

CHAPTER IX

SWEET BIRD OF YOUTH

Sweet Bird of Youth is a play about an aging movie star, the Princess Kosmonopolis, who is running away from what she believes has been a fiasco in her come-back screen picture. During her flight she meets Chance Wayne, a gigolo whom she pays as her travelling companion. Both of them are afraid of getting old and losing their charm. The Princess used to be a famous star and she considers herself an artist. Now she is getting old; she has been shocked by seeing herself in a close-up at the premiere showing of her come-back film. She has yielded to taking dope; she is frequently unable to breathe without an oxygen mask; and she thinks she needs most of all a lover. She has met Chance in a Florida cabana where he was working as a beach-boy. He is good-looking and his manners please her, so she has taken him with her. They have stopped in Chance's home town of St. Cloud, where the girl lives who had been Chance's lover at the age of fifteen. Heavenly is the daughter of Boss Finley, a powerful politician who runs things in that area. He has vowed to have Chance castrated if he ever returns to St. Cloud because Chance had infected Heavenly with a venereal disease which required her to have "a whore's operation."

Chance and the Princess have much in common. Both of them have minor talents; although neither of them has reached the top, both have seen better days than at present. To both of them, advancing age is comparable to the loss of their sexual organs. Both depend heavily on dope and liquor. In addition, Chance is a blackmailer. When he threatens the Princess with the tape he has recorded if she does not sign a contract to make him and Heavenly future movie stars, the Princess shows no sign of yielding but shows that she understands Chance: "You were well born, weren't you? Born of good Southern stock, in a genteel tradition, with just one disadvantage, a laurel wreath on your forehead, given too early, without enough effort to earn it"99

The Princess meets his threats of blackmail with her own demands; she wants life, and on any terms, as a way to forget what she does not want to remember. Life to her is the same as love-making. Desperate for sexual happiness and the illusion that she and Chance are innocent young lovers, she bids Chance to draw the curtains, turn on the radio, and prove himself before she gives him any money.

Forget the legend that I was and the ruin of that legend. Whether or not I do have a disease of the heart that places an early terminal date on my life, no mention of that, no reference to it ever. No mention of death, never, never a word on that odious subject.

I've been accused of having a death wish but I think it's life that I wish for, terribly, shamelessly, on any terms whatsoever. When I say now, the answer must not be later. I have only one way to forget these things I don't want to remember and that's through the act of love-making. That's the only dependable distraction so when I say now, because I need that distraction, it has to be now, not later.¹⁰⁰

Chance wants to be successful, as he used to be when he was young, before he rushed from his mother and the girl he loved and found himself a failure. He wants to become rich in order to get even with Boss Finley. He realizes that he is what Finley called him, "a handsome young criminal degenerate." Chance has returned from time to time to see Heavenly and be consoled and encouraged. He did not know that he was responsible for her disease and the operation that has made her barren. He did not know that his mother had died, as he left no forwarding address. He feels trapped when he returns to his home town, yet he feels drawn back there. As the Princess puts it, "You're a lost little boy that I really would like to help find himself."¹⁰¹ He tells his life story to the Princess, explaining what he is seeking after.

. . . I wanted, expected, intended to get, something better. . . . Yes, and I did, I got it. I did things that fat-headed gang never dreamed of. Hell, when they were still freshmen at Tulane or L.S.U. or Ole Miss, I sang in the chorus of the biggest show in New York, in

Oklahoma, and had pictures in Life in a cowboy outfit, tossin' a ten-gallon hat in the air! . . . And at the same time pursued my other vocation Maybe the only one I was truly meant for, love-making. . . . slept in the social register of New York! . . . And . . . I gave people more than I took. Middle-aged people I gave back a feeling of youth. Lonely girls? Understanding, appreciation! An absolutely convincing show of affection. Sad people, lost people? Something light and uplifting! Eccentrics? Tolerance, even odd things they long for. . . . But always just at the point when I might get something back that would solve my own need, which was great, to rise to their level, the memory of my girl would pull me back home to her. . . .

In a life like mine, you just can't stop, you know, can't take time out between steps, you've got to keep going right on up from one thing to the other; once you drop out, it leaves you and goes on without you and you're washed up.

Chance talks about being left outside of society as Amanda talked to her daughter in The Glass Menagerie.

