THE NOVEL

BY NORMAN M. KLEIN

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THE NOVEL
James Montgomery Flagg, “A Map of the World as seen by Him,” in: Life, 1905
INTRODUCTION
On January 2, 1900, ten philosophers gathered in New York to make a collective decision about the century to come. They were led by the celebrated misanthrope, D.L. Oncken, who restated his theory about evil foreboding. He had already condemned the moving pictures and new architecture. Nevertheless, the group decided to put a bright spot on their joint statement. Everyone chipped in his two cents. Relentless and petty nuances inevitably followed, until each argument was destroyed. After three long days, fifty pages were reduced to one sentence: “The future can only be told in reverse.”

These surviving eight words became famous. Mark Twain called it the Arabian Nights in Reverse, and dedicated his autobiography to it. The sentence was reprinted hundreds of times, even carved on a tombstone at Saint Paul’s Cathedral. Then it became an aphorism in early science fiction, about utopias crashing into the present; and found its way into presidential addresses.

“The future in reverse” is quoted at great length in a famous archive from the period. The archive was first assembled by Harry Brown – a man who devoted most of his life to erasing crimes that were embarrassing to the oligarchs of Los Angeles. Harry was a kind of lock-box. His clients assumed that he could bury anything – as his legal guarantee, ipse dixit.

That promise was challenged in 1908, when Harry’s niece shot a man in New York. Other scandals followed, inspiring him to begin an archive about Carrie in 1917. It was also Harry’s way of visiting his niece by proxy – even if she wasn’t there (which was often). Being very modern, Harry liked to build efficiencies. People, like information or electricity, should be at his convenience.

The archive operated literally by machine. Gears on tracks pushed along cards in metal sleeves. Thousands of documents could be rolled backwards, forward and sideways. The device was built at a shipyard. It steered mostly in two directions: first as a novel of seduction; and second as a codex for espionage.

Harry’s earliest documents – pamphlets, beggar books, prison tracts – dated from the Elizabethan period. They were among papers on the figure of the rogue, and the confidence arts, left to him by his family.

Arriving from Wales in 1740, the Angewynnes first made their way along “the featheredge,” in what is today western Ohio. During the French and Indian Wars, they made a dirty fortune as horse traders. They often sold the same livestock to both armies. They
were dazzling, but knew how to keep their heads low. They turned horse flesh into usury.

This eminence was short-lived. Clearly, the first generation had been geniuses. But their offspring were fatter and a trifle stupid. The children, as if in a daze, continued to speak French, with a snooty, poncy accent. They were deeply misunderstood after the Peace. One night in 1764, the entire family had to run for its life, young and old, barefooted into the forest. They were forced to transplant beyond the thirteen colonies.

This became a chronic problem. On the male line, every second generation would suffer from a business impulse disorder (BID). The heirs would be drawn toward financial self-destruction. Luckily, back in the wild, the next generation lived on bacteria-free water and wild trout. Their criminal genius returned.

By 1783, just as the American Revolution ended, younger Angewynnes arrived flush with money. A year later, they were on record as “well settled,” with holdings in New York. In 1795, they owned country seats in four states.

To Angewynnes, America’s trackless frontier meant chaos waiting to be skinned. Whenever the frontier brought tumult – when a lawless void suggested money to be made – an Angewynne was always there sharpening his teeth. For example, during the 1790s, a cadet wing of the family – named Telfft – made their fortune through loans to the new republic.

Then failure returned: Between 1822 and 1826, Augustus Angewynnne gambled and lost every nickel the family had, and more besides. Gus the Wind, as he was called, was a blizzard of hopeless ideas, including two legal wives at the same time, both as ruthless and spoiled as he was. His descendants led to Carrie. It was a family clearly burdened by shrunken opportunities.

“As a child,” Carrie wrote, “my family was like berbers, always pulling up stakes.” Her father moved continuously, ever on the prowl, from northern Alabama to Kansas. Carrie’s mother Lynn (Madeleine or Adeline) was gone, forced to leave. She had offended the male elders on the Telfft side. But to be honest, her shunning confuses us. What possible misdeed had Angewynnes not already committed? In 1884, Lynn was remanded by the elders, and ordered to leave. They gave her a ticket to travel south, soon after Carrie was born. She cheerfully agreed to abandon her baby to the family.

