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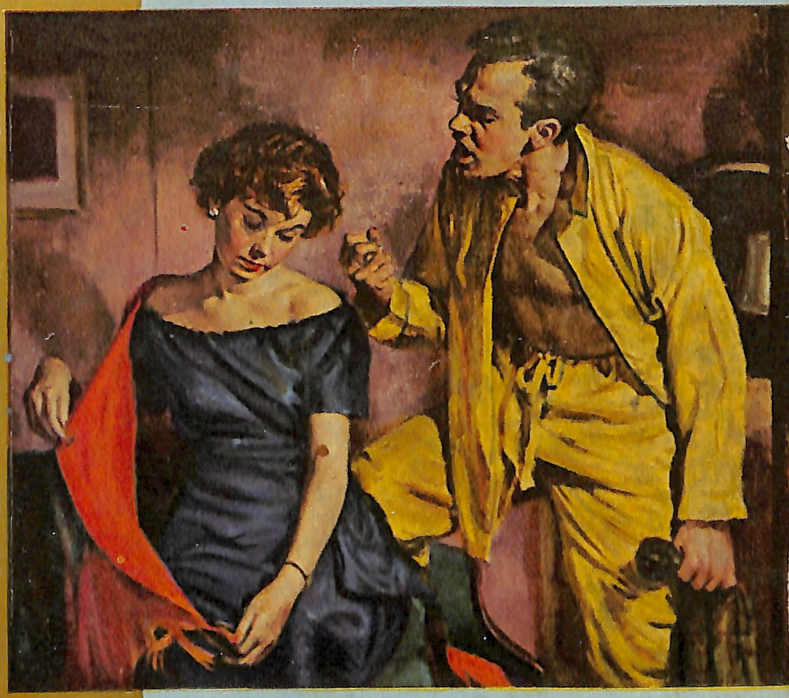

VARDIS FISHER

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We Are Betrayed

VARDIS FISHER

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TO

MARGARET TRUSLER

'Tis morning: but no morning can restore
What we have forfeited. I see no sin:
The wrong is mixed. In tragic life, God wot,
No villain need be! Passions spin the plot:
We are betrayed by what is false within.

GEORGE MEREDITH

WE ARE BETRAYED

PART I

AUGUST 14, 1906

Sick with rage and pity, hating such butchery as this and the dark wrong of its purpose; hating anything in life, whatever its reason, that reduced a lordly beast to such a mean and abject and impotent state; and hating in human beings their lust and greed and the way they broke all things to their will, Vridar withdrew and went under the bank. And he sat here so long, trying to understand, trying to fathom the black underworld of human purpose, that darkness came and with darkness his mother's voice. . . .

I

WHEN Vridar married Neloa Doole he was ashamed of her: not only of what she had been and of what she had done, but of her ignorance also. He was annoyed by her love of tinsel and gewgaw, of strut and glitter; and by her childlike interest in ornaments and powder and rouge. In nearly all matters that touched him vitally, she was untutored and unconcerned. Scoundrelism in politics or fraud in jurists or monopolies and poverty and strikes: over these her consciousness moved as water moves over stone. The world for her was a garden in which everything blossomed and was sweet. Good and evil, honor and dishonor, humility and greed: these for her were queer symbols out of a dictionary and were of no more importance to the heart of life than darkness was to growth. The War for Vridar was a nightmare of blood and blundering, but for her it was a field in Flanders where men gathered to the rainbows of glory. For him the greed of humankind was a blight and a curse but for her it was a strange notion out of a textbook. And when he howled in fury, as he often did, against injustice and the bedevilment of his race, she looked at him with troubled eyes and her gaze was luminous with wonder and pity. When he invoked God's wrath on exploiters of the weak and the helpless, he could tell by her silence, and by her childlike stare, that she did not understand at all.

And because he was ashamed of her he became her relentless tutor, determined to make of her an object of his pride. She would go to school as he went and reach the heights that he reached. She would lose her interest in the silly and shining things of life and look to the depths where greatness lay. And to this end he admonished and exhorted her hour by hour. He talked of art, of science, and of all that he had learned or dreamed of, trying to fire her blood, trying to

lay her destiny on the road that was his. And when he talked she looked at him, wonderingly like a child; and her eyes were haunted by the morbid earnestness of his words; and sometimes her hands trembled a little. But she always listened, he perceived, not to what he said, but to the hatred or the love, the fury or the grief, in his voice. . . .

"You're my wife," he said. "Don't think I'll always be the damned nobody I am now. Don't think I'll always live with a girl who says mebbe and usta and he don't. I won't live with a woman whose chief interest is biscuits and curly hair and a silver buckle on her slippers." He looked at her, trying to read her thought. "You'll have to go to college," he went on. "You'll have to love books."

"I do love books," she said.

"Like hell! What kind of books? Silly stories in the popular magazines. Plots of moonlight and roses and half-wittedness. Stories of girls who marry princes and live in castles and walk in silks down marble halls."

"I don't," she said. "I like good books."

"What? Name a good book." When Vridar spoke as now, his scorn, his contempt, retired her to silence. "And another thing. You've got to learn dignity. You simper and grin at everybody. You've got to learn to tell a hypocrite when you see one; a liar when you see one; and a fool when you see one. . . . I don't know," he said in despair, "why you're so damned stupid. Anyway, you've much to learn."

"All right, you learn me."

"Teach!" he cried. "Nobody can *learn* you anything!"

The color deepened in her cheeks.

"All right, you *teach* me."

"I don't think you want a-be taught."

"I do."

"Then why do you keep saying figger for figure? I've corrected you a thousand times. . . . Why?"

"I don't know."

"Because you have no interest."

"I do have interest!"

"Then show it. Stop saying everybody their. Everybody is singular, their is plural."

"You forget," she said, "that I haven't went to school as much as you."

"There you go!" he roared. "Haven't went! *Haven't gone!*"

On the next morning Neloa was enrolled as a sophomore in the best of the Salt Lake City high schools. Vridar said she would have to study Latin and algebra and English.

"Most girls," he said, scowling at her, "want to take typewriting and cooking and doll-dressing. That's all you took last year in Rigby. And a hell of a lot you learned."

"I also took English," she said.

"Oh, you did. You took men chiefly."

"I didn't!"

And during her first weeks as a student here, Vridar scanned her reports or went to her teachers to inquire how she did.

"Look at that!" he cried one day, thrusting in scorn at her card. "82 in Latin. You trying to flunk?"

"I don't like Latin," she said.

"Oh, you don't like Latin. And why, Miss Doole, don't you like Latin?"

"I don't like my teacher. She's an old crosspatch."

"I suppose," he went on, setting a trap, "that you like your teacher of history. I've been told he's very good."

"Yes, I like him."

"Is he the best one you have?"

"I think so."

"The others," said Vridar, springing his trap, "are all women. You mean you have a sort of tender feeling for men?"

"I didn't mean that."

"Of course you meant it. If your Latin teacher was a man you'd like Latin. If your algebra teacher——"

"I wouldn't! I hate Latin."

Vridar looked at her for a long moment.

"Well, you just as well run back to Antelope. There isn't any Latin there."

"I won't. Stop talking about me going to Antelope."

"Now why don't you like Latin?"

"I don't know. I can't see any sense in it."

"Do you think you're a good judge of that?"

"Mebbe not."

"Maybe!"

"All right, maybe not."

He looked at her again. Her eyes were resentful and baffled.

"Listen, Neloa," he said unreasonably, "if you're going to be my wife you'll have to like Latin. You can learn to like it."

"I don't see how." She looked at him and her eyes flashed. "I don't think anyone likes it," she said. "Not even you."

"Of course I like it," he said, lying shamelessly.

"Well, mebbe you do. But you're the only one."

"Maybe," he said quietly. "Darling, can you say maybe?"

"*Maybe!*"

"That's better," he said.

When they went to a dance or to a show or when they walked in the park Vridar watched her with morbidly searching eyes and he missed nothing, no matter how small, of what she did. He studied her smile and her walk, the way she sat, the way she used her hands; and what she said and how she said it; and the emotions behind her gestures, the secret meanings that looked out of her thoughts. He wished her to be, as he himself wished to be, both discriminating and incredulous. He wanted her to be dignified and aloof. But Neloa was artless; she was not critical, either of herself or of others; and when she smiled or spoke, her manner was that of a child. Her responses were natural and undisciplined. Her heart with all save Vridar was as open as her palm.

After they had been in the city only a few days he went with her to a dance. He had never danced with her. And now, instead of giving himself to the music and the allegory,

he studied her dancing, observing how and where she put her hands on him; and what her response was when he danced cheek to cheek or when he reached round her and touched her breast or when he thrust a knee between her thighs. She was his wife, of course; and it ought to have occurred to him —but it did not—that such intimacies were a part of wedlock. For him they were a record of her character and her soul.

But he did not rebuke her now. He decided, in his crafty and desperate way, to let her dance with another man. Standing with her in a crowd he glanced about him and he saw men everywhere looking at his wife. They always did. If he walked a street with her, men would stare at Neloa and turn after passing to look again. And all this interest did not, strange as it may seem, flatter him at all. It annoyed and angered him. He wanted men to mind their own business and not turn their covetous sexual stare on his wife. . . .

And now, observing that men looked at her, Vridar, a little curious, looked at her too. She was lovely and radiant—this he admitted; and he wished—but for a moment only—that she was hunchbacked or squint-eyed. Her hair like a heavy deep cloak lay down her back. Beyond the brightness of her eyes was a haunting inscrutable dusk. Her red lips smiled and showed her perfect teeth. She wore dark red and the color was part of her, like that in her cheeks; and it set off the dazzling luster of her eyes and hair. . . . Vridar observed, too, that women looked at her, but not in the way of the men.

"Shall I get you a partner?" he asked. The smile left her mouth. She had learned to suspect hidden meanings in everything that he said. "It's all right with me," he assured her, lying earnestly. "I want you to have fun." She searched his face for the lie but he was too cunning a liar.

He looked round him for a homely fellow who would be honest and stupid. He saw one: a big oaf with uncombed hair and a crooked nose. But now, changing swiftly, as was his way, from notion to notion, he resolved to bring to her the handsomest man he could find. This gesture sprang not only from self-contempt and a sardonic confusion of his whims,

but also from the cruelty and sadism in him: because he had a wish, now as always, to dramatize his pain. He wanted to make a spectacle of himself. He wanted to learn what a handsome man could do with her. He wanted, indeed, to bring his despair and his torture to a burning crisis of wrath. . . .

"You see anyone," he asked quietly, "you want a-dance with?"

She looked at him. He did not look at her because his purpose, he knew, was too clearly written in his eyes. He told her to wait here and he would fetch a partner and he moved through the crowd.

A few moments later he returned, bringing with him a college student: a tall broad Adonis who wore both his clothes and his manners with insolent ease. But Neloa was gone. Vridar looked for her among idlers, along the benches by the wall, and by the open windows where dancers went for air.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I left my wife here but wives don't stay where you leave them. I suppose you've noticed that?"

"What?" asked the man.

Then Vridar looked at the dancers and when he saw Neloa in the arms of a tall dark man he stood fixed in amazement. He remembered that time, only a few months ago, when he went with Neloa to a dance in Swan Valley. She deserted him then and he got drunk and the rowdies of Irwin stood him by a wall and punched his face. He wished he had a bottle of whiskey now. . . .

"I'm sorry," he said again. "My wife is dancing." He looked at this handsome prig and grinned. "You can't tell about women," he said. His grin was ghastly with humiliation and rage. The man shrugged and went away and Vridar found a bench and sat down. He shook so with fury that the muscles twitched in his arms and legs.

His first impulse was to rush to the dark man and knock him end over end. His next was to go home. His third was to find a harlot and get drunk and spend the night in lust. But it was the fourth impulse to which he gave himself. He resolved to find a girl and dance with her and her alone until all dancing was done.

Moving through the crowd, and watching Neloa but hiding from her all the while, he came upon Susie Perkins. Six months ago he had taken Susie home from a dance and had kissed her. He remembered that her kisses were hungry and wet; that her breasts were soft and pendent; that her laugh was shrill. His cousin Luke said you could tell a virgin by her breasts. "The woman I marry," Luke had said, "will have hard bubbies. I don't want no girl every man has played with. . . ." Vridar thought of these words as he looked at Susie.

"Hello," he said.

"Hello," said Susie. "Where you been all these months?"

"Oh, just knocking around the world."

"You been to Europe?"

"No, just bumming around the States. . . . Let's dance."

They danced. Susie was a slender sinuous girl. Her body hugged him like wet clothes from her throat to her knees. When she looked at him, she moved only her head and shoulders back, keeping her belly and thighs pressed against him.

"You glad to see me?"

"Sure," he said.

She sighed and came closer. She put her head on his breast and when he looked down at her he saw that her eyes were shut. He could feel the passion in her and the trembling of her hand on his arm and he wanted to leave her and go home. But dancing with her, he reflected, would make a pretty picture for Neloa to see.

He searched the throng but Neloa was not dancing now. She was standing beyond the rope and she was looking at him. "Go on!" Vridar thought. "Go dance round and round with your Willies! This is a game two can play!" But he felt very unhappy about it. This was not marriage as he had dreamed of marriage. This was not love. It was small and spiteful warfare and it would lead to contempt and divorce. Nevertheless, she would have to learn. Twice now he had been to a dance with her and she had made a monkey of him both times. She had no dignity and no taste; and he wondered sometimes if she had any sense. If a man asked her to dance,

she smiled and gave herself, her vanity standing in monstrous tyranny above her brain. . . .

When this dance was finished, he talked with Susie and watched Neloa; and then he danced with Susie again. He saw a man approach Neloa and speak to her and he saw Neloa smile. The man took her arm and led her to the floor. Vridar trembled with rage and to Susie's questions he gave no answer now. Susie pouted at him and pinched the flesh of his back or she sighed as if undone.

"What you thinkun about?"

"Me?" he asked, looking at her. "Nothing, I guess."

"I'll bet it ain't what I'm thinkun about."

"What are you thinking about?"

"You'll have to guess."

She was a vulgar creature, he thought. Why in hell couldn't a man and a woman dance without thinking of their flesh and of what their flesh could do! He looked round at other girls and he could tell by their faces, by their eyes, what their emotions were doing; and he looked at the men and he hated their dreamy sexual stares. Dancing after all was only an erotic orgy in clothes. He wished he had power to strip all these persons naked and make them dance nakedly and so force them to admit what their thoughts were. He had a vision of men waltzing around with their organs erect and he chuckled. They were all ashamed of their emotion and they were all hiding from their shame. If any man here were forced to the truth he would say, "While I dance with this girl, I'm thinking of her body against me, of her belly, her breasts, her thighs; and I'm fancying myself in embrace with her. . . ." And any woman: "When I dance with a tall handsome man I am carried out of myself. I am transported. A delicious warm emotion floods my whole being and all life seems so sweet and beautiful and dancing so wonderful a thing." In such words, at least, a woman had declared herself in a book. And the frauds! The cowards and hypocrites! If dancing was clean and decent, if it was a languorous searching of passion through mind and body—and he felt deeply that it was passion and that it could be clean—then

why did human beings lie about it? For if asked why they danced they would say, Oh, dancing is such wonderful exercise! It's so aesthetic, if you know what I mean! . . .

He trailed Neloa now but she never caught him watching her. He saw that she danced close to the man and that her cheeks were flushed, her eyes bright; and that the man, a tall sleek fellow, seemed to be relaxed and giddy. Every pound of him seemed to be fixed in one thought and burning toward it, like a flame reaching out of darkness to air. And Vridar was so sick with rage that he stopped dancing and led Susie off the floor.

"You here with anyone?"

"No."

"Let's go now."

"All right."

He walked home with her in a beautiful night. The trees along the walk were heaped with autumn and the air was heavy with autumn smells. If he could, Vridar reflected, he would seduce this girl tonight. He would not be a simple knothead forever. If life were chiefly, as it seemed to be, a matter of lust and fornication, of babbling shallows of virtue and the fraudulent hypocrisy of clothes, he might as well jump in where a man could swim. He had always been wading, and wading was the sport of a child. There was the sea for those who dared it. . . .

When he came to Susie's porch he laid hands on her shoulders and faced her. He looked at her eyes and read her thought.

"You want to?" he said. Her eyelids fell. She moved swiftly to him.

"Yes," she said.

