

Eunice Conger Halls

SUFFER THE BLIND TO COME TO THE ATTIC

Often when the top half of the front Dutch door is open on a fine day, I remember again her coming into the Whitman Birthplace. The dog walked in first of the four of them. Her hand held his stiff leash, and her face was vacant of any emotion. I would have to see if I could cause Walt Whitman's Birthplace to make her face light up even to a luster in her blind eyes.

In any other home, guests would be welcomed into the parlor. But we must not walk upon the old rug without good reason. Her dog takes his cue and sits beside the iron guard rail. One eye fully open, he is watching me trying to be a seeing eye.

She makes me think of Kitty, the sober little child of Walt's friend. She stands stiffly beside Walt Whitman for a formal photograph. Perhaps I would have given Kitty the soldier doll to hold too. It is delicate.

First I give the blind woman a pewter whale oil lamp to feel. If her mind has lit it up, her face does not tell us so. Her friend she calls Joan smiles, and so does the baby Joan holds. All right. I will distract her with the soldier doll sitting on a child's bench by the fireplace, as if Walt put him there, then went away to Washington.

"Walt Whitman nursed soldiers in a hospital in Washington in the Civil War. This soldier doll in his uniform reminds me how he wrote soldiers' last letters home. Often his was the last human hand to touch a dying youth."

The blind woman's china face, like Kitty's, still masks inner thoughts. But as children want to undress dolls, she asks, "What is under this doll's uniform?"

"Those are the smallest brass buttons yet, but as you see, no buttonholes."

She cannot see. I correct myself. "Feel the back cross stitches on his wool jacket. It doesn't come off him. He can't be stripped of his uniform in this world or the next."

Her face has a glimmer of interest that for a moment illuminates her eyes that don't see.

I tell her friend she calls Joan that the low, banister-back chair with the lower rungs almost to the floor belonged to Walt Whitman's mother.

The blind woman's face shows timeless sadness as if caught in an artist's portrait for all time. I will not allow a poet's birthplace to leave her unaffected.

"Let's go across the hall to the kitchen so I can show you the wooden spoons. Each spoon was hand carved for its special task. This right-angled apple butter spoon scraped the last dollop from the crock." I hand it around, even to a pretty young woman who has come in with her man.

"And here we have, of sturdy wooden ancestry, a broad-backed butter-making spoon to press out whey." I hand it to her to feel. "The handle is well polished by use and the butter fat."

The butter-making spoon shakes her hand across the years. "I feel a tiny crack," she says. She is almost pleased, but adds, "Too bad, after all those years."

I had never noticed the crack. Her insight is better than my sight.

I show her the redwood cabbage grater. I twine my fingers into the heart shape on its top.

"Louisa Whitman, a Van Velsor descended from Long Island's early Dutch, would have loved this heart." The cabbage grater blade, time-dulled, would be safe for her fingers to intuit unseen worlds. Now our kitchen's guests today know this special heart.

She smiles!

Sensing something in front of her, she reaches over the iron railing and fingers the dough-raising table top. "What is this for?"

"The table top lifts up. Inside, the rising bread dough keeps warm and out of drafts. Otherwise, it's lumpy. Louisa Whitman must have stood here one hundred sixty years ago kneading bread and looking out the kitchen window."

From this summer's day, our guests imagine Louisa Whitman standing by the window at her dough-raising table, kneading bread. "She waves a floury hand as a buggy passes, cutting through the friendly Whitman meadowland and between Old South Path and the Whitman Road."

"May we go upstairs?" Joan asks me.

The guide dog starts up first.

"Watch for the next to the last step. It's wider. Then the last riser is not as high and you are upstairs. Walt Whitman's father Walter Whitman built this house. He was a good carpenter and joiner. He wanted all three of his stairways that way."

Now she stands before Walt Whitman's schoolmaster's desk and feels the top; she tries to find out if it too lifts up. It does.

"We keep rejected poems from our *West Hills Review* in there. I don't know if Walt, being a poet, would like that."

She is amused.

Then I think of the corbel chimney! Do I dare take her up there? Of the few visitors whom I've shown this chimney, only one, English, had ever seen another attic chimney standing on two slanting legs.

"Let's go. She can make it," Joan assures me, and her three-month-old baby Michael smiles.

The pretty woman visitor has watched the sensing out of household objects like Walt knew. With her is a man whose hollow cheeks remind me of a Daumier print. They go up the attic stairs with all the rest of us, and the dog.

We all stand back to watch the blind woman feel the inward, sloping, merging of two brick chimney flues making one corbel chimney rising through the split cedar shingled roof.

She fingers both chimney flues, then places one hand on each of them. "Is one wider than the other?"

"In the birth and death room downstairs, the fireplace is smaller. The wider chimney flue comes from the fireplace in the parlor," I explain to them.

Suspended here in attic space, half a brick by half a brick, moving toward the keystone, at length bricks no longer stand above the bottom row.

"Our town historian Rufus Langhans lives in another older Whitman house, Nathaniel's, pre-Revolution. Two corner fireplaces use the same chimney. Occasionally a whisp of smoke strays from one fireplace to the other, he says. "It's eerie."

"An Englishman from Manchester said with a certain turn of wind the smoke comes down again, and then recirculates back up the other chimney."

"That's doing it the hard way," she says, then feels the slanting bricks again with her fingers.

"Some bricks are crumbling," she notes.

I love bricks and answer in detail. "Yes. The clay was not well pugged, and there are many pebbles much too large. These bricks are yellowish seconds. Yet these rude, homemade, common bricks, under-fired, still hold this corbel chimney up."

I get philosophical. "There is another miracle of simple folk besides this corbel chimney. The second miracle is birth, death and living join together into one named Walt. I feel it in the corbel chimney of the house where he was born."

They are thinking this out, and she keeps thinking about it.

There is one last thing she must see. The noggin the Van Velsors gave the House! That is, if she gets safely down the stairs. Trusting, she has climbed forbidden stairs.

"Duck the beam as your foot reaches for the first step down," I say. Her dog may have no signal for a hand-pegged beam. "The hand rail around the attic stairwell stops before that top short riser. They made it so to find it in the dark."

We all watch and do not breathe. I hope and pray the Lord may have a seeing eye to right the wrong I've done if she falls down this flight of Walter Whitman's special stairs.

Safely down, she holds the wooden noggin.

"Walt Whitman loved the Dutch hearthside, and drank with the Van Velsors a noggin or so of ale."

Something puzzles her. "But the rim is higher at the front. I do not know how they could drink from this."

"I want to bring an ale to try it out myself." I sweep a wide gesture with my hand as if to raise the noggin to my lips and drink. "That would need a toast," I add.

I know what she is thinking now—a shy smile comes and goes as her lips part a trifle. Woman too, I have thought what she thinks. Maybe my lips would touch where his lips touched.

She has Walt's blessing and, perhaps, his kiss. She is smiling as she leaves the Birthplace.