That same week, Carrie’s uncle Harrison was also unfairly punished: we think because he stood up for his sister. He was packed
off to Chicago, then five years later, slipped the leash, and headed to California.

Christened Harrison Telfft Angewynne (in honor of the presidents Harrison, who were distant relatives), he changed his name to Harry Brown. This was because of laws passed after the Civil War that had made parts of the family business illegal. A brotherhood of rogues more than gangsters, the Angewynnes had social bandit myths surrounding them. When every hamlet was cut off from the outside world, this outlaw image gave them power. But in an age of telegraphs and photos, false surnames had to be added, or invented. It became a family joke to sign papers as “harrybrown.” All this anonymity suited the oligarchs in southern California, who – beginning in 1898 – found Harry’s innate skills useful.

PAPA GUS
Carrie’s father was another case altogether. Papa Gus, as Carrie called him, suffered from over-confidence. A fortune teller once told him that he was born for greatness. Facts to the contrary, he remained convinced. Gus acquired only fragments of the arcane knowledge passed down to smarter Telffts and Angewynnes.

Meanwhile, with each year after 1885, the American chaos grew larger – and therefore more organized – more than even a clever financier could understand, except perhaps J.P. Morgan. In 1884, the stock market went into panic again, saved by Morgan – according to Papa Gus. Out of gratitude, Morgan placed a Telfft, named Charles Barney, on the path to success in New York banking.

Thus in 1890, Gus, brimming with confidence more than inspiration, decided to impress the Morgan clique. He arrived in New York dressed like a genius from out west; with a cowboy drawl and fake Rocky Mountain stories. But in no time, he realized that his impersonations worked much better in the prairie states. To Papa Gus, as he came to understand the world, a plutocracy of giant corporations was entangling him, slowing him down, like that Greek statue of a man being overwhelmed by snakes.

For young Carrie, businessmen were fragile people. They moved like caterpillars trying to avoid city traffic. Like her father, they tended to behave stupidly, as far as she could tell. That was natural. The bigger the problems, the less they noticed. Of course, none of them would seriously ask a ten-year-old child what she thinks.
In 1901, Carrie invited four men to seduce her, each with a version of the coming century. At least that is how the legend comes down to us.

We meet Carrie in 1893, as a girl of sixteen, clearly expected to look older than her age. Her features were still childlike, soft.

She was seen only in the company of her father. From the age of twelve, she traveled with him constantly, either out of mistaken gratitude, or as his shill. In court, Gus was called a jackleg, a defrauder, and a bunghole. Together, he and Carrie visited the great Columbian Exposition, in Chicago. Not for the first time, Gus was secretly failing in business. “I am drowning in stages,” he admitted.

Throughout July, Gus waited nervously for what proved to be a shipment of embalmed meat. In the meantime, he was bilking a very creditable man about a dubious pharmacy. “Caveat emptor,” Gus would say. “And suum cuique, to each his own.” The man was even shaped like a roll of cash, Carrie observed, like a bald, fat tube. And yet, Gus proved too slow for him. Gus could be a real chump. He invested in a dairy farm that sold butter mixed with a type of axle grease.

He usually needed Carrie’s good looks to close a deal. Today, Gus had three good old boys on the hook. Carrie’s glow would be the final touch. While Gus drew them out, she would gently look on. Carrie had to pose in the sun, like a young flower with a narrow stem – even through a boiling heat wave.

Then, bad luck took over. Gus’s string was running out. On the Midway Plaisance, he couldn’t fail to notice a tall deputy, with a military demeanor. The man was from back east, had purchased Gus’s debt; and was steadily tracking him down. Gus had to summon up his inner reserve, or wind up in court again. Surprisingly, he showed a rare spark of genius. In less than an hour, he bilked two investors for $350. But that would never be enough.

The next day, as if in a trance, Gus spent every dollar, and more – mostly to buy Carrie a startling warm-weather dress.

He had decided to put Carrie on the auction block, possibly not for the first time. They squabbled for a few days. Eventually, Gus arranged for Carrie to be squired through the Fair by the handsome, but somewhat overweight – older – son of a wealthy Chicago family. By now, Carrie understood what everyone expected of her – to be luminous and obedient, despite her gloomy moods.

