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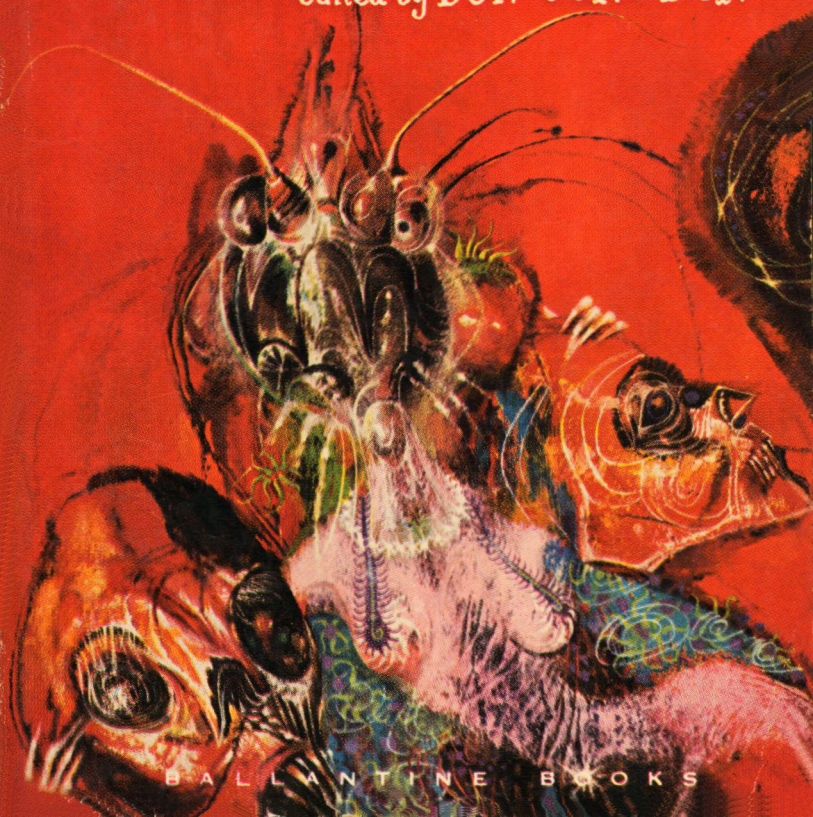
TALES of LOVE and HORROR

edited by DON CONGDON



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TALES of LOVE and HORROR

edited by DON CONGDON

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CONTENTS

♥

♠ NO SUCH THING AS A VAMPIRE

♥

RICHARD MATHESON

IN THE EARLY AUTUMN, Madame Alexis Gheria awoke one morning to a sense of utmost torpor. For more than a minute, she lay inertly on her back, her dark eyes staring upward. How wasted she felt. It seemed as if her limbs were sheathed in lead. Perhaps she was ill. Petre must examine her and see.

Drawing in a faint breath, she pressed up slowly on an elbow. As she did, her nightdress slid, rustling, to her waist. How had it come unfastened? she wondered, looking down at herself.

Quite suddenly, Madame Gheria began to scream.

In the breakfast room, Dr. Petre Gheria looked up, startled, from his morning paper. In an instant, he had pushed his chair back, slung his napkin on the table and was rushing for the hallway. He dashed across its carpeted breadth and mounted the staircase two steps at a time.

It was a near hysterical Madame Gheria he found sitting on the edge of her bed looking down in horror at her breasts. Across the dilated whiteness of them, a smear of blood lay drying.

Dr. Gheria dismissed the upstairs maid who stood frozen in the open doorway, gaping at her mistress. He locked the door and hurried to his wife.

"Petre!" she gasped.

"Gently." He helped her lie back across the blood-stained pillow.

"Petre, what *is* it?" she begged.

"Lie still, my dear." His practiced hands moved in swift search over her breasts. Suddenly, his breath choked off. Pressing aside her head, he stared down dumbly at the pinprick lancinations on her neck, the ribbon of tacky blood that twisted downward from them.

"My *throat*," Alexis said.

"No, it's just a——" Dr. Gheria did not complete the sentence. He knew exactly what it was.

Madame Gheria began to tremble. "Oh, my God, my *God*," she said.

Dr. Gheria rose and foundered to the wash basin. Pouring

in water, he returned to his wife and washed away the blood. The wound was clearly visible now—two tiny punctures close to the jugular. A grimacing Dr. Gheria touched the mounds of inflamed tissue in which they lay. As he did, his wife groaned terribly and turned her face away.

"Now listen to me," he said, his voice apparently calm. "We will not succumb, immediately, to superstition, do you hear? There are any number of——"

"I'm going to die," she said.

"Alexis, do you hear me?" He caught her harshly by the shoulders.

She turned her head and stared at him with vacant eyes. "You know what it is," she said.

Dr. Gheria swallowed. He could still taste coffee in his mouth.

"I know what it appears to be," he said, "and we shall—not ignore the possibility. However——"

"I'm going to die," she said.

"Alexis!" Dr. Gheria took her hand and gripped it fiercely. *"You shall not be taken from me,"* he said.

* * *

Solta was a village of some thousand inhabitants situated in the foothills of Romania's Bihor Mountains. It was a place of dark traditions. People, hearing the bay of distant wolves, would cross themselves without a thought. Children would gather garlic buds as other children gather flowers, bringing them home for the windows. On every door there was a painted cross, at every throat a metal one. Dread of the vampire's blighting was as normal as the dread of fatal sickness. It was always in the air.

Dr. Gheria thought about that as he bolted shut the windows of Alexis' room. Far off, molten twilight hung above the mountains. Soon it would be dark again. Soon the citizens of Solta would be barricaded in their garlic-reeking houses. He had no doubt that every soul of them knew exactly what had happened to his wife. Already the cook and upstairs maid were pleading for discharge. Only the inflexible discipline of the butler, Karel, kept them at their jobs. Soon, even that would not suffice. Before the horror of the vampire, reason fled.

He'd seen the evidence of it that very morning when he'd ordered Madame's room stripped to the walls and searched for rodents or venomous insects. The servants had moved about the room as if on a floor of eggs, their eyes more white than pupil, their fingers twitching constantly to their crosses.

They had known full well no rodents or insects would be found. And Gheria had known it. Still, he'd raged at them for their timidity, succeeding only in frightening them further.

He turned from the window with a smile.

"There now," he said, "nothing alive will enter this room tonight."

He caught himself immediately, seeing the flare of terror in her eyes.

"Nothing at *all* will enter," he amended.

Alexis lay motionless on her bed, one pale hand at her breast, clutching at the worn silver cross she'd taken from her jewel box. She hadn't worn it since he'd given her the diamond-studded one when they were married. How typical of her village background that, in this moment of dread, she should seek protection from the unadorned cross of her church. She was such a child. Gheria smiled down gently at her.

"You won't be needing that, my dear," he said, "you'll be safe tonight."

Her fingers tightened on the crucifix.

"No, no, wear it if you will," he said. "I only meant that I'll be at your side all night."

"You'll stay with me?"

He sat on the bed and held her hand.

"Do you think I'd leave you for a moment?" he said.

Thirty minutes later, she was sleeping. Dr. Gheria drew a chair beside the bed and seated himself. Removing his glasses, he massaged the bridge of his nose with the thumb and forefinger of his left hand. Then, sighing, he began to watch his wife. How incredibly beautiful she was. Dr. Gheria's breath grew strained.

"There is no such thing as a vampire," he whispered to himself.

* * *

There was a distant pounding. Dr. Gheria muttered in his sleep, his fingers twitching. The pounding increased; an agitated voice came swirling from the darkness. "Doctor!" it called.

Gheria snapped awake. For a moment, he looked confusedly toward the locked door.

"Dr. Gheria?" demanded Karel.

"What?"

"Is everything all right?"

"Yes, everything is——"

Dr. Gheria cried out hoarsely, springing for the bed. Alexis'

nightdress had been torn away again. A hideous dew of blood covered her chest and neck.

* * *

Karel shook his head.

"Bolted windows cannot hold away the creature, sir," he said.

He stood, tall and lean, beside the kitchen table on which lay the cluster of silver he'd been polishing when Gheria had entered.

"The creature has the power to make of itself a vapor which can pass through any opening however small," he said.

"But the cross!" cried Gheria. "It was still at her throat—untouched! Except by—blood," he added in a sickened voice.

"This I cannot understand," said Karel, grimly. "The cross should have protected her."

"But why did I see nothing?"

"You were drugged by its mephitic presence," Karel said. "Count yourself fortunate that you were not, also, attacked."

"I do not count myself fortunate!" Dr. Gheria struck his palm, a look of anguish on his face. "What am I to do, Karel?" he asked.

"Hang garlic," said the old man. "Hang it at the windows, at the doors. Let there be no opening unblocked by garlic."

Gheria nodded distractedly. "Never in my life have I seen this thing," he said, brokenly. "Now, my own wife . . ."

"I have seen it," said Karel. "I have, myself, put to its rest one of these monsters from the grave."

"The stake——?" Gheria looked revolted.

The old man nodded slowly.

Gheria swallowed. "Pray God you may put this one to rest as well," he said.

* * *

"Petre?"

She was weaker now, her voice a toneless murmur. Gheria bent over her. "Yes, my dear," he said.

"It will come again tonight," she said.

"No." He shook his head determinedly. "It cannot come. The garlic will repel it."

"My cross didn't," she said, "you didn't."

"The garlic will," he said. "And see?" He pointed at the bedside table. "I've had black coffee brought for me. I won't sleep tonight."

She closed her eyes, a look of pain across her sallow features.

"I don't want to die," she said. "Please don't let me die, Petre."

"You won't," he said. "I promise you; the monster shall be destroyed."

Alexis shuddered feebly. "But if there is no way, Petre," she murmured.

"There is always a way," he answered.

Outside, the darkness, cold and heavy, pressed around the house. Dr. Gheria took his place beside the bed and began to wait. Within the hour, Alexis slipped into a heavy slumber. Gently, Dr. Gheria released her hand and poured himself a cup of steaming coffee. As he sipped it, hotly bitter, he looked around the room. Door locked, windows bolted, every opening sealed with garlic, the cross at Alexis' throat. He nodded slowly to himself. It will work, he thought. The monster would be thwarted.

He sat there, waiting, listening to his breath.

* * *

Dr. Gheria was at the door before the second knock.

"Michael!" He embraced the younger man. "Dear Michael, I was sure you'd come!"

Anxiously, he ushered Dr. Vares toward his study. Outside, darkness was just falling.

"Where on earth are all the people of the village?" asked Vares. "I swear I didn't see a soul as I rode in."

"Huddling, terror-stricken, in their houses," Gheria said, "and all my servants with them save for one."

"Who is that?"

"My butler, Karel," Gheria answered. "He didn't answer the door because he's sleeping. Poor fellow, he is very old and has been doing the work of five." He gripped Vares' arm. "Dear Michael," he said, "you have no idea how glad I am to see you."

Vares looked at him worriedly. "I came as soon as I received your message," he said.

"And I appreciate it," Gheria said. "I know how long and hard a ride it is from Cluj."

"What's wrong?" asked Vares. "Your letter only said——"

Quickly, Gheria told him what had happened in the past week.

"I tell you, Michael, I stumble at the brink of madness," he said. "Nothing works! Garlic, wolfsbane, crosses, mirrors, running water—useless! No, don't say it! This isn't superstition nor imagination! This is *happening!* A vampire is destroying her! Each day she sinks yet deeper into that—deadly torpor from which——"

Gheria clenched his hands. "And yet I cannot understand it," he muttered, brokenly, "I simply cannot understand it."

"Come, sit, sit." Doctor Vares pressed the older man into a chair, grimacing at the pallor of him. Nervously, his fingers sought for Gheria's pulse beat.

"Never mind me," protested Gheria. "It's Alexis we must help." He pressed a sudden, trembling hand across his eyes. "Yet how?" he said.

He made no resistance as the younger man undid his collar and examined his neck.

"You, too," said Vares, sickened.

"What does that matter?" Gheria clutched at the younger man's hand. "My friend, my dearest friend," he said, "tell me that it is not I! Do *I* do this hideous thing to her?"

Vares looked confounded. *"You?"* he said. "But——"

"I know, I know," said Gheria, "I, myself, have been attacked. Yet nothing follows, Michael! What breed of horror is this which cannot be impeded? From what unholy place does it emerge? I've had the countryside examined foot by foot, every graveyard ransacked, ever crypt inspected! There is no house within the village that has not been subjected to my search. I tell you, Michael, there is nothing! Yet, there *is* something—something which assaults us nightly, draining us of life. The village is engulfed by terror—and I as well! I never see this creature, never hear it! Yet, every morning, I find my beloved wife——"

Vares' face was drawn and pallid now. He stared intently at the older man.

"What am I to do, my friend?" pleaded Gheria. "How am I to save her?"

Vares had no answer.

* * *

"How long has she—been like this?" asked Vares. He could not remove his stricken gaze from the whiteness of Alexis' face.

"For days," said Gheria. "The retrogression has been constant."

Dr. Vares put down Alexis' flaccid hand. "Why did you not tell me sooner?" he asked.

"I thought the matter could be handled," Gheria answered, faintly. "I know now that it—cannot."

Vares shuddered. "But, surely——" he began.

"There is nothing left to be done," said Gheria. "Everything has been tried, *everything!*" He stumbled to the window and

stared out bleakly into the deepening night. "And now it comes again," he murmured, "and we are helpless before it."

"Not helpless, Petre." Vares forced a cheering smile to his lips and laid his hand upon the older man's shoulder. "I will watch her tonight."

"It's useless."

"Not at all, my friend," said Vares, nervously. "And now you must sleep."

"I will not leave her," said Gheria.

"But you need rest."

"I cannot leave," said Gheria. "I will not be separated from her."

Vares nodded. "Of course," he said. "We will share the hours of watching then."

Gheria sighed. "We can try," he said, but there was no sound of hope in his voice.

Some 20 minutes later, he returned with an urn of steaming coffee which was barely possible to smell through the heavy mist of garlic fumes which hung in the air. Trudging to the bed, Gheria set down the tray. Dr. Vares had drawn a chair up beside the bed.

"I'll watch first," he said. "You sleep, Petre."

"It would do no good to try," said Gheria. He held a cup beneath the spigot and the coffee gurgled out like smoking ebony.

"Thank you," murmured Vares as the cup was handed to him. Gheria nodded once and drew himself a cupful before he sat.

"I do not know what will happen to Solta if this creature is not destroyed," he said. "The people are paralyzed by terror."

"Has it—been elsewhere in the village?" Vares asked him.

Gheria sighed exhaustedly. "Why need it go elsewhere?" he said. "It is finding all it—craves within these walls." He stared despondently at Alexis. "When we are gone," he said, "it will go elsewhere. The people know that and are waiting for it."

Vares set down his cup and rubbed his eyes.

"It seems impossible," he said, "that we, practitioners of a science, should be unable to——"

"What can science effect against it?" said Gheria. "Science which will not even admit its existence? We could bring, into this very room, the foremost scientists of the world and they would say—my friends, you have been deluded. There is no vampire. All is mere trickery."

Gheria stopped and looked intently at the younger man. He said, "Michael?"

Vares' breath was slow and heavy. Putting down his cup of untouched coffee, Gheria stood and moved to where Vares sat slumped in his chair. He pressed back an eyelid, looked down briefly at the sightless pupil, then withdrew his hand. The drug was quick, he thought. And most effective. Vares would be insensible for more than time enough.

Moving to the closet, Gheria drew down his bag and carried it to the bed. He tore Alexis' nightdress from her upper body and, within seconds, had drawn another syringe full of her blood; this would be the last withdrawal, fortunately. Stanching the wound, he took the syringe to Vares and emptied it into the young man's mouth, smearing it across his lips and teeth.

That done, he strode to the door and unlocked it. Returning to Vares, he raised and carried him into the hall. Karel would not awaken; a small amount of opiate in his food had seen to that. Gheria labored down the steps beneath the weight of Vares' body. In the darkest corner of the cellar, a wooden casket waited for the younger man. There he would lie until the following morning when the distraught Dr. Petre Gheria would, with sudden inspiration, order Karel to search the attic and cellar on the remote, nay fantastic possibility that——

Ten minutes later, Gheria was back in the bedroom checking Alexis' pulse beat. It was active enough; she would survive. The pain and torturing horror she had undergone would be punishment enough for her. As for Vares . . .

Dr. Gheria smiled in pleasure for the first time since Alexis and he had returned from Cluj at the end of the summer. Dear spirits in heaven, would it not be sheer enchantment to watch old Karel drive a stake through Michael Vares' damned cuckolding heart!

♥

♠ THE LOVE LETTER

♥

JACK FINNEY

I'VE HEARD OF SECRET DRAWERS in old desks, of course; who hasn't? But the day I bought my desk I wasn't thinking of secret drawers, and I know very well I didn't have any least premonition or feel of mystery about it. I spotted it in the window of a secondhand store near my apartment, went in to look it over, and the proprietor told me where he got it. It

came from one of the last of the big old mid-Victorian houses in Brooklyn; they were tearing it down over on Brock Place, a few blocks away, and he'd bought the desk along with some other furniture, dishes, glassware, light fixtures, and so on. But it didn't stir my imagination particularly; I never wondered or cared who might have used it long ago. I bought it and lugged it home because it was cheap and because it was small; a legless little wall desk that I fastened to my living-room wall with heavy screws directly into the studding.

I'm twenty-four years old, tall and thin, and I live in Brooklyn to save money and work in Manhattan to make it. When you're twenty-four and a bachelor, you usually figure you'll be married before much longer, and since they tell me that takes money, I'm reasonably ambitious and bring work home from the office every once in a while. And maybe every couple weeks or so I write a letter to my folks in Florida. So I'd been needing a desk; there's no table in my phone-booth kitchenette, and I'd been trying to work at a wobbly little end table I couldn't get my knees under.

So I bought the desk one Saturday afternoon, and spent an hour or more fastening it to the wall. It was after six when I finished. I had a date that night, and so I had time to stand and admire it for only a minute or so. It was made of heavy wood, with a slant top like a kid's school desk, and with the same sort of space underneath to put things into. But the back of it rose a good two feet above the desk top, and was full of pigeonholes like an old-style roll-top desk. Underneath the pigeonholes was a row of three brass-knobbed little drawers. It was all pretty ornate; the drawer ends carved, some fancy scrollwork extending up over the back and out from the sides to help brace it against the wall. I dragged a chair up, sat down at the desk to try it for height, then got showered, shaved and dressed and went over to Manhattan to pick up my date.

I'm trying to be honest about what happened, and I'm convinced that includes the way I felt when I got home around two or two-thirty that morning; I'm certain that what happened wouldn't have happened at all if I'd felt any other way. I'd had a good-enough time that evening; we'd gone to an early movie that wasn't too bad, then had dinner, a drink or so and some dancing afterward. And the girl, Roberta Haig, is pretty nice—bright, pleasant, good-looking. But walking home from the subway, the Brooklyn streets quiet and deserted, it occurred to me that while I'd probably see her again, I didn't really care whether I did or not. And I wondered, as I often

had lately, whether there was something wrong with me; whether I'd ever meet a girl I desperately wanted to be with —the only way a man can get married, it seems to me.

So when I stepped into my apartment I knew I wasn't going to feel like sleep for a while. I was restless, half-irritated for no good reason, and I took off my coat and yanked down my tie, wondering whether I wanted a drink or some coffee. Then —I'd half forgotten about it—I saw the desk I'd bought that afternoon, and I walked over and sat down at it, thoroughly examining it for the first time.

I lifted the top, and stared down into the empty space underneath it. Lowering the top, I reached into one of the pigeonholes, and my hand and shirt cuff came out streaked with old dust; the holes were a good foot deep. I pulled open one of the little brass-knobbed drawers, and there was a shred of paper in one of its corners, nothing else. I pulled the drawer all the way out and studied its construction, turning it in my hands; it was a solidly made, beautifully mortised little thing. Then I pushed my hand into the drawer opening; it went in to about the middle of my hand before my finger tips touched the back; there was nothing in there.

For a few moments I just sat at the desk, thinking vaguely that I could write a letter to my folks. And then it suddenly occurred to me that the little drawer in my hand was only half a foot long, while the pigeonholes just above the drawer extended a good foot back.

Shoving my hand into the opening again, exploring with my finger tips, I found a tiny grooved indentation and pulled out the secret drawer which lay in back of the first. For an instant I was excited at the glimpse of papers inside it. Then I felt a stab of disappointment as I saw what they were. There was a little sheaf of folded writing paper, plain white, but yellowed with age at the edges, and the sheets were all blank. There were three or four blank envelopes to match, and underneath them a small, round, glass bottle of ink; and because it had been upside down, the cork remaining moist and tight in the bottle mouth, a good third of the ink had remained unevaporated still. Beside the bottle lay a plain, black wooden pen holder, the pen point reddish-black with old ink. There was nothing else in the drawer.

And then, putting the things back into the drawer, I felt the slight extra thickness of one blank envelope, saw that it was sealed, and I ripped it open to find the letter inside. The folded paper opened stiffly, the crease permanent with age, and even before I saw the date I knew this letter was old.

The handwriting was obviously feminine, and beautifully clear —it's called Spencerian, isn't it?—the letters perfectly formed and very ornate, the capitals especially being a whirl of dainty curlicues. The ink was rust-black, the date at the top of the page was May 14, 1882, and reading it, I saw that it was a love letter. It began:

Dearest! Papa, Mamma, Willy and Cook are long retired and to sleep. Now, the night far advanced, the house silent, I alone remain awake, at last free to speak to you as I choose. Yes, I am willing to say it! Heart of mine, I crave your bold glance, I long for the tender warmth of your look; I welcome your ardency, and prize it; for what else should these be taken but sweet tribute to me?

I smiled a little; it was hard to believe that people had once expressed themselves in elaborate phrasings of this kind, but they had. The letter continued, and I wondered why it had never been sent:

Dear one: Do not ever change your ways. Never address me other than with what consideration my utterances should deserve. If I be foolish and whimsical, deride me sweetly if you will. But if I speak with seriousness, respond always with what care you deem my thoughts worthy. For, oh my beloved, I am sick to death of the indulgent smile and tolerant glance with which a woman's fancies are met. As I am repelled by the false gentleness and nicety of manner which too often ill conceal the wantonness they attempt to mask. I speak of the man I am to marry; if you could but save me from that!

But you cannot. You are everything I prize; warmly and honestly ardent, respectful in heart as well as in manner, true and loving. You are as I wish you to be—for you exist only in my mind. But figment though you are, and though I shall never see your like, you are more dear to me than he to whom I am betrothed.

I think of you constantly. I dream of you. I speak with you, in my mind and heart; would you existed outside them! Sweetheart, good night; dream of me, too.

With all my love, I am,
your HELEN

At the bottom of the page, as I'm sure she'd been taught in school, was written, "Miss Helen Elizabeth Worley, Brooklyn, New York," and as I stared down at it now I was no

longer smiling at this cry from the heart in the middle of a long-ago night.

The night is a strange time when you're alone in it, the rest of your world asleep. If I'd found that letter in the daytime, I'd have smiled and shown it to a few friends, then forgotten it. But alone here now, a window partly open, a cool late-at-night freshness stirring the quiet air—it was impossible to think of the girl who had written this letter as a very old lady, or maybe long since dead. As I read her words, she seemed real and alive to me, sitting—or so I pictured her—pen in hand at this desk, in a long, white, old-fashioned dress, her young hair piled on top of her head, in the dead of a night like this, here in Brooklyn almost in sight of where I now sat. And my heart went out to her as I stared down at her secret, hopeless appeal against the world and time she lived in.

I am trying to explain why I answered that letter. There in the silence of a timeless spring night it seemed natural enough to uncork that old bottle, pick up the pen beside it, and then, spreading a sheet of yellowing old notepaper on the desk top, to begin to write. I felt that I was communicating with a still-living young woman when I wrote:

Helen: I have just read the letter in the secret drawer of your desk, and I wish I knew how I could possibly help you. I can't tell what you might think of me if there were a way I could reach you. But you are someone I am certain I would like to know. I hope you are beautiful, but you needn't be; you're a girl I could like, and maybe ardently, and if I did I promise you I'd be true and loving. Do the best you can, Helen Elizabeth Worley, in the time and place you are; I can't reach you or help you. But I'll think of you. And maybe I'll dream of you, too,

Yours,
JAKE BELKNAP

I was grinning a little sheepishly as I signed my name, knowing I'd read through what I'd written, then crumple the old sheet and throw it away. But I was glad I'd written it—and I didn't throw it away. Still caught in the feeling of the warm, silent night, it suddenly seemed to me that throwing my letter away would turn the writing of it into a meaningless and foolish thing; though maybe what I did seems more foolish still. I folded the paper, put it into one of the envelopes and

sealed it. Then I dipped the pen into the old ink, and wrote "Miss Helen Worley" on the face of the envelope.

I suppose this can't be explained. You'd have to have been where I was and felt as I did to understand it; but I wanted to mail that letter. I simply quit examining my feelings and quit trying to be rational; I was suddenly determined to complete what I'd begun, just as far as I was able to go.

My parents sold their old home in New Jersey when my father retired two years ago, and now they live in Florida and enjoy it. And when my mother cleared out the old house I grew up in, she packed up and mailed me a huge package of useless things I was glad to have. There were class photographs dating from grammar school through college, old books I'd read as a kid, Boy Scout pins; a mass of junk of that sort, including a stamp collection I'd had in grade school. Now I found these things on my hall-closet shelf, in the box they'd come in, and I found my old stamp album.

It's funny how things can stick in your mind over the years; standing at the open closet door, I turned the pages of that beat-up old album directly to the stamps I remembered buying from another kid with seventy-five cents I'd earned cutting grass. There they lay, lightly fastened to the page with a little gummed-paper hinge; a pair of two, mint condition two-cent United States stamps, issued in 1869. And standing there in the hallway looking down at them, I once again got something of the thrill I'd had as a kid when I acquired them. It's a handsome stamp, square in shape, with an ornate border and a tiny engraving in the center; a rider on a galloping post horse. And for all I knew they might have been worth a fair amount of money by now, especially an unseparated pair of two stamps. But back at the desk I pulled one of them loose, tearing carefully through the perforation, licked the back and fastened it to the faintly yellowing old envelope.

I'd thought no further than that; by now, I suppose, I was in almost a kind of trance. I shoved the old ink bottle and pen into a hip pocket, picked up my letter and walked out of my apartment.

Brock Place, three blocks away, was deserted when I reached it; the parked cars motionless at the curbs, the high, late moonlight softening the lines of the big concrete-block supermarket at the corner. Then, as I walked on, my letter in my hand, there stood the old house, just past a little shoe-repair shop. It stood far back from the broken cast-iron fence in the center of its wide weed-grown lot, black-etched in the

moonlight, and I stopped on the walk and stood staring up at it.

The high-windowed old roof was gone, the interior nearly gutted, the yard strewn with splintered boards and great chunks of torn plaster. The windows and doors were all removed, the openings hollow in the clear wash of light. But the high old walls, last of all to go, still stood, tall and dignified in their old-fashioned strength and outmoded charm.

Then I walked through the opening where a gate had once hung, up the cracked and weed-grown brick pavement toward the wide old porch. And there on one of the ornate fluted posts, I saw the house number deeply and elaborately carved into the old wood. At the wide flat porch rail leading down to the walk, I brought out my ink and pen, and copied the number carefully onto my envelope; 972 I printed under the name of the girl who had once lived here, BROCK PLACE, BROOKLYN, NEW YORK. Then I turned toward the street again, my envelope in my hand.

There was a mailbox at the next corner, and I stopped beside it. But to drop this letter into that box, knowing in advance that it could go only to the dead-letter office, would again, I couldn't help feeling, turn the writing of it into an empty, meaningless act; and after a moment I walked on past the box, crossed the street and turned right, suddenly knowing exactly where I was going.

I walked four blocks through the night, passing a hack stand with a single cab, its driver asleep with his arms and head cradled on the wheel; passing a night watchman sitting on a standpipe protruding from the building wall, smoking a pipe; he nodded as I passed, and I nodded in response. I turned left at the next corner, walked half a block more, then turned up onto the worn stone steps of the Wister postal substation.

It must easily be one of the oldest postal substations in the borough; built, I suppose, not much later than during the decade following the Civil War. And I can't imagine that the inside has changed much at all. The floor is marble; the ceiling high; the woodwork dark and carved. The outer lobby is open at all times, as are post-office lobbies everywhere, and as I pushed through the old swinging doors I saw that it was deserted. Somewhere behind the opaque blind windows a light burned dimly far in the rear of the post office, and I had an impression of subdued activity back there. But the lobby itself was dim and silent, and as I walked across the worn stone of its floor, I knew I was seeing all around me precisely what

Brooklynites had seen for no telling how many generations long dead.

The Post Office has always seemed an institution of vague mystery to me; an ancient and worn but still functioning mechanism that is not operated, but only tended by each succeeding generation of men to come along. It is a place where occasionally plainly addressed letters with clearly written return addresses go astray and are lost, to end up no one knows where and for reasons impossible to discover, as the postal employee from whom you inquire will tell you. And its vague air of mystery, for me, is made up of stories—well, you've read them, too, from time to time; the odd little stories in your newspaper. A letter bearing a postmark of 1906 written half a century ago, is delivered today—simply because inexplicably it arrived at some post office along with the other mail, with no explanation from anyone now alive. Or sometimes it's a postcard of greeting—from the Chicago World's Fair of 1893, maybe. And once, tragically, as I remember reading, it was an acceptance of a proposal of marriage offered in 1901—and received today, a lifetime too late, by the man who made it and who married someone else and is now a grandfather.

I pushed the worn brass plate open, dropped my letter into the silent blackness of the slot and it disappeared forever with no sound. Then I turned and left to walk home; with a feeling of fulfillment; of having done, at least, everything I possibly could in response to the silent cry for help I'd found in the secrecy of the old desk.

Next morning I felt the way almost anyone might. Standing at the bathroom mirror shaving, remembering what I'd done the night before, I grinned, feeling foolish but at the same time secretly pleased with myself. I was glad I'd written and solemnly mailed that letter, and now I realized why I'd put no return address on the envelope. I didn't want it to come forlornly back to me with No Such Person, or whatever the phrase is, stamped on the envelope. There'd once been such a girl, and last night she still existed for me. And I didn't want to see my letter to her—rubber-stamped, scribbled on and unopened—to prove that there no longer was.

I was terrifically busy all the next week. I work for a wholesale-grocery concern; we got a big new account, a chain of supermarkets, and that meant extra work for everyone. More often than not I had lunch at my desk in the office and worked several evenings besides. I had dates the two evenings

I was free. On Friday afternoon I was at the main public library in Manhattan, at Fifth Avenue and Forty-second, copying statistics from half a dozen trade publications for a memorandum I'd been assigned to write over the weekend on the new account.

Late in the afternoon the man sitting beside me at the big reading-room table closed his book, stowed away his glasses, picked up his hat from the table and left. I sat back in my chair, glancing at my watch. Then I looked over at the book he'd left on the table. It was a big one-volume pictorial history of New York put out by Columbia University, and I dragged it over, and began leafing through it.

I skimmed over the first sections on colonial and precolonial New York pretty quickly, but when the old sketches and drawings began giving way to actual photographs, I turned the pages more slowly. I leafed past the first photos, taken around the mid-century, and then past those of the Civil War period. But when I reached the first photograph of the 1870's—it was a view of Fifth Avenue in 1871—I began reading the captions under each one.

I knew it would be too much to hope to find a photograph of Brock Place, in Helen Worley's time especially, and of course I didn't. But I knew there'd surely be photographs taken in Brooklyn during the 1880's, and a few pages farther on I found what I'd hoped I might. In clear, sharp detail and beautifully reproduced lay a big half-page photograph of a street less than a quarter mile from Brock Place; and staring down at it, there in the library, I knew that Helen Worley must often have walked along this very sidewalk. "Varney Street, 1881," the caption said; "A typical Brooklyn residential street of the period."

Varney Street today—I walk two blocks of it every night coming home from work—is a wasteland. I pass four cinder-packed used-car lots; a shabby concrete garage, the dead earth in front of it littered with rusting car parts and old tires; and a half dozen or so nearly paintless boardinghouses, one with a soiled card in its window, reading MASSAGE. It's a nondescript joyless street, and it's impossible to believe that there has ever been a tree on its entire length.

But there has been. There in sharp black-and-white, in the book on the table before me, lay Varney Street, 1881, and from the wide grass-covered parkways between the cut-stone curb and sidewalks, the thick old long-gone trees rose high on both sides to meet, intertwine and roof the wide street with green. The photograph had been taken, apparently, from the

street—it had been possible to do that then, in a day of occasional slow-trotting horses and buggies—and the camera was aimed at an angle to one side, toward the sidewalk and the big houses beyond it, looking down the walk for several hundred feet.

The old walk, there in the foreground under the great trees, appeared to be at least six feet wide; spacious enough easily for a family to walk down it four or five abreast—as families did, in those times walk together down the sidewalks under the trees. And beyond the walk, widely separated and set far back across the fine old lawns, rose the great houses, the ten-, twelve- and fourteen-room family houses, two or more stories high, and with attics above them for children to play in and discover the relics of childhoods before them. Their windows were tall, and they were framed on the outside with ornamented wood. And in the solid construction of every one of those lost houses in that ancient photograph there had been left over the time, skill, money and inclination to decorate their eaves with scrollwork; to finish a job with craftsmanship and pride. And time, too, to build huge wide porches on which families sat on summer evenings with palm-leaf fans.