I'm talking about the parade. THE parade! The parade! the boys that go places, that's the parade I'm talking about, not a parade of swabbies on a wet deck.¹⁰²

Both of the leading characters in this play are overwhelmed with the fear of oncoming age. Chance is the worse, as he recognizes that he has not made much progress and that his dreams will never come true. He holds Boss Finley responsible for his degradation because Finley would not let Chance marry Heavenly. Finley did say that Chance

could have Heavenly if he proved himself to become a somebody. Heavenly's Aunt Nonnie also accused Finley: "I remember when Chance was the finest, nicest, sweetest boy in St. Cloud, and he stayed that way till you, till you - . . ."103

Heavenly joins the accusers of her father:

. . . Papa, there was a time when you could have saved me, by letting me marry a boy that was still young and clean, but instead you drove him away, drove him out of St. Cloud. And when he came back, you took me out of St. Cloud, and tried to force me to marry a fifty-year-old money bag that you wanted something out of - . . . I'd gone, so Chance went away. Tried to compete, make himself big as these big-shots you wanted to use me for a bond with. He went. He tried. The right doors wouldn't open, and so he went in the wrong ones, and - Papa, you married for love, why wouldn't you let me do it, while I was alive, alive inside, and the boy still clean, still decent?104

Chance has had nothing to cling to except the hope that he will one day have Heavenly as his legal wife. All the time he wants to show off; he is vain even though he depends on his patrons. He wears the fine clothes that the Princess bought him when he helped her to stop being lonely, and he drives around in her Cadillac. When she sees him from her window, showing off in her car, she feels pity for him.

. . . I knew that your come-back had been a failure like mine. And I felt something in my heart for you. That's a miracle, Chance. That's the wonderful thing that happened to me. I felt something for someone besides myself. . . . And what I felt in my heart when I saw you returning, defeated, to this palm garden, Chance, gave me hope that I could stop being a monster. . . 105

Chance can go with the Princess if he wants, but he will not leave St. Cloud this time if Heavenly does not go with him.

Chance: I go back to Heavenly, or I don't. I live or die. There's nothing in between for me.

Aunt Nonnie: What you want to go back to is your clean, unashamed youth. And you can't.

Chance: You still don't believe me, Aunt Nonnie?

Aunt Nonnie: No, I don't. Please go. Go away from here, Chance. . . .

Chance: Where to? Where can I go? This is the home of my heart. Don't make me homeless.¹⁰⁶

Chance yields himself to Boss Finley's revenge because of his love for Heavenly. When he learns that he has harmed her unintentionally, he accepts his fate willingly. Moreover, he thinks, if he cannot live in his own home town, where can he live? He could go with the Princess, but he insults her when she invites him. He says, "It's all right, I'm alone now, nobody's hanging on to me."¹⁰⁷

When the Princess gets word from a Hollywood columnist that her come-back picture is not a failure, but a box-office success, she pulls herself together and gives Chance a piece of her mind.

Talk about a beach-boy I picked up for pleasure, distraction from panic? Now? When the nightmare is over? Involve my name, which is Alexandra Del Lago with the record of a - You've just been using me. Using me. When I needed you downstairs you shouted, 'Get her a wheel chair!' Well, I didn't need a wheel chair, I came up alone, as always. I climbed back alone up the beanstalk to the ogre's country where I live, now, alone. Chance, you've

gone past something you couldn't afford to go past; your time, your youth, you've passed it. It's all you had, and you've had it. 108

Yet when the moment for her departure arrives, the Princess tries to get Chance to get out of town with her, to save himself. Chance refuses, saying, "Whatever happens to me's already happened." 109 The playwright's note near the end of the play describes the gallant stand of these two lonely figures as they part ways.

NOTE: in this area it is very important that Chance's attitude should be self-recognition but not self-pity - a sort of deathbed dignity and honesty apparent in it. In both Chance and the Princess, we should return to the huddling-together of the lost, but not with sentiment, which is false, but with whatever is truthful in the moments when people share doom, face firing squads together. Because the Princess is really equally doomed. She can't turn back the clock any more than can Chance, and the clock is equally relentless to them both. . . . Both are faced with castration, and in her heart she knows it. They sit side by side on the bed like two passengers on a train sharing a bench. 110