JACK FINNEY

I Love Galesburg in the Springtime

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I Love Galesburg in the Springtime

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I Love Galesburg in the Springtime

JACK FINNEY

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CONTENTS

For Aunt Lou and Uncle Hugh Garver
with love

'I LOVE GALESBURG IN THE SPRINGTIME'

'...and in the summer when it sizzles, and in the fall, and in the winter when the snow lies along the black branches of the trees that line its streets.'
—Lines tapped out on his typewriter (when he should have been writing up the Soangetaha, Country Club dance) by Oscar Mannheim, Galesburg, Illinois, *Register-Mail* reporter.

I didn't make the mistake – he'd have thrown me down the elevator shaft – of trying to see E. V. Marsh in his room at the Custer. I waited in the lobby, watching the coffee shop, till he'd finished breakfast and was sipping his second cup of coffee before I braced him, walking up to his table smiling my lopsided, ingratiating, Jimmy Stewart smile.

When he learned I was from the paper he tried to fend me off. 'I've got nothing for you,' he said, shaking his head. He was a heavy man in his fifties, with straight thinning hair. 'There's no story. There just won't be any factory of mine in Galesburg, that's all. I'm leaving this town on the first train I can get.'

'Well, I'm sorry to hear that,' I said untruthfully, and dragged up a chair from an adjacent table. Straddling it, I sat down facing Marsh across the chair back, chin on my

folded arms. 'But that's not why I'm here,' I added softly, and waited. I'm a tall, bone-thin man; my pants legs flop like sails when I walk. I have a bony face, too, more or less permanently tanned, and straight Indian-black hair; and I'm still young, I guess. People generally like me all right.

But Marsh was mad now, his face reddening, his jaw muscles working; he knew what I meant. I glanced quickly around the room; it was still early and there were only a few people here. We were at a corner table looking out on Kellogg Street; no one was near us.

Leaning closer to Marsh's table, my chair legs tilting forward, I said, 'I'd rather get the story from you as it really happened than try to piece together from a lot of half-true rumours floating around town.'

He glared. Then he leaned towards me, voice quiet but furious. 'I wasn't drunk. I can tell you that!'

'I'm sure you weren't. Tell me about it.' And because I'm a reporter, he did.

He sighed a little, going through the motions of reluctance, but actually – and this is usually true – he was glad to talk now that he had to or thought he did. Ilene brought over the coffee I'd ordered when I walked into the room and I picked up my cup and tasted it; the coffee's good at the Custer. Then I dropped my chin to my folded arms, feeling alive and eager, anxious to listen. Because the only reason I was here, the only reason I'm a reporter at all, was simple curiosity. Haven't you ever wished it were somehow possible to cross-examine an absolute stranger about something none of your business but damned interesting all the same? Well, think it over – if you're a reporter, you can. There's no law says it has to be printed.

'I had two drinks before dinner,' Marsh said. 'We all did. We ate up in my suite – the property owner, a Chamber of Commerce man, an attorney from the city, and a couple of councilmen. If you want a list of their names, ask them for it. After dinner most of us had a brandy.

But we sat at the table from seven till ten and whatever drinks I had were spread over a considerable time; I wasn't drunk or even close.' Marsh shrugged impatiently. 'We worked things out – the price of the factory site, option terms, the probable contractor. Both councilmen and the attorney assured me there'd be no trouble about changing zoning restrictions, if necessary, or running my trucks down Broad Street to the Santa Fe depot. All friendly and pleasant.' Marsh took a cigar from the breast pocket of his suit coat and offered it. I shook my head and he began pulling off the cellophane wrapper. 'But I like to sleep on a deal of any importance and told them I'd think it over. They left about ten and I took a walk.'

Marsh stuck the unlighted cigar in his mouth, bulging one cheek out, and leaned toward me. 'I always do that,' he said angrily. 'I take a walk and go over the facts in my mind; then home to bed, and when I wake up in the morning I usually know what I want to do. So I left the hotel here, walked up Kellogg Street to Main Street, then over to the Public Square, and when I came to Broad Street I turned up it. Not because the proposed factory site was on Broad; it's way out near the city limits, a dozen blocks or more, and I wasn't planning to walk that. Besides I'd been all over the site that day and I couldn't have seen anything in the dark anyway. But Broad was as good a street as any other to walk along.' Marsh brought out matches, prepared to strike one, then sat staring at the tabletop instead. 'At that, I walked a lot farther than I meant to. Pleasant street.' He struck his match and looked up at me for comment, sucking the flame onto the cigar end.

'It's beautiful,' I said, nodding. 'All those streets – Broad, Cherry, Prairie, Kellogg, Seminary, and all the others – are beautiful,' and I was remembering the day my father, mother, sister, and I got off the train from Chicago at the Q depot. We rode through Galesburg then, in a taxi, to the house my father had bought on Broad Street. The driver took us up Seminary first, from the depot, then

along Kellogg, Prairie, and Cherry – a few blocks on each street – before turning onto Broad. I was six and as we rode something in me was responding to the town around us, and I began falling in love with Galesburg even before we reached our house. It happened completely, love at first sight, just north of Main Street when I first saw the thick old trees that line the streets of Galesburg, arching and meeting high overhead as far as I could see. We moved along under those new-leaved trees and the first warm-weather insects were sounding and the street was dappled with shade and sun, the pattern of it stirring as the trees moved in the late spring air. Then I heard our tyres humming with a ripply sound that was new to me, and saw that the street was paved with brick. I guess that's not done any more; nowadays, it's concrete or asphalt, never brick.

But a great many Galesburg streets are still brick-paved, and some of the kerbing is still quarried stone. And in the grassways beside those brick-paved streets there still remain stone kerbside steps for entering or leaving carriages. Near them – not added for quaintness' sake, but remaining from the days when they were put there for use – is an occasional stone or cast-iron hitching post. Back past the grassways and the sidewalks (of brick, too, often), and beyond the deep front lawns, rise the fine old houses. Many are wood, often painted white; some are brick or time-darkened stone; but – there along Cherry, Broad, Prairie, Academy, and the other old streets – they have the half comically ugly, half charming look, made of spaciousness, dignity, foolishness, and conspicuous waste, that belongs to another time.

I mean the curved bay windows with curving window glass; the ridiculous scroll and lathework at the eaves; the rounding, skyrocket-shaped tower rooms with conical roofs; the stained-glass windows (one of them, on Broad Street, I think, an actual pastoral scene); the great, wide front porches; the two stories with an attic above; the tall, lean windows beginning just over the floor. You

know what I mean, you've seen them, too, and admired them wryly; the kind old houses of other and better times. Some of them are sagging and debauched, decrepit and in need of paint. Some have been modernized, and there are new houses among them. These aren't museum streets but streets where human beings live. But many of the old houses here in Galesburg stand as always, occasionally the families living in them descendants of the families who built them in the deep peace of the eighties, nineties, the turn of the century, and the early twenties.

'Broad is a nice street, all right,' I said to Marsh and he nodded.

'Very attractive. Last night, when I walked along it the crickets were buzzing in the trees.' They weren't crickets, of course, but I didn't correct the man from Chicago. 'A lot of living-room lights were lighted, and now and then I heard voices murmuring from front porches. There were fireflies over the lawns and bushes, and all in all I walked a lot farther than I'd meant to. So when I saw a streetcar coming toward me I decided I'd ride back to Main Street.' Marsh leaned toward me, his cigar between thumb and forefinger, pointing its butt end at me. 'You hear what I say? I said I saw that streetcar and I heard it, too, I don't care what anyone tells you.' He sat back in his chair, regarding me bitterly, then continued.

'It was still a long way off when I first noticed it. But I saw the single round headlight moving slowly along toward me, swaying above the track down the middle of the street. Then I saw the light begin to glint along the rails, and a moment later heard the sound – there's no other sound just like it; a sort of steady, metallic hiss – of a streetcar moving along the rails.

'I saw it, I heard it, and I stepped out into the street to wait for it; there was no other traffic. I just stood there in the middle of the street beside the track waiting and thinking absently about the new factory. Down the street somewhere a phonograph was playing. I recognized the

tune; it was "Wabash Blues", and it slowed down for a few moments, the notes growling as they got slower and deeper. Then someone wound the phonograph and it speeded right up.

'Now, that motorman saw me; he must have. I signalled to make sure as the car came closer, stepping right up beside the rails to get into the beam of its light, and waving one arm. So he saw me, all right, and I saw him, very plainly. He had on a black uniform cap and wore a large moustache. He had on a blue shirt with a white stiff collar and a black tie, and a vest with flat metal buttons, and a gold watch chain stretching from pocket to pocket. That's how close I saw him but he never so much as glanced at me. I stood right there in the beam of his light waving my arm; it made a big swaying shadow down the street past us. Then all of a sudden, that car right on top of me, I saw that he wasn't going to stop; he hadn't even slowed down.

'The car swelled out at the sides the way a streetcar does, protruding well past the rails, and I was right next to the tracks. I was about to be hit by that car, I suddenly realized; *would* have been hit if I hadn't dropped back, falling to the street behind me like a ballplayer at bat dropping away from a badly pitched ball. Right back and down on my haunches I went, then lost my balance and sprawled out flat on my back on the street as that car rocked past me straight through the space I'd been standing in and went on by like a little island of light swaying off down the rails.

'I yelled after it. I was badly scared and I cursed that guy out. Still lying on my back in the dust of the street, I shouted so he could hear me, and a porch light snapped on. I didn't care; I was mad. Getting to my feet, I yelled after that guy some more, watching him shrink and disappear down the rails, his trolley sparking blue every once in a while, as though it were answering me. More porch lights were coming on now, and several men in shirt sleeves from the houses up beyond the lawns came

walking toward me. I heard their feet scuffle as they crossed the walks.

'Well, I expect I was a sight, all right, standing in the middle of the street shouting and shaking my fist after that streetcar, the entire back of my suit covered with dust, my hat in the gutter somewhere. They asked me, those men, stopping around me – speaking pleasantly and politely enough – what the trouble was. I could see women and children standing on porch steps, watching. I answered. I told them how that streetcar had nearly run me down. This might not be a regular stop, I said; I didn't know about that. But that was no excuse to run a man down without even clanging his bell to warn me. No reason he couldn't have stopped, anyway; there were no other passengers, no reason to be in such a hurry. They agreed with me, helping me find my hat, dusting me off. I expect it was one of the women who phoned the police – one of the men signalling to her behind my back, probably. Anyway, they got there pretty quickly and quietly. It wasn't till I heard the car door slam behind me that I turned and saw the police car, a sixty-two Plymouth with white doors, the two cops already out in the street and walking toward me.

' "Drunk and disorderly", or something of the sort, was the charge they arrested me on. I argued, I protested; I wasn't drunk. But one of the cops just said, "Show me the streetcar tracks, mister; just point them out and we'll let you go." ' Marsh looked at me, his face set and angry. 'And of course there aren't any tracks. There haven't been any on Broad Street since—'

'Since they tore them up sometime in the thirties,' I said. 'I know.'

Marsh was nodding. 'So of course you don't believe me, either. Well, I don't blame you. No one else did; why should you? I had to phone one of the councilmen to come down to the jail and identify me, and, when he arrived, he had the attorney from the city with him. They vouched for me, and apologized, and got me out of jail,

and kept their faces straight. Too straight; I knew they were laughing inside, and that it's a story I could never live down here, never at all. So I'm leaving Galesburg. There are plenty of other towns along the Santa Fe to build a factory in.'

'I didn't say I didn't believe you.' I leaned toward him and spoke quietly. 'Tell me something. How big was that streetcar?'

Marsh squinted at the ceiling. 'Small,' he said then, his voice a little surprised. 'Very small, actually; wouldn't hold much more than a dozen people or so.'

I nodded, still leaning over the tabletop. 'You saw the motorman up close, you said, and it was a warm night. Did you happen to notice his cap? What was his cap like, besides being black?'

Marsh thought again, then smiled. 'I'll be darned,' he said. 'Yes, I remember; it was wicker. It was a regular uniform cap, just like any other in shape, and with a shiny peak and a stiff hard top. But the top was made of wicker – actual wickerwork – dyed black. I never saw a cap like that before in my life.'

'Neither did I; nowhere else but here. But that's the kind of cap streetcar motormen used to wear in the summer in Galesburg, Illinois. I was just a little kid but I remember them. What colour was that streetcar, red or green?'

'It was yellow,' Marsh said quietly. 'I saw it pass under a street light just before it reached me, and it was yellow.'

'That's right,' I said. 'The streetcars in Galesburg were painted yellow, and the last of them quit running years ago.' I stood up and put my knuckles on the tabletop, resting my weight on them, leaning down to look Marsh in the eyes. 'But you saw one last night just the same. I don't know how or why but you did, and I know it and believe you.' I smiled, straightening up to stand beside the table. 'But no one else ever will. Of course you're right; you'd never enjoy living in Galesburg now.'

Do you see what I mean? Do you see why I'm a reporter? How else would you hear a story like that at first hand? I never turned it in, of course; I just wrote that Mr E. V. Marsh, of Chicago, had considered but decided against building a factory here, and it ran as a little five-inch story on page three. But it's because of occasional stories like Marsh's that I expect to continue reporting for the *Register-Mail* as long as I live or can get around. I know the town laughs at me a little for that; it's been a long time since Galesburg took me seriously, though it once expected big things of me.

I was first in my high-school class, in fact, and was offered a scholarship at Harvard. But I didn't take it. I went to Knox, the local college right here in town, working my way through – my mother was alive then but my father was dead and we didn't have much money. That's when I started reporting for the *Register-Mail*, full time in the summers, part time during school, and I graduated second in my class, Phi Beta Kappa, *summa cum laude*, and could have had any of several scholarships for post-grad work, or a job with American Chicle in South America. The town thought I was going places, and so did a girl I was engaged to – a junior at Knox, from Chicago. But I wasn't going anywhere and knew it; and I turned down every offer that would take me from Galesburg, and when she graduated next year the girl turned me down and went home.

So there's my trouble, if trouble it is; I'm in love with a town, in love with the handful of Main Street buildings that were built in the last century and that don't look much different, except for the modernized store fronts, from the way they do in the old photographs. Look at their upper stories, as I always do walking along Main, at the tall slim windows with the rounded tops, and maybe, just maybe, you're seeing at least one of the buildings Abraham Lincoln saw when he was in Galesburg. Yes; he debated Douglas on a wooden platform built over the east

steps of Old Main at Knox, something the college never seems to get tired of reminding the world about. And Old Main, too, stands very little changed, on the outside, anyway, from the day Lincoln stood there grasping his coat lapels and smiling down at Douglas.

There's sordidness and desolation in Galesburg, and just plain ugliness, too. But in so many other places and ways it's a fine old town, and I move through its streets, buildings, and private houses every day of my life, and know more about Galesburg in many ways than anyone else, I'm certain. I know that E. V. Marsh really saw the streetcar he said he did, whether that's possible or not; and I know why the old Pollard place out on Fremont Street didn't burn down.

The morning after the fire I was driving by on my way to work and saw Doug Blaisdel standing in the side yard, waist deep in yellow weeds. I thought he'd finally sold the place – he's the real-estate man who was handling it – and I pulled in to the kerb to see who'd bought it. Then, turning off the ignition, I saw that wasn't it because Doug was standing, fists on his hips, staring up at the side of the building, and now I noticed half a dozen kids there, too, and knew that something had happened.

Doug saw me stop, and as I opened the front gate he turned from the old building to cut across the front yard through the weeds to meet me. The place is on a great big lot, and there's a wrought-iron fence, rusting but in good shape, that runs across the lot in front by the sidewalk. A small gate opens onto a walk leading to the porch, and a larger, taller pair of gates opens onto what was once a carriage drive to a portico at the west side of the house. Closing the small gate behind me, I was looking up at the house admiring it as always; it looks like an only slightly smaller Mount Vernon, with four great two-story pillars rising to the roof from a ground-level brick-paved porch, and there's an enormous fanlight above the double front doors. But the old place was at least five years overdue for

painting; the heirs live in California and have never even seen it, so it sat empty and they didn't keep it up.

'What's the trouble?' I called to Doug when I got close enough.

He's a brisk, young, heavy-rimmed glasses type from Chicago; been here about five years. 'Fire,' he said, and beckoned with his chin to follow, turning back across the yard toward the house, the kids trooping along.

At the side of the house I stood looking up at the damage. The fire had obviously started inside, bursting out a window, and now the white clapboard outside wall was scorched and charred clear to the roof, the upper part of the window frame ruined. Stepping to the window to lean inside the house, I saw there wasn't much damage there. It looked as though the dining-room wallpaper, peeling and hanging loose, had somehow caught fire; but outside of soot stains the heavy plaster wall didn't seem much damaged. Mostly it was the window frame, both inside and out, that had burned; that was all. But it was ruined and would cost several hundred dollars to replace.

I said so to Doug, and he nodded and said, 'A lot more than the owners will ever spend. They'll just tell me to have the opening boarded over. Too bad the place didn't burn right down.'

'Oh?' I said.

He nodded again, shrugging. 'Sure. It's a white elephant, Oscar; you know that. Twenty-four rooms, including a ballroom. Who wants it? Been empty eight years now and there's never been a real prospect for it. Cost twenty thousand bucks to fix it up right, and just about as much to tear it down. Burned to the ground, though' – his brows rose at the thought – 'the site empty, I could sell the lot for an apartment building if I could get it re-zoned, and I probably could.' He grinned at me; everybody likes Doug Blaisdel; he insists on it. 'But don't worry,' he said. 'I didn't start the fire. If I had, I'd have done a better job.'

He glanced up at the blackened strip of wall again, then

down at the ground around us, and I looked, too. We were standing on what had been the old gravelled carriage drive, though the white gravel had long since washed away and it was just dirt now; it was trampled and soggy.

'Somebody put the fire out,' Doug said, nodding at the damp ground, 'but I can't find out who. Wasn't the fire department; they never got a call and don't know a thing about it. Neither do any of the neighbours. Nobody seems to have seen it.'

'I heard the fire bell,' one of the kids said. 'It woke me up, but then I fell asleep again.'

'You did not! You're crazy. You were dreamin'!' another boy answered, and they began wrestling, not serious but laughing.

Doug turned toward the street. 'Well, back to work!' he said brightly. 'See you around, Oscar. You going to put this in the paper?'

I glanced up at the house again and shrugged. 'I don't know; not much of a story. We'll see.'

The kids left, too, chasing each other through the weeds, horsing around, no longer interested; but I stood in the old driveway beside the house for a few moments longer. Old Man Nordstrum, as he's been called since he was thirty, I guess, lived in the house next door; and whoever had put this fire out, he'd heard it and seen it, maybe done it himself, no matter what he'd told Doug Blaisdel. I looked over suddenly at the side windows of his place, and he was standing watching me. When he saw that I'd seen him, he grinned. Doug was in his car now, the motor started; he flicked a hand at me, then glanced over his shoulder at the street, and pulled out. Smiling a little, I beckoned Nordstrum to come out.

He came out his front door, buttoning an old tan-and-brown sweater, walked to his front gate, then turned into the old Pollard driveway toward me. He's about seventy-one, a retired lawyer with a reputation for grouchiness. But it's less grouchiness, I think, than a simple unwilling-

ness to put up with anyone who doesn't interest him. He's rich, one of the best lawyers in the state; he's bald and has a lined face with smart brown eyes; a shrewd man.

'Doug Blaisdel tells me you didn't see the fire last night,' I said as he walked toward me.

Nordstrum shook his head. 'Blaisdel is inaccurate, as usual; that's only what I told him. I saw it; of course I saw it. How could I sleep through a fire right outside my bedroom window?'

'Why didn't you tell Doug about it, Mr Nordstrum?'

'Because he's a fool. Has it all figured out what he's going to believe for the rest of his life; it takes a fool to do that. But I don't think you're a fool, Oscar, not that kind, so I'll tell you; glad to tell somebody. What wakened me – this was just at three-fourteen this morning; I looked at my luminous alarm clock – was a sound.' Eyes narrowing, choosing his words carefully, he said, 'It was a combined sound – the hard crackle of growing flames and just the touch of a clapper on a brass fire gong. I opened my eyes, saw the orange light of flames reflected from my bedroom walls, and I jumped out of bed and grabbed my glasses. I looked out my window and saw the fire next door here, the flames and sparks shooting out the window in a strong updraught, licking the eaves two stories up; and I saw the fire engine a dozen yards away toward the street, and the firemen were tugging at the hose, unreeling it just as fast as they could pull. I stood and watched them. Best view of a fire I ever had.

'They worked fast; they got their hose connected to the hydrant out at the kerb, and they had a good stream on the fire, the pumper at work, in no more than a minute. In five minutes, maybe less, they had the fire completely out and wet down good. Then they packed up their hose and left.' Nordstrum stood there in his old-style button sweater, looking at me over the top of his glasses.

'Well, what's so hard to believe about that?' I asked.

'The fire engine, Oscar, had a tall, upright, cylindrical

boiler made of polished brass, narrowing at the top to a short smokestack. It looked like a boy's steam engine, only a thousand times larger. Underneath that boiler was a fire made of wood and coal; that's what heated the water that supplied steam pressure for the pump. The whole thing, my boy, along with hose, axes, and all the rest of it, was mounted on a low-slung wagon body with big wooden spoke wheels, painted red; and it was pulled by four big grey horses who stood waiting in the light of the fire stomping their hoofs in the soft dirt now and then and switching their tails.

'And when the fire was out and the hose reloaded, the firemen climbed onto the fire engine – two in the high seat up front, where the reins were; the others on the low step in back, hanging on – and the horses pulled it down the driveway, turned onto Fremont Street, breaking into a trot, and that's the last I could see of them. The firemen wore helmets and rubber coats, and they all had large moustaches, and one had a beard. Now, what about it, Oscar? You think I don't know what I saw?'

I shook my head. 'Hard to see how you could be mistaken about what you saw unless you've suddenly gone crazy.'

'Which I have not,' said Nordstrum. 'Not yet. Come here.' He turned to walk down the old carriageway toward the street, then stopped and pointed. 'Here's where the horses stood,' he said, 'well away from the heat of the fire.'

I looked down at the dirt and saw the horseshoe marks sharp and plain in the damp black earth, dozens of them, overlapping. Nordstrum pointed again with his foot and I saw the manure and, deeply imprinted in the earth at the edges of the carriageway, the long, indented ribbons that were wagon tracks.

That was just under a year ago. Two months later, in September, Doug Blaisdel sold the Pollard place – cheap, as he had to, but still he was glad now that it hadn't

burned down – to a retired farm-equipment dealer from Peoria who'd grown up in Galesburg. It took all last winter and I don't know how much money – the farm-equipment business must have been good – to get the old place fixed up; but now it looks the way it always used to, clean and white again, the lawn and iron fence and the burned window restored, and the inside of the house is beautiful. They've got an unmarried daughter, and last Friday they gave a dance in the old ballroom. It was a big affair, and walking up the path to the house – the daughter had invited me – I saw the house all lighted up, heard the music, and saw all the people at the windows and out on the huge porch, the big old house white and fresh and alive again, and I was glad it hadn't burned down and the site sold for an apartment building.

Do you see? Do you understand now what's happening in Galesburg? If you do, then you know why the phone rang late one night last fall out at the old Denigmann farm. It's one of the finest of the farms just past the city limits; a wonderful place. There are a half-dozen acres of fine woodland including some nut trees; there's a small but deep stream that winds through the whole farm and is wide enough for swimming in several places; and scattered over two acres of corn land are a dozen regularly shaped mounds which the kids out there have always believed were Indian burial mounds, and around which every generation of Denigmanns since they've owned the place has carefully ploughed.

A lot of the neighbouring farms are gone without a trace, the land covered with new houses. That's necessary, of course, and some of them are nice ones. But you wonder why so many of the houses we build nowadays are so tiny, so lightly built, and so nearly identical. And why it's necessary to lay them out in indistinguishable rows alongside raw concrete streets without even sidewalks for children to play on. And why they've simply got to be jammed together a few feet apart, on what was once Illinois prairie with an unlimited horizon. Can you imagine some of the

houses we build today lived in and loved a century from now?

Carl Denigmann was going to sell his place to the subdividers, too, a big Florida outfit that was reaching up into the North. It was a good offer; he was fifty-nine years old, a widower, his children all grown and gone; why not? Late one night, he told me – this was last November, about the middle of the month, after all his crops were in – he was sitting alone in the farm kitchen thinking about it. Carl's a small, strong man with black heavily greyed hair, all of which he still has, and he was probably smoking a pipe there in the farm kitchen.

Now the Galesburg telephone company is an independent, and in the fall of last year it brought various country phone lines up to date including Denigmann's – putting lines underground and installing dial phones. And in many a place, Carl's included, the company didn't bother removing the old out-of-date and now useless wall phone, unless the customer insisted on getting rid of it.

So Carl sat in his kitchen – there's a ninety-year-old fireplace in it, and he had a fire going – staring at the fire and thinking, smoking his pipe, I'm sure. And when the telephone rang – the stuttering, uncertain grumbling ring of an old hand-crank phone – he simply got up, stepped to the wall, and answered it as he'd done hundreds of times all through his life. The conversation, then, was ordinary enough; it was just Billy Amling asking Carl if he wanted to go rabbit hunting with their twenty-twos in the woods after school next day, keeping one eye open, as usual, for arrowheads. Carl listened, half nodding, ready to agree, as always, before it came back into his head that Billy had been killed in the war in France in 1918; and the telephone receiver lay dead in his hand, not in the way of a phone when the other party has hung up, but in the completely lifeless way of a telephone that is connected to nothing any more and is just hanging on a wall without even wires leading away to the outside now.

Nearly all the rest of the night Carl Denigmann sat up thinking of all the farm had been to him, and Billy Amling, and many others, including Denigmanns who were dead long before he'd been born. And this spring Carl is out ploughing it again and he expects to keep farming for at least a few more years. By then, he told me, he'll have figured out what to do; he thinks maybe Galesburg might accept the old farm as a sort of park or preserve, with picnic tables, maybe, but mostly leaving it pretty much as is for kids to hunt through with their twenty-twos, and swim in the creek, and prowl around the old mounds, and pretend, at least, that they're Indian graves. Carl doesn't know, exactly, what he'll do about the farm; he just knows he's not going to let them subdivide it.

I'm glad about that; just as I'm glad the old Pollard place was saved, and that there won't be a great big factory right out at the end of Broad Street, and about a lot of other things I haven't got time to tell. I'm glad because here in Galesburg, and everywhere else, of course, they're trying – endlessly – to destroy the beauty we inherit from the past. They keep trying, and when they succeed, they replace it – not always, but all too often – with drabness and worse. With a sterile sun-baked parking lot where decrepit, characterful, old Boone's Alley once ran; rechristening the asphalt-paved nothingness (as though even the memory of old Boone's Alley must be blotted from mind) with the characterless title Park Plaza. And with anonymous apartment buildings where fine old houses once stood. With concrete-block ugliness sprawling along what were charming country roads. With – but you know what they're doing; wherever you live, you see it all around you. They even want to level Galesburg's ancient Public Square into – well, a parking lot, of course, as though there were nothing more important.

And who are 'they'? Why, 'they' are us, of course; who else? We're doing these things to ourselves as though we were powerless to stop; or as though any feeling for beauty

or grace or a sense of the past were a kind of sentimental weakness to be jeered down. So what has been happening in Galesburg? Why, it's simple enough.

Galesburg's past is fighting back. It's *resisting* us, for the past isn't so easily destroyed; it's not simply gone with yesterday's newspaper. No, it is not, for it has been far too much – we are all products of it – to ever be completely gone. And so, somehow, in Galesburg, Illinois, when it's been necessary as it sometimes has, the past has fought against the present. When the need becomes desperate enough, then the old yellow streetcars, or horse-drawn fire engines, or abandoned wall phones can and do flicker into momentary existence again, struggling to keep what I and so many others – Carl Sandburg, for one, who was born here – love about Galesburg, Illinois.

It's hard to say whether it's succeeding; they did, after all, chop down a lot of fine old Galesburg elms to widen Losey Street; Boone's Alley is gone; and last year the library burned down and the townspeople voted against rebuilding it. And yet – well, I'd hate to be responsible for turning the old square into a parking lot, I can tell you that much. Because just last night, for example, I learned that those twenty-odd old elm trees on that big corner lot on north Cedar Street will not, after all, be chopped down. The man who was going to whack down with a power saw these trees older than himself – he was tired of raking leaves every fall, he said – is in the hospital instead, with a broken leg in traction. It's strung up in a wire-and-pulley contraption like a broken leg in a comic strip. The neighbour who saw what happened told me that the man was standing out in the street last night looking up at the old trees and estimating which way they'd fall when he sliced through them this weekend. All of a sudden he was struck by a car that appeared out of nowhere. The police report calls it a hit-and-run accident, which it was, and the chief has assured the *Register-Mail* that they'll find the car very soon. It shouldn't be

hard to find, they feel, because the neighbour who saw it happen got a good look at the car and furnished a complete description. It was a 1916 Buick roadster with a red body, varnished spoke wheels, and big polished brass headlights each the size of a small drum.