Far down that lovely tree-sheltered street—out of focus and indistinct—walked the retreating figure of a long-skirted puff-sleeved woman, her summer parasol open at her back. Of the thousands of long-dead girls it might have been, I knew this could not be Helen Worley. Yet it wasn't completely impossible, I told myself; this was a street, precisely as I saw it now, down which she must often have walked; and I let myself think that yes, this was she. Maybe I live in what is for me the wrong time, and I was filled now with the most desperate yearning to be there, on that peaceful street—to walk off, past the edges of the scene on the printed page before me, into the old and beautiful Brooklyn of long ago. And to draw near and overtake that bobbing parasol in the distance; and then turn and look into the face of the girl who held it.

I worked that evening at home, sitting at my desk, with a can of beer on the floor beside me; but once more now Helen Elizabeth Worley was in my mind. I worked steadily all evening, and it was around twelve-thirty when I finished; eleven handwritten pages which I'd get typed at the office on Monday. Then I opened the little center desk drawer into which I'd put a supply of rubber bands and paper clips, took out a clip and fastened the pages together, and sat back in my

chair, taking a swallow of beer. The little center desk drawer stood half open as I'd left it, and then, as my eye fell on it, I realized suddenly that of course it, too, must have another secret drawer behind it.

I hadn't thought of that. It simply hadn't occurred to me the week before, in my interest and excitement over the letter I'd found behind the first drawer of the row; and I'd been too busy all week to think of it since. But now I set down my beer, pulled the center drawer all the way out, reached behind it and found the little groove in the smooth wood I touched. Then I brought out the second secret little drawer.

I'll tell you what I think, what I'm certain of, though I don't claim to be speaking scientifically; I don't think science has a thing to do with it. The night *is* a strange time; things *are* different at night, as every human being knows somewhere deep inside him. And I think this: Brooklyn has changed over seven decades; it is no longer the same place at all. But here and there, still, are little islands—isolated remnants of the way things once were. And the Wister postal substation is one of them; it has changed really not at all. And I think that at night—late at night, the world asleep, when the sounds of things as they are now are nearly silent, and the sight of things as they are now is vague in the darkness—the boundary between here and then wavers. At certain moments and places it fades. I think that there in the dimness of the old Wister post office, in the dead of night, lifting my letter to Helen Worley toward the old brass door of the letter drop—I think that I stood on one side of that slot in the year 1959, and that I dropped my letter, properly stamped, written and addressed in the ink and on the very paper of Helen Worley's youth, into the Brooklyn of 1882 on the other side of that worn old slot.

I believe that—I'm not even interested in proving it—but I believe it. Because now, from that second secret little drawer, I brought out the paper I found in it, opened it, and in rust-black ink on yellowing old paper I read:

Please, oh, please—who are you? Where can I reach you? Your letter arrived today in the second morning post, and I have wandered the house and garden ever since in an agony of excitement. I cannot conceive how you saw my letter in its secret place, but since you did, perhaps you will see this one too. Oh, tell me your letter is no hoax or cruel joke! Willy, if it is you; if you have discovered my letter and think to deceive your sister with a prank, I pray you to tell me! But

if it is not—if I now address someone who has truly responded to my most secret hopes—do not longer keep me ignorant of who and where you are. For I, too—and I confess it willingly—long to see you! And I, too, feel and am most certain of it, that if I could know you, I would love you. It is impossible for me to think otherwise.

I must hear from you again; I shall not rest until I do.

I remain, most sincerely,
HELEN ELIZABETH WORLEY

After a long time, I opened the first little drawer of the old desk and took out the pen and ink I'd found there, and a sheet of the note paper.

For minutes then, the pen in my hand, I sat there in the night staring down at the empty paper on the desk top; finally, then, I dipped the pen into the old ink and wrote:

Helen, my dear: I don't know how to say this so it will seem even comprehensible to you. But I do exist, here in Brooklyn, less than three blocks from where you now read this—in the year 1959. We are separated not by space, but by the years which lie between us. Now I own the desk which you once had, and at which you wrote the note I found in it. Helen, all I can tell you is that I answered that note, mailed it late at night at the old Wister station, and that somehow it reached you, as I hope this will too. This is no hoax! Can you imagine anyone playing a joke that cruel? I live in a Brooklyn, within sight of your house, that you cannot imagine. It is a city whose streets are now crowded with wheeled vehicles propelled by engines. And it is a city extending far beyond the limits you know, with a population of millions, so crowded there is hardly room any longer for trees. From my window as I write I can see—across Brooklyn Bridge, which is hardly changed from the way you, too, can see it now—Manhattan Island, and rising from it are the lighted silhouettes of stone-and-steel buildings more than one thousand feet high.

You must believe me. I live, I exist, seventy-seven years after you read this; and with the feeling that I have fallen in love with you.

I sat for some moments staring at the wall, trying to figure out how to explain something I was certain was true. Then I wrote:

Helen: There are three secret drawers in our desk. Into the first you put only the letter I found. You cannot now add something to that drawer and hope that it will reach me. For I have already opened that drawer and found only the letter you put there. Nothing else can now come down through the years to me in that drawer, for you cannot now alter what you have already done.

Into the second drawer, in 1882, you put the note which lies before me, which I found when I opened that drawer a few minutes ago. You put nothing else into it, and now that, too, cannot be changed.

But I haven't opened the third drawer, Helen. Not yet! It is the last way you can still reach me, and the last time. I will mail this as I did before, then wait. In a week I will open the last drawer.

JAKE BELKNAP

It was a long week. I worked, I kept busy daytimes, but at night I thought of hardly anything but the third secret drawer in my desk. I was terribly tempted to open it earlier, telling myself that whatever might lie in it had been put there decades before and must be there now, but I wasn't sure, and I waited.

Then, late at night, a week to the hour after I'd mailed my second letter at the old Wister post office, I pulled out the third drawer, reached in and brought out the last little secret drawer which lay behind it. My hand was actually shaking, and for a moment I couldn't bear to look directly—something lay in the drawer—and I turned my head away. Then I looked.

I'd expected a long letter; very long, of many pages, her last communication with me, and full of everything she wanted to say. But there was no letter at all. It was a photograph, about three inches square, a faded sepia in color, mounted on heavy stiff cardboard, and with the photographer's name in tiny gold script down in the corner: *Brunner & Holland, Parisian Photography, Brooklyn, N. Y.*

The photograph showed the head and shoulders of a girl in a high-necked dark dress with a cameo brooch at the collar. Her dark hair was swept tightly back, covering the ears, in a style which no longer suits our ideas of beauty. But the stark severity of that dress and hair style couldn't spoil the beauty of the face that smiled out at me from that old photograph. It wasn't beautiful in any classic sense, I suppose. The brows were unplucked and somewhat heavier than we are used to. But it is the soft warm smile of her lips, and her

eyes—large and serene as she looks out at me over the years—that make Helen Elizabeth Worley a beautiful woman. Across the bottom of her photograph she had written, "I will never forget." And as I sat there at the old desk, staring at what she had written, I understood that, of course, that was all there was to say—what else?—on this, the last time, as she knew, that she'd ever be able to reach me.

It wasn't the last time, though. There was one final way for Helen Worley to communicate with me over the years, and it took me a long time, as it must have taken her, to realize it. Only a week ago, on my fourth day of searching, I finally found it. It was late in the evening, and the sun was almost gone, when I found the old headstone among all the others stretching off in rows under the quiet trees. And then I read the inscription etched in the weathered old stone: HELEN ELIZABETH WORLEY—1861–1934. Under this were the words, I NEVER FORGOT.

And neither will I.

♥

♠ THE HORSEHAIR TRUNK

♥

DAVE GRUBB

TO MARIUS the fever was like a cloud of warm river fog around him. Or like the blissful vacuum that he had always imagined death would be. He had lain for nearly a week like this in the big corner room while the typhoid raged and boiled inside him. Mary Ann was a dutiful wife. She came and fed him his medicine and stood at the foot of the brass bed when the doctor was there, clasping and unclasping her thin hands; and sometimes from between hot, heavy lids Marius could glimpse her face, dimly pale and working slowly in prayer. Such a fool she was, a praying, stupid fool that he had married five years ago. He could remember thinking that even in the deep, troubled delirium of the fever.

"You want me to die," he said to her one morning when she came with his medicine. "You want me to die, don't you?"

"Marius! Don't say such a thing! Don't ever—"

"It's true, though," he went on, hearing his voice miles above him at the edge of the quilt. "You want me to die. But I'm not going to. I'm going to get well, Mary Ann. I'm not going to die. Aren't you disappointed?"

"No! No! It's not true! It's not!"

Now, though he could not see her face through the hot blur of fever, he could hear her crying; sobbing and shaking with her fist pressed tight against her teeth. Such a fool.

On the eighth morning Marius woke full of a strange, fiery brilliance as if all his flesh were glass not yet cool from the furnace. He knew the fever was worse, close to its crisis, and yet it no longer had the quality of darkness and mists. Everything was sharp and clear. The red of his necktie hanging in the corner of the bureau mirror was a flame. And he could hear the minutest stirrings down in the kitchen, the breaking of a match stick in Mary Ann's fingers as clear as pistol shots outside his bedroom window. It was a joy.

Marius wondered for a moment if he might have died. But if it was death it was certainly more pleasant than he had ever imagined death would be. He could rise from the bed without any sense of weakness and he could stretch his arms and he could even walk out through the solid door into the upstairs hall. He thought it might be fun to tiptoe downstairs and give Mary Ann a fright, but when he was in the parlor he remembered suddenly that she would be unable to see him. Then when he heard her coming from the kitchen with his medicine he thought of an even better joke. With the speed of thought Marius was back in his body under the quilt again, and Mary Ann was coming into the bedroom with her large eyes wide and worried.

"Marius," she whispered, leaning over him and stroking his hot forehead with her cold, thin fingers. "Marius, are you better?"

He opened his eyes as if he had been asleep.

"I see," he said, "that you've moved the pianola over to the north end of the parlor."

Mary Ann's eyes widened and the glass of amber liquid rattled against the dish.

"Marius!" she whispered. "You haven't been out of bed! You'll kill yourself! With a fever like—"

"No," said Marius faintly, listening to his own voice as if it were in another room. "I haven't been out of bed, Mary Ann."

His eyelids flickered weakly up at her face, round and ghostlike, incredulous. She quickly set the tinkling glass of medicine on the little table.

"Then how—?" she said. "Marius, how could you know?"

Marius smiled weakly up at her and closed his eyes, saying nothing, leaving the terrible question unanswered, leaving her

to tremble and ponder over it forever if need be. She was such a fool.

It had begun that way, and it had been so easy he wondered why he had never discovered it before. Within a few hours the fever broke in great rivers of sweat, and by Wednesday, Marius was able to sit up in the chair by the window and watch the starlings hopping on the front lawn. By the end of the month he was back at work as editor of the Daily Argus. But even those who knew him least were able to detect in the manner of Marius Lindsay that he was a changed man—and a worse one. And those who knew him best wondered how so malignant a citizen, such a confirmed and studied misanthrope as Marius could possibly change into anything worse than he was. Some said that typhoid always burned the temper from the toughest steel and that Marius' mind had been left a dark and twisted thing. At prayer meeting on Wednesday nights the wives used to watch Marius' young wife and wonder how she endured her cross. She was such a pretty thing.

One afternoon in September, as he dozed on the bulging leather couch of his office, Marius decided to try it again. The secret, he knew, lay somewhere on the brink of sleep. If a man knew that—any man—he would know what Marius did. It wasn't more than a minute later that Marius knew that all he would have to do to leave his body was to get up from the couch. Presently he was standing there, staring down at his heavy, middle-aged figure sunk deep into the cracked leather of the couch, the jowls of the face under the close-cropped mustache sagging deep in sleep, the heart above his heavy gold watch chain beating solidly in its breast.

I'm not dead, he thought, delighted. But here is my soul—my damned, immortal soul standing looking at its body!

It was as simple as shedding a shoe. Marius smiled to himself, remembering his old partner Charlie Cunningham and how they had used to spend long hours in the office, in this very room, arguing about death and atheism and the whither of the soul. If Charlie were still alive, Marius thought, I would win from him a quart of the best Kentucky bourbon in the county. As it was, no one would ever know. He would keep his secret even from Mary Ann, especially from Mary Ann, who would go to her grave with the superstitious belief that Marius had died for a moment, that for an instant fate had favored her; that she had been so close to happiness, to freedom from him forever. She would never know. Still, it would be fun to use as a trick, a practical joke to set fools like his wife at

their wits' edge. If only he could *move* things. If only the filmy substance of his soul could grasp a tumbler and send it shattering at Mary Ann's feet on the kitchen floor some morning. Or tweak a copy boy's nose. Or snatch a cigar from the teeth of Judge John Robert Gants as he strolled home some quiet evening from the fall session of the district court.

Well, it was, after all, a matter of will, Marius decided. It was his own powerful and indomitable will that had made the trick possible in the first place. He walked to the edge of his desk and grasped at the letter opener on the dirty, ancient blotter. His fingers were like wisps of fog that blew through a screen door. He tried again, willing it with all his power, grasping again and again at the small brass dagger until at last it moved a fraction of an inch. A little more. On the next try it lifted four inches in the air and hung for a second on its point before it dropped. Marius spent the rest of the afternoon practicing until at last he could lift the letter opener in his fist, fingers tight around the haft, the thumb pressing the cold blade tightly, and drive it through the blotter so deeply that it bit into the wood of the desk beneath.

Marius giggled in spite of himself and hurried around the office picking things up like a pleased child. He lifted a tumbler off the dusty water cooler and stared laughing at it, hanging there in the middle of nothing. At that moment he heard the copy boy coming for the proofs of the morning editorials and Marius flitted quickly back into the cloak of his flesh. Nor was he a moment too soon. Just as he opened his eyes, the door opened and he heard the glass shatter on the floor.

"I'm going to take a nap before supper, Mary Ann," Marius said that evening, hanging his black hat carefully on the elkhorn hatrack.

"Very well," said Mary Ann. He watched her young, unhappy figure disappearing into the gloom of the kitchen and he smiled to himself again, thinking what a fool she was, his wife. He could scarcely wait to get to the davenport and stretch out in the cool, dark parlor with his head on the beaded pillow.

Now, thought Marius. Now.

And in a moment he had risen from his body and hurried out into the hallway, struggling to suppress the laughter that would tell her he was coming. He could already anticipate her white, stricken face when the pepper pot pulled firmly from between her fingers cut a clean figure eight in the air before it crashed against the ceiling.

He heard her voice and was puzzled.

"You must go," she was murmuring. "You musn't ever come

here when he's home. I've told you that before, Jim. What would you do if he woke up and found you here!"

Then Marius, as he rushed into the kitchen, saw her bending through the doorway into the dusk with the saucepan of greens clutched in her white knuckles.

"What would you do? You must go!"

Marius rushed to her side; careful not to touch her, careful not to let either of them know he was there, listening, looking, flaming hatred growing slowly inside him.

The man was young and dark and well built and clean-looking. He leaned against the half-open screen door, holding Mary Ann's free hand between his own. His round, dark face bent to hers, and she smiled with a tenderness and passion that Marius had never seen before.

"I know," the man said. "I know all that. But I just can't stand it no more, Mary Ann. I just can't stand it thinking about him beating you up that time. He might do it again, Mary Ann. He might! He's worse, they say, since he had the fever. Crazy, I think. I've heard them say he's crazy."

"Yes. Yes. You must go away now, though," she was whispering frantically, looking back over her shoulder through Marius' dark face. "We'll have time to talk it all over again, Jim. I— I know I'm going to leave him but— Don't rush me into things, Jim dear. Don't make me do it till I'm clear with myself."

"Why not now?" came the whisper. "Why not tonight? We can take a steamboat to Lou'ville and you'll never have to put up with him again. You'll be shed of him forever, honey. Look! I've got two tickets for Lou'ville right here in my pocket on the Nancy B. Turner. My God, Mary Ann, don't make me suffer like this—lyin' abed nights dreaming about him comin' at you with his cane and beatin' you—maybe killin' you!"

The woman grew silent and her face softened as she watched the fireflies dart their zigzags of cold light under the low trees along the street. She opened her mouth, closed it, and stood biting her lip hard. Then she reached up and pulled his face down to hers, seeking his mouth.

"All right," she whispered then. "All right. I'll do it! Now go! Quick!"

"Meet me at the wharf at nine," he said. "Tell him that you're going to prayer meeting. He'll never suspicion anything. Then we can be together without all this sneakin' around. Oh, honey, if you ever knew how much I—"

The words were smeared in her kiss as he pulled her down through the half-open door and held her.

"All right. All right," she gasped. "Now go! Please!"

And he walked away, his heels ringing boldly on the bricks, lighting a cigarette, the match arching like a shooting star into the darkness of the shrubs. Mary Ann stood stiff for a moment in the shadow of the porch vines, her large eyes full of tears, and the saucepan of greens grown cold in her hands. Marius drew back to let her pass. He stood then and watched her for a moment before he hurried back into the parlor and lay down again within his flesh and bone in time to be called for supper.

Captain Joe Alexander of the Nancy B. Turner was not curious that Marius should want a ticket for Louisville. He remembered years later that he had thought nothing strange about it at the time. It was less than two months till the elections and there was a big Democratic convention there.

Everyone had heard of Marius Lindsay and the power he and his Daily Argus held over the choices of the people. But Captain Alexander did remember thinking it strange that Marius should insist on seeing the passenger list of the Nancy B. that night and that he should ask particularly after a man named Jim. Smith, Marius had said, but there was no Smith. There was a Jim though, a furniture salesman from Wheeling: Jim O'Toole, who had reserved two staterooms, No. 3 and No. 4.

"What do you think of the Presidential chances this term, Mr. Lindsay?" Captain Alexander had said. And Marius had looked absent for a moment (the captain had never failed to recount that detail) and then said that it would be Cleveland, that the Republicans were done forever.

Captain Alexander had remembered that conversation and the manner of its delivery years later and it had become part of the tale that rivermen told in wharf boats and water-street saloons from Pittsburgh to Cairo long after that night had woven itself into legend.

Then Marius had asked for Stateroom No. 5, and that had been part of the legend, too, for it was next to the room that was to be occupied by Jim O'Toole, the furniture salesman from Wheeling.

"Say nothing," said Marius, before he disappeared down the stairway from the captain's cabin, "to anyone about my being aboard this boat tonight. My trip to Louisville is connected

with the approaching election and is, of necessity, confidential."

"Certainly, sir," said the captain, and he listened as Marius made his way awkwardly down the gilded staircase, lugging his small horsehair trunk under his arm. Presently the door to Marius' stateroom snapped shut and the bolt fell to.

At nine o'clock sharp, two rockaway buggies rattled down the brick pavement of Water Street and met at the wharf. A man jumped from one, and a woman from the other.

"You say he wasn't home when you left," the man was whispering as he helped the woman down the rocky cobbles, the two carpetbags tucked under his arms.

"No. But it's all right," Mary Ann said. "He always goes down to the office this time of night to help set up the morning edition."

"You reckon he suspicions anything?"

The woman laughed, a low, sad laugh.

"He always suspicions everybody," she said. "Marius has the kind of a mind that always suspicions; and the kind of life he leads, I guess he has to. But I don't think he knows about us—tonight. I don't think he ever *knew* about us—ever."

They hurried up the gangplank together. The water lapped and gurgled against the wharf, and off over the river, lightning scratched the dark rim of mountains like the sudden flare of a kitchen match.

"I'm Jim O'Toole," Jim said to Captain Alexander, handing him the tickets. "This is my wife—"

Mary Ann bit her lip and clutched the strap of her carpetbag till her knuckles showed through the flesh.

"—she has the stateroom next to mine. Is everything in order?"

"Right, sir," said Captain Alexander, wondering in what strange ways the destinies of this furniture salesman and his wife were meshed with the life of Marius Lindsay.

They tiptoed down the worn carpet of the narrow, white hallway, counting the numbers on the long, monotonous row of doors to either side.

"Good night, dear," said Jim, glancing unhappily at the Negro porter dozing on the split-bottom chair under the swinging oil lantern by the door. "Good night, Mary Ann. Tomorrow we'll be on our way. Tomorrow you'll be shed of Marius forever."

Marius lay in his bunk, listening as the deep-throated whistle shook the quiet valley three times. Then he lay smiling and

relaxed as the great drive shafts tensed and plunged once forward and backward, gathering into their dark, heavy rhythm as the paddles bit the black water. The Nancy B. Turner moved heavily away into the thick current and headed downstream for the Devil's Elbow and the open river. Marius was stiff. He had lain for nearly four hours waiting to hear the voices. Every sound had been as clear to him as the tick of his heavy watch in his vest pocket. He had heard the dry, rasping racket of the green frogs along the shore and the low, occasional words of boys fishing in their skiffs down the shore under the willows.

Then he had stiffened as he heard Mary Ann's excited murmur suddenly just outside his stateroom door and the voice of the man answering her, comforting her. Lightning flashed and flickered out again over the Ohio hills and lit the river for one clear moment. Marius saw all of his stateroom etched suddenly in silver from the open porthole. The mirror, washstand, bowl and pitcher. The horsehair trunk beside him on the floor. Thunder rumbled in the dark and Marius smiled to himself, secure again in the secret darkness, thinking how easy it would be, wondering why no one had thought of such a thing before. Except for the heavy pounding rhythm of the drive shafts and the chatter of the drinking glass against the washbowl as the boat shuddered through the water, everything was still. The Negro porter dozed in his chair under the lantern by the stateroom door. Once Marius thought he heard the lovers' voices in the next room, but he knew then that it was the laughter of the cooks down in the galley.

Softly he rose and slipped past the sleeping porter, making his way for the white-painted handrail at the head of the stairway. Once Marius laughed aloud to himself as he realized that there was no need to tiptoe with no earthly substance there to make a sound. He crept down the narrow stairway to the galley. The Negro cooks bent around the long wooden table eating their supper. Marius slid his long shadow along the wall toward the row of kitchen knives lying, freshly washed and honed, on the zinc table by the pump. For a moment, he hovered over them, dallying, with his finger in his mouth, like a child before an assortment of equally tempting sweets, before he chose the longest of them all, and the sharpest, a knife that would sheer the ham clean from a hog with one quick upward sweep. There was, he realized suddenly, the problem of getting the knife past human eyes even if he himself was invisible. The cooks laughed then at some joke one

of them had made and all of them bent forward, their heads in a dark circle of merriment over their plates.

In that instant Marius swept the knife soundlessly from the zinc table and darted into the gloomy companionway. The Negro porter was asleep still, and Marius laughed to himself to imagine the man's horror at seeing the butcher knife, its razor edge flashing bright in the dull light, inching itself along the wall. But it was a joke he could not afford. He bent at last and slipped the knife cautiously along the threadbare rug under the little ventilation space beneath the stateroom door; and then, rising, so full of hate that he was half afraid he might shine forth in the darkness, Marius passed through the door and picked the knife up quickly again in his hand.

Off down the Ohio the thunder throbbed again. Marius stepped carefully across the worn rug toward the sleeping body on the bunk. He felt so gay and light he almost laughed aloud. In a moment it would be over and there would be one full-throated cry, and Mary Ann would come beating on the locked door. And when she saw her lover . . .

With an impatient gesture, Marius lifted the knife and felt quickly for the sleeping, pulsing throat. The flesh was warm and living under his fingers as he held it taut for the one quick stroke. His arm flashed. It was done. Marius, fainting with excitement, leaned in the darkness to brace himself. His hand came to rest on the harsh, rough surface of the horsehair trunk.

"My God!" screamed Marius. "My God!"

And at his cry the laughing murmur in the galley grew still and there was a sharp scrape of a chair outside the stateroom door.

"The wrong room!" screamed Marius. "The wrong room!" And he clawed with fingers of smoke at the jetting fountain of his own blood.

♠ LUCIA'S KISS

RODERICK MacLEISH

THEY CAME IN FROM THE HILLS and the outlying farms. Some came from so great a distance that they arose before dawn and returned to their homes long after the sun had set. But

still they came to Baloe on Sunday for church. Church was the end purpose of everything; it was the citadel of worship, the social center—indeed, it was the very reason that they had migrated to this wild and unplowed land.

And they liked Pastor Chapin. He was a simple man, stern and devout, earnestly seeking to understand their sufferings and guide them to their salvation. The preacher lived alone in his house, observing with strict piety the laws of his sect. All of his energies and zeal had been directed to one end: the defeat of Satan in the Colonies.

To Pastor Chapin the war against the Lord of Evil was *his* war, personally bestowed on him. In some earlier year he had suddenly had a presentiment of the devil, and because of it he had cast aside everything in his grim dedication. He was unmarried, and sought neither love nor friendship, and lived only to banish Old Scratch from the Colonies forever.

Thus it was surprising to his parishioners when, on a sunny May morning in the year 1692, they came in to worship at Baloe, and saw a young and very beautiful girl standing by the parson's side as they left the church. Surely he had not married? No; the question was quickly answered. As each member of the congregation passed by, the girl was introduced as Lucia, daughter of Parson Chapin's late brother from Northtown.

"How nice to have you among us," smiled Mrs. Warren, "and so nice for the parson!"

"A man ought to have a woman in his house!" laughed the huge, burly miller as he shook the girl's hand.

For each, Lucia had a shy, becoming smile and a simple answer. And when they had all passed by, she turned to her uncle.

"You see," he said gravely, "they *do* like you, my dear."

Lucia's dark eyes turned downward and her fair skin reddened. "I didn't come to have them like me," she murmured. "I only want to make you happy, and to help you."

The parson smiled tenderly, "You are a good child," he said. "Come; we'll go to dinner." He locked the church door and, taking the girl's arm, walked homeward.

Never, thought the Reverend Mr. Chapin, had the world seemed so bright. The little town was through its winter. The buttercups and purple corn flowers were blooming, and not far away the river ran clear and sparkling. And now this lovely child had come to make his house gay with her laughter and beauty. With all of this, thought the parson, no evil could ever permeate his parish.

As the weeks passed by, Lucia's beauty did not go unnoticed. Young men came calling at the parson's house to walk out with the girl. But they found little opportunity, for she was busy morning and night, scrubbing, cooking, helping old Mother Avon, the parson's housekeeper, and even assisting the minister in visiting the poor of the parish. And sadly, after a passionate declaration of undying devotion, each suitor turned away. Lucia had no time for them; her only interest was her uncle.

But one was more persistent; Sam Bower had never learned to take no for an answer. Each day he could be found in the minister's house, following Lucia about, joking with Mother Avon, and even helping the parson. It became accepted in the parish house that the young man would cut wood, re-shoe the team, and help with the manual chores. And as the spring turned into summer and the summer to brown, warm autumn, a struggle grew within Lucia. Her growing affection for Sam was obvious, but she seemed determined to remain unmarried, to serve her uncle until the end of his days.

One night, when the minister had retired early, Lucia came into the room where Mother Avon sat sewing by candlelight. The old woman looked up and smiled. "Good evenin', my duck, and are ye not out walkin' with yer young man on this fine night?"

Lucia sat on the long bench beside the fire and shook her head. "I told him to go away," she said softly.

"Now, what a silly thing to do!" cried Mother Avon. "He's a fine one, and the prize of every girl in town!"

"It's too late now," said Lucia, a catch in her gentle voice. "I'll probably never see him again."

"Now, now," the old woman soothed, "you just make up to him and tell him yer sorry, and he'll come back."

"But how can I tell him?" sobbed the girl. "He'll never come back!"

"Ye might send him a note," suggested Mother Avon, resuming her sewing. "Have ye no place where you could leave it?"

Lucia nodded her head. "In the tree—on Camer's Hill."

"Then you just write him one," said Mother Avon, "and take it there; and he'll come for it sure, if I know my lads!"

"But I can't!" wept Lucia. "I can't go there alone at night!" She dried her eyes and looked appealingly at the old woman. "Would you?"

Mother Avon laughed. "It'd be a poor man who'd bother the likes o' me at night. Write it, child, and I'll take it!"

And so the note was written and handed to the old woman. "And where did ye say the place was?" she asked.

"On Camer's Hill, in the trunk of the dead tree."

Mother Avon frowned. " 'Tis a strange place. They say the witches meet there!"

Lucia smiled. "No witch would bother you," she said gently; "they come only for the wicked. . . ."

Sam Bower stood alone in the tavern staring moodily at his tankard of ale. All around him the farmers and workmen were laughing and talking, but there was no joy in big Sam's heart. He was thinking of Lucia, her strange reticence and the quarrel that had finally parted them. In his simple, logical mind there was no reason for Lucia to turn him out. He saw that she obviously loved him, but that very fact seemed to frighten her.

Suddenly the door of the tavern burst open and a girl's scream broke the soft babble of voices. Sam turned quickly, to see Mary Turner, wife of Elias Turner, standing in the doorway. Her hair was loose and tangled, her dress torn, and her eyes wide with fear. She stood paralyzed for a moment, staring wildeyed into the room, her breath coming in choking sobs.

"Elias," she gasped. "Elias . . ." She tottered forward, to fall into her husband's arms.

Swiftly the men gathered about her. A glass of brandy was brought, and presently the terrified girl opened her eyes and looked into their faces. "Elias," she said, her voice low in terror, "I saw it . . ."

"You saw what?"

"Himself . . . I saw . . ." She choked and turned her face into her husband's arm, sobbing hysterically. Gradually she was soothed, and when she turned back to speak again, her eyes were wide. "I was walking to Mother Gammon's. She's been ill. I went to take her broth. Suddenly, just this side of her gate, suddenly I saw a huge hound, a beast, Elias! His eyes were red, flaming, and his mouth dripped molten fire! He came for me, Elias!"

The men gasped. Elias Turner shook his wife roughly. "And then, Mary?"

"I ran . . . I screamed . . . But he was faster than I," she sobbed, "and suddenly I fell. The dog leaped at me, roar-

ing and growling. I threw up my hands as he came for my throat and then . . ."

"Yes!"

"He spoke!"

There was a stunned silence.

"Good God, protect us," muttered one.

"A very devil," said another.

"The Devil himself!" sobbed Mary.

"What did he say?"

Mary Turner choked as she answered: " 'On Camer's Hill . . . the witches fly . . . the first to go . . . the last to die . . .' " And then, sobbing with terror, she threw her arms around her husband's neck and would speak no more.

Slowly the men drew away from her. Fear was in their eyes. They had dreaded this moment; for years they had heard the warnings. Voiced through the land by the stern preachers, roared in the wilderness by Cotton Mather, told again and again from their own pulpit by Parson Chapin. They had heard that Lucifer would come to seize the Colonies, that no man could escape the shadow of the Lord of Evil, and one day he would walk from the forest to claim their souls. They had shuddered at the solemnity of the sermon, and now the autumn night seemed chill as they thought of the warning that had come to them.

"We'd better get the preacher," said one.

"No, wait!" cried another. "Think what it means! 'On Camer's Hill the witches fly, the first to go, the last to die!' There's a witch on the hill. He who gets her first will be spared the longest!"

"Aye! Let's get her!"

And like wind on the wheat the fever spread among them. In a matter of moments they were spilling out into the night, armed with pitchforks and clubs. A few protested but were quickly shouted down. Torches were brought, and suddenly the town was alive with the flickering lights and the shouts of the mob. Swiftly they ran the length of the town and out into the open fields. Sleeping birds rose in the trees as they passed and dogs followed in their wake, howling with excitement. The foot of Camer's Hill was quickly reached, and in an instant the slope was alive with the frenzied mob. They spread in all directions and swarmed up the hillside, and then, suddenly, there was a loud shout.

Crouched among the gnarled roots of a dead tree, her eyes bright with terror, huddled Mother Avon. . . .

Again and again the judge pounded his gavel, and presently the courtroom became quiet. Never before had so many people crowded into the small space; men, women, children had come from miles around as the story spread through the colony. They were gathered half in holiday spirit, half in fear, to view the witch. The terrible meaning of the trial seemed distant in the bright sunlight and the heinousness of the accusation did not fit the old woman who sat slumped before the bench.

"Oyez, oyez!" droned the provost. "The People of the Commonwealth versus Marion de Baun Avon, accused of witchcraft and conspiracy with the forces of evil."

First, the prosecutor spoke, telling the grim story over again. Next, Mary Turner, frightened and refusing to look at Mother Avon, took the stand. In a hushed voice she told of her wild visitation.

At last Mother Avon, herself, spoke. Her voice quavered as she related how she had carried the note for Lucia, and how, when turning away from the tree, she had seen the mob coming for her.

Then the court called Lucia. "Your name is Lucia Chapin?"

"Yes, m'lord."

"And you have heard the testimony of the accused?"

"Yes, m'lord."

"What say you to her charge, that you sent her to the hill with a note for this young man?"

Lucia blushed. "She is a good woman, m'lord, and I am sure—"

The prosecutor smiled gently. "We are not asking that you defend her, my child. Just speak the truth. Did you send her to the hill?"

Lucia's head bowed. She clasped her hands in desperation. When she looked up, there were tears in her eyes. "No, m'lord. I retired very early upon that night. I did not see her after the evening meal was done." Her voice was low and sorrowing.

"That will be all." The prosecutor turned away.

"But, m'lord!" Lucia rose in the stand and looked appealingly at the bench. The prosecutor turned, eying her quizzically. "She has done much good," pleaded the girl earnestly. "I beg you reconsider. She is not guilty of evil."

The prosecutor smiled. "Evil," he said softly, "comes in strange forms."

Suddenly Mother Avon was on her feet. "The girl lies!" she screamed. " 'Twas she that sent me!" The old woman broke

away from those who restrained her and ran to where Lucia stood. She fell on her knees and threw her arms around the girl's legs. "Tell them, child! Don't let them hang me."

In an instant Lucia was on the floor beside her, her arms around the thin old body. "Spare her," she sobbed. "Oh, spare her."

Swiftly the trial moved on as the damning evidence built higher and higher around the old woman. And at last, when Parson Chapin spoke, there was no power left to save her. Triumphantly the old man arose. For years he had fought an invisible enemy, one that dared not show himself before the preacher's might. Now Satan had come into the open for a last, desperate stand.

