to read the riot act to the crowd, in a vain attempt to stop them from attacking Loper's restaurant. But he was soon forced to beat a “hasty retreat” to the back room of nearby Mueller’s Cigar Store, where he spent the rest of the evening.

Overnight August 15-16, 1908, there was little change in the city of Springfield, as manifested by the headlines of the Sunday morning, August 16, Illinois State Register:

**ANOTHER CALL FOR TROOPS LAST NIGHT**
**FOLLOWS SECOND LYNCHING**

**W. DONNIGAN LYNCHED**
**LAST NIGHT AT CORNER**
**SPRING AND EDWARDS**

Tragedy Took Place at Edward’s School Corner Within Two Blocks of Governor Deneen’s Office in the State House

**GENERAL EXODUS FROM CITY OF NEGROES FOLLOWS VIOLENT RIOTING**

The opening paragraph reads: “That the spirit of mob violence in Springfield, home and burial place of Abraham Lincoln, is far from suppressed, despite the presence in the city of two thousand heavily armed militiamen, and the efforts of large police and sheriff’s forces, was proven last night when a mob formed, marched through the streets, crossed through the state house grounds, past the office of governor Deneen, and lynched W. K. Donnigan, an aged negro, at the corner of Spring and Edwards streets, only two blocks from the office of the governor, where he was directing the campaign” (elections were scheduled on November 3). [Note 14]

Saturday afternoon, the 15th, had passed quietly enough, but around 7:00 in the evening a growing gang of rabble rousers found their way to Payne’s Hardware at Fourth and Monroe. The objective was clothesline rope with which to lynch one or more African-Americans who had sought refuge in the State Arsenal building, located at Second and Monroe. Here, though, the mob came face to face with hundreds of soldiers from the Illinois National Guard (and a Gatling gun). Frustrated, the crowd surged across the Illinois State Capitol grounds, headed for the home
of William Donnegan, an aged and prosperous black man who had been married to a white wife for thirty-two years. Known as Lincoln’s friend, as well as his cobbler, Donnegan was found hiding. Someone cut his throat, and he was dragged across the street and lynched in front of Edwards School (at the southwest corner of Spring and Edwards Streets). National guardsmen arrived on the scene quickly, freed the still-breathing Donnegan, and dispersed the mob. The unfortunate Donnegan, who was alive only because the mob was unable to raise him high enough for his feet to clear the ground, was finally transported to St. John’s Hospital. Here the resident eye, ear, nose, and throat doctor, Elmer Ellsworth Hagler, worked feverishly to save the old man’s life, but finally to no avail.

Additional troops, shuttered taverns, and the beginning of a new work week finally brought relative calm to Springfield, along with hordes of out-of-town sightseers. The city’s newspapers and several entrepreneurs rushed to serve the curious newcomers, according to historian James Krohe Jr., with the Register publishing a souvenir pamphlet: Photographic Views of the Great Springfield Race War (25 cents). Hucksters sold pieces of wood from the trees used to hang Burton and Donnegan; postcards depicting the mayhem were available everywhere. The newspaper writers also attempted to divert blame from the citizens of Abraham Lincoln’s hometown. The riot ringleader, both the Register and the Journal insisted, was Abe Raymer, “a Jew from St. Louis.” Two other figures, Ernest “Slim” Humphrey and boarding house owner Kate Howard, played lesser roles, although the Journal described Howard as “a new Joan of Arc.” The riot began, after all, by the alleged rape of a white woman; and Howard wanted revenge. When the male rioters hesitated in front of Loper’s restaurant, they were confronted by an angry woman: “What the hell are you fellows afraid of? Women want protection and this seems the only way to get it.”

Sangamon County State’s Attorney, Frank Hatch, was also intent on justice. Within days a special grand jury of twenty-three men was impaneled to consider the fate of, in Hatch’s words, “the mob or rats and curs that . . . brought the blush of shame to every law-abiding citizen in the county.” Over the two weeks following the riot, the jury listened to countless witnesses relate the events of the bloody weekend and finally brought 107 indictments against more than 80 individuals on charges of riot, murder, arson, and larceny. Despite Hatch’s promise that no guilty person would be spared, state prosecutors over the ensuing three months were able to obtain only one conviction, and that for petty larceny. Clearly, no jury of Sangamon County white men was going to convict another white man of any crime against any black man, and in the end no one was held accountable for the murderous chaos of August 14 and 15. Indeed, the only casualty was Kate Howard, who poisoned herself when authorities came to arrest her. Ironically, she likely would have enjoyed the same fate as Abe Raymer and Slim Humphrey, had she only waited. Perhaps the greatest irony of all, however, was the admission of Mabel Hallam, who (on September 2) confessed to the grand jury that she had not been raped by a black man after all. She had suffered at the hands of a white man, likely the fallout from an adulterous love affair, since Mabel refused to name her assailant. George Richardson was released without compensation, and the Hallams left Springfield, apparently for Chicago. Joe James, though, was tried for murder, convicted (September 18), and hung by the neck till dead (October 24), just a few weeks prior to his eighteenth birthday.