LOVE, YOUR MAGIC SPELL IS EVERYWHERE

I'm a big noon-hour prowler. I like to duck out of the office when I haven't a lunch date, grab a fast bite, pick up a Hershey bar or a Snickers or something, and then poke around – into a Second Avenue antique store with a bell that clanks when you open the door, or an unclaimed-parcel auction, a store-front judo school, secondhand bookshop, pinball emporium, pawnshop, fifth-rate hotel lobby – you know what I mean?

You do if you've ever been a noon-hour prowler, but there aren't too many of them, not real ones. The only other one I ever ran into from our office – Simon & Laurentz, an advertising agency on Park near Forty-fourth – was Frieda Piper from the art department. I wandered into a First Avenue hardware store one noon this last May and there she was back in the store fiddling with a lathe. At least I was pretty sure no one else could look quite that shapeless and down-at-the-heels, though it was a little dark in there and her back was to me. But, when she turned at the sound of the door opening and her hair fell over her face, I knew it had to be Frieda.

She wore her hair like someone in an 1895 out-of-focus tintype, parted somewhere near the middle in a jagged lightning streak, hanging straight down at the sides, and snarled up at the back in a sagging granny-knot. It covered

the sides of her face as though she were peeking out through a pair of curtains, and it kept creeping out over her eyes as though she'd ducked back behind them. Walking toward her through the hardware store I was thinking that her dresses were like old ladies' hats; you couldn't imagine where they sold that kind. The one she had on now, like all her others, was no particular colour; call it anything and you wouldn't be wrong. It was a sort of reddish, greenish, blackish, brownish, haphazard draping of cloth that looked as though it had accidentally fallen on her from a considerable height; even I could see that the hem on one side was a good three inches lower than the other.

The heels of her shoes – not just the ones she had on now but all her shoes all the time – were so run down that her ankles bent out as though she were learning to skate, and her stocking seams were so crooked you wouldn't have been surprised if they'd actually turned loops. It was an office joke that she bought her stockings in special unmatched pairs with the runs already in, and she's the only young adult woman I ever saw with one of the side pieces of her glasses broken and held together with adhesive tape. They were the same kind of fancy glasses other girls wear, studded here and there with little shiny stones, but half the stones were missing, and the glasses were so knocked out of shape that they hung cockeyed on her nose, one eye almost squinting out over the top of the frame, the other trying to peer out underneath. She looked like the model for some of her own wilder cartoons.

I said, 'Hi, Frieda; buying a lathe?'

She surprised me. 'Hi, Ted,' she said. 'Yeah, I'm thinking about it. I've got a drill press, a router, a planer, a beltsander, and a nine-inch table saw; now I need a lathe.' I looked puzzled; someone had told me she lived in a little two-room apartment on upper Madison Avenue somewhere. She said, 'Oh, I haven't much room to use them, but I'm crazy about tools! I'm not too interested in

clothes,' she said as though she thought I might not have noticed, 'so I'm filling my hope chest with tools. Some day when I'm married, I can build all our furniture. Maybe even the house.'

I was pleased at the thought of a girl with a hope chest full of power tools, and wanted to hear a little more about it, and I brought out a Baby Ruth I'd bought, and offered Frieda some. She said no, she still had half a Love Nest left, and pulled it out of her skirt pocket, and we wandered around the hardware store for a while. She chattered away about her wood-working projects. One of them, a wedding gift for her future husband, was to be an enormous multiple-dwelling birdhouse, a sort of slum-clearance project I gathered, and I figured that the guy who married her would probably appreciate it.

She talked all the way back to the office, looking up at me eagerly through her slanted glasses, shoving the hair back off her face. The upper edge of her glasses bisected her right eye, the lower edge bisected the left; and since one lens made half her eye slightly smaller than normal, while the other lens magnified half of the remaining eye, she seemed to have four separate half-eyes of varying sizes, resembling a Picasso painting, and I got a little dizzy and tripped and nearly fell over a kerb.

But I learned that Frieda was a full-fledged noon-hour prowler; she'd been to most of the places I had, and she mentioned several, including a bootleg tattooing parlour in the back of a cut-rate undertaker's place, that I hadn't run across. So I wasn't surprised later that week when I passed a Lexington Avenue dance studio to see Frieda there. It was on the second floor, a corner room with big windows; I'd stopped in one noon and knew they offered you a free trial lesson when you came in. So now as I passed on the opposite side of the street, I glanced up and there was Frieda taking the free lesson, her dress billowing and flapping like loose sails in a typhoon. Her head rested dreamily on the instructor's shoulder, her eyes were closed behind the cockeyed glasses, and she was chew-

ing in time to the music; the hand behind the instructor's back held half a candy bar. He was looking down at her as though he were wondering how he'd ever gotten into this line of business.

The reason I mention Frieda is because of what happened the following week. One noon hour I was clear across town wandering around west of Sixth Avenue in the Forties somewhere, and I came to a narrow little place jammed in between an all-night barbershop and a Turkish bath. It said MAGIC SHOP on the window, and down in a corner in smaller letters, NOVELTIES, JOKES, JEWELLERY, SOUVENIRS. I went in, of course; there were glass showcases on three sides, practically filling the place. The proprietor was back of one, leaning on the counter reading the *Daily News*. He was a thin, tired-looking, bald guy about thirty-five, and he just looked up and nodded, then went back to his paper till I was ready for business.

I looked at the stuff in the showcases; it was about what you'd expect. There was some jewellery in one case – fake gold rings mounted with big zircons, imitation turquoise-and-silver Navaho jewellery, Chinese good-luck rings. On one counter was a metal rack filled with printed comic signs, and a display of practical jokes in the showcase underneath; a plastic ice cube with a fly in it; an ink bottle with a shiny metal puddle of what looked like spilled ink – that kind of stuff. I said, 'What's new in the magic-trick line?' and the guy finished a line of what he was reading, then looked up.

'Well,' he said, 'have you seen this?' and reached into the showcase and brought out a little brass cylinder with a handle, but I recognized it. It changed a little stack of nickels into dimes, and I told him I'd seen it. 'Well, there's this,' he said, and brought out a trick deck of cards, and demonstrated them, staring boredly out the window as he shuffled. I nodded when he finished, and waited. For a moment he stood thinking, then he shrugged a little, reached into the showcase, and pulled out a cheap grey cardboard box filled with a dozen or so pairs of glasses.

'These are new; some salesman left them last week.' I picked up a pair, and looked at them; it was just a cheap plastic frame with clear-glass lenses, no false nose attached or anything like that, and I looked up at the guy again, and said, 'What're they for?'

He reached wearily into the showcase once more – he'd demonstrated so many little tricks for so many people and made so few sales – and brought out a thin silk handkerchief. He made a fist with his other hand, draped the handkerchief over it, and held it up. 'Put on the glasses,' he said, and I did.

It wasn't a bad trick. As soon as I put on the glasses I could see his fist under the handkerchief very clearly, the handkerchief itself barely visible. 'Not bad,' I said. 'How's it work?'

He shrugged. 'I don't know. Salesman said a few rays of light get through cloth if it's thin, but not enough to see by. The lenses are ground some way to magnify the rays so you can see the hand underneath.'

I nodded, taking the glasses off to examine them. 'Is that the whole trick?'

'Yeah.' He looked away boredly. 'There are a couple others you can do with it, too.'

I glanced out the window. A truck and several cabs stood motionless, blocked in a traffic jam. A man in a business suit and carrying a briefcase turned to cross the street between two of the cabs. A tall good-looking showgirl type from one of the theatres around here walked along the other side of the street. I put the glasses on again absently, wondering if I wanted them; I felt I ought to buy something. The truck and the cabs sat there, the drivers leaning on their wheels trying to keep calm. The man in the business suit stepped up onto the opposite kerb. The showgirl was still walking – the showgirl's *dress* was gone!

There she was, walking along just as before glancing into store windows, and wearing nothing but high heels, a bra, lace-edged panties, and a purse! Then I saw the

dress, ghostlike and almost invisible, swaying as she walked. I snatched off the glasses, and instantly the dress was solid – thin but nontransparent cloth. I jammed the glasses back on before she got out of sight, almost putting my eye out with one of the side pieces, the dress became ghostly, and there she was again, by George, that handsome swaying figure under the nearly vanished dress marvellously visible once more.

I rushed to the doorway, looked toward the corner, and there they all were – all the sweet young office girls, not in their summer dresses but walking delightfully along in shoes, bras, and panties. It was entrancing, and I stood there for several happy and amazing minutes. When I finally turned back into the store again the proprietor was reading the *News*. 'Ah, look,' I said, hesitating, 'these are fine, but ... I was wondering if you had a stronger pair?'

He shook his head. 'No, but it's funny, that's something I get a lot of calls for, and I'm going to check the salesman next time he comes in. These only work through one or two layers of pretty thin cloth; not much use for anything but tricks, far as I can see. There's a couple of good ones, though. For example, you have someone wrap a coin in a handker—'

'Yeah, yeah; how much?'

'Buck and a quarter plus tax,' he said, and I bought them, and walked back to the office – strolled, actually, and it was wonderful. It was absolutely fascinating, in fact, and it seems to me that if girls understood how delicious they look walking along as I saw them now, they'd dress that way all the time, at least in nice weather. It'd be a lot cooler, terrifically healthy, and would bring a great deal of happiness into a drab, prosaic world. It might even bring about world peace; it's worth trying anyway.

I sauntered along observing, and grinning so happily – I couldn't help it – that people began staring at me wonderingly, girls especially. Once, stopped on a corner waiting for the traffic cop to wave us across, I stood beside a very good-looking girl with a haughty face – the kind that

shrivels you with a look if you so much as glance at her. She stood there in – I don't know why, but it's true – a bright blue bra and a pair of vivid orange panties; I noticed that she was slightly knock-kneed. I leaned toward her, and murmured very quietly, 'Orange and blue don't go together.' She looked at me puzzledly, then her eyes suddenly widened, and she stared at me with her mouth opening. Then she whirled and began looking frantically around her. The light changed, the cop waving us across, and she headed out into the street toward him, and I ran across to the other kerb, glancing at my watch so people would think I'd suddenly remembered I was late somewhere. Then I ducked into a building lobby across the street, snatching off the glasses so I'd be harder to identify, and just as I yanked them off I passed a girl who wasn't even wear— but I didn't stop; I hurried on, and came out of the building a block away just across the street from my office.

Upstairs in the office, Zoe was at the switchboard in the lobby as I came in. She was the best-looking girl in the office, resembling Anita Ekberg, only slimmer – more of a fashion-model type. I whipped out my glasses, put them on, said, 'Hi,' smiling at her as I passed, and – what a disappointment! There under that expensive, smart-looking, narrow-waisted, flounced-out dress sat a girl only ounces this side of malnutrition. It was the kind of figure that women, in their pitiful ignorance, envy; no hips, no nothing, except prominent ribs. 'You don't eat enough, Zoe,' I said.

She nodded proudly. 'That's what my roommate says.'

'Well, he's right.'

'Listen, wise guy,' she began, and I held up a hand placatingly, ducking behind one shoulder, and she smiled, and I walked on.

I kept the glasses on nearly all afternoon, wandering around the office with a sheaf of papers in my hand, and strangely it was Mrs Humphrey, our middle-aged overweight bookkeeper, that I stared at longest. Last year, I

knew, she'd celebrated the twenty-fifth anniversary of her marriage to her husband, Harvey. But there, unmistakably, tattooed on her left hip, was a four-inch-high red heart inside which, in a slanted blue script, was inscribed *Ralph*, and I wondered if she'd had the fearsome job of hiding it from Harvey for a quarter of a century.

But the biggest surprise of all came just before quitting time. I was managing to do a little actual work by then, and, when my office door opened and someone came in, I raised my eyes slowly, still reading a last few words of the paper in my hand. And there before me in bra and what I believe are called briefs embroidered with forget-me-nots, and I swore I never would, was – well, there is no describing what I saw, and I'm not going to try. It was nothing more or less than the most magnificently beautiful feminine figure the human race has ever known. It may even have been a mutant figure, the very first example of a new height in beauty to which humanity has never previously soared. I couldn't believe it, I couldn't tear away my eyes and lift my head until, entranced with those flawless beautifully shaped long legs, something vaguely familiar began tapping at the doors of my flabbergasted memory. The ankles, I saw when I reached them, were strangely bowed out, and then my chin shot up and I was staring openmouthed at the face above that incredible figure. 'Did I startle you or something, Ted? Sorry,' said Frieda, raking back a dank curtain of hair to expose a constellation of half-eyes of various sizes blinking down at me from behind and around those demented glasses.

'That's all right,' I managed to say. 'I've been concentrating all afternoon on some figures.' I yanked off my glasses, and sure enough, there stood Frieda as always – in a shapeless sackcloth, which the dictionary says is made of goat's or camel's hair, and in her case I didn't doubt it.

'Forgot to tell you,' she said, 'that I found a ladies' pool hall on Sixth Avenue last month,' and I thanked her, and she left. I couldn't quite believe what had happened and

I clapped my glasses on again and stared after her. But it was true. There, wobbling along on scuffed and run-down heels, went the world's greatest figure, and I pulled off my glasses, and sat there till quitting time rubbing the corners of my eyes between my thumb and forefinger.

I soon quit wearing my glasses regularly though I keep them in the breast pocket of my coat for emergency use. But the novelty of wearing them all the time wore off quickly; it was like walking around on a beach all day, you got used to it. And I never put them on – the contrast between face and figure was just too much – when Frieda dropped into my office as she took to doing. She'd stop in to tell me about some noon-hour discovery, and I told her about the magic shop and about a jail manufacturer on lower Park Avenue. Usually she'd be eating a Love Nest candy bar, not so much because of the taste, she explained, but because she loved to ask for them.

Coming to work on the Forty-ninth Street crosstown bus one morning about a week later, I sat down next to the optometrist in our building; his shop is in the lobby, he usually stands in the doorway between customers, and we generally nod and speak, so I knew him. We spoke now, then each sat reading our papers till the bus stopped for a light. I looked up to see where we were just as a particularly extravagant example of lush American girlhood was crossing the street, and I whipped out my glasses and clapped them on in a blur of movement; I now had, I felt sure, the fastest draw in the East. 'Farsighted?' my optometrist friend asked me, and I said no, these lenses were ground so you could see through thin cloth, such as summer dresses. He chuckled delightedly, and said, 'Any lenses that could do that must be magic.' I snatched off the glasses, and stared at him.

'You mean you couldn't make lenses like that?' I said finally.

'Of course not,' he said with the tolerant little chuckle doctors use for the idiot questions of stupid laymen. The

bus was slowing for Park Avenue, and he stood up, asking me if I weren't going to get off, but I shook my head.

'There's something I've got to do near Sixth Avenue; I just realized,' I said, and rode on across town.

The guy in the magic shop looked up from his *Daily News* as I walked in, and shook his head. 'That salesman was in again but he doesn't have any stronger glasses; I asked.'

'Never mind, that's not why I came,' I said. 'Tell me; what does this salesman look like? Does he have a thin saturnine face, a little waxed moustache, and strangely hypnotic eyes? Is his hair black and glossy, and high above the temples as though concealing little horns? Does he wear a silk hat and a full dress suit, and is there an odour of brimstone about h—'

'No, you must be thinking of a salesman for some other company. This here salesman is fat. Wears dirty wash pants, a Hawaiian shirt, and a cap. Smokes a cigar that smells a little like brimstone, though.'

I nodded, disappointed, then thought of something. 'He was here again, did you say? What'd he leave this time?'

'Some lousy jewellery. Cheap plated brass. I wouldn't of took it if he didn't leave it on consignment.'

I shrugged. 'Might as well look at it, long as I'm here.'

'Help yourself.' He pulled a cardboard box out of a showcase, shoved it across the counter at me, and went back to the *News*. Tumbled in the box lay a dozen or so heart-shaped little boxes made of cheap pink plastic. I opened one; a layer of pink imitation felt was glued to a piece of cardboard cut to fit the inside of the box. Lying on the felt was a bracelet of imitation brass chain studded with red glass hearts; it was as gaudy a looking thing as I'd seen in a long time. A badly printed label stuck to the inside of the lid read, GENUINE EGYPTIAN SLAVE BRACELET, and a little gummed tab on the back

said 75¢. I paid the guy – he looked at me pityingly as I did – then hurried out and to the office.

Zoe was at the switchboard, looking – with clothes on – as lovely as ever, and I stopped; there was no one else around. I took out the little pink box, opened it, and showed her the bracelet. 'Just bought this,' I said.

She glanced at the bracelet, then up at me. 'Bought it? Or did you find it in a box of Crackerjack?'

'Bought it. Try it on; I'd like to see how it looks.'

She frowned but picked up the bracelet; slipped it over her wrist, then held out her arm to inspect the result; it looked terrible. I said, 'Zoe, you are now my slave; kiss me, you mad fool!' and she stood up, walked out of her little enclosure, grabbed me around the waist, bent me far back – it was like a reverse scene from a Rudolph Valentino movie – stared into my eyes for a moment; then kissed me. Enormous blue sparks flashed and crackled around the room like St Elmo's fire; it was the most wildly abandoned and passionate kiss I'd ever imagined, and I've imagined some beauties.

It didn't stop, either. Behind us the switchboard buzzed, then another buzz began in a slightly different key, then a third. But I didn't realize it was the switchboard; I thought it was my nerves twanging in ecstasy and my mind and senses threw up their hands and went down for the first, then the second time, and were just going under for the third when I managed to reach out with my little remaining strength and yank the bracelet off her wrist or there's simply no telling what might have happened. Zoe raised her lovely head, stared down at me for a moment, said, 'For heaven's sakes,' and let me drop to run for her board. I fell flat on my back, banging my head on the floor, and raising a considerable lump. Then I hurried on, fifteen minutes late for work, as Zoe began clearing her board of calls, murmuring, 'Sorry!'

In my office I closed the door, sat down at my desk, and with trembling hands, began putting the bracelet back into its box. The door opened, and Frieda walked in

saying, 'Did you know there's a blacksmith shop down on Twenty-eighth Str–' Then she stopped, her mouth still open, and stood staring down at the bracelet in the pink heart-shaped box. She leaned closer, her hair fell over her face, and with both hands she pulled it aside like Stanley parting the jungle vines. For a moment longer she stared, then said, 'Isn't it *beautiful!* Oh, Ted, it's the loveliest thing I've ever seen!'

I looked at her quickly but she wasn't kidding. Her eyes, face, and voice were filled with the kind of yearning the Little Match Girl might feel gazing through the store window at the doll she could never have, and I realized that Frieda was probably the only human being in the civilized world who could think that damn bracelet was beautiful. I knew I could get another at noon, so I said, 'You like it? It's yours,' and handed it to her box and all. I was glad I did, because Frieda was entranced. Thanking me again and again, she put it on, then stood revolving her wrist so the bracelet would catch the light till I thought her arm would fall off.

That noon I stood in the magic shop, and I couldn't believe – my mind wouldn't accept – what the man was telling me. But he repeated it. 'That's right; a guy bought one right after you left this morning, and half an hour later he came back for the rest. Wanted to buy a gross, but I didn't have them.'

I could hardly speak. 'But ... can't you get more?'

He shrugged, turning a page of the *News*. 'I'll try. I'll ask the salesman next time he comes around. But he don't ever seem to have the same thing twice. Tried to get more of those glasses, but couldn't. Seems like he's more interested pushing new items than repeats.'

I didn't eat lunch; I didn't feel like it. I bought an Almond Joy, but could only eat half. And when, wandering aimlessly around, I passed an embalming school, I didn't even bother reading the placard in the window.

Back at the office I felt even worse, because in came

Frieda to thank me again, holding her arm up so I could admire the bracelet. I sat looking at it and thinking that this was typical of me; here was the only genuine Egyptian slave bracelet, I knew now, that I'd ever get my hands on, and of all the wrists of all the girls in the world I'd somehow managed to get it onto Frieda's. Looking at it as her wrist twisted and flashed like the revolving red light on top of a cop's car, I thought of what might have been.

I pictured myself going to Hollywood; I'd have had to travel by bus, eating almost nothing, but I could have managed it, and it would have been worth it. Somehow I knew, I could have gotten into the studio, found Anita Ekberg, and when she wasn't looking, slipped the bracelet onto her magnificent wrist, and then – but I couldn't bear to finish that lovely dream, not with Frieda standing there wearing the bracelet, yakking away about it and smiling down at me from behind and around those insane glasses.

Twice I opened my mouth to tell her that I had to have that bracelet back, that it was a family heirloom and that I'd get her another that was bigger, better, and even gaudier. But I simply could not get the words out; I just couldn't do it. Could you take a big, delicious piece of candy away from a child, telling her you'd get her a better one some other time? It just wasn't possible to take that bracelet away, yet the thought of a genuine slave bracelet being entirely wasted was more than I could stand. It was too much to bear, and I had a sudden idea.

I took out my glasses, put them on, and then – careful not to lift my eyes too high and catch sight of her face – I slowly looked up at Frieda. The embroidered forget-me-nots were gone today but I hadn't forgotten; there beside my desk, ankles bowed outward and one wrist steadily revolving, stood the world's most spectacular figure. And now, by an inspired act of will, keeping my eyes carefully lowered, I pictured Zoe's lovely face at the

upper end of that splendid torso. It was a spectacular combination, and I stood up saying, 'Kiss me; you are my slave,' and she did, her arms winding immediately around my neck.

It was great! It was wonderful! And when we finally stopped, Frieda sighed deeply and said, 'Do you always put on your glasses to kiss a girl?' I said yeah, and she said, 'Then why are your eyes closed?'

'Shut up and kiss me again,' I said and she did and this time it lasted even longer and was tremendous. Just kiss a girl like Zoe some time with your arms around a figure like that, and you'll know what I mean. It was so great, in fact, that the actual truth of what was happening faded from my mind. In a fit of delirious absentmindedness I languorously opened my eyes, and there only half an inch away and staring into mine were Frieda's eyes – all of them. I got so dizzy I had to break loose and sit down on the edge of the desk; not because of the split-level eyes in assorted sizes – I was used to them now – but because every single one of them was chock full of love. They were filled with it! They swam with it! And from an enormous distance I heard Frieda saying, 'Oh, Ted, darling, you're wonderful! I love you! Open your eyes!'

I couldn't; I'd closed them again instantly and they were squeezed tight as though I had soap in them. Then I forced myself; cautiously opening my eyes to a slit I looked again. They were still there in front of me, those four half-eyes each aflame with the light of love, and I slammed my eyelids shut knowing that, although it hardly seemed possible, I'd managed to make things infinitely worse. 'I'm crazy about you, Ted!' Frieda was saying. 'I'm your slave!' She reached out and pulled off my glasses saying, 'Please open your eyes and kiss me again!'

Bravely, I looked out once more; she was peering tenderly out at me from behind that jungle of hair looking as though she'd just jumped from a plane in a burlap

parachute in which she'd become hopelessly tangled. I thought of pretending to faint, when my phone rang and I snatched it up before the first ring had stopped. It was just one of the account men with one of the foolish questions they ask, and which I answered with a word. But I kept the phone at my ear long after he'd hung up, saying, 'Yeah' and 'You bet,' over and again, occasionally looking up at Frieda and shrugging helplessly. Finally she had to leave, giggling and murmuring horrible endearments, and I hung up the phone, covered my face with my hands, and planted my elbows on the desk squarely on the glasses Frieda had put there, smashing both lenses, but I was beyond caring.

Later, splashing cold water on my face in the washroom, I wondered what to do. Here was a girl helplessly in love with me and it was all my fault; maybe I was morally obliged to pretend that I, too – but I knew I couldn't do that. I went back to my desk, and three times that afternoon Frieda looked in hopefully, lovingly, and I told her that I had a headache. At quitting time I found her waiting at the elevators, and told her my headache was far worse and by this time it was true; it throbbed and pounded, and I stumbled home to a night of hideous dreams.

I don't know whether Frieda guessed the truth that night; I'm just not sure. But all next morning she didn't come into my office, though I kept glancing up every time footsteps sounded anywhere near my door. When noon came and she still hadn't come in, I was suddenly filled with remorse and fear. This was a nice girl, I'd probably hurt her feelings terribly, and – what if she were at the river, *in it*, by now going down for the last time, refusing to struggle? All noon hour I prowled along the river front cursing myself, worrying, and when I got back to the office, and sat down at my desk, and Frieda came in friendly and happy as ever, I jumped up and yelled, 'Where *were* you this noon?'

She just smiled, and shook her head. 'Want some?' she said, holding out a wrapped candy bar clutched in her hand like a banana; but printed on the wrapper just above her fist I could see the first word, Love, and the beginning vertical stroke of the next, and since Love Nests aren't really my favourite, I said no, thanks. But when she peeled off the wrapper, and urged me again, it occurred to me that I could hardly be expected to kiss her with my mouth full of candy, so I took a bite. Surprisingly, it was delicious, and when she offered me some more, I took another. Her eyes gleaming with love, she said, 'Finish it,' insisting with a gesture, so I did – chewing slowly, postponing as long as possible what I was afraid would happen next.

It happened. 'Kiss me, lover,' Frieda said then, and I looked up at her, my mouth opening to say that my headache was back. But I didn't say it. My mouth stayed open but I just sat looking at her astounded. It had suddenly occurred to me that if Frieda would simply use a judicious bobby pin or two and unsnarl that knot at the back, her hair would not only stay in place but would become a very handsome pageboy bob. And that if she'd just take off those crazy – I stood up as though in a dream, and did it myself. I pulled off those nutty glasses, and her various half-eyes merged in pairs like the split images in a camera viewfinder coming into focus, and turned into a single set of enormous, beautiful, myopic blue eyes. She couldn't see me now but I could see her, and her face was absolutely lovely, every bit as beautiful as the accompanying figure which I now found I was holding in my arms. I started to say something about contact lenses but decided that could wait while this could not – and I kissed her long and lingeringly.

For a moment I drew back to look down at that wonderful face, then grabbed her to me again, murmuring all sorts of trite phrases such as 'I love you,' to which Frieda said, 'Of course,' and, 'When can we get married?' to which she said, 'As soon as I finish your birdhouse.'

Looking down over her lovely shoulder, I noticed the candy wrapper lying where she'd dropped it on my desk, and now I could read both the words printed on it. Love Potion, they said in big blue letters, and now I knew where Frieda had been during noon hour.

WHERE THE CLUETTS ARE

We had open books and magazines lying on every flat surface in the room. They stood propped in a row along the fireplace mantel and lay face up on the seat cushions of the upholstered chairs. They hung like little tents on the chair arms and backs, were piled in layers on the big round coffee table, and lay scattered all over the carpeted floor. Every one of them was opened to a photograph, sketch, floor plan, or architect's elevation of a house. Ellie Cluett sat on the top of the ladder I used to reach the highest of the bookshelves. She was wearing a grey sweater and slacks and was slowly leafing through an *Architectural Forum*. Sam, her husband, sat on the floor, his back against the bookshelves, and now he held up his book for us to look at. This was the big room I worked in and I was at my drafting table watching them.

'How about something like this?' Sam said. It was a colour photograph of the Taj Mahal.

Ellie said, 'Great. The big dome in the centre is just right for a television aerial. Okay with you, Harry?'

'Sure. All I have to do is design the place. You'll have to live in it.' I smiled at Ellie. She was about twenty-three, intelligent and likeable.

Sam said, 'Well, I wish you *would* design it and quit pestering us about it.' He grinned to show he didn't mean it, though he did. Sam was wearing slacks and a sports

shirt and was about my age – somewhere just over thirty.

Ellie said, 'Yes, Harry, please. Have it built, and phone us in New York when it's finished. Surprise us! Honestly,' – she gestured at the roomful of opened books and magazines – 'I know we promised to look through all this, but it's driving me crazy.'

'I'll have the rooms padded, then. In tasteful decorator colours.'

'Damn it, Harry, I think you're being pointlessly stubborn,' Sam said. 'There are only two things that matter to me about this house, and you know what they are.'

I nodded. Sam owned a big boatyard on the Sound. He wanted a house here in Darley, Connecticut, because it was only thirty minutes from the yard. He sold his boats by demonstration and entertainment, so he wanted an impressive house to take his prospects to.

Sam said, 'That's all I care about, and you won't change it if you lock me up in here.'

'It isn't as though we'd really be living here,' Ellie said gently. 'We'll keep our apartment in New York, you can be sure. Except for the boat season, we'll hardly be in Darley.'

