

Death Comes for the Archbishop

by Willa Cather

Book 9, Chapter 3

The next morning Father Latour awakened with a grateful sense of nearness to his Cathedral—which would also be his tomb. He felt safe under its shadow; like a boat come back to harbor, lying under its own sea-wall. He was in his old study; the Sisters had sent a little iron bed from the school for him, and their finest linen and blankets. He felt a great content at being here, where he had come as a young man and where he had done his work. The room was little changed; the same rugs and skins on the earth floor, the same desk with his candlesticks, the same thick wavy white walls that muted sound, that shut out the world and gave repose to the spirit.

As the darkness faded into the grey of a winter morning, he listened for the church bells—and for another sound, that always amused him here; the whistle of a locomotive. Yes, he had come with the buffalo, and he had lived to see railway trains running into Santa Fe. He had accomplished an historic period.

All his relatives at home, and his friends in New Mexico, had expected that the old Archbishop would spend his closing years in France, probably in Clermont, where he could occupy a chair in his old college. That seemed the natural thing to do, and he had given it grave consideration. He had half expected to make some such arrangement the last time he was in Auvergne, just before his retirement from his duties as Archbishop. But in the Old World he found himself homesick for the the New. It was a feeling he could not explain; a feeling that old age did not weigh so heavily upon a man in New Mexico as in the Puy de Dome.

He loved the towering peaks of his native mountains, the comeliness of the villages, the cleanness of the county-side, the beautiful lines and the cloisters of his own college. Clermont was beautiful—but he found himself sad there; his heart lay like a stone in his breast. There was too much past, perhaps.....When the summer wind stirred lilacs in the old gardens, and shook down the blossoms of the horse-chestnuts, he sometimes closed his eyes and thought of the high song the wind was singing in the straight, striped pine trees in the Navaho forests.

During the day his nostalgia wore off, and by dinner time it was quite gone. He enjoyed his dinner and his wine, and the company of cultivated men, and usually retired in good spirits. It was in the early morning that he felt the ache in his breast; it had something to do with waking in the early morning. It seemed to him that the grey dawn lasted so long here, the country was a long while in coming to life. The gardens and the fields were damp, heavy mists hung in the valley and obscured the mountains; hours went by before the sun could disperse those vapours and warm and purify the villages.

In New Mexico he always woke a young man; not until he rose and began to shave did he realize that he was growing older. His first consciousness was a sense of the light dry wind blowing through the windows, with fragrance of hot sun and sage-brush and sweet clover; a wind that made one's body feel light and one's heart cry "To-day, to-day," like a child's.

Beautiful surroundings, the society of learned men, the charm of noble women, the graces of art, could not make up to him for the loss of those light-hearted mornings of the desert, for that wind that made one a boy again. He had noticed that this peculiar quality in the air of new countries vanished after they were tamed by man and made to bear harvests. Parts of Texas and Kansas that he had first known as open range had since been made into rich farming districts, and the air had quite lost that lightness, that dry aromatic odour. The moisture of ploughed land, the heaviness of labour and growth of grain-bearing utterly destroyed it; one could breathe that only on the bright edges of the world, on the great grass plains or the sage-brush desert.

That air would disappear from the whole earth in time, perhaps; but long after his day. He did not know just when it had become so necessary to him, but he had come back to die in exile for the sake of it. Something soft and wild and free, something that whispered to the ear on the pillow, lightened the heart, softly, softly picked the lock, slid the bolts, and released the prisoned spirit of man into the morning—into the morning!