One visitor to Springfield in the aftermath of the riot was not a typical, thrill-seeking sightseer. Chicagoan William English Walling, an impassioned advocate for African Americans, came to observe the horrific scene and to interview any and all persons who were involved
and/or who had an opinion on what had taken place in Abraham Lincoln’s adopted hometown. Walling was appalled, to say the least, and returned home to write “The Race War in the North,” published in The Independent (September 3, 1908). Local newspapers could argue that the rioters were led by a St. Louis Jew and that the Negroes provoked the mayhem, but Walling contended “that a large part of the white population of Lincoln’s home, supported largely by the farmers and miners of the neighboring towns, have initiated a permanent warfare with the Negro race. . . . I talked to many of them the day after the massacre,” he added, “and found no difference of opinion on the question, ‘Why, the niggers came to think they were as good as we are!’ was the final justification offered, not once, but a dozen times. . . . Springfield had no shame. She stood for the action of the mob. She hoped the rest of the Negroes might flee. She threatened that the movement to drive them out would continue.” For English Walling, as he was known to his friends, there was one primary cause: race hatred; and he wondered “what large and powerful body of citizens is ready to come to [the Negroes’] aid.”

“In New York City, Mary White Ovington” James Krohe relates, “read Walling’s article in The Independent with outrage. A social worker of abolitionist descent, Ovington shared Walling’s shock that Lynch mobs should terrorize blacks in Lincoln’s adopted home. At Ovington’s suggestion, [and with the help of fellow reformer Henry Moskowitz,] Walling arranged a meeting of like-minded friends to help right the wrongs suffered by blacks at the hands of lawless whites.” The meeting was held in New York City in January; and Oswald Garrison Villard, president of the New York Post Company, called for a centennial celebration of Lincoln’s birthday, February 12, inviting everybody who cared about justice for African Americans. The result was the formation of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

In Springfield, Illinois, on February 12, 1909, Lincoln’s 100th birthday was celebrated in the State Arsenal building, with no African Americans, no Jews, and no women allowed in the main floor audience. Women at least were permitted in the balconies, but African Americans perforce celebrated the occasion across town, in Springfield’s A.M.E. church, the Reverend L. H. Magee the featured speaker. Looking forward one hundred years, to February 2009, Reverend Magee predicted a different event: “We behold another Lincoln celebration by the great-grandchildren of those who celebrate this centenary. America shall have grown to be the center of civilization, mental and moral culture. Prejudice shall have been banished as a myth and relegated to the dark days of ‘Salem witchcraft.’ The gospel of ‘malice toward none and charity for all’ shall have regenerated and changed the mental attitude of all towards the poor and despised on account of race, color or previous condition of servitude. The colored people shall have risen above their present level by means of education, wealth and power as a factor in our government.” We have to doubt, though, that Reverend Magee (or anyone else in Springfield in 1908-1909) anticipated the results of the USA’s 2008 presidential election. [Note 15]

Across town, in a small, second-floor bedroom overlooking the grounds of the Illinois governors’ mansion, Uncle Boy had arrived at a conclusion similar to Reverend Magee’s, several months prior even to the race riot. The current adult generation was beyond social redemption. “Springfield had no shame,” Walling averred; and his observation was proven when riot ringleaders were acquitted by a jury of their peers (!) and when the 1909 Lincoln centennial banquet remained segregated. The English and French ambassadors were present; William Jennings Bryan was the featured speaker. But African Americans were barred from the Arsenal
main floor, the very place where hundreds sought refuge during the riot. The one glimmer of hope lay in the education of future generations: the young spirits Uncle Boy experienced on his way home from New York City: the boys at Lafayette College, little Frank and little Jimmy, and little Gretchen-Cecilia. In fact, “On the Building of Springfield” began to take shape directly after Vachel’s 1908 tramp:

Record it for the grandson of your son—
A city is not built in a day:
Our little town cannot complete her soul
Till countless generations pass away.

The poem would be introduced to Springfield at the conclusion of one of Uncle Boy’s most courageous efforts, a series of YMCA lectures intended to rescue Abraham Lincoln’s adopted city from arrant moral turpitude and international disgrace. How? Quite simply by demonstrating to Springfield citizens that artists and poets are, and always have been, the unacknowledged legislators of the world. Uncle Boy was reading Shelley’s “A Defence of Poetry” this summer, seeking emotional and intellectual support for his determination to pursue the arts. As a bonus, Shelley’s essay would also provide the philosophical foundation for Uncle Boy’s most important discourses to date.

Ironically, Vachel’s 1908 YMCA lecture series was announced at the very height of Springfield’s race-riot chaos. In the Illinois State Register of August 15, the newspaper that pictures Mabel Hallam and reports the lynching of Scott Burton and the trashing of Loper’s restaurant, the following article appears on page eleven:

LECTURES BY N. V. LINDSAY

BEFORE YOUNG MEN’S CHRISTIAN ASSOCIATION.