He looked round him on the porch for a bed or a mattress for her to lie on. In a corner was a tent and this he folded by a railing where passersby could not see. He led her to it and lifted her in his arms and laid her on the tent. Then he knelt by her; but when he touched her breasts, and when he saw the luminous hunger in her eyes, something now, as in former whiles, held him transfixed. He could no more

have embraced this girl than he could have murdered her; and he knew this, and he turned away, hating himself. He rose to his feet and looked down at her. He looked round him as if lost and then he left the porch and found the street and turned home.

II

HE WAS living in two dismal dark rooms in the attic of Professor Yupp's house. He went to this house and climbed a corkscrew stairway and entered his rooms. Neloa was not here. For a long moment he sat on a bed, wondering what he should do; and he thought now, as he had thought in many hours that were gone, that it would be best to kill himself. But he left the house and went to the corner and watched the trolleys come and go. Then he boarded a car and rode to the hall. The dancers were leaving now and he went among them, looking for his wife. He entered the hall but nobody was there and he came out and went to a corner where groups waited. Up streets to the north, south, east, and west, he could see couples walking; but he had no notion of which direction Neloa would take. He resolved to return home and wait for her.

He sat on the porch of Yupp's house and it seemed to him that he waited for hours. When he heard a trolley coming he would rise and go to the corner; he would look at those who got off; and he would return to the porch. Twice he climbed the stairway and explored in his rooms. He searched for her in the bathroom and in closets and under the bed. And all these doings, he realized, were pitiably silly; because Neloa never jested or played with him at hide-and-seek.

He was waiting at the corner when he saw her. She was not alone. She was walking with a man. He was the tall dark man with whom she had danced the first dance. Vridar

went forth to meet them and Neloa and the man stopped and they all looked at one another.

"Well?" Vridar said.

Neloa did not speak and the man did not speak. Neloa was baffled and angry and afraid. The man looked at Vridar with wonder and contempt.

"It's nice of you," Vridar said, "to fetch my wife home. What do I owe you?"

"Owe me! Listen——"

"Don't start anything," Vridar said. He strove to speak quietly but he was murderous. "Do you know what happens to men who run around with other men's wives? Perhaps you do." The man looked at Neloa. She was staring at Vridar as if paralyzed. "You'd better run along," Vridar said to the man. "I mean," he repeated, looking at the man with deadly purpose, "that you'd better run along." Again the man looked at Neloa.

"Shall I go now?" he asked.

"Yes," she said.

The man shrugged and turned away. He went down the street and stopped and looked back.

"Good night," he said. "I'll see you again."

"You'll what!" Vridar cried. He moved after the man but Neloa seized him.

"Don't!" she gasped. "Vridar, please!"

He tried to throw her off but she clung desperately and in the struggle they both fell to the walk. He fought to loosen her clutch but her fingers were cataleptic. Looking up, he saw the man down the street, staring at him.

"Come on back!" he shouted. "Come and help her!" He was a madman now. "Come and help her!" He was blind with fury now. With all his strength he shook her off and got to his feet. He started for the man but like a cat Neloa sprang to him and got her arms around him and locked her fingers.

"Please go!" she called to the man. "Please!"

The man turned and went down the street and Vridar

fought again to loosen Neloa's hands. Unable to, he clutched her throat and shook her.

"I'll kill you!" he cried.

"Do!" she said.

Then he heard a door open and he saw a man on a porch. The man said, "What's the trouble out here?" and Vridar said, "None of your business!" and the man stood in pyjamas and looked at him.

"Let's go home!" Neloa whispered. "Please." Then she went swiftly up the walk and Vridar stood there and looked at the man.

"Go on back to bed," he said to the man in pyjamas. Then he went up the street and found the stairway and his rooms and he saw Neloa lying face downward on the bed. He thought she had killed herself and a horrible fear struck through him. He grasped her and turned her over, crying her name; but she was all right. She was weeping a little: that was all.

"Neloa," he said, "I'm going. We can't live together. There's no use to try." She did not move but he knew she was listening. He opened the door and she sprang up and came to him like a tigress, her hair and eyes wild. She grasped him and tried to draw him back into the room. She looked at him, her eyes baffled and furious; but beyond the fury was a deep dark stealth. He allowed himself to be drawn to the bed.

"Neloa," he said, "tell me: why when I take you out do you have to make a fool of me?"

"I don't."

He studied her, wondering how to make her speak frankly. He did not want her frightened humility, her yes-or-no to everything he asked. He wanted to strike clean blows to the heart of their trouble, to lay open its darkness and pain.

"Neloa, why? Tell me why you do things. Why do you smile at every strange man as if he were an old friend? Why do you dance with every fellow who asks you? Is it because you don't love me?"

"No!"

"Then why? . . . I can't understand you. Neloa, don't you know why you do things?"

"No."

"Damn it, of course you know!" He wanted to choke her, shake her, and so make her aware of herself. "Neloa," he said gently, "please talk. Speak out and let the sky fall. I can endure anything you have to confess. I can't endure your silence." She still looked at him, her gaze fixed and unhappy. "Are you afraid of me?"

"Maybe," she said.

"Then you're a simpleton. I love you clear to the bottom of my heart. I'd die for you. And I want our lives together to be a splendid thing. . . . So tell me: why did you come home with this man?"

"He asked me to."

"Is that a good reason?"

"No."

"Then why did you do it?" He saw a change in her eyes. In the darkness he saw anger, and he saw anger change the curve of her mouth. "Say it, Neloa. Let us be frank."

"Well," she said, and her voice trembled, "why did you go with a woman?"

"Because you made me look cheap. Can't I take you to a dance without having to tie you up like a horse?"

"You ditched me first."

"I did not. I went to find you a partner."

"Oh yes?" said Neloa and her eyes were terrible. "You wanted me to dance with another man. You wanted to see what I'd do."

"Yes," he said, "I did. Well, I'm jealous. You're life to me, Neloa, but for you I'm only the man you married. We walk in the park and if a strange man smiles at you, you smile in return. I want our intimacy to be deep and complete——" He broke off and paced the room. "Neloa, I'm a greenhorn and I know it. Most married men have a lot of wild oats in distant townships. I have none. I'm just a simple oaf from the river flats. I have quaint notions of decency and honesty. I want to be straight with you. Funny, isn't it?

Funny you married such a man. Funnier still if you were to love him. . . .

"Listen. I took that girl home. Once last spring I went with her and she seems to be silly about me. Well, I took her home and she wanted to. You know what I mean. And I said I wouldn't be a fool forever. I'd be like other men, I said. And she lay down for me and I knelt by her but I couldn't do it. Laugh at me. You have learned what men do when women lie down. But I couldn't. A fool I am. I'm in love with you and I want only you. . . .

"Neloa, I didn't even kiss her," he went on, his calm more terrible than his fury could ever have been. "I tried to. And it's all pretty damned funny. If I'd embraced that girl you'd think more of me now. I know. Women are like that. Some day I'll knock your teeth out and rope you to a bed and hike out and seduce a virgin. You'll adore me then. But now—" For a long moment he looked at her.

"Neloa, I worship you." He came to her and knelt at her feet. He kissed her hands and the dress on her knees. "You mean all things in life to me: my anchor and church and gods. . . ."

III

BUT he felt, nevertheless, that his marriage had been a mistake and he was weary of its blind passion and abuse. He was weary of his studies, too. His instructors, he now saw clearly, were afraid of life: their lectures where thin flummery, their whole dialectic was an evasion of truth. His teacher of psychology ranted against Freud and spent time in the classroom telling how his baby daughter was learning to say da-da. His teacher of economics stared with implacable contempt when a question veered to Karl Marx. And his teacher of literature said *King Lear* was one of the world's

great tragedies and for Vridar it was only a pitiable record of a selfish and incredible fool.

But without books and his love of books he was lost. He thought of going to France and reducing all his woes to dust where they belonged; or of turning to the underworld and joining the outcasts; for nihilism was strong in his blood. His idealisms, his dreams, born of self-pitying illusions, now fed on hate. He wanted a way to strike into pain and purge himself and most unexpectedly a way was given. For a man said to him one afternoon, "Why don't you go out for football?" and Vridar went.

And he was amused. Football players were big-jawed fellows who lived on beans and beef; and as he looked at their strong naked bodies and heard their lewd jests, he envied the unashamed way of them; and he felt pity for himself. Lars Ongin, the coach, had been a great athlete: powerful, aggressive, and profane of tongue, he was the lord of might and muscle in this school. He was superb and overwhelming.

Vridar's underwear was ragged, his socks had holes in them, and his tie was a shabby thing that he never unknotted but slipped over his head. He went into hiding to undress; and on the field he stood in gawky self-consciousness and watched. The ease and power with which men kicked the ball or passed it filled him with wonder. He could never do anything like that. And when the ball was thrown to him he fumbled it and then went after it like a man out of his wits. He tried to punt and missed and the coach came to him, roaring.

"What the hell you think a football is? A pillow? A mattress? Now watch me." And Lars took the ball and punted and it sailed in a lovely arc for sixty yards.

But Vridar did not give up. He was out here to win or die and neither the contempt of the players nor the furious sarcasm of Ongin could make him falter now. . . .

"Listen, Hunter, football isn't a quilting-bee. When you tackle a man make his ribs stick out of him like a picket-fence. . . . Hey, you fellows, come here!" All the men

gathered to the coach and Lars made a line on the earth. "Get back there, Hunter, and when you leave that line leave the earth and don't come down without me under you."

Vridar went thirty yards down the field. He ran to the line and sprang into the air and came down on his head. Ongin howled with rage and glee.

"God damn it, Hunter, this isn't hop-skip-and-jump!"

Vridar shook with fury. "I can't jump that far!" he said.

"No? Listen, I could jump that far when I was in diapers." He made another line. "Get back there. Kill me."

Again Vridar went down the field. He turned and drew a deep breath and he gathered all his strength and fury to this leap. He sprang from the line and brought Ongin down and shoved a knee into his ribs. Ongin got to his feet and his eyes were wicked.

"That's better. When you tackle a man put him out. There'll be someone to carry him off the field. . . ."

And on an afternoon a week later Ongin called all the recruits into line and studied them. He walked up and down, looking at their faces, one by one. He fixed his gaze on Vridar.

"Hunter, you look like a fighter. Take the ball." And to Neloa an hour later Vridar said:

"I've made the first team! What do you think of that?"

"I guess it's all right," she said.

He learned much from his weeks in football. He learned to control, at least in some degree, his furious temper; he learned the spirit of give and take, of which he had so little himself; and he learned that this game, so dear to the American heart, had very little sportsmanship in it. He had thought it fostered courage and loyalties and fair play. It employed, on the contrary, all sorts of mean and stealthy tricks.

Early in the season his team opposed a squad from a near-by fort. The man who faced Vridar in the line was a big-boned giant with an evil grin. He chewed tobacco and squirted the juice at Vridar.

"You little pansy," he said. "Does your mother know you're out?" The man tongued his tobacco and grinned.

"Watch yourself, kid. If you go over me this time I'll jerk your thing out like a halter-rope. . . ."

Ongin had told Vridar to drop and block on defensive; and on offensive to go over the line. But now, when he fell to his knee and blocked, the army center in going over him would kick at his face; and when, on offensive, Vridar went over the line, his opponent reached up with a clutching hand.

"The son-of-a-bitch," Vridar said to his captain, "is trying to castrate me! I won't stand it." Dick Hortell, captain and all-conference end, looked at Vridar.

"Don't lose your temper. He'll be taken care of soon."

And then the crisis came. Bob Glauber, fullback and the most powerful man on the team, struck the army center in his mouth and laid him out. Down from the stands came three hundred soldiers, lusting for vengeance. They came snarling and striking and Vridar and his teammates were mobbed and one of the men was taken to a hospital.

"That's football for you," Vridar said to Neloa. "The great American game. Only the coaches and players know what it's like."

A week later he went to Colorado and played against teams there. Again he was faced by a giant who strove to frighten him with ridicule and although Vridar was not frightened he was confused. At a crucial moment he fumbled the ball on a long lateral pass and it was recovered by an opponent and borne to a touchdown, with Vridar in desperate and futile pursuit. Between the halves, Ongin addressed himself to Vridar.

"What the hell were you doing out there, Hunter? Did someone have his finger in your eye? Were you writing a sonnet? Didn't I tell you Shakspere never played football?"

"It's the center. He bothers me."

"Oh. He tells you your tail is out and you look around to see and drop the ball! Listen, Hunter, if a guy bothers you, get him! Break his neck!" And Ongin swung to his quarterback. "And you, Hotchkiss, what the hell were you doing? You play football like a girl out with a man the

first time! Is that ball hot?" He looked at Hotchkiss for a long moment. "Hotchkiss," he said quietly, "you've played with yourself too much." And then he spoke to the eleven men.

"Listen, fellows, this is not a sorority picnic. You run around like a bunch of old women. You, Jim, take that end out after this. Kill him! And you, Noral, when you tackle a man you don't have your arms around a woman! They open a hole through you big enough for the Chicago fair! God damn it, you're not a bunch of tap-dancers! Tear their guts out! If you're afraid of that gang we'll go home and play drop-the-handkerchief! If you're not afraid rip their slats out! You've got them licked! Now go out and finish them! . . ."

The men all rose, looking very earnest, and trotted back to the field. They smashed the line and boxed up the flanks and made two touchdowns on a faked reverse; and they flattened two men and saw them carried away. And Vridar, plotting to put the big center on the benches, drove into him on interference and stretched him prone on a foul play. And he laughed until he wept when he saw the big fellow limp off the field. . . .

But it was in the final game of the season that he learned how stealthy and ruthless football could be. They played their traditional enemy, another Utah team. The threat of this team was a Jew, an all-conference quarterback, and a deadly open-field runner. Ongin said:

"You've got a-put Cohen out. Put him out quick."

To Glauber, their big fullback, was given the task of putting Cohen out. He would put him out, Glauber said quietly. He did not grin. Nor did anyone who listened to him feel any shame.

During the first quarter Glauber tackled Cohen again and again but that elusive Jew was like rubber. Vridar and his teammates were alarmed. They asked of Glauber, "What the hell is the matter?" and Glauber would say, "I don't know. I bust him with all I have." And then the climax came. Cohen tackled Glauber and Glauber did not rise. When the physi-

cian raised Glauber's shirt Vridar saw two inches of bone thrust from the man's back. Glauber was carried off the field in terrible agony, and the game was lost, thirty-one to seven. In the dressing-room Vridar wept. All his teammates wept except Dick Hortell. The coach went outside and smoked a cigarette and when Vridar passed him a few minutes later he saw that Ongin's eyes were wet, too.

But football was not all savage smashing and skulking ambush. There was heroism in it. There was stern discipline of the emotions and the mind. There was drama, there was glory; and though Vridar was, it seemed to him, the weakest player on the team, he found joy in his achievement and he walked in new pride. Without experience, without anything but vanity and grit, he had made the first team and played the season through. "A football hero," he said to Neloa. "And I'd never had hold of a football in my life."

Neloa looked at him but she did not share his pride. She had not lived in the city where men are often sallow and weak and she did not have the city woman's nervous interest in big men with mighty hands. She could not understand women who adored fullbacks and bull-fighters and weight-lifting giants. Only once, indeed, did she go to watch Vridar play; and then she did not rise with ten thousand persons and screech and wave banners, or shake with excitement when a team held on the one-yard line.

But for Vridar each game was a bursting glory. When he and his mates trotted to the field, and when the spectators rose in a vast throng, yelling like jungle things, and the fighting music of a band rolled over the stadium, then his heart was almost out of him. He would glance at a hillside of faces to the west, to the east, and wish he were mighty enough to hold an opponent in his palm. But all his doings, save in one game, were undramatic and obscure, and no oceans of humanity shouted his name. In this exception he faced a timid lad and floored him and went through the line again and again to throw the ball-carrier for a loss. The captain patted Vridar's shoulder. The coach shook his hand.

But he knew, nevertheless, that all his teammates but one

held him in contempt. On a trip to Colorado Hortell looked at Vridar's silly cap and said, "Where'd you get it? Why don't you throw it away?" Thereafter, Vridar studied the men more closely, observing what they wore. His own clothes were of cotton. If given five dollars, he would have bought a book instead of a hat. The derision made him conscious, not only of his clothes, but of himself as a social nobody. He was now a football man and he was stared at, in classroom and out; and he could not live quietly under the scorn. And his unhappiness, his shame, made of him for a little while a social coward. He left his proud and shabby isolation and became a fraternity man.

IV

IN THIS college most of the fraternities and sororities were locals and the difference between them and the nationals was the difference between the moon and the sun. The nationals admitted only the choicest aristocrats. The Sigma Chis were the athletic monarchs; the Pi Kaps were the princes of scholarship and scribbling; and the Phi Delts were lords of the gardenia and dress suit. Among the sororities there was only one national. Its members were daughters of bankers and bishops; nieces of senators; and far cousins of mayors and undertakers and Cache Valley fruit growers. . . .