The parson began his speech in a low, quiet voice. He spoke of the prophecies of Isaiah, of the simple wisdom of the Proverbs, and of the teachings of Paul. Then his voice grew louder as he turned to recounting the fall of Lucifer. And at last his mighty words thundered against the very rafters, filling the courtroom with their exhortation as he demanded the death of the woman who had cast her lot with Satan.

When he had finished, the room was silent. Then the verdict came, and the witch was condemned to die. . . .

Lucia sat quietly in her uncle's living-room. The firelight played on her beautiful eyes and danced in the soft rolls of her hair. The white skin of her cheeks was wet with tears, and she stared straight before her, seeing and hearing nothing.

At last her uncle rose from his chair and put his arm about the grief-stricken girl. "Do not weep, my child," he said gently. "She died in knowledge of her God."

Lucia leaned against him wearily. There were few tears, no more grief would come from her. "Did she suffer?" she asked.

"Through their suffering, the wicked shall find salvation," replied her uncle. "Do not grieve for her. There will be more, many more."

"I—I feel—that I might have saved her," said Lucia softly.

"You would not want to save a witch," Parson Chapin said. "You did her service by telling the truth; for now, perhaps she is with God and has forgiveness for her sins."

Lucia slipped her hand over his arm. "You were wonderful in court. I could not help but be proud."

Parson Chapin smiled. "And I was proud of you."

Lucia leaned against him. "I'm glad we're alone at last. There have been so many people, so much to do."

"I shall have to get a new housekeeper."

"No!" She looked up at him and smiled through her tears.

"I am mistress of this house now, and want no other woman to help me."

He began to say something, but stopped. He began to remember that she was a woman, and then, in another instant, she was his niece, the daughter of his brother. Gently he kissed her and arose. "I shall go to bed now."

She stood with him. "Good night." She put her hands on his arms and drew him to her and kissed his cheek. "When there are others to fight, I will be here, always here." The old man held her for a moment and then went hastily from the room.

Again Lucia sat by the fire, staring into the darkness and seeing nothing. Suddenly there was a knock on the door. It startled Lucia out of her reverie and she rose, to admit Sam Bower.

"Well, Sam," she said, "this is late to come calling."

"I had to see you," he told her. "I saw you in the court."

Lucia sat on the bench again. "It was terrible," she said softly; "the poor woman . . ."

"But she was a witch!" cried Sam. "She deserved to be hanged."

"Do you believe that all evil should be banished?" Lucia suddenly asked him. For a moment her lovely face was hard and her eyes narrow as she waited for his answer.

"Of course," Sam said, "of course."

Lucia said nothing, but turned to look into the fire.

Gently Sam knelt beside her. "Lucia," he said, "don't send me away again." He talked to her for a long time. He told her again that he loved her, he told her about the farm land he would buy, the house he would build for her, and the children they might have.

Suddenly she stood up. The tears were fresh on her cheeks again. "Stop!" she cried desperately. "It can never be. . . . I can't marry you!"

"And why not?" demanded Sam angrily. "I'm as good as any man in Baloe!"

"It isn't that. I didn't come to fall in love; I came to—" Abruptly she stopped speaking and turned away from him.

"What *did* you come for, Lucia?" asked Sam tersely.

"Good night," Lucia said. She did not turn back, but walked quickly from the room, closing the door behind her. . . .

The fall became a cold winter that year, and the prediction of further mischief came true. As the winds howled through

Baloe's deserted streets, the manifestations of witchcraft were everywhere. A tree burst into flame in Piety Chester's farmyard, and Piety died by law before the week was out. In a nearby village three little girls were suddenly seized with fits, and their mother was put to death. All through the colony, the disciples of Satan seemed suddenly busy.

And always Parson Chapin was there. He had become exultant in his battle; restlessly probing every story and outburst, ruthlessly pushing the prosecution of the offenders. Some died screaming their innocence; others fought grimly for life until the rope snuffed out the last spark. From his pulpit the parson thundered out names and accusations, exhorting his congregation and proclaiming that the Devil was abroad in the land.

Lucia stayed close by her uncle's house that winter. She worked as before, scrubbing floors, washing and cooking, seemingly content with no company but his. From time to time Sam came to see her, but she always sent him away. At times, after his visits, Lucia would go into the woods alone, crying bitterly, torn by fears.

Parson Chapin struggled in his own battle against Satan that winter. Suddenly Lucia had seemed more lovely than ever before. Her slim, shy girlhood had grown into the haunting beauty of a mature woman. Each night she waited for him, and by the candlelight of their dinner, her gentle face and strong body seemed overpoweringly desirable. And the preacher fought grimly to be blind to her. Time and time again she protested that she loved no one, not even Sam Bower. Her only love, she said softly, was for her uncle. And in the sleepless nights Parson Chapin puzzled over what form her love took, and hated himself for wondering.

At night he would hear her moving about the house, long after the entire town was asleep. Occasionally he thought he heard voices, Lucia's and others, but always his mind and senses were drugged with weariness, and he dismissed the sounds as dreams. He would not rise to investigate her reason for being awake and about; for he did not trust himself to go to her when the world was dark and still.

And in the town they said that she was dutiful and good. . . .

The spring came late that year, and brought no joy. In the hearts of the people there was a mixture of dread and weariness. The fear of the evil works was still upon them, but they were tired of the man-made terror of the rope. Old friends and loved ones had died, and the people turned to Parson Chapin to question how long it would go on.

But still the preacher thundered from his pulpit and stalked

the streets and countryside in search for his elusive enemy. Always it seemed that Parson Chapin was winning, for even the behavior of the town improved. An old woman who had been a prime liar and gossip suddenly surprised everyone by admitting that she had caused thirteen unhappy homes and had driven her husband to drink, while the husband took the pledge of abstinence and became a deacon in the church.

All of this time, Sam Bower worked on his new land with confidence that Lucia would change her mind. He cut down trees, cleared away fields, and when May brought the yellow and purple flowers to the hills, the foundations of a log cabin were rising on his acres.

Then at last, one rainy night, the fires that tormented Preacher Chapin burst from within him and he rose from his sleepless bed to go to Lucia, who moved about the dark, silent house. For a moment he paused outside the living-room door, his heart pounding wildly, then he silently pushed it open. His heartbeats seemed to stand still and the breath caught in his throat.

The small room was dark, illuminated only by the flickering light of the fire. Lucia sat before the hearth, her back to the door. She was no longer the quiet, dutiful niece. Her long hair was loose, tumbling over her shoulders, gleaming, ebony black in the firelight. She wore a low nightgown and her feet were bare. In her hands she held a small wooden statuette and a knife. Slowly the glittering point of the instrument bit into the little figure. For a moment the girl did not sense the parson in the room, but when she turned, her eyes seemed to gleam with an inner fire and a slow smile played about her lips.

"Lucia!" gasped the preacher.

"Yes?" Her brows arched as she fixed him with her beautiful eyes.

"You *did* send Mother Avon to the mountains," he whispered, "and it was you who—"

"Burned the tree in Piety Chester's farmyard, and spoke in the throats of children," she answered.

"Who are you?" muttered Parson Chapin, backing against the door.

Slowly Lucia rose and smoothed her nightgown with one hand. She was framed against the firelight, beautiful and evil. Her face was in the shadows and only her eyes glowed brightly. "A thousand women," she said softly, "over ten thousand years. When the victims of the Borgias died, it was I who

poured the poison, and when Judas was tempted it was I who held the silver."

"Sister of Satan—Lucia!" whispered the parson, his forehead bright with perspiration. "A name like his—Lucifer—Lucia! Born of my brother and come to—"

"To defeat you," she smiled. "To manifest magic so that many would die, and thus to destroy you by their deaths. To make you loathed through all time as the witch killer of Baloe!"

"But I have found you out!" he cried triumphantly. "And I will destroy you to atone for what I've done!" He lunged toward her, reaching for her slim body.

"Not yet, Matthew Chapin," she purred. Swiftly she grasped him and ripped his shirt front open. Then, with a darting movement, she placed her mouth on his chest. Parson Chapin cried out in pain as her lips burned into his skin. He struggled to push her from him, and she fell back against the table, breathing heavily. "Here!" she cried, shoving the wooden statuette and knife into his hands. Then she ran screaming from the house into the rain.

She stood barefoot in the little street shrieking hysterically. Candles were brought, and soon a half-dozen men were by her side, calming and soothing the sobbing girl. The rain poured over her, wetting her hair and mingling with the tears on her face. "He—he attacked me!" she moaned. "He struck me and tried to kill me!"

Sam Bower placed his arm around her. He spoke to her softly, his words coming with calm assurance: "What happened, Lucia, beloved. What happened?"

"I came into the parlor," she sobbed. "He was by the fire—he was putting a knife into an image. Then I saw the mark on his chest, and he struck me, he tried to kill me!"

The men were silent. They stared in horror at the girl, hardly believing what she told them. Then one of them spoke. " 'Twas he who hanged them," he muttered. " 'Twas the devil's trick!"

"Aye, he hung my Meg!"

"And 'twas he who made the tree burn and the children speak!"

" 'Tis Satan himself!"

Angrily they rushed past the weeping girl and into the house.

Parson Chapin stood numbly beside the table, holding the knife and little statue in his hands. He did not seem to see them there, nor did he protest when their rough hands tore his shirt to expose the smoking scar on his chest. It was burned

deeply into his flesh—the sword with which Lucifer had attacked the city of God. . . .

Gray clouds scudded across the spring sky, and the wind moaned in the newly budding trees. Last year's leaves rustled over the ground, whirling past the heavy stake that stood buried in the earth. By ten in the morning the crowd had gathered silently around the place of execution, and by noon they brought the preacher.

He stood quietly as they tied his arms and piled the brush about him. Some had come in pity; others came believing that they were to see the death of Lucifer himself. And some could only remember what he had done, how he had guided them from his pulpit over the bitter years of the colony's birth.

His sorrowing niece was not present. Lucia had been in the court at his trial, and her pleas for mercy for her uncle had moved the crowd deeply. It was with tears in his eyes that the prosecutor had asked her to desist.

The parson stood quietly as they finished binding him, and then, gently, he began to speak. He asked of them forgiveness for the many who had died at his instigation, he asked forgiveness for his other sins—overzealousness, ambition, and pride. And then, at last, he began to speak of the forces of hell.

Sam Bower turned away from the outskirts of the crowd. He was one who came with loyalty in his heart for the minister. With his head bowed, he walked toward the parish house, the voice of Parson Chapin fading in his ears.

The door was unlocked and he went in without knocking. He entered the living-room, where Lucia sat writing at a little table before the window.

The girl looked up. "I did not hear you come in," she whispered. She was dressed in black and the stern shade of the mourning contrasted against her white skin.

"He is about to die," said Sam gently. "Will you not go and bid him farewell?"

She shook her head. "I cannot," she said, dropping her eyes.

"He was the strongest among us," said Sam. "He was our faith itself."

"Please," she said, "go now."

He moved a step forward. "You have no one. Now will you marry me?"

She shook her head. There were tears in her eyes. "I can never marry you, Sam," she said. "I cannot fall in love—I dare not. I did not come for it."

"That's the second time you've said that," he said, looking at her strangely. "Tell me what you mean and I will go."

Again she shook her head. "Please," she whispered desperately, "pity me and go—immediately."

"Look at me, Lucia!" he demanded. "Look at me and think how happy we might be."

"Please," she implored, "for the love of—"

"Yes!"

"—of Lucia—"

"Can you not say 'God'?"

"Go! Sam—now!" There were tears in her eyes as she turned, pleading, toward him.

"What are you writing?" he demanded.

Quickly her hand slid over the paper before her. "A letter," she said, "to my brother."

"You have no brother, Lucia," he answered grimly. "Let me see it."

He looked down. From beneath her fingers a thin coil of smoke curled as the edges of the paper turned brown and crinkled inward. Suddenly it burst into flame and was soon a smoldering ash beneath her fingers. "Now will you go," she said softly, "and quickly—for your own sake?"

"That's why you fear me," he whispered. "You dare not love a mortal. You dare not love at all!"

"I have tried to turn from you, Sam," she said. "Now, for your own sake, I beg you to go. Already I have damaged myself by sparing you."

Sam looked out the window at the crowd in the square. "You can still save him," he said. "Go—quickly—tell them!"

"No," she said rising; "I cannot—I dare not. It was he whom I came to destroy."

Swiftly Sam took her by the shoulders. Her flesh was warm beneath his fingers and burned as he dug into it. "Look at me, Lucia," he said fiercely.

"No—please—" She turned her head and pressed away from him.

"Lucia! You love me. Look at me!"

Her body shook and tears streamed down her face. Sam held her until she turned her head and looked into his eyes. "Now *I* will burn instead," she whispered. "But for it I will have a kiss."

Her lips burned his cheek as she pressed into him and her eyes were hot and smoldering. Then she drew away and went swiftly toward the door.

"Hurry," he cried, going after her.

She ran across the square, with Sam following closely behind her. The executioner was bending to touch the torch to Parson Chapin's pyre when Lucia's hand seized his wrist and stayed him. "Wait!" she cried. "I must speak!"

"Mistress," said the prosecutor, coming forward, "you cannot save him now."

"Release him," said Lucia firmly. "He is innocent. It was I"—her voice dropped—"who put the mark upon him."

The crowd gasped, but the prosecutor held up his hand. "Go, child," he commanded. "You cannot save him now."

Swiftly Lucia gathered her skirts about her and stepped over the faggots that were piled about the parson. As the crowd swept back she touched his bonds, one by one.

And, as she touched them, they burst into flame and dropped from him. When he was loose she pushed him from the stake.

"Be free!" she cried to him. "You have won!"

She turned to face Sam, who stood at the edge of the crowd. There were tears in her dark eyes and the wind blew in her hair. "I will burn for you," she sobbed. "I should curse you, but I cannot. I can only curse my coming!"

Suddenly, before the astonished eyes of the crowd, the faggots burst into a roaring fire. Higher and higher the flames leaped about her, as if a wind from the bowels of the earth stirred them into an inferno. She stood weeping while the blasting furnace consumed her body. Then, as the long tresses of her hair splintered into flame, she held out her arms toward Sam, and he alone heard her last despairing cry. "I love you," she wept, "I love you."

And all through his life Sam Bower carried her lip marks on his face. But it was an honorable mark, and people looking at it would recall how the sister of Lucifer was defeated in the Colonies by the love of a mortal man.

♥

♠ THE SIGN OF SCORPIO

♥

CHARLES MERGENDAHL

AT FIRST SHE WAS STARTLED by the ringing phone. But then, moving into the hallway, humming a little nursery rhyme, she thought that even a ringing telephone was *something* on this hot, dreary afternoon.

"Helen? . . . Maury Coates. I'm in town for a few days,

and just wanted to make sure you were home before I drove over."

"Maury," she said, and the phone became slippery between her fingers. "Listen, Maury——"

But he'd hung up before she finished.

She put down the receiver and sat twisting her wedding band in an old nervous habit, then rose and moved slowly to the bedroom. She drew a well-read book, *Life by the Stars,* from her own "secret" drawer, and looked up today's date under SCORPIO. Her horoscope warned her to be wary of strangers. Maury was not exactly a stranger. But even so . . .

She stared at her blonde hair, her pouting red lips, her baby-blue eyes in the bedroom mirror. "It's been seven years," she told the eyes, "and he's *not* a stranger, so what are you afraid of now?" Then she turned away and slipped into a cool, ice-blue afternoon dress. It was too tight across her full breasts, but it was cut very conservatively at the neck and shoulders, and she thought, accordingly, that it would do.

Maury arrived at 10 minutes after three. He was dark and lean, wearing slacks and a gay sport shirt that displayed the chocolate tan on his corded arms. "I'd have come before," he said, "but didn't know where you lived until today." He looked at her with those black, knowing eyes, then moved slowly about the room inspecting the furniture, the drapes, her prized collection of tiny dolls along the mantel.

"Would you like a drink?" she asked.

"You *still* haven't grown up."

"Maury?"

"The little girl playing house." Then, "I'd love one, if you'll have one with me."

She tried to control her naturally sensuous movements as she walked to the bar and pulled open the doors. Inside there were two decanters, one marked NED'S and one marked OTHERS. She drew out the OTHERS and poured them both a drink.

"I'm one of the OTHERS?" he said, amused.

"Ned—he doesn't like anything but this very special—very expensive Scotch."

"I remember," he said. "Ned always lived on schedule—liked everything just so." He raised his glass, smiled, said, "Well, sometime I'll have a taste of Ned's." Then he sat on the sofa watching her as she stood motionless, twisting the ring on her finger. He was dangerous, she thought in the long silence. Attractive and charming and very dangerous, as other young girls had discovered too late—as she had nearly discovered too late herself, until a gypsy fortuneteller had warned her barely in

time, and she'd rushed wildly to the safety of Ned's big steadiness.

"How *is* Ned?" he said finally.

"Fine."

"I always liked him, you know. Steady, hard-working. Maybe a little dull——"

"Stop it, Maury!"

"But OK by the sign of Scorpio."

"Now that isn't funny."

"I'm sorry," he said.

"After all, it doesn't hurt to believe in the stars and omens and things like that."

"No . . . And what's your *future*?" he said with his eyes looking into her, through her, undressing her, so she dropped her own eyes to the gold band, twisted constantly between her fingers. She took it off, put it on again, took it off again and stared at the inscription inside the ring. *Till Death Do Us Part.* It had been her own idea, that inscription. *Her* idea, and after the ring had come back from the jewelers, she'd actually taken an oath on it, as she'd taken oaths as a child, kneeling in the grass of the back yard under the light of a full moon:

"I swear, I swear,
By the bright full moon,
To keep this vow,
Or I die too soon."

"Something written in there?" said Maury.

"Something private," she said. "You'd think it was silly." And she was not so frightened now. "He can't touch me now," she whispered to the row of little dolls. "I have a wonderful husband, and I made my vow, 'Till death do us part,' and Maury can't possibly touch me now."

Maury left at 4:30, and she felt an overwhelming relief when he'd gone. She fixed Ned his favorite dinner of corned beef hash, and when he finally arrived home exactly at 5:30 as always, she threw her soft curved self against him, then sat watching him with a touch of wifely irritation while he went through his nightly routine, a routine that never varied, she knew, even on those few occasions when she had been shopping and had not been there to greet him when he arrived home. He hung up his hat; he took off his coat; he said, "There's a ball game on TV." Then he opened the cupboard and made himself his routine drink from his own personal decanter.

"See you had company," he said, lifting the OTHERS.

"Yes, some of the girls." And she wondered why she lied, and

thought that it didn't matter because Maury had come and gone and it was all over now.

That night, passionate, she tried to coax Ned to bed at 9:30. But he preferred watching the ball game, and never went to bed until exactly 10:15 in any case.

The next day was even hotter. She worked lethargically in the morning, dressed in halter and shorts. Then, after lunch, she studied her horoscope. It told her to have confidence. "I have confidence," she told her dolls, and sipped iced tea until the doorbell rang and Maury stepped into the hall before she could protest.

He strode to the bar and made himself a drink. "Someday," he said, tapping Ned's decanter. "Someday." Then he turned and smiled and appraised her body beneath the shorts and halter. "It just doesn't make sense," he said. "A beautiful face—luscious face—and yet you don't even seem to realize it yourself. A little girl collecting dolls."

"Maury," she said firmly. "I don't want you to come here again."

"I'll be leaving town in a couple of days. Maybe tomorrow."

"I don't *want* you here," she repeated, remembering to have confidence.

"We're old friends," he said, "so where's the harm?" His eyes moved over her bare legs and bare midriff and sun-tanned shoulders. "A waste," he said. "A terrible waste."

She started to protest, then finally sat wearily on the sofa and twisted her ring and stared at the row of little dolls.

"Seven years ago," Maury said, "I asked you to run off with me. At the last minute you went to some crazy gypsy, who told you to beware of a tall fellow with black hair. Now wasn't that kind of silly?" Then seriously, after a moment: "I still love you, Helen."

"Till death do us part," she murmured.

"I'm leaving town tomorrow. If you could only understand how I feel—if you could still feel the way you used to—well, we could pick everything up where we left off."

"I swore by the full moon."

"Please think about it," he said. "You're a real woman, Helen, and you need adventure in your life. So stop suffocating yourself because of horoscopes and gypsies." He touched her bare shoulder, and she pulled sharply away. He said, "I'm sorry," really meaning it, she thought. "I'm leaving tomorrow," he said. "But I'll come by here first, and if you still don't want me, well—I know where you live, so I'll come by again and again, because I won't be able to help myself."

"No," she said. "No, *no!*"

"Tomorrow," he said gently, and left.

That night Ned brought her a wooden doll, carved and painted in Mongolia. She named it Sin-Sin and told Ned she loved him and at 10:15 she showed him a passion that profoundly shocked him. "I made you a vow," she whispered, "and nothing —*nothing* will ever make me break it. You'll see," she said. "*He'll* see."

"Who?" Ned asked.

"Never you mind."

"Lord, it's after *eleven,*" he said, and went promptly to sleep, while she lay awake, restless, brooding in the dark.

The next morning, after Ned had gone off to work, she opened her secret drawer and checked her horoscope. "Express your feelings," it read, "but keep your promises." She laughed aloud. It was perfect. She drove to the next town and bought a small bottle of powder with a skull and crossbones on it. She took it home, opened the bar, made sure she had the right decanter, and emptied the powder into the brown liquid. She shook it well and placed it back in the bar. Then she put on a white low-necked linen dress that showed the curve of her breasts, and sat waiting near the little dolls.

The doorbell rang at precisely 20 after three. She held her breath as Maury's eyes found her moist, pouting mouth and then the smooth flesh that hinted at her body beneath the dress.

He said, "You're dressed for traveling," with a touch of disbelief in his voice.

"Yes, I read my horoscope, and it tells me to *express* myself today. And, after all—if you're going to keep coming back—keep wearing me down—why should I fight it any longer? I mean if you still love me—you still want me——"

He strode toward her eagerly, but she slipped provocatively away. "Later," she teased. "Later."

"Shall we get going then?"

"No, I—I've got to pack a bag, you see, and—I'll meet you at the corner of Main and Harvard at five o'clock."

"I'll pick you up here."

"No, it's safer for me to meet you."

"Well—all right then," and he started for the door. But he turned back and said, "How about a little drink? Just one—to sort of—celebrate? I always wanted to taste that stuff of Ned's."

Her heart beat faster. "No," she said hastily. "He'd notice right away, you see, and he'd know something was wrong

and it might spoil everything." She carefully selected the bottle marked OTHERS and poured him a large double drink. "Anybody know you're here?" she asked casually.

"Not a soul."

"Anybody know where we're going? I mean so Ned can't follow?"

"I'm a gay wanderer," he said. "He'll never find us."

"Fine." She smiled and gave him the drink. "It'll take about five minutes," she said.

"What?"

"Nothing, nothing."

"Aren't you drinking?"

"No, I—I don't care for one."

"Well, then—here's to 'later.'" She stood back, twisting the ring on her slippery finger as he downed the whiskey at a gulp.

"Good," he said, "but I hate to do this to Ned. The way he'll feel."

"Now don't worry about Ned."

He started to sit, but she told him to hurry and go now. She'd meet him at five—the corner of Main and Harvard. He said, "All right," and "Boy, that drink really gave me a jolt. The heat, I guess." And then, looking at her with great contentment, he said, "We'll just have to make up for all that wasted time."

"Yes," she agreed softly. She led him to the door, then went to the window and watched his car move up the street. It swerved slightly as he rounded the corner.

At a quarter of five she kissed all her dolls good-by. He was waiting for her. They drove fast out of town, and on the first stretch of open road, he pulled to a stop and tried to kiss her.

"Later," she said. "I'll never break my vow, you see. Till death do us part."

He drove on. But at exactly 5:35, after she knew for certain that Ned had come home and had his single special drink, then she laughed and said "Now" and he stopped the car again, and she threw the ring out the open window into a little patch of weeds.

♥

♠ CLAY-SHUTTERED DOORS

♥

HELEN R. HULL

FOR MONTHS I HAVE TRIED not to think about Thalia Corson. Anything may invoke her, with her languorous fragility, thin wrists and throat, her elusive face with its long eyelids. I can't quite remember her mouth. When I try to visualize her sharply I get soft pale hair, the lovely curve from her temple to chin, and eyes blue and intense. Her boy, Fletcher, has eyes like hers.

To-day I came back to New York, and my taxi to an uptown hotel was held for a few minutes in Broadway traffic where the afternoon sunlight fused into a dazzle a great expanse of plateglass and elaborate show motor cars. The "Regal Eight" —Winchester Corson's establishment. I huddled as the taxi jerked ahead, in spite of knowledge that Winchester would scarcely peer out of that elegant setting into taxi cabs. I didn't wish to see him, nor would he care to see me. But the glimpse had started the whole affair churning again, and I went through it deliberately, hoping that it might have smoothed out into some rational explanation. Sometimes things do, if you leave them alone, like logs submerged in water that float up later, encrusted thickly. This affair won't add to itself. It stays unique and smooth, sliding through the rest of life without annexing a scrap of seaweed.

I suppose, for an outsider, it all begins with the moment on Brooklyn Bridge; behind that are the years of my friendship with Thalia. Our families had summer cottages on the Cape. She was just enough older, however, so that not until I had finished college did I catch up to any intimacy with her. She had married Winchester Corson, who at that time fitted snugly into the phrase "a rising young man." During those first years, while his yeast sent up preliminary bubbles, Thalia continued to spend her summers near Boston, with Winchester coming for occasional week-ends. Fletcher was, unintentionally, born there; he began his difficult existence by arriving as a seven-month baby. Two years later Thalia had a second baby to bring down with her. Those were the summers which gave my friendship for Thalia its sturdy roots. They made me wonder, too, why she had chosen Winchester Corson. He was person-

able enough; tall, with prominent dark eyes and full mouth under a neat mustache, restless hands, and an uncertain disposition. He could be a charming companion, sailing the catboat with dash, managing lobster parties on the shore; or he would, unaccountably, settle into a foggy grouch, when everyone—children and females particularly—was supposed to approach only on tiptoe, bearing burnt offerings. The last time he spent a fortnight there, before he moved the family to the new Long Island estate, I had my own difficulties with him. There had always been an undertone of sex in his attitude toward me, but I had thought "that's just his male conceit." That summer he was a nuisance, coming upon me with his insistent, messy kisses, usually with Thalia in the next room. They were the insulting kind of kisses that aren't at all personal, and I could have ended them fast enough if there hadn't been the complication of Thalia and my love for her. If I made Winchester angry he'd put an end to Thalia's relation to me. I didn't, anyway, want her to know what a fool he was. Of course she did know, but I thought then that I could protect her.

There are, I have decided, two ways with love. You can hold one love, knowing that, if it is a living thing, it must develop and change. That takes maturity, and care, and a consciousness of the other person. That was Thalia's way. Or you enjoy the beginning of love and, once you're past that, you have to hunt for a new love, because the excitement seems to be gone. Men like Winchester, who use all their brains on their jobs, never grow up; they go on thinking that preliminary stir and snap is love itself. Cut flowers, that was Winchester's idea, while to Thalia love was a tree.

But I said Brooklyn Bridge was the point at which the affair had its start. It seems impossible to begin there, or anywhere, as I try to account for what happened. Ten years after the summer when Winchester made himself such a nuisance—that last summer the Corsons spent at the Cape—I went down at the end of the season for a week with Thalia and the children at the Long Island place. Winchester drove out for the week-end. The children were mournful because they didn't wish to leave the shore for school; a sharp September wind brought rain and fog down the Sound, and Winchester nourished all that Sunday a disagreeable grouch. I had seen nothing of them for most of the ten intervening years, as I had been first in France and then in China, after feature-article stuff. The week had been pleasant: good servants, comfortable house, a half-moon of white beach below the drop of lawn; Thalia

a stimulating listener, with Fletcher, a thin, eager boy of twelve, like her in his intensity of interest. Dorothy, a plump, pink child of ten, had no use for stories of French villages or Chinese temples. Nug, the wire-haired terrier, and her dolls were more immediate and convincing. Thalia was thin and non-committal, except for her interest in what I had seen and done. I couldn't, for all my affection, establish any real contact. She spoke casually of the town house, of dinners she gave for Winchester, of his absorption in business affairs. But she was sheathed in polished aloofness and told me nothing of herself. She did say, one evening, that she was glad I was to be in New York that winter. Winchester, like his daughter Dorothy, had no interest in foreign parts once he had ascertained that I hadn't even seen the Chinese quarters of the motor company in which he was concerned. He had an amusing attitude toward me: careful indifference, no doubt calculated to put me in my place as no longer alluring. Thalia tried to coax him into listening to some of my best stories. "Tell him about the bandits, Mary"—but his sulkiness brought, after dinner, a casual explanation from her, untinged with apology. "He's working on an enormous project, a merging of several companies, and he's so soaked in it he can't come up for a breath."

In the late afternoon the maid set out high tea for us, before our departure for New York. Thalia suggested that perhaps one highball was enough if Winchester intended to drive over the wet roads. Win immediately mixed a second, asking if she had ever seen him in the least affected. "Be better for you than tea before a long damp drive, too." He clinked the ice in his glass. "Jazz you up a bit." Nug was begging for food and Thalia, bending to give him a corner of her sandwich, apparently did not hear Winchester. He looked about the room, a smug, owning look. The fire and candlelight shone in the heavy waxed rafters, made silver beads of the rain on the French windows. I watched him—heavier, more dominant, his prominent dark eyes and his lips sullen, as if the whisky banked up his temper rather than appeased it.

Then Jim, the gardener, brought the car to the door; the children scrambled in. Dorothy wanted to take Nug, but her father said not if she wanted to sit with him and drive.

"How about chains, sir?" Jim held the umbrella for Thalia.

"Too damned noisy. Don't need them." Winchester slammed the door and slid under the wheel. Thalia and I, with Fletcher between us, sat comfortably in the rear.

"I like it better when Walter drives, don't you, Mother?" said Fletcher as we slid down the drive out to the road.

"Sh—Father likes to drive. And Walter likes Sunday off, too." Thalia's voice was cautious.

"It's too dark to see anything."

"I can see lots," announced Dorothy, whereupon Fletcher promptly turned the handle that pushed up the glass between the chauffeur's seat and the rear.

The heavy car ran smoothly over the wet narrow road, with an occasional rumble and flare of headlights as some car swung past. Not until we reached the turnpike was there much traffic. There Winchester had to slacken his speed for other shiny beetles slipping along through the rain. Sometimes he cut past a car, weaving back into line in the glaring teeth of a car rushing down on him, and Fletcher would turn inquiringly toward his mother. The gleaming, wet darkness and the smooth motion made me drowsy, and I paid little heed until we slowed in a congestion of cars at the approach to the bridge. Far below on the black river, spaced red and white stars suggested slow-moving tugs, and beyond, faint lights splintered in the rain hinted at the city.

"Let's look for the cliff dwellers, Mother."

Thalia leaned forward, her fine, sharp profile dimly outlined against the shifting background of arches, and Fletcher slipped to his feet, his arm about her neck. "There!"

We were reaching the New York end of the bridge, and I had a swift glimpse of their cliff dwellers—lights in massed buildings, like ancient camp fires along a receding mountain side. Just then Winchester nosed out of the slow line, Dorothy screamed, the light from another car tunneled through our windows, the car trembled under the sudden grip of brakes, and like a crazy top spun sickeningly about, with a final thud against the stone abutment. A shatter of glass, a confusion of motor horns about us, a moment while the tautness of shock held me rigid.

Around me that periphery of turmoil—the usual recriminations, "What the hell you think you're doing?"—the shriek of a siren on an approaching motor cycle. Within the circle I tried to move across the narrow space of the car. Fletcher was crying; vaguely I knew that the door had swung open, that Thalia was crouching on her knees, the rain and the lights pouring on her head and shoulders; her hat was gone, her wide fur collar looked like a drenched and lifeless animal. "Hush, Fletcher." I managed to force movement into my stiff body. "Are you hurt? Thalia——" Then outside Winchester, with the bristling fury of panic, was trying to lift her drooping head. "Thalia! My God, you aren't hurt!" Someone focused a

searchlight on the car as Winchester got his arms about her and lifted her out through the shattered door.

Over the springing line of the stone arch I saw the cliff dwellers' fires and I thought as I scrambled out to follow Winchester, "She was leaning forward, looking at those, and that terrific spin of the car must have knocked her head on the door as it lurched open."

"Lay her down, man!" An important little fellow had rushed up, a doctor evidently. "Lay her down, you fool!" Someone threw down a robe, and Winchester, as if Thalia were a drowned feather, knelt with her, laid her there on the pavement. I was down beside her and the fussy little man also. She did look drowned, drowned in that beating sea of tumult, that terrific honking of motors, unwilling to stop an instant even for—was it death? Under the white glare of headlights her lovely face had the empty shallowness, the husklikeness of death. The little doctor had his pointed beard close to her breast; he lifted one of her long eyelids. "She's just fainted, eh, doctor?" Winchester's angry voice tore at him.

The little man rose slowly. "She your wife? I'm sorry. Death must have been instantaneous. A blow on the temple."

With a kind of roar Winchester was down there beside Thalia, lifting her, her head lolling against his shoulder, his face bent over her. "Thalia! Thalia! Do you hear? Wake up!" I think he even shook her in his baffled fright and rage. "Thalia, do you hear me? I want you to open your eyes. You weren't hurt. That was nothing." And then, "Dearest, you must!" and more words, frantic, wild words, mouthed close to her empty face. I touched his shoulder, sick with pity, but he staggered up to his feet, lifting her with him. Fletcher pressed shivering against me, and I turned for an instant to the child. Then I heard Thalia's voice, blurred and queer, "You called me, Win?" and Winchester's sudden, triumphant laugh. She was standing against his shoulder, still with that husklike face, but she spoke again, "You did call me?"