His Subject Will Be the Composite Citizenship of America and the Races that Are Making America.

“Nicholas Vachel Lindsay proposes a course of ten consultations among the Y.M.C.A. members,” the article reads, “beginning about Oct. 15 on the races that are making America—especially those represented in Springfield—the English, Scotch, Irish, Germans, Swedes, Jews, Italians, Portuguese, Greeks, Poles, Lithuanians, negroes, Chinese, Japanese. Each race will be taken first in its golden age; second in the last hundred years of its history; third, its present social and political conditions in Springfield.” The lecturer, according to the reporter, expects audience participation, with individuals sharing observations from their own interaction with persons of different races. “The first requisition,” however, “is to have a big heart for alien men.”

The second half of the article, under the subtitle “Cosmopolitan Population,” offers a hint as to Vachel’s purpose and methodology:

Remember the Greek of whom you only ask candy now, once gave the world a great art without asking; the Russian tailor, who sews buttons on your coat, once wrote the world’s greatest book [War and Peace]; the Irishman who helps to muddy local politics
has in his heart the Celtic fires that fertilized the whole art and literature of Europe; the Chinaman who hands you your laundry with such an unseemly grin may be quoting within himself some Chinese proverb more august than anything you have said aloud in your whole life, dating back to the beginning of time. Why are not these men producing their greatest in Springfield? They say in New York, “Oh! If we were not so crowded, this teeming race congress would have a chance.” Here people are spread out. We have no slums; yet the lack is still in the social conditions. The men are the same as their illustrious ancestors. Maybe Springfield can sometime become a place where they can do themselves justice in new splendid ways.

The initial title of the series is reported to be: “The Composite Citizenship of Springfield—Their Golden Age, Their Recent History, Their Place in Springfield.” The individual lectures are then listed:

2. “The Irish.”
5. “The Italians, Portuguese and Greeks.”

The series, though, is two months away; and, as we shall see, the lecture line-up will change. [Note 16].

Like Springfield, we will delay learning about Vachel’s lecture series. He was obviously hard at work preparing, but several other projects were underway as well. On October 4, 1908, the First Christian Church (the Lindsay family church) celebrated its 75th anniversary. Located in 1908 on the northwest corner of 5th and Jackson Streets, just one block north of Dr. Lindsay’s home, the church interior “had been tastefully decorated,” according the Illinois State Register (October 5, 1908, p. 5):

Draped across the altar was a large American flag, and the choir loft was bedecked with a similar decoration. Over the main door at the entrance to the edifice was draped a large American flag, the same scheme of decoration being carried out around the balcony, with the exception that in the center had been placed a group of flags representing the various countries in which the church has spread the gospel of Christ. On either side of the pulpit were arranged palms, ferns and potted plants, while about the building were large sprays of asparagus [ferns]. Interwoven with the decorations there appeared a series of ten posters, designed by N. Vachel Lindsay, each representing a flaming altar. The same general design shown in the posters was carried out on the cover of the programme. Extending above the altar was shown in large letters the words, “Hitherto Hath the Lord Helped Us” [I Samuel 7:12], while on either side appeared the figures 1833-1908.
It is doubtful that the grouping of flags from various nations was Vachel’s idea, but it is important to remember the ecumenical emphasis of his family church. Acceptance of racial and ethnic diversity was central to Uncle Boy’s upbringing.

In addition to the flaming altar posters, Vachel prepared two poems and two pictures for display in the windows of Coe Brothers’ bookstore, then located at the northeast corner of 5th and Monroe Streets, about midway between the Lindsay home and the site of Loper’s late restaurant. Both poems are now well known: “The Tree of Laughing Bells” and “The Last Song of Lucifer” (see the conclusion of this chapter). In the Illinois State Register of October 7, 1908 (p. 5), we read Vachel’s explanation of both works:

The Tree of Laughing Bells, . . . illustrated by the big oil painting in the window of Coe’s Book store, is supposed to be growing on the edge of the universe. Therefore a weird green wind from Chaos beats upon it. It is supposed to be in a magical place, therefore the trunk and branches of the tree are ghostly, of dim outline. Red bells are falling from the branches every moment, and no effort has been spared to make them seem to ring. Intense action and wizardry are the keynotes of the picture.

Now this tree may seem a far-off thing indeed to the Springfield passerby, but according to the poem, the hero starts for the Tree from the banks of the Sangamon, and Springfield, Illinois, is described as Dreamland Town. Now this is absurd, of course. Yet it is true and proper. Springfield is Dreamland Town as often as any place is. Many a flight of the imagination has begun in a more everyday place. I hold that he who cannot find enough flowers for the wings of his fancy on the banks of the Sangamon is not likely to find them anywhere.