All these names were, and had been for two years, most unlovely symbols in Vridar's mind. Nothing in college life astonished him more than the foppish insolence or the empty aloofness of these groups. "The only difference between us and Europeans," he said to Neloa, "is that they have titles, we have clubs. All a fraternity man needs is a monocle to make him as silly as he wants to be."

But when he was asked to a fraternity house he went; and he was pledged; and he began to feel pretty silly about it. It was not his running of petty errands or polishing of

shoes that distressed him; it was the malicious, and sometimes devilish, glee of those who commanded him. "Shine them shoes, Hunter. You got a-learn spirit. You got a-learn co-operate."

"Nonsense," Vridar would say. "You're full of Frank Crane."

But it was the initiation that amazed him. He entered a sepulchral chamber hung with crêpe and wanly lighted by a weird assortment of candles. All the brothers were very solemn; and Vridar, looking at one and another, felt a mad impulse to laugh. Mawry, the president, hitherto so warm and whimsical, now stood behind a sputtering candle. He looked as if a thousand dead dynasties of pomp and pageantry weighed on his mind; and flanking him were Ebbetts and Adams, quite as austere, quite as borne down.

Two other men had been pledged with Vridar. He looked at them and he saw that they were deeply affected, as if they were entering Rosicrucian corridors and staring at amulets. And again Vridar checked an impulse to roar with infernal joy. One laugh, he knew, would shatter all this grave monkey business but he only grinned.

In this gloomy crypt the secret rites were performed. In an elegiac voice, Mawry imparted to Vridar the dread secrets of this order, speaking like an emissary of death. His tone was almost spectral, as if his lungs were a vault; and with a long finger he punctuated his hagiologic testament, now placing on Vridar's shoulder a grave comma, now solemnizing his unction with a period and a pause. And Vridar, staring at the liturgic earnestness of Mawry's face, at the small sacristy of either eye, was convulsed within. He had never known, he had never dreamed, that vanity could make of human beings such side-splitting clowns. In all the vestment and capuche and karma of history, there was nothing more incredible than this.

And when, a few moments later, he was asked to repeat the oath of allegiance and brotherhood, the mirth within made him shake. "I do solemnly vow and promise that I will hold sacred. . . ." The oath was given and pledged and Vridar was

then taught the handclasp. It was an intricate solemnity of interlocking fingers and thumbs.

"What," asked Vridar of Ebbetts, "if a brother lost a hand? How would he recognize another brother?"

"In that case," said Ebbetts gravely, "I don't know. But in our secret archives it will tell."

"How often are we supposed to shake hands?"

"When a brother meets a brother."

"But I don't understand. Every time I meet a stranger am I to shake to find out if he's my brother?"

"Of course not. If he says he is, then you shake hands to find out. Then you speak a word. If he answers with the right word——"

"What word?"

"Mawry will tell you."

And when Vridar asked Mawry for the word, that solemn young man glanced about as if for spies. "The word," he said, speaking as if he were telling the one profound secret of life, "is ylang-ylang-ramus."

"The devil! What does it mean?"

"Ylang-ylang is a tree. Ramus means branch. I invented it," said Mawry, speaking with pride.

Vridar was now ushered from the ritual chamber into a spacious room. The master of ceremonies here was Bill Oaks, a sturdily stupid fellow with malicious eyes. "Get them duds off," said Bill. Vridar and his two brothers-in-the-making undressed. At one end of the room was a table and upon this table were twenty beans. Through the length of the room the brothers formed a double line and each man grasped a stout slat.

"See them beans?" asked Oaks, speaking to Vridar. "Each time you carry a bean we get a swat at you. All right, Hunter, this is where we learn you some spirit."

"Do all fraternities," asked Vridar, "initiate this way?"

"God damn," said Oaks, "this is apple pie. In some places they kill them dead."

Vridar drew a long breath and shrugged. Naked and desperate, he sprang between the lines and ran for a bean;

swung and came back; and as he ran every fellow in the lines struck him with a board. The men howled and fought for advantage and one of them in his eagerness struck a brother on his chin. Before Vridar was done with this weird flogging his breath was like flame and there were welts on his body and there was blood on his rump. And when he stood at last, shaking and undone, his mind was full of wonder for humankind.

He went to another room now and he could hear the slap of boards and the shouts of mirth. Then there was silence. Looking into the room he saw that one of the pledges, a sickly youth, had fainted, and he turned away, sickened. What was it in human beings that set them to such devilish cruelty? This was the spirit of the Crusades when thousands raped and murdered in the name of Jesus. It was akin to witch-baiting, lynching, and the third-degrees. And somehow, in an awful dark way, it was sexual at its source. If he could have found his clothes he would have dressed and gone home. He thought of entering the street naked. If a passerby hailed him he would say: "I'm fleeing from college life. I thought farm life was brutal but its brutality is necessary as long as women eat flesh and men have an appetite for mountain oysters. Has it occurred to you, Sir, that the tiger must also be a Christian? . . ."

The third act in this drama was performed in the room where Vridar now stood. Oaks placed a chair by a wall and told Vridar to stand on the chair.

"Put your hands up. Turn your mug to the wall. . . . Now you're gonna sing. Ever time I say *Change* you'll change your tune."

"And what if I don't?" asked Vridar, looking round at Oaks.

"Then you get a pop with this board."

"Listen, I've had enough pops with your damned boards!"

"Get them hands up!" Vridar raised his hands. "Now get ready! . . . GO!"

"Ohh my darr-ling Nellie Gray,
They have tak–en you awaaay,
And I'll never see my darrrling any moore—"

"Change!"

"Be it evv—ver so hummm—bull
There's noohh play—aace like hohmmm—"

"Change!"

"The sunnn shines bright on my ohhhld Kentuck—eee
hohmmm,
'Tis summer, the darrkees are gay!
The corn-top's ripe and the meddd—"

"Change!"

"Twen-tee frog-gees went to school
Down be-side the rush-ing pool!
Twenty lit-tul coats of greeen,
Twen-tee frog-gees faaat aaand leeeen!—"

"Change!"

"Umm-a-tahh-tum—ta-tum ta-tum! Ummm-a-tah-
tumm! Ummm-a-tah-tumm—"

"Here, cut that out! That's not a song!"
"I don't know any more songs!"
"Sing!"
Vridar did not sing and Oaks gave him a smart rap with the slat.
"I tell you I don't know any more!"
Oaks struck him twice and the slat stung like fire.
"Sing!"
"God damn it, I tell you I don't know any more!"
"Go on, Vridar," said Mawry. "Sing some more."
"Hurry," Oaks said, "or I'll knock your hinder off."

"Down by the ohhld milll streammmm,
That's where I firrrst mettt youuuu!

Huh-huh-huhhh-wahhh-wahhh,
Tuh-tuh-tahhh-tahhh-tahhh—"

"Cut out that tah-tahing," said Oaks, and he struck again.

"You were my king in cal-i-cohhh,
I was your bash-ful barefoot boahhh—"

"Get that right!" Oaks howled. "Epsilons believe in scholarship."

Vridar sprang to the floor.

"That's all I know," he said.

"Get up there!"

"That's enough, Bill," Mawry said.

"He don't have the right spirit," Oaks said. "We got a-learn him spirit." He looked at Vridar. "A hell of a fraternity man you'll make!"

In the fourth act of this fraternal drama Vridar was hobbled to the sallow youth. Boxing-gloves were laced on the hands of each. The one who got knocked down, Oaks said, would be shoved into a tub of water and ice.

"At the word go, blaze away. And no damn girlish mincing."

Vridar looked at the young man facing him. His body was fleshless and weak and Vridar thought it would be a pity to knock him down.

"Go ahead," he told the youth. "Knock me over."

"Cut that out!" Oaks cried. "You both fight your damnedest. . . . Now—go!"

Vridar brought his gloves up. His opponent was staring at him like a helpless child.

"You mean I'm to sock him a good one?" Vridar asked, turning to Oaks.

"Sure, knock his head off."

Vridar studied his opponent again. The man's legs were shaking. His eyes were frightened and sick. Then Vridar put a glove to the youth's face and pushed him over, and he sprawled willing, as if preferring ice to fists.

A large bathtub was half filled with water and in the water floated snow and chunks of ice. In this the youth was thrown and shoved under, and when the cold closed over him he screamed. He clawed, howling like a demon, and his head was pushed under and held under; and frantic breath spouted from the water and made dancing eddies of the snow. Then the lad was dragged out like a hog from a barrel and set on his shaking legs.

"My gosh!" he cried. He pawed snow from his body and hair.

An hour later in his clothes Vridar walked about from room to room, his flesh still burning.

"Why don't you set down?" Oaks asked, grinning.

When Vridar entered his rooms he looked at Neloa.

"Well," he said, "I'm a fraternity man. Imagine it!" He raised an arm and sniffed. "Can't you smell the faint odor of a duke?"

But he remained in this fraternity only two weeks. He was asked to wear formal clothes at formal parties and to bring with him a sorority girl. "That's for prestige," Bill Oaks said. He was asked to investigate a prospective pledge.

"Listen, Bill. If Lincoln were a student here would you pledge him?"

"Well," said Bill, grinning, "we sure would if we knowed he'd ever be famous. But you can't figure ever guy who comes here smellun of pigs is gonna be a Lincoln. . . . Listen, Hunter, you just don't have the right spirit."

"I know it. And I never will have."

"Then get out."

"That's just what I'm thinking of doing."

But first he talked with his friend, Dave Roth, a brilliant and cynical Jew. Dave was a fraternal brother but he spent all his time in the library, reading Spinoza and Lucian and Keats.

"Why," asked Vridar, "did you join a frat?"

"Why did you?"

"I don't know. Vanity, I guess."

"My reasons," said Dave, "were leprous and finical. Understand that in American colleges Jews are social outcasts among the Great Untouchables. Well, we Jews are socially conscious. For centuries we've been kicked around as if we were a football and Asia was a stadium. But you've heard of that?"

"Yes," said Vridar, grinning.

"Perhaps you've heard, too, that Jews are the only men without a country. Vridar, we're frat brothers and that means nothing. We're friends and that means something. I speak to you as to a friend."

"All right. Now tell me why you joined."

"Listen. In a Christian world, every Jew has to be a Machiavelli. If the country were less Christian, we'd be less persecuted." Dave's grin was sardonic. He smoked for a long moment in thought. "So my philosophy is this: I take what I can get and give as little as I must. Being in a frat makes it easier for me to get along. I can go to some social flings. I can feel now and then that I'm not a gypsy. Now and then a Christian smiles at me. And that," he said, grinning at Vridar, "is quite a gift to a Jew. Of course we gave you the Bible and Jesus. But not Mormons and Baptists and the Inquisition. You'll have to settle with God on those."

"I'm not a Christian," Vridar said.

"Yes you are. Religion is like smallpox. If you get a good dose you wear scars. You had a good dose."

"Well, anyway, I'm going to leave the frat. It sickens me."

"Of course. It's of no value to you. But for me it's like a pessary: it has its uses. I can have some fun without having to marry the damned thing."

"With what I've spent," said Vridar dismally, "I could have bought a thesaurus and the poems of Meredith. Lord!"

Dave's grin was cynical.

"Those," he said, "are worth more."

And on the next afternoon Vridar went to Mawry.

"I want to be kicked out," he said.

"Like hell you do. Listen, we're about to make a national."

"I don't care. It's worse to be a national prig than a local one."

"It's just like Bill says. Hunter, you don't have the right spirit."

"I know it. And listen, Mawry, I'm sorry as hell. I like you. But I didn't know what a fraternity is like and I was a fool to join. I'm awfully sorry about it."

"Be honest," said Mawry. "What is your real reason?"

"Well, I've told you. I just don't believe in what fraternities and sororities stand for. And you couldn't give me the right spirit as Bill calls it if you worked on me a thousand years. My people, Mawry, are common people. They're simple and hard-working and fairly honest and that's about all. And I don't want to stand socially above any of my fellows. I don't feel right about it. I feel silly and stupid.

"Well, that's how I see the thing. I'm sorry as hell to have to do this but I'd be a hypocrite if I didn't." He got his cap and went to the door. He stood there for a long moment and looked at Mawry's hurt eyes.

"Mawry, I belong to the common people. I'm going back where I belong."

V

WHILE thinking of himself during these weeks Vridar perceived that his homeland with its sunken basin and its mountains flung round was still the parable of his life. As a child he had felt entombed and had wanted to climb. He had wanted to stand on the highest peak and look far, as if, in doing so, he could see roads to follow, great prairies without walls. And he had the same wish now. He was not on the river-bottom, gazing up at a gray sky and gray peaks; but his home was with him, and this valley and these mountains here were its symbol. He could see a little farther but he could not tell where his path led.

And he wanted to flee from this valley and these mountains that were so much like his own. He wanted to flee from human beings, because he hated them deeply without knowing why. Since revoking his pledge, he was spoken to by Dave only, of all his fraternal brothers. The others ignored him. And other students, too, hearing of the matter, looked upon him with contempt, as if he had been a traitor to his country or to his God. He became, indeed, a social outcast, and he suffered under the scorn. And the one personality—of the two that possessed him—was like a bewildered child: it saw and heard and recoiled, not knowing what the crime had been. The other part of him, ruthless and vengeful, looked at scorn with scorn and went its headstrong way. "Honesty," he said to Neloa, "has to pay its price. It used to pay in hemlock or hanging. Now it pays in isolation. . . ."

And Neloa looked at him, as she always did, as if he were a perverse and impetuous riddle. She had withdrawn more and more into silence. His cyclonic furies, delivered at her from day to day, left her helpless and frightened. Because he cursed so many things now. He cursed the exploiters who, he declared, would sit at home and stack their money-bags while others went to France to be shot. "Money is the ark and covenant and decalogue of this wretched country! War is the only prayer it knows. . . ." Or he cursed his college teachers, declaring that there wasn't an ounce of honesty in an acre of them. They were forever talking of loyalty and leadership and truth and their words were as empty as teacups turned bottomside up. "Their wives are the only things they aren't afraid of!" Or he would throw himself in savage profane scorn at the old and revered traditions. Who, he asked of Neloa, started the damned silly notion about unselfishness? Did not Hazlitt blow that up a century ago? "But the idea still clings to people like their hair! Unselfishness and be God-damned! There is none. We're a race of Judases, grabbing our thirty pieces of silver and kissing cheeks. . . ." And sometimes he would clown, with madness torturing him; or he would mimic one person and another.

"Brown got stuck in sentiment today like a fly in jam. Let

me show you what he did." Vridar stood behind a chair and said the chair was his desk. "You're the students," he said, "and I'm talking to you. Listen. If anyone of you is to be married in June, I'll give you an A. There's nothing I'd rather give an A for. Let me tell you the story of a young man. He was a simple honest young fellow, ambitious and humble and proud. Note," Vridar said parenthetically, "that he was both humble and proud. There came into this young man's life a blackeyed lass. He had known her for years. They had been childhood sweethearts. She became his inspiration, his philosopher and friend. At this point," Vridar observed, "he lifted a few metaphors out of Wordsworth. This girl prompted him to noble endeavor. She urged him to go to college. She stood behind him, a simple girlish creature, yet a pillar of strength. And in his senior year he led her to the altar. In June she became his bride. And that meant more in this young man's life than books and maps and test tubes. That is what education meant to him: a blackeyed girl in a fragrant lane who looked at the stars while he studied his books. Note," Vridar said, "the tender pathos of my smile. . . . Well, this proud and humble genius who married the blackeyed lass is now the dull humorless hack who tries to teach me and who gives A's to the brides and bridegrooms. And why? Can you guess?"

"I suppose he believes in marriage," Neloa said.

"No! Because he's sick of his blackeyed lass. Because he has a houseful of kids. Because he wants other men to suffer as he suffers. . . . Neloa, don't you understand human motives at all?"

"You don't think I do," she said.

"Damn it, can't you see what's the matter with this fellow? Can't you see how it works? He wants to seduce these fresh young virgins in his class. I'll bet my head on this. When that man hikes off to conferences he does his level damnedest to pull off a seduction. But here he is, a noble St. George slaying dragons. And he has plenty of dragons. . . ."