Month by month, as womanhood approached, Carrie noticed an improvement in her exchange value. Those gloomy spells were now adding something to her face. At ten years old, her depressed
hazel and blue eyes evoked a guilt. Now her sadness was a fugue; it made her even more seductive. It commanded men.

An old admirer remembers her at sixteen: “She stands at the foot of a stairway. Her face suggests a fear of strangers. She clutches her skirt in one hand. The gaslight catches her glancing backward, as if she were about to slip.” Carrie had won his heart instantly. She appeared quite unaware of her affect. She always had a way of forcing men to catch her before she collapsed.

At the Fair, Carrie was impressed most of all by the Hall of Machinery. It looked like a massive train station wrapped inside an Italian palace, at the water’s edge. She often remembered the roar and length of that endless room, at whose center stood a mechanized Egyptian temple with symbols of electricity in relief.

She called it an “ancient relic left by a vanished race.” She compared it to the engine room of a ship, like those along the Chicago harbor that were transforming the river week by week. You may have seen the photo of her leaning against the rail at the Fair, as if she were watching ships working cargo.

Then the archive skips about two years: unseemly details apparently edited out. We think that Carrie and Papa Gus came to one of their embarrassing arrangements. In 1895, still strangely obedient to her father’s wishes, Carrie married a few weeks after her eighteenth birthday. The husband was a Ted, or a Thaddeus, the second wealthy Thaddeus in his family.

As an added confusion, her husband was already a man of thirty-three, with strange sexual habits. It seemed to Carrie that he went after any woman within arm’s reach, except Carrie, which remains a mystery. Very soon, Ted grew fat, even by the standards of men in his family.

Next (after more perplexing gaps in the archive, suggesting additional embarrassments), we meet Carrie at twenty-two, in 1899. She was divorced honorably, after a great scandal. Of course, the strangest part of the scandal was how long it took for her to notice. Carrie had remained submerged. She was almost agoraphobic, afraid to leave the house. Trying to second-guess Ted’s sexual behavior became Carrie’s major initiation into the new age. She gathered books by moral crusaders, to help her visualize the Chicago tenderloin. A diligent reader, she learned about sinkholes, remembering them as places that she had visited with her father. She underlined a page about the slowly dying inmates of a Dearborn Street brothel.
At first, Ted lived high among respectable whores. He preferred to be a degenerate on the fashionable side, a “heavy hitter” in the Levee. He generally avoided Little Cheyenne and Hell’s Half Acre. As his interests widened, however, Ted drifted to the “segregated district,” where black and Chinese businesses handled more extreme requests.

However, even though his taste in sex grew riskier, this was hardly the reason why his scandals – which had been mostly hidden and officially protected for five years – suddenly became big news in 1898. Headlines were everywhere you looked. More likely Ted was the victim of a grudge – a so-called friend who had it in for him (perhaps Carrie herself. I guess that is what I wish for her.).

Once the scandal broke, a Belgian nurse escorted Carrie to places where Ted had gone. After speaking with the trollops that knew him, Carrie became enraged. She contacted the press. Two journalists were assigned to her story. They took notes as a constable walked her past various sinkholes. Chicago featured thousands of saloons, along with legalized, easily available opium compounds in patent medicines. According to the papers (who were now running a column on him every day), Ted purchased opium mixtures at “blind-pig” fronts. He was even illustrated in Judge reclining with an opium pipe.

Oddly enough, the opium story turned to be a lie. Opium was practically the only sin that Ted hadn’t committed. The newspapers also claimed that he had developed a relationship with a “strong arm woman,” but Carrie knew that no one was less likely to trust a strong woman than Ted.

Carrie spent almost two years unable to respond to Ted’s growing dementia. Indeed, what was sex like with a very experienced man who was increasingly mentally ill? And what’s more, a stylish man, a man of leisure?

At first, Carrie ignored the symptoms. That lasted about four months. Ted remained endlessly well spoken. Then his speeches turned into scientific rants. He asked her to forgive him, which she refused.

Finally, he demanded that she sit almost naked for half the day, exposed like a piece of pottery – mostly listening. Ted would lecture at her for hours, misquoting one natural scientist after another. Or so she found out later: Ted was not only base and gluttonous, but also ignorant.
He barely took a breath between words. She was forced to agree with him that biologically speaking, no matter how lovable the woman’s body, it was engineered by evolution to seek revenge against men. To prove his theories, Ted became something of a gruesome zoologist. He once claimed, while bubbling away on the toilet, that lobsters begin sex by urinating into each other’s eyes. Before he could test his theory, she said no.