"Here, let's get out of this." Winchester was again the efficient, competent man of affairs. The traffic cops were shouting, the lines of cars began to move. Winchester couldn't start his motor. Something had smashed. His card and a few words left responsibility with an officer, and even as an ambulance shrilled up, he was helping Thalia into a taxi. "You take the children, will you?" to me, and "Get her another taxi, will you?" to the officer. He had closed the taxi door after himself, and was gone, leaving us to the waning curiosity of passing cars. As we rode off in a second taxi, I had a glimpse of the

little doctor, his face incredulous, his beard wagging, as he spoke to the officer.

Dorothy was, characteristically, tearfully indignant that her father had left her to me. Fletcher was silent as we bumped along under the elevated tracks, but presently he tugged at my sleeve, and I heard his faint whisper. "What is it?" I asked.

"Is my mother really dead?" he repeated.

"Of course not, Fletcher. You saw her get into the cab with your father."

"Why didn't Daddy take us too?" wailed Dorothy, and I had to turn to her, although my nerves echoed her question.

The house door swung open even as the taxi bumped the curb, and the butler hurried out with an umbrella which we were too draggled to need.

"Mr. Corson instructed me to pay the man, madam." He led us into the hall, where a waiting maid popped the children at once into the tiny elevator.

"Will you wait for the elevator, madam? The library is one flight." The butler led me up the stairs, and I dropped into a low chair near the fire, vaguely aware of the long, narrow room, with discreet gold of the walls giving back light from soft lamps. "I'll tell Mr. Corson you have come."

"Is Mrs. Corson—does she seem all right?" I asked.

"Quite, madam. It was a fortunate accident, with no one hurt."

Well, perhaps it had addled my brain! I waited in a kind of numbness for Winchester to come.

Presently he strode in, his feet silent on the thick rugs.

"Sorry," he began, abruptly. "I wanted to look the children over. Not a scratch on them. You're all right, of course?"

"Oh, yes. But Thalia——"

"She won't even have a doctor. I put her straight to bed —she's so damned nervous, you know. Hot-water bottles . . . she was cold. I think she's asleep now. Said she'd see you in the morning. You'll stay here of course." He swallowed in a gulp the whisky he had poured. "Have some, Mary? Or would you like something hot?"

"No, thanks. If you're sure she's all right I'll go to bed."

"Sure?" His laugh was defiant. "Did that damn fool on the bridge throw a scare into you? He gave me a bad minute, I'll say. If that car hadn't cut in on me—I told Walter last week the brakes needed looking at. They shouldn't grab like that. Might have been serious."

"Since it wasn't—" I rose, wearily, watching him pour amber

liquid slowly into his glass—"if you'll have someone show me my room——"

"After Chinese bandits, a little skid ought not to matter to you." His prominent eyes gleamed hostilely at me; he wanted some assurance offered that the skidding wasn't his fault, that only his skill had saved all our lives.

"I can't see Thalia?" I said.

"She's asleep. Nobody can see her." His eyes moved coldly from my face, down to my muddy shoes. "Better give your clothes to the maid for pressing. You're smeared quite a bit."

I woke early, with clear September sun at the windows of the room, with blue sky behind the sharp city contours beyond the windows. There was none too much time to make the morning train for Albany, where I had an engagement that day, an interview for an article. The maid who answered my ring insisted on serving breakfast to me in borrowed elegance of satin negligee. Mrs. Corson was resting, and would see me before I left. Something—the formality and luxury, the complicated household so unlike the old days at the Cape—accented the queer dread which had filtered all night through my dreams.

I saw Thalia for only a moment. The heavy silk curtains were drawn against the light and in the dimness her face seemed to gather shadows.

"Are you quite all right, Thalia?" I hesitated beside her bed, as if my voice might tear apart the veils of drowsiness in which she rested.

"Why, yes——" as if she wondered. Then she added, so low that I wasn't sure what I heard, "It is hard to get back in."

"What, Thalia?" I bent toward her.

"I'll be myself once I've slept enough." Her voice was clearer. "Come back soon, won't you, Mary?" Then her eyelids closed and her face merged into the shadows of the room. I tiptoed away, thinking she slept.

It was late November before I returned to New York. Free-lancing has a way of drawing herrings across your trail and, when I might have drifted back in early November, a younger sister wanted me to come home to Arlington for her marriage. I had written to Thalia, first a note of courtesy for my week with her, and then a letter begging for news. Like many people of charm, she wrote indifferent letters, stiff and childlike, lacking in her personal quality. Her brief reply was more unsatisfactory than usual. The children were away in school, lots of cold rainy weather, everything was going well. At the end, in writing unlike hers, as if she scribbled the line in haste, "I am

lonely. When are you coming?" I answered that I'd show up as soon as the wedding was over.

The night I reached Arlington was rainy, too, and I insisted upon a taxi equipped with chains. My brother thought that amusing, and at dinner gave the family an exaggerated account of my caution. I tried to offer him some futile sisterly advice and, to point up my remarks, told about that drive in from Long Island with the Corsons. I had never spoken of it before; I found that an inexplicable inhibition kept me from making much of a story.

"Well, nothing happened, did it?" Richard was triumphant.

"A great deal might have," I insisted. "Thalia was stunned, and I was disagreeably startled."

"Thalia was stunned, was she?" An elderly cousin of ours from New Jersey picked out that item. I saw her fitting it into some pigeonhole, but she said nothing until late that evening when she stopped at the door of my room.

"Have you seen Thalia Corson lately?" she asked.

"I haven't been in New York since September."

She closed the door and lowered her voice, a kind of avid curiosity riding astride the decorous pity she expressed.

"I called there, one day last week. I didn't know what was the matter with her. I hadn't heard of that accident."

I waited, an old antagonism for my proper cousin blurring the fear that shot up through my thoughts.

"Thalia was always *individual,* of course." She used the word like a reproach. "But she had *savoir faire.* But now she's —well—*queer.* Do you suppose her head was affected?"

"How is she queer?"

"She looks miserable, too. Thin and white."

"But how——"

"I am telling you, Mary. She was quite rude. First she didn't come down for ever so long, although I sent up word that I'd come up to her room if she was resting. Then her whole manner —well, I was really offended. She scarcely heard a word I said to her, just sat with her back to a window so I couldn't get a good look at her. When I said, 'You don't look like yourself,' she actually sneered. 'Myself?' she said. 'How do you know?' Imagine! I tried to chatter along as if I noticed nothing. I flatter myself I can manage awkward moments rather well. But Thalia sat there and I am sure she muttered under her breath. Finally I rose to go and I said, meaning well, 'You'd better take a good rest. You look half dead.' Mary, I wish you'd seen the look she gave me! Really I was frightened. Just then their dog came in, you know, Dorothy's little terrier. Thalia used to

be silly about him. Well, she actually tried to hide in the folds of the curtain, and I don't wonder! The dog was terrified at her. He crawled on his belly out of the room. Now she must have been cruel to him if he acts like that. I think Winchester should have a specialist. I didn't know how to account for any of it; but of course a blow on the head can affect a person."

Fortunately my mother interrupted us just then, and I didn't, by my probable rudeness, give my cousin reason to suppose that the accident had affected me, too. I sifted through her remarks and decided they might mean only that Thalia found her more of a bore than usual. As for Nug, perhaps he retreated from the cousin! During the next few days the house had so much wedding turmoil that she found a chance only for a few more dribbles: one that Thalia had given up all her clubs—she had belonged to several—the other that she had sent the children to boarding schools instead of keeping them at home. "Just when her husband is doing so well, too!"

I was glad when the wedding party had departed, and I could plan to go back to New York. Personally I think a low-caste Chinese wedding is saner and more interesting than a modern American affair. My cousin "should think I could stay home with the family," and "couldn't we go to New York together, if I insisted upon gadding off?" We couldn't. I saw to that. She hoped that I'd look up Thalia. Maybe I could advise Winchester about a specialist.

I did telephone as soon as I got in. That sentence, "I am lonely," in her brief note kept recurring. Her voice sounded thin and remote, a poor connection, I thought. She was sorry. She was giving a dinner for Winchester that evening. The next day?

I had piles of proof to wade through that next day, and it was late afternoon when I finally went to the Corson house. The butler looked doubtful but I insisted, and he left me in the hall while he went off with my card. He returned, a little smug in his message: Mrs. Corson was resting and had left word she must not be disturbed. Well, you can't protest to a perfect butler, and I started down the steps, indignant, when a car stopped in front of the house, a liveried chauffeur opened the door, and Winchester emerged. He glanced at me in the twilight and extended an abrupt hand.

"Would Thalia see you?" he asked.

"No." For a moment I hoped he might convoy me past the butler. "Isn't she well? She asked me to come to-day."

"I hoped she'd see you." Winchester's hand smoothed at his little mustache. "She's just tired from her dinner last night.

She over-exerted herself, was quite the old Thalia." He looked at me slowly in the dusk, and I had a brief feeling that he was really looking at me, no, *for* me, for the first time in all our meetings, as if he considered me without relation to himself for once. "Come in again, will you?" He thrust away whatever else he thought of saying. "Thalia really would like to see you. Can I give you a lift?"

"No thanks, I need a walk." As I started off I knew the moment had just missed some real significance. If I had ventured a question . . . but, after all, what could I ask him? He had said that Thalia was "just tired." That night I sent a note to her, saying I had called and asking when I might see her.

She telephoned me the next day. Would I come in for Thanksgiving? The children would be home, and she wanted an old-fashioned day, everything but the sleigh ride New York couldn't furnish. Dinner would be at six, for the children; perhaps I could come in early. I felt a small grievance at being put off for almost a week, but I promised to come.

That was the week I heard gossip about Winchester, in the curious devious way of gossip. Atlantic City, and a gaudy lady. Someone having an inconspicuous fortnight of convalescence there had seen them. I wasn't surprised, except perhaps that Winchester chose Atlantic City. Thalia was too fine; he couldn't grow up to her. I wondered how much she knew. She must, years ago, with her sensitiveness, have discovered that Winchester was stationary so far as love went and, being stationary himself, was inclined to move the object toward which he directed his passion.

On Thursday, as I walked across Central Park, gaunt and deserted in the chilly afternoon light, I decided that Thalia probably knew more about Winchester's affairs than gossip had given me. Perhaps that was why she had sent the children away. He had always been conventionally discreet, but discretion would be a tawdry coin among Thalia's shining values.

I was shown up to the nursery, with a message from Thalia that she would join me there soon. Fletcher seemed glad to see me, in a shy, excited way, and stood close to my chair while Dorothy wound up her phonograph for a dance record and pirouetted about us with her doll.

"Mother keeps her door tight locked all the time," whispered Fletcher doubtfully. "We can't go in. This morning I knocked and knocked but no one answered."

"Do you like your school?" I asked cheerfully.

"I like my home better." His eyes, so like Thalia's with their

long, arched lids, had young bewilderment under their lashes.

"See me!" called Dorothy. "Watch me do this!"

While she twirled I felt Fletcher's thin body stiffen against my arm, as if a kind of panic froze him. Thalia stood in the doorway. Was the boy afraid of her? Dorothy wasn't. She cried, "See me, Mother! Look at me!" and in her lusty confusion, I had a moment to look at Thalia before she greeted me. She was thin, but she had always been that. She did not heed Dorothy's shrieks, but watched Fletcher, a kind of slanting dread on her white, proud face. I had thought, that week on Long Island, that she shut herself away from me, refusing to restore the intimacy of ten years earlier. But now a stiff loneliness hedged her as if she were rimmed in ice and snow. She smiled. "Dear Mary," she said. At the sound of her voice I lost my slightly cherished injury that she had refused earlier to see me. "Let's go down to the library," she went on. "It's almost time for the turkey." I felt Fletcher break his intent watchfulness with a long sigh, and as the children went ahead of us, I caught at Thalia's arm. "Thalia——" She drew away, and her arm, under the soft flowing sleeve of dull blue stuff, was so slight it seemed brittle. I thought suddenly that she must have chosen that gown because it concealed so much beneath its lovely embroidered folds. "You aren't well, Thalia. What *is* it?"

"Well enough! Don't fuss about me." And even as I stared reproachfully she seemed to gather vitality, so that the dry pallor of her face became smooth ivory and her eyes were no longer hollow and distressed. "Come."

The dinner was amazingly like one of our old holidays. Winchester wore his best mood, the children were delighted and happy. Thalia, under the gold flames of the tall black candles, was a gracious and lovely hostess. I almost forgot my troublesome anxiety, wondering whether my imagination hadn't been playing me tricks.

We had coffee by the library fire and some of Winchester's old Chartreuse. Then he insisted upon exhibiting his new radio. Thalia demurred, but the children begged for a concert. "This is their party, Tally!" Winchester opened the doors of the old teakwood cabinet which housed the apparatus. Thalia sank back into the shadows of a wing chair, and I watched her over my cigarette. Off guard, she had relaxed into strange apathy. Was it the firelight or my unaccustomed Chartreuse? Her features seemed blurred as if a clumsy hand trying to trace a drawing made uncertain outlines. Strange groans and whirs from the radio.

"Win, I can't stand it!" Her voice dragged from some great distance. "Not to-night." She swayed to her feet, her hands restless under the loose sleeves.

"Static," growled Winchester. "Wait a minute."

"No!" Again it was as if vitality flowed into her. "Come, children. You have had your party. Time to go upstairs. I'll go with you."

They were well trained, I thought. Kisses for their father, a curtsy from Dorothy for me, and a grave little hand extended by Fletcher. Then Winchester came toward the fire as the three of them disappeared.

"You're good for Thalia," he said, in an undertone. "She's —well, what do you make of her?"

"Why?" I fenced, unwilling to indulge him in my vague anxieties.

"You saw how she acted about the radio. She has whims like that. Funny, she was herself at dinner. Last week she gave a dinner for me, important affair, pulled it off brilliantly. Then she shut herself up and won't open her door for days. I can't make it out. She's thin——"

"Have you had a doctor?" I asked, banally.

"That's another thing. She absolutely refuses. Made a fool of me when I brought one here. Wouldn't unlock her door. Says she just wants to rest. But"—he glanced toward the door—"do you know that fool on the bridge . . . that little runt? The other night, I swear I saw him rushing down the steps as I came home. Thalia just laughed when I asked about it."

Something clicked in my thoughts, a quick suspicion, drawing a parallel between her conduct and that of people I had seen in the East. Was it some drug? That lethargy, and the quick spring into vitality? Days behind a closed door——

"I wish you'd persuade her to go off for a few weeks. I'm frightfully pressed just now, in an important business matter, but if she'd go off—maybe you'd go with her?"

"Where, Winchester?" We both started, with the guilt of conspirators. Thalia came slowly into the room. "Where shall I go? Would you suggest—Atlantic City?"

"Perhaps. Although some place further south this time of year——" Winchester's imperturbability seemed to me far worse than some slight sign of embarrassment; it marked him as so rooted in successful deceit whether Thalia's inquiry were innocent or not. "If Mary would go with you. I can't get away just now."

"I shall not go anywhere until your deal goes through. Then——" Thalia seated herself again in the wing chair. The

hand she lifted to her cheek, fingers just touching her temple beneath the soft drift of hair, seemed transparent against the firelight. "Have you told Mary about your deal? Winchester plans to be the most important man on Automobile Row." Was there mockery in her tone? "I can't tell you the details, but he's buying out all the rest."

"Don't be absurd. Not all of them. It's a big merging of companies, that's all."

"We entertain the lords at dinner, and in some mysterious way that smooths the merging. It makes a wife almost necessary."

"Invite Mary to the next shebang, and let her see how well you do it." Winchester was irritated. "For all your scoffing, there's as much politics to being president of such a concern as of the United States."

"Yes, I'll invite Mary. Then she'll see that you don't really want to dispense with me—yet."

"Good God, I meant for a week or two."

As Winchester, lighting a cigarette, snapped the head from several matches in succession, I moved my chair a little backward, distressed. There was a thin wire of significance drawn so taut between the two that I felt at any moment it might splinter in my face.

"It's so lucky"—malice flickered on her thin face—"that you weren't hurt in that skid on the bridge, Mary. Winchester would just have tossed you in the river to conceal your body."

"If you're going over that again!" Winchester strode out of the room. As Thalia turned her head slightly to watch him, her face and throat had the taut rigidity of pain so great that it congeals the nerves.

I was silent. With Thalia I had never dared intrude except when she admitted me. In another moment she too had risen. "You'd better go home, Mary," she said slowly. "I might tell you things you wouldn't care to live with."

I tried to touch her hand, but she retreated. If I had been wiser or more courageous, I might have helped her. I shall always have that regret, and that can't be much better to live with than whatever she might have told me. All I could say was stupidly, "Thalia, if there's anything I can do! You know I love you."

"Love? That's a strange word," she said, and her laugh in the quiet room was like the shrilling of a grasshopper on a hot afternoon. "One thing I will tell you." (She stood now on the stairway above me.) "Love has no power. It never shouts out across great space. Only fear and self-desire are strong."

Then she had gone, and the butler appeared silently, to lead me to the little dressing room.

"The car is waiting for you, madam," he assured me, opening the door. I didn't want it, but Winchester was waiting, too, hunched angrily in a corner.

"That's the way she acts," he began. "Now you've seen her I'll talk about it. Thalia never bore grudges, you know that."

"It seems deeper than a grudge," I said cautiously.

"That reference to the . . . the accident. That's a careless remark I made. I don't even remember just what I said. Something entirely inconsequential. Just that it was damned lucky no one was hurt when I was putting this merger across. You know if it'd got in the papers it would have queered me. Wrecking my own car . . . there's always a suspicion you've been drinking. She picked it up and won't drop it. It's like a fixed idea. If you can suggest something. I want her to see a nerve specialist. What does she do behind that locked door?"

"What about Atlantic City?" I asked, abruptly. I saw his dark eyes bulge, trying to ferret out my meaning, there in the dusky interior of the car.

"A week there with you might do her good." That was all he would say, and I hadn't courage enough to accuse him, even in Thalia's name.

"At least you'll try to see her again," he said, as the car stopped in front of my apartment house.

I couldn't sleep that night. I felt that just over the edge of my squirming thoughts there lay clear and whole the meaning of it all, but I couldn't reach past thought. And then, stupidly enough, I couldn't get up the next day. Just a feverish cold, but the doctor insisted on a week in bed and subdued me with warnings about influenza.

I had begun to feel steady enough on my feet to consider venturing outside my apartment when the invitation came, for a formal dinner at the Corsons'. Scrawled under the engraving was a line, "Please come. T." I sent a note, explaining that I had been ill, and that I should come—the dinner was a fortnight away—unless I stayed too wobbly.

I meant that night to arrive properly with the other guests, but my watch, which had never before done anything except lose a few minutes a day, had gained an unsuspected hour. Perhaps the hands stuck—perhaps—— Well, I was told I was early, Thalia was dressing, and only the children, home for the Christmas holidays, were available. So I went again to the nursery. Dorothy was as plump and unconcerned as

ever, but Fletcher had a strained, listening effect and he looked too thin and white for a little boy. They were having their supper on a small table, and Fletcher kept going to the door, looking out into the hall. "Mother promised to come up," he said.

The maid cleared away their dishes, and Dorothy, who was in a beguiling mood, chose to sit on my lap and entertain me with stories. One was about Nug the terrier; he had been sent out to the country because Mother didn't like him any more.

"I think," interrupted Fletcher, "she likes him, but he has a queer notion about her."

"She doesn't like him," repeated Dorothy. Then she dismissed that subject, and Fletcher too, for curiosity about the old silver chain I wore. I didn't notice that the boy had slipped away, but he must have gone down stairs; for presently his fingers closed over my wrist, like a frightened bird's claw, and I turned to see him, trembling, his eyes dark with terror. He couldn't speak but he clawed at me, and I shook Dorothy from my knees and let him pull me out to the hall.

"What is it, Fletcher?" He only pointed down the stairway, toward his mother's door, and I fled down those stairs. *What* had the child seen?

"The door wasn't locked——" he gasped behind me—"I opened it very still and went in——"

I pushed it ajar. Thalia sat before her dressing table, with the threefold mirrors reiterating like a macabre symphony her rigid, contorted face. Her gown, burnished blue and green like peacock's feathers, sheathed her gaudily, and silver, blue and green chiffon clouded her shoulders. Her hands clutched at the edge of the dressing table. For an instant I could not move, thrust through with a terror like the boy's. Then I stumbled across the room. Before I reached her, the mirrors echoed her long shudder, her eyelids dragged open, and I saw her stare at my reflection wavering toward her. Then her hands relaxed, moved quickly toward the crystal jars along the heavy glass of the table and, without a word, she leaned softly forward, to draw a scarlet line along her white lips.

"How cold it is in here," I said, stupidly, glancing toward the windows, where the heavy silk damask, drawn across, lay in motionless folds. "Fletcher said——" I was awkward, an intruder.

"He startled me." Her voice came huskily. She rouged her hollow cheeks. It was as if she drew another face for herself. "I didn't have time to lock the door." Then turning, she sought him out, huddled at the doorway, like a moth on a pin of

fear: "It wasn't nice of you, Son. It's all right now. You see?" She rose, drawing her lovely scarf over her shoulders. "You should never open closed doors." She blew him a kiss from her finger tips. "Now run along and forget you were so careless."

The icy stir of air against my skin had ceased. I stared at her, my mind racing back over what I knew of various drugs and the stigmata of their victims. But her eyes were clear and undilated, a little piteous. "This," she said, "is the last time. I can't endure it." And then, with that amazing flood of vitality, as if a sudden connection had been made and current flowed again, "Come, Mary. It is time we were down stairs."

I thought Fletcher peered over the railing as we went down. But a swift upward glance failed to detect him.

The dinner itself I don't remember definitely except that it glittered and sparkled, moving with slightly alcoholic wit through elaborate courses, while I sat like an abashed poor relation at a feast, unable to stop watching Thalia, wondering whether my week of fever had given me a tendency to hallucinations. At the end a toast was proposed, to Winchester Corson and his extraordinary success. "It's done, then?" Thalia's gayety had sudden malice—as she looked across at Winchester, seating himself after a slightly pompous speech. "Sealed and cemented forever?"

"Thanks to his charming wife, too," cried a plump, bald man, waving his glass. "A toast to Mrs. Corson!"

Thalia rose, her rouge like flecked scarlet on white paper. One hand drew her floating scarf about her throat, and her painted lips moved without a sound. There was an instant of agitated discomfort, as the guests felt their mood broken so abruptly, into which her voice pierced, thin, high. "I . . . deserve . . . such a toast——"

I pushed back my chair and reached her side.

"I'll take her——" I saw Winchester's face, wine-flushed, angry rather than concerned. "Come, Thalia."

"Don't bother. I'll be all right—now." But she moved ahead of me so swiftly that I couldn't touch her. I thought she tried to close her door against me, but I was too quick for that. The silver candelabra still burned above the mirrors. "Mary!" Her voice was low again as she spoke a telephone number. "Tell him *at once.*" She stood away from me, her face a white mask with spots of scarlet, her peacock dress ashimmer. I did as I was bid and when I had said, "Mrs. Corson wishes you at once," there was an emptiness where a man's voice had come which suggested a sudden leap out of a room somewhere.

"I can never get in again!" Her fingers curled under the chif-

fon scarf. "Never! The black agony of fighting back—— If he——" She bent her head, listening. "Go down to the door and let him in," she said.

I crept down the stairs. Voices from the drawing-room. Winchester was seeing the party through. Almost as I reached the door and opened it I found him there: the little doctor with the pointed beard. He brushed past me up the stairs. He knew the way, then! I was scarcely surprised to find Thalia's door fast shut when I reached it. Behind it came not a sound. Fletcher, like an unhappy sleepwalker, his eyes heavy, slipped down beside me, clinging to my hand. I heard farewells, churring of taxis and cars. Then Winchester came up the stairs.

"She's shut you out?" He raised his fist and pounded on the door. "I'm going to stop this nonsense!"

"I sent for a doctor," I said. "He's in there."

"Is it"—his face was puffy and gray—"that same fool?"

Then the door opened, and the man confronted us.

"It is over," he said.

"What have you done to her?" Winchester lunged toward the door, but the little man's lifted hand had dignity enough somehow to stop him.

"She won't come back again." He spoke slowly. "You may look if you care to."

"She's dead?"

"She died—months ago. There on the bridge. But you called to her, and she thought you wanted—*her.*"

Winchester thrust him aside and strode into the room. I dared one glance and saw only pale hair shining on the pillow. Then Fletcher flung himself against me, sobbing, and I knelt to hold him close against the fear we both felt.

What Winchester saw I never knew. He hurled himself past us, down the stairs. And Thalia was buried with the coffin lid fast closed under the flowers.

♥

♠ VARIOUS TEMPTATIONS

♥

WILLIAM SANSOM

HIS NAME UNKNOWN he had been strangling girls in the Victoria district. After talking no one knew what to them by the gleam of brass bedsteads; after lonely hours standing on pavements with people passing; after perhaps in those hot July

streets, with blue sky blinding high above and hazed with burnt petrol, a dazzled head-aching hatred of some broad scarlet cinema poster and the black leather taxis; after sudden hopeless ecstasies at some rounded girl's figure passing in rubber and silk, after the hours of slow crumbs in the empty milk-bar and the balneal reek of grim-tiled lavatories? After all the day-town's faceless hours, the evening town might have whirled quicker on him with the death of the day, the yellow-painted lights of the night have caused the minutes to accelerate and his fears to recede and a cold courage then to arm itself—until the wink, the terrible assent of some soft girl smiling towards the night . . . the beer, the port, the meat-pies, the bedsteads?

Each of the four found had been throttled with coarse thread. This, dry and the colour of hemp, had in each case been drawn from the frayed ends of the small carpet squares in those linoleum bedrooms. 'A man,' said the papers, 'has been asked by the police to come forward in connection with the murders,' etc., etc., . . . 'Ronald Raikes—five-foot-nine, grey eyes, thin brown hair, brown tweed coat, grey flannel trousers. Black soft-brim hat.'

A girl called Clara, a plain girl and by profession an invisible mender, lay in her large white comfortable bed with its polished wood headpiece and its rose quilt. Faded blue curtains draped down their long soft cylinders, their dark recesses—and sometimes these columns moved, for the balcony windows were open for the hot July night. The night was still, airless; yet sometimes these queer causeless breezes, like the turning breath of a sleeper, came to rustle the curtains—and then as suddenly left them graven again in the stifling air like curtains that had never moved. And this girl Clara lay reading lazily the evening paper.

She wore an old wool bed-jacket, faded yet rich against her pale and bloodless skin; she was alone, expecting no one. It was a night of restitution, of early supper and washing underclothes and stockings, an early night for a read and a long sleep. Two or three magazines nestled in the eiderdowned bend of her knees. But saving for last the glossy, luxurious magazines, she lay now glancing through the paper——half reading, half tasting the quiet, sensing how secluded she was though the street was only one floor below, in her own bedroom yet with the heads of unsuspecting people passing only a few feet beneath. Unknown footsteps approached and retreated on the pavement beneath—footsteps that even on this still sum-

mer night sounded muffled, like footsteps heard on the pavement of a fog.

She lay listening for a while, then turned again to the paper, read again a bullying black headline relating the deaths of some hundreds of demonstrators somewhere in another hemisphere, and again let her eyes trail away from the weary greyish block of words beneath. The corner of the paper and its newsprint struck a harsh note of offices and tube-trains against the soft texture of the rose quilt—she frowned and was thus just about to reach for one of the more lustrous magazines when her eyes noted across the page a short, squat headline above a blackly-typed column about the Victoria murders. She shuffled more comfortably into the bed and concentrated hard to scramble up the delicious paragraphs.

But they had found nothing. No new murder, nowhere nearer to making an arrest. Yet after an official preamble, there occurred one of those theoretic dissertations, such as is often inserted to colour the progress of apprehension when no facts provide thmselves. It appeared, it was *thought,* that the Victoria strangler suffered from a mania similar to that which had possessed the infamous Ripper; that is, the victims were mostly of a 'certain profession'; it might be thus concluded that the Victoria murderer bore the same maniacal grudge against such women.

At this Clara put the paper down—thinking, well for one thing she never did herself up like those sort, in fact she never did herself up at all, and what would be the use? Instinctively then she turned to look across to the mirror on the dressing-table, saw there her worn pale face and sack-coloured hair, and felt instantly neglected; down in her plain-feeling body there stirred again that familiar envy, the impotent grudge that still came to her at least once every day of her life —that nobody had ever bothered to think deeply for her, neither loving, nor hating, nor in any way caring. For a moment then the thought came that whatever had happened in those bedrooms, however horrible, that murderer had at least felt deeply for his subject, the subject girl was charged with positive attractions that had forced him to act. There could hardly be such a thing, in those circumstances at least, as a disinterested murder. Hate and love were often held to be variations of the same obsessed emotion—when it came to murder, to the high impassioned pitch of murder, to such an intense concentration of one person on another, then it seemed that a divine paralysis, something very much like love, possessed the murderer.

Clara put the paper aside with finality, for whenever the question of her looks occurred then she forced herself to think immediately of something else, to ignore what had for some years groaned into an obsession leading only to hours wasted with self-pity and idle depression. So that now she picked up the first magazine, and scrutinized with a false intensity the large and laughing figure in several colours and few clothes of a motion-picture queen. However, rather than pointing her momentary depression, the picture comforted her. Had it been a real girl in the room, she might have been further saddened; but these pictures of fabulous people separated by the convention of the page and the distance of their world of celluloid fantasy instead represented the image of earlier personal dreams, comforting dreams of what then she hoped one day she might become, when that hope which is youth's unique asset outweighed the material attribute of what she in fact was.

In the quiet air fogging the room with such palpable stillness the turning of the brittle magazine page made its own decisive crackle. Somewhere outside in the summer night a car slurred past, changed its gear, rounded the corner and sped off on a petulant note of acceleration to nowhere. The girl changed her position in the bed, easing herself deeper into the security of the bedclothes. Gradually she became absorbed, so that soon her mind was again ready to wander, but this time within her own imagining, outside the plane of that bedroom. She was idly thus transported into a wished-for situation between herself and the owner of the shop where she worked: in fact, she spoke aloud her decision to take the following Saturday off. This her employer instantly refused. Then still speaking aloud she presented her reasons, insisted—and at last, the blood beginning to throb in her forehead, handed in her notice! . . . This must have suddenly frightened her, bringing her back abruptly to the room—and she stopped talking. She laid the magazine down, looked round the room. Still that feeling of invisible fog—perhaps there was indeed mist; the furniture looked more than usually stationary. She tapped with her finger on the magazine. It sounded loud, too loud. Her mind returned to the murderer, she ceased tapping and looked quickly at the shut door. The memory of those murders must have lain at the back of her mind throughout the past minutes, gently elevating her with the compounding unconscious excitement that news sometimes brings, the sensation that somewhere something has happened, revitalising life. But now she suddenly shivered. Those murders had happened in Victoria, the neighbouring district, only in fact—she counted—five, six streets away.

The curtains began to move. Her eyes were round and at them in the first flickering moment. This time they not only shuddered, but seemed to eddy, and then to belly out. A coldness grasped and held the ventricles of her heart. And the curtains, the whole length of the rounded blue curtains moved towards her across the carpet. Something was pushing them. They travelled out towards her, then the ends rose sailing, sailed wide, opened to reveal nothing but the night, the empty balcony—then as suddenly collapsed and receded back to where they had hung motionless before. She let out the deep breath that whitening she had held all that time. Only, then, a breath of wind again; a curious swell on the compressed summer air. And now again the curtains hung still. She gulped sickly, crumpled and decided to shut the window—better not to risk that sort of fright again, one never knew what one's heart might do. But, just then, she hardly liked to approach those curtains. As the atmosphere of a nightmare cannot be shaken off for some minutes after waking, so those curtains held for a while their ambience of dread. Clara lay still. In a few minutes those fears quietened, but now forgetting the sense of fright she made no attempt to leave the bed, it was too comfortable, she would read again for a little. She turned over and picked up her magazine. Then a short while later, stretching, she half-turned to the curtains again. They were wide open. A man was standing exactly in the centre, outlined against the night outside, holding the curtains apart with his two hands.

Ron Raikes, five-foot-nine, grey eyes, thin brown hair, brown sports jacket, black hat, stood on the balcony holding the curtains aside looking in at this girl twisted round in her white-sheeted bed. He held the curtains slightly behind him, he knew the street to be dark, he felt safe. He wanted to breathe deeply after the short climb of the painter's ladder—but instead held it, above all kept quite still. The girl was staring straight at him, terrified, stuck in the pose of an actress suddenly revealed on her bedroom stage in its flood of light; in a moment she would scream. But something here was unusual, some quality lacking from the scene he had expected—and he concentrated, even in that moment when he knew himself to be in danger, letting some self-assured side of his mind wander and wonder what could be wrong.

He thought hard, screwing up his eyes to concentrate against the other unsteady excitements aching in his head—he knew how he had got here, he remembered the dull disconsolate hours waiting round the station, following two girls without result,

then walking away from the lighted crowds into these darker streets and suddenly seeing a glimpse of this girl through the lighted window. Then that curious, unreasoned idea had crept over him. He had seen the ladder, measured the distance, then scoffed at himself for risking such an escapade. Anyone might have seen him . . . and then what, arrest for house-breaking, burglary? He had turned, walked away. Then walked back. That extraordinary excitement rose and held him. He had gritted his teeth, told himself not to be such a fool, to go home. Tomorrow would be fresh, a fine day to spend. But then the next hours of the restless night exhibited themselves, sounding their emptiness—so that it had seemed too early to give in and admit the day worthless. A sensation then of ability, of dexterous clever power had taken him—he had loitered nearer the ladder, looking up and down the street. The lamps were dull, the street empty. Once a car came slurring past, changed gear, accelerated off petulantly into the night, away to nowhere. The sound emphasized the quiet, the protection of that deserted hour. He had put a hand on the ladder. It was then the same as any simple choice—taking a drink or not taking a drink. The one action might lead to some detrimental end—to more drinks, a night out, a headache in the morning—and would thus be best avoided; but the other, that action of taking, was pleasant and easy and the moral forehead argued that after all it could do no harm? So, quickly, telling himself he would climb down again in a second, this man Raikes had prised himself above the lashed night-plank and had run up the ladder. On the balcony he had paused by the curtains, breathless, now exhilarated in his ability, agile and alert as an animal —and had heard the sound of the girl turning in bed and the flick of her magazine page. A moment later the curtains had moved, nimbly he had stepped aside. A wind. He had looked down at the street—the wind populated the kerbs with dangerous movement. He parted the curtains, saw the girl lying there alone, and silently stepped onto the threshold.

