

STANLEY BERNE

From

THE GREAT AMERICAN EMPIRE

Chapter 2

His death was real all right. The flow of blood ceased, the magic of the heart exhausted. All of it slowly promised year by year by organs sluggish, needing help, the legs moved more slowly, the eyes not focusing, the back weaker, the muscles after exertion taking longer to recover.

Now, absurdly he lay silent, a captive of time, the spring unwound, the organs' last redness and freshness, turned grey and ceased, and whispers now, of those still on this side, those too about to part, but for now, here, to mourn his passing.

In spite of all care, what had he left?

Those dreams of spirit of an earlier time when he was young, hope is abstracted from time, it exists as a smiling force of spirit, of adventure, of love, of semen that is built and stored and pressing and pressure that forces outward onto the world which is female, Nature all female, as the sky, open, the streets pass the bodies down through as canals, the trees spread their branches, the Bermuda grass emerges and runs outward joyously filling the level space touching runner to runner. All outward graces smile roundly, female and womblike, as the round earth that harbours and nurtures and feeds and succors, set as it is in a round universe dotted with planets that urge invisible forces upon one another, now that we have measures of those fingers, running toward and away from each other as do the runners of grass. The female of the earth as a waist of heat, an equator of division, of the head and bowels which when he crossed it, dove into the heat of the tropics, warm, moist, a womb of wet earth, the water of the Philippine gulfs and shores that lapped on the beach as he undressed and threw himself into the silver water to swim with the slim silver fish that the fishermen pulled into their boats.

And so outward, possessing tools, as a man, he had followed the unconscious urge to swim, to feed, to breathe air, to cohabit, to shoot forward and make an impression in Nature, to shoot outward from the loins, to embody all that the tools of the eyes saw.

From the Jersey shore, the New York skyline was there clear and silver. The buildings rose in erectile silver issue from the rock, the wall, albeit impenetrable, saw streets slowly running traffic, clear mornings when the sun was hot, clear air that came from the Western hills of New Jersey and freshened and cleaned, moving slowly then, it moved across the water to a city that female as it was a port, received the world at its lips, all the ships pointed to her bowel, all the load of merchandise from the old world we all admired, from whom our genius had its source, a love affair with Europe that ancient, slow, historical, clean, intellect, the Greek lips that told the Roman how to live and think and worship and value, told us, as Europe did, and we hungered for the Mother, the Mother, the female, the plant, the melons on a stalk, his hunger as young was

green, all the Nature of the city was long since swept away to make way for the history of a new giant spawned by Europe, and he was the son of that Goliath. Thoughtless, powerful, with arms and machines, with ships and machines, the nuts tightened on the bolt and the armature began to whirr as the water sluiced over the cement into the channel to turn the great fins on a wheel attached to the wires and core that had the tentacles and brushes absorbing the turn that crackled and ran through the veins, the blood of electricity that ran overhead immediately after processing into the thick rams of heavy coils and thence to the cable that ran up the steel tower to the journey of 800 miles to the city to run the motors and heart of an electrical giant machine whose large machines ran smaller and smaller machines until you felt the energy in your eyes, you breathed the movement, you took the vibrations in at your feet and it ran through your whole body and you ran faster and faster as the pace of the motor ran faster and you were part of the complex, of the machine, and the machine ran the city, the lights, the signs that flashed light and smoke, the cars, the oil, the black tar roads, the hydraulic hammer splitting rock, the buildings beginning to rise under the fingers of the few men on the job seated at their spectral cranes, lifting girders of steel that would make the cage, man-made steel, thin and lofty once in place, heavy and immovable once in place, warrens of cells and cell on cell all pointing inward, under roofs, Nature, as a tree swept away, the cement, stone, glass all became a part of him and less and less open, more of it closing in all the time, as a giant frenzy siezed the populace of the city from which he turned, to get air, got into the tube, rode on a train, he rode on a ferry over fresh water in fresh air to the cliffs of the Jersey shore and scrambled by hand and foot up the rocks, grabbing at trees and roots of trees, holding to clumps of green and dried grass between the rocks by foot and hand as the Indians climbed from their caves to the plateau above, bare toes like fingers set in narrow ledges until he reached the top of the Jersey cliffs and one more pull, he reached the summit from which Jersey went West straight out, and turning, standing upright, he looked now at the silver city, the sun at four o'clock striking a thousand windows, glinting like the facets of a city glints from a thousand eyes, and he raised a single warm blooded human fist and he threatened that city that he would destroy it, that he would either break into a window and stand triumphant, part of it, or he would destroy it by smashing it in his mind, obliterating it by going away, deny it and destroy it for its prison structure, take aim and retaliate in the name of Nature, seek revenge for every tree that now was a corpse, the tears beginning at the eyes, he hated it with all his soul, but he felt puny, defeated, outlawed, prevented, and he knew that his attack must come from far away as his soul resisted incorporation, and being 23 he did not yet know quite why.