Vridar's tirade against Brown was prompted, of course, by his own regret. His marriage, he was convinced now, had been a mistake. Again and again, nevertheless, feeling shame

for himself, feeling disgust, he would try to be gentle with Neloa. He would try to be whimsical or droll or tender, or he would try to talk of ordinary things. But it was useless. He was all intensity and fire and within him were savage and powerful conflicts. His idealism fought against his ruthless cunning, and their feud was so ceaseless, so implacable, that it gave him no peace. It split him into two personalities; and each of these was to grow and to become an almost undefeatable thing; until in this year, and more deeply in years lying ahead, he was to hang between two crosses, the one of love and the one of hate. He stood now, as he was to stand for a long time, between courage and fear, reaching to the one, trying to destroy the other. And his pilgrimage now became chiefly this struggle: to conquer fear and to rise to an unimpeachable integrity of heart and mind, and to lose his hatred in a love for all things. But this terrific conflict, born of the torture and darkness of childhood, was only beginning in this year. Its elements and its purpose were vague in his mind. He knew only that he was frenzied and goaded; that he was spending himself in violence and wrath; and that he could not endure for any great while the bewilderment that engulfed him now. He struck about him for a way out but he struck blindly because he could not see. The sources of his impulses, the hungers that fed his motives, he had in these dark months no power to understand.

In January his aimless violence was brought to a momentary climax. Neloa said she was pregnant. Vridar sank to a chair as if she had struck him.

"You sure?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Have you been vomiting?"

"Yes."

"My God!" he said.

When Vridar married he knew almost nothing of birth-control. There were ways, of course: he knew that. But they were the privilege of leisure and wealth; and the poor man, trapped by an inexorable law, spent his years and his health

trying to feed his litter. He had tried to learn of contraceptives; but one doctor to whom he went looked scared and guilty, and another dismissed him with a shrug.

He did not want a child now. "We'll have children," he had said, "when we'n take care of them. When we're old and wise enough to train them. . . . Besides, I don't have the vanity of most parents. I don't want a Vridar Hunter Junior. Most men take a silly pride in fatherhood. But their power to procreate—which the stupid fatheads regard as a miracle—is shared equally well, I observe, by bulls and boars. . . ."

And now he was trapped.

"Are you really sure?" he asked again.

"Yes." He saw in Neloa's eyes that she was pleased and that she wanted a child.

"It's a hell of a fine mess! What do you want a kid now for?"

"I don't."

"You do. You're like most women. You want a bunch of kids and you want some man to pay for them." He studied her face. "All right," he said, "I'm going to war."

"Vridar!"

"Don't Vridar me. You damned selfish women! A lot of men would amount to something if women didn't hang kids around their necks!"

"I didn't do it. You talk as if I did it."

"You helped. You're glad it's done."

"I'm not."

He paced the room, staring at her.

"What'll we do?" he shouted at her. "I haven't any money! I'm not through school yet! . . . Well, it's a fine mess. I tell you I'm going to war."

"You're not."

"I am. If I'm to have a kid I'll provide for it. I'll take out a big insurance policy. I'll get shot."

"Don't talk like a fool!"

"Why not? I am a fool. Damn it, when a child comes into this world it has a right to decency and health. This bringing babes in by the millions and letting them grow up in ignorance and filth! This halfwitted notion that souls are waiting

to be born! It's better, say these Christians, for a babe to be born hunchbacked or an idiot than not to be born at all. Isn't that a swell doctrine?"

"But ours won't be an idiot," Neloa said.

"You can't tell. There's a lot of simple lubbers in my dad's line. You'd rather have an idiot than nothing."

"I would not!"

"Sure. You want a lot of kids. You want to cover an acre with them. A dooryard full, seven in the kitchen, and twenty in school. Then I'd shake hands with the President and get my mug in the papers. And I should be hanged! If I were dictator I'd shoot every man who has more kids than he'n clothe and educate. Or I'd string him up by his thumbs and hang weights to his ears. . . . Listen, darling, if a big family is an honorable thing we ought to canonize flies."

"Well," Neloa said, "we'n have an abortion."

"No! Abortions cost money. They're dangerous. They're hard on women. . . . No, I guess we'll have to grin and bear it. But where in hell, I'd like to know, does all this stuff about glorious Mother Nature come from? She's nothing but a damned big womb that feels empty. Did you ever think of that?"

While Vridar was agonizing over this matter there came to him a letter from Washington, D.C. It invited him to join the air corps. A letter like his own, he soon learned, had been sent to every athlete in this school. And he was flattered. He still hated war but he liked to be thought of as a candidate to its most difficult and dangerous service. It offered a dramatic way to die. Better to be set aflame in the air than to be rammed with a bayonet while stuck in mud.

He went at once to be examined. Twelve athletes went with him and he was one of five pronounced fit. After being spun in the chair, he lay by a wall, sick through and through his being and as white as death. He thought he had failed but the captain said he was all right.

"But won't flying make me sick?"

"You'll get over it."

He left the building and rushed home.

"Well," he said, trying to seem casual, "I'm a flying cadet now." Neloa came to him, looking frightened.

"Vridar, please don't go."

"Of course I'll go. I'm no coward."

"But you don't believe in war."

"Imagine me," he said, "ten thousand feet up. A German blows up my gas-tank, I come down in flame, cremated and ready for the roses."

"Darling, please don't go!"

"Do you want me to be a slacker?"

"But you don't believe in war, you said."

"I don't. I'm not a Christian so how could I?"

"If you go what'll I do?"

"Be a war widow. You'll have a lot of company. You'll get a pension."

"I don't want a pension!" Her eyes flashed and then her eyes were wet. She looked at him and great tears fell down her cheeks. And Vridar was deeply moved. He let her hair down and she trembled under his touch.

"Don't feel that way," he said gently. "We all have to die sometime. If I don't go they'll draft me."

"You can go to jail. You said you would."

"No. You'd hate me then. Everyone would hate me then."

"I wouldn't hate you."

"You think you wouldn't but you would." And now, to hush her grief, he lied about his purpose; he said he would not be killed; he would be careful, he said, and he would come back to her when the war was done.

"If you don't," Neloa said, "I'll kill myself."

"That would be silly. What would our child do?"

"I'll kill it, too."

"Darling, don't talk that way. I'll come back."

But Vridar did not intend to come back. He was taking the road to France as the road out; and once there, he intended to plot his journey to death and peace. To return to Neloa and to resume his hopeless struggle with her—this he had no courage for. He could not endure her efforts to please him and

to be what he wanted her to be. Her humility shook him. And in all hours he despised himself: his ambition and intolerance, his fury and scorn. And because he loved her and because he was too sunk in despair to see anything but death he wanted to sacrifice himself. In this wish, to be sure, there was much vanity and self-pity, much that was cowardly and dark; but there was also a mighty idealism, a great power to give. And to die and set her free was not only the most generous way he could think of but also, in these months, the only way for which he had the courage and the strength.

In March he was called and Neloa went to the station with him. She looked very lonely and deserted. When she kissed him good-by she did not break and weep but she shook in his arms. In his mind was one thought and one only: he was leaving this girl whom he loved; he was riding out of her life and out of his own life; and he would never see her again. His life was done, save for a few months, and this was the end.

"Well," he said, "I guess it's good-by now."

"Not good-by," she said, smiling at him through tears. "Just —just till we meet again."

"Yes," he said, and his voice shook. "I'll come back."

"I know it," she said.

He put hands to her shoulders. He knew that his own eyes were wet.

"Neloa, if I never come back, remember that I loved you. Never forget that. Never doubt that."

"I won't," she said.

"I've been mean to you. I've said mean and terrible things. But all the while I've loved you as I love nothing else on earth. . . . And—in our child—" He broke off, unable to speak. Her eyes still smiled through tears.

"Darling, write to me often," she said.

"I—I will." She looked at him, the tears falling to her cheeks.

"O sweetheart!" he cried. She came into his arms and shook with grief. After a little while he tried to put her away but

she clung to him. He looked at a clock. "Darling, I have to go now."

"Oh, I know!"

"Neloa, I must go now."

She hushed her grief. When she looked at him now her eyes were wet and blind. He took his bags and turned away; but he looked back, after a moment, and saw her standing alone. She was a picture of desolation and he stopped, having no power to go now. He stood here for a long moment and looked at her. Then he dropped his bags and ran to her and folded her in his arms; and he kissed her hair and her wet eyes and her wet mouth. Turning away, he went to his bags and seized them and ran and he did not stop until he found the train.

Sitting alone in one end of a coach he bowed his head and wept. Never in his life had his grief been more bitter or terrible. He heard the train singing under him and he knew that the miles were spreading away like a carpet behind. Back in the city, somewhere, alone, was this girl whom he loved more deeply than he loved himself. And in this hour, as in so many that had gone, Vridar thought of life: of all its loveliness and pain, its ancient loneliness and its strange haunted dark; and he thought his heart would break. Because in life, no matter where a man went, there was nothing to get hold of: it was impalpable and elusive, it was like smoke in a closing hand. You could see it and smell it and you could feel the deep wonder of its way; and yet what was it but a wraith, when all was said and done? He looked into his past and it seemed to be no part of him now. He looked back toward a valley and could not believe that Neloa was there.

For everything was strange to the mind and heart; and even the familiar, when looked at closely, was only the shadow of a thought. The world was a fog of light. It was a luminous circle, like a moon in a black sky; and across the face of it, like a mist of cloud, moved the troubled wonder of humankind. But it was all no more real than a photograph. You could look at a photograph, as he now looked at one of Neloa, and you could say, This is of a living thing, of a strange thing

that moves and feels and breathes. But you could not believe it. You could only try to think about it; remember only that you had touched it and smelled of it; and try to realize what these meant. It was foolish to think of a building as steel and stone, of a mountain as earth and rock; for they, too, were only shadows, hard to the touch. And a person sought, he hungered after, a reality that he had no vision for, no heart and no hands. He was a ghost that drank air and wanted wine. He was a vapor that tried to condense itself into the sea. And everything that he did and saw and felt was an outline for him, within a vague and bewildered consciousness, of the starved and futile limits of his being: as light is thinned to nothingness against black velvet, as pink grows sickly against red. The fragrance of flowers, sweet in itself, satisfied no hunger and awoke vast and terrible ones; as if beyond the gardens of man's world there lay an intensity of loveliness and smell, with intimations of it brought forth to the senses, as rainbows are brought out of the darkness of storms. . . .

And so it was with humankind in all things. The brightest experience, the most poignant and lasting, hinted only of what lay beyond. A kiss hinted, as a lone flower did, of a garden somewhere; and sexual embrace, reaching into depths veiled by the kiss, awoke in the soul a hunger that rose beyond flesh. But beyond sexual passion, man, in his search for the eternal, had never gone. He gave himself to it, as Vridar had, and he felt in its sudden power an imminent vision, as if a light would break. But the only light that came was a rocket that burst and went out. In the moment of its being, Vridar could see, as in a great void of sky, the core of an emptiness and the dark that flanked it; and shadows piled above and below; and far faint outposts of the boundless and the infinite. Then the night closed in and he was again in the inexplicable wonder of himself, in the heartache of a pinched and sick isolation. And he turned over and cradled himself in bewilderment and slept.

Tonight, while journeying into the west, he felt more lost and unreal than he had felt in weeks. The sky of stars made

him a stranger to himself; and far lights set on the earth, and misty backdrops of mountain, and the ghostly nothingness of gardens and hillsides and trees. Could it be true that in a distant house, gloomy and hushed, a man lay in sleep and breathed? And if so, what did it mean? Each star out there, he had read, was a vast white sun, tremendously larger than the earth's own; each was a gigantic sphere of heat and leaping coronas, shooting through space in its awful journey. But these statements could mean nothing to anyone: they were the cuneiform jargon of a scientific world. The only man who could bother with them, or find in them any beauty or use, must be one who looked upon himself as a mechanism; calling his eye a lens, his ear a drum, his heart a pump. For any sensitive person life was allegory, and as astonishing to think of as his own face. Trying to reduce it to formulas and clockwork, to a codified pandect, was both futile and silly. That was like trying to anatomize beauty. It was as stupid and meaningless as kissing a woman's image in a mirror. Once he had moved to kiss Neloa's image, and had found, instead, that his own was there; and this, it seemed to him, was a happy similitude for science. A man explored the inscrutable and came at last face to face with himself. . . .

And after his heartache had spanned a few years he died. He was a pilgrim, seeking the invisible canterburies of his dream. His life was a small edition of the Bible, running from parable to parable; and after he had found his Gethsemane and Cross, death offered the vinegar and the book was shut. And the wise person, it seemed to him, would gather the aimless destinies to his own hands. He would close his story on the Song of Songs.

Such, at least, he would do. He wiped his eyes and looked into the black night and shrugged; and the shrug meant that he was renouncing life. Its mad tempests and turmoils, its inexorable dooms and tides, he would leave to those who followed the journey into the loneliness of old age. . . .

But he looked again at the photograph of Neloa and kissed it and shook with grief.

VI

BERKELEY and the campus of the university here were lovely in March. Used to naked winters and the blizzards and slush of northern springs, Vridar looked round him in wonder at the fragrant gardens and flowering trees. It was all like June in his homeland. Hillsides were deep with foliage and all the campus paths were bright with summertime. It would be pleasant, he reflected, to spend a few weeks in this tropical Eden; and for an hour he followed winding trails, smelling the growth, or climbed a hill and looked westward to a great plateau of sea.

But only for an hour was he at peace. When he reported for duty he was given common army equipment: a cotton uniform and a pair of infantry shoes. The cadets here, he had observed, shone like officers: they had serge uniforms, tailored, neatly pressed; and they had trappings to match. When Vridar meekly protested, he was told that he could buy a better outfit if he wanted to. He signed for the clothes and gathered them in his arms and went to the barracks. He was full of misgivings and he was wishing deeply that he had not come.

On the way to the barracks, he met Lars Ongin, his football coach.

"Hello," Lars said. "When did you blow in?"

"This morning."

"How's everything? Can I help you any?"

Vridar looked at his armful of clothes. He looked at Ongin's uniform.

"Tell me," he said. "Do I have to wear these things?"

"Hell no. You'n buy you an outfit."

Vridar wanted to ask what an outfit would cost. Well, no matter: he hadn't the money for one. Among all these splendid fellows he would be, as he had been in college, a bump-

kin in cotton and cowhide. In the army he had expected to find a democratic spirit; but here, as elsewhere, the caste system prevailed.

He entered the barracks and was assigned to a cot. Taking off his civilian clothes—guiltily, lest his ragged underwear be seen—he stored them in his shabby bag and strove to hide the bag. He put on his uniform and looked at himself and was appalled. The thing was baggy and shapeless. The leggings wrapped round his calves made his feet look grotesquely huge. The other cadets had shining leather and their shoes were long and polished; and their hair and eyes shone like their shoes.

Vridar now became aware that the cadets in this room were slyly watching him. Some were amused. Some looked vaguely astonished. And one, more friendly than the others, came to Vridar and asked if he could help.

"I don't know," Vridar said. He began to sweat. He looked with shame at himself and then with wonder at this immaculate fellow who had spoken. "I guess," he went on, trying to seem casual, "I'll have to get me a decent outfit. . . . How much do the damned things cost?" He tried to speak as if the cost did not matter. He looked at his outlandish uniform and shrugged. A smart tailored outfit, the man said, could be had for about seventy dollars, including leggings and shoes.

"You'll need two outfits," he said. "A man can get along with two."

"Thanks," Vridar said.

"If I'n help you," the man said, "call me."

"That's nice of you," Vridar said. "I—I—thanks a lot."

The man went away and Vridar sank to his bed, overcome. Seventy dollars!—and he had sixteen. Of course he would be paid a salary; but Neloa would need that, or most of it. And even so, even if he spent from his salary, he would have to dodge around here in cotton for a month. No: he was caught. He had got himself into a pretty mess this time. Aviation, like fraternities, belonged to the sons of wealth. It was the aristocracy of murder. To him, and to the millions of common fel-

lows like him, who owned only the clothes on their backs, belonged the infantry, the bayonets and dugouts and mud.

For a long while he sat on the cot, wishing he could flee. When evening came, the men around him, he observed, were preparing to shave. Everyone of them had a lordly outfit. And what did he have? A cheap tarnished razor, a silly little brush that was losing its hair, and a chunk of handsoap—these, and a comb, with several teeth knocked out of it. He wanted to laugh. He wanted to stand up and say to these men: Look at me, fellows. I thought war was murder and that nothing mattered except guns that shoot straight and knives that are sharp. But even in war, I perceive now, fashion declares the mode and vanity goes over the top. . . . Or he wanted to say: This cotton outfit is all I have and all I can afford. But it wouldn't do, I can see, for one of Uncle Sam's aviators to be shot out of the air in duds like these. He must come down, tailored in wool and leather, with his shoes polished and his ears clean. . . .

