

# SCRIBNER'S MAGAZINE

VOL. XCII, NO. 1



JULY, 1932

## The Web of Earth

A COMPLETE SHORT NOVEL

*By Thomas Wolfe*

*The rich story of a life, a tapestry of experiences and sensations woven from the fabric of a woman's memory, as she tells her son what begins as a simple episode and becomes in the telling a narrative covering seventy years. The author of "Look Homeward, Angel" has created a memorable character in Delia Hawke and through her has given reality to the events and people in her life.*

... in the year that the locusts came, something that happened in the year the locusts came, two voices that I heard there in that year. . . . Child! Child! It seems so long ago since the year the locusts came, and all of the trees were eaten bare: so much has happened and it seems so long ago. . . .

"What say?" I said.

Says, "Two . . . Two," says, "Twenty . . . Twenty."

"Hah? What say?"

"Two . . . Two," the first voice said; and, "Twenty . . . Twenty," said the other.

"Oh, Two!" I cried out to your papa, and "Twenty . . . Twenty—can't you hear them?"

"Two . . . Two," it said again, the first voice over by the window, and "Twenty . . . Twenty" said the second, at my ear.

"Oh, don't you hear it, Mr. Hawke?" I cried.

"Why, Lord, woman!" your papa said. "What on earth are you talking about? There's no one there," he said.

"Oh, yes, there is!" I said, and then I heard them once again, "Two . . . Two" and "Twenty . . . Twenty."

"There they are!" I said.

"Pshaw, Mrs. Hawke," your papa said. "It's something you imagined. You fell asleep, you must have dreamed it."

"Oh, no, I didn't," I said. "It's there! It's there all right!"—because I *knew*, I *knew*: because I heard it just as plain!

"It's the condition you're in," he said. "You're tired and overwrought and you've imagined it."

Then all of the bells began to ring and he got up to go.

"Oh! don't go!" I said. "I wish you wouldn't go"—you know I had a premonition, and it worried me to see him go.

And then I heard it once again—"Two . . . Two," the first voice said, and "Twenty . . . Twenty," said the other . . . and I *know*, I *know*—why, yes! Lord God! don't I remember, boy!—the hour, the time, the very year it happened to the day . . . because that was the year the locusts came at home and all of the trees were eaten bare.

"But, say, then!—Ed—Gil—Lee—pshaw! Boy! *John!* I mean—I reckon Lee is thinking of me at this moment, that's why I keep calling you his name. Well, now—hah? What say?"

"You started to tell about two voices that you heard one time."

"Oh, yes! That's so! Well, now, as I was—say! What was that? Hah?"

"Those were the ships out on the harbor, mama."

"What say? Harbor? Ships? Oh, yes, I reckon now that's so. The harbor is yon way?"

"No, mama, it's the other way. You're turned around. It's just the other way: it's there."

"Hah? *That* way? Why, no, child, surely not. . . . Are you telling me the truth? . . . Well, then, I'll vow! I *am* mixed up. I reckon comin' in that tunnel did it. But you couldn't lose me in the country; give me a landmark of some sort to go by and I'll be all right. . . . Why, boy, I'll vow! . . . There goes that thing again! Why, Lord! It sounds like some old cow! And here you are right on the edge of it! How did you ever come to such a place? Lord! Listen—do you hear it? I reckon that's a big one gettin' ready to pull out. . . . Lord, God! You're all alike: your daddy was the same—forever wantin' to be up and gone. If I'd a let him he'd have been nothing but a wanderer across the face of the earth. . . . Child, child, you mustn't be a wanderer all your days. . . . It worries me to think of you away off somewheres with strange people. . . . You mustn't spend your life alone with strangers. . . . You ought to come back where your people came from. . . . Child, child, it worries me. . . . Come back again."



"Well, now, as I was goin' on to say, that night I heard it, the first voice—pshaw! there goes that whistle once again. Say, boy! I tell you what—it makes me want to pick right up and light out with it! Why, yes, I'm not so old! I could start out now—I tell you what, I've got a good mind to do it—I'd like to start right out and just see everything—why! all those countries, England, where all your folks came from, and France, Germany, Italy—say! I've always wanted to see Switzerland—that must certainly be a beautiful spot—as the feller says, the Wonderland of Nature. . . .

"Say . . . oh, now I hear it! . . . Now I know. . . . Why, yes! It's out yon way. And where's the bridge, then, that we walked across that night?"