I didn't want to lose this job. Just before the boat craze began, Sam Cluett started his boat works on nothing; now he was rich and offering me a free hand in designing a show place with nothing skimped. I wanted to do it and needed the money but I said, 'I can't do it alone. If this house doesn't mean enough to you to give it some time and work and to develop some opinions and enthusiasms about it, then I don't want to design it. Because it would never be much of a house. It wouldn't be yours, mine, or anyone's. It would be a house without life or soul – or, even worse, the wrong kind of soul.'

Absolutely identical looks came to their faces: brows raised in polite question, eyes alertly interested in and amused by the notion of a house with a soul.

I suspected that I was about to become an anecdote back in New York but I was going to save this job if I

could and I smiled and said, 'It's true, or close to it. A house can have a life and soul of its own. There's a house here in Darley, twelve years old and it's had nineteen owners. No one ever lives in it long. There are houses like it in every town in the world.' I stood up and began walking around the room, hands shoved into my back pockets, picking my way through the scattered books.

Sam sat watching me from the floor, arms folded. Ellie sat on top of the ladder staring down at me, her chin on her fist. There was a faint smile of interest on each face and they looked like a couple of sophisticated kids waiting for the rest of a story.

I said, 'It's an ordinary enough house but I prowled through it between tenants, once, and began to understand why it never kept an owner. Everywhere you look the proportions are just faintly unpleasant. There's a feeling of harshness to the place. There's even something wrong in the very way the light slants in through the windows. It wasn't the designer's fault; the house simply developed an ugly life and soul of its own. It's filled with unpleasant associations and after you're in it awhile it becomes downright repelling. I don't really understand why, and I'm an architect.' I glanced at Sam, then at Ellie, smiling so as not to seem too deadly serious. Ellie's eyes were bright with interest. I said, 'There's another house in Darley that no one has ever willingly left. Those who've left it, the husbands were transferred or something of that sort, and I've heard that each wife cried when she had to give up that house. And that a child in one family said and has continued to say that when he grows up, he's going to buy that house back and live in it. I don't doubt these stories because I've been in that house, too, and I swear it welcomes you as you step through the front door.'

I looked at the Cluetts again, and began to hope. I said, 'You've been in that kind of house; everyone has. For no reason you can explain you feel a joy at just being in it. I almost think that kind of house *knows*

you're in it and puts its best foot forward. There's a kind of felicity about it, everything in it just right. It's something more and better than any designer could consciously plan. It's the occasional rare and wonderful house that somehow acquires a life and soul of its own, and a fine one. Personally, I believe that kind of house comes out of the feelings and attitude and actual love for it of the people who plan it and bring it to life. And that has to be the people who are going to live in it; not just the architect. When I design a house I want it to have a chance of turning out to be that kind. But you're not giving yours any chance at all.'

It didn't work. For half an hour, the Cluetts were contrite and industrious, searching through my books and magazines, pointing out to me and each other houses, rooms, windows, doors, roof styles, bathrooms, and gardens they liked or said they did. I sat at my table again, listening, but I knew their interest was synthetic and I added no more notes to the pad in my clip board. I had only one: 'Enormous master bdrm w. fireplace.' But every client says that; I could have it printed on my note pads. And the Cluetts had nothing more to add; they really didn't care.

Finally, Ellie put a book back on the shelf beside her, then stood up on the ladder and began scanning the top shelf boredly. She reminded me of a child reluctantly doing homework, ready to welcome any diversion, and now she found one. Pulling out a book, she dislodged a thick wadding of paper crammed onto the shelf beside it and caught it as it fell. She unfolded it, opening it up finally to half a dozen big sheets of linen drawing paper each the size of a newspaper page. When she saw what was on the top sheet she slowly sat down on the ladder top, staring and murmuring, 'For heaven's sake.' After a moment she looked at me, saying, 'Harry! What in the world is this?'

'Just what it looks like.' I heard the tired irritation in my voice and forced it out before I continued. I wasn't

going to take their job, but I liked the Cluetts just the same. 'Those are drawings for a house, architectural drawings,' I said more pleasantly. 'That top sheet is a perspective showing what it would look like finished. The sheets underneath are the working drawings for building it. They've always been up there; belonged to my grandfather. Most of the stuff on that top shelf was his. He was an architect and so was my father.'

Sam was getting to his feet, pleased with the diversion, too, and Ellie quickly turned on the ladder, hurried down it, then dropped, kneeling, to the floor and smoothed the big top sheet flat on the rug. 'Look!' she said excitedly.

Sam and I went to stand beside her, staring. The edges of the paper were yellowed but the rest was bone-white still and I remembered that I'd once meant to frame this and hang it in my office downtown. It was an India-ink drawing, the lines thin, sharp, and black in the scribed and ruled precision architects once favoured. It was an incredible sight – I'd almost forgotten – but there lay the clear-etched architectural rendering for a house of the early 1880s just as its designer had conceived it in every gabled, turreted, dormered, bay-windowed and gingerbreaded detail.

'Imagine,' Ellie murmured, her voice incredulous and delighted. 'Why, it never entered my head that these houses were actually built!'

'What do you mean?' Sam said.

She turned to look up at him, eyes shining. 'Why, they've always *been* here – forever! Since long before any of us was born. They're old, shabby, half tumbling down. It simply never occurred to me that they could ever have been new! Or not even *built* yet, like this one!' Quickly, she began spreading out the other sheets in a half circle.

I knew what she meant and so did Sam, and he nodded. It was strange to see at our feet the actual floor by floor plans – the framing plans and sections, full-sized profiles, every last detail, all precisely dimensioned ready for construction – of what had to seem to our eyes like an old

old house. And for some moments, then, silent and bemused, we looked at the careful old drawings thinking the wordless thoughts you often think looking at a relic of other earlier lives than your own.

It seems to me that it's usually impossible to get hold of another time. You look at a pair of high-button shoes, the leather dry and cracked, buttons missing, the cloth uppers nearly drained of colour by the years, and it just isn't possible to get into the mind of some long-gone woman who once saw them new. How could they ever have been new and shining, something a woman might actually covet?

But these old drawings lying on the floor beside us weren't quite like any other relic of the past I'd ever before encountered. Because these were the house before it was built; old though they were, these were still the plans for a house-yet-to-be. And so at one and the same time they were quaint and old-fashioned, yet new and fresh, still untouched by the years. And it was possible to see in them, and feel, not merely quaintness but something of the fresh beauty the architect must have seen and felt the day he finished them a lifetime ago.

Ellie was getting to her feet and I turned to look at her. Her jaw actually hung open a little and her eyes were wide, and almost stunned in a kind of incredulous awe at what she'd just thought of. 'Sam!' she said, and grabbed his forearm. 'Let's build it!'

'What?'

'Yes! I mean it! Let's build it! And I'll furnish it! In the style of those days! Why, good lord,' she murmured, turning to stare at nothing, eyes shining with excitement, 'there's not a woman I know who won't envy me green.'

Sam is bright and used to making decisions, I suppose. His eyes narrowed and he stared at Ellie's face as though testing or absorbing her feelings through her eyes as she stared back at him, elated. Then he stepped forward abruptly and looked down at the drawings again for half

a minute. He took a few paces around the room, then turned to me. 'Is it possible, Harry? Could that house be built today? Is it practical, I mean? Could we live in it and have it make any kind of sense? Suddenly he grinned, delighted at the notion.

I shrugged and said, 'Sure. Why not? If you're willing to pay the cost. The plans are there and can be followed today as well as in the eighteen eighties.' Both started to speak but I held up a hand, cutting them off. 'But to build even a contemporary house with that much floor space would be very expensive, Sam. And with this house, every foot of that space would cost twice as much, three times as much, maybe more. Who can say? You might not even get a bid on a job like that.'

'Oh? Why not?'

I touched the plans with the toe of my shoe. 'Look at the lumber specifications. Half of it different from anything milled today – heavier, thicker, longer. You'd pay a fortune in special milling costs alone. Look at the fancy trim all over the house inside and out. When those plans were drawn I suppose it could be bought from stock. Today it doesn't exist. All of it would have to be special order, lathed and jig-sawed out and by people not used to it. Lot of errors and spoilage. What's more, the entire construction method is different from today's. No contractor has had any experience at it, or his men, either. He might not even bid; you'd have to pay cost plus. And the final price?' I shook my head. 'It would be fantastic, and if you ever wanted to sell you'd have the world's biggest white elephant on your hands, a brand-new antique that no bank in the world would ever lend you a dime...'

Sam shut me off with a hand on my arm, smiling. He said gently, 'Everything you're telling me, Harry, can be said in one word – money. Well, I've got the money and whatever it costs to build this house I guarantee you it'll be worth it.' He saw I didn't know what he meant, and said, 'Harry, boats are sold just like anything else – in

a variety of ways. And one of the best ways is publicity. Think of the *talk* this'll make!' He grinned tensely. 'Every customer I bring into that house will go home full of it. Why, Sam Cluett's new place will be talked about at cocktail parties, in restaurants, on boat decks, and in living-rooms all over the Eastern seaboard. And who is Sam Cluett? Why, he makes boats! Harry, I could blow the place up two years after it's finished and it'll have paid for itself three times over.' He turned to Ellie, saying, 'Baby, you've picked yourself a house,' then he swung back to me. 'You know the contractors here. Hire one, Harry, and follow through for me, will you? Don't even ask for a bid; just have him follow the plans and send me his bills as he gets them, adding – what? Twenty per cent? Work it out with him.' Sam glanced at his watch. 'Now, let's get out of here and go look for a site!'

He was right about the talk. He and Ellie picked a building site that same afternoon, Sunday, and Monday morning I bought it for them – a three-and-a-half-acre plot over three hundred feet deep in the best residential section of town. It had been held for years in the hope of a fat price, and now Sam paid it. And less than seventy-two hours after Ellie Cluett dislodged the papers that were the forgotten plans for a forgotten house, its foundation was being laid – of brick, just as the old plans specified.

At first the new house attracted no attention; the wood frame of one house looks just about like any other at the beginning. Then the roof framing began and before it was finished it was plain to everyone passing that these were remarkably steep and complex gables. They intersected in dozens of places; they were pierced by innumerable dormers; at corners, they rose into sharp, narrow peaks, and they projected over – it was suddenly obvious – what were going to become bay windows and an enormous porch. And now all day every day cars crept past and clusters stood on the sidewalk as people watched the

steady, skeletal growth in fresh white pine of a brand-new Victorian mansion.

I was just as fascinated. I had plenty of work. Specifying, ordering, and checking up on all the special milling were a job in themselves and I had much more to do. But still I spent more time at the new house than I really had to. Even at night, as though I were the actual architect, I'd sometimes drive over and prowl around and through it. One night I found Ellie standing on the walk, the big collar of her camel's-hair coat turned up, hands deep in her pockets, looking at the half-finished house.

The house was set far back from the street, and from the sidewalk the eye could take it all in. There was a three-quarter moon; we could see clearly. The new wood looked pale against the night sky and the door and window openings were narrow black rectangles, for the house was no longer skeletal. Most of the exterior sheathing was on, and the external shape of the house was complete. For the first time we could see, rising from the bare wood-littered earth, the beginning reality of what had been only architectural drawings.

Ellie murmured, 'Isn't it astonishing?'

'Yeah.' I was enjoying the almost ghostly sight of this strange unfinished house in the moonlight and I began fooling, playing with words. 'We're looking at a vanished sight. This is a commonplace sight of a world long gone and we've reached back and brought it to life again. Maybe we should have let it alone.'

Ellie smiled. 'I don't think so. I feel good about it.'

The work went fast; the men liked this job. Several had grown moustaches or sideburns in styles they thought appropriate to the house. One of the carpenters had just finished a year in New Jersey doing nothing but hanging doors in over nine hundred identical tract houses. He told me this job was the first time carpentering actually was what, as a boy, he'd imagined it to be. Now the siding was on, and the big veranda was complete. All windows were in. Everything was finished outside, in fact,

except the eave ornamentation, not yet delivered, and some special-patterned shingle work on the gable ends.

Inside the hammering was constant – inlaid hardwood floors going down on the third floor, interior trim on the first and second. Plastering was finished, complete with old-style wood lathing, and on the first floor, doors were being hung – inches wider, two feet taller, and far heavier and more solid than any ordinarily made today. Their surfaces were beautifully panelled with fine mouldings, and they, too, were new-minted and fresh-sanded, not even drilled yet for lock sets. Walking through the house, I'd stop when no one could see me, close my eyes, and sniff the familiar damp-plaster, new-wood fragrance of a just-finished house. Then I'd open my eyes and wonder at the magnificent brand-new old mansion in which, incredibly, I stood.

Sam wanted speed, and got it. When the completed house was still wet with paint, new grass was showing on the landscaped grounds, and transplanted bushes almost surrounded it. He'd had a dozen fir trees trucked to and planted on the grounds at whatever enormous cost – full-grown trees taller than the roof. And five stone masons, all I'd been able to round up, were building a wall clear around the grounds using old grey stone from a dismantled church. And now, the activity of building over and the house painted – entirely white – it lost its visual novelty and took its place in the town. People pausing on the walk dwindled to an occasional one or two.

The day Ellie finished furnishing it she stopped at my office downtown and invited me to see it. We drove in her car, and when we reached the house the great wrought-iron gates stood open in the wall and we swung through them onto a snow-white gravel driveway that curved up to the shaded veranda.

Ellie stopped halfway, giving me a chance to look around. All trace of raw newness was gone; the grounds were lush. This was June and the immense lawns were a flawless, fresh-mowed, brilliant summer green. The

hedges were perfectly trimmed and flower beds stood in full bloom.

The house itself was immaculate; it sparkled. It stood there in the splendour of its grounds like a new-cut jewel in a just-finished setting – solid and vigorous, in the very prime of its youth – the living and finished reality of drawings that had lain dustily on my shelves for years.

I had only an impression of the interior when we'd finished – of large-patterned wallpaper suggesting the nineteenth century but colourful, gay, wonderfully cheerful; of last-century furniture intricately but beautifully carved, ornately but gracefully curved, finished to perfection and upholstered in tufted velvets of emerald green, canary yellow, scarlet, coral, and sky blue. I remember a little dressing-room carpeted in pink. All doors were dull white, with polished brass hardware. The house sang.

I was out of town on a job the night of the Cluetts' big party a week later, the housewarming. But I drove back late in the evening and, while I wasn't dressed to go inside, I stopped my car by the big iron gates and what I saw was the most haunting sight I've ever seen.

The house was equipped with two lighting systems. One, which I designed, was electric with concealed outlets and almost unnoticeable flush ceiling lights. The other was gas, the lines following the original plans and with ornate fixtures which Ellie had searched out and bought, in all the principal rooms. Tonight as I sat looking in through the big gates, only the gas system was in use. And on all three floors of the big, rambling house, every window – tall and arched at the tops, looking like rows of great slender candles – glowed against the blue summer night with the yellowy, wonderfully warm light electricity has never equalled.

Dancing couples moved across those rectangles of light and music from a live orchestra moved out through the open windows across the lawns into the darkness. Sam had bought a horse and carriage to meet his New York guests at the railroad station. Tonight he'd hired three

more and now they all stood on the white gravel of the curved driveway. Any guest who'd come by car had parked in the street. This was one of the last June nights and the air was balmy and alive with the drone of insects, the very sound of summer; and the lawns, strung with candlelit Japanese lanterns, flickered with fireflies. From the veranda I could hear laughter and the murmur of voices softened by distance and people stood outlined on the glowing candle shapes of the windows. Over and enclosing it all, the backdrop for everything, stood the great dark silhouette of the turreted, dormered, many-gabled house. It was a scene lost to the world, a glimpse of another time and manner of living, and I sat there for a long time before I drove home.

You lose touch with clients fairly quickly once a house is finished. For a time you're in each other's company and minds every day, more intimate than friends. Then suddenly you're busy with someone else. I didn't see the Cluetts again till well after Labour Day. Then one afternoon on impulse, I stopped in, not sure if they were still there. But they were. Sam met me on the porch in shirt sleeves – it was warm yet – calling to Ellie that I was there. He led me to the end of the veranda. There was a wooden porch swing, and we sat down, lifting our feet to the porch railing.

I said, 'No work today, Sam?'

He smiled. 'No. Lately I've been taking more time off than I used to.'

From the window behind me, I heard steps in the kitchen, and the sound of glassware. Then Ellie appeared in the doorway.

I stared in open astonishment. Ellie – smiling mischievously as she bent forward to set a tray on a little wicker table – was wearing a dress that began high at the neck and snug around it and ended well below her ankles, brushing the porch floor. It was a soft leaf green and the long sleeves ended at the wrists in lace cuffs. The upper arms weren't actually puffed but they were full, peaking

up a little at the shoulders. It was a dress of the last century and as Ellie sat down I saw that her hair was long now. It was parted in the centre and braided and coiled at the back into a flat disc covering the nape of her neck.

Sam was grinning. He said, 'You wouldn't want us to be the only things in the house that weren't appropriate, would you, Harry? Ellie and I decided we ought to be dressed for the place.' With his fingers he flicked one of his cream-coloured pants legs and I saw that they were patterned with a light-blue stripe, a kind of trousers last worn decades ago. Then I realized that his hair wasn't just overdue for cutting; he was wearing it in a style outmoded when my father was born.

I grinned, too, then. Ellie was pouring from a brown stoneware pitcher beaded with tight little drops, the ice clinking as it slid into the glasses. I said, 'You look wonderful, both of you; absolutely right for this house. Your guests must get a kick out of it.'

'Well, as a matter of fact,' Sam said, 'we've pretty well quit entertaining my customers here. Not many of them really appreciated the place.'

Ellie handed me a filled glass, and I tasted the drink; it was fresh-squeezed lemonade, and delicious. I said, 'You must like the house for its own sake, then.'

'I can't tell you how much,' Ellie said softly. 'We've moved here permanently, you know. We don't go to New York any more.'

For half an hour, then, we talked about the house. Ellie told me she even sewed here in a little room at the top of a turret. It was something she'd never before had patience for but she'd actually made the dress she was wearing. She said the pattern for it and even the exact shade just came drifting into her mind one day and she wanted to have it and made it herself.

Presently she said, 'I always assumed that the plans for this house had never been used, didn't you, Harry?' I nodded, and she said, 'But it's just as possible that they *were* used, isn't it?'

'I suppose so.'

She smiled wonderingly. 'Strange, isn't it, to think that this house existed before? Right here in Darley, undoubtedly, maybe in sight of this one.'

'If it existed.'

She looked at me for a moment, her face dead serious. Then, with such quiet certainty that I smiled in surprise, she said, 'It did.'

'Oh? How do you know?'

Ellie looked at Sam. He hesitated, then nodded slightly, and Ellie turned back to me. She said, 'You know how associations slowly form in a house you've lived in for a long time. The way the sun strikes the ceiling of a certain room may remind you forever of how it felt when you were a child getting dressed for school. Do you know what I mean?'

I said, 'Sure. After a hot day, the beams of my house cool off and contract; make a lot of noise. Every time it happens I remember the first time I tasted strawberries as a kid. With some of the other old associations in my house, the memories are gone, only the emotions left, and I can't remember why they began.'

'Yes!' Ellie leaned forward, excited. 'This house is full of them! Turn a corner in the front hallway, and the way the stairs rise toward the second floor gives me a feeling of peace. And when the back screen door slams, just the sound of it makes me happy for no reason I know.' She hesitated, then said, 'And there are other more specific things. One morning I walked into the library. Sam was sitting there reading. The windowpanes are divided into quarters, and the sun came through at an angle, and four diamond-shaped patches of sunlight lay across the bindings of the books on the shelves. Harry, I saw them, smiled, and said to Sam, "Well, the Pelliers arrive tomorrow for a week. Won't we have fun!" And Sam looked up and nodded. He knew it, too! Then we just stared at each other. Because we don't know anyone named Pellier; we never have. And no one was coming next day.'

Sam said, 'I thought she was nuts, too, Harry, till that happened. But from then on, things happened to me, too. There's an upstairs window, and when you open it, it squeals and the sash weight rattles. All I can tell you is that whenever that happens I'm just glad to be alive. And a couple of months ago I opened the front door to see if the morning paper had arrived. My hand touched the doorknob and the instant I felt it – it's porcelain and oval; feels like a china egg – I thought, *Today's the parade!* At the same time, I knew there wasn't any parade, hadn't been a parade in Darley for years.' He turned to Ellie. 'Tell him about the skating.'

She said, 'Night before last we were reading in the living-room. I looked up from my book at the fireplace, then thought, *In a couple of months, we'll be lighting that. And when we do, there'll be skating on Sikermann's Slough.* Yet I don't even know what that means.'

I felt the hair on the back of my neck prickle as I said, 'I do. It's been filled in and forgotten for years but it was still there when my father was a boy – a slough that used to freeze over every winter. It was on a corner of what was once the Sikermann farm, sometime in the eighteen eighties.'

In Darley, as elsewhere, building slacks off during the winter; and whenever I had time, I tried to learn where or when the old house existed before but I never did. The title block of the original plans tells for whom they were drawn but I found nothing about him or the plans in town records which isn't particularly surprising. I poked through back files of the old Darley *Intelligencer*, too, but found out very little; they're incomplete with gaps of days, weeks, months, and even years. All I learned was how many more fires there were back in the days of largely wood construction and of gas and kerosene lighting and wood stoves.

But I have no doubt that that house existed – sometime in the eighties, I should think. And that it was a happy house – one of the occasional rare and wonderful

houses that acquire souls and lives of their own; the kind of house that seems to know you're in it and puts its best foot forward; a house born of the feelings and love of the lost and forgotten people who planned, built, lived in, and gave it life. I think that like many another house of the times this one burned and that maybe my granddad produced the plans for a fire-insurance claim agent, then stuck them on his shelves. I don't know.

But in one way or another its life was cut suddenly short. And then, miraculously, it found itself in being again. Room for room, in every least detail – exactly as it had been in the far-off moment when fire flared along the edge of a curtain, perhaps – the old house existed once more. And it simply resumed its life; the kind of life and times, of course, that it knew.

I've never gone back to it. I suppose I'd be welcome but I don't feel that I belong there any more, not in the life the Cluetts lead now. They leave the grounds only when necessary, Sam driving his buggy. No one goes in; the big gates are kept closed. Sam sold his boatyard this spring – for enough money, I've heard, so that he need never work again. They no longer take a newspaper and whether they read their mail no one knows; they never send any.

But every night the lights are on, the wonderfully warm yellow-orange gas lights, and all last winter they used the fireplaces. This summer people have had glimpses of them. They've been seen playing croquet on the lawn, Ellie in a long white dress. And just this week twin hammocks, the kind with long fringe at the sides, appeared on the shaded veranda. And the two of them lie there reading the lazy afternoons away. I know what they read. The books they'd bought had arrived when I last visited the Cluetts, and along with other fine leather-bound old volumes there were the complete works of Dickens and Sir Walter Scott, just the thing for long summer afternoons far back in the past.

For that's where the Cluetts are, of course. I don't quite believe stories I've heard – that one night last winter it

snowed on their property and nowhere else; and that occasionally sun has shone or rain has fallen on their roof but not on the rest of the town, as though the house existed in some other year. Just the same, Ellie and Sam are living far back in the past; that's where they are. For their new house is haunted by its old self. And its ghost has captured the Cluetts – rather easily, for I think they were glad to surrender.

HEY, LOOK AT ME!

About six months after Maxwell Kingery died I saw his ghost walking along Miller Avenue in Mill Valley, California. It was two twenty in the afternoon, a clear sunny day, and I saw him from a distance which I later paced off; it was less than fifteen feet. There is no possibility that I was mistaken about who – or what – I saw, and I'll tell you why I'm sure.

My name is Peter Marks, and I'm the book editor of a San Francisco newspaper. I live in Mill Valley a dozen miles from San Francisco, and I work at home most days, from about nine till around two or three in the afternoon. My wife is likely to need something from the store by then, so I generally walk downtown, nearly always stopping in at Meier's bakery which has a lunch counter. Until he died, I often had coffee there with Max Kingery, and we'd sit at the counter for half an hour and talk.

He was a writer, so it was absolutely inevitable that I'd be introduced to him soon after he came to Mill Valley. A lot of writers live here, and whenever a new one arrives people love to introduce us and then stand back to see what will happen. Nothing much ever does, though once a man denounced me right out on the sidewalk in front of the Redhill liquor store. 'Peter Marks? The book critic?' he said, and when I nodded he said, 'You, sir, are a puling idiot who ought to be writing "News of Our Pets" for the *Carmel Pine Cone* instead of criticizing the work of your

betters.' Then he turned, and – this is the word – stalked off while I stood staring after him, smiling. I'd panned two of his books, he'd been waiting for Peter Marks ever since, and was admirably ready when his moment came.

But all Max Kingery said, stiffly, the day we were introduced, was, 'How do you do,' then he stood there nodding rapidly a number of times, finally remembering to smile; and that's all I said to him. It was in the spring, downtown in front of the bank, I think, and Max was bareheaded, wearing a light-brown, shabby-looking topcoat with the collar turned up He was a black-haired, black-eyed man with heavy black-rimmed glasses, intense and quick-moving; it was hard for him to stand still there. He was young but already stooped, his hair thinning. I could see this was a man who took himself seriously but his name rang no bell in my mind and we spoke politely and parted quickly, probably forever if we hadn't kept meeting in the bakery after that. But we both came in for coffee nearly every afternoon, and after we'd met and nodded half a dozen times we were almost forced to sit together at the counter and try to make some conversation.

So we slowly became friends; he didn't have many. After I knew him I looked up what he'd written, naturally, and found it was a first novel which I'd reviewed a year before. I'd said it showed promise, and that I thought it was possible he'd write a fine novel some day, but all in all it was the kind of review usually called 'mixed', and I felt awkward about it.

But I needn't have worried. I soon learned that what I or anyone else thought of his book was of no importance to Max; he knew that in time I and everyone else would have to say that Maxwell Kingery was a very great writer. Right now not many people, even here in town, knew he was a writer at all but that was okay with Max; he wasn't ready for them to know. Some day not only every soul in Mill Valley but the inhabitants of remote villages in distant places would know he was one of the important writers of his time, and possibly of all time. Max never

said any of this but you learned that he thought so and that it wasn't egotism. It was just something he knew, and maybe he was right. Who knows how many Shakespeares have died prematurely, how many young geniuses we've lost in stupid accidents, illnesses, and wars?

Cora, my wife, met Max presently, and because he looked thin, hungry, and forlorn – as he was – she had me ask him over for a meal, and pretty soon we were having him often. His wife had died about a year before we met him. (The more I learned about Max, the more it seemed to me that he was one of those occasional people who, beyond all dispute, are plagued by simple bad luck all their lives.) After his wife died and his book had failed, he moved from the city to Mill Valley, and now he lived alone working on the novel which, with the others to follow, was going to make him famous. He lived in a mean, cheap little house he'd rented, walking downtown for meals. I never knew where he got whatever money he had; it wasn't much. So we had him often so Cora could feed him, and once he was sure he was welcome he'd stop in of his own accord, if his work were going well. And nearly every day I saw him downtown, and we'd sit over coffee and talk.

It was seldom about writing. All he'd ever say about his own work when we met was that it was going well or that it was not, because he knew I was interested. Some writers don't like to talk about what they're doing, and he was one; I never even knew what his book was about. We talked about politics, the possible futures of the world, and whatever else people on the way to becoming pretty good friends talk about. Occasionally he read a book I'd reviewed, and we'd discuss it, and my review. He was always polite enough about what I did, but his real attitude showed through. Some writers are belligerent about critics, some are sullen and hostile, but Max was just contemptuous. I'm sure he believed that all writers outranked all critics – well or badly, they actually do the deed which we only sit and carp about. And sometimes Max would

listen to an opinion of mine about someone's book, then he'd shrug and say, 'Well, you're not a writer,' as though that severely limited my understanding. I'd say, 'No, I'm a critic,' which seemed a good answer to me, but Max would nod as though I'd agreed with him. He liked me, but to Max my work made me only a hanger-on, a camp follower, almost a parasite. That's why it was all right to accept free meals from me; I was one of the people who live off the work writers do, and I'm sure he thought it was only my duty, which I wouldn't deny, to help him get his book written. Reading it would be my reward.

But of course I never read Max's next book or the others that were to follow it; he died that summer, absolutely pointlessly. He caught flu or something – one of those nameless things everyone gets occasionally. But Max didn't always eat well or live sensibly, and it hung on and turned into pneumonia, though he didn't know that. He lay in that little house of his waiting to get well, and didn't. By the time he got himself to a doctor, and the doctor got him to a hospital and got some penicillin in him, it was too late and Max died in Marin General Hospital that night.