In brief, attempting to create a prejudice-free Springfield seems as impossible as a journey to the tree of laughing bells, the blood-red symbols of hope and joy. But all journeys, all flights of fancy, must begin somewhere, some place. Why not set flight from the banks of the Sangamon? Who knows, but in a hundred or more years, an African-American candidate will announce his quest for the Presidency of the United States, starting in Springfield, Illinois, starting on the banks of the Sangamon.

Vachel’s explanation of “The Last Song of Lucifer” is yet more interesting, and also vital to our understanding of the upcoming YMCA lectures:

For the Last Song of Lucifer, . . . I have made a poster, exhibited in Coe Brothers’ window, showing Lucifer before he wanders from heaven. I have tried to show that he is bored by the perpetual sameness and sweetness of angel life. He has the title Light Bearer. Therefore his hair is crimson flame and his cloak is embroidered with torches. According to the Scripture he was a violinist, but I have taken the liberty to make him a harpist instead, and embroidered his cloak with harps. Because he is destined to become the future king of Babylon, that is Hades, I have given him a Babylonian cast of countenance. [Emphasis added.]

Like Lucifer, his hero since some boring days at Hiram College, Vachel intends to harp on the undesirability of sameness. Race riots are bred when ignorant people fear and despise diversity. But diversity, when properly understood—and artists are on the cusp of teaching such understanding—diversity is one of the greatest gifts given humankind, both as individuals and as citizens. Ignorant people are unable to recognize the mind-numbing boredom of a traditional “heaven”; ignorant people label artists and light bearers as devils, and assign them to Babylon or
to Hades or to some other “evil” space. Lucifer, the angel of light, is viewed as the Prince of Darkness. His future kingdom, a kingdom of art and music, is defined as “Hades” or “Babylon.”

In early October 1908, Uncle Boy was about to begin a series of lectures designed to overthrow the complacency of the status quo. He was about to attempt the impossible, knowing full well what the consequences could be. After all, in Vachel’s cosmology as expressed in “The Map of the Universe,” Lucifer is buried under the river of hatred. “What you sellin’ boy?” Springfield asked. Uncle Boy’s answer, in ten lectures, would amount to a single classical concept, a concept dear to Shelley and to countless other artists. Uncle Boy would be trying to sell HARMONY.

Notes for Chapter Twenty

[Note 1] Unlike Vachel’s 1906 tramp, the 1908 tramp has received close attention. The late Professor Owen Hawley (see “Works Cited”) has published a thorough study in the periodical *Western Illinois Regional Studies* 2 (Fall, 1979): 156-172. In 2006, Professor Hawley died and willed his extensive Lindsay materials, collected with the assistance of Professor Ralph Schroeder (see “Works Cited”), to the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library in Springfield, Illinois. I use the original documents, but I have relied heavily on Hawley’s narrative. The page numbers in the text are from the first edition of *A Handy Guide for Beggars* (1916), which is available online at Google Books. Copies of *The Last Song of Lucifer* booklet are preserved in Springfield’s Lincoln Library Sangamon Valley Collection and in the University of Indiana’s Lilly Library. For a detailed description, see Byrd 68-69. The Vachel Lindsay Association owns a copy of the *God Help Us to Be Brave* booklet, part of which is copied at the end of the last chapter.

[Note 2] The notebook entry describing Vachel’s Newark experience reads: “Paid my fifteen cents and received bed on third floor. Checked coat in office. Bed no 134 (I think), lower tier. Men asleep on upper tiers on each side, none just above. Man on the right half drunk but crossed himself and said ‘God keep me tonight’ before he slept. 44 beds in the room, about 2/3 occupied. Most of the men slept naked, some in underwear. Kept running to wash-room. A goodly number snored. More snorted and spat spat spat on the floor. About three, half drunk, talked till midnight. Finally the fat one rolled off his bed, falling about eight feet, naked, and almost breaking his head. That shut them up. He boasted he had had fifty beers yesterday . . . The sheets were filthy. Mine had blood on them. . . . The pillow-cases were well oiled. The place was on the whole better than the one in Atlanta.” The next morning Vachel was denied access to the washroom for the shower to which he was entitled, because, the “Cap” in charge explained, a lot of men were already in there scrubbing up, “and [you] wouldn’t like it.” The visitor’s final observation on Newark then follows: “He must have been afraid” (Virginia, cf. Ruggles 130).

[Note 3] “In Praise of the Unexpected Beauty of the New Jersey Hills” (2 pp.) is collected in the Hawley-Schroeder papers owned by the state of Illinois’s Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library (see “Works Cited and Other Resources”). New Jersey’s “noble hills” are not entirely pleasing, as their beauty reminds Vachel of “Apple Blossoms at Dawn,” an admired painting by his New York City friend, Earl H. Brewster. The reminiscence is disconcerting, and the manuscript ends with the homeward-bound wanderer’s rueful realization that “. . . I was not to see that picture again for many a day.”

