

*Robert Frost (1874–1963). North of Boston. 1915.*

## 12. The Generations of Men

A GOVERNOR it was proclaimed this time,  
When all who would come seeking in New Hampshire  
Ancestral memories might come together.  
And those of the name Stark gathered in Bow,  
A rock-strewn town where farming has fallen off, 5  
And sprout-lands flourish where the axe has gone.  
Someone had literally run to earth  
In an old cellar hole in a by-road  
The origin of all the family there.  
Thence they were sprung, so numerous a tribe 10  
That now not all the houses left in town  
Made shift to shelter them without the help  
Of here and there a tent in grove and orchard.  
They were at Bow, but that was not enough.  
Nothing would do but they must fix a day 15  
To stand together on the crater's verge  
That turned them on the world, and try to fathom  
The past and get some strangeness out of it.  
But rain spoiled all. The day began uncertain,  
With clouds low trailing and moments of rain that misted. 20  
The young folk held some hope out to each other  
Till well toward noon when the storm settled down  
With a swish in the grass. “What if the others

Are there," they said. "It isn't going to rain."

Only one from a farm not far away 25

Strolled thither, not expecting he would find

Anyone else, but out of idleness.

One, and one other, yes, for there were two.

The second round the curving hillside road

Was a girl; and she halted some way off 30

To reconnoitre, and then made up her mind

At least to pass by and see who he was,

And perhaps hear some word about the weather.

This was some Stark she didn't know. He nodded.

"No fête to-day," he said. 35

"It looks that way."

She swept the heavens, turning on her heel.

"I only idled down."

"I idled down."

Provision there had been for just such meeting 40

Of stranger cousins, in a family tree

Drawn on a sort of passport with the branch

Of the one bearing it done in detail—

Some zealous one's laborious device.

She made a sudden movement toward her bodice, 45

As one who clasps her heart. They laughed together.

"Stark?" he inquired. "No matter for the proof."

"Yes, Stark. And you?"

"I'm Stark." He drew his passport.

"You know we might not be and still be cousins. 50

The town is full of Chases, Lowes, and Baileys,

All claiming some priority in Starkness.

My mother was a Lane, yet might have married

Anyone upon earth and still her children

Would have been Starks, and doubtless here to-day." 55

"You riddle with your genealogy

Like a Viola. I don't follow you."

"I only mean my mother was a Stark

Several times over, and by marrying father

No more than brought us back into the name." 60

"One ought not to be thrown into confusion

By a plain statement of relationship,

But I own what you say makes my head spin.

You take my card—you seem so good at such things—

And see if you can reckon our cousinship. 65

Why not take seats here on the cellar wall

And dangle feet among the raspberry vines?"

"Under the shelter of the family tree."

"Just so—that ought to be enough protection."

"Not from the rain. I think it's going to rain."

70

"It's raining."

"No, it's misting; let's be fair.

Does the rain seem to you to cool the eyes?"

The situation was like this: the road  
Bowed outward on the mountain half-way up.              75  
And disappeared and ended not far off.  
No one went home that way. The only house  
Beyond where they were was a shattered seedpod.  
And below roared a brook hidden in trees,  
The sound of which was silence for the place.              80  
This he sat listening to till she gave judgment.

"On father's side, it seems, we're—let me see——"

"Don't be too technical.—You have three cards."  
"Four cards, one yours, three mine, one for each branch  
Of the Stark family I'm a member of."              85

"D'you know a person so related to herself  
Is supposed to be mad."

“I may be mad.”

“You look so, sitting out here in the rain

Studying genealogy with me 90

You never saw before. What will we come to  
With all this pride of ancestry, we Yankees?

I think we’re all mad. Tell me why we’re here

Drawn into town about this cellar hole

Like wild geese on a lake before a storm? 95

What do we see in such a hole, I wonder.”

“The Indians had a myth of Chicamoztoc,  
Which means The Seven Caves that We Came out of.  
This is the pit from which we Starks were digged.”

“You must be learned. That’s what you see in it?” 100

“And what do you see?”

“Yes, what do I see?

First let me look. I see raspberry vines——”

“Oh, if you’re going to use your eyes, just hear

What I see. It’s a little, little boy. 105

As pale and dim as a match flame in the sun;

He’s groping in the cellar after jam,

He thinks it’s dark and it’s flooded with daylight.”