Now when at last she screamed—a hoarse diminutive sob—he knew he must move, and so soundlessly on the carpet went towards her. As he moved he spoke: "I don't want to hurt you" —and then knowing that he must say something more than that, which she could hardly have believed, and knowing also that above all he must keep talking all the time with no pause to let her attention scream—"Really I don't want to hurt you, you mustn't scream, let me explain—but don't you see if you scream I shall have to stop you. . . ." Even with a smile, as soft a gesture as his soft quick-speaking voice, he

pushed forward his coat pocket, his hand inside, so that this girl might recognise what she must have seen in detective stories, and even believe it to be his hand and perhaps a pipe, yet not be sure: ". . . but I won't shoot and you'll promise won't you to be good and not scream—while I tell you why I'm here. You think I'm a burglar, that's not true. It's right I need a little money, only a little cash, ten bob even, because I'm in trouble, not dangerous trouble, but let me tell you, please, *please* listen to me, Miss." His voice continued softly talking, talking all the time quietly and never stuttering nor hesitating nor leaving a pause. Gradually, though her body remained alert and rigid, the girl's face relaxed.

He stood at the foot of the bed, in the full light of the bedside lamp, leaning awkwardly on one leg, the cheap material of his coat ruffled and papery. Still talking, always talking, he took off his hat, lowered himself gently to sit on the end of the bed—rather to put her at her ease than to encroach further for himself. As he sat, he apologised. Then never pausing he told her a story, which was nearly true, about his escape from a detention camp, the cruelty of his long sentence for a trivial theft, the days thereafter of evasion, the furtive search for casual employment, and then worst of all the long hours of time on his hands, the vacuum of time wandering, time wasting on the café clocks, lamp-posts of time waiting on blind corners, time walking quickly away from uniforms, time of the head-aching clocks loitering at the slow pace of death towards his sole refuge—sleep. And this was nearly true—only that he omitted that his original crime had been one of sexual assault; he omitted those other dark occasions during the past three weeks; but he omitted these events because in fact he had forgotten them, they could only be recollected with difficulty, as episodes of vague elation, dark and blurred as an undeveloped photograph of which the image should be known yet puzzles with its indeterminate shape, its hints of light in the darkness and always the feeling that it should be known, that it once surely existed. This was also like anyone trying to remember exactly what had been done between any two specific hours on some date of a previous month, two hours framed by known engagements yet themselves blurred into an exasperating and hungry screen of dots, dark, almost appearing, convolving, receding.

So gradually as he offered himself to the girl's pity, that bedclothed hump of figure relaxed. Once her lips flexed their corners in the beginning of a smile. Into her eyes once crept that strange coquettish look, pained and immeasurably tender, with

which a woman takes into her arms a strange child. The moment of danger was past, there would be no scream. And since now on her part she seemed to feel no danger from him, then it became very possible that the predicament might even appeal to her, to any girl nourished by the kind of drama that filled the magazines littering her bed. As well, he might look strained and ill—so he let his shoulders droop for the soft extraction of her last sympathy.

Yet as he talked on, as twice he instilled into the endless story a compliment to her and as twice her face seemed to shine for a moment with sudden life—nevertheless he sensed that all was not right with this apparently well-contrived affair. For this, he knew, should be near the time when he would be edging nearer to her, dropping his hat, picking it up and shifting thus unostensibly his position. It was near the time when he would be near enough to attempt, in one movement, the risk that could never fail, either way, accepted or rejected. But . . . he was neither moving forward nor wishing to move. Still he talked, but now more slowly, with less purpose; he found that he was looking at her detachedly, no longer mixing her image with his words—and thus losing the words their energy; looking now not at the conceived image of something painted by the desiring brain—but as at something unexpected, not entirely known; as if instead of peering forward his head was leant back, surveying, listening, as a dog perhaps leans its head to one side listening for the whistled sign to regulate the bewildering moment. But—no such sign came. And through his words, straining at the diamond cunning that maintained him, he tried to reason out this perplexity, he annotated carefully what he saw. A white face, ill white, reddened faintly round the nostrils, pink and dry at the mouth; and a small fat mouth, puckered and fixed under its long upper lip: and eyes also small, yet full-irised and thus like brown pellets under eyebrows low and thick: and hair that colour of lustreless hemp now tied with a bow so that it fell down either side of her cheeks as lank as string: and round her thin neck, a thin gold chain just glittering above the dull blue wool of that bed-jacket, blue brittle wool against the ill white skin: and behind, a white pillow and the dark wooden head of the bed curved like an inverted shield. Unattractive . . . not attractive as expected, not exciting . . . yet where? Where before had he remembered something like this, something impelling, strangely sympathetic and—there was no doubt—earnestly wanted?

Later, in contrast, there flashed across his memory the colour

of other faces—a momentary reflection from the scarlet-lipped face on one of the magazine covers—and he remembered that these indeed troubled him, but in a different and accustomed way; these pricked at him in their busy way, lanced him hot, ached into his head so that it grew light, as in strong sunlight. And then, much later, long after this girl too had nervously begun to talk, after they had talked together, they made a cup of tea in her kitchen. And then, since the July dawn showed through the curtains, she made a bed for him on the sofa in the sitting-room, a bed of blankets and a silk cushion for his head.

Two weeks later the girl Clara came home at five o'clock in the afternoon carrying three parcels. They contained two coloured ties, six yards of white material for her wedding dress, and a box of thin red candles.

As she walked towards her front door she looked up at the windows and saw that they were shut. As it should have been—Ron was out as he had promised. It was his birthday. Thirty-two. For a few hours Clara was to concentrate on giving him a birthday tea, forgetting for one evening the fabulous question of that wedding dress. Now she ran up the stairs, opened the second door and saw there in an instant that the flat had been left especially clean, tidied into a straight, unfamiliar rigour. She smiled (how thoughtful he was, despite his 'strangeness') and threw her parcels down on the sofa, disarranging the cushions, in her tolerant happiness delighting in this. Then she was up again and arranging things. First the lights—silk handkerchiefs wound over the tops of the shades, for they shone too brightly. Next the tablecloth, white and fresh, soon decorated with small tinsels left over from Christmas, red crackers with feathered paper ends, globes gleaming like crimson quicksilver, silver and copper snowflakes.

(He'll like this, a dash of colour. It's his birthday, perhaps we could have gone out, but in a way it's nicer in. Anyway, it must be in with him on the run. I wonder where he is now. I hope he went straight to the pictures. In the dark it's safe. We did have fun doing him up different—a nice blue suit, distinguished—and the moustache is nice. Funny how you get used to that, he looks just the same as that first night. Quite, a quiet one. Says he likes to be quiet too, a plain life and a peaceful one. But a spot of colour—oh, it'll do him good.)

Moving efficiently she hurried to the kitchen and fetched the hidden cake, placed it exactly in the centre of the table, wound a length of gold veiling round the bottom, undid the candle-parcel and expertly set the candles—one to thirty-one

—round the white-iced circle. She wanted to light them, but instead put down the matches and picked off the cake one silver pellet and placed this on the tip of her tongue: then impatiently went for the knives and forks. All these actions were performed with that economy and swiftness of movement peculiar to women who arrange their own houses, a movement so sure that it seems to suggest dislike, so that it brings with each adjustment a grimace of disapproval, though nothing by anyone could be more approved.

(Thirty-one candles—I won't put the other one, it's nicer for him to think he's still thirty-one. Or I suppose men don't mind—still, do it. You never know what he really likes. A quiet one—but ever so thoughtful. And tender. And that's a funny thing, you'd think he might have tried something, the way he is, on the loose. A regular Mr. Proper. Doesn't like this, doesn't like that, doesn't like dancing, doesn't like the way the girls go about, doesn't like lipstick, nor the way some of them dress . . . of course he's right, they make themselves up plain silly, but you'd think a man . . .?)

Now over to the sideboard, and from that polished oak cupboard take very carefully one, two, three, four fat quart bottles of black stout—and a half-bottle of port. Group them close together on the table, put the shining glasses just by, make it look like a real party. And the cigarettes, a coloured box of fifty. Crinkly paper serviettes. And last of all a long roll of paper, vivid green, on which she had traced, with a ruler and a pot of red paint: HAPPY BIRTHDAY RON!

This was now hung between two wall-lights, old gas-jets corded with electricity and shaded—and then she went to the door and switched on all the lights. The room warmed instantly, each light threw off a dark glow, as though it were part of its own shadow. Clara went to the curtains and half-drew them, cutting off some of the daylight. Then drew them altogether—and the table gleamed into sudden night-light, golden-white and warmly red, with the silver cake sparkling in the centre. She went into the other room to dress.

Sitting by the table with the mirror she took off her hat and shook her head; in the mirror the hair seemed to tumble about, not pinned severely as usual, but free and flopping—she had had it waved. The face, freckled with pin-points of the mirror's tarnish, looked pale and far away. She remembered she had much to do, and turned busily to a new silk blouse, hoping that Ron would still be in the pictures, beginning again to think of him.

She was not certain still that he might not be the man

whom the police wanted in connection with those murders. She had thought it, of course, when he first appeared. Later his tender manner had dissipated such a first impression. He had come to supper the following night, and again had stayed; thus also for the next nights. It was understood that she was giving him sanctuary—and for his part, he insisted on paying her when he could again risk inquiring for work. It was an exciting predicament, of the utmost daring for anyone of Clara's way of life. Incredible—but the one important and over-riding fact had been that suddenly, even in this shocking way, there had appeared a strangely attractive man who had expressed immediately an interest in her. She knew that he was also interested in his safety. But there was much more to his manner than simply this—his tenderness and his extraordinary preoccupation with *her,* staring, listening, striving to please and addressing to her all the attentions of which through her declining youth she had been starved. She knew, moreover, that these attentions were real and not affected. Had they been false, nevertheless she would have been flattered. But as it was, the new horizons became dreamlike, drunken, impossible. To a normally frustrated, normally satisfied, normally hopeful woman—the immoral possibility that he might be that murderer would have frozen the relationship in its seed. But such was the waste and the want in lonely Clara that, despite every ingrained convention, the great boredom of her dull years had seemed to gather and move inside her, had heaved itself up like a monstrous sleeper turning, rearing and then subsiding on its other side with a flop of finality, a sigh of pleasure, welcoming now anything, anything but a return to the old dull days of nothing. There came the whisper: 'Now or never!' But there was no sense, as with other middle-aged escapists, of desperation; this chance had landed squarely on her doorstep, there was no striving, no doubt—it had simply happened. Then the instinctive knowledge of love—and finally to seal the atrophy of all hesitation, his proposal of marriage. So that now when she sometimes wondered whether he was the man the police wanted, her loyalty to him was so deeply assumed that it seemed she was really thinking of somebody else—or of him as another figure at a remove of time. The murders had certainly stopped—yet only two weeks ago? And anyway the man in the tweed coat was only wanted *in connection with* the murders . . . that in itself became indefinite . . . besides, there must be thousands of tweed coats and black hats . . . and besides

there were thousands of coincidences of all kinds every day. . . .

So, shrugging her shoulders and smiling at herself for puzzling her mind so—when she knew there could be no answer—she returned to her dressing-table. Here her face grew serious, as again the lips pouted the down-drawn disapproval that meant she contemplated an act of which she approved. Her hand hesitated, then opened one of the dressing-table drawers. It disappeared inside, feeling to the very end of the drawer, searching there in the dark. Her lips parted, her eyes lost focus—as though she were scratching deliciously her back. At length the hand drew forth a small parcel.

Once more she hesitated, while the fingers itched at the knotted string. Suddenly they took hold of the knot and scrambled to untie it. The brown paper parted. Inside lay a lipstick and a box of powder.

(Just a little, a very little. I must look pretty, I *must* tonight.)

She pouted her lips and drew across them a thick scarlet smear, then frowned, exasperated by such extravagance. She started to wipe it off. But it left boldly impregnated already its mark. She shrugged her shoulders, looked fixedly into the mirror. What she saw pleased her, and she smiled.

As late as seven, when it was still light but the strength had left the day, when on trees and on the gardens of squares there extended a moist and cool shadow and even over the tram-torn streets a cooling sense of business past descended—Ronald Raikes left the cinema and hurried to get through the traffic and away into those quieter streets that led towards Clara's flat. After a day of gritted heat, the sky was clouding; a few shops and orange-painted snack-bars had turned on their electric lights. By these lights and the homing hurry of the traffic, Raikes felt the presence of the evening, and clenched his jaw against it. That restlessness, vague as the hot breath before a headache, lightly metallic as the taste of fever, must be avoided. He skirted the traffic dangerously, hurrying for the quieter streets away from that garish junction. Between the green and purple tiles of a public house and the red-framed window of a passport photographer's he entered at last into the duller, quieter perspective of a street of brown brick houses. Here was instant relief, as though a draught of wind had cooled physically his head. He thought of the girl, the calm flat, the safety, the rightness and the sanctuary there. Extraordinary, this sense of rightness and order that he felt

with her; ease, relief, and constant need. Not at all like 'being in love.' Like being very young again, with a protective nurse. Looking down at the pavement cracks he felt pleasure in them, pleasure reflected from a sense of gratitude—and he started planning, to get a job next week, to end this hiding about, to do something for her in return. And then he remembered that even at that moment she was doing something more for him, arranging some sort of treat, a birthday supper. And thus tenderly grateful he slipped open the front-door and climbed the stairs.

There were two rooms—the sitting-room and the bedroom. He tried the sitting-room door, which was regarded as his, but found it locked. But in the instant of rattling the knob Clara's voice came: "Ron? . . . Ron, go in the bedroom, put your hat there—don't come in till you're quite ready. Surprise!"

Out in the dark passage, looking down at the brownish bare linoleum he smiled again, nodded, called a greeting and went into the bedroom. He washed, combed his hair, glancing now and then towards the closed connecting door. A last look in the mirror, a nervous washing gesture of his hands, and he was over at the door and opening it.

Coming from the daylit bedroom, this other room appeared like a picture of night, like some dimly-lit tableau recessed in a waxwork-show. He was momentarily dazzled not by light but by a yellowed darkness, a promise of other unfocussed light, the murky bewilderment of a room entered from strong sunlight. But a voice sang out to help him: "Ron—HAPPY BIRTHDAY!" and, reassured, his eyes began to assemble the room—the table, crackers, shining cake, glasses and bottles, the green paper greeting, the glittering tinsel and those downcast shaded lights. Round the cake burned the little upright knives of those thirty-one candles, each yellow blade winking. The ceiling disappeared in darkness, all the light was lowered down upon the table and the carpet. He stood for a moment still shocked, robbed still of the room he had expected, its cold and clockless daylight, its motionless smell of dust.

An uncertain figure that was Clara came forward from behind the table, her waist and legs in light, then upwards in shadow. Her hands stretched towards him, her voice laughed from the darkness. And thus with the affirmation of her presence, the feeling of shock mysteriously cleared, the room fell into a different perspective—and instantly he saw with gratitude how carefully she had arranged that festive table, indeed how prettily reminiscent it was of festivity, old Christmases

and parties held long ago in some separate life. Happier, he was able to watch the glasses fill with rich black stout, saw the red wink of the port dropped in to sweeten it, raised his glass in a toast. Then they stood in the half-light of that upper shadow, drank, joked, talked themselves into the climate of celebration. They moved round that table with its bright low centre-light like figures about a shaded gambling board—so vivid the clarity of their lowered hands, the sheen of his suit and the gleam of her stockings, yet with their faces veiled and diffused. Then, when two of the bottles were already empty, they sat down.

Raikes blinked in the new light. Everything sparkled suddenly, all things round him seemed to wink. He laughed, abruptly too excited. Clara was bending away from him, stretching to cut the cake. As he raised his glass, he saw her back from the corner of his eye, over the crystal rim of his glass—and held it then undrunk. He stared at the shining white blouse, the concisely corrugated folds of the knife-edge wave of her hair. Clara? The strangeness of the room dropped its curtain round him again, heavily. Clara, a slow voice mentioned in his mind, has merely bought herself a new blouse and waved her hair. He nodded, accepting this automatically. But the stout to which he was not used weighed inside his head, as though some heavy circular hat was being pressed down, wreathing leadenly where its brim circled, forcing a lightness within that seemed to balloon aerily upwards. Unconsciously his hand went to his forehead—and at that moment Clara turned her face towards him, setting it on one side in the full light, blowing out some of those little red candles, laughing as she blew. The candle flames flickered and winked like jewels close to her cheek. She blew her cheeks out, so that they became full and rounded, then laughed so that her white teeth gleamed between oil-rich red lips.

Thin candle-threads of black smoke needled curling by her hair. She saw something strange in his eyes. Her voice said: "Why Ron—you haven't a headache? Not yet anyway . . . eh, dear?"

Now he no longer laughed naturally, but felt the stretch of his lips as he tried to smile a denial of the headache. The worry was at his head, he felt no longer at ease in that familiar chair, but rather balanced on it alertly, so that under the table his calves were braced, so that he moved his hands carefully for fear of encroaching on what was not his, hands of a guest, hands uneasy at a strange table.

Clara sat round now facing him—their chairs were to the

same side of that round table, and close. She kept smiling; those new things she wore were plainly stimulating her, she must have felt transformed and beautiful. Such a certainty together with the unaccustomed alcohol brought a vivacity to her eye, a definition to the movements of her mouth. Traces of faltering, of apology, of all the wounded humilities of a face that apologizes for itself—all these were gone, wiped away beneath the white powder; now her face seemed to be charged with light, expressive, and in its new self-assurance predatory. It was a face bent on effect, on making its mischief. Instinctively it performed new tricks, attitudes learnt and stored but never before used, the intuitive mimicry of the female seducer. She smiled now largely, as though her lips enjoyed the touch of her teeth; lowered her eyelids, then sprung them suddenly open; ended a laugh by tossing her head—only to shake the new curls in the light; raised her hand to her throat, to show the throat stretched back and soft, took a piece of butter-coloured marzipan and its marble-white icing between the tips of two fingers and laughing opened her mouth very wide, so that the tongue-tip came out to meet the icing, so that teeth and lips and mouth were wide and then suddenly shut in a coy gobble. And all this time, while they ate and drank and talked and joked, Raikes sat watching her, smiling his lips, but eyes heavily bright and fixed like pewter as the trouble roasted his brain.

He knew now fully what he wanted to do. His hand, as if it were some other hand not connected to his body, reached away to where the parcel of ties lay open; and its fingers were playing with the string. They played with it overwillingly, like the fingers guiding a paintbrush to over-decorate a picture, like fingers that pour into a well-seasoned cook-pot. Against the knowledge of what he wanted, the mind still balanced its danger, calculated the result and its difficult aftermath. Once again this was gluttonous, like deciding to take more drink. Sense of the moment, imagination of the result; the moment's desire, the mind's warning. Twice he leant towards her, measuring the distance then drawing back. His mind told him that he was playing, he was allowed such play, nothing would come of it.

Then abruptly it happened. That playing, like a swing pushing higher and then somersaulting the circle, mounted on its own momentum, grew huge and boundless, swelled like fired gas. Those fingers tautened, snapped the string. He was up off the chair and over Clara. The string, sharp and hempen, bit into her neck. Her lips opened in a wide laugh, for she thought

he was clowning up suddenly to kiss her, and then stretched themselves wider, then closed into a bluish cough and the last little sounds.

♥

♠ THE NATURE OF THE EVIDENCE

♥

MAY SINCLAIR

THIS IS THE STORY Marston told me. He didn't want to tell it. I had to tear it from him bit by bit. I've pieced the bits together in their time order, and explained things here and there, but the facts are the facts he gave me. There's nothing that I didn't get out of him somehow.

Out of *him*—you'll admit my source is unimpeachable. Edward Marston, the great K.C., and the author of an admirable work on *The Logic of Evidence*. You should have read the chapters on "What Evidence Is and What It Is Not." You may say he lied; but if you knew Marston you'd know he wouldn't lie, for the simple reason that he's incapable of inventing anything. So that, if you ask me whether I believe this tale, all I can say is, I believe the things happened, because he said they happened and because they happened to him. As for what they *were*—well, I don't pretend to explain it, neither would he.

You know he was married twice. He adored his first wife, Rosamund, and Rosamund adored him. I suppose they were completely happy. She was fifteen years younger than he, and beautiful. I wish I could make you see how beautiful. Her eyes and mouth had the same sort of bow, full and wide-sweeping, and they stared out of her face with the same grave, contemplative innocence. Her mouth was finished off at each corner with the loveliest little moulding, rounded like the pistil of a flower. She wore her hair in a solid gold fringe over her forehead, like a child's, and a big coil at the back. When it was let down it hung in a heavy cable to her waist. Marston used to tease her about it. She had a trick of tossing back the rope in the night when it was hot under her, and it would fall smack across his face and hurt him.

There was a pathos about her that I can't describe—a curious, pure, sweet beauty, like a child's; perfect, and perfectly immature; so immature that you couldn't conceive its lasting—like that—any more than childhood lasts. Marston

used to say it made him nervous. He was afraid of waking up in the morning and finding that it had changed in the night. And her beauty was so much a part of herself that you couldn't think of her without it. Somehow you felt that if it went she must go too.

Well, she went first.

For a year afterwards, Marston existed dangerously, always on the edge of a break-down. If he didn't go over altogether it was because his work saved him. He had no consoling theories. He was one of those bigoted materialists of the nineteenth century type who believe that consciousness is a purely physiological function, and that when your body's dead, *you're* dead. He saw no reason to suppose the contrary. "When you consider," he used to say, "the nature of the evidence!"

It's as well to bear this in mind, so as to realize that he hadn't any bias or anticipation. Rosamund survived for him only in his memory. And in his memory he was still in love with her. At the same time he used to discuss quite cynically the chances of his marrying again.

It seems that in their honeymoon they had gone into that. Rosamund said she hated to think of his being lonely and miserable, supposing she died before he did. She would like him to marry again. If, she stipulated, he married the right woman.

He had put it to her: "And if I marry the wrong one?"

And she had said, That would be different. She couldn't bear that.

He remembered all this afterwards; but there was nothing in it to make him suppose, at the time, that she would take action.

We talked it over, he and I, one night.

"I suppose," he said, "I shall have to marry again. It's a physical necessity. But it won't be anything more. I shan't marry the sort of woman who'll expect anything more. I won't put another woman in Rosamund's place. There'll be no unfaithfulness about it."

And there wasn't. Soon after that first year he married Pauline Silver.

She was a daughter of old Justice Parker, who was a friend of Marston's people. He hadn't seen the girl till she came home from India after her divorce.

Yes, there'd been a divorce. Silver had behaved very decently. He'd let her bring it against *him,* to save her. But there were some queer stories going about. They didn't get round to Marston, because he was so mixed up with her people;

and if they had he wouldn't have believed them. He'd made up his mind he'd marry Pauline the first minute he'd seen her. She was handsome; the hard, black, white and vermilion kind, with a little aristocratic nose and a lascivious mouth.

It was, as he had meant it to be, nothing but physical infatuation on both sides. No question of Pauline's taking Rosamund's place.

Marston had a big case on at the time.

They were in such a hurry that they couldn't wait till it was over; and as it kept him in London they agreed to put off their honeymoon till the autumn; and he took her straight to his own house in Curzon Street.

This, he admitted afterwards, was the part he hated. The Curzon Street house was associated with Rosamund; especially their bedroom—Rosamund's bedroom—and his library. The library was the room Rosamund liked best, because it was his room. She had her place in the corner by the hearth, and they were always alone there together in the evenings when his work was done, and when it wasn't done she would still sit with him, keeping quiet in her corner with a book.

Luckily for Marston, at the first sight of the library Pauline took a dislike to it.

I can hear her. "Br-rr-rh! There's something beastly about this room, Edward. I can't think how you can sit in it."

And Edward, a little caustic:

"*You* needn't, if you don't like it."

"I certainly shan't."

She stood there—I can see her—on the hearthrug by Rosamund's chair, looking uncommonly handsome and lascivious. He was going to take her in his arms and kiss her vermilion mouth, when, he said, something stopped him. Stopped him clean, as if it had risen up and stepped between them. He supposed it was the memory of Rosamund, vivid in the place that had been hers.

You see it was just that place, of silent, intimate communion, that Pauline would never take. And the rich, coarse, contented creature didn't even want to take it. He saw that he would be left alone there, all right, with his memory.

But the bedroom was another matter. That, Pauline had made it understood from the beginning, she would have to have. Indeed, there was no other he could well have offered her. The drawing-room covered the whole of the first floor. The bedrooms above were cramped, and this one had been formed by throwing the two front rooms into one. It looked south, and the bathroom opened out of it at the back. Mar-

ston's small northern room had a door on the narrow landing at right angles to his wife's door. He could hardly expect her to sleep there, still less in any of the tight boxes on the top floor. He said he wished he had sold the Curzon Street house.

But Pauline was enchanted with the wide, three-windowed piece that was to be hers. It had been exquisitely furnished for poor little Rosamund; all seventeenth century walnut wood, Bokhara rugs, thick silk curtains, deep blue with purple linings, and a big, rich bed covered with a purple counterpane embroidered in blue.

One thing Marston insisted on: that *he* should sleep on Rosamund's side of the bed, and Pauline in his own old place. He didn't want to see Pauline's body where Rosamund's had been. Of course he had to lie about it and pretend he had always slept on the side next the window.

I can see Pauline going about in that room, looking at everything; looking at herself, her black, white and vermilion, in the glass that had held Rosamund's pure rose and gold; opening the wardrobe where Rosamund's dresses used to hang, sniffing up the delicate, flower scent of Rosamund, not caring, covering it with her own thick trail.

And Marston (who cared abominably)—I can see him getting more miserable and at the same time more excited as the wedding evening went on. He took her to the play to fill up the time, or perhaps to get her out of Rosamund's rooms; God knows. I can see them sitting in the stalls, bored and restless, starting up and going out before the thing was half over, and coming back to that house in Curzon Street before eleven o'clock.

It wasn't much past eleven when he went to her room.

I told you her door was at right angles to his, and the landing was narrow, so that anybody standing by Pauline's door must have been seen the minute he opened his. He hadn't even to cross the landing to get to her.

Well, Marston swears that there was nothing there when he opened his own door; but when he came to Pauline's he saw Rosamund standing up before it; and, he said, *"She wouldn't let me in."*

Her arms were stretched out, barring the passage. Oh yes, he saw her face, Rosamund's face; I gathered that it was utterly sweet, and utterly inexorable. He couldn't pass her.

So he turned into his own room, backing, he says, so that he could keep looking at her. And when he stood on the threshold of his own door she wasn't there.

No, he wasn't frightened. He couldn't tell me what he felt;

but he left his door open all night because he couldn't bear to shut it on her. And he made no other attempt to go in to Pauline; he was so convinced that the phantasm of Rosamund would come again and stop him.

I don't know what sort of excuse he made to Pauline the next morning. He said she was very stiff and sulky all day; and no wonder. He was still infatuated with her, and I don't think that the phantasm of Rosamund had put him off Pauline in the least. In fact, he persuaded himself that the thing was nothing but a hallucination, due, no doubt, to his excitement.

Anyhow, he didn't expect to see it at the door again the next night.

Yes. It was there. Only, this time, he said, it drew aside to let him pass. It smiled at him, as if it were saying, "Go in, if you must; you'll see what'll happen."

He had no sense that it had followed him into the room; he felt certain that, this time, it would let him be.

It was when he approached Pauline's bed, which had been Rosamund's bed, that she appeared again, standing between it and him, and stretching out her arms to keep him back.

All that Pauline could see was her bridegroom backing and backing, then standing there, fixed, and the look on his face. That in itself was enough to frighten her.

She said, "What's the matter with you, Edward?"

He didn't move.

"What are you standing there for? Why don't you come to bed?"

Then Marston seems to have lost his head and blurted it out:

"I can't. I can't."

"Can't what?" said Pauline from the bed.

"Can't sleep with you. She won't let me."

"She?"

"Rosamund. My wife. She's there."

"What on earth are you talking about?"

"She's there, I tell you. She won't let me. She's pushing me back."

He says Pauline must have thought he was drunk or something. Remember, she *saw* nothing but Edward, his face, and his mysterious attitude. He must have looked very drunk.

She sat up in bed, with her hard, black eyes blazing away at him, and told him to leave the room that minute. Which he did.

The next day she had it out with him. I gathered that she kept on talking about the "state" he was in.

"You came to my room, Edward, in a *disgraceful* state."

I suppose Marston said he was sorry; but he couldn't help it; he wasn't drunk. He stuck to it that Rosamund was there. He had seen her. And Pauline said, if he wasn't drunk then he must be mad, and he said meekly, "Perhaps I *am* mad."

That set her off, and she broke out in a fury. He was no more mad than she was; but he didn't care for her; he was making ridiculous excuses; shamming, to put her off. There was some other woman.

Marston asked her what on earth she supposed he'd married her for. Then she burst out crying and said she didn't know.

Then he seems to have made it up with Pauline. He managed to make her believe he wasn't lying, that he really had seen something, and between them they arrived at a rational explanation of the appearance. He had been overworking. Rosamund's phantasm was nothing but a hallucination of his exhausted brain.

This theory carried him on till bedtime. Then, he says, he began to wonder what would happen, what Rosamund's phantasm would do next. Each morning his passion for Pauline had come back again, increased by frustration, and it worked itself up crescendo, towards night. Supposing he *had* seen Rosamund. He might see her again. He had become suddenly subject to hallucinations. But as long as you *knew* you were hallucinated you were all right.

So what they agreed to do that night was by way of precaution, in case the thing came again. It might even be sufficient in itself to prevent his seeing anything.

Instead of going in to Pauline he was to get into the room before she did, and she was to come to him there. That, they said, would break the spell. To make him feel even safer he meant to be in bed before Pauline came.

Well, he got into the room all right.

It was when he tried to get into bed that—he saw her (I mean Rosamund).

She was lying there, in his place next the window, her own place, lying in her immature childlike beauty and sleeping, the firm full bow of her mouth softened by sleep. She was perfect in every detail, the lashes of her shut eyelids golden on her white cheeks, the solid gold of her square fringe shining, and the great braided golden rope of her hair flung back on the pillow.

He knelt down by the bed and pressed his forehead into the bedclothes, close to her side. He declared he could feel her breathe.

He stayed there for the twenty minutes Pauline took to undress and come to him. He says the minutes stretched out like hours. Pauline found him still kneeling with his face pressed into the bedclothes. When he got up he staggered.

She asked him what he was doing and why he wasn't in bed. And he said, "It's no use. I can't. I can't."

But somehow he couldn't tell her that Rosamund was there. Rosamund was too sacred; he couldn't talk about her. He only said:

"You'd better sleep in my room to-night."

He was staring down at the place in the bed where he still saw Rosamund. Pauline couldn't have seen anything but the bedclothes, the sheet smoothed above an invisible breast, and the hollow in the pillow. She said she'd do nothing of the sort. She wasn't going to be frightened out of her own room. He could do as he liked.

He couldn't leave them there; he couldn't leave Pauline with Rosamund, and he couldn't leave Rosamund with Pauline. So he sat up in a chair with his back turned to the bed. No. He didn't make any attempt to go back. He says he knew she was still lying there, guarding his place, which was her place. The odd thing is that he wasn't in the least disturbed or frightened or surprised. He took the whole thing as a matter of course. And presently he dozed off into a sleep.

A scream woke him and the sound of a violent body leaping out of the bed and thudding on to its feet. He switched on the light and saw the bedclothes flung back and Pauline standing on the floor with her mouth open.

He went to her and held her. She was cold to the touch and shaking with terror, and her jaws dropped as if she was palsied.

She said, "Edward, there's something in the bed."

He glanced again at the bed. It was empty.

"There isn't," he said. "Look."

He stripped the bed to the foot-rail, so that she could see.

"There *was* something."

"Do you see it?"

"No. I felt it."

She told him. First something had come swinging, smack across her face. A thick, heavy rope of woman's hair. It had waked her. Then she had put out her hands and felt the body. A woman's body, soft and horrible; her fingers had sunk in the shallow breasts. Then she had screamed and jumped.

And she couldn't stay in the room. The room, she said, was "beastly."

She slept in Marston's room, in his small single bed, and he sat up with her all night, on a chair.

She believed now that he had really seen something, and she remembered that the library was beastly, too. Haunted by something. She supposed that was what she had felt. Very well. Two rooms in the house were haunted; their bedroom and the library. They would just have to avoid those two rooms. She had made up her mind, you see, that it was nothing but a case of an ordinary haunted house; the sort of thing you're always hearing about and never believe in till it happens to yourself. Marston didn't like to point out to her that the house hadn't been haunted till she came into it.

The following night, the fourth night, she was to sleep in the spare room on the top floor, next to the servants, and Marston in his own room.

But Marston didn't sleep. He kept on wondering whether he would or would not go up to Pauline's room. That made him horribly restless, and instead of undressing and going to bed, he sat up on a chair with a book. He wasn't nervous; but he had a queer feeling that something was going to happen, and that he must be ready for it, and that he'd better be dressed.

It must have been soon after midnight when he heard the doorknob turning very slowly and softly.