[Note 4] Vachel associated drunkenness with immoderate materialism, and seems to have made this association a major theme in his Anti-Saloon speeches. In his essay entitled “The New
Localism,” first published in the short-lived periodical Vision (1912), the relationship between drinking and industrialism is very clear: “The incoming saloon, with all its usual appurtenances, is the sign that men’s appetites are being made morbid and their nerves are being warped by industrialism. The outgoing saloon is the sign that Agriculture still reigns in the land. It means that here, in this hamlet, lives the half-retired farmer and his son who support their church and its opinions the season round. They make it the dominant social unit. Though it may seem to languish it is always around the corner, and from it blossoms everything else. Here is the Lincoln Chautauqua, and the more elaborate Methodist Chautauqua. Briefly, the Agricultural hamlet is the entrenchment of rural reserve force, richness of blood and religious devotion, against a steam-made and steam-centralized world” (3). Available online: see “Works Cited.”


[Note 5] Johannes Wilhelm Meinhold’s The Amber Witch (1846) is a famous literary hoax. Touted as “the most interesting trial for witchcraft ever known,” the novel depicts the plight of Maria Schweidler, who is falsely accused of witchery but who is finally rescued by a young nobleman who loves her and who reveals the evil plot against her. Meinhold’s intent was to show his disdain for hypocritical religionists, like the Pharisees in the New Testament and the 1908 Presbyterians in Morristown, New Jersey. Gretchen-Cecilia and Vachel Lindsay likely read the English translation by Lucie, Lady Duff-Gordon (1821-69), first published in 1844 and available online at Project Gutenberg (EBook #8743).

“The Enchanted Horse,” not to be confused with the later novel by Magdalen Nabb, is a tale from the Arabian Nights that portrays the rescue of another damsel in distress. An English translation may be read at:


“The Two Brothers,” a Grimm fairytale which stresses kindness to animals and faith in one’s fellow human beings, may be read at:

http://www.literaturecollection.com/a/grimm-brothers/558/

Finally, Martha Finley’s (1828-1909) Elsie Dinsmore books, a series of children’s books published from 1867 to 1905, demonstrate how a child’s religious faith and respect for moral authority can overcome mistreatment and lead to substantial rewards. William Sidney Porter, “O. Henry,” wrote a famous parody of the series, Elsie in New York, which may be read online at:


Many of Finley’s Elsie books are available online at Project Gutenberg.

[Note 6] Two important letters survive from the end of Vachel’s 1908 tramp, both addressed to “Dear Papa and Mama” (Virginia). The first, dated “May 15,” was written from Dr. Page’s home: “I have just arrived at Warren [Ohio], and being invited to stay all night by Dr. Page I have accepted his invitation with thanks, and take my first chance to write to you. When I crossed the Shickshinny bridge near Wilkesbarre^ they charged me two cents and the two cents I had to give in my last stamp. Now I shall borrow a stamp from Dr. Page. . . . It seems to me I have been rained on and sunburned and walking forever, though it is only seventeen days. [May 15 was the eighteenth day on the road.] I started Tuesday afternoon April 28th after paying all my debts and having $1.50 in my pocket. [A narrative list of places visited follows here.] “I am
in the best of condition and spirits, twice a day for seventeen days I have read and explained the poem “God Help us to be Brave” and exchanged it for dinner, or for supper, bed and breakfast. As a usual thing just after dinner they are willing to be read to for fifteen minutes, and after supper around the fire for half an hour. I have had the highest kind of living, good and lavish cooking, and good beds, sleeping hard every night, walking generally from 6:30 A.M. to 5 P.M. When in a hurry, I have had hand-outs at noon. I had one afternoon’s ride in a box-car and an all day’s ride with a glove-drummer in a rubber-tired buggy. I have generally had a lift of three miles a day. During the rainy week I walked along the railroad that followed the Susquehannah, the country-roads being impassable, spending my nights at little lumber-towns. But otherwise I have been among the Farmers, having the time of my life.

“Several episodes will make this trip worth while from a literary standpoint. I have enough for three or four sketches, maybe more, and shall write to the Outlook soon to see if they can be interested.

“I shall stop in Hiram about two days, no more. [This plan changed, as the next letter explains.] I shall there make up my mind whether to ride or walk to Indianapolis, but am pretty much inclined to ride. If so I will borrow the necessary cash from Joy [his sister], or on her credit there, if you cannot send it to her in time. You know whether she has enough or not.

“If I walk to Springfield it ought to be done in about the same time it took me to get here, about June 10th I ought to get home. But it is pretty likely I will ride home. I am eager to write, I have a pile laid out and intend to work like the old scratch at it. With love, Nicholas Vachel Lindsay. [P.S.] May 10th there were no carnations about [Kate Lindsay’s favorite flower], but I put on a dandelion and violet and spring beauty, in memory of my Ma.” [For the record, the first official “Mother’s Day” was May 10, 1908.]