Finally in April, the turning point came right after a rain froze the branches overnight. She remembered the ice around the buds looking like stemware. On that day, Ted’s condition grew measurably worse. By now, his nighthawk ways left him almost sleepless, like a bear caught in the attic. He kept the lights going until dawn, waking her up to argue.

That was when the very worst of it began. We don’t know precisely how ugly; only that the judge was very understanding, according to the court record. There had even been fist fights between Ted and Carrie’s nurse, a stout Belgian girl named Euphrosina; which strengthened Carrie suit. Like so much of Carrie’s biography, details of the last months of the marriage were later erased.

After the divorce, Carrie devoted weeks to evaluating her situation. She compared her in-laws to “leaf-nosed bats feeding on horses at night.” As part of the deal, Ted’s family offered to bribe her with a comfortable settlement on one condition: that Carrie stay out of Chicago from now on. Her return would only bring the scandal mongers and newspapers all over again. Ted’s family investments, both moral and financial, could not survive that.

Thus, Carrie was provided enough money to travel, but not in luxury, only with a cheaper woman; and a well-tailored wardrobe. Then as an added bonus, a month after her divorce, Papa Gus disappeared, like a bad loan. Truly and measurably no great loss, she used to say. At least, he left me $75 in folding money.

One sweaty evening in the summer of 1899, Carrie pulled out letter paper and drew up a balance sheet. “I am twenty-two years old,” she wrote. “But I am already divorced without any scandal on my side. I was the victim. It says so in every newspaper. I don’t have to protect my reputation. Better still, I have my own money.”

But the world outside – for men of business – had not changed. This would require strategy. “Men are gathering like pigeons on top of Marshall Fields’ Great Clock. I can see their eyes follow me. So here I am, still in the blush of life. There is certainly no reason to go into harness again, not for a long time.”
Obviously, “the best way out” had occurred to her: she was now, by sheer luck, possibly the freest woman in America. But what to do with this freedom? She had a great hunger for travel, to reverse the Arabian Nights. This time, let Scheherazade take control.

The gray slate of late autumn floated in from Lake Michigan, as Carrie prepared to enjoy a taste of Europe – as a solitary woman. In her mind’s eye, she saw the Hall of Machinery again, and the glow of Tesla’s electricity on the building, on that Egyptian column. She heard the layers of noise from business on the street. And the crowds growing on Dearborn.

She packed her traveling library, especially her pocket edition of Rémy de Gourmont’s *The Natural Philosophy of Love*. It corrected a detail that Ted had missed: Atlantic lobsters have almost invisible sex organs, hiding between their neck and thorax. So a smart woman looking for adventure on an ocean-going ship should avoid lobster, even on deck – avoid chatty rogues – and dress accordingly.

To live the dangerous life, to never be shocked again, she needed to improve her knowledge of philosophy. Once in Paris, she would visit Professor Henri Bergson’s lectures on personality, to gather theories about human nature, and to see who she could meet.

In her journal, we read about her last trip to the north of Chicago: “The horses bowl down a firm, hard road that skirts the park, then plays deeply into the forest. I see a thicket of bare tree trunks and brown copses. But even deep in the woods, a businessman pops up out of nowhere; and tips his hat. Enough of this Chicago frost.”

She returns to the old bones of the great house on Prairie Avenue. She packs her trunks, mumbles good riddance. The merchant swindlers are still hot on her trail. She allows another fumbling young man to see her off. He grabs her hand, her tan glove made of stretched dogskin. He kisses it; she shrugs, as if in a faint. He leans over to gather her. He tries to protect her against imaginary threats.

Her mind wanders. “The men of business in Chicago,” she writes, “are like a double parlor above the stairs, too much furniture and no style.”

The panic since 1893 had left Chicago in turmoil. The constant roar of the new elevated trains, and their floodgates emptied ever larger crowds into the center.

A window advertisement at the Dearborn station read: “The American woman of the fashionable set lives in a whirl of unhealthful stress and excitement. She sleeps too little, and keeps her nerves constantly on edge.”
Authors' biographies

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