What made it even more shocking to Cora and me was the way we learned about it. We were out of town on vacation six hundred miles away in Utah when it happened, and didn't know about it. (We've thought over and again, of course, that if only we'd been home when Max took sick we'd have taken him to our house and he'd never have gotten pneumonia, and I'm sure it's true; Max was just an unlucky man.) When we got home, not only did we learn that Max was dead but even his funeral, over ten days before, was already receding into the past.

So there was no way for Cora and me to make ourselves realize that Max was actually gone forever. You return from a vacation and slip back into an old routine so easily sometimes it hardly seems you'd left. It was like that now, and walking into the bakery again for coffee in the afternoons it seemed only a day or so since I'd last seen Max

here, and whenever the door opened I'd find myself glancing up.

Except for a few people who remembered seeing me around town with Max, and who spoke to me about him now, shaking their heads, it didn't seem to me that Max's death was even discussed. I'm sure people had talked about it to some extent at least, although not many had known him well or at all. But other events had replaced that one by some days. So to Cora and me Max's absence from the town didn't seem to have left any discernible gap in it.

Even visiting the cemetery didn't help. It's in San Rafael, not Mill Valley, and the grave was in a remote corner; we had to climb a steep hill to reach it. But it hardly seemed real; there was no marker, and we had to count in from the road to even locate it. Standing there in the sun with Cora, I felt a flash of resentment against his relatives, but then I knew I shouldn't. Max had a few scattered cousins or something in New Jersey and Pennsylvania. The last time he'd known any of them at all well they'd been children, and he hadn't corresponded with them since. Now they'd sent a minimum of money to California to pay expenses, more from family pride than for Max, I expect, and none of them had come themselves. You couldn't blame them, it was a long way and expensive, but it was sad; there'd been only five people at the funeral. Max had never been in or even seen this cemetery, and standing at the unmarked grave, the new grass already beginning, I couldn't get it through my head that it had anything much to do with him.

He just vanished from the town, that's all. His things – a half-finished manuscript, portable typewriter, a few clothes, and half a ream of unused yellow paper – had been shipped to his relatives. And Max, with a dozen great books hidden in his brain, who had been going to become famous, was now just gone, hardly missed and barely remembered.

Time is the great healer; it makes you forget; some-

times it makes you forget literally and with great cruelty. I knew a man whose wife ran away, and he never saw her again. He missed her so much he thought he could never for a moment forget it. A year later, reading in his living-room at night, he became so absorbed in his book that when he heard a faint familiar noise in the kitchen he called out without looking up from his book and asked his wife to bring him a cup of tea when she came back into the room. Only when there was no answer did he look up from his complete forgetfulness; then his loss swept over him worse than ever.

About six months after Max died, I finished my day's work and walked downtown. This was in January, and we'd just had nearly a month of rain, fog, and wet chill. Then California did what it does several times every winter and for which I always forgive it anything. The rain stopped, the sun came out, the sky turned an unclouded blue, and the temperature went up into the high seventies. Everything was lush from the winter rains and there was no way to distinguish those three or four days from summer, and I walked into town in shirtsleeves. And when I started across Miller Avenue by the bus station heading for Meier's bakery across the street and saw Max Kingery over there walking toward the corner of Throckmorton just ahead, I wasn't surprised but just glad to see him. I think it was because this was like a continuation of the summer I'd known him, the interval following it omitted, and because I'd never really had proof that he died. So I walked on, crossing the street and watching Max, thin, dark and intense; he didn't see me. I was waiting till I got close enough to call to him and I reached the middle of the street and even took a step or two past it before I remembered that Max Kingery was dead. Then I just stood there, my mouth hanging open, as Max or what seemed to be Max walked on to the corner, turned, and moved on out of sight.

I went on to the bakery then and had my coffee; I had to have something. I don't know if I could have spoken

but I didn't have to; they always set a cup of coffee in front of me when I come in. My hand shook when I lifted the cup, and I spilled some, and if it had occurred to me I'd have gone to a bar instead and had several drinks.

If you ever have some such experience you'll learn that people resist believing you as they resist nothing else; you'll resist it yourself. I got home and told Cora what had happened; we sat in the living-room and this time I did have a drink in my hand. She listened; there really wasn't much to say, I found, except that I'd seen Max Kingery walking along Miller Avenue. I couldn't blame Cora; my words sounded flat and foolish as I heard them. She nodded and said that several times she'd seen dark, preoccupied, thin young men downtown who reminded her a little of Max. It was only natural; it was where we'd so often run into him.

Patiently I said, 'No, listen to me, Cora. It's one thing to see someone who reminds you of someone else – from a distance, or from the back, or just as he disappears in a crowd. But you cannot possibly mistake a stranger when you see him close up and see his face in full daylight for someone you know well and saw often. With the possible exception of identical twins, there are no such resemblances between people. That was Max, Cora, Max Kingery and no one else in the world.'

Cora just sat there on the davenport continuing to look at me; she didn't know what to say. I understood, and felt half sorry for her, half irritated. Finally – she had to say *something* – she said, 'Well . . . what was he wearing?'

I had to stop and think. Then I shrugged. 'Well, just some kind of pants; I didn't notice the shoes; a dark shirt of some kind, maybe plaid, I don't know. And one of those round straw hats.'

'Round straw hats?'

'Yeah, you know. You see people wearing them in the summer. I think they buy them at carnivals or somewhere. With a peak. Shaped like a baseball cap, only they're made of some kind of shiny yellow straw. Usually the peak

is stitched around the rim with a narrow strip of red cloth or braid. This one was, and it had a red button on top, and' – I remembered this suddenly, triumphantly – 'it had his initials on front! Big red initials, M.K., about three inches high, stitched into the straw just over the peak in red thread or braid or something.'

Cora was nodding decisively. 'That proves it.'

'Of course! It . . .'

'No, no,' she said irritably. 'It proves that it *wasn't* Max; it couldn't be!'

I don't know why we were so irritable; fear of the unnatural, I suppose. 'And just how does it prove that?'

'Oh, Pete! Can you *imagine* Max Kingery of all people wearing a hat like that? You've got to be' – she shrugged, hunting for the word – 'some kind of extrovert to wear silly hats. Of all people in the world who would *not* wear a straw baseball cap with a red button on the top and three-inch-high *initials* on the front . . .' She stopped, looking at me anxiously, and after a moment I had to agree.

'Yeah,' I said slowly. 'He'd be the last guy in the world to wear one of those.' I gave in then; there wasn't anything else to do. 'It must have been someone else. I probably got the initials wrong; I saw what I thought they ought to be instead of what they were. It would *have* to be someone else, naturally, cap or no cap.' Then the memory of what I'd seen rose up in my mind again clear as a sharply detailed photograph, and I said slowly, 'But I just hope you see him sometime, that's all. Whoever he is.'

She saw him ten days later. There was a movie at the Sequoia we wanted to see, so we got our sitter, then drove downtown after supper; the weather was clear and dry but brisk, temperature in the middle or high thirties. When we got to the box office, the picture was still on with twenty minutes to go yet, so we took a little walk first.

Except for the theatre and a bar or two, downtown Mill Valley is locked up and deserted at night. But most

of the display windows are left lighted, so we strolled along Throckmorton Avenue and began looking into them, beginning with Gomez Jewellery. We were out of sight of the theatre here, and as we moved slowly along from window to window there wasn't another human being in sight, not a car moving, and our own footsteps on the sidewalk – unusually loud – were the only sound. We were at the Men's Shop looking in at a display of cuff links, Cora urging me once more to start wearing shirts with French cuffs so I could wear links in my sleeves, when I heard footsteps turn a corner and begin approaching us on Throckmorton, and I knew it was Max.

I used to say that I'd like to have some sort of psychical experience, that I'd like to see a ghost, but I was wrong. I think it must be one of the worst kinds of fear. I now believe it can drive men insane and whiten their hair, and that it has. It's a nasty fear, you're so helpless, and it began in me now, increasing steadily, and I wanted to spare Cora the worst of it

She was still talking, pointing at a pair of cuff links made from old cable-car tokens. I knew she would become aware of the footsteps in a moment and turn to see whoever was passing. I had to prepare her before she turned and saw Max full in the face without warning, and – not wanting to – I turned my head slowly. A permanent awning projects over the store fronts along here, and the light from the windows seemed to be confined under it, not reaching the outer edge of the walk beyond the awning. But there was a three-quarter moon just rising above the trees that suround the downtown area, and by that pale light I saw Max walking briskly along that outer edge of sidewalk beside the kerb, only a dozen yards away now. He was bareheaded and I saw his face sharp and clear, and it was Max beyond all doubt. There was no way to say anything else to myself.

I slipped my hand under Cora's coat sleeve and began squeezing her upper arm, steadily harder and harder till it must have approached pain – and she understood, be-

coming aware of the footsteps. I felt her body stiffen and I wished she wouldn't but knew she had to – she turned. Then we stood there as he walked steadily toward us in the moonlight. My scalp stirred, each hair of my head moved and tried to stand. The skin all over my body chilled as the blood receded from it. Beside me Cora stood shivering, violently, and her teeth were chattering, the only time in my life I've ever heard the sound. I believe she would have fallen except for my grip on her arm.

Courage was useless, and I don't claim I had any, but it seemed to me that to save Cora from some unspeakable consequence of fear beyond ability to bear it that I had to speak and that I had to do it casually. I can't say why I thought that but as Max approached – his regular steadily advancing steps the only sound left in the world now, his white face in the moonlight not ten feet away – I said, 'Hello, Max.'

At first I thought he wasn't going to answer or respond in any way. He walked on, eyes straight ahead, for at least two more steps, then his head turned very slowly as though the effort were enormous, and he looked at us as he passed with a terrible sadness lying motionless in his eyes. Then, just as slowly, he turned away again, eyes forward, and he was actually a pace or two beyond us when his voice – a dead monotone, the effort tremendous – said, 'Hello,' and it was the voice of despair, absolute and hopeless.

The street curves just ahead – he would disappear around its bend in a moment – and, as I stared after him, in spite of the fear and sorrow for Max I was astounded at what I saw now. There is a kind of jacket which rightly or wrongly I associate with a certain kind of slouching, thumbs-hooked-in-the-belt juvenile exhibitionist. They are made of some sort of shiny sateenlike cloth, always in two bright and violently contrasting colours – the sleeves yellow, the body a chemical green, for example – and usually a name of some sort is lettered across its back. Teenage gangs wear them, or used to.

Max wore one now. It was hard to tell colours in the moonlight but I think it was orange with red sleeves, and stitched on the back in a great flowing script that nearly covered it was *Max K.* Then he was gone, around the corner, his fading footsteps continuing two, three, four, or five more times as they dwindled into silence.

I had to support Cora and her feet stumbled as we walked to the car. In the car she began to cry, rocking back and forth, her hands over her face. She told me later that she'd cried from grief at feeling such fear of Max. But it helped her, and I drove us to lights and people, to a crowded bar away from Mill Valley in Sausalito a few miles off. We sat and drank then, several brandies each, and talked and wondered and asked each other the same questions but had no answers.

I think other people saw Max in Mill Valley during those days. One of the local cab drivers who park by the bus station walked up to me one day; actually he strolled, hands in pockets, making a point of seeming very casual. He said, 'Say, that friend of yours, that young guy used to to be around town that died?' There was caution in his voice, and he stood watching me closely as I answered. I nodded and said yeah to show that I understood who he meant. 'Well, did he have a brother or something?' the driver said, and I shook my head and said not that I knew of. He nodded but was unsatisfied, still watching my face and waiting for me to offer something more but I didn't. And I knew he'd seen Max. I'm sure others saw him and knew who it was, as Cora and I did; it isn't something you mention casually. And I suppose there were those who saw him and merely recognized him vaguely as someone they'd seen around town before.

I walked over to Max's old house a day or so after we'd seen him; by that time, of course, I knew why he'd come back. The real-estate office that had it listed for rental again would have let me have the key if I'd asked; they knew me. But I didn't know what I could tell them as a reason for going in. It was an old house, run down, too

small for most people, not the kind that rents quickly or that anyone bothers guarding too diligently. I felt sure I could get in somewhere, and on the tiny back porch, shielded from view, I tried the kitchen window and it opened and I climbed in.

The few scraps of furniture that had come with the place were still there, in the silence: a wooden table and two chairs in the tiny kitchen which Max had hardly used; the iron single bed in the bedroom; the worn-out musty-smelling davenport and matching chair in the living-room, and the rickety card table beside the front windows where Max had worked. What little I found, I found lying on the floor beside the table: two crumpled-up wads of the yellow copy paper Max had used.

I opened them up but it's hard to describe what was written on them. There were single words and what seemed to be parts of words and fragments of sentences and completely unreadable scribblings, all written in pencil. There was a word that might have been 'forest' or 'foreign'; the final letters degenerated into a scrawl as though the hand holding the pencil had begun to fall away from the paper before it could finish. There was an unfinished sentence beginning, 'She ran to', and the stroke crossing the *t* wavered on part way across and then down the sheet till it ran off the bottom. There is no use describing in detail what is on those two crumpled sheets; there's no sense to be made of it, though I've often tried. It looks, I imagine, like the scrawling of a man weak from fever and in delirium, as though every squiggle and wobbly line were made with almost-impossible effort. And I'm sure they were. It is true that they might be notes jotted down months earlier when Max was alive and which no one bothered to pick up and remove; but I know they aren't. They're the reason Max came back. They're what he tried to do, and failed.

I don't know what ghosts are or why, in rare instances, they appear. Maybe all human beings have the power, if they have the will, to reappear as Max and a few others

have done occasionally down through the centuries. But I believe that to do so takes some kind of terrible and unimaginable expenditure of psychic energy. I think it takes such a fearful effort of will that it is beyond our imagining, and that only very rarely is such an incredible effort made.

I think a Shakespeare killed before *Hamlet*, *Othello*, or *Macbeth* were written might have put forth such effort and returned. And I know that Max Kingery did. But there was almost nothing left over to do what he came back for. Those meaningless fragments were the utmost he could accomplish. His appearances were at the cost of tremendous effort, and I think that to even turn his head and look at us in addition, as he did the night we saw him, and then to actually pronounce an audible word besides, were efforts no one alive can understand.

It was beyond him; he could not return and then write the books that were to have made the name of Max Kingery what he'd been certain it was destined to be. And so he had to give up; we never saw Max again, though we saw one more place he'd been.

Cora and I were driving to San Rafael over the county road. You can get there on a six-lane highway now, 101, that slices straight through the hills, but this was once part of the only road between the two towns and it winds a lot around and between the Marin County hills, under the trees. It's a pleasant narrow two-lane road, and we like to take it once in a while; I believe it's still the shortest route to San Rafael, winding though it is. This was the end of January or early in February, I don't remember. It was early in the week, I'd taken the day off, and Cora wanted something at Penney's, so we drove over.

Twenty or thirty feet up on the side of a hill about a mile outside Mill Valley there's an outcropping of smooth-faced rock facing the road, and Cora glanced at it, exclaimed and pointed, and I jammed on the brakes and looked up where she was pointing. There on the rock facing the public road, painted in great four-foot letters,

was MAX KI, the lines crude and uneven, driblets of paint running down past the bottoms of letters, the final stroke continuing on down the face of the rock until the paint or oil on the brush or stick had run thin and faded away. We knew Max had painted it – his name or as much of it as he could manage – and staring up at it now, I understood the loud jacket with MAX K on its back, and the carnival straw hat with the big red initials.

For who *are* the people who paint their names or initials in public places and on the rocks that face our highways? Driving from San Francisco to Reno over the Donner Pass you see them by the hundreds, some painted so high that the rocks must have been scaled, dangerously, to do it. I used to puzzle over them; to paint your name or initials up there in the mountains wasn't impulse. It took planning. You'd have to drive over a hundred miles with the can of paint on the floor of the car. Who would do that? And who would wear the caps stitched with initials and the jackets with names on their backs? It was plain to me now; they are the people, of course, who feel that they have no identity. And who are fighting for one.

They are unknown, nearly invisible, so they feel; and their names or initials held up to the uninterested eyes of the world are silent shouts of, 'Hey, look at me!' Children shout it incessantly while acquiring their identities, and if they never acquire one maybe they never stop shouting. Because the things they do must always leave them with a feeling of emptiness. Initials on their caps, names on their jackets, or even painted high on a cliff visible for miles, they must always feel their failure to leave a real mark, and so they repeat it again and again. And Max who had to be someone, who *had* to be, did as they did, finally, from desperation. To have never been anyone and to be forgotten completely was not to be borne. At whatever cost he too had to try to leave his name behind him even if he were reduced to painting it on a rock.

I visited the cemetery once more, that spring, plodding up the hill, eyes on the ground. Nearing the crest I looked

up, then stopped in my tracks, astounded. There at the head of Max's grave stood an enormous grey stone, the biggest by far of any in sight, and it was made not of concrete or pressed stone but of the finest granite. It would last a thousand years, and cut deeply into its face in big letters was MAXWELL KINGERY, AUTHOR.

Down in his shop outside the gates I talked to the middle-aged stonecutter in the little office at the front of the building; he was wearing a work apron and cap. He said, 'Yes, certainly I remember the man who ordered it – black hair and eyes, heavy glasses. He told me what it should say, and I wrote it down. Your name's Peter Marks, isn't it?' I said it was, and he nodded as though he knew it. 'Yes, he told me you'd be here, and I knew you would. Hard for him to talk; had some speech impediment, but I understood him.' He turned to a littered desk, leafed through a little stack of papers, then found the one he wanted, and slid it across the counter to me. 'He said you'd be in, and pay for it; here's the bill. It's expensive but worth it, a fine stone and the only one here I know of for an author.'

For several moments I just stood there staring at the paper in my hand. Then I did the only thing left to do, and got out one of the cheques I carry in my wallet. Waiting while I wrote, the stonecutter said politely, 'And what do you do, Mr Marks; you an author, too?'

'No,' I said, signing the cheque, then I looked up smiling. 'I'm just a critic.'

A POSSIBLE CANDIDATE FOR THE PRESIDENCY

I expect Kennedy will be re-elected, or maybe it'll be Rockefeller or Nixon, next time. But it might, it just *might*, be Charley. There's a one-in-ten chance, I'd say, and we could probably do worse. Oh, they say he's a charlatan, a confidence man – and, off the record, they're right. For hard-bitten practicality and gouging in the clinches, he could give odds to a loan shark. But – and I'm not making a speech – he's a dreamer, too, an artist warmed by the fires of genius, a shrewd and shifty poet at heart, and when it comes to pulling rabbits out of the hat I promise you he'll produce them by litters.

If Charley gets in the running at all you'll certainly read about his boyhood and see his early photographs till you're sick of them – that thin, composed, alert little face behind tortoise-shell glasses. And you'll see the old newspaper clippings reproduced once more: the stories and several dozen photographs that ran for a week, thirty-odd years ago, in the Galesburg, Illinois, *Register-Mail*; the follow-up interviews in the big Chicago papers next day; and the page-three wire story from the files of the *New York Times*. You might, if you can remember Calvin Coolidge, even recall the story yourself. Charley was the boy who hypnotized the tiger.

Yes, he did; don't think I'm remembering through a golden haze. In the things that counted with boys Charley

was unquestionably a genius. One summer vacation Charley bought for two dollars – every cent he had – an immense dusty carton of unsold Easter-egg dyes from the grocery store at eight o'clock one Tuesday morning. By eight thirty, using the upstairs telephone at his house, he had instructed five of us to meet in his basement and to bring along the big metal clothes boilers our mothers all used on washdays. By nine, when we met, Charley's mother had gone to the Tuesday morning sewing group at the church. Ten minutes later the five of us dispersed at Charley's direction, each to an assigned territory. Within forty minutes we were back, each with at least one and some with two and three white or semi-white neighbourhood dogs of all sizes and breeds, two white Angoras, and one mottled-white alley cat.

Charley was ready. The two stationary laundry tubs were filled with warm, sudsy water for the preliminary baths; the clothes boilers were each half full of dye; a section of the basement – the drying area – was neatly paved with newspapers; and Charley, seated above us on the basement stairs, was ready to direct and oversee the fast, efficient, assembly-line operation he had planned.

We were finished on schedule by noon when the neighbourhood was briefly busy with husbands coming home for lunch. Then Charley gave the signal and – dry and combed now – fourteen excited red, green, violet, vivid yellow, sky-blue, and purple dogs, two sullen scarlet cats, and a final experimental red-white-and-blue one were simultaneously released on a flabbergasted neighbourhood.

This accomplishment had the clean-cut touch of genius, and we knew it. It was a conception so far above the routine traditional mischief of the rest of us that it was beyond envy and only to be admired and accepted with gratitude. Even then, as you can see – call it pump-priming, if you like – Charley never hesitated to spend what was necessary to the largeness of his purposes; he was broke for a week after the episode of the dogs but it was

obviously necessary and worth it. Then, as today, he understood that accomplishment carries its price.

But there was more to Charley than flash. In between his larger spectacular achievements ran a steady workaday stream of minor though always talented activity. He devised a simple effective method of dipping the entire supply of school blackboard chalk, stick by stick, into a thinned solution of shellac, coating each with a hard, invisible shell which eliminated blackboard instruction for a day and a half. Charley found the pet cock at the back of an untended pipe down at the pop-bottling plant, which, when turned, released a warm, uncarbonated delicious stream of grape pop, and we used it at intervals for a week till Ed Krueger got careless and was caught.

And it was Charley, at the tattooing booth of a travelling carnival, who had a red-and-blue rose-wreathed heart labelled Mother worked onto his chest in genuine tattoo ink – though without the use of the needle – to the awe-struck envy of us all, till it began to wear off and he admitted the hoax.

He made things work. The essence of success ran in his veins – there was the key to Charley's character. And when he showed up, that memorable morning, after breakfast and the mail delivery, with a paper-bound volume of instructions on hypnotism, we all felt in our bones that Charley would become – perhaps already had become – a skilled practising mesmerist.

There were five of us – four boys and Agnes, the tomboy sister of one – and we had gathered, as we did often that summer, in Mrs Councilman's back yard. I remember that day and all those long ago, deep-summer days in Galesburg, Illinois, with a terrible nostalgia. Already the sky was a hard hot blue, the air shimmering with sun. The grass under our bare feet was faded and dry and the tree locusts were sawing their wings for yards and blocks and miles around us.

Today, I suppose, we would have known about the tiger hours earlier and been safe behind doors; radios would

have been issuing urgent warnings and sound trucks would have been touring the streets. But in those days – on that day – news spread slowly and haphazardly, by word of mouth. And at the moment when Charley sat down on the grass to show us the book with the chin-bearded Svengali on the cover, only a handful of circus men knew that a young and thoroughly dangerous tiger was out of his cage and on the prowl.

We discussed Charley's book for a time; then Ken Garver ran up the tree, and we all followed. The tree was the reason we so often gathered in Mrs Councilman's yard. It was thick-boled and squat, the trunk slanting out from the ground at a forty-five-degree angle, so that with a short running start, a barefooted boy could run right up the trunk to the lowest branches. We sat roosting in the tree and talked desultorily about the circus out at the fairgrounds. I don't remember that we were ever especially excited over a circus, and none of us ever carried water for the elephants. We were taken to the circus every year by our parents, or given money to buy tickets, and we were reasonably interested and talked about it a little.

But mostly, that morning, as at the beginning of every day, we were waiting for something to happen, for some activity, set off by a stimulus from outside or inside our minds, to begin. And the day, filled with promise, stretched far ahead, each hour infinitely longer and richer than any have ever been since.

Mrs Councilman came out of her house and greeted us pleasantly, and Agnes, lowering her voice sympathetically, said, 'How's Mr Councilman?' Mrs Councilman nodded sadly and said, 'Fine.' One or the other of us inquired each day about her husband's health as though he were an invalid, and Mrs Council responded as though he were. Actually, the man – slight, pale, and half his wife's buxom size – went to work every day in a machine shop. But he suffered, whiningly, from a perpetual plague of vague ailments.

Once when Charley and I were in the bathroom of their

house – we had the run of the place – the door of a large wooden cabinet on the floor was ajar and we stood astounded, staring at shelf after shelf crammed with prescriptions and pills, great bottles of tonic and liniment, Nerv-Aid and sleeping tablets, most of them with Mr Councilman's name on the labels, and for a moment we had a dim awareness of the kind of half life that poor man lived.

Smiling benignly, Mrs Councilman stood by our tree, enjoying the sun. Then Agnes, her voice surprised, said, 'There's a tiger.' She shrieked, and sat staring across the yard. There are, or were, no fences or alleys in Galesburg; all the back yards of a block blend into one and it is possible to walk, as we often did, for block after block through the gardens and back yards of the town. We all turned to look, and there, impossibly, ambling toward us from the next yard, his tail erect and switching slightly, was an enormous tiger.

It was outside of all experience, past belief, yet there, indisputably, *was* a tiger; and we saw the muscles slide and the white hairs of his chest, just under the shoulders, spread apart and come together with each silent step.

He could have reached Mrs Councilman in a single leap, killing or maiming her with a swipe of his paw. But instead, just within our yard now, he sat down, a colossal cat with foot-long white whiskers, and returned our stare, gazing at us through the slitted pupils of his immense yellow eyes. For a moment frozen in time, we all simply stared, he at us, we at him. Then the animal's small ears flicked, one at a time, and flattened on his skull. Soundlessly, he opened his mouth, and we saw the great shiny-wet fangs.

In a sudden hoarse whisper, Charley said, 'Up in the tree!' and reached down and grabbed Mrs Councilman's hair. Then Charley, and in a moment Ed Krueger, Ken Garver and I, clutching the branches with our legs, tugging at Mrs Councilman's hair and the collar of her dress, tried to drag her up the slanting trunk of the tree. She

came to life then, and grasping the trunk, scrambling awkwardly, managed to catch hold of the lowest limb and drag herself, moaning softly all the time, up into the branches with us.

For perhaps a full half minute longer, the tiger sat in the sun, staring up at us with a lively and terrible interest. Agnes began to cry softly, and Mrs Councilman, climbing higher, managed to reach up and get an arm around her waist to comfort her. Then the tiger's hind end raised, and he trotted to the house, and sat, his back toward us now, staring up at the partly opened first-floor window of Mrs Councilman's pantry.

Each of us, I'm sure, was certain that in only a moment this impossible situation must end; that, as always in any predicament beyond a child's ability, adult help would be quickly forthcoming. But time passed and the summer sound of the locusts droned on. Then, incredibly, in the street around at the front of the house, a car door slammed, and we heard a woman's voice call out, 'Hello, Mrs Garver. Hot isn't it?' We heard Ken's mother reply cheerily. A screen door banged shut. The car started up; then the sound of its motor diminished, and once again there was no sound but the steady drone of the locusts. It came to us then that the world was going on about its business in blank ignorance of us, and no help was on its way.

Now the tiger stood up, placed his forepaws up on the wood side of the house, straining his neck toward the window, and growled in his throat; and the prickling fright came washing over us.

It was Charley who understood first. 'The window reminds him of the place he's fed at,' he said. At the sound of the voice, the tiger's head turned, and he stared at us over his shoulder for a moment. Then, once more, he strained up toward the window and growled, a deep terrible sound, and we heard his claws clinking and scratching on the painted clapboards, and knew this was a savage and dangerous beast.

Carefully, Charley planted both feet in the main crotch of the tree, slid off his branch, and crouched, out of reach of Mrs Councilman's free arm. 'I think,' he announced to us then, 'that I can hypnotize that tiger.'

'Charley!' Mrs Councilman shrieked. 'Don't you move!' And again the tiger turned to stare.

Charley didn't answer. From his back pocket he pulled a bandanna and handed it up to me. 'If he comes running, throw this in his face; it'll confuse him,' he told me. He pulled his book out of his pocket, opened it to the first page, and ran a finger down the table of contents. Then, looking up at us, smiling reassuringly, Charley nodded. 'Yep,' he said, 'there's a chapter on animal hypnotism.' He shoved the book in his pocket and dropped from the tree, landing on his feet beside it.

For seconds Charley stood poised, ready to leap for the tree again, but the animal across the yard continued to stare up at the half-open window. Then – not calmly, I'm certain, but coolly – Charley began slowly walking toward the back steps and screen door which lead into the kitchen of Mrs Councilman's house. At the third step, the tiger's head swung toward Charley, and Charley – helpless now, far from safety by several seconds and steps – could only walk on, an undersized ten-year-old boy staring at a four-hundred-pound tiger a dozen yards away. It sounds like incredible bravery, yet I doubt that courage had anything to do with it. It is simply that, for a mind like Charley's, some opportunities are just too big to lose.