"It's here—right at the bottom of the street. Here! Come to the window and look out. Don't you remember how we came?"

Remember! Now, boy, you ask me if I can remember! Lord, God! I reckon I remember things you never read about, the way it was, the things they never wrote about in books.

I reckon that they tried to put it down in books, all of the wars and battles, child, I guess they got that part of it all right, but Lord!—how could these fellers know the way it was when they weren't born, when they weren't there to see it: they made it seem so long ago and like it happened in some strange land—what could they know, child, of the way it was: the way the wind blew and the way the sun was shining, the smell of the smoke out in the yard, and mother singin' and the scalded feathers, and the way the river swelled that spring when it had rained. The way the men looked as they marched back along the river road that day, as they were comin' from the war, and the things we said, and the sound of all the voices of the people who are dead, and the way the sunlight came and went, and how it made me sad to see it, and the way the women cried as we stood there in Bob Patton's yard, and the men marched by us, and the dust rose, and we knew the war was over. Lord, God! do I remember! Those are the things that I remember, child, and that's the way things were.

I can remember all the way back to the time when I was two years old, and let me tell you, boy: there's mighty little I've forgotten since.

Why, yes!—don't I remember how they took me by the hand that day and led me down into the holler—Bob Patton and your Uncle George—and here boy-like they had constructed an effigy of Willy and Lucindy Patton out of that old black mud they had there—you could mould it in your hands just like a piece of putty—and how I screamed and all—because I *knew*, I *knew*, I'd seen them both and I remembered them—why! Willy and Lucindy were two slaves that Cap'n Patton owned—Oh, Lord! the blackest African niggers you ever saw, as father said, charcoal would a left a white mark on them, their parents had been taken right out of the jungle—and those white teeth, those gleaming white teeth when they grinned—but oh! the odor! that awful odor, that old black nigger smell that nothin' could wash out, mother couldn't stand it, it made her deathly sick, when they passed through a room they left the smell behind them—and here these two devils of boys had made this effigy with pebbles they had taken from the creek for teeth, and to think of it!—that they should tell a

child of two a thing like that—*why*, that it was Willy and Lucindy Patton I was lookin' at—"Look out!" says Bob, "they're goin' to eat you up," he says, and how I screamed—why I remember it all the same as yesterday!

And don't I remember taking Brother Will up to the Indian Mound—of course the story went that there were Indians buried there, that's what it was, they said—and here this brook was filled up with this old black oily stuff that came out from the mound—of course, father always gave it as his opinion there was oil there, that's what he said, you know, that some one would make a fortune some day if they dug a well there—and Will was only two and a half years old and George told him that the old black oil was squeezed out of the corpses of the Indians and how Will screamed and hollered when he told him—"Why," mother said, "I could wring your neck for having no more sense than to frighten a child with such a story."



And yes, now! What about it? Don't I remember that winter when the deer come boundin' down the hill across the path and stopped and looked at me not ten feet away, and I screamed because I saw its antlers? Lord! I didn't know what to make of it, I'd never heard of such an animal, and how it bounded away into the woods again and how when I told mother she said, "Yes, you saw a deer. That was a deer you saw all right. The hunters ran it down here off the mountain" and—why, yes! wasn't it only the next spring after that when I was a big girl four years old and remembered everything that the Yankees began to come through there, and didn't I hear them, didn't I see them with my own eyes, the villains—those two fellers tearing along the road on two horses they had stolen as hard as they could as if all hell had cut loose after them—why! it's as plain in my mind today as it was then, the way they looked, two ragged-lookin' troopers bent down and whippin' those horses for all that they were worth, with bandanna handkerchiefs tied around their necks and the ends of them whipping back as stiff and straight as if they'd been starched and ironed—now *that* will give you some idea of how fast they were goin'—and couldn't I hear the people shoutin' and hollerin' all along the road that they were comin', and how the women-folks took on and made the men go out and hide themselves?

"Oh, Lord," says mother, wringin' her hands, "here they come!" and didn't Addie Patton come running up the hill to tell us, the poor child frightened out of her wits, you know, screaming, "Oh, they've come, they've come! And grandfather's down there all alone," she says. "They'll kill him, they'll kill him!"