The door opened behind him and Pauline came in, moving without a sound, and stood before him. It gave him a shock; for he had been thinking of Rosamund, and when he heard the doorknob turn it was the phantasm of Rosamund that he expected to see coming in. He says, for the first minute, it was this appearance of Pauline that struck him as the uncanny and unnatural thing.

She had nothing, absolutely nothing on but a transparent white chiffony sort of dressing-gown. She was trying to undo it. He could see her hands shaking as her fingers fumbled with the fastenings.

He got up suddenly, and they just stood there before each other, saying nothing, staring at each other. He was fascinated by her, by the sheer glamour of her body, gleaming white through the thin stuff, and by the movement of her fingers. I think I've said she was a beautiful woman, and her beauty at that moment was overpowering.

And still he stared at her without saying anything. It sounds as if their silence lasted quite a long time, but in reality it couldn't have been more than some fraction of a second.

Then she began. "Oh, Edward, for God's sake *say* something. Oughtn't I to have come?"

And she went on without waiting for an answer. "Are you thinking of *her?* Because, if—if you are, I'm not going to let her drive you away from me. . . . I'm not going to. . . . She'll keep on coming as long as we don't— Can't you see that this is the way to stop it . . . ? When you take me in your arms."

She slipped off the loose sleeves of the chiffon thing and it fell to her feet. Marston says he heard a queer sound, something between a groan and a grunt, and was amazed to find that it came from himself.

He hadn't touched her yet—mind you, it went quicker than it takes to tell, it was still an affair of the fraction of a second—they were holding out their arms to each other, when the door opened again without a sound, and, without visible passage, the phantasm was there. It came incredibly fast, and thin at first, like a shaft of light sliding between them. It didn't do anything; there was no beating of hands, only, as it took on its full form, its perfect likeness of flesh and blood, it made its presence felt like a push, a force, driving them asunder.

Pauline hadn't seen it yet. She thought it was Marston who was beating her back. She cried out: "Oh, don't, don't push me away!" She stooped below the phantasm's guard and clung to his knees, writhing and crying. For a moment it was a struggle between her moving flesh and that still, supernatural being.

And in that moment Marston realized that he hated Pauline. She was fighting Rosamund with her gross flesh and blood, taking a mean advantage of her embodied state to beat down the heavenly, discarnate thing.

He called to her to let go.

"It's not I," he shouted. "Can't you *see* her?"

Then, suddenly, she saw, and let go, and dropped, crouching on the floor and trying to cover herself. This time she had given no cry.

The phantasm gave way; it moved slowly towards the door, and as it went it looked back over its shoulder at Marston, it trailed a hand, signalling to him to come.

He went out after it, hardly aware of Pauline's naked body that still writhed there, clutching at his feet as they passed, and drew itself after him, like a worm, like a beast, along the floor.

She must have got up at once and followed them out onto the landing; for, as he went down the stairs behind the phantasm, he could see Pauline's face, distorted with lust and terror, peering at them above the stairhead. She saw them

descend the last flight, and cross the hall at the bottom and go into the library. The door shut behind them.

Something happened in there. Marston never told me precisely what it was, and I didn't ask him. Anyhow, that finished it.

The next day Pauline ran away to her own people. She couldn't stay in Marston's house because it was haunted by Rosamund, and he wouldn't leave it for the same reason.

And she never came back; for she was not only afraid of Rosamund, she was afraid of Marston. And if she *had* come it wouldn't have been any good. Marston was convinced that, as often as he attempted to get to Pauline, something would stop him. Pauline certainly felt that, if Rosamund were pushed to it, she might show herself in some still more sinister and terrifying form. She knew when she was beaten.

And there was more in it than that. I believe he tried to explain it to her; said he had married her on the assumption that Rosamund was dead, but that now he knew she was alive; she was, as he put it, "there." He tried to make her see that if he had Rosamund he couldn't have *her*. Rosamund's presence in the world annulled their contract.

You see I'm convinced that something *did* happen that night in the library. I say, he never told me precisely what it was, but he once let something out. We were discussing one of Pauline's love-affairs (after the separation she gave him endless grounds for divorce).

"Poor Pauline," he said, "she thinks she's so passionate."

"Well," I said, "wasn't she?"

Then he burst out. "No. She doesn't know what passion is. None of you know. You haven't the faintest conception. You'd have to get rid of your bodies first. *I* didn't know until——"

He stopped himself. I think he was going to say, "until Rosamund came back and showed me." For he leaned forward and whispered: "It isn't a localized affair at all. . . . If you only knew——"

So I don't think it was just faithfulness to a revived memory. I take it there had been, behind that shut door, some experience, some terrible and exquisite contact. More penetrating than sight or touch. More—more extensive: passion at all points of being.

Perhaps the supreme moment of it, the ecstasy, only came when her phantasm had disappeared.

He couldn't go back to Pauline after *that*.

TACTICAL EXERCISE

EVELYN WAUGH

JOHN VERNEY MARRIED ELIZABETH IN 1938, but it was not until the winter of 1945 that he came to hate her steadily and fiercely. There had been countless brief gusts of hate before this, for it was a thing which came easily to him. He was not what is normally described as a bad-tempered man, rather the reverse; a look of fatigue and abstraction was the only visible sign of the passion which possessed him, as others are possessed by laughter or desire, several times a day.

During the war he passed among those he served with as a phlegmatic fellow. He did not have his good or his bad days; they were all uniformly good or bad; good in that he did what had to be done, expeditiously without ever "getting in a flap" or "going off the deep end"; bad from the intermittent, invisible sheet-lightning of hate which flashed and flickered deep inside him at every obstruction or reverse. In his orderly room when, as a company commander, he faced the morning procession of defaulters and malingerers; in the mess when the subalterns disturbed his reading by playing the wireless; at the Staff College when the "syndicate" disagreed with his solution; at Brigade H.Q. when the staff-sergeant mislaid a file or the telephone orderly muddled a call; when the driver of his car missed a turning; later, in hospital, when the doctor seemed to look too cursorily at his wound and the nurses stood gossiping jauntily at the beds of more likeable patients instead of doing their duty to him—in all the annoyances of army life which others dismissed with an oath and a shrug, John Verney's eyelids drooped wearily, a tiny grenade of hate exploded and the fragments rang and ricocheted round the steel walls of his mind.

There had been less to annoy him before the war. He had some money and the hope of a career in politics. Before marriage he served his apprenticeship to the Liberal party in two hopeless by-elections. The Central Office then rewarded him with a constituency in outer London which offered a fair chance in the next general election. In the eighteen months before the war he nursed this constituency from his flat in Belgravia and travelled frequently on the Continent to study

political conditions. These studies convinced him that war was inevitable; he denounced the Munich agreement pungently and secured a commission in the Territorial Army.

Into this peacetime life Elizabeth fitted unobtrusively. She was his cousin. In 1938 she had reached the age of twenty-six, four years his junior, without falling in love. She was a calm handsome young woman, an only child, with some money of her own and more to come. As a girl, in her first season, an injudicious remark, let slip and overheard, got her the reputation of cleverness. Those who knew her best ruthlessly called her "deep."

Thus condemned to social failure, she languished in the ballrooms of Pont Street for another year and then settled down to a life of concert-going and shopping with her mother, until she surprised her small circle of friends by marrying John Verney. Courtship and consummation were tepid, cousinly, harmonious. They agreed, in face of coming war, to remain childless. No one knew what Elizabeth felt or thought about anything. Her judgements were mainly negative, deep or dull as you cared to take them. She had none of the appearance of a woman likely to inflame great hate.

John Verney was discharged from the Army early in 1945 with a M.C. and one leg, for the future, two inches shorter than the other. He found Elizabeth living in Hampstead with her parents, his uncle and aunt. She had kept him informed by letter of the changes in her condition, but, preoccupied, he had not clearly imagined them. Their flat had been requisitioned by a government office; their furniture and books sent to a repository and totally lost, partly burned by a bomb, partly pillaged by firemen. Elizabeth, who was a linguist, had gone to work in a clandestine branch of the Foreign Office.

Her parents' house had once been a substantial Georgian villa overlooking the Heath. John Verney arrived there early in the morning after a crowded night's journey from Liverpool. The wrought-iron railings and gates had been rudely torn away by the salvage collectors, and in the front garden, once so neat, weeds and shrubs grew in a rank jungle trampled at night by courting soldiers. The back garden was a single, small bomb-crater; heaped clay, statuary and the bricks and glass of ruined greenhouses; dry stalks of willow-herb stood breast high over the mounds. All the windows were gone from the back of the house, replaced by shutters of card and board, which put the main rooms in perpetual darkness. "Welcome to Chaos and Old Night," said his uncle genially.

There were no servants; the old had fled, the young had

been conscripted for service. Elizabeth made him some tea before leaving for her office.

Here he lived, lucky, Elizabeth told him, to have a home. Furniture was unprocurable, furnished flats commanded a price beyond their income, which was now taxed to a bare wage. They might have found something in the country, but Elizabeth, being childless, could not get release from her work. Moreover, he had his constituency.

This, too, was transformed. A factory wired round like a prisoner-of-war camp stood in the public gardens. The streets surrounding it, once the trim houses of potential Liberals, had been bombed, patched, confiscated, and filled with an immigrant proletarian population. Every day he received a heap of complaining letters from constituents exiled in provincial boarding-houses. He had hoped that his decoration and his limp might earn him sympathy, but he found the new inhabitants indifferent to the fortunes of war. Instead they showed a sceptical curiosity about Social Security. "They're nothing but a lot of reds," said the Liberal agent.

"You mean I shan't get in?"

"Well, we'll give them a good fight. The Tories are putting up a Battle-of-Britain pilot. I'm afraid he'll get most of what's left of the middle-class vote."

In the event John Verney came bottom of the poll, badly. A rancorous Jewish schoolteacher was elected. The Central Office paid his deposit, but the election had cost him dear. And when it was over there was absolutely nothing for John Verney to do.

He remained in Hampstead, helped his aunt make the beds after Elizabeth had gone to her office, limped to the greengrocer and fishmonger and stood, full of hate, in the queues; helped Elizabeth wash up at night. They ate in the kitchen, where his aunt cooked deliciously the scanty rations. His uncle went three days a week to help pack parcels for Java.

Elizabeth, the deep one, never spoke of her work, which, in fact, was concerned with setting up hostile and oppressive governments in Eastern Europe. One evening at a restaurant, a man came and spoke to her, a tall young man whose sallow, aquiline face was full of intellect and humour. "That's the head of my department," she said. "He's so amusing."

"Looks like a Jew."

"I believe he is. He's a strong Conservative and hates the work," she added hastily, for since his defeat in the election John had become fiercely anti-Semitic.

"There is absolutely no need to work for the State now," he said. "The war's over."

"Our work is just beginning. They won't let any of us go. You must understand what conditions are in this country."

It often fell to Elizabeth to explain "conditions" to him. Strand by strand, knot by knot, through the coalless winter, she exposed the vast net of governmental control which had been woven in his absence. He had been reared in traditional Liberalism and the system revolted him. More than this, it had him caught, personally, tripped up, tied, tangled; wherever he wanted to go, whatever he wanted to do or have done, he found himself baffled and frustrated. And as Elizabeth explained she found herself defending. This regulation was necessary to avoid that ill; such a country was suffering, as Britain was not, for having neglected such a precaution; and so on, calmly and reasonably.

"I know it's maddening, John, but you must realize it's the same for everyone."

"That's what all you bureaucrats want," he said. "Equality through slavery. The two-class state—proletarians and officials."

Elizabeth was part and parcel of it. She worked for the State and the Jews. She was a collaborator with the new, alien, occupying power. And as the winter wore on and the gas burned feebly in the stove, and the rain blew in through the patched windows, as at length spring came and buds broke in the obscene wilderness round the house, Elizabeth in his mind became something more important. She became a symbol. For just as soldiers in far-distant camps think of their wives, with a tenderness they seldom felt at home, as the embodiment of all the good things they have left behind, wives who perhaps were scolds and drabs, but in the desert and jungle become transfigured until their trite air-letters become texts of hope, so Elizabeth grew in John Verney's despairing mind to more than human malevolence as the archpriestess and maenad of the century of the common man.

"You aren't looking well, John," said his aunt. "You and Elizabeth ought to get away for a bit. She is due for leave at Easter."

"The State is granting her a supplementary ration of her husband's company, you mean. Are we sure she has filled all the correct forms? Or are commissars of her rank above such things?"

Uncle and aunt laughed uneasily. John made his little jokes with such an air of weariness, with such a droop of the eyelids

that they sometimes struck chill in that family circle. Elizabeth regarded him gravely and silently.

John was far from well. His leg was in constant pain so that he no longer stood in queues. He slept badly; as also, for the first time in her life, did Elizabeth. They shared a room now, for the winter rains had brought down ceilings in many parts of the shaken house and the upper rooms were thought to be unsafe. They had twin beds on the ground floor in what had once been her father's library.

In the first days of his homecoming John had been amorous. Now he never approached her. They lay night after night six feet apart in the darkness. Once when John had been awake for two hours he turned on the lamp that stood on the table between them. Elizabeth was lying with her eyes wide open staring at the ceiling.

"I'm sorry. Did I wake you?"

"I haven't been asleep."

"I thought I'd read for a bit. Will it disturb you?"

"Not at all."

She turned away. John read for an hour. He did not know whether she was awake or asleep when he turned off the light.

Often after that he longed to put on the light, but was afraid to find her awake and staring. Instead he lay, as others lie in a luxurious rapture of love, hating her.

It did not occur to him to leave her; or, rather, it did occur from time to time, but he hopelessly dismissed the thought. Her life was bound tight to his; her family was his family; their finances were intertangled and their expectations lay together in the same quarters. To leave her would be to start fresh, alone and naked in a strange world; and lame and weary at the age of thirty-eight, John Verney had not the heart to move.

He loved no one else. He had nowhere to go, nothing to do. Moreover he suspected, of late, that it would not hurt her if he went. And, above all, the single steadfast desire left to him was to do her ill. "I wish she were dead," he said to himself as he lay awake at night. "I wish she were dead."

Sometimes they went out together. As the winter passed, John took to dining once or twice a week at his club. He assumed that on these occasions she stayed at home, but one morning it transpired that she too had dined out the evening before. He did not ask with whom, but his aunt did, and Elizabeth replied, "Just someone from the office."

"The Jew?" John asked.

"As a matter of fact, it was."

"I hope you enjoyed it."

"Quite. A beastly dinner, of course, but he's very amusing."

One night when he returned from his club, after a dismal little dinner and two crowded Tube journeys, he found Elizabeth in bed and deeply asleep. She did not stir when he entered. Unlike her normal habit, she was snoring. He stood for a minute, fascinated by this new and unlovely aspect of her, her head thrown back, her mouth open and slightly dribbling at the corner. Then he shook her. She muttered something, turned over and slept heavily and soundlessly.

Half an hour later, as he was striving to compose himself for sleep, she began to snore again. He turned on the light, and looked at her more closely and noticed with surprise, which suddenly changed to joyous hope, that there was a tube of unfamiliar pills, half empty, beside her on the bed table.

He examined it. *"24 Comprimés narcotiques, hypnotiques,"* he read, and then in large scarlet letters, "NE PAS DEPASSER DEUX." He counted those which were left. Eleven.

With tremulous butterfly wings hope began to flutter in his heart, became a certainty. He felt a fire kindle and spread inside him until he was deliciously suffused in every limb and organ. He lay, listening to the snores, with the pure excitement of a child on Christmas Eve. "I shall wake up tomorrow and find her dead," he told himself, as once he had felt the flaccid stocking at the foot of his bed and told himself, "Tomorrow I shall wake up and find it full." Like a child, he longed to sleep to hasten the morning and, like a child, he was wildly, ecstatically sleepless. Presently he swallowed two of the pills himself and almost at once was unconscious.

Elizabeth always rose first to make breakfast for the family. She was at the dressing-table when sharply, without drowsiness, his memory stereoscopically clear about the incidents of the night before, John awoke. "You've been snoring," she said.

Disappointment was so intense that at first he could not speak. Then he said, "You snored, too, last night."

"It must be the sleeping-tablet I took. I must say it gave me a good night."

"Only one?"

"Yes, two's the most that's safe."

"Where did you get them?"

"A friend at the office—the one you called the Jew. He has them prescribed by a doctor for when he's working too hard. I told him I wasn't sleeping, so he gave me half a bottle."

"Could he get me some?"

"I expect so. He can do most things like that."

So he and Elizabeth began to drug themselves regularly and passed long, vacuous nights. But often John delayed, letting the beatific pill lie beside his glass of water, while knowing the vigil was terminable at will, he postponed the joy of unconsciousness, heard Elizabeth's snores, and hated her sumptuously.

One evening while the plans for the holiday were still under discussion, John and Elizabeth went to the cinema. The film was a murder story of no great ingenuity but with showy scenery. A bride murdered her husband by throwing him out of a window, down a cliff. Things were made easy for her by his taking a lonely lighthouse for their honeymoon. He was very rich and she wanted his money. All she had to do was confide in the local doctor and a few neighbours that her husband frightened her by walking in his sleep; she doped his coffee, dragged him from the bed to the balcony—a feat of some strength—where she had already broken away a yard of balustrade, and rolled him over. Then she went back to bed, gave the alarm next morning, and wept over the mangled body which was presently discovered half awash on the rocks. Retribution overtook her later, but at the time the thing was a complete success.

"I wish it were as easy as that," thought John, and in a few hours the whole tale had floated away in those lightless attics of the mind where films and dreams and funny stories lie spider-shrouded for a lifetime unless, as sometimes happens, an intruder brings them to light.

Such a thing happened a few weeks later when John and Elizabeth went for their holiday. Elizabeth found the place. It belonged to someone in her office. It was named Good Hope Fort, and stood on the Cornish coast. "It's only just been derequisitioned," she said; "I expect we shall find it in pretty bad condition."

"We're used to that," said John. It did not occur to him that she should spend her leave anywhere but with him. She was as much part of him as his maimed and aching leg.

They arrived on a gusty April afternoon after a train journey of normal discomfort. A taxi drove them eight miles from the station, through deep Cornish lanes, past granite cottages and disused, archaic tin-workings. They reached the village which gave the house its postal address, passed through it and out along a track which suddenly emerged from its high banks into open grazing land on the cliff's edge, high, swift clouds and sea-birds wheeling overhead, the turf at their feet alive with fluttering wild flowers, salt in the air, below them the

roar of the Atlantic breaking on the rocks, a middle-distance of indigo and white tumbled waters and beyond it the serene arc of the horizon. Here was the house.

"Your father," said John, "would now say, 'Your castle hath a pleasant seat.' "

"Well, it has rather, hasn't it?"

It was a small stone building on the very edge of the cliff, built a century or so ago for defensive purposes, converted to a private house in the years of peace, taken again by the Navy during the war as a signal station, now once more reverting to gentler uses. Some coils of rusty wire, a mast, the concrete foundations of a hut, gave evidence of its former masters.

They carried their things into the house and paid the taxi.

"A woman comes up every morning from the village. I said we shouldn't want her this evening. I see she's left us some oil for the lamps. She's got a fire going too, bless her, and plenty of wood. Oh, and look what I've got as a present from father. I promised not to tell you until we arrived. A bottle of whisky. Wasn't it sweet of him. He's been hoarding his ration for three months . . ." Elizabeth talked brightly as she began to arrange the luggage. "There's a room for each of us. This is the only proper living-room, but there's a study in case you feel like doing any work. I believe we shall be quite comfortable . . ."

The living-room was built with two stout bays, each with a French window opening on a balcony which over-hung the sea. John opened one and the sea-wind filled the room. He stepped out, breathed deeply, and then said suddenly: "Hullo, this is dangerous."

At one place, between the windows, the cast-iron balustrade had broken away and the stone ledge lay open over the cliff. He looked at the gap and at the foaming rocks below, momentarily puzzled. The irregular polyhedron of memory rolled uncertainly and came to rest.

He had been here before, a few weeks ago, on the gallery of the lighthouse in that swiftly forgotten film. He stood there, looking down. It was exactly thus that the waves had come swirling over the rocks, had broken and dropped back with the spray falling about them. This was the sound they had made; this was the broken ironwork and the sheer edge.

Elizabeth was still talking in the room, her voice drowned by wind and sea. John returned to the room, shut and fastened the door. In the quiet she was saying ". . . only got the furniture out of store last week. He left the woman from the village

to arrange it. She's got some queer ideas, I must say. Just look where she put . . ."

"What did you say this house was called?"

"Good Hope."

"A good name."

That evening John drank a glass of his father-in-law's whisky, smoked a pipe and planned. He had been a good tactician. He made a leisurely, mental "appreciation of the situation." Object: murder.

When they rose to go to bed he asked: "You packed the tablets?"

"Yes, a new tube. But I am sure I shan't want any tonight."

"Neither shall I," said John, "the air is wonderful."

During the following days he considered the tactical problem. It was entirely simple. He had the "staff-solution" already. He considered it in the words and form he had used in the Army. ". . . Courses open to the enemy . . . achievement of surprise . . . consolidation of success." The staff-solution was exemplary. At the beginning of the first week, he began to put it into execution.

Already, by easy stages, he had made himself known in the village. Elizabeth was a friend of the owner; he the returned hero, still a little strange in civvy street. "The first holiday my wife and I have had together for six years," he told them in the golf club and, growing more confidential at the bar, hinted that they were thinking of making up for lost time and starting a family.

On another evening he spoke of war-strain, of how in this war the civilians had had a worse time of it than the services. His wife, for instance; stuck it all through the blitz; office work all day, bombs at night. She ought to get right away, alone somewhere for a long stretch; her nerves had suffered; nothing serious, but to tell the truth he wasn't quite happy about it. As a matter of fact he had found her walking in her sleep once or twice in London.

His companions knew of similar cases; nothing to worry about, but it wanted watching; didn't want it to develop into anything worse. Had she seen a doctor?

Not yet, John said. In fact she didn't know she had been sleep-walking. He had got her back to bed without waking her. He hoped the sea air would do her good. In fact, she seemed much better already. If she showed any more signs of the trouble when they got home, he knew a very good man to take her to.

The golf club was full of sympathy. John asked if there

were a good doctor in the neighbourhood. Yes, they said, old Mackenzie in the village, a first-class man, wasted in a little place like this; not at all a stick-in-the-mud. Read the latest books; psychology and all that. They couldn't think why Old Mack had never specialized and made a name for himself.

"I think I might go and talk to Old Mack about it," said John.

"Do. You couldn't find a better fellow."

Elizabeth had a fortnight's leave. There were still three days to go when John went off to the village to consult Dr. Mackenzie. He found a grey-haired, genial bachelor in a consulting room that was more like a lawyer's office than a physician's, book-lined, dark, permeated by tobacco smoke.

Seated in the shabby leather armchair he developed in more precise language the story he had told in the golf club. Dr. Mackenzie listened without comment.

"It's the first time I've run against anything like this," he concluded.

At length Dr. Mackenzie said: "You got pretty badly knocked about in the war, Mr. Verney?"

"My knee. It still gives me trouble."

"Bad time in hospital?"

"Three months. A beastly place outside Rome."

"There's always a good deal of nervous shock in an injury of that kind. It often persists when the wound is healed."

"Yes, but I don't quite understand . . ."

"My dear Mr. Verney, your wife asked me to say nothing about it, but I think I must tell you that she has already been here to consult me on this matter."

"About her sleep-walking? But she can't . . ." Then John stopped.

"My dear fellow, I quite understand. She thought you didn't know. Twice lately you've been out of bed and she had to lead you back. She knows all about it."

John could find nothing to say.

"It's not the first time," Dr. Mackenzie continued, "that I've been consulted by patients who have told me their symptoms and said they had come on behalf of friends or relations. Usually it's girls who think they're in a family-way. It's an interesting feature of your case that you should want to ascribe the trouble to someone else, probably the decisive feature. I've given your wife the name of a man in London who I think will be able to help you. Meanwhile I can advise plenty of exercise, light meals at night . . ."

John Verney limped back to Good Hope Fort in a state of

consternation. Security had been compromised; the operation must be cancelled; initiative had been lost . . . all the phrases of the tactical school came to his mind, but he was still numb after this unexpected reverse. A vast and naked horror peeped at him and was thrust aside.

When he got back Elizabeth was laying the supper table. He stood on the balcony and stared at the gaping rails with eyes smarting with disappointment. It was dead calm that evening. The rising tide lapped and fell and mounted again silently among the rocks below. He stood gazing down, then he turned back into the room.

There was one large drink left in the whisky bottle. He poured it out and swallowed it. Elizabeth brought in the supper and they sat down. Gradually his mind grew a little calmer. They usually ate in silence. At last he said: "Elizabeth, why did you tell the doctor I had been walking in my sleep?"

She quietly put down the plate she had been holding and looked at him curiously. "Why?" she said gently. "Because I was worried, of course. I didn't think you knew about it."

"But have I been?"

"Oh yes, several times—in London and here. I didn't think it mattered at first, but the night before last I found you on the balcony, quite near that dreadful hole in the rails. I was really frightened. But it's going to be alright now. Dr. Mackenzie has given me the name . . ."

It was possible, thought John Verney; nothing was more likely.

He had lived night and day for ten days thinking of that opening, of the sea and rock below, the ragged ironwork and the sharp edge of stone. He suddenly felt defeated, sick and stupid, as he had as he lay on the Italian hillside with his smashed knee. Then as now he had felt weariness even more than pain.

"Coffee, darling."

Suddenly he roused himself. "No," he almost shouted. "No, no, no."

"Darling, what is the matter? Don't get excited. Are you feeling ill? Lie down on the sofa near the window."

He did as he was told. He felt so weary that he could barely move from his chair.

"Do you think coffee would keep you awake, love? You look quite fit to drop already. There, lie down."

He lay down; like the tide slowly mounting among the rocks below, sleep rose and spread in his mind. He nodded and woke with a start.

"Shall I open the window, darling, and give you some air?"

"Elizabeth," he said, "I feel as if I have been drugged." Like the rocks below the window—now awash, now emerging clear from falling water; now awash again deeper; now barely visible, mere patches on the face of gently eddying foam—his brain was softly drowning. He roused himself, as children do in nightmare, still scared, still half asleep. "I can't be drugged," he said loudly, "I never touched the coffee."

"Drugs in the coffee?" said Elizabeth gently, like a nurse soothing a fractious child. "Drugs in the *coffee?* What an absurd idea. That's the kind of thing that only happens on the films, darling."

He did not hear her. He was fast asleep, snoring stertorously by the open window.

♠ THE ILLUSTRATED WOMAN

RAY BRADBURY

WHEN A NEW PATIENT wanders into the office and stretches out to stutter forth a compendious ticker-tape of free-association, it is up to the psychiatrist immediately beyond, behind and above, to decide at just which points of the anatomy the client is in touch with the couch.

In other words, where does the patient make contact with reality?

Some people seem to float half an inch above any surface whatsoever. They have not seen earth in so long they have become somewhat airsick.

Still others so firmly weight themselves down, clutch, thrust, heave their bodies toward reality that long after they are gone you find their tiger shapes and claw marks in the upholstery.

In the case of Emma Fleet, Dr. William C. George was a long time deciding which was furniture and which was woman and where what touched which.

For, to begin with, Emma Fleet resembled a couch.

"Mrs. Emma Fleet, doctor," announced his receptionist.

Dr. William C. George gasped.

And it *was* a traumatic experience, seeing this woman shunt herself through the door without benefit of railroad switchman or the ground-crews who rush about under Macy's

Easter balloons, heaving on lines, guiding the massive images to some eternal hangar off beyond.

In came Emma Fleet, as quick as her name, the floor shifting like a huge scale under her weight.

Dr. George must have gasped again, guessing her at four hundred on the hoof, for Emma Fleet smiled as if reading his mind.

"Four hundred and two and one-half pounds, to be exact," she said.

He found himself staring at his furniture.

"Oh, it'll hold all right," said Mrs. Fleet, intuitively.

She sat down.

The couch yelped like a cur.

Dr. George cleared his throat. "Before you make yourself comfortable," he said, "I feel I should say immediately and honestly, that we in the psychiatric field have had little success in inhibiting appetites. The whole problem of weight and food has so far eluded our ability for coping. A strange admission, perhaps, but unless we put our frailties forth, we might be in danger of fooling ourselves and thus taking money under false pretenses. So, if you are here seeking help for your figure, I must list myself among the nonplussed."

"Thank you for your honesty, doctor," said Emma Fleet. "However, I don't wish to lose. I'd prefer your helping me *gain* another one hundred or two hundred pounds."

"Oh, no!" Dr. George exclaimed.

"Oh, yes. But, my heart will not allow what my deep dear soul would most gladly endure. My physical heart might fail at what my loving heart and mind would ask of it."

She sighed. The couch sighed.

"Let me brief you. I'm married to Willy Fleet. We work for the Dillbeck-Hornemann Traveling Shows. I'm known as Lady Bountiful. And, Willy . . .?"

She swooned up out of the couch and glided or rather escorted her shadow across the floor. She opened the door.

Beyond, in the waiting room, a cane in one hand, a straw hat in the other, seated rigidly, staring at the wall, was a tiny man with tiny feet and tiny hands and tiny bright blue eyes in a tiny head. He was, at the most, one would guess, three feet high, and probably weighed sixty pounds in the rain. But there was a proud, gloomy, almost violent look of genius blazing in that small but craggy face.

"That's Willy Fleet," said Emma, lovingly, and shut the door.

The couch, sat on, cried again.

Emma beamed at the psychiatrist who was still staring, in shock, at the door.

"No children, of course?" he heard himself say.

"No children." Her smile lingered. "But that's not my problem, either. Willy, in a way, is my child. And I, in a way, besides being his wife, am his mother. It all has to do with size, I imagine, and we're happy with the way we've balanced things off."

"Well, if your problem isn't children, or your size or his, or controlling weight, then what . . .?"

Emma Fleet laughed lightly, tolerantly. It was a nice laugh, like a girl's somehow caught in that great body and throat.

"Patience, doctor. Mustn't we go back down the road to where Willy and I first met?"

The doctor shrugged, laughed quietly himself, and relaxed, nodding. "You must."

"During high school," said Emma Fleet, "I weighed one-eighty and tipped the scales at two-fifty when I was twenty-one. Needless to say, I went on few summer excursions. Most of the time I was left in dry dock. I had many girlfriends, however, who liked to be seen with me. They weighed one-fifty, most of them, and I made them feel svelte. But . . . that's a long time ago. I don't worry over it any more. Willy changed all that."

"Willy sounds like a remarkable man," Dr. George found himself saying, against all the rules.

"Oh, he is, he is! He—*smoulders*—with ability, with talent as yet undiscovered, untapped!" she said, quickening warmly. "God bless him, he leapt into my life like summer lightning! Eight years ago I went with my girlfriends to the visiting Labor Day carnival. By the end of the evening, the girls had all been seized away from me, by the running boys who rushing by grabbed and took them off into the night. There I was alone with three Kewpie dolls, a fake alligator handbag and nothing to do but make the GUESS YOUR WEIGHT man nervous by looking at him every time I went by and pretending like at any moment I might pay my money and dare him to guess.

"But, the GUESS YOUR WEIGHT man *wasn't* nervous! After I had passed three times I saw him staring at me. With awe, yes, with admiration! And who was this GUESS YOUR WEIGHT man? Willy Fleet, of course. The fourth time I passed he called to me and said I could get a prize free if only I'd let him guess my weight. He was all feverish and excited. He danced around. I'd never been made over so much in my life. I blushed. I felt good. So I sat in the scales chair. I heard the

pointer whizz around and I heard Willy whistle with honest delight.

" 'Two hundred and eight-nine pounds!' he cried. 'Oh boy, oh boy, you're *lovely!*'

" 'I'm *what?*' I said.

" 'You're the loveliest woman in the whole world,' said Willy, looking me right in the eye.

"I blushed again. I laughed. We both laughed. Then I must have cried, for the next thing, sitting there, I felt him touch my elbow with concern. He was gazing into my face, faintly alarmed.

" 'I haven't said the wrong thing——?' he asked.

" 'No,' I sobbed, and then grew quiet. 'The right thing, only the right thing. It's the first time anyone ever——'

" 'What?' he said.

" 'Ever put up with my fat,' I said.

" 'You're not fat,' he said. 'You're large, you're big, you're wonderful. Michelangelo would have loved you. Titian would have loved you. Da Vinci would have loved you. They knew what they were doing in those days. Size. Size is everything. I should know. Look at me. I traveled with Singer's Midgets for six seasons, known as Jack Thimble. And Oh my God, dear lady, you're right out of the most glorious part of the Renaissance. Bernini, who built those colonnades around the front of St. Peter's and inside at the altar, would have sold his everlasting soul just to know someone like you . . .'

" 'Don't!' I cried. 'I wasn't meant to feel this happy. It'll hurt so much when you stop.'

" 'I won't stop, then,' he said. 'Miss . . .?'

" 'Emma Gertz.'

" 'Emma,' he said, 'are you married?'

" 'Are you kidding?' I said.

" 'Emma, do you like to travel?'

" 'I've never traveled.'

" 'Emma,' he said, 'this old carnival's going to be in your town one more week. Come down every night, every day, why not? Talk to me, know me. At the end of the week, who can tell, maybe you'll travel with me.'

" 'What are you suggesting?' I said, not really angry or irritated or anything but fascinated and intrigued that anyone would offer anything to Moby Dick's daughter.

" 'I mean marriage!' Willy Fleet looked at me breathing hard, and I had the feeling that he was dressed in a mountaineer's rig, alpine hat, climbing boots, spikes, and a rope slung over his

baby shoulder. And if I should ask him, 'Why are you saying this?' he might well answer, 'Because you're *there.*'

"But I didn't ask, so he didn't answer. We stood there in the night, at the center of the carnival, until at last I started off down the midway, swaying. 'I'm drunk!' I cried. 'Oh, so very drunk, and I've had nothing to drink.'