He followed the men to a washroom where they shaved. Now and then one looked at him, his brows lifting in gentle amazement. The stare would travel down Vridar to his shoes and then come back for a moment to his face. And Vridar, desperate, resorted as usual to clowning. He would give the man a solemn wink; or, affecting astonishment, he, too, would look at his trousers and shoes; or he would sag as if undone and look oafish and woebegone. But under his clowning he was frightened and sick.

Going softly to his bag he got his razor and brush and soap and hid them in his clothes. Then he hung about the washroom, waiting for a chance to be alone; but no chance came. Once, finding the room deserted, he dashed in and was frantically lathering his face when a cadet entered. And now, instead of shaving, as he had meant to, he pretended to be washing only: he scrubbed his ears and neck, making a big racket, as if cleanliness and godliness in his mind were one. He watched, too what the man did. The man opened a regal leather case and drew forth shining tools, and powders and creams, and odds and ends of luxury that Vridar had never

before seen. And the man's way, leisurely, almost voluptuous, suggested that he had spent all his years in tiled bathrooms and Simmons beds.

Returning to the barracks, Vridar hid his absurd tools and left the room. He went into Berkeley for a shave. On his way out he saw no one but on his way back he was hailed by a guard. The guard approached and stared at him.

"Where you been?" he asked.

"Downtown getting shaved."

"Who gave you permission?"

"Permission? I didn't know I needed any."

"What's your name?"

"Vridar Hunter."

"All right, Hunter, you'll be reported."

Vridar went to the barracks, feeling dark and awful rage. All around him now, men, half undressed or naked, were inspecting themselves. Some were manicuring their toenails; some were brushing their hair with costly looking brushes; and some, from big Gladstone bags, were laying clothes out. They were all superbly equipped, untroubled, at ease. Vridar shrank from them. He wanted a small dark room of his own where he could be himself.

On the next morning he was awakened early and when he saw men around him he sprang from his cot. He dressed in frantic haste, trying to hide the fact that he had no pyjamas; not knowing what would happen to him if he were late. Then he saw that men were making their beds and he tried to make his own. The other beds began to look neat and orderly; but his own, in spite of all he could do, bulged and spread and showed clearly that it had been slept in. He watched the deft movements of others. He yanked his outfit into its several pieces and tried again. And while he was on his knees, wholly engrossed by his efforts, he heard a man speak. At first he paid no heed; but when the voice spoke again, it was sharp and furious, and Vridar looked round at the man. He saw a glittering officer. He saw that the other cadets were all standing like dummies of leather and serge.

"What's your name?" the officer asked.

"Vridar Hunter."

"When did you get in?"

"Yesterday."

"Say *sir* to me! Get up!" Vridar looked at the small pompous fellow but he did not move. A dark murderous fury was taking hold of him. "I said get up!" Vridar rose to his feet. "Attention!" Vridar looked round him, wondering how to stand at attention. "Get those heels together!" the officer roared. Vridar clicked his heels. "Salute!" Vridar made an awkward gesture. And then for a long moment the officer looked at Vridar's uniform. His gaze was unpitying and hard. It traveled from Vridar's throat down to his shoes and for an instant lingered there; and came back to his throat. Then the man's gaze met Vridar's and Vridar hated with all his strength what he saw in the man's eyes.

He attended classes but they were insoluble mystery to him. Drawings of engines, magnetos, carburetors—they were handwriting in a foreign tongue. He listened to instructors but he could not understand what they were talking about. The Eisemann G-4 magneto had secondary windings of the armature and primary circuits and distribution brushes, but the drawings of all these were as meaningless as Norse runes. There was talk of a thermal principle and a Bosch-Rushmore system and an Entz system; of the Atwater-Kent polarity switch; of primary intakes and auxiliary air valves; of ballast resistors and field poles; and Vridar, for all that he got out of it, might as well have been listening to a Moslem's prayers. The cadets around him, he observed, looked as if they understood. They made notes and drawings and they asked questions. And Vridar, too, made notes, as if all this for him were kindergarten stuff; but his notes were a caricature of the instructor and a sonnet to Neloa.

I listen while these solemn asses name
The p's and q's of war and hate and death.
Enthusiasm rides upon their breath;

But out in France I hear the blind and lame,
Or see the rotting carcasses piled high
To make the Morgan bonfire; and I know
That God somewhere now hides His face in woe
Against the smell of murder in the sky.

Dear Neloa, I can no longer see
The face of Jesus in the human dream.
His bones, I think, still hang in Galilee;
His heart is still there, spiked upon the beam.
And now instead of aconite we set
Against His lips the bomb and bayonet!

He drilled with the cadets and he was the only one here who wore a cotton uniform. He looked like the gawkiest recruit anywhere and he felt like it. Burning with shame, he fumbled in his movements, acting more like a wooden soldier than a man of flesh and bone. Now and then an officer stared at him.

And for ten days he suffered this spiritual agony. He drove himself from task to task, and with all his courage, he strove not to read the summary of himself in the eyes of another. War was murder, he reasoned, and it made no difference whether a man was slain in cotton or in wool: death would level the derisions and give to every soldier the same quality of dust. "It's a living hell," he wrote to Neloa, "but I'm trying to stick it out. The man who shaves with a chainstore razor makes as good a target as the man who shaves with a Gillette. . . ."

But at the end of ten days he could stand no more. He resolved to leave. If he could not get an honorable discharge he would desert: anything to be done with this stupid aristocracy in the shadow of death. And early one morning he presented himself to the commandant.

Clicking his heels sharply he was saluted and for five minutes he was ignored. This room was full of officers: they were all arrogant and glittering, plump and well-fed. They saw him, Vridar knew, but they left him standing in the doorway.

At last a colonel, sitting like an overstuffed Napoleon behind a desk, looked at Vridar and spoke.

"Well, what do you want?"

"I'd like, sir, to speak to you."

"Speak. You still have your tongue, haven't you?"

Vridar advanced to the desk and stood at attention. A dozen officers roundabout were looking at him. He looked into the colonel's cold blue eyes.

"I want to leave this place," he said.

"Say *sir* when you address an officer. . . . What do you mean?"

"I mean, sir, that I'm sick of this place. I want to be discharged."

A great silence fell. Not a man stirred and for a long moment not a man spoke. The colonel looked bloated with amazement.

"You're sick of this place!" he said sharply. "What do you mean by that?"

"I mean, sir, that I don't like its spirit."

The officers looked at one another. The colonel looked at his staff as if to say, Did you ever see such insolence? Then he stared at Vridar for another long moment.

"Explain yourself!" he said, his voice barking.

"Do you mean, sir, that I'm to say what I think?"

"Exactly! And be brief."

"I think, sir, that these flying-cadets are a bunch of prigs. I don't like their spirit. It's bad enough to have social arrogance in civilian life. It's ridiculous to find it among men who are facing death. I believe——"

"That'll do!" the colonel roared. "I don't care what you believe!"

"Sir, you asked me to be frank."

"You've said enough! You're insulting every officer in this room!" The colonel rose from his chair. His face was mottled with rage. He looked round him as if baffled and then with terrible eyes he looked at Vridar. But Vridar was not to be intimidated now. He had enlisted to seek death and a handful

of officers could not frighten him. As a matter of fact, he enjoyed their consternation and rage.

"Pardon me, sir, but you did not allow me to finish."

"Allow you to—to finish!" the colonel shouted. "You upstart! I'll have you thrown into the guardhouse!"

"Sir, that is all right with me. Do as you please. But first let me finish."

The colonel stared at him, speechless with amazement. Other officers began to murmur. And Vridar, seizing his chance, went boldly ahead.

"You see me, sir, in a cotton uniform. It's all I have and all I can afford. My people are poor people. They haven't learned yet to make other persons work for them——"

"That'll do!" the colonel roared. He banged a clenched fist on his desk. And instantly, like the blaze of a match, fury came to life in Vridar. Stepping closer, he met the colonel's outraged gaze and he spoke savagely, his voice ringing.

"I enlisted to fight! I didn't come here to put on the dog! I didn't come to strut around here in wool and leather like a damned turkey-cock! And I won't!" He paused a moment and then went furiously ahead. "There ought to be a democratic spirit here! But there's only arrogant pomp! And I hate it! Do with me as you please! Throw me in your damned guardhouse! Take me out and shoot me for insubordination! A hell of a lot I care what you do! But you can't scare me with your damned glittering discipline and you may as well stop trying!" He now shook from head to feet. His face was white.

The colonel as if stricken sank to his chair. He looked at his staff.

"What," he asked, "shall we do with him?"

"Discharge him," one said. "We don't want such men here."

"An honorable discharge——" Vridar began.

"Shut up!" the colonel thundered. "You'll take what we give you! And that'll be more than you're worth!"

"All right," Vridar said. "Make it as dishonorable as you can."

"Harriman," said the colonel, turning to an aide, "fix him up." And the colonel rose like an old man and left the room.

An hour later Vridar ferried across to San Francisco and walked down Market Street. He entered a building and presented papers and was given an honorable discharge and his fare home. And never before in his life, never in the years to come, had he ever felt or was he ever to feel such tremendous relief. He went into a saloon and drank whisky until he staggered, and then took a quart with him and found a railway station and entered a train.

VII

NELOA, meanwhile, had gone to her Antelope home. It was to these hills that Vridar was going now; and when he thought of them he drank from his bottle or he brooded and cursed. Only six months ago he had left them, believing that he would never return; but they had been with him all the while. In the geography of his doings, they were the great inland empire, surrounded by provinces of the strange. Of his spirit and thought, they were the enormous and haunting consciousness; and no matter where he went, no matter what he did, they were with him. The river was still in his dreams. The Bridwell Place, the mountains, the gray hills, were a solemn darkness even in his brightest moments.

But he was not returning to the bowl of his home. His father a year ago had stepped into conference with a fortune-teller; and this woman, arrayed and adorned like a gypsy, had prophesied great things. The stars, she declared, had marked him for leadership. Looking at his hands, smelling the barnyard in his clothes, she said he had been wasting his genius with binders and plows. For he had the stuff in him of a mechanical wizard and the stars were calling him to

school. Soon he would own a string of garages from Lake Pend d'Oreille to the Utah line.

And Joe forthwith had leased his ranch and with his brother Ike, to whom also had been granted a larger destiny, went away to school. With a raw and mighty enthusiasm he studied automobiles, from patching a tube to winding an armature; and then with Ike, and one of the instructors of the school, he came to Idaho Falls and bought a garage there. His war profits in wheat had achieved all this.

No: Vridar was not returning to his home but he was going back to the scene of his humiliations; to the circumference of his shame and defeat. And in every few minutes he sipped from his bottle and tried to swagger, and he assured himself that he didn't give a good God-damn where he went or what he did. "Why the hell should I care!" he reflected. "I'll be shot before this war is over. In some gray morning I'll be a scattered armful of viscera and legs. So why should I care?"

When he arrived in the Idaho city he bought a bottle of whisky there and then caught a ride with a farmer to Antelope. This man was from Star Valley. It was in Star Valley, Vridar remembered, that Harvey Kress lived. He offered his bottle and the farmer drank as if choked.

"That's darn good whisky," he said, his eyes shining; and drank again.

"You know Harvey Kress?" Vridar asked.

"Harvey Kress? Hell's bells, yes. He's a neighbor a mine."

"Oh. I used to know him. How's he getting along?"

"In a fair way, I guess. This war, it's makun us farmers rich."

"Is Harvey married yet?"

"Lord yes. He's got two kids . . . Now this war," the man said. "How long you figger it'll last? I hope it don't stop for a while yet. You see how wheat jumped again?"

Vridar gave the man another drink on the Antelope flat and left him. He went down into the creek bed and sat there for a little while and drank. The whisky made everything unimportant and senseless. Out there in the Doole stable Neloa had told her tales of wrong; but what of it now? In a mad

world, with bayonets in the bellies of men and with blood running like water, what difference did anything make? There was an orgy of guns and gas, whisky and delirium; and all else was pious whimwham. He would stay drunk all the time now. . . .

He hid his bottle and staggered up the road. He kicked at a wire gate and knocked it down; and as he went up the path, he saw Neloa in a doorway. She came running to him; and Vridar, convulsed by rage and grief and joy, threw his arms out and hailed her.

"Stop!" he said. "I want you to see the great American aviator!"

But Neloa did not stop. She came and put arms round him and put her face to his face and trembled with joy; and Vridar grinned at the far reaches of hill and sky.

"I'm drunk," he said.

"Oh darling!" She drew back to look at him. "Oh, you big silly goose!"

"I'm drunk," he said. "Can't you tell I'm drunk?" Neloa shook him and scowled.

"You big silly fellow!" she cried. "Shame on you!"

"I'm not a bit ashamed. I like to be drunk."

"You come with me," she said; and she tried to drag him to the house.

"Don't!" he yelled. "You got a-listen to me. I'm a drunkard now. I'm gonna drink myself to death. . . . You want a drink?"

"No!"

"Well, all right. Come with me. I got a-have another drink."

But his threats were only childish threats and when his whisky was gone he looked around him for work. He went as hired man and Neloa went as cook to the Con Wote ranch. It was the most manorial of all ranches here; and its manager, short and plump, gave himself feudal airs, as did his wife also, a huge woman with a heavy dead face. Lizzie Boe, now and then, would ask to have her breakfast served at her bedside; and she would affect a yawning, luxurious weariness

as if she were president of a bridge club. John Boe would dress up like a steeplechase lord and ride over the fields. Both of them assumed a vast and hungry interest in culture and in far strange things like the Italian Riviera and Mardi Gras festivals and Paisley shawls. Their big words, invariably mispronounced, and their allusions and dinner-table talk, they gathered from advertisements in magazines.

At first they amused Vridar; but more and more, as the days passed, they annoyed him. Their patronizing gestures made him furious. When at table they addressed their remarks to each other and took it for granted, it seemed to Vridar, that he was a dusty ignorant fellow who had never been to school. They spoke to one another as Mr. and Mrs. Boe. They murmured with small polite apology. And they often alluded to the time when, living in a town somewhere, they gave afternoon teas and played bridge. . . .

"Anna writes that she's visitun Europe this summer." It was Lizzie Boe speaking. She yawned behind her napkin and turned to Neloa. "Uh—may I have another cup a coffee, please." She looked across at Mr. Boe. "And will you pass the eggs to Mr. Boe?"

"To Europe," said Mr. Boe. "That's interestun. To the Italian Rivarah, I guess."

"Oh yes. She may go to the Rivarah. But not at first. She expects to visit Sweden first. Anna, of course, is Swedish."

"Oh," said Mr. Boe. "Yes, I remember."

"Neloa, I think Mr. Boe would like another cup a coffee." Neloa rose and served the coffee.

"I thank you," said Mr. Boe. He coughed a little and said ummm. He looked at his wife.

"You remember the time Anna bid a gran slam in hearts? That was—uh, when was that?"

"Do I remember! I thought it was a des*pic*able thing to do. We set her four tricks. That learnt her something." Mr. Boe's chuckle was mirthless and well-bred.

"I see," he declared, laying his spoon in his saucer, "that mebbe France will rebuild the Reems cathedral."

"Oh, indeed? I'm glad to hear that. What a pity it was to

mutilate such a lovely building. . . . Neloa, may I have coffee?"

Often while riding a plow or while bunching hay Vridar reflected on the Boes. He had cherished the notion that country people were, for the most part, unaffected and earnest and genuine; and that city folk were evasive and dishonest and a little degenerate. These notions he had gathered from his reading. Poets—and novelists, too—were forever extolling the rustic, forever excoriating the urban. Country lasses in gingham smiled innocently from magazine covers; scoundrels of the city sneered and smirked on the inside pages. The pastoral—tradition declared—was close to the heart of the beautiful and the true. Take the verse of Whittier and Bryant, of Shelley and Tennyson; take the novels of Cooper and Hardy, as well as those countless books which made glamorous the doings of frontiersman and cowboy. It all told the same tale. . . .

But now, in reflection, he wondered if he had been following another blind path. Was human nature much the same in every land and clime? or did a man's abode make either an angel or a rogue of him? And if it did not, out of what had grown this monstrous tradition?

It was a notion which he had cherished but it was not a notion, to be sure, that he could uproot at once. Like his piety, like his hatred of meanness, it was a part of him: it had been assimilated into him like his food. And later, too, he was to fall upon the early novels of Willa Cather and of others and these were to make more difficult his road to freedom. . . .