Of course we didn't know then that these two Yankee stragglers were alone, we thought they were the advance guard of a whole brigade of Sherman's troopers. But law! the rest of them never got there for a week, here these two thieving devils had broken away, and I reckon were just trying to see how much they could steal by themselves. Why, yes! Didn't all the men begin to shoot at them then as they went by and when they saw they didn't have the army with them, and didn't they jump off their horses and light out for the mountains on foot as hard as they could, then, and leave the horses? And didn't some people from way over in Bedford County come to claim the horses when the war was over? They identified them, you know, and said those same two fellers were the ones that took 'em. And Lord! didn't they tell it how Amanda Stevens set fire to the Bridge with her own hands on the other side of Sevier so that those that were comin' in from Tennessee were held up for a week before they got across—yes! and stood there laughin' at them, you know; of course they used to tell it on her that she said ("Lord!" I said, "you know she wouldn't say a thing like that!") but of course Amanda was an awful coarse talker, she didn't care what she said, and they all claimed later that's just the way she put it—"Why," she hollers to them, "you don't need a bridge to get across a little stream like that, do you? Well, you must be a pretty worthless lot, after all," she said. "Why, down here," she says, "we'd call it a pretty poor sort of man who couldn't — across it," and, of course, the Yankees had to laugh then, that's the story that they told.

And yes! Didn't they tell it at the time how the day the Yankees marched into town they captured old man Dockery. I reckon they wanted to have some fun with him more than anything else, a great fat thing, you know, with that swarthy yellor complexion and that kinky hair, of course, the story went that he had nigger blood in him and—what about it! he admitted it, sir, he claimed it then and there in front of all the Yankees, I reckon hoping they would let him off. "All right," the Yankees said, "if you can prove that you're a nigger we'll let

you go." Well, he said that he could prove it, then. "Well, how're you goin' to prove it?" they asked him. "I'll tell you how," this Yankee captain says, calls to one of his troopers, you know, "Run him up and down the street a few times, Jim," he says, and so they started, this soldier and old man Dockery, running up and down in that hot sun as hard as they could go. Well, when they got back, he was wringin' wet with perspiration, Dockery, you know, and the story goes the Yankee went over to him and took one good smell and then called out, "Yes, by God, he told the truth, boys. He's a nigger. Let him go!" Well, that's the way they told it, anyhow.

And yes! Don't I remember it all, yes! With the men comin' by and marchin' along that river road on their way into town to be mustered out and all of us ganged together there in the front yard of Uncle John's place to see them pass, father and mother and all the children and all of the Patton and Alexander and Woodsend tribes and these two black African niggers that I told you John Patton owned, Willy and Lucindy Patton, and your great-grandfather, boy, old Bill Woodsend that they called Bill the Hatter because he could make them of the finest felt—learned how to treat the wool with chamber lye, oh! the finest hats you ever saw, why, don't I remember an old farmer coming to our house in my childhood to give a hat to Uncle Sam to be re-blocked, says, "Sam, old Bill Woodsend made that hat for me just twenty years ago and it's as good," he says, "as it ever was, all it needs is to be blocked and cleaned," and let me tell you, every one that knew him said that Billy Woodsend was certainly a man with a remarkable mind.



Now, boy, I want to tell you, I've always said whatever ability you had came from that side of the house, there's one thing sure, Bill Woodsend was a man who'd a gone far if he'd had the education. Of course he had no book-learnin' but they told it, you know, how he could argue and take sides on any question, hale and hearty, mind you, right up to the hour of his death, sent word down to Sam one day to come up there to see him, says, "Sam"—of course Sam told it how he found him building his fire and singin' a hymn, at peace with the world and without a thing wrong with him—"Sam," he says, "I'm glad you've come. There are matters I want to talk over with you. Lay down on that bed," he says, "so we can talk." Well, that just suited Sam, you know, oh!