My faith in him wavered and died. This, I knew, was too big, beyond any boy, even Charley. I knew he'd overreached himself, that in the next seconds he might actually be killed before my eyes. But he went up the fourth step, the fifth, and the sixth; then his bare foot touched the porch and suddenly he bolted, stumbling and crashing in through the screen door. Then the kitchen door slammed shut, and we heard the sliding bolt on the inside shoot home. The tiger trotted to the stairs, gazed up them, then returned to his position under the window.

Then it occurred to me – I knew that Charley was a showman, a lover of the hoax, but no fool – that he had no intention of trying any such nonsense as hypnotizing this tiger, and that he was simply going to telephone the police. When he did not appear at the pantry window, I was certain of it, and waited for the sound of the receiver being removed from the wall phone in the kitchen. But seconds passed, and I heard nothing. Then, presently, we heard Mrs Councilman's icebox open, heard the clink of a milk bottle and the rattle of paper. Then the icebox door slammed shut, and a moment later Charley's composed face appeared at the window.

He glanced down at the sitting tiger, who licked his chops. Then Charley spoke, raising one arm to show us the open book in his hand. 'It says here' – he studied the text, apparently reading as he talked – 'that in hypnotizing animals it is necessary first to obtain their attention and confidence with food.' He laid the book down on the open working shelf just below the level of the window.

Then he held up a large, shallow, thin wood dish, the kind butchers used in those days to pack ground meat in; it was heaped, we saw, with blood-red hamburger. Charley set the dish down at one side of the window. His hands were busy for a moment; then he held them up and we could see that he was packing a handful of ground meat into a baseball-sized sphere. Taking careful aim, he tossed the ball, underhanded. It struck the tiger squarely on the nose, and he recoiled, a blur of tan and black, snarling. But he had smelled the meat. His tongue swiped his nose, and he scooped the ball from the grass with his front teeth, swallowed it instantly, then stretched his neck toward the window, yearning up for more.

Charley had a second meatball ready, poised in his left hand; now the fingers of his right hand began rhythmically extending and drawing back, his arm moving slowly back and forth, making passes in the air at the tiger's staring eyes. 'Your eyes are getting heavy,' he murmured to the tiger. 'You are getting sleepier and sleepier.' The

animal growled, and Charley quickly tossed the meat. This time the tiger caught it in mid-air and swallowed it in a gulp, instantly staring up for more.

Charley made another meatball, holding it up for the tiger to see, and the animal reared up, his forepaws scratching the side of the house, his face no more than four feet from Charley's unwavering eyes, his attention complete. Charley prudently lowered the window a bit more; then his fingers again undulated gracefully, his arm swaying like a charmed snake, and it would not have surprised me at all to see miniature lightning lines dart from his fingertips to the tiger's fascinated eyes. 'You want to *sle-e-ep*,' he droned. 'Your eyes are *so-o-o* heavy.' He tossed the meatball, and again the tiger snapped it up in mid-air.

The Councilmans' dinner made seven or eight meatballs; and, after each, Charley murmured steadily of sleep, *sle-e-ep*, his arm making graceful passes. Then the meat was gone, and the beast sat there growling, wide awake as ever, his appetite only tantalized, obviously. Charley left the window, the icebox door opened and slammed shut, and Charley reappeared with half a dozen pork chops lying on the butcher's paper they'd been wrapped in.

Again Charley murmured to the tiger, while his arm swayed, the fingers curling. Then he tossed out a chop. The tiger caught it, chewed just once, and we heard the bone crunch to splinters. Then he gulped, the chop was gone, and still he yearned up for more, his tail switching, his ears steadily flattening and rising.

In the tree, we sat silent and motionless – all but Mrs Councilman. From time to time she would moan softly, and say, 'Oh, my God,' in utter anguish and despair. Charley must have seemed insane to her, tossing her pork chops to the tiger at regular intervals and murmuring unceasingly. 'Your eyes are so *heavy*,' he droned. 'You want to *relax*. Relax and rest. Rest every weary muscle, and sleep, sleep, sle-e-ep.' From time to time, he would glance down at his book, and once he raised it, and we all stared at the black-haired evening-clothed man on the

cover while Charley turned back a page and studied the text.

He must have seemed mad to Mrs Councilman and even we had doubts that Charley really knew what he was doing. But we watched intently for any signs of success, and were not actually surprised when presently they appeared.

'You can't keep your eyes open,' Charley was saying, his fingers waving like ribbons in a breeze. 'And now they are closing, *closing*.' And they did. The tiger dropped to his belly, his forelegs extended, and yawned tremendously. Then he turned his head to look back at us, and his eyes blinked lazily, and actually closed for a moment.

But he growled immediately, opened his eyes, and stood up once again, and Charley tossed him another chop. The tiger caught it, but this time he lay on his belly to chew, lazily, the bone crunching again and again. He swallowed, dropped his chin to his paws, and gazed dreamily up at Charley. 'Sleep,' said Charley. He glanced at his book, then nodded to us vigorously, smiling. 'Sleep,' he said, 'you are so very tired.' And the tiger yawned, and rolled on his side, blinking repeatedly. 'Rest.' Charley's voice dropped to a whisper. 'Rest and sleep. You are, oh, so weary.'

He stood for a moment, looking down at the tiger, then tossed the last chop, which fell on the grass not an inch from the tiger's nose. The animal sniffed it without stirring, his nose twitching, and seemed to debate whether to bother taking it or not. Then he did, raising his head just far enough to pull the chop into his mouth with his teeth. He lay back then, chewing slowly, his eyes heavy and blinking. 'Yes,' said Charley, more softly than ever, 'you are going to sleep.' In a soft soprano, he began to sing, leaning far out the window. 'Sweet and low, sweet and low; wind of the west-ern sea-ee. Sweet and low, sweet and low ...' He paused, humming softly, studied the motionless tiger, then turned from the window.

A moment later we heard the telephone receiver being lifted from the hook and I waited to hear Charley ask for

the police. 'Give me the *Register-Mail* office,' he said briskly. 'Emergency.' There was a pause; then Charley said, 'Send someone down here, quick,' and he gave the address. 'There's a tiger in the back yard. We captured it. *Yes*, the one from the circus. He's *here*, right now, hypnotized, but I don't know how long the trance will last, so get down here fast. And be sure you bring a cameraman!' Then he hung up.

The screen door opened slowly, and Charley cautiously appeared on the top step and looked down at the tiger who was lying with his head on his forepaws, his huge tongue occasionally flicking out to lick his whiskers, his eyes closed. 'Sleep,' said Charley, slowly coming down the stairs. Both hands, now – one a little behind the other – were at work, the fingers curling and uncurling at the tiger's head. 'Rest,' said Charley, 'every muscle relaxed.' The tiger sighed, his striped side and white belly swelling tremendously; then the breath hissed through his nostrils and he lay there in the grass breathing quietly, fast asleep.

I suppose it must have taken several minutes but it seemed to me that almost instantly we heard car brakes squeal, then the sound of running feet approaching. The *Register-Mail* reporter came charging around the corner of the house into the yard, his camera in his hand, then stopped, his heels digging into the grass, as he saw the tiger on the ground. A split second later the chief and another policeman came plunging into him, almost knocking him over. Then they all stood gaping, staring down at the tiger, then up at Charley. Casually, Charley stepped forward, his thumbs hooked in his belt, to the tiger's side. 'Don't worry,' he said. 'He's scientifically mesmerized.'

The newspaperman recovered first, and raised his camera. 'Wait,' said Charley. He took his book from a back pocket, opened it and held it at chest level, as though he were reading, the cover facing the camera. He spread the fingers of his other hand, aimed at the tiger's nose, lifted one foot and planted it gently on the tiger's ribs. 'OK,'

he said then, and the man snapped the picture that appeared in over one hundred papers in nine different states.

We were climbing down from the tree and the yard was suddenly filling with people, the newspaperman snapping photographs of the house, the open window, us, the tiger, Charley, and everything else in sight. I am sure, in spite of the evidence lying on the ground before them, that the newspaperman and the police would never quite have believed what had happened, but an adult, Mrs Councilman, had been there too, and she confirmed in excited almost hysterical detail the fact that Charley had indisputably hypnotized the tiger.

It seems strange, now, to recall this omen of the future. I still had Charley's bandanna in my hand and I wanted to return it. But even as I approached him I was dimly aware that he had passed irrevocably into a sphere beyond and above me, and I stopped beside him in awe. He was talking easily to the adults crowded around him, and I'd no more have interrupted than I'd interrupt the President of the United States. So I simply tucked the bandanna part way into his hip pocket, opening the pocket gently and cautiously so as not to disturb him. I caught a glimpse of, and for an instant touched, an object in his pocket. Then Charley turned, smiling graciously, and pushed the handkerchief deep into his pocket. The circus men arrived at that moment with a huge net, and then – all at once and all together – the frantic mothers came and we were all, including even Charley, whisked from the scene.

The event was a screaming sensation. A full third of the *Register-Mail*'s front page that night was occupied by the picture of Charley, book in hand, his foot on the tiger's chest; and the headline was set in the type that had been last used to announce the Armistice after World War I.

Three Chicago newspapermen came in on the afternoon train. Charley held his first Press conference on his front porch, serving coffee and explaining modestly that any boy could have done it. And that night, from the

main ring of the circus, Charley was introduced as a hero. The caged tiger sat beside him, and as the band played 'Columbia, the Gem of the Ocean', Charley, his book in his hand, made graceful passes at the beast who simply sat there this time, glaring crossly at Charley as though his head ached. At Charley's request, the rest of us were with him standing on the sawdust in the spotlight sharing his glory. He always took care of his friends.

Actually, I only mentioned the episode once to Charley and that was the day it happened just before the Chicago reporters arrived. 'That empty bottle I saw in your pocket this morning,' I said casually as we waited on his front porch. 'The only other bottle I've seen just like it was on a shelf in the Councilmans' bathroom – and it was full then. Full of Mr Councilman's sleeping tablets.'

Charley considered this comment, staring thoughtfully out at the street. Then he said quietly, 'I had a phone call from the company that printed my hypnotism book. They've heard the news and they want to print my picture in their ads with a signed testimonial, and they're paying me for it – a nice piece of money. Enough,' he added delicately, 'for everyone. You helped me,' he said, and clapped me on the back. 'You held the bandanna in case it was needed. I want to split the profits with you; I want you for my partner from now on.' He put his arm affectionately around my shoulders. 'I think you've got the right qualifications,' he said, and we shook hands on it.

Just then the Chicago reporters drove up in a rented car, and while they interviewed Charley I hung around in case he needed me to back up his story.

I guess you can see that I think Charley's a great man. I don't say his methods would always stand the full light of day, but for that matter neither did those of any great President we've had. His aims, though – and this is what counts – are right, and he usually achieves them, one way or another. Don't get me wrong; I'm not announcing Charley's candidacy. In fact 'Charley' isn't his first name at all and I haven't even hinted at his last because I

don't want to seem to be speaking for him. But frankly, I'd love to see him nominated and elected, not only because I think he'll make a fine President, but because I'll make a pretty good Secretary of State myself. As Charley himself has said, with an arm around my shoulders, I've got the right qualifications.

PRISON LEGEND

There were three requests from Condemned Row on the warden's desk that Thursday, and he turned to them even before glancing at the morning mail. They might have very little time left, some of the men on the row, and the warden, a neatly dressed man in his forties with dark thinning hair and a patient intelligent face, liked to grant their requests, if he could, just as quickly as possible.

He smiled a little, shaking his head wonderingly, as he read the first of the requests, written, as they all were, on a pink slip of paper in pencil. This man, a friendly engaging twenty-year-old who had killed a man in a knife fight, asked permission to buy a Ouija board, and have it mailed in to him. The warden stared across his office for a moment – it was a large, carpeted, quiet room, its many windows hung with Venetian blinds – to wonder where this boy had heard of such a thing. Then he scrawled an OK at the bottom of the sheet, and signed his initials.

The second man, who had burned a building for the insurance, a man accidentally dying in the fire, asked that a name be added to his list of approved visitors. A nineteen-year-old girl, a stranger, had written his attorney asking that she be allowed to visit him; she had seen the attorney's name in a newspaper account of the condemned man's crime. The warden wrote 'Denied' at the bottom of this slip.

The third request was written in Spanish and came from a young Mexican convicted of killing a Chinese grocer in a holdup. There are many Mexicans in the West, and a number of them, therefore, among its prison inmates; and so, years before, when he had first come here as a lieutenant, the warden had studied Spanish at the local college. He had learned to speak, read, and write it well, and now he read the last of the three notes from the row.

It was a request for oil paints, brushes, palette, charcoal, and other such supplies, and the warden sat back in his swivel chair, raising a knee to the edge of his beautifully carved prison-made desk to consider this request. The man was a good artist, he knew. A year ago he had made a pencil sketch soon after arriving at the prison. It was a street scene, the single dirt street of the village he had been born in. It was beautifully done, the best prison art the warden had ever seen, and he wondered why this man – Luis Perez – should have waited till now to draw or paint again.

For Perez was within seven days of death. His sentence was automatically appealed under the law of the state, and it was technically possible that he might still receive a stay of execution or commutation to a lesser sentence. But out of his long experience the warden felt sure neither of these things would happen, and that Perez would die in the prison gas chamber a week from today at eleven in the morning.

So he wanted to grant this request but he hesitated, staring absently across his big quiet office at the framed photograph of the governor on the wall, and the big cabinet whose shelves were littered with handmade knives, ropes, and other contraband taken from the prisoners' cells. For the last sentence of Perez's request said that his proposed painting was to be 'a kind of mural, only not, however, precisely a mural.' But it was to be a large painting, in any case, and would be painted on the wall of his cell. Still, it could always be scraped from the wall

once Perez had left his cell for the last time, the warden decided, and he scribbled his OK at the bottom of the pink sheet. Then he reached for his phone to send a prison employee to the nearby small town to buy the things Perez had asked for. If Perez was to complete his mural he had no time to lose.

So the painting was begun that morning on a blank wall of Perez's seven-by-eight cell. It was nothing but a rectangle at first, measuring something over a yard by about six and a half feet. Its longest dimension, however – and this puzzled the guards on the row – ran vertically, beginning just above the floor and rising toward the ceiling. In colour it was drab, very little different in shade from the wall it was painted on. Actually, it was only sizing, a preparation of the surface to receive the paint, and at this point the guards were only mildly interested. When they asked what he was painting, Perez – a slim rather handsome man, who looked younger than the twenty-five he said he was – replied in Spanish, shrugging helplessly and smiling in apology for his lack of English. The guards suspected, correctly, that he understood more English than he pretended but were not curious enough to press their question.

Anyway, it was answered by eleven the next morning. The cells of Condemned Row, twenty-eight of them, stood in a line running down the side of a large room. There was a line of barred windows in the wall opposite and a skylight above. As the ceilings of the cells were steel mesh, the light inside them was good, and Perez was up at dawn sketching in his painting with a charcoal stick in the first white daylight. His supplies arranged on the cot behind him, he worked rapidly and surely, standing in his blue prison denims and work shirt, completely concentrated on his work. He began by sketching a horizontal line across the long rectangle of sizing, about four inches from the top. A little below this line he drew another which paralleled the first.

He drew a series of these double lines, spaced four or

five inches apart, from the top of the panel clear down to the floor. At seven o'clock breakfast was brought to Perez in his cell, as it was to all the others, and he ate without interrupting his work, poking forkfuls of scrambled eggs into his mouth as he sketched. Breakfast over, the men came out of their cells if they chose to watch the big television set at one end of the room; or play table tennis at one of the two tables set up between the cells and one wall; or to sit at small tables playing checkers, chess, dominoes, or cards. Today a number of the men stood watching Perez, calling occasional questions or jokes to him; he was popular here. But he simply glanced out at them, smiling a little, never pausing in his work.

The last of the horizontal lines sketched in, Perez drew a long vertical line near the panel's left edge and running from the top of the area to the bottom. About four inches to the right of this line, he drew another line parallel to the first. With the heel of his hand he then smudged out all horizontal lines wherever they crossed this new vertical panel. Then he drew a duplicate of the vertical panel at the other side of his work area.

Now Perez stopped to sharpen his charcoal to a fine point, using the little sandpaper board he had asked for among his supplies. Then, beginning in the topmost of the horizontal panels he had drawn, he began to sketch a series of gently undulating lines, the men outside his cell watching. In some places, pressing hard on his charcoal stick, he carefully thickened these lines. In other places, he interrupted them, drawing the wavering line out to the finest line he could make, then lifting the charcoal to resume the line an inch or so farther on. Once he stopped, near the centre of a panel, to draw an irregular half-dollar-size circle. Then he resumed his sketching of the undulating lines, and, as they approached this circle, he curved them around it, above and below.

Presently the little group before his cell saw that, while

these lines had seemed to be haphazardly placed at first, they were not. They were forming a kind of pattern.

Just before he finished the fourth of his horizontal panels they dropped into focus for one of the watching men before his cell door. Suddenly the man saw what these panels were and he turned to murmur to the others. They were boards; on the wall of his cell Perez was sketching a series of roughly cut boards complete with graining and occasional knotholes.

When finally they were all finished, Perez went back over them, thickening portions of the knothole outlines until suddenly they had depth, shading the edges of the boards to give them thickness. At ten fifteen – one of the watching guards called over another at this point – Perez began sketching in two huge ornate hinges at the left-hand edge of his panel, and when they were finished he drew a latch on the opposite side. At eleven o'clock he put down his charcoal, and stood – extending and contracting his fingers, working the stiffness from them – studying what he had done. Outside his cell door the watching men were silent and no longer smiling. On the wall of his cell, this condemned man – it was suddenly unmistakable – had drawn a door.

Word reached the warden before noon. A runner, a minimum-custody inmate, stopped in the office of the warden's assistant to pick up his outgoing mail, and told him, grinning, what Perez was doing. The warden's assistant, stepping to the door of his office, repeated this news to one of the warden's secretaries. Next time the warden rang for her, she went in and told him what Perez was doing.

By noon every man in the prison yard, the five great cell blocks, the furniture and denim factories, the prison farm a mile to the west, and even the single unguarded inmate manning the salt-water pump half a mile outside the main prison gate, knew what Perez was doing. And because prison humour is largely elemental, the news was accepted as a huge joke.

About twelve twenty the warden walked to the employees' dining-room just outside the prison's main gate, and there he listened, smiling a little, to each of the elaborations of this joke offered him by guards, other employees, and inmate waiters. But, although he smiled, the warden wasn't amused at the knowledge that a man who was to die in a week had frantically begun to paint a door on the wall of his cell.

He left the dining-room and was passed, by the guards there, through the double admittance gates of the prison's walled area. Then he walked toward the north cell block, passing through the great asphalt-paved yard thronged with prisoners, nodding and speaking to those inmates he knew, of whom there were many. In the north cell block, he rode to the top floor in the little elevator, greeted the guards there, and signed the register, as everyone entering or leaving this part of the prison had to do. A lieutenant unlocked the mesh-covered barred gate opening onto Condemned Row, and the warden stepped in, and walked down the row to Perez's cell. *'Buenos dias,'* he said as he stopped, and Perez glanced up, smiling.

'Buenos dias,' he answered but did not stop working. Brush and palette in his hands now, he was painting the topmost of his charcoal-sketched boards. The colours squeezed onto his palette were a large blob of grey, and smaller dabs of green, brown, yellow, and white. And under his steadily moving brush the sketched-in board on the wall of his cell was turning into the likeness of wood, touched and handled and worn down through the years by many human hands. It looked absolutely real.

It took Perez four hours to finish this one board; the warden had stood silently watching him for five minutes, then turned and left. At just before three, when he finished, Perez stopped to clench and unclench his stiffened fingers into suppleness again. Then he rolled a cigarette of prison tobacco which he lighted and left in his mouth and began work on the second board from the

top. By seven o'clock that evening, Perez working rapidly in the fading daylight, the second board was finished.

It took him four more days, working from five thirty each morning until after seven each night, passing up all his exercise periods, to complete the door. On Tuesday, a little past four in the afternoon – working on his knees now, his face nearly touching the concrete floor – he finished the last board. He stood up then, immediately cleaned his brushes in turpentine, then scraped his palette clean and scrubbed its surface with a turpentine-soaked rag. He squeezed new colours onto it – black, with small dabs each of dark green, purple, and white – and resumed work at once, painting the big hinges at the side of his door.

At first they were dead black – silhouettes. But then, at the upper edges of the topmost hinge he began working in tiny streaks and flecks of dark green, purple, and here and there almost invisible lines of white; and suddenly the hinge had depth. When he finished it was no longer a silhouette of paint but a strap of heavy black metal supporting the weight of the wooden door. Tonight he worked until seven twenty, for the days were getting longer.

By nine thirty the next morning, Wednesday – he hadn't touched his breakfast – both hinges were completed, and now they were completely real. They had depth and weight and their surfaces were studded with rounded bolt heads, the crowns flattened from hammer blows. The hinges were pitted by the rounded peen of the mallet that had forged them, and they and the bolt heads were streaked with old rust. Shortly before noon he completed the latch.

The door was finished at noon, then, the day before Perez was to die; and again, after lunch, the warden went up to look at it. There it stood, a door of old warped, unevenly cut wood; the eye knew it was wood. In absolute realness it stood there on the wall of the cell, and the warden's eyes said that a finger tip sliding along the

smooth-worn graining of one of the planks would actually drop into the first knothole or crack it encountered, and bump into the concrete which pressed against the door on its other side.

People feel a mystery about old places in which intense and prolonged emotions have been experienced. And so superstition lives in old prisons because through generations men have hanged themselves there, gone insane, and in general lived in agonies most human beings never know. They are places where strange unexplainable things sometimes happen. The warden at this particular prison, at this particular time, was an intelligent and sensitive man; too much so not to be affected, too, by the nameless superstitious dread that sometimes moved through the prison – with and without cause – like currents of air. And, now, standing at the bars of Perez's cell, he did not like this door painted on its wall. For the primary function of a warden's job is to prevent escape. These aren't his prisoners but the state's. It is his job to keep them, and the condemned man must not escape execution by death, or the confined man escape past the walls. Everything else is secondary to that, and the lurking fear of escape is always with the warden.

So now, against all reason, the warden was afraid of this door. It seemed to him, staring at it now – Perez was cleaning his brushes, occasionally glancing up at the warden to smile – that possibly this door was a masterpiece. Perhaps not, but at least it was a masterpiece of realism, and the impulse to order it scraped from the wall rose up strongly in the warden's mind. But he didn't seriously consider giving this order. Reason and common sense aren't lightly abandoned; this was a door made of paint squeezed out of tubes. So once again, presently, the warden turned and walked away.

An hour later he was notified by phone from the north cell block that Perez had rigged up a blanket in his cell. A corner of it, the lieutenant explained, was jammed into a ventilator grill just below the ceiling and above the

painting; another corner was tied to a hook on the opposite wall. The effect of this – the hanging blanket angling out from the wall – was to conceal the painting, and Perez was now at work behind the blanket; what were the warden's orders?

After only a moment or two of silence the warden answered. Leave Perez and his blanket alone, he said. But in those few moments of silence his mind had moved through a long train of thought. To order a guard to go in and pull Perez's blanket down, his first quick thought, was an immediate and easy answer to the lieutenant, but an important matter of policy was involved. The warden was – always outwardly, and usually inwardly – a composed man, and his invariable appearance of lack of apprehension was important. For in case of trouble, a riot, for example, the prison staff took its cue from the warden. And if his seeming calm, then, was to be accepted as real, he could not be known to be a man who was ruffled by trifles. He wished he knew what Perez was doing behind that blanket but he smiled, and, making his voice casual, he ordered the lieutenant to leave Perez alone.

At six o'clock he rode up in the elevator to the row again. It was usual for him to visit a man the night before his execution, and now after allowing Perez's blanket to go unchallenged all afternoon he could visit him without risking comment or speculation. 'I've come to see you, Luis,' he said in Spanish, standing before the cell; a guard was selecting the proper key from among a large brass ringful of keys in his hand.

'I am busy; I do not wish to be disturbed,' Perez answered from behind his blanket.

'Bueno!' the warden said, nodding at the guard as though he had been cordially welcomed, and the guard unlocked the cell door, pulled it open, and the warden stepped inside. Hearing the barred door locked behind him, the warden felt an impulse to yank down Perez's blanket here and now. But that would betray worry and

doubt and he knew he was also irrationally afraid of what the guard might see on the wall.

The warden lifted an edge of the blanket just enough to stoop and step under it, then let it fall into place again. Perez stood painting – with furious speed, the tip of his brush darting from palette to wall, and back again. He didn't pause to glance up at the warden; he was filling in the wide cracks and knotholes of his door, and he had already reached the middle of his painting.

The warden stood staring at what he had done. Neatly lettered in dark green at the centre of the topmost board of his door, Perez had painted his name, L. Perez, the paint seemingly old and half weathered away; and the warden understood now that he was looking at a painted likeness of the door to Perez's home somewhere in Mexico. Below Perez's name, through the wide cracks between the topmost boards of the door, the warden caught a glimpse of low ceiling, and of the tops of three wide, glassless, adobe-framed windows. Through the windows and down into the room, slanted sunlight, and – somehow Perez had achieved this with paint – it was the hot yellow sun of a tropical country pouring down from a patch of sky so blue, sunny, and real that the warden's eyes smarted as he stared at it.

Below this, at eye level – through a big knothole and the carelessly wide cracks of a door made for a hot climate – the warden caught a glimpse of a crude wooden table top. And bending over the table, in the act of placing upon it two plates and a bottle of wine, was a woman. He could not see her face; through the wide uneven crack he could see only her bare brown arms and a portion of her upper body in a blue-and-yellow blouse. Through the cracks below this the warden saw a glimpse of bright skirt and at one end of the table a water glass filled with flowers.

'Luis, do you want to talk now?' the warden said gently. 'There won't be much time in the morning.'

But Perez shook his head, not turning from his work.

'Thank you, but no,' he said. 'I do not have time. I must finish.'

'Why the blanket, Luis?'

'Oh' – Perez lifted a shoulder in a little shrug – 'this is a painting of sentiment, Warden; and I do not wish the others to see it. Until it no longer matters to me.'

'All right' – the warden nodded – 'no one else will see it. Until after tomorrow.' He glanced at his watch. 'But you'd better finish soon. You'll be leaving your cell tonight, you know.'

Perez turned, his jaw dropping in stunned shock, and the warden knew he'd actually forgotten. A condemned man, here, is taken from his cell the night before his execution to another cell only a dozen steps from the little concrete room which contains the gas chamber. There are reasons for this. It would be a profoundly upsetting thing to the other men on the row to watch one of them led away, perhaps struggling or collapsed and semiconscious, having to be physically carried. And for the man himself to have to walk from the row, ride down in the elevator, then walk hundreds of yards through the prison, would be a terrible ordeal; it was hard enough for a man to steel himself to walk only a dozen steps to the chamber. So men were moved from the row the night before their executions.

But now Perez – his eyes stunned, remembering this – was shaking his head in dumb appeal. 'No, Warden,' he said then. 'No!' He gestured at the painting behind him. 'I've got to finish! I must work tomorrow, too, to finish! You can't move me; I must finish!'

The warden did not know why it was of absolute importance for Perez to finish this painting of the door to his home, with its glimpses of the room on its other side, but he knew that somehow it was. It was not legally necessary to move Perez tonight; the rule had come out of long prison experience. 'Luis, how will you act tomorrow?' he said, and Perez's eyes closed for a moment in relief.

Then he opened them. 'I will walk out,' he said,

'without help or force. And I will walk out smiling, Warden. Believe me.'

The warden nodded. 'OK,' he said. 'Finish your door.'

At eight thirty Thursday morning the block captain reported to the warden by phone that Perez had been restless in the night; the guards had heard him moving in his cell from time to time and they doubted that he had slept much. But this wasn't unusual. He had not touched his breakfast tray, either, but this, too, surprised no one.

Just after ten the warden and a prison chaplain arrived at Perez's cell. But from behind his blanket, Perez refused to see them. He did this respectfully but he had to finish his painting, he explained, and did not have an instant to spare for anything else. Standing at the door of Perez's cell the warden felt awkward and foolish; this was a ridiculous situation, the condemned man hiding behind a blanket he had rigged up in his cell. To order it pulled down now, the warden knew, would be excusable and understandable to the guards who stood watching him, and he knew the chaplain wanted to see Perez. But he felt unwilling to do this to a man in the last minutes of his life, and besides, he had given his word; so he turned away from the cell.

They came for Perez forty-seven minutes later, at ten minutes of eleven. A guard unlocked the cell and after a moment, when Perez did not appear from behind his blanket, the warden said quietly in Spanish, 'All right, Luis; it's time.'

'A moment, Warden,' Perez replied. 'One moment longer.'