The notion, nevertheless, flattered him now. He was of the country and it was good, whatever the truth might be, to regard himself as a more genuine fellow than his urban brothers. For a little while he thought of the matter and felt at peace. But he had resolved—and this resolve was mighty and fixed—to accept no tradition without searching to its origin and purpose. To Neloa he said:

"I think I've been wrong. I think country people are

probably no more decent than city people. Look at these Boes, the wretched humbugs! Wouldn't any man in the country, if he had a chance, be just as much of a tyrant and slave-driver as a man from the city? I don't know. But this I do know: I'll figure it out."

This moment, this statement, marked the beginning of his repudiation of socialism. He did not know it. He knew only that he had come face to face with another problem of the first magnitude. And after a long moment of thought he added:

"If I ever write novels about country people I'll tell the truth. I won't simper and bellyache over them like a Dickens or a Hardy . . . . And that isn't all," he said. "I'm going to figure out what made Dickens and Hardy sentimental."

Neloa looked at him with unhappy eyes. "You'll sure be busy," she said, "if you figure out half what you say you will. You won't have time for anything else."

"I don't care. I'm going to know the truth."

Vridar's wretchedness of spirit as the days passed here was caused by more than the priggish airs of this household. In every day while laboring in the fields he could see the Antelope country and the blue mountains of his home; and he never looked at either without thinking of his dark and bitter years. During an afternoon he would brood upon these, and when night came and he was alone with Neloa he would often abuse her or reproach her or break her to tears. She had wanted to come here, he said. She loved this ugly desolate place. Like her people she dwelt in a handful of townships, never looking, never reaching, beyond.

And he reproached her, too, for her loyalty to her kinsfolk. The Doole clan had the blood integrity of an Indian tribe. They banded together in their thriftless nomadic ways and every one of them, no matter how stupid or unworthy, dwelt in the clan's bosom. . . .

"It's ridiculous!" he said. "Some of your people are all right. Some aren't worth shooting. And why stick like glue

to every one of them? I didn't marry your whole damned outfit. . . ."

"You stick to yours," Neloa said.

"I do not! Some of them, yes. But most of my relatives aren't worth a bowl of soup. And I mean bad soup. . . . Neloa, in God's name grow up. Learn to look at human beings and see them for what they are."

And to all this Neloa gave her usual reply:

"Blood is thicker than water," she said.

But the circumstance that distressed Vridar most was Neloa's pregnancy. As the summer passed, he saw this slender queenly girl grow shapeless and stout. She looked, he reflected, as if she had swallowed a bag of wheat. And he was appalled. Never before had he seen a pregnant woman—at least he remembered none; and when he stared at her, thinking of how graceful she used to be, he hated life and its dark blundering ways.

Why, he asked of nobody, did God—if there was a God—employ such vulgar distortions? In the lowest forms of life cells divided and multiplied themselves without agony and blood; and in flowers, in trees, the way was beautiful and clean. But the more civilized the animal, the more ghastly was its way of aborting its kind. A cow or a mare looked stuffed, but only as if overfed; and in birth they suffered pain; and the delivery, though hideously unclean, took only a little while. The calf or the colt, after an hour or two, was spry and alert and good to look at. But a woman swelled up as if bloated with some horrible disease; and she went to bed and sometimes screamed all night; and she almost lay with death when the ordeal was over. The infant was so incredibly raw and ugly and helpless that it sickened Vridar to look at one.

His violent distaste for pregnancy and birth was, to be sure, abnormal: it reached back along dark and devious ways to his childhood years; but even so, his attitude, as he discovered later, was shared by many men. A year ago he had read a book by a doctor, addressed to married folk; and this

author, to Vridar's utter amazement, had eulogized in two ecstatic pages the gentle roundness of a woman's abdomen. He had written: "A husband looks at this full rounded cradle and reflects that it is the noble and miraculous repository of daughters and sons that will soon shout in angelic innocence around the nursery. . . ." At this point Vridar had thrown the book down and kicked it. What experiences, in heaven's name, could produce so monstrous a simpleton!

His distaste, he realized now, was related in some fashion to aesthetics: it was a lively and morbid awareness of pain and ugliness, and of life reaching in its terrible ways toward the sun. To what other sources it led, he could not be sure in these weeks and he did not care. He asked only why rapture, why the passionate beauty of flesh mating with flesh, should lead to such deformity as this. It was a gruesome circumstance, discolored, like leprous flesh, with the diseased blood of the horrible. It was kin to a pellagrous face, and to shrunken limbs and idiocy and bloat.

Neloa never again would have the alluring body of girlhood. She would get broader in her hips and she would take on fat and indolence. After her breasts were given to suckling, they would hang, in a year or two, like empty bags under her clothes. And yet women, roped and tied to an inexorable biology, and delivered body and soul to the greedy selfishness of motherhood, expected a man to be the same kind of lover after a child came. They expected him to forget the monstrous swelling and the sickness and the blood. . . .

"I'm going to enlist," he said to Neloa.

They were in their room alone. She rose and came to him, and Vridar, after looking down at her body, wanted to laugh. He did laugh; and his laughter was so wild and bitter that she shrank from him. He left the room and passed through the house, still laughing, and the Boes stared at him in amazement.

"Give me my time!" he cried. "I'm leaving."

And he went laughing into the night.

VIII

ON THE next day he went with Neloa to Idaho Falls and lived with his sister and parents in a dark scabbed apartment. But he did not enlist. Neloa wept and pleaded with him to stay with her.

"Our child," she said, "you should think of it. You should at least wait until our child is born."

And Vridar thought of the child. He owed a duty to the unborn and he resolved to wait.

"But ten to one," he said, "I'll be drafted. That'll be a hell of a note."

"Maybe the war will stop," she said.

"Stop! Not as long as there are fools like me to fight for the Rockefellers and the Morgans. . . ."

Early in August Neloa went to her Antelope home. She wanted Vridar to go with her but Vridar said she would be all right. He did not want to be with her when the child was born. He remained in the city, now helping in the garage, now walking the streets in thought; and one day there came to him an Antelope farmer and the man was so agitated he could barely speak.

"You know what's happened?" he cried. "You're a father now!"

Vridar stared at the man.

"What of it?" he said. "A lot of things are fathers." He shrugged. "Likely as not you're a father yourself."

Like a man deeply lost to himself Vridar entered a car and was driven to Neloa's home. As he walked to the house everything about him seemed crazy and unreal. His fatherhood, it seemed to him, was very silly: it was a blunder that he ought to be punished for. Because here he was, a man bewildered and driven, with a child on his hands: with a son, born of his own haunted flesh and blood, and looking into the

awful wonder of life. He would be killed soon and his child would grow up and marry and breed; and it was all nightmare. . . .

He entered the house and looked at Neloa on the bed. She was very white and weak but her eyes were radiant.

"Oh sweetheart!" she cried, and he had never heard her voice ring so. "Darling, come and see!"

He went over to the bed. He stared at the hideous squirming infant. Neloa, watching his face, spoke again.

"Darling, aren't you glad?'

"I don't know," he said.

"It's a boy!" she said. "Aren't you glad it's a boy?"

"I can't see it makes any difference."

Neloa reached out and grasped his hand.

"Aren't you going to kiss me?" He stooped and kissed her. "And now kiss *him!*"

"No," he said, scowling at the child. And he added: "What an ugly brat!"

"Oh darling, how can you say such a thing! He looks just like you. Mama says he does."

"Like me?" he said; and he stared hard at his son. "I know I'm an ugly bastard but I didn't know I was as ugly as that."

"He has your nose. He has your mouth."

"Nonsense."

"Look, he has your ears!"

"Fiddlesticks."

"And darling, his eyes are just like yours. Look."

"Oh, in God's name! All babes are said to look like their parents! That's more damned fool vanity!"

"It isn't. He looks just like you."

"I tell you he's the homeliest brat I ever saw!"

Neloa looked at Vridar and the smile left her face.

"Darling, aren't you glad?"

"I don't know. It's easy to get kids. It's not so easy to give them a decent life. . . . I suppose you wish you'd had twins."

"I don't. I want just one."

"Like hell. You want enough to fill a barn. Every woman does."

"Vridar," she said, trying to draw him to her, "just kiss him once."

"No."

"Darling, please!"

He bent swiftly and kissed the warm pink flesh.

Two weeks later he was called in the draft. For a long while he stared at the summons.

ORDER OF INDUCTION INTO MILITARY SERVICE
OF THE UNITED STATES

The President of the United States,

To *Vridar Baroledt Hunter*

Order Number *1031* Serial Number *1496*

Greeting: Having submitted yourself to the local board composed of your neighbors for the purpose of determining the place and time in which you can best serve the United States in the present emergency, you are hereby notified that you have now been selected for immediate military service.

You will, therefore, report to the local board named below at *Court House,* at *10 A. M.,* on the *19th* day of *September, 1918* for military duty.

From and after the day and hour just named you will be a soldier in the military service of the United States.

A. C. Binson
Chief Clerk

Member of the Local Board for *Bonneville County*

Well, Vridar reflected, that settled it, and he felt relief. He wrote to Mertyl in Salt Lake City and asked if he would go with him. At once came Mertyl's reply.

DEAR V. B.

Of course I'll go. I'll be right up. It's all a dog's life anyway but God knows it's worse sitting here and reading about what is going on over there. Don't feel so damned blue. Your old pal will soon be with you and we'll jump into the lousy fracas and mix things to suit ourselves.

Give my love to Neloa.

MERT.

Mertyl came on the next train and went with Vridar to the Board.

"My brother and I," said Vridar, speaking to the sheriff, "want a-go together. Is it all right?"

The sheriff looked thoughtful and pulled at his drooping mustaches. He turned to other members of the Board.

"How about it?" he asked.

The other members looked thoughtful, too. They all looked, indeed, as if there had been laid upon them the destinies of nations. They asked a lot of questions.

"Why," said the sheriff solemnly, "does your brother want a-go?"

"We want a-be killed together," Vridar said.

"Umph," said the sheriff; and he looked at Vridar and then at Mertyl as if to read their thoughts; as if to learn whether they plotted seditions and insurrections. He became suspicious. He turned to his fellow members as if to say, "I think I smell a plot here." And to Vridar he said:

"Are your parents—well—umm, what nationality are you?"

"American. Isn't that enough?"

During a long silence the sheriff played with his western-magazine mustaches and stared at Vridar.

"Your parents German?" he asked at last.

"German. What difference does that make?"

"Answer me," said the sheriff, speaking out of terrible dignity.

"One grandfather was German, one was Dutch. One grandmother was English and one is Irish with a little Indian in her. About ten drops," Vridar said, "to the gallon."

"I see," said the sheriff. "Yes. Well—"

"One greatgrandparent," Vridar went on impatiently, "fought in the Revolutionary War. Another fought in the War of 1812. My father's father fought in the Civil War."

"Oh, he did. Which side?"

"The North. But what's the difference?"

"A lot," the sheriff said. "You say you're partly German? . . . Well, I'll tell you. We'll consider the matter and let you know."

An hour later he called Vridar by telephone. It would be all right, he said. Mertyl would go in place of Arthur Hammond who had been summoned in this draft.

In this evening Hammond came to Vridar. He was a huge flabby fellow and he broke and wept.

"It's sure swell of you!" he said, blubbering like a child. "I—I'm married. I have a little baby—" The word baby left him bursting with sobs. Vridar looked at him in pity.

"I've a child, too," he said. "Two weeks old."

"You—you have! That's too bad. That's too darn bad."

"And besides," Vridar went on, "it's my brother who's taking your place, not me. If you want a-thank anyone, thank him."

Hammond wrung Vridar's hand and went to find Mertyl. He shook with gratitude and joy and offered gifts.

"I'n never thank you enough!" he cried. "Gosh, I never can!"

To celebrate his good fortune Arthur Hammond borrowed a shotgun and went duck-hunting. He caught influenza and two weeks later he was dead.

Vridar went to Antelope to say good-by to Neloa. She was up now but she was very thin and white. She was with him only an hour. She wept in his arms and her grief moved him deeply but he spoke jestingly of war and said he would be back soon. He held her at arm's length and stared earnestly at this face which he loved. And again he thought, I'll never see her again in life or after death. This is the end. He went

over to the bed and kissed his son. He came back and kissed Neloa and turned away with his heart breaking. . . .

On his way back to the city he drove his father's automobile with such reckless speed that he ran over a hog and a half-dozen chickens and lost the cushion from the rear seat. He bought whisky and drank until he staggered in wild fancies; and most of this night he walked up and down the streets with his drafted comrades, looking for a brawl. To one man and another he said, "Do you believe a just God approves war?" And the men, seeing that Vridar was drunk, said they did not. But at last he came to a man who rebuked him.

"Go home!" the man said. "Beat it before I smack your ears down!"

"Answer me," Vridar said, grinning. "Do you—uh—believe what I asked you?"

"Yes!"

"Then," said Vridar, still grinning, "you're a cockeyed liar."

The man sprang to the fight but other recruits, also dizzy with whisky, led the warriors to a garage. They went into the part where cars were overhauled and where buckets of oil stood about and grease was deep on the floor. And here they fought. Of this fight Vridar could remember nothing clearly. When he came to himself he was in bed; and his clothes, piled on a chair by him, looked as if they had mopped a ton of grease. He left the bed and dragged Mertyl after him.

"Get up!" he said. "Our train leaves in an hour."

An hour later they stood on a platform and watched a great train roll in from the north. Their parents were with them. Joe gave no sign of grief but when he tried to say good-by the words stuck in his throat. Prudence smiled through her tears.

"Be careful," she said. "I know you'll come back."

"We will," they said.

"Well, good-by!"

"Good-by!"
"Good-by!"
And they swung up to the coach and were gone.

IX

BESIDES Vridar and Mertyl there were nine recruits, all bound for Fort Rosecrans at San Diego. Vridar had been placed in charge. With his protégés sitting round him he studied their faces. They were all country youths, the sons of farmers, and they were all simple and earnest and homesick. Not one of them had ever been forty miles from his front gate.

Vridar was touched by their sober roundeyed bewilderment. They were boys lost to their mothers; they were fighting grief now, and each was fighting in silence and alone. In their own township, in their own small world, they had been hard-fisted rowdies and they had swaggered and cursed; but now they were off to war and all their bravado was hushed. And what Vridar saw in their eyes aroused in him all that was most generous, as if he were a father, as if these were his sons.

When noon came he led them to the dining-car. While he stood in the entrance, looking for tables where they could all sit together, the chief steward came to him and spoke sharply. He said they were blocking the passage and asked them to move and Vridar flushed with rage. He had observed the deference paid to well-dressed diners; but he and these lads were only ignorant fellows, going to die for their country. To the men behind him Vridar said, "Come on!" and they moved in a body down the aisle. All the diners stared at them and Vridar hated what he saw in their stares. Their eyes did not say, "Here are some more soldiers, offering their lives. Steward, make room for these men!" No: their eyes said,

"What a bunch of gawks! There ought to be a separate place for them to eat!"

Vridar and Mertyl sat at a table for two. He told the men to sit where they could and they fell into seats. One of them, a strapping youth who looked sunbaked and unwashed, sat across from a haughty woman who stared at him in amazement. The fellow met her eyes and then, abashed, looked at Vridar.

"It's all right," Vridar said, speaking so the woman could hear. "If she doesn't like you she'n get out."

The woman rose and left the car. Another youth, who had been writhing under the manicured gaze of the man who faced him, bolted across the aisle and fell to the seat. Then they all grinned at one another and waited for food. Other diners, Vridar observed, were bowed to tables and served at once.

"The sons-of-bitches!" he said to Mertyl. "We don't matter. We're only some hayseeds on our way to death." Mertyl, too, was furious.

"Go to the steward," he said. "Tell him if he doesn't hurry up we'll throw him off the train. . . . Go on!"

"Well, wait a minute."

"You're in charge of this bunch. Go on!"

Vridar rose and went to the steward.

"Why aren't we served?" he asked. The steward looked at him and Vridar wanted to strike the man in his teeth.

"You'll be served," the steward said.

After Vridar and Mertyl had eaten they slyly placed twenty-five cents under a plate. This gesture on Vridar's part was cowardly. He despised social gratuities and he had never tipped before. And when, hours later, the men came in to dinner, he was amazed to learn what a quarter had done.

Because now the waiter smiled at him and at Mertyl and served them at once. The other men had not tipped and they were ignored. Vridar looked at his food and waited.

"We made a mistake," he said to Mertyl. "Tipping, I mean."

"Let's get rough," Mertyl said.

"No, not yet."