the *laziest* feller that ever lived, he could spend his whole life just a-layin' round and talkin', "Why," he says, "what is it, father? What's the matter? Aren't you feelin' good?" he says. "Oh," says Bill, "I never felt better, but I'm not goin' to be here with you much longer," he says, says, "I've made up my mind it's time to die, Sam, and I want to put my house in order before I go." "Why, father," Sam says, "what are you talkin' about, what do you mean? There's nothing wrong with you." "No, not a thing," says Bill. "Why, you'll be here for years to come," says Sam. "No, Sam," the old man says, he shook his head, you know. "I've just decided that it's my time to go. I've had a Call. Now, I've lived out my full three score years and ten," he says, "with some to spare and I feel there's nothin' more I can do on earth, so I've made up my mind." "Made up your mind?" says Sam, "why, made up your mind to what?" "Why," he says, "I've made up my mind to die, Sam." "Why, father," says Sam, "what are you talking about? You're not going to die," he says. "Yes," says Bill, "I've made up my mind to die tomorrow," says, "I've made up my mind to die at ten minutes after six tomorrow afternoon, and that's the reason I sent for you." Well! they built up a roarin' big fire and stayed up all night long talkin' together, and oh! you know, Sam told it how the wind roared and howled, and how they talked long, long into the night, and they cooked breakfast, and lay around and talked some more, and they cooked dinner, and talked some more, and that old man was as well and strong as he'd ever been, at peace with mankind, sir, and without a worry in the world, but on the stroke of six, now, boy, I want to tell you the kind of man *he* was, on the stroke of six, he turned to Sam and said, "Get ready, Sam," and at ten minutes after six to the dot, he looked at him again and said, "Good by, Sam: it's my time, I'm going, son," and he turned his face to the wall, sir, and *died*—now that's the kind of a man he was, that goes to show the kind of will power and determination he had in *him*—and *let me tell you something*: we've all had it in us, that same thing, when it came our time to go, we *knew* it, father went the same way, sir, kept wakin' up all day long to say, "Is it six o'clock, yet?"—couldn't seem to get it off his mind, you know—"Why, no, father," I said, "it's only noon." Now, six, six, I kept a-thinkin', why does he keep asking if it's six? That *very day*, sir, as the clock was striking the last stroke of six he breathed his last, I turned to Jim



and whispered "Six": he nodded, "Yes," he said. Of course we knew.

But here he was that day—don't I remember him? Old Bill Woodsend standin' there with all the rest of us to watch the troops go by, a hale and hearty old man, sir, oh! married twice and had all those childern, eight by his first wife, Martha Patton, of course father was one of *that* crowd and fourteen by that other woman—well, that's so, there *was* that other one, I reckon, that he'd had by that woman down in South Carolina, of course there was no record of the ceremony and I reckon what they said was true, but he brought that child home and sat her down at the table with all the rest of them and said to them all: "From this time on she is your sister and must be treated so," and that's the way it was all right. And here, to think of it! All these childern that he had went out and had big families of their own, those that didn't die early or get killed, until now there are hundreds of them living down there in Catawba in the mountains and in Georgia and Texas and out west in California and Oregon until now they are spread all over like a web—but that's where they came from, from that one old man, he was the only one there was to begin with, the son of that Englishman that came there back in Revolutionary days to sink those copper shafts out there in Yancey. Of course they say we've got great estates waitin' for us in England—I know Uncle Bob came to father at the time Bill Woodsend died and told him he ought to do something about it, but they decided against it, said the expense would be too great—but he was *there*, all right, Bill Woodsend was there with all the rest of us the day they came back from the war. And here came all the troops, you know, and you could hear the men a-cheerin' and the women-folks a-crying, and every now and then you'd see one of the men drop out of line and then the women would start crying again, and here comes Uncle Bob—only sixteen, mind you, but he seemed like an old man to me—wearing a stovepipe hat I reckon he'd looted from some store and no shoes on, and here he comes and we all began to cry.

"Why, Lord!" says Bob, "this is a pretty home-comin' for a fact," he says, you know, trying to joke us along and cheer us up. "Why, I thought you'd be glad to see me," he says. "I didn't expect you all to bust out cryin'! Why, if that's the way you feel," he says, "I'm goin' back."

"Oh, Bob, Bob," his mother says, "you've got no shoes, poor child, you're barefooted," she says.

"No," says Bob, "I wore 'em out in my hurry to get home," he says, "I just walked them clean off my feet," he says, "but if I'd known it was goin' to be like this, I wouldn't have come so fast," he said, and of course that made 'em laugh.