The warden waited through a few seconds, looking at Perez's personal possessions. There weren't many, beyond the paints and supplies he had sent in to Perez. There was a pipe, a sack of prison tobacco, a guitar, which he seldom played, and his wife's photograph. It was the posed, stiffly smiling face of a young Mexican woman – pretty, her black hair parted in the middle and coiled in braids on the top of her head. She had never visited Perez; she had no money. But she had written often, and her letters, in

their envelopes with the cancelled Mexican stamps, were stacked beside her photograph.

'Come on, Luis,' the warden said quietly. 'You've got to come now.' It was true; the law means what it says and the condemned man is not allowed to anticipate or delay its sentence. 'Come on, Luis,' the warden repeated after a moment. 'You don't want to make us have to bring you out.'

For perhaps three seconds longer there was no response, and the warden waited that additional time, desperately hoping he would not have to signal the guards. A corner of the blanket moved and lifted, and Perez stepped out, a paint brush in his hand, and stood staring at them. Then he kept his promise. Tossing the brush to his bunk, he smiled and walked out of his cell to take his place between the two waiting guards. 'Thank you,' he said to the warden. 'It is finished.'

And then the warden kept his promise. 'Lock the cell,' he said to the guard who had opened it. 'No one is to go into it, till afterward.' Perez again smiled his thanks, and they all stepped forward.

The two guards have since said they heard this; the chaplain has said he did not. As Perez stepped forward, both guards have insisted, a sound came from the locked cell behind them. It was faint, they have said, but distinct, and it was a creaking sound, the sound of a door moving on its hinges; they insist upon that.

But the chaplain says no, and he would not lie, and the warden will still only shake his head and shrug. Perez heard it though, the guards say. For his eyes suddenly widened in an intense realization of something, they didn't know what, and he hesitated in his stride for a second. Then, of necessity, he walked on, and the sound, if any, was lost in the murmur of farewells, mumbled good lucks, and urgings of courage from the cells they were passing.

Things move very quickly in an execution; it is no kindness to delay. The little concrete room, dominated by the windowed pastel-green gas chamber, was ready when

the little party reached it. On a tier of benches facing the thick window of the chamber sat the dozen witnesses required by law. They were prison employees in this case – there were no relatives – who were obliged to be here, and a single newspaper reporter representing all the metropolitan papers; this was not an important or newsworthy execution. The two chairs of perforated metal stood with their straps wide, a waiting guard behind one of them. But before the warden gave the signal to bind Perez into the waiting chair, he stepped, as always, to the telephone just outside the chamber door.

This phone had been installed immediately after the time, some years before, when a stay of execution had been phoned to the prison three minutes before an execution. The message had reached the prison in time, but not this room, and the man had been executed. Now this phone, as it had been for some minutes now, was an open line to the office of the governor at the state capital eighty miles away. And as always, the warden spoke into it now to make absolutely sure that the line was working and that someone at the governor's office sat at its other end. 'This is the warden here,' he said quietly. 'We're ready. Do you have anything?' There was no answer, and the warden spoke again. 'Hello,' he said, louder now, 'this is the . . .'

'Just a second, Warden,' a man's voice, an assistant to the governor, replied, and there was a note of anxiety in his voice. 'Hold it a second!' he said then, his voice fading as though he were turning from the phone, and the warden frowned, the room dead silent, everyone staring at him. 'Warden,' said the voice at the other end again, 'there's an hour's stay. Don't start! Repeat, don't start! Have you started yet?'

'No, of course not! What . . .'

'Just a second; the governor's coming on.'

There was a pause, a click, then the governor's voice said, 'Warden, have you started?'

'No, sir. I wouldn't start till we'd checked . . .'

'I know, I know; I just wanted to be sure. I'm granting an hour's stay, till twelve.' As the governor continued, the warden listened, glancing up at the motionless staring Perez, and he was sorry for him. An hour's stay of execution during the last minutes was not an infrequent occurrence. A condemned man's attorney, including Perez's state-appointed lawyer, almost automatically appealed for stays right up to the last, advancing whatever reasons he could find or think of. And if such an appeal had any possibility of solid merit, a stay of an hour or of even a day might be granted until it could be ruled upon or investigated. But the warden knew from long experience that these brief delays were seldom more than a postponement of the inevitable, and he sometimes wondered whether the attorneys who obtained them were doing their clients a favour at all.

It was typical of this warden that when he replaced the phone, he spoke first not to the newspaperman or the others but to Perez. 'You have an hour's stay,' he said to the now smiling man, wondering as always at the joy of a condemned man over an additional hour of agonized waiting. 'The police in Chicago' – now he spoke to the newspaperman as well as Perez – 'are on the phone to the governor. They have a man, arrested last night, who's confessing a string of robberies' – the warden shrugged at this familiar phenomenon. 'He knows something, or seems to' – again the warden shrugged – 'about this killing. There's no confession but he's talking, hinting, then retracting and hedging. But of course we're going to wait.'

Turning to the guards, he ordered them to take Perez, for the hour's wait, to the condemned cell just outside the room and to get him a drink of whisky if he wanted it. To Perez he said, smiling, 'Good luck; here's hoping,' and while he meant this – he hated executions – he didn't really hope. There are innocent men in prisons, he knew – less often than cynics think but more often than the gently bred might suppose. And this includes men convicted of murder as well as of other crimes. But the

warden knew also that nearly every murder brings confessions. What had happened just now had happened before, and, glancing at the waiting chair as he left the room, he did not believe Perez would escape it.

But he did. In less than fifteen minutes the phone – in his office now, where he sat waiting – rang again. The man in a Chicago police station, driven by whatever impels men to this, was confessing freely to crimes far beyond the one for which he had been arrested, including the grocery store shooting for which Perez had been convicted upon the positive identification of three witnesses. And it was, in the words of the Chicago police lieutenant who had spoken to the governor, a 'solid' confession. The man had shot a Chinese, he said, and he knew – the local police had just confirmed these facts to the governor – the location of the grocery store, the approximate date and the exact time of the shooting, the amount of money stolen; and the calibre of the pistol he said he had used was that of the bullet taken from the dead man's body. He had thrown the gun into the bay, and if it was recovered it would substantiate the confession conclusively. No one now doubted that the confession was genuine.

It was the warden, walking fast, who brought the news to Perez, waiting in the cell just across from the gas chamber. And he explained, smiling now, in full detail, as they walked with the two guards back to the row and Perez's cell, for he was still a condemned prisoner, his sentence of death stayed now for one month. Walking down the row, Perez smiling at the shouts of the men he had left an hour before, the warden said, 'If this holds up, Luis, you can be out in a day on a pardon. If you want another trial . . .'

'A pardon will do, Warden,' Perez answered, smiling. 'I want to get home.' They stood waiting, as a grinning guard unlocked his cell. 'And it will stand up,' Perez added. 'I am certain of that.'

'I hope so.'

'It will, Warden; oh, it will. I've known that all morn-

ing,' and he beckoned, and the warden followed him into his cell. Perez lifted a corner of his hanging blanket then, and they stepped behind it, to face the painting. It had taken Perez a week, working every daylit hour, to bring his painting to the nearly finished state in which the warden had last seen it yesterday afternoon. It was impossible, the warden knew – he knew this, he told himself – for Perez to have scraped it from the wall, and completely repainted it last night, even if he'd been able to see by the dim night light in the corridor outside the cell. Yet apparently this is what Perez had done.

For there, painted on the wall of his cell, was the miraculously real-looking door, except that it now stood open. It was opened wide, flat against the wall, its inner side now facing the warden's eyes. And beyond the now open doorway lay the entire room he had glimpsed through the cracks of the closed door of the day before. There stood the table, all of it now, set with plates, a bottle of wine and a glassful of flowers. And there, in the blue-and-yellow blouse and bright skirt, was the woman he had seen, but now he saw her fully, and saw her face. She was crying, her face contorted in an agony of joy, and she was running toward the open doorway, her arms outflung, as though it had just opened and someone she loved were stepping through it. Her forehead, the warden saw, was lined, and there were grooves in her cheeks, and her black hair was streaked with grey. But still he did not have to turn to the photograph on the shelf behind him and compare it with the older face in this painting to know who this woman was.

'This is what I will see, very soon now,' Perez said. 'This is what waited on the other side of the door you allowed me to finish.'

Standing in Perez's cell, still staring, the warden knew it was impossible, no matter how terribly intense the desire, to paint a door on a wall so lovingly and realistically that it would open onto what lay waiting on the

other side. He knew it was impossible for a man to escape Condemned Row through a door made of paint squeezed out of tubes. He knew these things, but – a legend had begun – he also knew that neither he nor anyone else in this prison would ever believe them.

TIME HAS NO BOUNDARIES

On one of the upper floors of the new Hall of Justice I found the room number I was looking for, and opened the door. A nice-looking girl inside glanced up from her typewriter, switched on a smile, and said, 'Professor Weygand?' It was a question in form only – one glance at me, and she knew – and I smiled and nodded, wishing I'd worn my have-fun-in-San-Francisco clothes instead of my professor's outfit. She said, 'Inspector Ihren's on the phone; would you wait, please?' and I nodded and sat down, smiling benignly the way a professor should.

My trouble is that, although I have the thin, intent, professorial face, I'm a little young for my job, which is assistant professor of physics at a large university. Fortunately I've had some premature grey in my hair ever since I was nineteen, and on campus I generally wear those miserable permanently baggy tweeds that professors are supposed to wear, though a lot of them cheat and don't. These suits, together with round, metal-rimmed, professor-style glasses which I don't really need, and a careful selection of burlap neckties in diseased plaids of bright orange, baboon blue, and gang green (*de rigueur* for gap-pocketed professor suits) complete the image. That's a highly popular word meaning that if you ever want to become a full professor you've got to quit looking like an undergraduate.

I glanced around the little anteroom: yellow plaster

walls; a big calendar; filing cabinets; a desk, typewriter, and girl. I watched her the way I inspect some of my more advanced girl students – from under the brows and with a fatherly smile in case she looked up and caught me. What I really wanted to do, though, was pull out Inspector Ihren's letter and read it again for any clue I might have missed about why he wanted to see me. But I'm a little afraid of the police – I get a feeling of guilt just asking a cop a street direction – and I thought rereading the letter just now would betray my nervousness to Miss Candyhips here who would somehow secretly signal the inspector. I knew exactly what it said, anyway. It was a formally polite three-line request, addressed to my office on the campus, to come here and see Inspector Martin O. Ihren, if I would, at my convenience, if I didn't mind, please, sir. I sat wondering what he'd have done if, equally politely, I'd refused, when a buzzer buzzed, the smile turned on again, and the girl said, 'Go right in, Professor.' I got up, swallowing nervously, opened the door beside me, and walked into the Inspector's office.

Behind his desk he stood up slowly and reluctantly as though he weren't at all sure but what he'd be throwing me into a cell soon. He put out a hand suspiciously and without a smile saying, 'Nice of you to come.' I answered, sat down before his desk, and I thought I knew what would have happened if I'd refused this man's invitation. He'd simply have arrived in my classroom, clapped on the handcuffs, and dragged me here. I don't mean that his face was forbidding or in any way remarkable; it looked ordinary enough. So did his brown hair and so did his plain grey suit. He was a young-middle-aged man somewhat taller and heavier than I was, and his eyes looked absolutely uninterested in anything in the universe but his work. I had the certain conviction that, except for crime news, he read nothing, not even newspaper headlines; that he was intelligent, shrewd, perceptive, and humourless; and that he probably knew no one but other policemen and didn't think much of most of them. He

was an undistinguished formidable man, and I knew my smile looked nervous.

He got right to the point; he was more used to arresting people than dealing with them socially. He said, 'There's some people we can't find, and I thought maybe you could help us.' I looked politely puzzled but he ignored it. 'One of them worked in Haring's Restaurant; you know the place; been there for years. He was a waiter and he disappeared at the end of a three-day weekend with their entire receipts – nearly five thousand bucks. Left a note saying he liked Haring's and enjoyed working there but they'd been underpaying him for ten years and now he figured they were even. Guy with an oddball sense of humour, they tell me,' Ihren leaned back in his swivel chair, and frowned at me. 'We can't find that man. He's been gone over a year now, and not a trace of him.'

I thought he expected me to say something, and did my best. 'Maybe he moved to some other city, and changed his name.'

Ihren looked startled, as though I'd said something even more stupid than he expected. 'That wouldn't help!' he said irritatedly.

I was tired of feeling intimidated. Bravely I said, 'Why not?'

'People don't steal in order to hole up forever; they steal money to spend it. His money's gone now, he feels forgotten, and he's got a job again somewhere – as a waiter.' I looked sceptical, I suppose, because Ihren said, 'Certainly as a waiter; he won't change jobs. That's all he knows, all he can do. Remember John Carradine, the movie actor? Used to see him a lot. Had a face a foot long, all chin and long jaw; very distinctive.' I nodded, and Ihren turned in his swivel chair to a filing cabinet. He opened a folder, brought out a glossy sheet of paper, and handed it to me. It was a police WANTED poster, and while the photograph on it did not really resemble the movie actor it had the same remarkable long-jawed memorability. Ihren said, 'He could move and he could change

his name, but he could never change that face. Wherever he is he should have been found months ago; that poster went everywhere.'

I shrugged, and Ihren swung to the file again. He brought out, and handed me, a large old-fashioned sepia photograph, mounted on heavy grey cardboard. It was a group photo of a kind you seldom see any more – all the employees of a small business lined up on the sidewalk before it. There were a dozen moustached men in this and a woman in a long dress smiling and squinting in the sun as they stood before a small building which I recognized. It was Haring's Restaurant looking not too different than it does now. Ihren said, 'I spotted this on the wall of the restaurant office; I don't suppose anyone has really looked at it in years. The big guy in the middle is the original owner who started the restaurant in 1885 when this was taken; no one knows who anyone else in the picture was but take a good look at the other faces.'

I did, and saw what he meant; a face in the old picture almost identical with the one in the WANTED poster. It had the same astonishing length, the broad chin seeming nearly as wide as the cheekbones, and I looked up at Ihren. 'Who is it? His father? His grandfather?'

Almost reluctantly he said, 'Maybe. It could be, of course. But he sure looks like the guy we're hunting for, doesn't he? And look how he's grinning! Almost as though he'd deliberately gotten a job in Haring's Restaurant again, and were back in 1885 laughing at me!'

I said, 'Inspector, you're being extremely interesting, not to say downright entertaining. You've got my full attention, believe me, and I am in no hurry to go anywhere else. But I don't quite see . . .'

'Well, you're a professor, aren't you? And professors are smart, aren't they? I'm looking for help anywhere I can get it. We've got half a dozen unsolved cases like that – people that absolutely should have been found, and found easy! William Spangler Greeson is another one; you ever heard of him?'

'Sure. Who hasn't in San Francisco?'

'That's right, big society name. But did you know he didn't have a dime of his own?'

I shrugged. 'How should I know? I'd have assumed he was rich.'

'His wife is; I suppose that's why he married her, though they tell me she chased him. She's older than he is, quite a lot. Disagreeable woman; I've talked to her. He's a young, handsome, likeable guy, they say, but lazy; so he married her.'

'I've seen him mentioned in Herb Caen's column. Had something to do with the theatre, didn't he?'

'Stage-struck all his life; tried to be an actor and couldn't make it. When they got married she gave him the money to back a play in New York, which kept him happy for a while; used to fly East a lot for rehearsals and out-of-town tryouts. Then he started getting friendly with some of the younger stage people, the good-looking female ones. His wife punished him like a kid. Hustled him back here, and not a dime for the theatre from then on. Money for anything else but he couldn't even buy a ticket to a play any more; he'd been a bad boy. So he disappeared with a hundred and seventy thousand bucks of hers, and not a sign of him since, which just isn't natural. Because he can't – you understand, he *can't* – keep away from the theatre. He should have shown up in New York long since – with a fake name, dyed hair, a moustache, some such nonsense. We should have had him months ago but we haven't; he's gone, too.' Ihren stood up. 'I hope you meant it when you said you weren't in a hurry, because . . .'

'Well, as a matter of fact . . .'

'. . . because I made an appointment for both of us. On Powell Street near the Embarcadero. Come on.' He walked out from behind his desk, picking up a large Manila envelope lying on one corner of it. There was a New York Police Department return address on the envelope, I saw, and it was addressed to him. He walked to the door

without looking back as though he knew I'd follow. Down in front of the building he said, 'We can take a cab; with you along I can turn in a chit for it. When I went by myself I rode the cable car.'

'On a day like this anyone who takes a cab when he can ride the cable car is crazy enough to join the police force.'

Ihren said, 'Okay, tourist,' and we walked all the way up to Market and Powell in silence. A cable car had just been swung around on its turntable, and we got an outside seat, no one near us; presently the car began crawling and clanging leisurely up Powell. You can sit outdoors on the cable cars, you know, and it was nice out, plenty of sun and blue sky, a typical late summer San Francisco day. But Ihren might as well have been on the New York subway. 'So where is William Spangler Greeson?' he said as soon as he'd paid our fares. 'Well, on a hunch I wrote the New York police, and they had a man in a few hours for me at the city historical museum.' Ihren opened his Manila envelope, pulled out several folded sheets of greyish paper, and handed the top one to me. I opened it; it was a photostatic copy of an old-style playbill, narrow and long. 'Ever hear of that play?' Ihren said, reading over my shoulder. The sheet was headed: TONIGHT & ALL WEEK! SEVEN GALA NIGHTS! Below that, in big type: MABLE'S GREENHORN UNCLE!

'Sure, who hasn't?' I said. 'Shakespeare, isn't it?' We were passing Union Square and the St Francis Hotel.

'Save the jokes for your students, and read the cast of characters.'

I read it, a long list of names; there were nearly as many people in oldtime plays as in the audiences. At the bottom of the list it said *Members of the Street Crowd,* followed by a dozen or more names in the middle of which appeared William Spangler Greeson.

Ihren said, 'That play was given in 1906. Here's another from the winter of 1901.' He handed me a second photo-

stat, pointing to another list at the bottom of the cast. *Onlookers at the Big Race*, this one said, and it was followed by a half-inch of names in small type, the third of which was William Spangler Greeson. 'I've got copies of two more playbills,' Ihren said, 'one from 1902, the other from 1904, each with his name in the cast.'

The car swung off Powell, and we hopped off, and continued walking north on Powell. Handing back the photostat, I said, 'It's his grandfather. Probably Greeson inherited his interest in the stage from him.'

'You're finding a lot of grandfathers today, aren't you, Professor?' Ihren was replacing the stats in their envelopes.

'And what are you finding, Inspector?'

'I'll show you in a minute,' he said, and we walked on in silence. We could see the Bay up ahead now, beyond the end of Powell Street, and it looked beautiful in the sun, but Inspector Ihren didn't look at it. We were beside a low concrete building, and he gestured at it with his chin; a sign beside the door read, STUDIO SIXTEEN: COMMERCIAL TV. We walked in, passed through a small office in which no one was present and into an enormous concrete floored room in which a carpenter was building a set – the front wall of a little cottage. On through the room – the Inspector had obviously been here before – then he pulled open a pair of double doors, and we walked into a tiny movie theatre. There was a blank screen up front, a dozen seats, and a projection booth. From the booth a man's voice called, 'Inspector?'

'Yeah. You ready?'

'Soon as I thread up.'

'OK.' Ihren motioned me to a seat, and sat down beside me. Conversationally he said, 'There used to be a minor character around town name of Tom Veeley, a sports fan, a nut. Went to every fight, every Giant and Forty-Niners game, every auto race, roller derby, and jai-alai exhibition that came to town – and complained about them all. We knew him because every once in a

while he'd leave his wife. She hated sports, she'd nag him, he'd leave, and we'd have to pick him up on her complaint for desertion and nonsupport; he never got far away. Even when we'd nab him all he'd talk about was how sports were dead, the public didn't care any more and neither did the players, and he wished he'd been around in the really great days of sports. Know what I mean?'

I nodded, the tiny theatre went dark, and a beam of sharp white light flashed out over our heads. Then a movie appeared on the screen before us. It was black and white, square in shape, the motion somewhat more rapid and jerky than we're used to, and it was silent. There wasn't even any music, and it was eerie to watch the movement hearing no sound but the whir of the projector. The picture was a view of Yankee Stadium taken from far back of third base showing the stands, a man at bat, the pitcher winding up. Then it switched to a close-up – Babe Ruth at the plate, bat on shoulder, wire backstop in the background, fans behind it. He swung hard, hit the ball, and – chin rising as he followed its flight – he trotted forward. Grinning, his fists pumping rhythmically, he jogged around the base. Type matter flashed onto the screen: *The Babe does it again!* it began, and went on to say that this was his fifty-first home run of the 1927 season, and that it looked as though Ruth would set a new record.

The screen went blank except for some meaningless scribbled numbers and perforations flying past, and Ihren said, 'A Hollywood picture studio arranged this for me, no charge. Sometimes they film cops-and-crooks television up here, so they like to co-operate with us.'

Jack Dempsey suddenly appeared on the screen, sitting on a stool in a ring corner, men working over him. It was a poor picture; the ring was outdoors and there was too much sun. But it was Dempsey, all right maybe twenty-four years old, unshaven and scowling. Around the edge of the ring, the camera panning over them now between

rounds, sat men in flat-topped straw hats and stiff collars; some had handkerchiefs tucked into their collars and others were mopping their faces. Then, in the strange silence, Dempsey sprang up and moved out into the ring, crouching very low, and began sparring with an enormous slow-moving opponent; Jess Willard, I imagined. Abruptly the picture ended, the screen illuminated with only a flickering white light. Ihren said, 'I looked through nearly six hours of stuff like this; everything from Red Grange to Gertrude Ederle. I pulled out three shots; here's the last one.'

On the screen the scratched flickering film showed a golfer sighting for a putt; spectators stood three and four deep around the edge of the green. The golfer smiled engagingly and began waggling his putter; he wore knickers well down below his knees and his hair was parted in the middle and combed straight back. It was Bobby Jones, one of the world's great golfers, at the height of his career back in the 1920s. He tapped the ball, it rolled, dropped into the cup, and Jones hurried after it as the crowd broke onto the green to follow him – all except one man. Grinning, one man walked straight toward the camera, then stopped, doffed his cloth cap in a kind of salute, and bowed from the waist. The camera swung past him to follow Jones who was stooping to retrieve his ball. Then Jones moved on, the man who had bowed to us hurrying after him with the crowd, across the screen and out of sight forever. Abruptly the picture ended, and the ceiling lights came on.

Ihren turned to face me. 'That was Veeley,' he said, 'and it's no use trying to convince me it was his grandfather, so don't try. He wasn't even born when Bobby Jones was winning golf championships, but just the same that was absolutely and indisputably Tom Veeley, the sports fan who's been missing from San Francisco for six months now.' He sat waiting, but I didn't reply; what could I say to that? Ihren went on, 'He's also sitting just back of home plate behind the screen when Ruth hit

the home run, though his face is in shadow. And I think he's one of the men mopping his face at ringside during the Dempsey fight, though I'm not absolutely certain.'

The projection-booth door opened, the projectionist came out saying, 'That all today, Inspector?' and Ihren said yeah. The projectionist glanced at me, said, 'Hi, Professor,' and left.

Ihren nodded. 'Yeah, he knows you, Professor. He remembers you. Last week when he ran off this stuff for me, we came to the Bobby Jones film. He remarked that he'd run that one off for someone else only a few days before. I asked who it was, and he said a professor from the university named Weygand. Professor, we must be the only two people in the world interested in that one little strip of film. So I checked on you; you were an assistant professor of physics, brilliant and with a fine reputation, but that didn't help me. You had no criminal record, not with us, anyway, but that didn't tell me anything either; most people have no criminal record, and at least half of them ought to. Then I checked with the newspapers, and the *Chronicle* had a clipping about you filed in their morgue. Come on' – Ihren stood up – 'lets get out of here.'

Outside, he turned toward the Bay, and we walked to the end of the street, then out onto a wooden pier. A big tanker, her red-painted bottom high out of the water, was sailing past, but Ihren didn't glance at her. He sat down on a piling, motioning me to another beside him, and pulled a newspaper clipping from his breast pocket. 'According to this, you gave a talk before the American-Canadian Society of Physicists in June, 1961, at the Fairmont Hotel.'

'Is that a crime?'

'Maybe; I didn't hear it. You spoke of "Some Physical Aspects of Time," the clipping says. But I don't claim I understood the rest.'

'It was a pretty technical talk.'

'I got the idea, though, that you thought it might actually be possible to send a man back to an earlier time.'

I smiled. 'Lots of people have thought so, including Einstein. It's a widely held theory. But that's all, Inspector; just a theory.'

'Then let's talk about something that's more than a theory. For over a year San Francisco has been a very good market for old-style currency; I just found that out. Every coin and stamp dealer in town has had new customers, odd ones who didn't give their names and who didn't care what condition the old money was in. The more worn, dirty and creased – and therefore cheaper – the better they liked it, in fact. One of these customers, about a year ago, was a man with a remarkably long, thin face. He bought bills and a few coins; any kind at all suited him just as long as they were no later than 1885. Another customer was a young, good-looking, agreeable guy who wanted bills no later than the early 1900s. And so on. Do you know why I brought you out on this dock?'

'No.'

He gestured at the long stretch of empty pier behind us. 'Because there's no one within a block of us; no witnesses. So tell me, Professor – I can't use what you say, uncorroborated, as evidence – how the hell did you do it? I think you'd like to tell someone; it might as well be me.'

Astonishingly, he was right; I *did* want to tell someone, very much. Quickly, before I could change my mind, I said, 'I use a little black box with knobs on it, brass knobs.' I stopped, stared for a few seconds at a white Coast Guard cutter sliding into view from behind Angel Island, then shrugged and turned back to Ihren. 'But you aren't a physicist; how can I explain? All I can tell you is that it really *is* possible to send a man into an earlier time. Far easier, in fact, than any of the theorists had supposed. I adjust the knobs, the dials, focusing the black box on the subject like a camera, as it were. Then' – I shrugged again – 'well, I switch on a very faint specialized kind of precisely directed electric current or beam.

And while my current is on – how shall I put it? He is afloat, in a manner of speaking; he is actually free of time, which moves on ahead without him. I've calculated that he is adrift, the past catching up with him at a rate of twenty-three years and eleven weeks for every second my current is on. Using a stopwatch, I can send a man back to whatever time he wishes with a plus or minus accuracy of three weeks. I know it works because – well, Tom Veeley is only one example. They all try to do something to show me they arrived safely, and Veeley said he'd do his best to get into the newsreel shot when Jones won the Open Golf Championship. I checked the newsreel last week to make sure he had.'

The inspector nodded. 'All right; now, *why* did you do it? They're criminals, you know; and you helped them escape.'

I said, 'No, I didn't know they were criminals, Inspector. And they didn't tell me. They just seemed like nice people with more troubles than they could handle. And I did it because I needed what a doctor needs when he discovers a new serum – volunteers to try it! And I got them; you're not the only one who ever read that news report.'

'Where'd you do it?'

'Out on the beach not far from the Cliff House. Late at night when no one was around.'

'Why out there?'

'There's some danger a man might appear in a time and place already occupied by something else, a stone wall or building, his molecules occupying the same space. He'd be all mixed in with the other molecules, which would be unpleasant and confining. But there've never been any buildings on the beach. Of course the beach might have been a little higher at one time than another, so I took no chances. I had each of them stand on the lifeguard tower, appropriately dressed for whatever time he planned to enter, and with the right kind of money for the period in his pocket. I'd focus carefully around him so as to exclude

the tower, turn on the current for the proper time, and he'd drop onto the beach of fifty, sixty, seventy, or eighty years ago.'

For a while the inspector sat nodding, staring absently at the rough planks of the pier. Then he looked up at me again, vigorously rubbing his palms together. 'All right, Professor, and now you're going to bring them all back!' I began shaking my head, and he smiled grimly and said, 'Oh, yes, you are, or I'll wreck your career! I can do it, you know. I'll bring out everything I've told you, and I'll show the connections. Each of the missing people visited you more than once. Undoubtedly some of them were seen. You may even have been seen on the beach. Time I'm through, you'll never teach again.' I was still shaking my head, and he said dangerously, 'You mean you won't?'

'I mean I can't, you idiot! How the hell can I reach them? They're back in 1885, 1906, 1927, or whatever; it's absolutely impossible to bring them back. They've escaped you, Inspector – forever.'

He actually turned white. 'No!' he cried. '*No*; they're criminals and they've got to be punished, *got* to be!'

I was astounded. 'Why? None of them's done any great harm. And as far as we're concerned, they don't exist. Forget them.'

He actually bared his teeth. 'Never,' he whispered, then he roared, 'I *never* forget a wanted man!'

'OK, Javert.'

'Who?'

'A fictional policeman in a book called *Les Misérables*. He spent half his life hunting down a man no one else wanted any more.'