Twenty minutes passed before food was brought to the other nine. And when it came, Vridar, looking at the rations, saw that they were only half as generous as they had been at noon. He knew the meaning of that: these men had not tipped and they were being rebuked. And this unspeakable insolence aroused in him, as few things could have done, a murderous rage. He went to the head steward.

"Listen," he said, and his voice shook like his body, "I'm in charge of a group of men who are on their way to France to be shot. They did not tip at noon because they've never heard of tipping. And now they're served only half the food they should have." He paused for a moment, his voice choked. Then he said: "The government is paying for their food and they're going to get it. This is what I mean: we've been drafted to fight and we don't give a damn when the fighting starts. Do you understand me?"

The steward looked at him and his blue eyes darkened.

"Don't they have enough?" he asked.

"Go see for yourself."

Shaking all over, Vridar went back to his seat; and the men looked at him, their eyes questioning.

"It's all right," Vridar said. "They'll bring you a decent meal. If they don't, we'll throw them off the train."

Two waiters came and bore the food away. They returned with heaped dishes and the men grinned like schoolboys and ate.

When they arrived in San Diego it was pitch dark. A sergeant met them at the station and led them away, and as he went ahead of them down a black street he barked orders as if he were leading an attack in a fog. They entered a tugboat and were taken across the bay; they climbed a steep, difficult path; they came to tents on a hill.

A few minutes later Vridar lay on his small cot and looked at his brother.

"Well," he said, "we're in it now."

"Yes," Mertyl said. "I'n smell the canned horseflesh."

"And the beans and saltpeter."

"God yes, the saltpeter."

"Let's learn to smoke," Vridar said. "We'll be hellish soldiers if we don't smoke."

"And drink and chase women. God help any girls who stray around here."

"Yes," Vridar said solemnly, "God help them. They'll learn what a soldier thinks of."

Vridar fell asleep, thinking of his brother. Mertyl was not the pious lad of two years ago. With one gesture he seemed to have thrown away all his ideals and to have set his heart on whisky and women.

On the next morning all the recruits for Battery D, 26th Artillery, were called into line. Lieutenant Jacks, commanding officer of the Battery, looked at the men. Vridar looked at the men, too. Some of them were from Idaho and Montana and California but most of them were from New Mexico and they were a dark and sinister lot. Many of them looked like Indians and halfbreeds. . . .

"Can any of you men use a typewriter? Put your hands up."

Vridar thrust a hand up. He glanced to right and left and saw that he was the only man with his hand up. Jacks came over to him.

"Are you a typist?"

"Yes sir."

"Come with me." Vridar went with him to a tent. "Sergeant Strumm, this man is a typist. Find out if he's any good."

Sergeant Strumm was paunched and bowlegged and had a pudgy red face. His blue eyes were whimsical and kind. . . . Vridar sat at a typewriter and pounded the keys and the two men watched.

"You'll do," Strumm said. "You'll be company clerk."

When Jacks left, Strumm talked to Vridar as man to man. This was a lucky break, he said. The clerk didn't do much: he had a soft and lazy job. In a few days Vridar

would be a corporal, and he would become a sergeant when the Battery landed in France.

And all this flattered Vridar. He looked about him and began to feel like a corporal. He sat at a table and typed reports and letters and he fancied himself in reverie as a brigadier-general. Two days later two stripes were sewed on his shirt-sleeves and on his coat. He was Corporal Hunter now and he fairly ached with power and dignity.

But his joy was short-lived. A week passed and there came to him, in an awful moment, the appalling truth of what he had done. It was Mertyl's eyes that awakened him. Because Mertyl, in coming with him, had assumed that they would be two privates in the ranks, together side by side. And in those eyes when Mertyl came in from drill Vridar saw contempt and pain and in Mertyl's mouth he saw bitterness that made his heart ache.

Vridar went at once to Sergeant Strumm.

"I don't want this job," he said. "Please get another clerk and reduce me to the ranks."

"Now what's the matter?"

"I want to become a common private out in the field."

"Gonococcus! You're the clerk and you'll stay here."

"Sergeant, please do this for me. Listen. My brother came with me. He came instead of another man so we could be together. Honest to God, I never thought when I took this job! And I don't want it!"

"Don't be a fool," said Strumm. "You're the only typist we have."

"But I don't want it! I've been a damned traitor to my brother!"

"Well, it can't be helped now. Jacks would laugh at you."

Vridar left the tent and went to Lieutenant Jacks. He saluted. He stood at attention and waited.

"Well?" said Jacks at last.

"Sir, I don't want a-be company clerk. I want a-be a common private with my brother."

Jacks was amazed.

"You're a corporal," he said.

"Sir, I don't want a-be a corporal. Please reduce me to the ranks."

Jacks grinned faintly and looked at him and Vridar did not like the grin. Jacks was a huge fellow who had been an all-American guard in football. He was brutal and arrogant.

"Corporal Hunter," he said, "go back to your work."

"But, sir, you don't understand. My brother took the place——"

"Corporal, did you hear me?"

"—took the place," Vridar went on desperately, "of another man. He did that so we could be together in the ranks. Please sir——"

Jacks rose from his chair. His face was dark with anger.

"Corporal, there's no place for sentimentality in war. Go on back to your work."

Vridar went back to his tent and he hated his work now and he hated himself. He would have given anything, even his life, to take that hurt look from Mertyl's eyes. But he said nothing to his brother. This was his folly, his traitorous blunder; this was his shame. And now, as in his childhood, he drew the pain of it into himself and it was never told.

To Strumm he said:

"All right, make an office flunky of me. But don't think I won't fight when I get to France. I wasn't drafted to pound a typewriter."

"You're a strange bird," Strumm said. "Most men would jump at your job."

"I don't care, I'm in to fight. I'm going to France to be killed."

"To be killed! What the hell, are you crazy?"

"No. But I mean that."

Strumm began to whistle.

"Listen," he said, after a moment, "I like you. I think I'n trust you. I want a-tell you something. . . ."

Alonzo Strumm, top-sergeant of Battery D, had been a soldier for nine years but he was not a soldier. He was a poet and a maker of dreams. He loved books. He read Dante

and St. Francis and Hindu philosophy and in his soul he built empires of the fantastic and the far-away. He was the only officer whom Vridar liked. Every man in the Battery liked him, and some, after a few weeks, loved him; for his whimsical discipline said, "Obey orders, you jackass. Life is a battlefield and you may as well fight in the army as anywhere else. . . . Don't take it seriously, fellows, and death may miss you somewhere. . . ." And Strumm would smile.

"I want a-tell you something," he said now. "I'm in love. You ever been in love?"

"Lord yes," Vridar said.

"Fine," said Strumm. "You'll understand." He gave Vridar a cigarette and studied his face. "There's no place in the army for love. A man in the army is supposed to eat saltpeter and beans and pretend he's a steer. . . . You taste the stuff in your chow?"

"I guess so. I taste something."

"That's it. We buy it by the ton." He studied Vridar again. "I'm in love with a married woman," he went on. "She's a doctor's wife over in San Diego, the swellest woman you ever saw. . . . You married?"

"Yes."

"Her name is Dorothy but I call her Dolly. And she's a peach. I've been seeing her twice a week." Strumm paused. Vridar looked at him and waited. "Now what I want a-tell you is this: it's against orders but I have to see her. Out on the hill. In the brush, just like a guilty schoolboy. . . . I want you to help me."

"Sure, if I can."

"When I'm gone, if Jacks comes blustering around, wanting to know where I am, you make some excuse. I'll do something for you sometime. When we're in France. You might want—but I guess you wouldn't. . . . You say you're married?"

"Yes."

"Well, so am I. My wife's in Seattle. But a man can't love a woman if she's in Seattle and he's in San Diego, can he? That sounds pretty bad, I know. But this is decent between

Dolly and me. Don't get the idea that she lives out there under a bush."

Vridar grinned.

"Army life is hell," Strumm went on. "But if a man can get away now and then to a bottle of whisky or a woman—— When we get in France I'll do something for you. . . . Army life, Vridar, is a lot of pomp and a big mess of beans. But you'll get used to it." Strumm rose from his chair. His manner changed swiftly and he swung to Vridar.

"Corporal Hunter, is that report ready?"

"Yes sir."

"All right, Corporal, you may go now."

But there was none of the dreamer, none of the poet, in Lieutenant Frederick Jacks. He was brawny and scowling and arrogant and all the men despised him. He disliked Vridar and he chastened him again and again and their scorn of one another became frank and open. One afternoon a sergeant entered the tent and spoke to Jacks and left.

"Corporal Hunter, go tell Sergeant Adkins I want to see him."

Vridar left the tent and hailed Adkins. He delivered the message and returned and saluted.

"The fellow, sir, says he'll be back in a minute."

Jacks swung in his chair and looked at Vridar. His thin smile was a leer.

"Listen, Hunter, you're in the army. Do you know that?"

"Yes sir."

"Then what do you mean by calling Sergeant Adkins a fellow?"

"Why," Vridar said, "he is a fellow, isn't he, sir?"

Jacks rose to his feet. He gave Vridar a long and unpitying stare.

"Corporal Hunter, there are no *fellows* in this army. They are all in college. In this army there are soldiers and officers. Do you understand that?"

"Yes sir."

"All right. Now go tell Sergeant Adkins I desire to see him at once."

Vridar left the tent, hot with shame and rage.

But two days later his attitude was changed, not only toward Jacks but toward army life. He sat at his typewriter to work. In the machine was a paper, and Vridar saw that it was a letter and he read the salutation and the first line. It was a letter from Jacks to his mother. After hesitating a moment, Vridar swiftly read the letter and his amazement grew as he read.

DEAR MUMSY:

The longer I stick around in this cockeyed army the madder I get. I hate the whole mess. All my superior officers are overbearing fools. When Colonel White comes around he bawls me out and tries to make me look cheap. It's the same with the others. Nothing that I do is right. Nothing pleases them. To hear them tell it my battery is the worst in the army and I'm the most inefficient officer between here and Verdun. White and all the other stuckup asses come parading around to show off and it gets under my hide. I won't stand it much longer. One of these days I'll draw my good right arm back and smash White in his mouthful of gold. . . .

The letter was unfinished. Vridar went to the entrance and looked out. He read the letter again and his astonishment left him witless. During the whole of this afternoon he could think of nothing but the implications in this letter. For two days he pondered them. Then he wrote to Neloa.

DEAREST GIRL:

The other day I got the surprise of my life. I've been trying to figure out why Christians who profess peace tax themselves to death to support armies and navies. I thought in the first place it is because men aren't civilized; and they aren't. They don't love peace. They love danger and feuds. That's why ships aren't sunk and soldiers aren't sent home to mind their business.

And another reason is the profit: munitions-makers are the war-makers; but, darling, they probably go to church and say prayers and donate to cathedrals. Human ingenuity in insulting God offers endless food to wonder.

And a third reason is women. They like to see men march away to fight. Being the fools they are, I suppose they can't help it, or these halfwitted societies like the D.A.R. As long as women would rather give birth to a soldier than a poet, we'll have bigger and lustier wars.

But the most important reason of all I've just stumbled upon. Being a man, I blush to name it; for men, my dear, are indescribably vain and petty and love nothing so much as a position of authority over their fellows; and in such positions they are, of course, nearly always tyrants and brutes. They love to give orders and make men jump through loops. They love to swagger and put on the dog. Note the outlandish monkey-uniforms of kings; the plush and padding and glitter of religious dignitaries; apes starched to a fine stupidity at formal dinners. And all this is, I see at last, the biggest reason for war: it serves male vanity and greed on a huge scale. And I see, too, that the only soldier who doesn't sweat under discipline is the knothead at the top: Pershing probably now twists in his polished boots, since he is under Foch; and Foch is the only murderer in the whole outfit who doesn't have someone knifing his self-esteem. I've been hating Lieut. Jacks because he's an overbearing fool. But no longer. I see now that his superior officer makes him jump like a circus monkey; and so he makes us jump; and I'd be making someone jump if I could. I confess with shame that when I was made a corporal I began to feel my oats. It pleased me to reflect that I outranked most of the army and had privileges not given a private. My self-love shot up like a toadstool from a dung-pile. But not any more. I want to get back to the ranks where a man is a target and God, poor fellow, is on both sides.

Isn't it amusing? And there's something more: I smell it. There's a relationship between war and sex. If the "Huns" don't get me I'll figure that out, too. Over in the German dugouts, my dear, are some poor frightened devils waiting

for me and the rest of us; wondering why war has to be; and at the top, driving them on, are, unless I miss my guess, a pack of sexual degenerates. I make this guess, too: those hottest crusaders for war in this country have never had a good orgasm. Smile, my dear, but the truth is still strange and Napoleon was nothing but a stinking runty impotence.

I don't know when we leave here. Before Christmas, anyway; and within a year I'll have driven a bayonet into some pitiable fellow or I'll be pushing up weeds. I'm not cocky enough to suppose that I'll push up daisies. Only the officers, I think, do that.

The smell of the sea is glorious. I wish we could sit together out here on the hill and watch the sun bury itself in the ocean and draw a sky of flame after it. And we may sometime. There's a little flu here but I'm careful. And darling, keep cheerful. We take life as we take a physic; and then we sleep.

Your VRIDAR.

X

BUT Vridar was not unhappy during these weeks. His spirit was reckless and fatalistic, as was that of the men around him; and only from such a point of view, he began to see, was contentment born. In two months he gained fifteen pounds in weight; and Mertyl advanced steadily from a hundred and fifty-three pounds to a hundred and eighty-six. The brothers ate together, notwithstanding the stripes on Vridar's arm; they hogged their food and grinned; and they were always first to offer their tins for a second helping.

And a mood of fellowship, of comrades sealed to a common destiny, took hold of Vridar. . . .

O-ver there;—O-ver there!
Send the word, send the word o-ver there

That the Yanks are coming, the Yanks are coming,
The drums rum-tum-ming everywhere!

In a spirit of brotherhood he looked at these men. He liked all of them and he felt something deep and wordless in this new order that bound each to each:

And we won't come back till it's o-ver o-ver there!

When he went to the canteen for sweets or tobacco, or when, during the evening, he prowled with the men up and down the tent-aisles, his soul reached out to them in a common and mighty bond. He had not changed toward war: he still hated it and the greed that fostered it; but there was something here, something in the heart of this company, that reached beyond slaughter to the clean. . . .

Goodbye sweet-heart, wives and moth-ers,
It won't take us long!
Don't you wor-ry while we're there,
It's for you we're fighting too!
So goodbye Broadway, hel-lo France!
We're going to square our debt to you!

Because all these men were singing now. They sang who had never sung before, as if joy were a chamber in their hearts. And Vridar surprised himself, again and again, by bursting into song. Melodies and words ran in endless meaning through his thoughts and his dreams. Any former time, when looked at in memory, came to him now as a strange dark silence, with music dying far away, like imminent storm when a lark is hushed. And he marveled at this new spirit which defeated analysis and lay, in spite of blood and death, in the realms of the beautiful and the good. "There is more in war," he wrote to Neloa, "than I thought. It is all that I said but it is more than that. There is something beyond definition, as in religion there is something beyond the empty ritual and the prayer; as in poetry there is the greater reach, the un-

touched wonder, beyond the poet. But what it is I cannot tell. It is in war but no more a part of war than movement is a part of water. There is a force that purges, or so it seems to me now; but I am confused, I cannot grasp the thing I feel. Something is taking hold of me. . . ."

O joy! O boy! Where do we go from here?

But after a few weeks Vridar fought against this possession of himself by a power which he could not understand. His detachment, his spiritual isolation, was being drawn as rivers draw their streams into the common journey. He was not here to be a uniformed mannikin, jumping like a robot to the enemy's trench: he was here to go to his death clearly and calmly and to observe how he went. He wanted to see, to study, this enormous process of annihilation, and not to be snuffed out, waving a flag: no, but to keep his mind intact and watchful, his spirit aloof.

And to recover this detachment again he refused to sing. He retired to a margin and he watched, as clearly as he could, the changes that were taking place. He saw, vaguely at first, but more sharply as the days passed, that the training of a soldier, so unimplicit to the casual eye, was very devious and cunning. On the surface these men were clothed and fed and drilled; but under the surface they were stripped of their decency, their scruples; they were led step by step to their heritage of the brute. The only emotions called forth were primitive and fundamental. Because these men, exiled from all tenderness, lived and breathed in the spirit of the feud; and as they gained in health and strength and fatalism, they hungered for a brawl. They wanted to go to France and they wanted to fight. And in one event and another, Vridar saw their savage hearts, their dark and unadorned animalism, made clear.