Vachel’s second letter, dated “May 18,” was written from Hiram, and begins with thanks for Papa’s twenty-dollar check. The grateful recipient has decided to stay for Miner Lee Bates’s formal installation as President of the college (Wednesday, May 20) and for a lecture-exhibit featuring “God Help Us to Be Brave” on the next night: “It is a show that always makes a hit.” He will then take the train to Aunt Fannie’s Indiana home, arriving Friday afternoon, the 22nd [see Frances Hamilton in “Works Cited”]. Typically, Aunt Fannie’s nephew continues to be introspective: “I hope to get some solid results from this walk. I have interviewed all sorts and conditions of men about their views, work, hopes, neighbors, politics. If I can remember all they have told me I have a pretty good start on my next winter’s lecture course on Comparative Races, for every man I talked to had something to say about the Italian and the Polak. It isn’t that it is true—the point is—it is what the American workman thinks.” [Interestingly, we know this “lecture course” will be given in Springfield, Illinois, not in New York City.]

Finally, this long letter outlines promising and not-so-promising New York opportunities: “I fluttered about New York two or three weeks trying to get my fingers into something. Then methought the only thing that has brought me something sure was the Outlook series [see chapter 19], and that had a deal to do with my taking my walk, or at least to justify the walk in my eyes. I wanted to have it pretty well started before you [Papa and Mama] had time to worry but you seemed determined to worry anyway. Whatever I have done that I shouldn’t it was through desire to spare your feelings and because I did not know just what was best. Not a day but what I would have been glad to be home at some time of the day. I had my good times and my bad times, my pleasures and pains, but never did I forget my father or mother, and every family reminded me in some way or other of our family. I am very anxious to get right home to writing. I hope to work at it as I never worked before, on prose I have some assurance of selling. If I only
can get a little of my stuff printed in two or three magazines at once, the magazines will know it, even if the public does not, and they all will be more likely to let me in permanently. I hope to thoroughly revise all the hopeful manuscripts I have on hand besides work out some new ones. If I only could get a good start I would be willing to stay away from New York.”

The hopeful author then lists topics for ten stories, several of which are published in A Handy Guide for Beggars, such as “2. I was naked and ye clothed me. Showing how the mission in Morristown has its peculiarities. How they fumigated my clean clothes, and what they made me wear”; and “5. The American miner, and what he thinks of the Polack. Being the observation of my host near Shickshinny Pa.” The writer also has in mind several essays: “The Creed of an Art Student,” “The Special Relations of Art to Life in America,” “Social Distinctions from the standpoint of a wanderer,” and “The Man with the Scraggly Beard, a short story of Art Student life in New York.” In short, in May 1908, Uncle Boy was eager to return home and write “like the old scratch.”

[Note 7] The Springfield newspapers published many stories about Joe James, beginning in early July and continuing through October, 1908. Generally, James is described as a sullen, uncooperative “negro vagrant,” about twenty-one or twenty-two years old. However, on October 24, the day after Joe James was executed, the Illinois State Register published his life story, as told by his mother, “Mrs. Katharine D. Roberts of Hattiesburg, Mississippi” (p. 2). According to Mrs. Roberts, Joe was born in Birmingham, Alabama, on November 28, 1890, indicating that Springfield had just hung a man who was not yet eighteen years old. (Contemporary Illinois law dictated that eighteen was the minimum age for capital punishment.) Joe’s father died when his son was two years old, and the boy was sent to live with an uncle, “the Reverend V. B. James, colored, of the Baptist church,” according to the Register. The Reverend Mr. James moved from Birmingham to Avondale, Alabama, when Joe was thirteen. The following year, Joe returned to Birmingham to live with his mother; and then, a year later, at age fifteen, he was on his own for a short time. After awhile, he moved to Hattiesburg with his mother and her new husband, only to return to Birmingham on his own in May 1907. This was the last she had heard of her son, Mrs. Roberts maintained, until she learned that he was in trouble in Springfield, Illinois. Her account supports other newspaper articles that report Joe had come to Springfield from East St. Louis, where he had worked a construction job for about a year.

[Note 8] The account of Olive’s illness and the Wakefield family decision to return to Springfield in 1907 is related by Olive’s daughter, Catharine Wakefield Ward, in an unpublished essay currently on display at the Vachel Lindsay Home historic site. Mary Churchill Wakefield’s middle name reflects her paternal grandmother’s maiden name. The Wakefields’ decision to abandon their apartment, likely in 1909, may have been due to a rodent infestation (see Fowler 43).