'Good man; like to have him in the department.'

'He's not generally regarded too highly.'

'He is by me!' Inspector Ihren began slowly pounding his fist into his palm, muttering, 'They've got to be punished, they've got to be punished,' then he looked up at me. 'Get *out* of here,' he yelled, '*fast!*' and I was glad to, and

did. A block away I looked back, and he was still sitting there on the dock slowly pounding his fist in his palm.

I thought I'd seen the last of him then but I hadn't; I saw Inspector Ihren one more time. Late one evening about ten days later he phoned my apartment and asked me – ordered me – to come right over with my little black box, and I did even though I'd been getting ready for bed; he simply wasn't a man you disobeyed lightly. When I walked up to the big dark Hall of Justice he was standing in the doorway, and without a word he nodded at a car at the kerb. We got in, and drove in silence out to a quiet little residential district.

The streets were empty, the houses dark; it was close to midnight. We parked just within range of a corner street light, and Ihren said, 'I've been doing some thinking since I saw you last, and some research.' He pointed to a mailbox beside the street lamp on the corner a dozen feet ahead. 'That's one of the three mailboxes in the city of San Francisco that has been in the same location for almost ninety years. Not that identical box, of course, but always that location. And now we're going to mail some letters.' From his coat pocket, Inspector Ihren brought out a little sheaf of envelopes, addressed in pen and ink, and stamped for mailing. He showed me the top one, shoving the others into his pocket. 'You see who this is for?'

'The chief of police.'

'That's right; the San Francisco chief of police – in 1885! That's his name, address, and the kind of stamp they used then. I'm going to walk to the mailbox on the corner, and hold this in the slot. You'll focus your little black box on the envelope, turn on the current as I let it go, and it will drop into the mailbox that stood here in 1885!

I shook my head admiringly; it was ingenious. 'And what does the letter say?'

He grinned evilly. 'I'll tell you what it says! Every spare moment I've had since I last saw you, I've been reading old newspapers at the library. In December, 1884,

there was a robbery, several thousand dollars missing; there isn't a word in the paper for months afterward that it was ever solved.' He held up the envelope. 'Well, this letter suggests to the chief of police that they investigate a man they'll find working in Haring's Restaurant, a man with an unusually long thin face. And that if they search his room, they'll probably find several thousand dollars he can't account for. And that he will absolutely *not* have an alibi for the robbery in 1884!' The Inspector smiled, if you could call it a smile. 'That's all they'll need to send him to San Quentin, and mark the case closed; they didn't pamper criminals in those days!'

My jaw was hanging open. 'But he isn't guilty! Not of that crime!'

'He's guilty of another just about like it! And he's got to be punished; I *will* not let him escape, not even to 1885!'

'And the other letters?'

'You can guess. There's one for each of the men you helped get away, addressed to the police of the proper time and place. And you're going to help me mail them all, one by one. If you don't I'll ruin you, and that's a promise, Professor.' He opened his door, stepped out, and walked to the corner without even glancing back.

I suppose there are those who will say I should have refused to use my little black box no matter what the consequences to me. Well, maybe I should have, but I didn't. The inspector meant what he said and I knew it, and I wasn't going to have the only career I ever had or wanted be ruined. I did the best I could; I begged and pleaded. I got out of the car with my box; the inspector stood waiting at the mailbox. '*Please* don't make me do this,' I said. '*Please!* There's no need! You haven't told anyone else about this, have you?'

'Of course not; I'd be laughed off the force.'

'Then forget it! Why hound these poor people? They haven't done so much; they haven't really hurt anyone.

Be humane! Forgiving! Your ideas are at complete odds with modern conceptions of criminal rehabilitation!'

I stopped for breath, and he said 'You through, Professor? I hope so, because nothing will ever change my mind. Now, go ahead and use that damn' box!' Hopelessly I shrugged, and began adjusting the dials.

I am sure that the most baffling case the San Francisco Bureau of Missing Persons ever had will never be solved. Only two people – Inspector Ihren and I – know the answer, and we're not going to tell. For a short time there was a clue someone might have stumbled onto, but I found it. It was in the rare photographs section of the public library; they've got hundreds of old San Francisco pictures, and I went through them all and found this one. Then I stole it; one more crime added to the list I was guilty of hardly mattered.

Every once in a while I get it out, and look at it; it shows a row of uniformed men lined up in formation before a San Francisco police station. In a way it reminds me of an old movie comedy because each of them wears a tall helmet of felt with a broad turn-down brim, and long uniform coats to the knees. Nearly every one of them wears a drooping moustache, and holds a long nightstick poised at the shoulder as though ready to bring it down on Chester Conklin's head. Keystone Kops they look like at first glance, but study those faces closely and you change your mind about that. Look especially close at the face of the man at the very end of the row, wearing sergeant's stripes. It looks positively and permanently ferocious, glaring out (or so it always seems) directly at me. It is the implacable face of Martin O. Ihren of the San Francisco police force, back where he really belongs, back where I sent him with my little black box, in the year 1893.

THE INTREPID AERONAUT

On the sixth day that he was home alone Charley Burke walked out onto the patio, nodded at the empty chairs, saying, 'Hello, everybody. Don't get up,' and dropped into a lounge chair. He was wearing the tan wash pants and brown loafers he'd just changed into and the white shirt he'd worn that day in San Francisco at the office. Now he tilted far back in the chair, his feet rising higher than his head. It was August, still daylight, and he lay staring up at the clear blue sky. He was conscious of the emptiness of the suburban house beside him but absently so, used to it now. Then his jaw dropped, his eyes widened, and he lay motionless, staring up at the sky, paralysed by the strength of a strange new emotion.

His house, across the Bay from the city, in Marin County, lay in a miniature valley; the street wound between two rows of hills. Fifty yards above the hills that rose behind the patio a hawk hung in the air high in the sun. He was there often hunting field rodents; Charley had seen him before. But now he saw him, actually, for the first time. The big bird didn't move. Wings out he lay on an invisible column of air that pressed against the sides of the hills to be deflected upward. He lay there magically neither rising nor falling, moving neither forward nor back, no least movement of his wings necessary to sustain him. Then the wings tilted, the bird dropped in a sudden swift and graceful arc and soared up again.

The wings tilted back once more and again the hawk hung in the summer sky belonging to it; and all that Charley Burke wanted of the entire world was somehow to be able to do that, too.

It was no idle wish. It was an overpowering seizure, a wild and passionate necessity. Its intensity drew him to his feet and he walked the patio, smiling, trying to laugh the feeling away. But there was no escape. He was possessed by an irresistible urge to rise in effortless detachment from gravity up into the blueness till he could feel the sky around him touching his skin. And it occurred to him that he could do what he wanted to do – not in a plane fighting the air but in a balloon.

Stepping between the open glass doors, he stood in the living-room, neat in the gathering darkness – ashtrays emptied, magazines stacked. But when he snapped on a light the room looked dusty. He stood thinking over all he knew about balloons. Mostly this was just a picture in his mind of a large, rounded object shaped like a giant punching bag upside down in the sky. It was made in vertical panels of contrasting colours, a long ribbon pennant fluttered from its top, and under it hung a trapeze-like bar on which sat a man wearing tights. He wore his hair parted in the centre, had a large moustache, and sat smiling, ankles crossed, legs dangling gracefully, a hand negligently holding to one rope of his perch. Stitched to the chest of his tights was an American flag. This picture was supplanted by another very much like it except that now a square basket with high sides hung under the balloon. A man stood in the basket staring out at him; he wore a black silk hat, black frock coat, square-cut beard, pince-nez, and had a brass telescope tucked under one arm.

That was all Charley knew about balloons. He took down volume two of the encyclopaedia on the living-room bookshelves, found the article on balloons, and sat down at one end of the davenport, leaning over the pages. 'Balloon,' the article began, 'a bag of impermeable material

which, when inflated with a gas lighter than air, rises from the ground.' This had almost the lilt of poetry, he felt, the last four words especially, and he read it through several times, glancing up each time to smile.

Then he read everything in the article about how and why a balloon rises, descends, and is controlled, and it seemed to him as simple and effective a device as man has yet invented. Filled with a gas lighter than the volume of air it displaces, a balloon must rise. Release some of the gas and its ascent is checked or reversed. Spill ballast and its rise will resume. The open book on his lap, Charley sat back, hands clasped behind his head, at peace with this explanation.

It was easily understood without special training, like most of the mechanical devices of the previous century. Men understood the things they used then; they were masters of the machines that served them. He felt sure that passengers riding in hydraulic elevators of the time knew how they worked, and that most men, a forefinger on a sharp-etched woodcut diagram, could trace through the workings of a horsecar mechanism. Of the thousands of years men have been civilized, it is only in the last fifty, Charley thought, that things we use daily have gone beyond the understanding of most of us – our television sets, jet planes, even our automobiles today. Most of us use them in helplessness, no longer their masters, no longer masters of very much at all any more. So that to understand the balloon was a solid satisfaction and Charley stood up and began to sing. It was an ancient song he hadn't thought of in years and the house being empty he shouted it in full voice. 'Come, Josephine, in my flying machine, and it's *up* we'll go *up* we'll go!' he yelled in sudden exuberance, and walked quickly to the garage where he began hunting for things he needed, such as his wife's plastic clothesline and two old tennis nets.

Through that and the following two evenings, working hard and steadily, Charley made a balloon. He cut the panels from two rolls of lightweight rubberized cloth –

one was blue, and one was white – which he bought in San Francisco, and stitched them together on his wife's sewing machine. With odds and ends around the house – a wire coat hanger, an aluminium pot lid, his wife's clothes pole – he completed the balloon, then hung it from a rope over the patio.

It could turn chilly after the sun was down here in the San Francisco Bay area, and Charley changed into black ski pants and jersey, light in weight but snug-fitting and very warm. Looking down at himself it occurred to him that they somewhat resembled a balloonist's tights, and he smiled. Finally, well after eleven at night, Charley stood on the patio beside the brick barbecue tending a bed of coals. The electric blower was on full, the coals white hot and flameless in the forced draught, and a steady rush of hot air roared up through a stovepipe resting on the grill and into the balloon hanging overhead.

Almost instantly the long blue-and-white wrinkles of hanging cloth rising up into the night over Charley's head had begun to stir; now they were visibly distending. From a long, wrinkled prune the balloon swelled into a thin pear; then rounded into a smooth-skinned sphere. At eleven forty-five the bag, round and tight, began to lift. Within minutes, it seemed alive. Tugging at the anchor rope tied to the barbecue, it swayed in the air fat, buoyant, and eager. Two tennis nets hung draped over it. Tied to their ends by short lengths of clothesline hung a trapeze-like seat made from half a clothes pole. Several dozen paper bags imprinted Mill Valley Market and filled with sand hung in the netting.

Charley switched off the barbecue blower and sat on the trapeze. Like a child slowly untying a gift to prolong the anticipation, he began pulling the drawstring that would release his balloon from the anchor rope. At that moment the moon, which had been rising for some minutes, lifted an edge over the uneven horizon of hills. Hanging under the balloon in his black ski suit and a pair of heavy navy-blue wool socks, Charley saw the pale wash

of light touch the windows of the empty house beside him and turn them opaque, dimly reflecting himself and the bottom of the balloon like a faded poster from a forgotten circus. Looking up, he watched the moonlight slide up and down the striped sides of the balloon as it swayed and he felt a surge of pride stronger than any he'd felt in years. Of all the things he owned, it suddenly occurred to him, this was the only one he'd created, the only thing he hadn't bought. Of all his possessions this was uniquely his own and, while he knew that what he was about to do could be dangerous, he didn't believe in the danger. His heart beat from joy, not fear, as he yanked hard at the rope in his hand.

Instantly the wooden bar on which he sat pressed deep into the undersides of Charley's legs and he was looking down onto his moonlit roof. Immediately the roofs of his neighbours came sliding into view from the sides; then he was looking at the street in front of his house. It was growing in length, shrinking in width, winding through the hills between two rows of rooftops which were diminishing as he stared into smaller and smaller rectangles and squares.

Up through the moonlight he rose into the night in glorious silence. His only motive power was air itself, air being lifted by air. He was a weightless part of the element he was in mingling with its breezes. Now he rose above the level of the low Marin County hills and here occasional puffs of air touched him and he drifted a little like a ball of dandelion fluff over the light-speckled patches and great dark areas of town and countryside spreading below him. A hand tightly gripping each support rope, Charley sat on his wife's clothes pole swinging slightly, pleasantly, and felt the gentle lift of the bar under his legs slacken and then stop. Mouth agape, eyes wide and heart pounding, he hung in the air staring down between his dangling feet at the tiny roofs and narrow moonlit black ribbon that was the street he lived on.

A breeze touched the balloon momentarily and it

slowly revolved. As he turned in the air Charley suddenly saw over his shoulder the great shiny-black expanse of San Francisco Bay far ahead and far below. From ground level it lay behind rows of hills and could not be seen. But hanging up here in the sky he saw it all, saw the mysterious lights of its great bridges – dotted lines of luminous orange-juice-colour lights curving across the shiny blackness. A path of moonlight silvered the water between the bridges silhouetting Angel Island, humping up out of the bay, lustreless, black, and lightless. White mast lights and green side lights, the ship itself invisible, moved across the ink-shiny blackness and beyond all this, rising up in light and splendour, was the glorious glitter of San Francisco. The shining city criss-crossed by the pattern of its streets and the vast black Bay edged in light on the Oakland rim were a great living map far below his hanging feet. It was an awesome sight, incredible and beautiful, and Charley shouted in delight.

The slow revolution of the balloon continued and when Charley again faced south the Bay had disappeared, the tops of the hills that concealed it rising beyond his head. The heated air in the balloon cooling in the night, the balloon was sinking and within minutes, he knew, it would gently collapse in the street directly below him. He tried to make it stop by an effort of will, tried to make himself lighter on the bar he sat on. But like an ancient slow-moving elevator, it descended steadily until, well below the level of the surrounding hills, a breeze suddenly took it.

Nearly every night during the summer, beginning just after sunset, an easterly breeze flowed down this street, channelled between the hills like a river. Charley moved with it now, along the curving street toward home, perhaps ten feet above the street lamps moving past him on either side of the road. Down here between the bases of the hills, the breeze narrowed and quickened, and now he moved swiftly, the trapped current carrying him silently

along the wide street precisely over the white-painted centre line following its curves and windings exactly.

Slipping through the night just over the roofs of the familiar houses, he glanced from one side to the other as he passed. He knew or at least spoke to the people in most of these houses. But now the houses were dark, the cars parked before them dead and silent, their windows blind with dew, and Charley thought of his own empty house and felt suddenly depressed. A cat darted across the street through a circle of light from a street lamp; it stopped suddenly, crouching motionless in the gutter to stare up at him over a shoulder as he swung past.

Just ahead the road curved, and now the breeze curved with it and Charley swung around the bend nearing his house. His dangling legs swinging from the turn, Charley rounded the curve and a movement ahead caught his eye. Then he saw a big Dalmatian dog trotting briskly beside the curb and just entering a circle of lamplight. This side of the circle he caught the slower movement of a woman in a tan polo coat. He knew who she was. Once or twice, driving home late at night, he had seen her walking this dog. She was a Mrs Lanidas who lived a dozen houses down the street from his.

There was nothing he could do, there was no time to spill ballast. His feet and half his body were below the level of the glass-shaded street lamp now and his shadow flashed across the circle of light on the lonely asphalt road as Mrs Lanidas walked into it. She stopped, her chin lifting quickly, and for the space of a heartbeat she and Charley, looking back over his shoulder, stared into each other's eyes. Then Charley swung on around a final bend. Just before his driveway, the balloon sinking fast, his stockinged feet touched the road and he ran, tugging at the tennis nets to bring down the collapsing balloon.

Still running, he swung into his driveway, dragging the balloon through the air on the very last of its buoyancy. Then it melted on to the concrete before the garage door in a rustling mass of striped cloth. Stooping quickly, his

hand on the door handle, Charley paused for an instant, listening. In the almost complete silence of the late-at-night street he heard the slight grate of leather on pebbles. The steps were hurrying, he thought, and he heaved the garage door up. Tugging, yanking, he dragged the balloon in alongside the car, then grabbed for the garage door. But even as it slid down again, the footsteps stopped and he knew the woman was standing in the street at the end of his driveway staring at the door as it closed.

But nothing could have kept him from going up again. He got through the next day at the office. At home, even before he changed clothes, he was prowling through the garage, the attic of the tract house. There he found the little kerosene brazier he'd once bought for a camping trip he'd never taken. After eating a can of salmon and half a jar of black olives, he made a bracket of wire for the brazier, bending its ends into hooks. That finished, Charley sat on the davenport wearing his ski suit and socks, waiting for full dark.

It was past ten when he had the balloon strung up on its rope over the brick barbecue and stood tending the coals. Occasionally he glanced up at the balloon watching its sides unwrinkle, puff out, and gradually swell into roundness. Then he heard some slight sound, a sigh or little movement. Eyes squinting, he searched the blackness, then found the faint blur of a face a dozen yards out in the night. But even before he found it, he knew who it would be. And when she knew he'd found her, Mrs Lanidas walked slowly toward him and Charley saw a movement at her feet, a sudden dilution of the darkness, and realized that her dog was with her and had sat silently watching him, too.

In her tan polo coat, Mrs Lanidas walked into the little circle of firelight and for a moment they stood staring at each other. 'I've got to go up, too,' she said quickly and desperately. 'I want to come with you. Please. I've got to. I've simply got to. You must take me. Please!'

She continued, the words spilling out, and all the reasons for refusing came rising up in Charley's mind. But he didn't speak any of them; he knew the truth when he heard it. For whatever reasons – and what they were didn't matter – she, too, had to do what he'd known he must do the day he lay out here staring at the hawk in the sky. And because Charley understood that feeling of absolute necessity, he couldn't refuse it and didn't bother going through the motions of protest. He said, 'All right,' then gestured at the dog. 'What about him?'

'I'll tie him up here. He'll sit quietly.' She spoke anxiously, afraid he'd change his mind. 'I'm out with him every night, sometimes till one, two, even three o'clock. My husband never waits up or even notices I'm gone. He'll never know.'

'It's dangerous.' Charley glanced up at the balloon but he spoke perfunctorily, and she simply nodded to acknowledge that she'd heard and accepted the warning.

The balloon was puffed tight now and tugging hard. Charley turned off the blower switch, then threw a bucket of water on to the coals and the cloud of smoke turned milk-white in the moonlight. He hooked the wire bracket holding the kerosene burner into the netting and the brazier hung under the open neck of the balloon several feet below it. Charley lighted it, then thrust the stovepipe up into the balloon neck and let it slide down over the brazier and now the heat from the intense blue flame poured up into the balloon.

Mrs Lanidas had tied her dog's leash to the barbecue and he lay on the patio watching them, head cocked. Charley gestured politely at the swinglike seat hanging just over the flagstones. Mrs Lanidas nodded, took off her coat, and Charley saw that she was not, as he'd thought, wearing black stockings; Mrs Lanidas had on a skintight black leotard.

She sat down on the bar, holding the support rope, legs straight out over the pavement, ankles gracefully crossed. Charley sat beside her, glanced at her, and she nodded.

He pulled at the rope and they rose instantly into the moonlight.

They rose swiftly, the house, street, and hills contracting beneath them, and when he looked at Mrs Lanidas the fear was gone from her eyes. They were half closed in pleasure now, the breeze rippling her hair, and she smiled at Charley in delight and he grinned back. Tonight the balloon didn't drift. Somewhere above hilltop level a high-up breeze took them, carrying them south, the balloon slowly revolving. As it turned Charley watched Mrs Lanidas' face. She caught sight of the Bay, a vast blackness striped by moonlight, and of the jewel-bright orange dots of the bridge lights, and of the clustered white towers of the lighted city rising in splendour beyond the black water, and she gasped in pleasure and said, 'Oh, my God!' and Charley laughed aloud, his pleasure reinforced by hers. The balloon completed its revolution, and, their backs to the Bay now, they moved over the land watching it slide out from under their feet.

Marin County, California, is low softly rounded hills and little valleys winding between them; and it is flatland, seashore, and bay shore. It is towns with apartment buildings and not enough parking space and it is still-untouched areas where foxes and deer live. It is rows of squeeze-together tract houses, a commuting area; and there are ranches yet where real cowboys round up cattle. It has a mountain twenty-five hundred feet high, a forest of giant redwood trees, and there are miles of coastline on which ocean waves break. Soundlessly, effortlessly, they moved over this patchwork and Charley kept his bearings by the tiny moving lights on the highway that cut through the hills below. Sometimes he spilled sand from the paper ballast sacks strung in the netting beside him. Sometimes he released hot air from a vent in the top of the balloon or raised or lowered the flame in his burner. He had the feel of ballooning now. Moving steadily along through the sky and the night he had never, not even as a child, felt so free.

Off to the right lay the floodlighted buff-colour walls of San Quentin Prison looking like a miniature castle. Behind it the lights of San Rafael lay scattered on its hills. Below them lay moon-washed darkness, an area unbuilt upon. It was glorious moving along above it; a thrill glowed in Charley's breast. At the same time it was an utter contentment, and glancing at Mrs Lanidas beside him – who turned to smile – he knew she felt the same way. The air was soft and warm and pressed gently against their faces. He glanced over his shoulder; the great Bay, though still far ahead, was appreciably closer and Charley lowered the balloon feeling the decrease in pressure of the bar under his legs as they began sliding closer to the ground in a long, slow arc. The breeze held and Charley lowered again till they were perhaps a hundred feet above ground so that he could descend quickly if he had to before they were blown out over the Bay.

Swinging on their bar they crossed the boundary of a tract such as the one they lived in. From here it was a criss-cross of sparsely illuminated streets; of squares of darkness that were front or back yards; of lighted windows; of rods of moving light which were automobiles; and of occasional rectangles of moonlight which were swimming pools. Sound moved up to them distinctly. The night was balmy, windows were open, and they heard – glancing at each other to smile – the familiar nightly blasts of gunfire from television sets. They crossed a back yard and saw the red glow of cigarette ends and the quiet voices of two men.

'Four kids named Stephen in his grade alone. Aren't there any kids named George or Frank any more?'

'I know. Same with girls, these days. Ten million Debbies and no more Ednas.'

'Or Edwins.'

'Or Gladyses.'

'Or . . .'

They heard a child call, 'Mom!' and the mother answer. 'What is it? Now, get to sleep!' As a dog glanced up at

the moon they saw the moonlight eerily reflected in its eyes. Then the dog saw the balloon's black silhouette moving across the face of the moon and raced the length of the back yard, its chain rattling, barking at them. Then for miles around and minutes afterward the barking was picked up and repeated like a tom-tom message. Not ten feet off in the darkness they heard a duck honk and the beat of its wings.

Charley felt godlike, drifting soundlessly and invisibly over the rooftops. He wondered what the people under them were doing and thinking. He loved them, suddenly, all of them, and wanted to bestow a blessing on them and did so. He trickled a little sand into his palm, then scattered it benevolently over the community below saying, 'Blessings. Blessings on you all, from your friends Charley Burke and Mrs Lanidas.'

Then they laughed and in simultaneous impulse lifted their feet, ankles together, legs straight out, and leaned far back at arm's length, their free arms around each other's waists, supporting each other, and began to pump together, like children on a school playground. Alternately tucking their legs far back under their perch, then shooting them forward and up in unison, they swung back and forth in a great arc under the balloon and Charley began singing. 'Come, Josephine, in my flying machine!' he shouted. 'And it's *up* we'll go, *up* we'll go!' A man in pyjamas hurried out into a yard directly below them, head turning rapidly as he looked all around. But he never looked up at Charley and Mrs Lanidas grinning a hundred feet over his head and moving silently past.

They moved with the breeze, dipping with it into the valleys, then riding it over the hills again. They did this now, riding up the slope of a hill higher than any others they'd passed so far. They had left the tract, and the area below them was black and lightless. The balloon had revolved several times as they travelled so Charley was confused, not sure where they were, and when they reached the crest of the hill and rose over it the whole

sweep of the Bay suddenly lay before them. Down the other slope, they moved with the breeze and an instant later sailed out across the shoreline over the Bay – and the enormous length and tremendous height of the great Golden Gate Bridge suddenly dwarfed them, towering over their heads and incredibly close, not fifty yards to the right.

And they were dropping. Here over the water the current of air that carried them flowed on down to the water's surface, moving just over it, and in the blackness beneath them Charley suddenly saw the white caps of waves. Then he heard them, too, heard their cold and watery ripple, and understood how very close they were. High, high overhead hung the roadway of the bridge, its yellow lighting shining far up into the shadowed red superstructure of towers and cables even farther beyond them. An instant later, arms tight around each other's waists, gripping the support ropes, they were staring directly up at the underside of the bridge, silhouetted blackly against the moonlit sky, and Charley understood that they were being swept under the bridge and out to sea, dangling just above the white-speckled black water.

He spilled ballast. He tore open the sand sacks as fast as his free arm could move. Their trapeze seat jerked under them, and they shot toward the sky. Kicking his feet sideways, gripping both ropes and jerking his body at the waist, Charley managed to turn the balloon so that they faced the bridge. But even before the half-turn was complete they'd shot to the level of the roadway and for an instant – not a dozen feet out in the blackness west of the bridge – they stared over their shoulders directly into the windows of cars driving past them. Then, Mrs Lanidas clinging with one arm to Charley's waist, they were staring down at moving car roofs, yellowed by the bridge lights, and the car roofs were shrinking and they were still rising.

But now they were free of the surface breeze and climbing vertically. Even in his rigidly suppressed panic Charley

was observing, judging. They rose but more and more slowly until – just higher than the flat tops of the enormous bridge towers – they stopped and through several moments hung absolutely motionless not six feet from the northern tower of the bridge and nearly level with its top. Far below the cars had shrunk to miniatures, the six-lane roadway to the width of a man's hand. Around them the air lay still and unmoving through a dozen heartbeats while they held their breaths. Then they felt the air stir infinitesimally, and ever so slowly it began to move them not seaward but back toward the bridge and for an instant Charley closed his eyes in relief. Then he opened them quickly to grin at Mrs Lanidas and after a moment she smiled back.

Almost precisely even with the level top of the bridge tower, they drifted slowly toward it and would have bumped gently into it if Charley hadn't fended them off with his free arm. For a moment the flat top of the great bridge tower lay directly before them like a moonlit table top, their knees almost touching it. Inspired by the excitement of relief, Charley reached overhead and rubbed a finger across the base of the kerosene brazier. It came away blackened with soot and he leaned forward slightly and in the moonlight wrote 'C.B.' on the very top of the northern tower of the Golden Gate Bridge. He looked at it for a moment – proudly, smiling – then glanced at Mrs Lanidas, and she reached up to the brazier, then wrote 'E.L.' just under his initials. Once more Mrs Lanidas rubbed her finger through the soot of the brazier, reached out to the tower, and began to draw something – a circle, an oval, or something else – around the set of intials. But what it was to be Charley never knew because the breeze had them again now, their moment of motionlessness over, and they moved on across the bridge leaving their initials on its very top to the eternal mystification of the steeplejacks who painted it.

They were out over the Bay moving high above it in a wide arc that was carrying them, Charley saw, north to-

ward the Marin County shoreline again. Off to the right lay the shining city and they stared down at it in awe. Its lights were scattered thinly now, most of the city asleep. But they picked out the floodlighted front of the Fairmont Hotel and, directly across from it at their own eye level, the huge windows of the Top of the Mark. Far to the south they saw Market Street angling across the city, the great dark rectangle of Golden Gate Park, and the whole maplike criss-crossing of San Francisco's streets rising over and then slipping down its hills. And they heard – very clearly – the toylike cling-clang of a cable-car bell.

Then they were across the shoreline moving almost due north in a straight line which, Charley saw, would intersect their mile-and-a-half-long east-and-west street. Almost sleepily now, they simply sat waiting until they should reach it. Presently, when he recognized the curving pattern of lighted dots ahead which were the lamps of their street, they moved along it, following the curving white centre line toward home.

In the morning Charley's wife and daughter were back again, the house alive and happy once more. In the days, then weeks, then months that followed, he thought of his balloon packed away in the garage, and of using it again. But he never did and presently he realized that, alone no longer, he wasn't going to; that he'd had what he wanted from it and needed no more. And that, in fact, his flight in the balloon could not ever really be repeated. He thought of showing the balloon to his wife and of telling her what had happened. But he realized that he wasn't sure he knew what had happened; that what had happened was very little a matter of fact and almost entirely a matter of emotion for which he had no words.

He didn't see Mrs Lanidas again for six months. Then he was at a PTA meeting, and, the meeting over, the parents standing in the corridor chatting, Charley stood beside his wife who was talking to someone. He'd spoken politely to a number of people whom he saw nowhere else but here. His wife had introduced him to still others.