But, child, that wasn't the reason that the women cried. So many had gone off that never would come home again and, of course, they knew it, they knew it, and then, didn't we all flock into the house, and hadn't they all been baking and cooking for a week and, let me tell you, poor as we were, that was a *meal*, no little dabs of stuff such as they give you in these days: fried chickens—why we must have cooked two dozen of them—and boiled hams and pork and roasting ears and sweet pertaters and string beans and plates full of corn bread and hot biscuits and peach and apple dumplings and all kinds of jams and jellies and pies and cakes galore and all of the cider you could drink, and Lord! I wish you could have seen the way that Bob and Rufus Alexander and Fate Patton put that food away—why, as mother said, you'd a thought they hadn't had a square meal since they went to war and I reckon maybe she didn't miss it much either.

Why, wasn't I a big girl of five years old at the time, and saw it all, and remember it as well as I'm settin' here—yes, and things that happened long before that—and things you never heard of, boy, with all your reading out of books: why, yes, didn't we learn to do everything ourselves and to grow everything we ate and to take the wool and dye it, yes, to go out in the woods and get the sumac and the walnut bark and all the walnut hulls and elderberries for the dyes and rinse the wool in copperas water until we had a hard fast black you couldn't take the shine off—why! it beat the stuff they have today all hollow—didn't I learn to do it with my own hands and couldn't I get the finest reds and greens and yellors that you ever saw, and didn't I learn to spin the flax and bleach it and make fine shirts and sheets and tablecloths myself, why, yes, don't I remember the day—oh! that strong rank smell, you know, of scalded feathers, with mother plucking the chicken in the yard, and the smell of the smoke, and the fresh pine chips out by the chopping block, and all (that's where you got your sense of smell from, boy!) and the wind that howled and whistled through that old coarse grass, it

*Continued on page 43*

# The Birth Rate — Potential Dynamite

*By J. J. Spengler*

*Children are economic commodities, and they must be so regarded if biological decay and the collapse of western civilization is to be avoided, declares Doctor Spengler, who from his studies in population brings out intensely interesting data. He suggests a plan for regulation of the birth rate.*

NOTHING intrigues man so much as the contemplation of his rise and possible fall. How account for the decay of Egypt, the eclipse of Hellas, the fall of Rome, the decay of Spain? What does the future hold in store for the industrial civilization of the twentieth century?

We know that in the past the decay of peoples has been contributed to by changes in climate, diminution in rainfall, dilution of the fertility of the soil, the disturbing effects of inventions and discoveries. We also know that the dissolution of civilization has been accelerated by the increasing effeminacy of the ruling classes, the sepulchral blight of priestly absolutism, the peonization of agriculture, and the persistent use of the state as a device to enrich the few at the expense of the many. Yet we of to-day feel that, as a result of the advances of modern science, man can either avoid or successfully adapt himself to each of the disruptive factors mentioned.

This general feeling of security against social collapse which Americans, Englishmen, and Europeans derive from their faith in modern science may possibly prove the undoing of Western civilization. For preservation of the group depends, just as does preservation of the individual, upon unbroken wariness against potential dangers. All social ills, unemployment, poverty, economic and social instability, and the like may be prevented if society so wills. If, however, it is believed that social ills cure themselves, the very steps necessary to eliminating social ills will not be taken.

## I

No factor in Western civilization is so loaded with potential power for good or evil as the birth rate. Consequently, those who would chart and

plan the future course of Western civilization must be able to chart and plan the future course of the birth rate. The political scientist knows that marked differences in the birth rates of various countries almost inevitably spell war. The economist knows that an unduly high birth rate is of necessity accompanied by poverty, a brutish scale of life, and a high death rate, such as we find in China and India. A birth rate which just equals the death rate makes possible, as I have shown in a recent number of SCRIBNER'S, a level of economic prosperity not achievable under any alternative set of conditions. A birth rate which is consistently lower than the death rate will result in the ultimate extinction of the population. The proportion of children in such a population will become constantly smaller, the proportion of aged will become constantly greater. Every year the percentage of deaths in the population will increase. Production will fall off sharply. Poverty will increase. Political and economic organization will disintegrate. Gloom will pervade the psychology of the people until, ultimately, they disappear or become merged with a growing, expanding people.

The reader may point out that history supplies us with instances where the population of countries decreased for a few years only to begin again to increase, or, finally, he may observe that, although fear of depopulation has been expressed by French writers for the last seventy-five years, births continue to exceed deaths in France. But, unfortunately, neither of these replies fits the current situation.

True, there have been periods in the history of certain nations, such as France and England, when more people died than were born. But this excess of deaths grew out of the frequency of deaths and not out of the fewness of births. When the Black Death cut down more than one-quarter of Europe's