110

"He's nothing. Listen. When I lean like this  
I can make out old Grandsir Stark distinctly,—  
With his pipe in his mouth and his brown jug—  
Bless you, it isn't Grandsir Stark, it's Granny,  
But the pipe's there and smoking and the jug.  
She's after cider, the old girl, she's thirsty;  
Here's hoping she gets her drink and gets out safely."

"Tell me about her. Does she look like me?"

"She should, shouldn't she, you're so many times  
Over descended from her. I believe  
She does look like you. Stay the way you are.  
The nose is just the same, and so's the chin—  
Making allowance, making due allowance."

"You poor, dear, great, great, great, great Granny!"

"See that you get her greatness right. Don't stint her."

"Yes, it's important, though you think it isn't.  
I won't be teased. But see how wet I am."

"Yes, you must go; we can't stay here for ever.  
But wait until I give you a hand up.  
A bead of silver water more or less  
Strung on your hair won't hurt your summer looks.

I wanted to try something with the noise      130

That the brook raises in the empty valley.

We have seen visions—now consult the voices.

Something I must have learned riding in trains

When I was young. I used the roar

To set the voices speaking out of it,      135

Speaking or singing, and the band-music playing.

Perhaps you have the art of what I mean.

I've never listened in among the sounds

That a brook makes in such a wild descent.

It ought to give a purer oracle."      140

"It's as you throw a picture on a screen.

The meaning of it all is out of you;

The voices give you what you wish to hear."

"Strangely, it's anything they wish to give."

"Then I don't know. It must be strange enough.      145

I wonder if it's not your make-believe.

What do you think you're like to hear to-day?"

"From the sense of our having been together—

But why take time for what I'm like to hear?

I'll tell you what the voices really say.      150

You will do very well right where you are

A little longer. I mustn't feel too hurried,

Or I can't give myself to hear the voices."

"Is this some trance you are withdrawing into?"

"You must be very still; you mustn't talk."

155

"I'll hardly breathe."

"The voices seem to say——"

"I'm waiting."

"Don't! The voices seem to say,

Call her Nausicaa, the unafraid

160

Of an acquaintance made adventurously."

"I let you say that—on consideration."

"I don't see very well how you can help it.

You want the truth. I speak but by the voices.

You see they know I haven't had your name,

165

Though what a name should matter between us——"

"I shall suspect——"

"Be good. The voices say,

Call her Nausicaa, and take a timber

That you shall find lies in the cellar charred

170

Among the raspberries, and hew and shape it

For a door-sill or other corner piece

In a new cottage on the ancient spot.

The life is not yet all gone out of it.

And come and make your summer dwelling here. 175

And perhaps she will come, still unafraid,

And sit before you in the open door

With flowers in her lap until they fade,

But not come in across the sacred sill——”

“I wonder where your oracle is tending. 180

You can see that there’s something wrong with it,

Or it would speak in dialect. Whose voice

Does it purport to speak in? Not old Grandsir’s

Nor Granny’s, surely. Call up one of them.

They have best right to be heard in this place.” 185

“You seem so partial to our great-grandmother

(Nine times removed. Correct me if I err.)

You will be likely to regard as sacred

Anything she may say. But let me warn you,

Folks in her day were given to plain speaking. 190

You think you’d best tempt her at such a time?”

“It rests with us always to cut her off.”

“Well then, it’s Granny speaking. ‘I dunnow!

Mebbe I’m wrong to take it as I do.

There ain’t no names quite like the old ones though. 195

Nor never will be to my way of thinking.

One mustn't bear too hard on the new comers,  
But there's a dite too many of them for comfort.

I should feel easier if I could see  
More of the salt wherewith they're to be salted. 200

Son, you do as you're told! You take the timber—  
It's as sound as the day when it was cut—

And begin over——' There, she'd better stop.  
You can see what is troubling Granny, though.

But don't you think we sometimes make too much 205  
Of the old stock? What counts is the ideals,  
And those will bear some keeping still about."

"I can see we are going to be good friends."

"I like your 'going to be.' You said just now

It's going to rain." 210

"I know, and it was raining.

I let you say all that. But I must go now."

"You let me say it? on consideration?

How shall we say good-bye in such a case?"

"How shall we?" 215

"Will you leave the way to me?"

"No, I don't trust your eyes. You've said enough.

Now give me your hand up.—Pick me that flower."

"Where shall we meet again?"

"Nowhere but here                  220

Once more before we meet elsewhere."

"In rain?"

"It ought to be in rain. Sometime in rain.

In rain to-morrow, shall we, if it rains?

But if we must, in sunshine." So she went.                  225