Now he stood absently waiting, wanting to go home and have a drink. When his wife touched his arm, saying, 'Charley, I want you to meet' – he turned with an automatic smile as she finished – 'Mrs Lanidas, from our street.'

For a moment Charley stood looking at her knowing that, factually speaking, this was Mrs Lanidas. Yet it wasn't at all. This was no laughing girl in a black leotard, sailing through the sky and the night as the wind rippled her hair. This was a mother of small children with the first lines in her face, all dressed up in a hat, good dress, dark coat, and wearing a girdle. Charley nodded pleasantly. 'Oh, yes,' he said politely. 'I've met Mrs Lanidas.'

At the absurdity of this, she smiled, and for a moment – eyes warm, almost mischievous – she was a girl once more. Speaking to both of them, but her hand rising to touch Charley's sleeve, she said, 'Not Mrs Lanidas. Call me Josephine.'

Out in the dark schoolyard as they got into their car, Charley's wife said, 'Now, why did she say that? I'm almost certain her name isn't Josephine. I think it's Edna.'

But Charley didn't answer. Sliding under the steering wheel he simply shrugged, smiling a little, and, half under his breath, he continued his whistling of an old, old tune.

THE COIN COLLECTOR

'. . . will let me know the number of the pattern,' my wife was saying, following me down the hall toward our bedroom, 'and I can knit it myself if I get the blocking done.'

I think she said blocking anyway, whatever that means. And I nodded, unbuttoning my shirt as I walked. It had been hot out today and I was eager to get out of my office clothes. I began thinking about a dark-green eight-thousand-dollar sports car I'd seen during noon hour in that big showroom on Park Avenue.

'. . . kind of a ribbed pattern with a matching freggel-heggis,' my wife seemed to be saying as I stopped at my dresser. I tossed my shirt on the bed and turned to the mirror, arching my chest.

'. . . middy collar, batten-barton sleeves with sixteen rows of smeddlycup balderdashes. . . .' Pretty good chest and shoulders I thought, staring in the mirror; I'm twenty-six years old, kind of thin-faced, not bad-looking, not good-looking.

'. . . dropped hem, doppelganger waist, maroon-green, and a sort of frimble-framble daisystitch . . . .' Probably want two or three thousand bucks down on a car like that, I thought; the payments'd be more than the rent on this whole apartment. I began emptying the change out of my pants pockets glancing at each of the coins. When I was a kid there used to be an ad in a boys' magazine: 'Coin collecting can be PROFITABLE and FUN too! Why don't

you start TODAY?' It explained that a 1913 Liberty-head nickel – 'and many others!' – was worth thousands and I guess I'm still looking for one.

'So what do you think?' Marion was saying. 'You think they'd go well together?'

'Sure, they'd look fine.' I nodded at her reflection in my dresser mirror. She stood leaning in the bedroom doorway, arms folded, staring at the back of my head. I brought a dime up to my eyes for a closer look; it was minted in 1958 and had a profile of Woodrow Wilson, and I turned to Marion. 'Hey, look,' I said, 'here's a new kind of dime – Woodrow Wilson.' But she wouldn't look at my hand. She just stood there with her arms folded, glaring at me, and I said, 'Now what? What have I done wrong now?' Marion wouldn't answer, and I walked to my closet and began looking for some wash pants. After a moment I said coaxingly, 'Come on, Sweetfeet, what'd I do wrong?'

'Oh, Al!' she wailed. 'You don't listen to me; you really don't! Half the time you don't hear a word I say!'

'Why, sure I do, honey.' I was rattling the hangers, hunting for my trousers. 'You were talking about knitting.'

'An orange sweater, I said, Al – orange. I *knew* you weren't listening and asked you how an orange sweater would go with – close your eyes.'

'What?'

'No, don't turn around! And close your eyes.' I closed them, and Marion said, 'Now, without any peeking, because I'll see you, tell me what I'm wearing right now.'

It was ridiculous. In the last five minutes, since I'd come home from the office, I must have glanced at Marion maybe two or three times. I'd kissed her when I walked into the apartment, or I was pretty sure I had. Yet standing at my closet now, eyes closed, I couldn't for the life of me say what she was wearing. I worked at it; I could actually hear the sound of her breathing just behind me and could picture her standing there, a small girl five feet three inches tall, weighing just over a hundred pounds,

twenty-four years old, nice complexion, pretty face, honey-blonde hair, and wearing . . . wearing . . .

'Well, am I wearing a dress, slacks, medieval armour, or standing here stark naked?'

'A dress.'

'What colour?'

'Ah – dark green?'

'Am I wearing stockings?'

'Yes.'

'Is my hair done up, shaven off or in a pony tail?'

'Done up.'

'OK, you can look now.'

Of course the instant I turned around to look, I remembered. There she stood, eyes blazing, her bare foot angrily tapping the floor, and she was wearing sky-blue wash slacks and a white cotton blouse. As she swung away to walk out of the room and down the hall, her pony tail was bobbing furiously.

Well, brother – and you, too, sister – unless the rice is still in your hair you know what came next – the hurt indignant silence. I got into slacks, short-sleeved shirt and huarachos, strolled into the living-room, and there on the davenport sat Madame Defarge grimly studying the list, disguised as a magazine, of next day's guillotine victims. I knew whose name headed the list, and I walked straight to the kitchen, mixed up some booze in tall glasses, and found a screw driver in a kitchen drawer.

In the living-room, coldly ignored by what had once been my radiant laughing bride, I set the drinks on the coffee table, reached behind Marion's magazine, and gripped her chin between thumb and forefinger. The magazine dropped and I instantly inserted the tip of the screw driver between her front teeth, pried open her mouth, picked up a glass and tried to pour in some booze. She started to laugh, spilling some down her front, and I grinned, handing her the glass, and picked up mine. Sitting down beside her, I saluted Marion with my glass, then took a delightful sip and as it hurried to my sluggish blood

stream I could feel the happy corpuscles dive in, laughing, and shouting, and felt able to cope with the next item on the agenda which followed immediately.

'You don't love me any more,' said Marion.

'Oh, yes, I do.' I leaned over to kiss her neck, glancing around the room over her shoulder.

'Oh, no, you don't. Not really.'

'Oh, yes, I do. Really. Honey, where's the book I was reading last night?'

'There! You see! All you want to do is read all the time! You never want to go out! The honeymoon's certainly over around here, all right!'

'No, it isn't, Sweetknees, not at all. I feel exactly the way I did the day I proposed to you; I honestly do. Was there any mail?'

'Just some ads and a bill. You used to listen to every word I said before we were married and you always noticed what I wore and you complimented me and you sent me flowers and you brought me little surprises and' – suddenly she sat bolt upright – 'remember those cute little notes you used to send me! I'd find them all the time,' she said sadly, staring past my shoulder, her eyes widening wistfully. 'Tucked in my purse maybe' – she smiled mournfully – 'or in a glove. Or they'd come to the office on post cards, even in telegrams a couple times. All the other girls used to say that were just darling.' She swung to face me. 'Honey, why don't you ever . . .'

'Help!' I said. 'Help, help!'

'What do you mean?' Marion demanded coolly, and I tried to explain.

'Look, honey,' I said briskly, putting an arm companionably around her shoulders, 'we've been married four years. Of course the honeymoon's over! What kind of imbeciles,' I asked with complete reasonableness, 'would we be if it weren't? I love you, sure,' I assured her, shrugging a shoulder. 'Of course. You bet. Always glad to see you; any wife of old Al Pullen is a wife of mine! But after four years I walk up the stairs when I come home;

I no longer run up three at a time. That's life,' I said, clapping her cheerfully on the back. 'Even four-alarm fires eventually die down, you know.' I smiled at her fondly. 'And as for cute little notes tucked in your purse – help, help!' I should have known better, I guess; there are certain things you just can't seem to explain to a woman.

I had trouble getting to sleep that night – the davenport is much too short for me – and it was around two forty-five before I finally sank into a kind of exhausted broken-backed coma. Breakfast next morning, you can believe me, was a glum affair at the town home of Mr and Mrs Alfred E. Pullen, well-known, devoted couple.

Who can say whether the events of the night before affected those which now followed? I certainly couldn't; I was too tired, dragging home from the office along Third Avenue, heading uptown from Thirty-fourth Street about five thirty the next evening. I was tired, depressed, irritated, and in no hurry at all to get home. It was hot and muggy outside and I was certain Marion would give me cold cuts for supper – and all evening long, for that matter. My tie was pulled down, my collar open, hat shoved back, coat slung over one shoulder, and trudging along the sidewalk there I got to wishing things were different.

I didn't care how, exactly – just different. For example, how would things be right now, it occurred to me, if I'd majored in creative botany at college instead of physical ed? Or what would I be doing at this very moment if I'd gone to Siam with Tom Biehler that time? Or if I'd got the job with Enterprises, Incorporated, instead of Serv-Eez? Or if I hadn't broken off with what's-her-name, that big, black-haired girl who could sing 'Japanese Sandman' through her nose?

At Thirty-sixth Street I stopped at the corner newsstand, plunking my dime down on the counter before the man who ran it; we knew each other long since, though I don't think we've ever actually spoken. Glancing at me, he scooped up my dime, grabbed a paper from one of the

stacks and folded it as he handed it to me; and I nodded my thanks, tucking it under my arm, and walked on. And that's when it happened; I glanced up a brick building kitty-corner across the street and there on a blank side wall three or four stories up was a painted advertisement – a narrow-waisted bottle filled with a reddish-brown beverage and lying half buried in a bed of blue-white ice. Painted just over the bottle in a familiar script were the words. 'DRINK COCO-COOLA'.

Do you see? It didn't say 'Coca-Cola'. Not quite. And staring up at that painted sign, I knew it was no sign painter's mistake. They don't make mistakes like that; not on great big outdoor signs that take a couple of men several days to paint. I knew it couldn't possibly be a rival soft drink either; the spelling and entire appearance of this ad were too close to those of Coca-Cola. No, I knew that sign was meant to read 'Coco-Coola', and turning to walk on finally – well, it may strike you as insane what I felt certain I knew from the sight of that painted sign high above a New York street.

But within two steps that feeling was confirmed. I glanced out at the street beside me; it was rush hour and the cars streamed past, clean cars and dirty ones, old and new. But every one of them was painted a single colour only, mostly black, and there wasn't a tail fin or strip of chromium in sight. These were modern, fast, good-looking cars, you understand, but utterly different in design from any I'd ever before seen. The traffic lights on Third Avenue clicked to red, the cars slowed and stopped, and now as I walked along past them I was able to read some of their names. There were a Ford, a Buick, two Wintons, a Stutz, a Cadillac, a Dort, a Kissel, an Oldsmobile, and at least four or five small Pierce-Arrows. Then, glancing down Thirty-seventh Street as I passed it, I saw a billboard advertising Picayune Cigarettes: AMERICA'S LARGEST-SELLING BRAND. And now a Third Avenue bus dragged past me, crammed with people as

usual this time of day, but it was shaped a little differently and it was painted blue and white.

I spun suddenly around on the walk, looking frantically for the Empire State Building. But it was there, all right, just where it was supposed to be, and I actually sighed with relief. It was shorter, though, by a good ten stories at least. When had all this happened? I wondered dazedly and opened my paper, but there was nothing unusual in it – till I noticed the name at the top of the page. New York *Sun*, it said, and I stood on the sidewalk gaping at it because the *Sun* hasn't been published in New York for years.

Do you understand now? I did, finally, but of course I like to read – when I get the chance, that is – and I'm extremely well grounded in science from all the science fiction I've read. So I was certain, presently, that I knew what had happened; maybe you've figured it out too.

Years ago someone had to decide on a name for a new soft drink and finally picked 'Coca-Cola'. But certainly he considered other possible alternatives; and if the truth could be known, I'll bet one of them was 'Coco-Coola'. It's not a bad name – sounds cool and refreshing – and he may have come very close to deciding on it.

And how come Ford, Buick, Chevrolet, and Oldsmobile survived while the Moon, Willys-Knight, Hupmobile, and Kissel didn't? Well, at some point or other maybe a decision was made by the men who ran the Kissel Company, for example, which might just as easily have been made another way. If it had, maybe Kissel would have survived and be a familiar sight today.

Instead of Lucky Strikes, Camels, and Chesterfields, we might be buying chiefly Picayunes, Sweet Caporals, and Piedmonts. We might not have the Japanese beetle or the atom bomb. While the biggest newspaper in New York could be the *Sun*, and George Coopernagel might be President. If – what would the world be like right now, what would you or I be doing? – if only things in the past had happened just a tiny bit differently. There are

thousands of possibilities, of course; there are millions and trillions. There is every conceivable kind of world, in fact; and a theory of considerable scientific standing – Einstein believed it – is that these other possible worlds actually exist – all of them, side by side and simultaneously with the one we happen to be familiar with.

I believed it too now, naturally; I knew what had happened, all right. Walking along Third Avenue through the late afternoon on my way home from the office, I had come to one of the tiny points where two of these alternate worlds intersected somehow. And I had walked off out of one into another slightly altered, somewhat different word of 'If' that was every bit as real and which existed quite as much as the one I'd just left.

For maybe a block I walked on, stunned but with a growing curiosity and excitement – because it had occurred to me to wonder where I was going. I was walking on with a definite purpose and destination, I realized; and when a traffic light beside me clicked to green, I took the opportunity to cross La Guardia Avenue, as it was labelled now, and then continue west along Thirty-ninth Street. I was going somewhere, no doubt about that; and in the instant of wondering where I felt a chill along my spine. Because suddenly I knew.

All the memories of my life in another world, you understand, still existed in my mind, from distant past to the present. But beginning with the moment that I had turned from the newsstand to glance up at that painted sign, another set of memories – an alternate set of memories of my other life in this alternate world – began stirring to life underneath the first. But they were dim and faint yet, out of focus. I knew where I was going – vaguely – and I no more had to think how to get there than any other man on his way home from work. My legs simply moved in an old familiar pattern, carrying me up to the double glass doors of a big apartment building, and the doorman said, 'Evening, Mr Pullen. Hot today.'

'You said it, Charley,' I answered and walked on into

the lobby. Then my legs were carrying me up the stairs to the second floor, then down a corridor to an apartment door which stood open. And just as I did every night, I realized, I walked into the living-room, tossing my copy of the *Sun* to the davenport. I was wearing a suit I'd never seen before, I noticed, but it fitted me perfectly, of course, and was a little worn.

'Hi, I'm home,' I heard my voice call out as always. And at one and the same time I knew, with complete and time-dulled familiarity – and also wondered with intense and fascinating curiosity – who in the world was going to answer; who in *this* world?

An oven door slammed in the kitchen as I turned to hang up my suit coat in the hall closet as always, then footsteps sounded on the wood floor between the kitchen and the living-room. And as she said, 'Hi, darling,' I turned to see my wife walking towards me.

I had to admire my taste in this world. She was a big girl, tall and not quite slim; black-haired and with a very fair complexion; quite a pretty face with a single vertical frown line between her brows; and she had an absolutely gorgeous figure with long handsome legs. 'Why, hel-lo,' I said slowly. 'What a preposterously good-looking female you are!'

Her jaw dropped in simple astonishment, her blue eyes narrowing suspiciously. I held my arms wide then, walking towards her delightedly, and, while she accepted my embrace, she drew back to sniff my breath. She couldn't draw back very far, though, because my embrace – I simply couldn't help this – was tight and close; this fine-looking girl was a spectacular armful. 'Now I know why I go to the office every day,' I was saying as I nuzzled her lovely white neck, an extremely agreeable sensation. 'There had to be a reason and now I know what it is. It's so I can come home to this.'

'Al, what in the world is the matter with you?' she said. Her voice was still astonished but she'd quit trying to draw back.

'Nothing you can't remedy,' I said, 'in a variety of delightful ways,' and I kissed her again.

'Honey,' she murmured after a considerable time. 'I have to fix supper,' and she made a little token effort to get away. 'Supper can wait,' I answered, and my voice was a full octave deeper, 'but I can't.' Again I kissed her, hard and eagerly, full on the lips. Her great big beautiful blue eyes widened in amazement – then they slowly closed and she smiled languorously.

Marion's face abruptly rose up in my mind. There in the forefront of my consciousness and conscience suddenly was her betrayed and indignant face, every bit as vivid as though she'd actually walked in through the door to discover this sultry brunette in my arms; and I could feel my face flame with guilt. Because I couldn't kid myself, I couldn't possibly deny the intensity of the pleasure I'd felt at this girl in my arms. I knew how very close I'd come to betraying Marion and I felt terribly ashamed and stood wondering – this long length of glorious girlhood still in my arms – how to end the situation with charm and grace. A moment later her eyes opened and she looked up at me questioningly, those full ripe moist lips slightly apart. 'Hate to say this,' I said then, sniffing the air thoughtfully, 'but seems to me I smell something burning – besides me.'

'Oh!' – she let out a little shriek and as she ran to the kitchen I actually closed my eyes and sighed with a terrible relief. I didn't know how I'd walked into this other alternate world or how I could leave it, but Marion was alive in my mind while the world around me seemed unreal. In the kitchen I heard the oven door open, heard water run in the sink, then the momentary sizzle of cooking meat; and I walked quickly to the davenport and snatched up my copy of the *Sun*.

As I raised it to my face the tap of high heels sounded on the wood floor just outside the kitchen door. There was silence as they crossed the rug toward me, then the davenport cushion beside me sank; I felt a deliciously

warm breath on my cheek, and I had to lower my trembling rattling newspaper and smile into the sloe eyes of the creature beside me.

Once again – my head slowly shaking in involuntary approval – I had to admire my own good taste; this was not a homely woman. 'I turned the oven down,' she murmured. 'It might be better to have dinner a little later. When it gets cooler,' she added softly.

I nodded quickly. 'Good idea. Paper says it's the hottest day in five hundred years,' I babbled. 'Doctors advise complete immobility.'

But the long-legged beauty beside me wasn't listening. 'So I'm the reason you like to come home, am I?' she breathed into my ear. 'It's been a long time, darling, since you said anything like that.'

'H'm'm,' I murmured and nodded frantically at the paper in my hands. 'I see they're going to tear down City Hall,' but she was blowing gently in my ear now. Then she pulled the *Sun* from my paralysed fingers, tossed it over her shoulder, and leaned toward me. *Marion!* I was shrieking silently. *Help!* Then the raven-haired girl beside me had her arms around my neck and I simply did not know what to do; I thought of pretending to faint, claiming sunstroke.

Then with the blinding force of a revelation it came to me. Through no fault of my own I was in another world, another life. The girl in my arms – somehow that's where she was now – was singing softly, almost inaudibly. It took me a moment to recognize the tune. Then finally I knew, finally I recognized this magnificent girl. ' "Just a Japanese Sandman," ' she was singing softly through her lovely nose and now I remembered fully everything about the alternate world I was in. I hadn't broken off with this girl at all – not in this particular world! Matter of fact, I suddenly realized, I'd never even met Marion in this world. It was even possible, it occurred to me now, that she'd never been born. In any case, this was the girl I'd married in this world. No denying it, this was my wife

here beside me with her arms around my neck; we'd been married three years, in fact. And now I knew what to do – perfectly well.

Oh, boy! What a wonderfut time Vera and I had in the months that followed. My work at the office was easy, no strain at all. I seemed to have an aptitude for it and, just as I'd always suspected, I made rather more money at Enterprises, Incorporated, than that Serv-Eez outfit ever paid in their lives. More than once, too, I left the office early, since no one seemed to mind, just to hurry back home – leaping up the stairs three at a time – to that lovely big old Vera again. And at least once every week I'd bring home a load of books under my arm, because she loved to read, just like me; and I'd made a wonderful discovery about this alternate world.

Life, you understand, was different in its details. The San Francisco Giants had won the 1962 Series, for example; the Second Avenue El was still up; Yucatan gum was the big favourite; television was good; and several extremely prominent people whose names would astound you were in jail. But basically the two worlds were much the same. Drugstores, for example, looked and smelled just about the same; and one night on the way home from work I stopped in at a big drugstore to look over the racks of paperback books and made a marvellous discovery.

There on the revolving metal racks were the familiar rows of glossy little books, every one of which, judging from the covers, seemed to be about an abnormally well-developed girl. Turning the rack slowly I saw books by William Faulkner, Bernard Glemser, Agatha Christie, and Charles Einstein, which I'd read and liked. Then, down near the bottom of the rack my eye was caught by the words, 'By Mark Twain'. The cover showed an old side-wheeler steamboat, and the title was *South from Cairo*. A reprint fitted out with a new title, I thought, feeling annoyed; and I picked up the book to see just which of

Mark Twain's it really was. I've read every book he wrote – *Huckleberry Finn* at least a dozen times since I discovered it when I was eleven years old.

But the text of this book was new to me. It seemed to be an account, told in the first person by a young man of twenty of his application for a job on a Mississippi steamboat. And then, from the bottom of a page, a name leaped out at me. '"Finn, sir," I answered the captain,' the text read, '"but mostly they call me Huckleberry."'

For a moment I just stood there in the drugstore with my mouth hanging open; then I turned the little book in my hands. On the back cover was a photograph of Mark Twain – the familiar shock of white hair, the moustache, that wise old face. But underneath this the brief familiar account of his life ended with saying that he had died in 1918 in Mill Valley, California. Mark Twain had lived eight years longer in this alternate world, and had written – well, I didn't yet know how many more books he had written in this wonderful world but I knew I was going to find out. And my hand was trembling as I walked up to the cashier and gave her two bits for my priceless copy of *South from Cairo*.

I love reading in bed, and that night I read a good half of my new Mark Twain in bed with Vera, and afterward – well, afterward she fixed me a nice cool Tom Collins. And oh, boy, this was the life all right.

In the weeks that followed – that lanky length of violet-eyed womanhood cuddled up beside me, singing softly through her nose – I read a new novel by Ernest Hemingway, the best of all, I think. I read a serious wonderfully good novel by James Thurber, and something else I'd been hoping to find for years – the sequel to a marvellous book called *Delilah*, by Marcus Goodrich. In fact, I read some of the best reading since Gutenberg kicked things off – a good deal of it aloud to Vera, who enjoyed it as much as I did. I read *Mistress Murder*, a hilarious detective story by George S. Kaufman; *The Queen Is Dead*, by

George Bernard Shaw; *The Clock of Time*, a collection of short stories by someone or other I never heard of, but not too bad; a wonderful novel by Allen Marple; a group of fine stories about the advertising business by Alfred Eichler; a terrific play by Orson Welles; and a whole volume of Sherlock Holmes stories by A. Conan Doyle.

For four or five months, as Vera rather aptly remarked, I thought, it was like a second honeymoon. I did all the wonderful little things, she said, that I used to do on our honeymoon and before we were married; I even thought up some new ones. And then – all of a sudden one night – I wanted to go to a night club.

All of a sudden I wanted to get out of the house in the evening and do something else for a change. Vera was astonished – wanted to know what was the matter with me, which is typical of a woman. If you don't react precisely the same way day after endless day, they think something must be wrong with you. They'll even insist on it. I didn't want any black-cherry ice cream for dessert, I told Vera one night at dinner. Why not, she wanted to know – which is idiotic if you stop to think about it. I didn't want any because I didn't want any, that's all! But being a woman she had to have a reason; so I said, 'Because I don't like it.'

'But of course you like it,' she said. 'You always used to like it!'

You see what I mean? Anyway, we did go to this night club, but it wasn't much fun. Vera got sleepy, and we left, and were home before twelve. Then she wasn't sleepy but I was. Couple nights later I came home from the office and was changing my clothes; she said something or other and I didn't hear her and didn't answer, and we actually had a little argument. She wanted to know why I always looked at every coin in my pocket like an idiot every time I changed clothes. I explained quietly enough; told her about the ad I used to read as a kid and how I was

still looking for a 1913 Liberty-head nickel worth thousands of dollars, which was the truth.

But it wasn't the whole truth. As I looked through the coins I'd collected in my pocket during the day – the Woodrow Wilson dimes, the Grover Cleveland pennies, the nickels with George Coopernagel's profile, and all the other familiar coins of the world I now lived in – I understood something that had puzzled me once.

These other alternate worlds in which we also live intersect here and there – at a corner newsstand, for example, on Third Avenue in New York and at many another place, too, no doubt. And from these intersecting places every once in a while something from one of these worlds – a Woodrow Wilson dime, for example – will stray into another one. I'd found such a dime and when I happened to plank it down on the counter of that little newsstand there at an intersection of the two alternate worlds, that dime bought a newspaper in the world it belonged in. And I walked off into that world with the New York *Sun* under my arm. I knew this now, and I'd known it long since. I understood it finally, but I didn't tell Vera. I simply told her I was looking for a 1913 Liberty-head nickle. I didn't tell her I was also looking for a Roosevelt dime.

I found one, too. One night finally, sure enough, there it lay in my palm – a dime with the profile of Franklin D. Roosevelt on its face. And when I slapped it down on the counter of the little newsstand next evening, there at the intersection of two alternate worlds, I was trembling. The man snatched up a paper, folding it as he handed it to me, and I tucked it under my arm and walked on for three or four steps, hardly daring to breathe. Then I opened the paper and looked at it. New York *World-Telegram*, the masthead read, and I began to run – all the way to Forty-fourth Street, then east to First Avenue, and then up three flights of stairs.

I could hardly talk I was so out of breath when I burst

into the apartment, but managed to gasp out the only word that mattered. 'Marion!' I said and grabbed her to me, almost choking her, because my arms hit the back of her head about where Vera's shoulders would have been. But she managed to talk, struggling to break loose, her voice sort of muffled against my coat.

'Al!' she said. 'What in the world is the matter with you?'

For her, of course, I'd been here last night and every night for the months and years past. And of course, back in this world, I remembered it, too, but dimly, mistily. I stepped back now and looked down at the marvellous tiny size of Marion, at that wonderful, petite figure, at her exquisite and fragile blonde beauty. 'Nothing's the matter with me,' I said, grinning down at her. 'It's just that I've got a beautiful wife and was in a hurry to get home to her. Anything wrong with that?'

There wasn't; not a thing, and – well, it's been wonderful, my life with Marion, ever since. It's an exciting life; we're out three and four nights a week, I guess – dancing, the theatre, visiting friends, going to night clubs, having dinner out, even bowling. It's the way things used to be, as Marion has aptly said. In fact, she remarked recently, it's like a second honeymoon, and she's wonderfully happy these days and so am I.

Oh, sometimes I'm a little tired at night lately. There are times after a tough day at Serv-Eez when I'd almost rather stay home and read a good book; it's been quite a while since I did. But I don't worry about that. Because the other night, about two thirty in the morning, just back from the Mirimba, standing at my dresser looking through the coins in my pocket, I found it – another Woodrow Wilson dime. You come across them every once in a while, I've noticed, if you just keep your eyes open; Wilson dimes, Ulysses Grant quarters, Coopernagel nickels. And I've got my Wilson dime safely tucked away, and – well, I'm sure Vera, that lithe-limbed creature, will be mighty

glad to see her husband suddenly acting his old self once again. I imagine it'll be like a third honeymoon. Just as – in time – it will be for Marion.

So there you are, brother, coin collecting can be profitable. And FUN too! Why don't you start – tonight!

THE LOVE LETTER

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 premonition or feeling 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 try-

ing to work at a wobbly end table I couldn't get my knees under.

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, 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 fingertips 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. 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 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 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. Standing 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 centre, a rider on a galloping post horse. 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 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 kerbs, the high, late moonlight softening the lines of the big concrete 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 centre of its 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.

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 on to my envelope; 972 I printed under the name of the girl who had once lived here, Brock Place, Brooklyn, New York. Then I turned towards 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, 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 on to 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. 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 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 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 mystery to me, an ancient, 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. Its 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 over 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. 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 fulfilment 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 busy all the next week. I work for a wholesale grocery company; we got a big new account, a chain of supermarkets, and that meant extra work for everyone. More often than not I had my 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 week-end 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 section on colonial and pre-colonial 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 1870s – 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 1880s, 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 tyres; and a half dozen or so nearly paintless boarding houses, 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 kerb 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 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. 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 storeys high and with attics above them for children to play in and discover the relics of childhoods before theirs. 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 palmleaf 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 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 centre 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 centre desk drawer stood half open as I'd left it and as my eye fell on it I realized 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 centre 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 then, as every human being knows. 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 hasn't really changed 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 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 1962 and that I dropped my letter, properly stamped, written and addressed in 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 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 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 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 1962. 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 eighty 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 alter what you have already done.

Into the second drawer 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 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 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 colour, mounted on heavy stiff cardboard, and with the photographer's name in tiny gold script down in the corner. *Brunner & Holland, Parisian Photography, Brooklyn, NY.*

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 the 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 made 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. 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.

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