" 'Now that I've found you!' called Willy Fleet after me, 'you'll never escape me, remember!'

"Stunned and reeling, blinded by his large man's words sung out in his soprano voice, I somehow blundered from the carnival grounds and trekked home.

"The next week, we were married."

Emma Fleet paused and looked at her hands.

"Would it bother you if I told about the honeymoon?" she asked, shyly.

"No," said the doctor, then lowered his voice, for he was responding all too quickly to the details. "Please *do* go on."

"The honeymoon." Emma sounded her *vox humana.* The response from all the chambers of her body vibrated the couch, the room, the doctor, the dear bones within the doctor.

"The honeymoon . . . was not usual."

The doctor's eyebrows lifted the faintest touch. He looked from the woman to the door beyond which, in miniature, sat the image of Edmund Hillary, he of Everest.

"You have never seen such a rush as Willy spirited me off to his home, a lovely doll house, really, with one large normal-sized room that was to be mine, or rather, ours. There, very politely, always the kind, the thoughtful, the quiet gentleman, he asked for my blouse, which I gave him, my skirt, which I gave him. Right down the list, I handed him the garments that he named, until at last . . . Can one blush from head to foot? One can. One did. I stood like a veritable hearth-fire stoked by a blush of all-encompassing and ever-moving color that surged and resurged up and down my body in tints of pink and rose and then pink again.

" 'My God!' cried Willy, 'you're the loveliest grand camellia that ever did unfurl!' Whereupon new tides of blush moved in hidden avalanches within, showing only to color the tent of my body, the outermost and, to Willy anyway, most precious skin.

"What did Willy do then? Guess."

"I daren't," said the doctor, flustered himself.

"He walked around and around me."

"*Circled* you?"

"Around and around, like a sculptor gazing at a huge block

of snow-white granite. He said so, himself. Granite or marble from which he might shape images of beauty as yet unguessed. Around and around he walked, sighing and shaking his head happily at his fortune, his little hands clasped, his little eyes bright. Where to begin, he seemed to be thinking, where, where to begin!?

"He spoke at last. 'Emma,' he asked, 'why, why do you think I've worked for years as the GUESS YOUR WEIGHT man at the carnival? Why? Because I have been searching my lifetime through for such as you. Night after night, summer after summer, I've watched those scales jump and twitter! And now at last I've the means, the way, the wall, the canvas, whereby to express my genius!'

"He stopped walking and looked at me, his eyes brimming over.

" 'Emma,' he said, softly, 'may I have permission to do anything absolutely whatsoever at all with you?'

" 'Oh, Willy, Willy,' I cried. 'Anything!' "

Emma Fleet paused.

The doctor found himself out at the edge of his chair.

"Yes, yes. And *then?*"

"And then," said Emma Fleet, "he brought out all his boxes and bottles of inks and stencils and his bright silver tattoo needles."

"Tattoo needles?"

The doctor fell back in his chair.

"He . . . tattooed you?"

"He tattooed me."

"He was a tattoo artist?"

"He was, he is, an artist. It only happens that the form his art takes happens to be the tattoo."

"And you," said the doctor, slowly, "were the canvas for which he had been searching much of his adult life?"

"I was the canvas for which he had searched *all* of his adult life."

She let it sink, and it *did* sink, and kept on sinking, into the doctor. Then when she saw it had struck bottom and stirred up vast quantities of mud, she went serenely on.

"So our grand life began! I loved Willy and Willy loved me and we both loved this thing that was larger than ourselves that we were doing together. Nothing less than creating the greatest picture the world has ever seen! 'Nothing less than perfection!' cried Willy. 'Nothing less than perfection!' cried myself, in response.

"Oh, it was a happy time. Ten thousand cozy busy hours we

spent together. You can't imagine how proud it made me to be the vast shore along which the genius of Willy Fleet ebbed and flowed in a tide of colors.

"One year alone we spent on my right arm and my left, half a year on my right leg, eight months on my left, in preparation for the grand explosion of bright detail which erupted out along my collarbones and shoulderblades, which fountained upward from my hips to meet in a glorious July celebration of pinwheels, Titian nudes, Giorgione landscapes, and El Greco cross-indexes of lightning on my façade, prickling with vast electric fires up and down my spine.

"Dear me, there never has been, there never will be, a love like ours again, a love where two people so sincerely dedicated themselves to one task, of giving beauty to the world in equal portions. We flew to each other day after day, and if I ate more, grew larger, with the years, Willy approved, Willy applauded. Just that much more room, more space for his configurations to flower in. We could not bear to be apart, for we both felt, were certain, that once the Masterpiece was finished we could leave circus, carnival, or vaudeville forever. It was grandiose, yes, but we knew that once finished, I could be toured through the Art Institute in Chicago, the Kress Collection in Washington, the Tate Gallery in London, the Louvre, the Uffizi, the Vatican Museum! For the rest of our lives we would travel with the sun!

"So it went, year on year. We didn't need the world or the people of the world, we had each other. We worked at our ordinary jobs by day, and then till after midnight, there was Willy at my ankle, there was Willy at my elbow, there was Willy exploring up the incredible slope of my back toward the snowy-talcumed crest. Willy wouldn't let me see, most of the time. He didn't like me looking over his shoulder, he didn't like me looking over *my* shoulder, for that matter. Months passed before, curious beyond madness, I would be allowed to see his progress, slow inch by inch, as the brilliant inks inundated me and I drowned in the rainbow of his inspirations. Eight years, eight glorious wondrous years. And then at last, it was done, it was finished. And Willy threw himself down and slept for forty-eight hours straight. And I slept near him, the mammoth bedded with the black lamb. That was just four weeks ago. Four short weeks back, our happiness came to an end."

"Ah, yes," said the doctor. "You and your husband are suffering from the creative equivalent of the 'baby blues,' the depression a mother feels after her child is born. Your work is

finished. A listless and somewhat sad period invariably follows. But, now, consider, you will reap the rewards of your long labor, surely? You *will* tour the world?"

"No," cried Emma Fleet, and a tear sprang to her eye. "At any moment, Willy will run off and never return. He has begun to wander about the city. Yesterday I caught him brushing off the carnival scales. Today I found him working, for the first time in eight years, back at his GUESS YOUR WEIGHT booth!"

"Dear me," said the psychiatrist. "He's——?"

"Weighing new women, yes! Shopping for new canvas! He hasn't said, but I know, I know! This time he'll find a heavier woman yet, five hundred, six hundred pounds! I guessed this would happen, a month ago, when we finished the Masterpiece. So I ate still more, and stretched my skin still more, so that little places appeared here and there, little open stretches that Willy had to repair, fill in with fresh detail. But now I'm done, exhausted, I've stuffed to distraction, the last fill-in work is done. There's not a millionth of an inch of space left between my ankles and my Adam's apple where he can squeeze in one last demon, dervish, or baroque angel. I am, to Willy, work over and done. Now he wants to move on. He will marry, I fear, four more times in his life, each time to a larger woman, a greater extension for a greater mural, and the grand finale of his talent. Then, too, in the last week, he has become critical."

"Of the Masterpiece with a capital M?" asked the doctor.

"Like all artists, he is a perfectionist. Now he finds little flaws, a face here done slightly in the wrong tint of texture, a hand there twisted slightly askew by my hurried diet to gain more weight and thus give him new space and renew his attentions. To him, above all, I was a beginning. Now he must move on from his apprenticeship to his true masterworks. Oh, doctor, I am about to be abandoned. Where is there for a woman who weighs four hundred pounds and is laved with illustrations? If he leaves, what shall I do, where go, who would want me now? Will I be lost again in the world as I was lost before my wild happiness?"

"A psychiatrist," said the psychiatrist, "is not supposed to give advice. But——"

"But, but, but?" she cried, eagerly.

"A psychiatrist is supposed to let the patient discover and cure himself. Yet, in this case——"

"This case, yes, go on!"

"It seems so simple. To keep your husband's love——"

"To keep his love, yes?"

The doctor smiled. "You must destroy the Masterpiece."

"What?"

"Erase it, get rid of it. Those tattoos *will* come off, won't they? I read somewhere once that——"

"Oh, doctor!" Emma Fleet leapt up. "That's *it!* It can be done! And best of all, Willy can do it! It will take three months alone to wash me clean, rid me of the very Masterpiece that irks him now. Then, virgin-white again, we can start another eight years, after that another eight and another and another. Oh, doctor, I know he'll do it! Perhaps he was only waiting for me to suggest—and I too stupid to guess! Oh, doctor, doctor!"

And she crushed him in her arms.

When the doctor broke happily free, she stood off, turning in a circle.

"How strange," she said. "In half an hour, you solve the next three thousand days and beyond, of my life. You're very wise. I'll pay you anything!"

"My usual modest fee is sufficient," said the doctor.

"I can hardly wait to tell Willy! But first," she said, "since you've been so wise, you deserve to see the Masterpiece before it is destroyed."

"That's hardly necessary, Mrs.——"

"You must discover for yourself the rare mind, eye and artistic hand of Willy Fleet, before it is gone forever, and we start anew!" she cried, unbuttoning her voluminous frock-coat.

"It isn't really——"

"There!" she said, and flung her coat wide.

The doctor was somehow not surprised to see that she was stark naked beneath her coat.

He gasped. His eyes grew large. His mouth fell open. He sat down slowly, though in reality he somehow wished to stand, as he had in the fifth grade as a boy, during the salute to the flag, following which three dozen voices broke into an awed and tremulous song:

"Oh, Beautiful for spacious skies,
O'er amber waves of grain,
Thy purple mountain majesties,
Above the fruited plain . . ."

But, still seated, overwhelmed, he gazed at the continental vastness of the woman.

Upon which nothing whatsoever was stitched, painted, water-colored or in any way tattooed.

Naked, unadorned, untouched, unlined, unillustrated.

He gasped again.

Now she had whipped her coat back about her with a winsome acrobat's smile, as if she had just performed a towering feat. Now she was sailing toward the door.

"Wait——" said the doctor.

But she was out the door, in the reception room, babbling, whispering. "Willy, Willy!" and bending to her husband, hissing in his tiny ear until *his* eyes flexed wide, and his firm and passionate mouth dropped open and he cried aloud and clapped his hands with elation.

"Doctor, doctor, thank you, thank you!"

He darted forward and seized the doctor's hand and shook it, hard. The doctor was surprised at the fire and rock hardness of that grip. It was the hand of a dedicated artist, as were the eyes burning up at him darkly from the wildly illuminated face.

"Everything's going to be fine!" cried Willy.

The doctor hesitated, glancing from Willy to the great shadowing balloon that tugged at him wanting to fly off away.

"We won't have to come back again, ever?"

Good Lord, the doctor thought, does *he* think that *he* has illustrated her from stem to stern, and does she humor him about it? Is *he* mad?

Or does *she* imagine that he has tattooed her from neck to toe-bone, and does he humor her? Is *she* mad?

Or, most strange of all, do they *both* believe that he has swarmed, as across the Sistine Chapel ceiling, covering her with rare and significant beauties? Do both believe, know, humor each other in their specially dimensioned world?

"Will we have to come back again?" asked Willy Fleet a second time.

"No." The doctor breathed a prayer. "I think not."

Why? Because, by some idiot grace, he had done the right thing, hadn't he? By prescribing for an invisible cause he had made a full cure, yes? Regardless if she believed or he believed or both believed in the Masterpiece, by suggesting the pictures be erased, destroyed, the doctor had made her a clean, lovely and inviting canvas again, if *she* needed to be. And if he, on the other hand, wished a new woman to scribble, scrawl, and pretend to tattoo on, well, that worked, too. For new and untouched she would be.

"Thank you, doctor, oh thank you, thank you!"

"Don't thank me," said the doctor. "I've done nothing." He almost said, it was all a fluke, a joke, a surprise! I fell downstairs and landed on my feet!

"Goodbye, goodbye!"

And the elevator slid down, the big woman and the little man sinking from sight into the now suddenly not-too-solid earth, where the atoms opened to let them pass.

"Goodbye, thanks . . . thanks . . ."

Their voices faded calling his name and praising his intellect long after they had passed the fourth floor.

The doctor looked around and moved unsteadily back into his office. He shut the door and leaned against it.

"Doctor," he murmured. "Heal thyself."

He stepped forward. He did not feel real. He must lie down, if but for a moment.

Where?

On the couch, of course, on the couch.

♠ THE SHOUT

ROBERT GRAVES

WHEN WE ARRIVED WITH OUR BAGS at the Asylum cricket ground, the chief medical officer, whom I had met at the particular house where I was staying, came up. I told him that I was only scoring for the Lampton team today (I had broken a finger the week before, keeping wicket on a bumpy pitch). He said: "Oh, then you'll have an interesting companion."

"The other scoresman?" I asked.

"Crossley is the most intelligent man in the asylum," answered the doctor, "a wide reader, a first-class chess-player, and so on. He seems to have travelled all over the world. He's been sent here for delusions. His most serious delusion is that he's a murderer, and his story is that he killed two men and a woman at Sydney, Australia. The other delusion, which is more humorous, is that his soul is split in pieces—whatever that means. He edits our monthly magazine, he stage-manages our Christmas theatricals, and he gave a most original conjuring performance the other day. You'll like him."

He introduced me. Crossley, a big man of forty or fifty, had a queer, not unpleasant, face. But I felt a little uncomfortable, sitting next to him in the scoring box, his black-whiskered hands so close to mine. I had no fear of physical violence, only the sense of being in the presence of a man of unusual force, even perhaps, it somehow occurred to me, of occult powers.

It was hot in the scoring box in spite of the wide window.

"Thunderstorm weather," said Crossley, who spoke in what country people call a "college voice," though I could not identify the college. "Thunderstorm weather makes us patients behave even more irregularly than usual."

I asked whether any patients were playing.

"Two of them, this first wicket partnership. The tall one, B. C. Brown, played for Hants three years ago, and the other is a good club player. Pat Slingsby usually turns out for us too—the Australian fast bowler, you know—but we are dropping him today. In weather like this he is apt to bowl at the batsman's head. He is not insane in the usual sense, merely magnificently ill-tempered. The doctors can do nothing with him. He wants shooting, really." Crossley began talking about the doctor. "A good-hearted fellow and, for a mental-hospital physician, technically well advanced. He actually studies morbid psychology and is fairly well-read, up to about the day before yesterday. I have a good deal of fun with him. He reads neither German nor French, so I keep a stage or two ahead in psychological fashions; he has to wait for the English translations. I invent significant dreams for him to interpret; I find he likes me to put in snakes and apple pies, so I usually do. He is convinced that my mental trouble is due to the good old 'antipaternal fixation'—I wish it were as simple as that."

Then Crossley asked me whether I could score and listen to a story at the same time. I said that I could. It was slow cricket.

"My story is true," he said, "every word of it. Or, when I say that my story is 'true,' I mean at least that I am telling it in a new way. It is always the same story, but I sometimes vary the climax and even recast the characters. Variation keeps it fresh and therefore true. If I were always to use the same formula, it would soon drag and become false. I am interested in keeping it alive, and it is a true story, every word of it. I know the people in it personally. They are Lampton people."

We decided that I should keep score of the runs and extras and that he should keep the bowling analysis, and at the fall of every wicket we should copy from each other. This made storytelling possible. . . .

Richard awoke one morning saying to Rachel: "But what an unusual dream."

"Tell me, my dear," she said, "and hurry, because I want to tell you mine."

"I was having a conversation," he said, "with a person (or persons, because he changed his appearance so often) of great

intelligence, and I can clearly remember the argument. Yet this is the first time I have ever been able to remember any argument that came to me in sleep. Usually my dreams are so different from waking that I can only describe them if I say: 'It is as though I were living and thinking as a tree, or a bell, or middle C, or a five-pound note; as though I had never been human.' Life there is sometimes rich for me and sometimes poor, but I repeat, in every case so different, that if I were to say: 'I had a conversation,' or 'I was in love,' or 'I heard music,' or 'I was angry,' it would be as far from the fact as if I tried to explain a problem of philosophy, as Rabelais's Panurge did to Thaumast, merely by grimacing with my eyes and lips."

"It is much the same with me," she said. "I think that when I am asleep I become, perhaps, a stone with all the natural appetities and convictions of a stone. 'Senseless as a stone' is a proverb, but there may be more sense in a stone, more sensibility, more sensitivity, more sentiment, more sensibleness, than in many men and women. And no less sensuality," she added thoughtfully.

It was Sunday morning, so that they could lie in bed, their arms about each other, without troubling about the time; and they were childless, so breakfast could wait. He told her that in his dream he was walking in the sand hills with this person or persons, who said to him: "These sand hills are a part neither of the sea before us nor of the grass links behind us, and are not related to the mountains beyond the links. They are of themselves. A man walking on the sand hills soon knows this by the tang in the air, and if he were to refrain from eating and drinking, from sleeping and speaking, from thinking and desiring, he could continue among them for ever without change. There is no life and no death in the sand hills. Anything might happen in the sand hills."

Rachel said that this was nonsense, and asked: "But what was the argument? Hurry up!"

He said it was about the whereabouts of the soul, but that now she had put it out of his head by hurrying him. All that he remembered was that the man was first a Japanese, then an Italian, and finally a kangaroo.

In return she eagerly told her dream, gabbling over the words. "I was walking in the sand hills; there were rabbits there, too; how does that tally with what he said of life and earth? I saw the man and you walking arm in arm towards me, and I ran from you both and I noticed that he had a black silk handkerchief; he ran after me and my shoe buckle came off and

I could not wait to pick it up. I left it lying, and he stooped and put it into his pocket."

"How do you know that it was the same man?" he asked.

"Because," she said, laughing, "he had a black face and wore a blue coat like that picture of Captain Cook. And because it was in the sand hills."

He said, kissing her neck: "We not only live together and talk together and sleep together, but it seems we now even dream together."

So they laughed.

Then he got up and brought her breakfast.

At about half past eleven, she said: "Go out now for a walk, my dear, and bring home something for me to think about: and be back in time for dinner at one o'clock."

It was a hot morning in the middle of May, and he went out through the wood and struck the coast road, which after half a mile led into Lampton.

("Do you know Lampton well?" asked Crossley. "No," I said, "I am only here for the holidays, staying with friends.")

He went a hundred yards along the coast road, but then turned off and went across the links: thinking of Rachel and watching the blue butterflies and looking at the heath roses and thyme, and thinking of her again, and how strange it was that they could be so near to each other; and then taking a pinch of gorse flower and smelling it, and considering the smell and thinking. "If she should die, what would become of me?" and taking a slate from the low wall and skimming it across the pond and thinking, "I am a clumsy fellow to be her husband"; and walking towards the sand hills, and then edging away again, perhaps half in fear of meeting the person of their dream, and at last making a half circle towards the old church beyond Lampton, at the foot of the mountain.

The morning service was over and the people were out by the cromlechs behind the church, walking in twos and threes, as the custom was, on the smooth turf. The squire was talking in a loud voice about King Charles, the Martyr: "A great man, a very great man, but betrayed by those he loved best," and the doctor was arguing about organ music with the rector. There was a group of children playing ball. "Throw it here, Elsie, No, to me, Elsie, Elsie, Elsie." Then the rector appeared and pocketed the ball and said that it was Sunday; they should have remembered. When he was gone they made faces after him.

Presently a stranger came up and asked permission to sit down beside Richard; they began to talk. The stranger had

been to the church service and wished to discuss the sermon. The text had been the immortality of the soul: the last of a series of sermons that had begun at Easter. He said that he could not grant the preacher's premise that *the soul is continually resident in the body.* Why should this be so? What duty did the soul perform in the daily routine task of the body? The soul was neither the brain, nor the lungs, nor the stomach, nor the heart, nor the mind, nor the imagination. Surely it was a thing apart? Was it not indeed less likely to be resident in the body than outside the body? He had no proof one way or the other, but he would say: Birth and death are so odd a mystery that the principle of life may well lie outside the body which is the visible evidence of living. "We cannot," he said, "even tell to a nicety what are the moments of birth and death. Why, in Japan, where I have travelled, they reckon a man to be already one year old when he is born; and lately in Italy a dead man—but come and walk on the sand hills and let me tell you my conclusions. I find it easier to talk when I am walking."

Richard was frightened to hear this, and to see the man wipe his forehead with a black silk handkerchief. He stuttered out something. At this moment the children, who had crept up behind the cromlech, suddenly, at an agreed signal, shouted loud in the ears of the two men; and stood laughing. The stranger was startled into anger; he opened his mouth as if he were about to curse them, and bared his teeth to the gums. Three of the children screamed and ran off. But the one whom they called Elsie fell down in her fright and lay sobbing. The doctor, who was near, tried to comfort her. "He has a face like a devil," they heard the child say.

The stranger smiled good-naturedly: "And a devil I was not so very long ago. That was in Northern Australia, where I lived with the black fellows for twenty years. 'Devil' is the nearest English word for the position that they gave me in their tribe; and they also gave me an eighteenth-century British naval uniform to wear as my ceremonial dress. Come and walk with me in the sand hills and let me tell you the whole story. I have a passion for walking in the sand hills: that is why I came to this town . . . My name is Charles."

Richard said: "Thank you, but I must hurry home to my dinner."

"Nonsense," said Charles, "dinner can wait. Or, if you wish, I can come to dinner with you. By the way, I have had nothing to eat since Friday. I am without money."

Richard felt uneasy. He was afraid of Charles, and did not

wish to bring him home to dinner because of the dream and the sand hills and the handkerchief: yet on the other hand the man was intelligent and quiet and decently dressed and had eaten nothing since Friday; if Rachel knew that he had refused him a meal, she would renew her taunts. When Rachel was out of sorts, her favourite complaint was that he was overcareful about money; though when she was at peace with him, she owned that he was the most generous man she knew, and that she did not mean what she said; when she was angry with him again, out came the taunt of stinginess: "Tenpence-halfpenny," she would say, "tenpence-halfpenny and threepence of that in stamps"; his ears would burn and he would want to hit her. So he said now: "By all means come along to dinner, but that little girl is still sobbing for fear of you. You ought to do something about it."

Charles beckoned her to him and said a single soft word; it was an Australian magic word, he afterwards told Richard, meaning *Milk:* immediately Elsie was comforted and came to sit on Charles' knee and played with the buttons of his waistcoat for awhile until Charles sent her away.

"You have strange powers, Mr. Charles," Richard said.

Charles answered: "I am fond of children, but the shout startled me; I am pleased that I did not do what, for a moment, I was tempted to do."

"What was that?" asked Richard.

"I might have shouted myself," said Charles.

"Why," said Richard, "they would have liked that better. It would have been a great game for them. They probably expected it of you."

"If I had shouted," said Charles, "my shout would have either killed them outright or sent them mad. Probably it would have killed them, for they were standing close."

Richard smiled a little foolishly. He did not know whether or not he was expected to laugh, for Charles spoke so gravely and carefully. So he said: "Indeed, what sort of shout would that be? Let me hear you shout."

"It is not only children who would be hurt by my shout," Charles said. "Men can be sent raving mad by it; the strongest, even, would be flung to the ground. It is a magic shout that I learned from the chief devil of the Northern Territory. I took eighteen years to perfect it, and yet I have used it, in all, no more than five times."

Richard was so confused in his mind with the dream and the handkerchief and the word spoken to Elsie that he did not

know what to say, so he muttered: "I'll give you fifty pounds now to clear the cromlechs with a shout."

"I see that you do not believe me," Charles said. "Perhaps you have never before heard of the terror shout?"

Richard considered and said: "Well, I have read of the hero shout which the ancient Irish warriors used, that would drive armies backwards; and did not Hector, the Trojan, have a terrible shout? And there were sudden shouts in the woods of Greece. They were ascribed to the god Pan and would infect men with a madness of fear; from this legend indeed the word 'panic' has come into the English language. And I remember another shout in the *Mabinogion,* in the story of Lludd and Llevelys. It was a shriek that was heard on every May Eve and went through all hearts and so scared them that the men lost their hue and their strength and the women their children, and the youths and maidens their senses, and the animals and trees, the earth and the waters were left barren. But it was caused by a dragon."

"It must have been a British magician of the dragon clan," said Charles. "I belonged to the Kangaroos. Yes, that tallies. The effect is not exactly given, but near enough."

They reached the house at one o'clock, and Rachel was at the door, the dinner ready. "Rachel," said Richard, "here is Mr. Charles to dinner; Mr. Charles is a great traveller."

Rachel passed her hand over her eyes as if to dispel a cloud, but it may have been the sudden sunlight. Charles took her hand and kissed it, which surprised her. Rachel was graceful, small, with eyes unusually blue for the blackness of her hair, delicate in her movements, and with a voice rather low-pitched; she had a freakish sense of humour.

("You would like Rachel," said Crossley, "she visits me here sometimes.")

Of Charles it would be difficult to say one thing or another: he was of middle age, and tall; his hair grey; his face never still for a moment; his eyes large and bright, sometimes yellow, sometimes brown, sometimes grey; his voice changed its tone and accent with the subject; his hands were brown and hairy at the back, his nails well cared for. Of Richard it is enough to say that he was a musician, not a strong man but a lucky one. Luck was his strength.

After dinner Charles and Richard washed the dishes together and Richard suddenly asked Charles if he would let him hear the shout: for he thought that he could not have peace of mind until he had heard it. So horrible a thing was, surely,

worse to think about than to hear: for now he believed in the shout.

Charles stopped washing up; mop in hand. "As you wish," said he, "but I have warned you what a shout it is. And if I shout it must be in a lonely place where nobody else can hear; and I shall not shout in the second degree, the degree which kills certainly, but in the first, which terrifies only, and when you want me to stop put your hands to your ears."

"Agreed," said Richard.

"I have never yet shouted to satisfy an idle curiosity," said Charles, "but only when in danger of my life from enemies, black or white, and once when I was alone in the desert without food or drink. Then I was forced to shout, for food."

Richard thought: "Well, at least I am a lucky man, and my luck will be good enough even for this."

"I am not afraid," he told Charles.

"We will walk out on the sand hills tomorrow early," Charles said, "when nobody is stirring; and I will shout. You say you are not afraid."

But Richard was very much afraid, and what made his fear worse was that somehow he could not talk to Rachel and tell her of it: he knew that if he told her she would either forbid him to go or she would come with him. If she forbade him to go, the fear of the shout and the sense of cowardice would hang over him ever afterwards; but if she came with him, either the shout would be nothing and she would have a new taunt for his credulity and Charles would laugh with her, or if it were something she might well be driven mad. So he said nothing.

Charles was invited to sleep at the cottage for the night, and they stayed up late talking.

Rachel told Richard when they were in bed that she liked Charles and that he certainly was a man who had seen many things, though a fool and a big baby. Then Rachel talked a great deal of nonsense, for she had had two glasses of wine which she seldom drank, and she said: "Oh, my dearest, I forgot to tell you. When I put on my buckled shoes this morning while you were away I found a buckle missing. I must have noticed that it was lost before I went to sleep last night and yet not fixed the loss firmly in my mind, so that it came out as a discovery in my dream; but I have a feeling, in fact I am sure that he is the man whom we met in our dream. But I don't care, not I."

Richard grew more and more afraid, and he dared not tell of the black silk handkerchief, or of Charles' invitations to

him to walk in the sand hills. And what was worse, Charles had used only a white handkerchief while he was in the house, so that he could not be sure whether he had seen it after all. Turning his head away, he said lamely: "Well, Charles knows a lot of things. I am going for a walk with him early tomorrow if you don't mind; an early walk is what I need."

"Oh, I'll come too," she said.

Richard could not think how to refuse her; he knew that he had made a mistake in telling her of the walk. But he said: "Charles will be very glad. At six o'clock then."

At six o'clock he got up, but Rachel after the wine was too sleepy to come with them. She kissed him goodbye and off he went with Charles.

Richard had had a bad night. In his dreams nothing was in human terms, but confused and fearful, and he had felt himself more distant from Rachel than he had ever felt since their marriage, and the fear of the shout was gnawing at him. He was also hungry and cold. There was a stiff wind blowing towards the sea from the mountains and a few splashes of rain. Charles spoke hardly a word, but chewed a stalk of grass and walked fast.

Richard felt giddy, and said to Charles: "Wait a moment, I have a stitch in my side." So they stopped, and Richard asked, gasping: "What sort of shout is it? Is it loud, or shrill? How is it produced? How can it madden a man?"

Charles was silent, so Richard went on with a foolish smile: "Sound, though, is a curious thing. I remember once, when I was at Cambridge, that a King's College man had his turn of reading the evening lesson. He had not spoken ten words before there was a groaning and ringing and creaking, and pieces of wood and dust fell from the roof; for his voice was exactly attuned to that of the building, so that he had to stop, else the roof might have fallen; as you can break a wine glass, by playing its note on a violin."

Charles consented to answer: "My shout is not a matter of tone or vibration but something not to be explained. It is a shout of pure evil, and there is no fixed place for it on the scale. It may take any note. It is pure terror, and if it were not for a certain intention of mine, which I need not tell you, I would not shout for you."

Richard had a great gift of fear, and this new account of the shout disturbed him more and more; he wished himself at home in bed, and Charles two continents away. But he was fascinated. They were crossing the links now and going through the

bent grass that pricked through his stockings and soaked them.

Now they were on the bare sand hills. From the highest of them Charles looked about him; he could see the beach stretched out for two miles and more. There was no one in sight. Then Richard saw Charles take something out of his pocket and begin carelessly to juggle it on his finger tip and spinning it up with finger and thumb to catch it on the back of his hand. It was Rachel's buckle.

Richard's breath came in gasps, his heart beat violently and he nearly vomited. He was shivering with cold, and yet sweating. Soon they came to an open place among the sand hills near the sea. There was a raised bank with sea holly growing on it and a little sickly grass; stones were strewn all around, brought there, it seemed, by the sea years before. Though the place was behind the first rampart of sand hills, there was a gap in the line through which a high tide might have broken, and the winds that continually swept through the gap kept them uncovered of sand. Richard had his hands in his trouser pockets for warmth and was nervously twisting a soft piece of wax around his right forefinger—a candle end that was in his pocket from the night before when he had gone downstairs to lock the door.

"Are you ready?" asked Charles.

Richard nodded.

A gull dipped over the crest of the sand hills and rose again screaming when it saw them. "Stand by the sea holly," said Richard, with a dry mouth, "and I'll be here among the stones, not too near. When I raise my hand, shout! When I put my fingers to my ears, stop at once."

So Charles walked twenty steps toward the holly. Richard saw his broad back and the black silk handkerchief sticking from his pocket. He remembered the dream, and the shoe buckle and Elsie's fear. His resolution broke: he hurriedly pulled the piece of wax in two, and sealed his ears. Charles did not see him.

He turned, and Richard gave the signal with his hand.

Charles leaned forward oddly, his chin thrust out, his teeth bared, and never before had Richard seen such a look of fear on a man's face. He had not been prepared for that. Charles' face, that was usually soft and changing, uncertain as a cloud, now hardened to a rough stone mask, dead white at first, and then flushing outwards from the cheekbones red and redder, and at last as black, as if he were about to choke. His mouth then slowly opened to the full, and Richard fell on his face, his hands to his ears, in a faint.

When he came to himself he was lying alone among the stones. He sat up, wondering numbly whether he had been there long. He felt very weak and sick, with a chill on his heart that was worse than the chill of his body. He could not think. He put his hand down to lift himself up and it rested on a stone, a larger one than most of the others. He picked it up and felt its surface, absently. His mind wandered. He began to think about shoemaking, a trade of which he had known nothing, but now every trick was familiar to him. "I must be a shoemaker," he said aloud.

Then he corrected himself: "No, I am a musician. Am I going mad?" He threw the stone from him; it struck against another and bounced off.

He asked himself: "Now why did I say that I was a shoemaker? It seemed a moment ago that I knew all there was to be known about shoemaking and now I know nothing at all about it. I must get home to Rachel. Why did I ever come out?"

Then he saw Charles on a sand hill a hundred yards away, gazing out to sea. He remembered his fear and made sure that the wax was in his ears: he stumbled to his feet. He saw a flurry on the sand and there was a rabbit lying on its side, twitching in a convulsion. As Richard moved towards it, the flurry ended: the rabbit was dead. Richard crept behind a sand hill out of Charles' sight and then struck homeward, running awkwardly in the soft sand. He had not gone twenty paces before he came upon the gull. It was standing stupidly on the sand and did not rise at his approach, but fell over dead.

How Richard reached home he did not know, but there he was opening the back door and crawling upstairs on his hands and knees. He unsealed his ears.

Rachel was sitting up in bed, pale and trembling. "Thank God you're back," she said; "I have had a nightmare, the worst of all my life. It was frightful. I was in my dream, in the deepest dream of all, like the one of which I told you. I was like a stone, and I was aware of you near me; you were you, quite plain, though I was a stone, and you were in great fear and I could do nothing to help you, and you were waiting for something and the terrible thing did not happen to you, but it happened to me. I can't tell you what it was, but it was as though all my nerves cried out in pain at once, and I was pierced through and through with a beam of some intense evil light and twisted inside out. I woke up and my heart was beating so fast that I had to gasp for breath. Do you think I had a heart

attack and my heart missed a beat? They say it feels like that. Where have you been, dearest? Where is Mr. Charles?"

Richard sat on the bed and held her hand. "I have had a bad experience too," he said. "I was out with Charles by the sea and as he went ahead to climb on the highest sand hill I felt very faint and fell down among a patch of stones, and when I came to myself I was in a desperate sweat of fear and had to hurry home. So I came back running alone. It happened perhaps half an hour ago," he said.

He did not tell her more. He asked, could he come back to bed and would she get breakfast? That was a thing she had not done all the years they were married.

"I am as ill as you," said she. It was understood between them always that when Rachel was ill, Richard must be well.

"You are not," said he, and fainted again.