[Note 9] This important letter, collected at the New York Public Library, is published in Chénetier, pp. 22-24. Civil War veteran Richard Watson Gilder (1844-1909) was co-founder of the Newark Register, and later served as editor of Scribner’s Monthly, which was renamed The Century Magazine in 1881. From the beginning, Gilder served as editor-in-chief of the Century, and held the influential position until his death, November 19, 1909. Gilder was a poet in his own right, publishing In Palestine, and Other Poems (1898), Poems and Inscriptions (1901), and In the Heights (1905), among other works. Gilder’s books are available online at Google Books, along with The Poems of Richard Watson Gilder (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1908).
Gilder’s wife, Helena de Kay (1846-1916), was a painter and co-founder of the Society of American Artists, as well as an early model for Winslow Homer. Jeanette Leonard Gilder (1849-1916), Richard’s sister, worked as an editor for Scribner’s Monthly and was the New York correspondent for The Boston Evening Transcript, writing under the pen name “Brunswick.” In 1881, she co-founded The Critic, the literary magazine that published Vachel’s “The Queen of Bubbles.” Assistant editor for the Critic from 1903 to 1905, [Frederick] Ridgely Torrence (1874-1950) was a poet and a playwright, one of the first white Americans to create serious roles for black actors. As poetry editor of The New Republic (1920-33), he championed many of Vachel’s later poems. Fiction writer and playwright Zona Gale (1874-1938) was born in Portage, Wisconsin, where she created much of her work, although she made many trips to New York City. At an early age, Gale and Torrence were lovers who planned to marry, although Torrence ended the engagement, alleging infidelity. Zona Gale’s adaptation of her novel, Miss Lula Bett, was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1921.

Finally, The Critic, Volume 44 (March 1904) is available online at Google Books. Vachel’s poem “The Queen of Bubbles,” without the drawing of the bubbles and the girl (see Poetry 38-39), is on page 212. The brief biography Vachel refers to precedes on page 211: “It is not often that both the arts of line and that of verse are possessed by one personality. Rossetti is about the only figure of this kind in English literature. Mr. Nicholas Vachel Lindsay is a young man from the west who has lately come to New York, and who is striving for laurels in both fields. I reproduce one of his designs with the word-accompaniment, or rather one of his poems illustrated with his design. Speaking for the words I wish to call attention to the fact that they are good poetry, and as for the drawing it is interesting at least.”

[Note 10] The reference to Torrence and Gale and their everyday use of “imagination” suggests that Vachel was rereading Shelley’s A Defence of Poetry (1819), likely seeking support to defend his determination to live as a man of letters. One of Shelley’s better-known passages equates poetry and morality with imagination: “A man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and of many others; the pains and pleasure of his species must become his own. The great instrument of moral good is the imagination; and poetry administers to the effect by acting upon the cause. Poetry enlarges the circumference of the imagination by replenishing it with thoughts of ever new delight, which have the power of attracting and assimilating to their own nature all other thoughts, and which form new intervals and interstices whose void forever craves fresh food. Poetry strengthens the faculty which is the organ of the moral nature of man, in the same manner as exercise strengthens a limb.” Although he is unaware at this time, Vachel will turn to Shelley’s essay again in just a few weeks, in the aftermath of Springfield’s infamous 1908 race riot.

[Note 11] Vachel’s November 6, 1908, letter to Gilder (Chénetier pp. 28-31) is in obvious response to queries concerning the Springfield race riot, although Gilder’s letter seems not to have survived. Vachel’s answer manifests important insights concerning Abraham Lincoln and African-Americans, and we will return to it in the next chapter. Vachel received at least two additional letters from Gilder, one that acknowledges the November 6 communication. See selected excerpts in Letters of Richard Watson Gilder, ed. Rosamond Gilder (Boston & New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1916), pp. 433-434, 485 (available online at Google Books).

Sources for my account of the Springfield 1908 race riot include contemporary reports in Springfield’s Illinois State Register and Illinois State Journal newspapers; Roberta Senechal, Carole Merritt, and James Krohe, Jr. (see “Works Cited and Resources”); James L. Crouthamel,

http://socyberty.com/history/springfield-illinois-riot-of-1908/

Additionally, the *New York Times* published a very detailed account of the riot and the aftermath (August 17, 1908), pp. 1-2, available online at: http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive-free/pdf?res=F50614F6395A17738DDDAC0994D0405B888CF1D3

[Note 12] Mabel Hallam’s false identification of George Richardson (1875-1948) is especially ironic, as Richardson was the grandson of Abraham Lincoln’s friend (and pallbearer) William Florville, “Billy the Barber.” When Mabel’s misidentification was discovered (September 2), Richardson was in the McLean County jail in Bloomington-Normal. He returned to Springfield, with no recorded apologies and no compensation, and finally retired from a janitorial position at Illinois Bell Telephone Company. See Pete Sherman, “The Accused: George Richardson,” *Illinois State Journal-Register* (May 31, 2008), available online (with a picture of Richardson):

http://www.sj-r.com/raceriot/x1798683271/The-Accused-George-Richardson

For further detail, see “Illinois Mobs Kill and Burn,” *New York Times* (August 15, 1908), available online:


There is some confusion as to just where Loper had driven the prisoners; but the *Illinois State Journal* (September 2, 1908, pp. 1-2) published an account from Loper himself. His destination was Williamsville, and he claimed that Richardson professed his innocence all the way from Springfield to Williamsville, insisting that he had spent the night at home with his wife.

We may remember that, in 1905, Vachel described the dining room of his West 56th Street boarding house (New York City) as “half as big as Loper’s Restaurant” (which was, at the time, Springfield’s largest restaurant—see Chapter 15, p. 6.)

[Note 13] Vachel may have been very close to the rioters. On August 14, 1908, while Loper’s restaurant was being ravaged, Prohibitionist Party Presidential candidate, Eugene W. Chafin, was attempting to hold a political rally on the opposite or east side of the Old State Capitol square. An avid “dry,” and soon to be a lecturer for the Anti-Saloon League, Uncle Boy could well have been a member of the audience, even though Chafin, like Republican candidate (and eventual winner) William Howard Taft, was running against Democrat William Jennings “Heaven-born Bryan.” During Chafin’s speech, a terrified black man who was being chased by angry whites jumped onto the platform. Pretending he had a pistol in his pocket, Chafin threatened to shoot anybody else who tried to climb on stage; and the black fugitive escaped into the night. The angry pursuers hurled bricks, one of which caught Chafin aside the head, and thus the rally came to an abrupt end.

In discussing the riot with Englishman Stephen Graham some fourteen years later, Vachel suggested an interesting way of halting such civic chaos: “I believe the only way to stop lynching would be to break into a lynching crowd and make them either lynch you instead of the Negro or lynch you for interfering. When they realized what they had done their hearts would be touched, their consciences would be shocked . . . . It is expedient that one man should die for the people once more.” Although we have no proof, the proposal may well reflect the courage manifested by Eugene Chafin. For the full discussion of the riot, including Vachel’s belief that it was “unholy” and “a terrible disgrace,” see *Tramping with a Poet in the Rockies*, pp. 205-211.
Polk’s Springfield City Directory (1902) lists “Wm K H Donnegan,” identified as “c” (colored), a “shoemkr” living at 118 W. Edwards. Newspapers and other sources spell the surname “Donnigan” or “Donegan” or “Donnegan,” at times different spellings in the same article. Similarly, reports of Donnegan’s age vary from the mid-80s to the mid-70s, although all sources agree that Mr. Donnegan was very old and nearly blind. He is buried at Springfield’s Oak Ridge Cemetery, the same cemetery as Abraham Lincoln.

The late Clarissa Hagler Jorgensen (1903-1985), daughter of Dr. Elmer Ellsworth Hagler, often told the story of her father’s unsuccessful attempt to save the life of William Donnegan. Mrs. Jorgensen’s memories of Vachel have been recorded as part of the University of Illinois-Springfield’s oral history project: www.uis.edu/archives/memoirs/JORGENSEN.pdf


Vachel’s race riot lectures did not originate entirely as a result of the riot itself. In a letter to “Dear Papa and Mama,” written from New York City on April 16, 1908, the Lindsay son reported that “Powlison [the religious director of New York’s West Side YMCA] wants me next winter to give a course on the Comparative races that have made and are making New York. If I study this out I will get as much of the People as mortal ever gets. I may study the course out in social settlements, or taking trips in the steerage, or preaching at a slum church, or all of these. I have consulted Dr. [Robert] McKenzie, Pastor of Rutgers [Presbyterian Church], where I preached, and he may get me a place with the Church of the Sea and Land, which has every nation under heaven in it” (Virginia, also see Chapter 19, note 16).

The historic Church of the Sea and Land (originally named the Northeast Dutch Reformed Church) was located at 61 Henry and Market Streets on Manhattan’s lower East side. The Georgian Gothic Revival edifice was the second oldest church building in New York City. In Uncle Boy’s day the church catered especially to sailors of all nationalities, and could therefore serve as an interesting “study hall” for someone planning to lecture on the different races.

We need to remember also the nationalistic structure of “Litany of the Heroes” (a.k.a. “The Heroes of Time” and “God Help Us to Be Brave”) and the influence of Kate Lindsay’s colloquies, particularly the colloquy of the nations (see Poetry 946-947). Unfortunately, Springfield provided the tragic circumstances for Vachel’s race lectures, and New York’s West Side YMCA was forced to seek another teacher for the fall, 1908.
The Tree of Laughing Bells
(one of several versions)

Once on display at the Vachel Lindsay Home State Historic Site, the original of this “Tree” is currently collected in the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, Springfield, Illinois. The picture is dated “June 15, 1908,” and is likely the version once on display at Coe Brothers’ store (see above, p. 27).
Once on display at the Vachel Lindsay Home State Historic Site, the original of this “Lucifer” is currently collected in the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, Springfield, Illinois. This version, dated “1908,” almost certainly is the work once on display at Coe Brothers’ store (see above, p. 27).
Once on display at the Vachel Lindsay Home State Historic Site, the original of this explanation of “Lucifer” is currently collected in the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, Springfield, Illinois. This poster, dated “1908,” accompanied the above “Lucifer” and almost certainly is the work once on display at Coe Brothers’ store (see above, p. 27).