She helped him to bed ungraciously and dressed herself and went slowly downstairs. A smell of coffee and bacon rose to meet her and there was Charles, who had lit the fire, putting two breakfasts on a tray. She was so relieved at not having to get breakfast and so confused by her experience that she thanked him and called him a darling, and he kissed her hand gravely and pressed it. He had made the breakfast exactly to her liking: the coffee was strong and the eggs fried on both sides.

Rachel fell in love with Charles. She had often fallen in love with men before and since her marriage, but it was her habit to tell Richard when this happened, as he agreed to tell her when it happened to him: so that the suffocation of passion was given a vent and there was no jealousy, for she used to say (and he had the liberty of saying): "Yes, I am in *love* with so-and-so, but I only *love* you."

That was as far as it had ever gone. But this was different. Somehow, she did not know why, she could not own to being in love with Charles: for she no longer loved Richard. She hated him for being ill, and said that he was lazy, and a sham. So about noon he got up, but went groaning around the bedroom until she sent him back to bed to groan.

Charles helped her with the housework, doing all the cooking, but he did not go up to see Richard, since he had not been asked to do so. Rachel was ashamed, and apologized to Charles for Richard's rudeness in running away from him. But Charles said mildly that he took it as no insult; he had felt queer himself that morning; it was as though something evil was astir in the air as they reached the sand hills. She told him that she too had had the same queer feeling.

Later she found all Lampton talking of it. The doctor maintained that it was an earth tremor, but the country people said that it had been the Devil passing by. He had come to fetch the black soul of Solomon Jones, the gamekeeper, found dead that morning in his cottage by the sand hills.

When Richard could go downstairs and walk about a little without groaning, Rachel sent him to the cobbler's to get a new buckle for her shoe. She came with him to the bottom of the garden. The path ran beside a steep bank. Richard looked ill and groaned slightly as he walked, so Rachel, half in anger, half in fun, pushed him down the bank, where he fell sprawling among the nettles and old iron. Then she ran back into the house laughing loudly.

Richard sighed, tried to share the joke against himself with Rachel—but she had gone—heaved himself up, picked the shoes from among the nettles, and after awhile walked slowly up the bank, out of the gate, and down the lane in the unaccustomed glare of the sun.

When he reached the cobbler's he sat down heavily. The cobbler was glad to talk to him. "You are looking bad," said the cobbler.

Richard said: "Yes, on Friday morning I had a bit of a turn; I am only now recovering from it."

"Good God," burst out the cobbler, "if you had a bit of a turn, what did I not have? It was as if someone handled me raw, without my skin. It was as if someone seized my very soul and juggled with it, as you might juggle with a stone, and hurled me away. I shall never forget last Friday morning."

A strange notion came to Richard that it was the cobbler's soul which he had handled in the form of a stone. "It may be," he thought, "that the souls of every man and woman and child in Lampton are lying there." But he said nothing about this, asked for a buckle, and went home.

Rachel was ready with a kiss and a joke; he might have kept silent, for his silence always made Rachel ashamed. "But," he thought, "why make her ashamed? From shame she goes to self-justification and picks a quarrel over something else and it's ten times worse. I'll be cheerful and accept the joke."

He was unhappy. And Charles was established in the house: gentle-voiced, hard-working, and continually taking Richard's part against Rachel's scoffing. This was galling, because Rachel did not resent it.

("The next part of the story," said Crossley, "is that comic relief, an account of how Richard went again to the sand hills,

to the heap of stones, and identified the souls of the doctor and rector—the doctor's because it was shaped like a whiskey bottle and the rector's because it was as black as original sin —and how he proved to himself that the notion was not fanciful. But I will skip that and come to the point where Rachel two days later suddenly became affectionate and loved Richard she said, more than ever before.")

The reason was that Charles had gone away, nobody knows where, and had relaxed the buckle magic for the time, because he was confident that he could renew it on his return. So in a day or two Richard was well again and everything was as it had been, until one afternoon the door opened, and there stood Charles.

He entered without a word of greeting and hung his hat upon a peg. He sat down by the fire and asked: "When is supper ready?"

Richard looked at Rachel, his eyebrows raised, but Rachel seemed fascinated by the man.

She answered: "Eight o'clock," in her low voice, and stooping down, drew off Charles' muddy boots and found him a pair of Richard's slippers.

Charles said: "Good. It is now seven o'clock. In another hour, supper. At nine o'clock the boy will bring the evening paper. At ten o'clock, Rachel, you and I sleep together."

Richard thought that Charles must have gone suddenly mad. But Rachel answered quietly: "Why, of course, my dear." Then she turned viciously to Richard: "And you run away, little man!" she said, and slapped his cheek with all her strength.

Richard stood puzzled, nursing his cheek. Since he could not believe that Rachel and Charles had both gone mad together, he must be mad himself. At all events, Rachel knew her mind, and they had a secret compact that if either of them ever wished to break the marriage promise, the other should not stand in the way. They had made this compact because they wished to feel themselves bound by love rather than by ceremony. So he said as calmly as he could: "Very well, Rachel. I shall leave you two together."

Charles flung a boot at him, saying: "If you put your nose inside the door between now and breakfast time, I'll shout the ears off your head."

Richard went out this time not afraid, but cold inside and quite clear-headed. He went through the gate, down the lane, and across the links. It wanted three hours yet until sunset. He joked with the boys playing stump cricket on the school field. He skipped stones. He thought of Rachel and tears started

to his eyes. Then he sang to comfort himself. "Oh, I'm certainly mad," he said, "and what in the world has happened to my luck?"

At last he came to the stones. "Now," he said, "I shall find my soul in this heap and I shall crack it into a hundred pieces with this hammer"—he had picked up the hammer in the coal shed as he came out.

Then he began looking for his soul. Now, one may recognize the soul of another man or woman, but one can never recognize one's own. Richard could not find his. But by chance he came upon Rachel's soul and recognized it (a slim green stone with glints of quartz in it) because she was estranged from him at the time. Against it lay another stone, an ugly misshapen flint of a mottled brown. He swore: "I'll destroy this. It must be the soul of Charles."

He kissed the soul of Rachel; it was like kissing her lips. Then he took the soul of Charles and poised his hammer. "I'll knock you into fifty fragments!"

He paused. Richard had scruples. He knew that Rachel loved Charles better than himself, and he was bound to respect the compact. A third stone (his own, it must be) was lying the other side of Charles' stone; it was of smooth grey granite, about the size of a cricket ball. He said to himself: "I will break my own soul in pieces and that will be the end of me." The world grew black, his eyes ceased to focus, and he all but fainted. But he recovered himself, and with a great cry brought down the coal hammer, crack, and crack again, on the grey stone.

It split in four pieces, exuding a smell like gunpowder: and when Richard found that he was still alive and whole, he began to laugh and laugh. Oh, he was mad, quite mad! He flung the hammer away, lay down exhausted, and fell asleep.

He awoke as the sun was just setting. He went home in confusion, thinking: "This is a very bad dream and Rachel will help me out of it."

When he came to the edge of the town he found a group of men talking excitedly under a lamp-post. One said: "About eight o'clock it happened, didn't it?" The other said: "Yes." A third said: "Ay, mad as a hatter. 'Touch me,' he says, 'and I'll shout. I'll shout you into a fit, the whole blasted police force of you. I'll shout you mad.' And the inspector says: 'Now, Crossley, put your hands up, we've got you cornered at last.' 'One last chance,' says he. 'Go and leave me or I'll shout you stiff and dead.' "

Richard had stopped to listen. "And what happened to Crossley then?" he said. "And what did the woman say?"

" 'For Christ's sake,' she said to the inspector, 'go away or he'll kill you.' "

"And did he shout?"

"He didn't shout. He screwed up his face for a moment and drew in his breath. A'mighty, I've never seen such a ghastly looking face in my life. I had to take three or four brandies afterwards. And the inspector he drops the revolver and it goes off; but nobody hit. Then suddenly a change comes over this man Crossley. He claps his hands to his side and again to his heart, and his face goes smooth and dead again. Then he begins to laugh and dance and cut capers. And the woman stares and can't believe her eyes and the police lead him off. If he was mad before, he was just harmless dotty now; and they had no trouble with him. He's been taken off in the ambulance to the Royal West County Asylum."

So Richard went home to Rachel and told her everything and she told him everything, though there was not much to tell. She had not fallen in love with Charles, she said; she was only teasing Richard and she had never said anything or heard Charles say anything in the least like what he told her; it was part of his dream. She loved him always and only him, for all his faults; which she went through—his stinginess, his talkativeness, his untidiness. Charles and she had eaten a quiet supper, and she did think it had been bad of Richard to rush off without a word of explanation and stay away for three hours like that. Charles might have murdered her. He did start pulling her about a bit, in fun, wanting her to dance with him, and then the knock came on the door, and the inspector shouted: "Walter Charles Crossley, in the name of the King, I arrest you for the murder of George Grant, Harry Grant, and Ada Coleman at Sydney, Australia." Then Charles had gone absolutely mad. He had pulled out a shoe buckle and said to it: "Hold her for me." And then he had told the police to go away or he'd shout them dead. After that he made a dreadful face at them and went to pieces altogether. "He was rather a nice man; I liked his face so much and feel so sorry for him."

"Did you like that story?" asked Crossley.

"Yes," said I, busy scoring, "a Milesian tale of the best. Lucius Apuleius, I congratulate you."

Crossley turned to me with a troubled face and hands clenched trembling. "Every word of it is true," he said. "Cross-

ley's soul was cracked in four pieces and I'm a madman. Oh, I don't blame Richard and Rachel. They are a pleasant, loving pair of fools and I've never wished them harm; they often visit me here. In any case, now that my soul lies broken in pieces, my powers are gone. Only one thing remains to me," he said, "and that is the shout."

I had been so busy scoring and listening to the story at the same time that I had not noticed the immense bank of black cloud that swam up until it spread across the sun and darkened the whole sky. Warm drops of rain fell: a flash of lightning dazzled us and with it came a smashing clap of thunder.

In a moment all was confusion. Down came a drenching rain, the cricketers dashed for cover, the lunatics began to scream, bellow, and fight. One tall young man, the same B. C. Brown who had once played for Hants, pulled all his clothes off and ran about stark naked. Outside the scoring box an old man with a beard began to pray to the thunder: "Bah! Bah! Bah!"

Crossley's eyes twitched proudly. "Yes," said he, pointing to the sky, "that's the sort of shout it is; that's the effect it has; but I can do better than that." Then his face fell suddenly and became childishly unhappy and anxious. "O dear God," he said, "he'll shout at me again, Crossley will. He'll freeze my marrow."

The rain was rattling on the tin roof so that I could hardly hear him. Another flash, another clap of thunder even louder than the first. "But that's only the second degree," he shouted in my ear; "it's the first that kills."

"Oh," he said. "Don't you understand?" He smiled foolishly. "I'm Richard now, and Crossley will kill me."

The naked man was running about brandishing a cricket stump in either hand and screaming: an ugly sight. "Bah! Bah! Bah!" prayed the old man, the rain spouting down his back from his uptilted hat.

"Nonsense," said I, "be a man, remember you're Crossley. You're a match for a dozen Richards. You played a game and lost, because Richard had the luck; but you still have the shout."

I was feeling rather mad myself. Then the Asylum doctor rushed into the scoring box, his flannels streaming wet, still wearing pads and batting gloves, his glasses gone; he had heard our voices raised, and tore Crossley's hands from mine. "To your dormitory at once, Crossley!" he ordered.

"I'll not go," said Crossley, proud again, "you miserable Snake and Apple Pie Man!"

The doctor seized him by his coat and tried to hustle him out.

Crossley flung him off, his eyes blazing with madness. "Get out," he said, "and leave me alone here or I'll shout. Do you hear? I'll shout. I'll kill the whole damn lot of you. I'll shout the Asylum down. I'll wither the grass. I'll shout." His face was distorted in terror. A red spot appeared on either cheek.

I put my fingers to my ears and ran out of the scoring box. I had run perhaps twenty yards, when an indescribable pang of fire spun me about and left me dazed and numbed. I escaped death somehow; I suppose that I am lucky, like the Richard of the story. But the lightning struck Crossley and the doctor dead.

Crossley's body was found rigid; the doctor's was crouched in a corner, his hands to his ears. Nobody could understand this because death had been instantaneous, and the doctor was not a man to stop his ears against thunder.

It makes a rather unsatisfactory end to the story to say that Rachel and Richard were the friends with whom I was staying—Crossley had described them most accurately—but that when I told them that a man called Charles Crossley had been struck at the same time as their friend the doctor, they seemed to take Crossley's death casually by comparison with his. Richard looked blank; Rachel said: "Crossley? I think that was the man who called himself the Australian Illusionist and gave that wonderful conjuring show the other day. He had practically no apparatus but a black silk handkerchief. I liked his face so much. But Richard didn't like it at all."

"No, I couldn't stand the way he looked at you all the time," Richard said.

♠ NOT FAR AWAY, NOT LONG AGO

JOHN COLLIER

HE OPENED THE FRONT DOOR and the two men were standing there. He had always known there would be two of them. He now realized he had always known they would come.

Their faces were masked to just below the eyes, but only by the shadows of their hat-brims cast by the porch light he had switched on from inside. There was no hope at all of the thrust

of a gun, and of safety to be bought cheaply by the handing over of a wallet.

On the other hand, these two men might be just anybody. They might be two strangers lost in the featureless streets of the still unfinished building development. They had seen his light. They had rung the bell. They wanted to ask how to get to the State Highway.

"Mr. George H. Rogers?" asked, or perhaps stated, the taller of the two men.

Nothing is more banal, and more noticeable, than to stand opening one's mouth like a fish, uttering no sound. Already the two men were turning to look at each other. In profile their faces were so colorless and so pointed they might have been cut from sheets of tin. They looked back at him, and George heard himself saying, "Yes, I'm George Rogers. What is it?"

Next moment he was standing aside and the two men were walking past him into the hallway. He did not know whether he had stood aside to invite their entry, or whether they had moved to enter, causing him to stand aside.

"This'll be the living room," said the smaller man. His hand was already on the door, and it was definitely a statement and not a question. George, though shaken, realized that the knowledge did not necessarily imply that these men had been in the house before; the position of the living room was obvious from the outside. Its window was the only large ground floor window in the front of the little house, and there was a light within, for George kept the room ready for the reception of unexpected visitors. His paper-back lay open, face-downwards, on the arm of his chair; his coffee cup stood almost empty on the table nearby. The room had a lived-in appearance; no one would have thought George had been busy in the kitchen when the sound of the bell, like a long, thin knife, pierced the silence that had been building up day after day within the four walls. The flimsy walls had seemed altogether too thin to hold such a tremendous silence. George felt it must have been heard for miles. However, now it was dead. "All right with you if we have a little chat in the living room, Mr. Rogers?"

The three of them had already flowed in there. It was extremely hard to decide whether things were being said and then acted on, or whether the act came first and the speech followed as a sort of trailer. George knew that he was thinking incredibly fast, and that his sensory reactions were perhaps a little slow.

"Barging in like this after ten o'clock at night," said the tall man, "no doubt you're wondering who we are. You've got a

right to know that, Mr. Rogers. My name's McDermot, and this is Mr. Schiller."

Exactly on the utterance of each name, first McDermot and then Schiller held out a stiff arm towards George. Each hand, not to be shaken, held a little leather folder. These folders at once fell open, and exposed cards which opened with the folders. On the right was a photograph of the bearer, with an embossed seal with a date scribbled across it, and a signature and a fingerprint below. On the left there was the blurred facsimile of a flag, two or three lines of print beneath it, and another signature.

The print was clear and by no means small, but no one can read two cards at once, especially when his senses are lagging far behind his thoughts. George was given time enough, though not more than enough, to read every word; then the cases were snapped shut. He was left with only the ghosts of words fading in his mind's eye, as when an illuminated sign is switched off, its neon legend seems to linger in the air.

George felt he could decipher the vanishing outlines of BUREAU; perhaps of something FREEDOM. *Constitution* or *Constitutional* seemed to have been in a line of smaller print underneath. It was certainly, or almost certainly, not FEDERAL BUREAU above and *Investigation* in the line below, but of course there might be agencies of State police departments with somewhat similar titles with which the ordinary man would have no concern. If it is possible to remember something which has been constantly present in one's mind, waking and sleeping, for several days, George now remembered he was no longer an ordinary man.

"What was it you wanted to see me about?" he was saying in a thick voice rather like that of one suddenly awakened from a fireside nap. Feeling that this would account for everything, he began to rub his eyes and to give the appearance of suppressing a yawn. While he was doing so he thought of the sharp and wakeful stare with which he had first greeted his visitors, so he stopped.

"Well, we certainly want to apologize for stopping by so late," said the taller man, who was perhaps the senior. "But you know how it is, Mr. Rogers. If it wasn't for some people being willing to cooperate after hours, I don't think we'd ever get through."

"We had the word you were up and around pretty late these nights," put in the smaller man when the other paused.

"Mrs. Rogers having been away for a week or so," continued the tall man.

"If our informants aren't altogether haywire," added the other.

"Informants?" said George, in a tone of surprise and distaste.

"Look at it like this, Mr. Rogers," said the taller man quietly. "We've all got neighbors, you know that."

George had always been aware of this. He now became more vividly aware of it than before. The thin walls seemed suddenly transparent. He could see the naked, sleepless houses standing all around in the clear, cold, black night air on lots not yet lawned or hedged and each house with two upper windows lighted like eyes.

"Some of the information we get—well, it's just so much garbage," added the taller man. "We know that, Mr. Rogers, and I want you to know we know it."

"It's perfectly true my wife has been away for the last few days," said George. "She's visiting some friends."

"Having a good time, I hope," said the smaller one.

"A wonderful time, she says," said George. "I had a letter from her only yesterday."

"Yesterday?" asked the taller man.

"Yesterday," said George.

"Only yesterday," said the taller man, "was Sunday." He was by this time sitting in the armchair opposite George's. His head was tilted back; he might have been speaking to the ceiling.

"I meant the day before yesterday," said George. "I meant Saturday. I got a letter from my wife on Saturday, and everything sounded fine." He saw that the smaller man, on the upright chair, was pulling out a notebook, and he thought it well to add, on a note of concern, "Nothing wrong, is there? I mean, not an accident or . . . ?"

"Nothing of that sort, Mr. Rogers," said the tall man reassuringly. "Just following a routine lead. Just a matter of routine."

"Perhaps if you'd be good enough to give us the address," said the smaller man, his pen poised over his book.

"The address?" said George.

"The name and address of these friends where she's staying," said the man.

"Well, the name . . . let me see . . ." said George. "The name's Billaine. Mr. and Mrs. Billaine. I sometimes forget the married name. Mrs. Billaine hasn't been married long. Actually, I've never met the husband. Mrs. Billaine and my wife were friends when they were in school."

"Would you happen to remember what her name was in those days?" asked the small man.

"Well, of course I do," said George. "Naturally I do. Her name was Mikyovski."

"That might check," said the tall man, again addressing the ceiling.

The smaller man turned back a leaf or two in his notebook. "Not the same," said he. And then, addressing George: "And what did you say the address was, Mr. Rogers?"

"Let me explain," said George. "These people, they're not really my friends—in fact I don't know them at all—they're my wife's friends as I was saying, and she only heard from Mrs. Billaine after she got married. And she gets this letter asking her to come out there, to Oklahoma, and visit. So she went off with the letter in her purse, and she forgot to write down the address in our book, so when I came to look for it, it wasn't there."

"Lucky you got that letter from her on Saturday," observed the smaller one.

"Yes," said George, "I was glad to get that letter."

"Because that'll give us the address," persisted the other.

"It was on the letter," said George. "But when I sat down to write to my wife this evening, it seemed like that letter's been mislaid, or lost."

"Maybe somewhere in all this heap you've got on your desk," said the smaller man, moving in that direction.

"It's not," said George. "I've looked. I know what's happened. A letter could easily get pushed off over the edge of the desk and fall into the basket at the side there. This afternoon I emptied that basket into the furnace."

"You filled it up again pretty quick," said the tall man, turning to look at the full waste-paper basket.

"Looking for my wife's letter just now, going through that mess of papers, there was a lot of stuff I threw out."

"Don't take me for an eager beaver," said the smaller man, "but it so happens I've known people just crumple up and chuck away the very paper they're looking for. Mr. Rogers, let me just take a peep through all this junk and see if I can find your wife's letter for you."

George, though he knew the man would find nothing, nevertheless felt that this was the point at which to draw the line. It is one thing to be cooperative, to demonstrate that one has nothing to conceal; it is quite another to be cringingly anxious to propitiate. Therefore, as the man sat down at the

desk, and drew up the waste-paper basket: "Now wait a minute!" said George, and he frowned.

"Now don't tell me to go to hell for asking a very personal question," said the tall man in his extremely level voice, "but just for curiosity, how do you and Mrs. Rogers get along?"

At these words George's frown utterly vanished, and, after a momentary interval of grey blankness and exhaustion, he looked as anxious to please as a spaniel, or a salesman. "We get along fine," said George. "My wife's a good deal younger than I am, but I'm not ashamed to say we're a devoted couple."

"So I suppose Mrs. Rogers won't be staying away very much longer?" said the man at the desk. He was taking crumpled milk bills and marketing lists from the basket, smoothing them out, and putting them in a neat pile.

"She might stay on another week or two," said George. "As long as she's enjoying herself, it's fine by me."

"A wife can be very devoted, like you say, and yet take a bit of a vacation," said the taller man. "A couple can be very devoted and yet have a little spat now and then. Would you agree to that, Mr. Rogers?"

"My wife and I never had as much as a . . ." began George. But then, remembering the neighbors, seeing the trap, he interrupted himself with a brief, aborted laugh, almost a cough, and continued, " . . . anything but a spat, as you call it. My wife's got a lot of temperament, and when she blows her top, she blows her top. She makes herself heard. I expect the people next door can confirm that for you, if you haven't asked them already."

"We cover most angles," said the tall man with a sort of atrocious modesty.

"A little argument," said George. "Well, maybe sometimes a big one. But when it's over, it's over." He stopped for a moment, and then added, "I'm very deeply fond of my wife, gentlemen." He used the plural term because he wanted both his visitors to be impressed by what he said, and also because the man at the desk had turned half around and was looking at him.

"Mr. Rogers," said the man at the desk, "excuse me for butting into private matters, but have you got something cooking out there at the back?"

"My god!" said George. "Excuse me one minute, if you please."

Without awaiting an answer, he hurried from the room. The hallway was already full of the smell of burning, or at least of that smell which comes just before the real burning begins.

George threw open the kitchen door and turned off the gas jet just in time. He lifted the big pot with an effort and got it to the sink and let cold water run in. He wondered for a moment if he dared make quick use of the garbage disposal unit. It was merely a wishful thought; he knew very well it was not a thing that could be done quickly; moreover the garbage disposer had begun to vibrate noisily under the strain. So he lifted the pot again and dumped it back on the stove.

He turned to go back to the living room and saw the tall man standing in the doorway. "Baching it?" asked the man, looking at the big pot.

"Camping out while I'm here by myself," said George.

"Enough for a regiment in there," observed the man, indicating the pot.

"I cut down on the cooking," said George. "I buy in quantity. I buy enough lamb, or veal or whatever, to last me quite a time."

"Ham and eggs too," said the man, eyeing the topmost plate in the pile.

"That's for breakfast," said George.

"Mrs. Rogers like ham and eggs?" asked the tall man casually.

"If they're good," said George. "Why not?"

"It's nice when people have the same tastes and the same background," said the tall man. "And you give the bones to the dog." And he pointed down on the floor by the sink. It must have fallen there when George was stabbed by the sound of the bell.

"Just a neighborhood mutt," said George. "He likes to come in for a bone." At this moment George had that feeling which sometimes comes to athletes; he knew he was surpassing himself. He crossed to the doorway, interposing his body between the fragment and the insatiable eyes of the intruder.

"They say it's tough on a dog's stomach," said the man, "when he splits the bone that way. They say, never give a dog a shank bone, especially a lamb shank, because he splits it up into needles. But maybe that's not a lamb shank? Maybe that bone's too long . . ."

George was already beside him in the doorway, and though he had had to step for a moment out of the man's line of vision, his hand was already on the switch. "That's a bit of deermeat a friend sent me," said he, and he put out the light while he was still speaking. Now the only light was in the hallway, and they turned to it, and thus back to the living room.

"Nice lot of books you got here," said the smaller man,

looking up from the books as they entered. The books were not numerous; the reference must have been to their quality. "This boy, Mickey Spillane," said he, touching the book that lay on the arm of George's chair, "he's got what it takes." Then, turning back to the books in the small, fireside bookcase: "Highbrow stuff," he said with appreciation which was none the better for being genuine. "Hemingway: *Death in the Afternoon.* Brother, I read that book, and I agree with my old professor at N.Y.U. It's one of the classics of our time. *Compulsion!* A real, deep analysis of the rich boy murderers. You ought to read that one, Mac, if you haven't already. I see you've got Raymond Chandler here, Mr. Rogers. I'm not saying that guy didn't have guts, but I wonder if you agree with me he seemed like he's always had a chip on his shoulder. Don't you feel there's a sort of beef between the lines; something he didn't like about our way of life?"

"He wrote about crime," said George. "Who likes a criminal?"

"Well, it's just one man's opinion," said the other. "That's no reason you shouldn't have whatever book you like on your shelves, Mr. Rogers. And, believe me or not, I'll fight to the death for your right to do so. Maybe in return you'll allow me to ask if you're a follower of Einstein?"

George heard himself repeating certain words, for all the world as if he was ejecting a mouthful of splinters. "Einstein? Me? A follower? But what's *he* got to . . . ?" He did not in the least understand; his mind was too tightly clenched to its one fear and its one purpose for him to make any sort of guess as to what such a question might imply. But as, before the sun is visible, there is a lightening of the air that wakens bird and beast, so, without any discernible reason, a feeling of heavenly relief mounted up in George just under the horizon of his consciousness, and he replied in the tone of a man who does not need to reply, and who perhaps will not go on replying. "Mr. Schiller, I don't know what sort of wrong tree you're barking up. I'm not a mathematician. I'm not a scientist. I know nothing about Einstein. So if that's all you want to know . . ."

The smaller man reached over and pulled a book from the upper shelf. "This little number," said he to his companion, "is called *Out of My Later Years* by Albert Einstein."

"Oh, that!" said George, who had utterly forgotten the book. "That's only essays on science in general and peace and tolerance and that sort of thing."

"We stand for tolerance," said the smaller man. "We can understand a guy picking up a book like this, just out of curios-

ity let's say, when he's browsing around in a second hand book store. That's the way you got hold of it, maybe, Mr. Rogers?"

"No," said George, almost ready to laugh. "It isn't."

"Then I guess some friend must have lent it to you," said the smaller man. "Asked you to read it? Wanted to know what you thought of the ideas and all that?"

"No one lent it me," said George. "It's mine."

"Inside, it says E.D. from F.D., Christmas 1950,' " said the smaller man opening the book to its fly-leaf. "Just for the record, Mr. Rogers (which I believe begins with an R) would you be so kind as to tell us who this 'E.D.' is?"

"Those initials were my wife's before she and I got married," said George. "Does that help you? I should have said 'ours' instead of 'mine.' "

"Eileen Doyle," said the tall man, sounding distinctly bored.

"Is my face red?" said his companion ruefully. "Mr. Rogers, I hope you'll let me apologize. I carry the notebook, but my friend here's got the memory." He automatically glanced at the notebook, and then, less automatically, looked at his companion. "Just trying it on for size," said he. "How about 'F.D.' being the very bird we're interested in?"

"Your wife got any near kin with the initial 'F'?" said the tall man to George.

"No," said George. "She hasn't."

"Would there be a friend of the family," pursued the other, "by the name of Floyd Drexel?"

"I . . ." George paused.

"Ever heard that name?" said the smaller man.

"I think I've heard my wife mention a young man called Drexel," said George. "If so, it was when she was still in college. He may have given her the book. Probably he did. But . . ."

"What do you know about Mr. Floyd Drexel that leads you to think he's the sort of man who'd give this sort of book to a young girl still in college?" asked the tall man with a certain smooth, cold velocity.

"I've never met him," said George. "I know nothing about him."

"About his activities?" said the smaller man.

"Nothing but his name," said George firmly. "So, gentlemen, if that's all I can do for you, I'm afraid . . ."

"Direct testimony—that's the only thing," said the tall man to his colleague. Then, turning to George, "Mr. Rogers," said he, "would you be very kind and make a real effort to remember that address."

"I can't remember it," said George, getting up.

"Do me this favor," said the smaller man. "Would you mind just taking this basket, and—let's say you've got the furnace open and you're pitching the waste paper in. Just show us how you go about that."

"I don't know," said George. "Something like this, I suppose." And he made a half-hearted gesture with the now empty basket.

"That's fine," said the smaller man. "It doesn't need any kind of Einstein's theory to show there could always be the chance of a little crumpled up ball of paper hitting the outside of the furnace and bouncing off into some dark corner you'd never notice."

"No," said George, his heart sinking again. "Nothing fell. I looked. I made sure. I cleaned the whole cellar yesterday—every inch!"

"You stated it was this afternoon you emptied that basket," said the tall man.

"Yes. I said that. And it's true," said George. "But, you see, I like a tidy cellar, so, having cleaned it yesterday as I said, I looked all around when I emptied the basket. Nothing was dropped. If you want to, you can come down and see." His voice as he uttered these last words, was as dull and cold and hard as iron; not at all the sort of voice for an invitation.

"Might as well take a look," said the smaller man, getting to his feet.

"It's a bit oppressive down there," said George piteously. "It's the deer meat. I told your friend about this friend of mine sending me a whole batch of deer meat. Some of it's down there, wrapped up."

"You left it there when you cleaned up yesterday?" said the taller man.

"It's still okay for the dog," said George.

"The neighborhood mutt?" said the tall man.

"I like him to come in. It's pretty lonely," said George. As he spoke he caught sight of his face in the glass. For a delicious moment he almost forgot his two visitors; he was so enthralled by the rightness of that word 'lonely.' But then, as if surging up to meet that lonely face, he felt the rise of a great soft tidal wave within him, a wave of desire, of the desire to confess, to confide, to tell all. George rode this wave; he allowed it to sweep him toward his objective. "Gentlemen," said he, borrowing its strength and sadness, "my wife has left me." He was only just in time; the smaller man was turning

towards the door, was opening his mouth to insist. "I told you a lie," said George. "There's no letter. There never was one. My wife's not in Oklahoma. We have no friends there. But you see it hurts a man, it humiliates him, to have to say his wife has walked out on him. So I've told one or two people my wife's staying with friends. I'm sorry if I've misled you, but that's how it is."

"That's just too bad," said the smaller man. "I guess we've been wasting our time." And he actually looked as if he was ready to leave.

"Hold it!" said the tall man. "Mr. Rogers, I want you to know you've got our sympathy for the break-up of your home. Of course, you've been kidding us along a bit, so maybe now you'd like to make a little statement."

"I don't know what I can say," said George.

"Just drawing a bow," said the tall man. "Is there any possibility she might have gone off with this Floyd Drexel?"

"She hasn't seen him in years," said George wearily. "She's gone to Argentina, if you're really interested."

"With a Latin American?" asked the smaller man with renewed alertness.

"That's what she said. But she didn't tell me his name, and she didn't tell me his address," said George.

"But she made pretty much of a scene before she left?" asked the smaller man. "According to our sources she was just about screaming her head off." George made some vague gesture of assent, and the smaller man turned to his companion. "She shot her mouth off plenty according to the newspaper account," said the smaller man defensively.

"Keep to Drexel," said the tall man. "We owe you a bit of an explanation, Mr. Rogers. I guess, in view of what you just told us, we're not dropping any bombshell. Anyway, it was back in '51. Two couples—well maybe I'd better say four young people—tried to register at a hotel in a certain resort in Vermont. Your wife was one of the party; also this Mr. Drexel, and a Miss Miriam Jacobs and a Milton Weissman. Don't get me wrong; for all I know the girls wanted one room and the boys another. Maybe they wanted four single rooms. We don't know, and we don't care; we don't pry into people's private lives. Anyway, they never got to first base in registering, because that hotel happened to be one of these restricted hotels. We don't take any attitude for or against that sort of thing, but it seems your wife shot off her mouth as my friend says. However, that's neither here nor there. Mr. Floyd Drexel took a poke at the desk clerk, who I guess was only doing

his job. So there was trouble, and it made the local paper, and from there it got reprinted in a certain sheet whose back numbers we go through with a fine-tooth comb. A lead like that—you'd be surprised where it takes you!"

"Nothing against Mrs. Rogers," said the smaller man. "I mean she's just a housewife—or was. But she might have remembered something. You see, this Drexel guy, we're getting together quite a file on him."

"And if you knew the position that young man is being considered for right now," said the tall man, "believe me, Mr. Rogers, you'd be very disturbed. I don't expect Mrs. Rogers is likely to be back here, is she?"

"No," said George. "She's not."

"Just on the off-chance," said the tall man, giving him a card, "we'd appreciate a ring."

"No going all the way down *there* for testimony," said the smaller man. "Some people think we can take joy rides on the old expense account, but we don't operate that way, Mr. Rogers. Sorry we came in at such an unfortunate time."

"That's quite all right," said George, following them to the door. "It's quite all right."

"Good night, Mr. Rogers," said the tall man.

"Good night," said the smaller one.

"Good night," said George.

He watched their car drive away, and when its red taillight had disappeared he closed the door and went back to the kitchen. In spite of the late hour, and in spite of the clatter of the garbage disposer, he started work again, beginning, of course, with the fragment which lay near the sink.

THE LINE BETWEEN LOVE AND HATE

is perilously thin—indeed it frequently disappears altogether, confronting us with the specter of life and death marching nakedly hand-in-hand. This is a puzzle which has fascinated writers since time began. In their efforts to find an answer to the paradox they have explored the dual phenomenon, not only in the human world, but in the eerie world beyond—searching for a solution among the phantasms of demonology and the supernatural.

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