He saw, for instance, the malicious cruelty of the company surgeon. When the men passed in single file round a room to be inoculated against typhoid, Vridar, while moving slowly

in the line, studied the doctor's face. It was a large heavy face and upon it from time to time lay a devilish grin. It was the face of a man whose brain was the nimble and sardonic servant of a dark and impetuous heart. When a soldier flinched under the needle, the surgeon's joy was as unmistakable as the epaulets on his shoulders. He thrust more deeply, it seemed to Vridar, into the flesh of those who were scared; and once, when a man twisted suddenly under the jab, the needle was broken off and the surgeon probed into the flesh with tweezers. Three men fainted while Vridar was in the room.

The first of them sprawled as if shot.

"Take him away!" the surgeon roared. Two corporals dragged the man out and threw a bucket of water into his face. The man came to, gasping and yelling; he was set on his shaking legs; and he left the room with something in his eyes that went like a knife to Vridar's heart.

"If you men faint at a needle jab," said the surgeon, looking round him, "what'll you do when you get a bayonet in your guts? . . . All right, next!"

Vridar resolved to be very steady and unafraid. He offered his arm and the surgeon pinched the flesh of it between a powerful thumb and finger. Then the needle came like a stab of lightning and two inches of steel were buried in Vridar's arm. He looked at the man and grinned.

After Vridar had left the building he heard a man scream. It was not the thrust of the steel, he reflected, that bedeviled these men. It was the cruel cynical face of the man who plied the steel. It was the vindictive gesture in a world that had become friendless and strange.

The inoculation made him sick. Never before in his life, save mildly with smallpox and measles, had Vridar been ill; and now he thought he would die. Fever flushed him and lifted its hot violent nausea to his throat.

"I'm sick as a dog," he said to Mertyl. "Tell Strumm I'm going to stay in bed."

"Aren't you going to eat anything?"

"God no!"

An hour later Strumm came to the tent. His face was sympathetic and his hand on Vridar's brow was the hand of a friend.

"What's the matter, Corp? You sick?" Vridar turned a hot face to the light. "It's inspection this morning. I don't suppose you'n get up?"

"I wouldn't get up for Pershing himself."

"Well, all right. The Major will bawl you out but I guess you'n stand it. . . . Anything you want?"

"A gallon of ice-water."

"You can't have it. Want some coffee?"

"Thanks, it would be all right." Coffee was brought and Vridar drank it and vomited. "Take it away!" he said.

A little before ten o'clock Vridar heard the Major and his retinue coming down the aisle between the tents. Vridar lifted a flap and peered out. Men on both sides of the aisle were standing at attention, with everything about them polished and scrubbed. The flaps of every tent were thrown back to show the good soldierly discipline within. And here Vridar lay, the solitary blot on an immaculate parade. . . .

"What's the trouble in there?" a voice asked. "Lieutenant Jacks, why isn't this tent in order?"

"The man in there, sir, is ill." It was Strumm speaking.

"Ill! What's wrong with him?"

"A little typhoid, sir."

The Major came to the tent and raised a flap.

"You there!" he cried. "Are you sick?"

Vridar affected sleep. He breathed deeply so that the Major would see the blanket rise and fall. The Major entered the tent and roughly turned Vridar's face to the light. Vridar opened his eyes.

"Why aren't you up?"

"Sir, I'm sick."

"You don't look sick to me." The Major laid a hand on Vridar's brow. "A little fever. Do you think you're sick every time you get a little fever?"

"No sir."

"Sergeant Strumm, give this man three pills."

"Three pills, sir? Yes sir."

The Major left the tent. Vridar looked at the ceiling and grinned. Major Dockworth was small and plump and Vridar wondered why undersized men were so arrogant and pompous. He thought of Napoleon and turned to the wall.

And even in the eyes of Mertyl, who had been a quiet and inoffensive youth, Vridar saw a dark lusting. Out of a slender stripling had grown a powerful broadshouldered man, and Mertyl, sensing his new power, carried himself defiantly, neither seeking trouble, nor yet avoiding it; and one evening at mess he ran into more than he was looking for.

He was in line with Vridar behind him when a great halfbreed with mess-tin in hand pushed into the line ahead of Mertyl. Mertyl looked round at Vridar.

"Did you ever see such damn gall? Here, hold these."

Vridar took the mess-kit. Mertyl stepped out of the line and with all his power he smashed into the halfbreed and floored him. The man leapt up and turned and his face was the ugliest snarl Vridar had ever seen.

"Go to the end of the line," Vridar said. "You've no right to push in here." The man shrugged and went down the line.

Two hours later Vridar and Mertyl were sitting in their tent. The flap was raised and a Mexican face peered in.

"Come on out," the face said.

"What you want?" Mertyl asked.

"I want you should come out."

Then another face appeared. It was that of the big halfbreed.

"Come out," the man said. "We'll finish this thing."

Mertyl rose but Vridar sprang up and took his arm.

"Just a minute," he said turning to the halfbreeds. "We'll be out." The faces disappeared. "I don't trust them," Vridar said to Mertyl. "They'll knife you."

"Well, let's go out," Mertyl said.

They went out. They saw the halfbreed with a half-dozen men around him.

"Come this way," the halfbreed said.

"Where?" Mertyl asked.

"Just back here. Just over the hill."

Vridar led Mertyl aside.

"They'll kill us," he said. "This'll have to be a fair fight."

"You're an officer," said Mertyl. "Search them."

"No, they'd gang up. I'll report it to Jacks."

"No you won't!" said Mertyl.

"Don't be a fool! Go back in the tent." Mertyl hesitated. "Go on! I'll arrange the fight." Mertyl entered the tent and Vridar went to the halfbreed. "I'm an officer," he said. "I suppose you know that?" The halfbreed shrugged. The contempt made Vridar furious. "Obey orders," he cried, "or I'll have you thrown into the guardhouse! Stay here till I come back!"

He went to headquarters and told Strumm of what had happened. Jacks swung in his chair and listened.

"Where are they?" he asked.

"Near my tent, sir. They're waiting."

"Bring them down here."

"Yes sir."

Vridar went back to the tent and told Mertyl and the halfbreeds to come with him. Jacks had put a dozen men to work. Under a hanging light they were roping off a squared arena. Jacks came over to Vridar.

"Where are they?"

"Here, sir. My brother and this man."

"All right," Jacks said, "strip to your waist."

The two men stripped. Six-ounce gloves were brought and laced on their hands. They were ordered into the ring and soldiers came to watch the fight.

"There'll be no rounds in this fight," Jacks said, addressing the warriors. "You'll fight until one of you has enough. And I mean fight. All right, Sergeant, let them go."

Vridar stood by the rope and looked at his brother. Mertyl was a little pale but he seemed grim and determined. The big halfbreed, muscled like a gladiator, looked at no one but Mertyl. His face was sallow and unpitying and unafraid. And in this fight, there was no feinting, no guarding of

belly or face: they drove their blows with murderous fury. A more wicked bone-crushing fight Vridar had never seen. It sickened him. Soldiers crowded the ropes, howling like devils, urging the men to bloodier efforts; and Vridar shook as he watched. More than anything else he wanted to leap in there and take Mertyl's part. He had done so years ago and no habit of his life had been more unalterably fixed. When he saw the halfbreed strike Mertyl in his teeth, spilling blood, or when he saw Mertyl writhe from a driving smash in his stomach, Vridar babbled with anguish, as if his own son were being slain before his eyes. And then, without realizing what he did, he vanished under the rope and soldiers grasped him and drew him back.

The men fought for what seemed to Vridar a long time. They were both bloody and exhausted and they staggered like drunkards or fell under their own blows.

"Shall I stop them, sir?" Strumm asked of Jacks.

"No! They wanted to fight. Let them fight."

But in a few moments Vridar saw two men enter the ring. Each carried a pail of water and one drenched Mertyl and the other drenched the halfbreed. The two warriors, gasping, stricken, looked around them.

"That'll do," Jacks said. "Get back to your tents."

Vridar leapt in and took the gloves from Mertyl's hands. He led his brother to the tent, one arm around him, and wiped the blood from Mertyl's face.

"I'm all right!" Mertyl said impatiently. "He didn't hurt me!"

"I thought," Vridar said, "he knocked some of your teeth out."

"No! I tell you he didn't hurt me!"

"All right, I'm glad he didn't."

Vridar stared at him. Was this, he asked, the timid lad who had gone to school in Annis, in Poplar? It was hard to believe. Army training had given to him the heart of a wolf.

A few minutes later Rollie Pitkin came to them. Rollie was a slender youth who always looked frightened. Sometimes he went into his tent and wept and Vridar heard him

weep there and he wanted to take this terrified lad to his breast and hush his grief and fear. . . .

"Listen!" Rollie said, whispering.

"Yes? What is it?"

"I just heard them halfbreeds talkun. I wanted a-tell you what they said."

"All right. What did they say?"

"They plan to kill you both. I heard them say it. When we get in France——"

"Oh. When we get in France."

"Yes. They're plannun it now. . . . I thought you should know."

"Thanks, Rollie. Thanks a lot. We'll keep our eyes open."

Rollie quietly left the tent. The brothers looked at one another and grinned.

"Well," Vridar said, "so that's it. They'll do it too if they can."

Mertyl shrugged again.

"That," he said, "is a game we can both play."

Vridar sat by Mertyl and put an arm across his shoulders. He patted his arm as he used to do when they were frightened lads in school. I must get back to the ranks, he thought, and protect him; and tears came to his eyes out of the great loneliness and heartache of his past. He would have died for Mertyl. His love for his brother was as deep as his love for Neloa and for either of them he would have died.

XI

WHEN Vridar was with Neloa he reproached her but when away, he felt for her only great tenderness and a wish to cherish. He poured out his heart and his love to her in passionate mad letters; and her letters to him were the only thing that he lived for. He read them over and over

until he knew them by heart and with frenzied idealism he built them into the core of his life.

On a day early in November when his departure for France was near he went over a hill, taking her letters with him; and sitting where he could see and smell the rolling gray tides of the ocean he read them again.

DEAR HEART:

Well, another lonesome old Sunday has about dragged itself to a close and I am still able to smile. Agnes has been singing "Somewhere in France is Daddy" and "Keep the Home Fires Burning" and some more songs like them. When I hear any of the war songs I get lonesome in spite of all I can do. Funny, isn't it? I always think of you. I get lonesome for you and just wish so much that you could be with me.

Dearie, when you write again tell me how you spend your Sundays. Are they the same as every other day? Your father has been preaching to Agnes all day trying to make a Mormon of her but I'm afraid he didn't accomplish very much. Sweetheart, haven't you taken any photos since you got down there? I wish you would take some and send them to me. If you only knew how much I love you and how I love your letters you would steal time to write to me every day. I love you, love you. Oh, sweetheart! . . .

DARLING BOY:

I don't know what is wrong with your mother and Diana but they are so cross they make life a misery for themselves and every one around them. But there, I don't want you to think I am complaining. I'm just telling you how things really are here. Babe and I are well and happy so don't you think we aren't. Do you know yet when you will leave? I got a basket and baby is sleeping alone now. Your father said to tell you you can just expect to sleep alone when you come home. He said if the babe can't sleep with me you can't either. I'm afraid he would have an awful time stopping you, wouldn't he? Darling, when you come I'm going

to stick to you like glue. I'm not going to let you out of my sight for a whole lifetime. Dearie, you're in for an awful lot of loving when you get home. And will you be glad?

I have our future all pictured and it hasn't a single disturbance in it. I'll be terribly surprised if we ever have the least bit of trouble again. I am suffering tonight, too, dearie. I suffer when you suffer and I always shall. I thank God for your love and pray the time will come when you can forget the old Neloa, who is dead now, and live with and love your own. It was your love, dear, that made me what I am now. Sweetheart, I will swear to you that if I were to be hanged and could save my life by telling a dirty story, I could not do it. . . .

Vridar looked away at morning sunlight on the sea. In Salt Lake City six months ago she had amazed him with the simple statement, "I'll bet I know as many dirty stories as anyone you ever saw." And then, cunningly, he had led her to confession; and such utter mental filth he had never before listened to. It was erotic leprosy, stinking and foul. And he wondered then, as he had wondered so many times before, what it was in human beings out of which came the privy-house legends. He had stared at her then with amazement gathering within him; and he reproached her furiously; and he rebuked himself for loving one with an unclean mind. . . . But all this he forgave and forgot. He believed deeply now that Neloa could not tell an obscene story to save her life. And he sighed and read again.

DEAREST HEART:

You know what my dream is now? To go somewhere far away where there will be no memories of the past to haunt us. I want a little home with just you and baby, a small world of our own. I don't want ever to see the Antelope country again and when I die I don't want to be buried there. I don't want to be buried in Idaho for I hate the place. And I have learned, dear, that we can never live around your folks or mine.

I am getting fat, really. I now weigh 138 with my suit and hat on. Don't you think that is pretty good? I am weak and my nerves are bad but don't you worry about me. If I got sick I don't think they'd let you come. I wonder if I'll see you before you see France. I must, darling, because I love you with the truest strongest love a woman can have for a man. And don't feel so sorry because you have been what you call mean to me. No matter what you have said or done I'll always love you. I'll always love you no matter what you do. Just think of our future, for we shall be happy, dear. Oh, so very happy when you come home! And I know you will come!

Love, darling, with all my heart!

YOUR NELOA.

Vridar read these letters and others and kissed them and sat in thought. He felt a great sadness today, not alone for himself and Neloa but also for the men in this camp. They were dying now like hogs with cholera. Influenza had struck here. Half the soldiers were stretched out on cots and some had died. Rollie Pitkin, that pathetic and terrified lad, was in a box now and on his way home. The big halfbreed was close to death. To Neloa Vridar wrote:

I know, dearest, that you forgive, because forgiveness is one of your golden virtues; but just the same, I am sick to death of the shameless way in which I abuse you when we are together and my awful dark worship of you when we're apart. God knows I have tried to fight out of it and see my way clear; but there is something in my blood or training that is more terrible than nightmare and I can't see what it is. And I'm so damned weary of trying. And I believe deep in my heart, and this I've told you before, that it would be better for you if I were dead. I could easily die here for the Flu is everywhere; but a will stronger than all other wills keeps me in life because I love you, love you, and want to see you again. . . .

As company clerk I take care of the mail. Some of the letters don't have return addresses on the envelopes and I have to open them to get the address. I don't have to read them but I do. Listen to this one:

Dear husband mine, you don't know how me and baby miss you. Every day is just like a awful dream. I try and keep busy but I just think about you all the time and it seems like I couldn't stand it. I try and keep busy making things for you. Honey, did you get the socks I sent? I'm making you a sweater now. Honey, did you get the cake I sent and was it nice and fresh? Tell me what you'd like. I dreamed about you last night, honey. We was in the woods where we used to walk on Sunday and you was in a uniform but it seemed like you had come back to stay. And oh I was so happy I just cried and cried and when I woke up my pillow was all wet. . . .

And now, my dear, listen to this one to Private Harry Johnson:

MY OWN DEAREST:

I'm just so excited I can hardly write. Daddy says the War won't last much longer and that you'll be home for Christmas! Imagine, dear! He says he knows it's true and I can't believe him but something deeper than reason tells me it is so. And, Harry, do you know what I'm doing? Oh, you wouldn't! You men! I'm making my wedding-gown. *Harry, dear, I'm making my wedding-gown* and mamma is helping me. Dearest, let's be married on Christmas day! You'll be my wedding-gift. And the gown, it's just too darling for words! And won't we be happy? And then I think, Oh, but maybe he won't come after all. But I know you will, I know you will! I'm fluttering like a bird today. Please write and say I'm not foolish and my father is a good prophet and you'll soon be here.

Love, dearest, worlds and worlds without end!

VIRGINIA.

Again Vridar sat in thought. He looked far away to the Pacific and his eyes were wet and blind. Barely able to see what he wrote he finished the letter to Neloa:

Over these letters yesterday I wept like a silly fellow and I'm weeping now. It's heartbreaking. Because, my dear, both John and Harry *are* going home. They are both dead.

As ever,
VRIDAR.

XII

NEWS of the Armistice was a great rumor here. Is it true? the men asked and nobody knew or nobody cared to tell. Death had entered this camp and after it, hope of peace like a wind from the ocean, salty and clean. But the men did not sing and they had not sung for many days. There were faces gone from the mess-line, cots empty in the tents. And how many were dying in the huge gloomy hospital down the hill?

To Vridar came one and another. "Is—is Latrielle dead yet?" "I don't know. I'll see." And again: "Corporal, can you tell me about Huff?—Arthur Huff. Is he——?" "Yes." Sometimes the question was only a whisper. Sometimes the men turned away, choked by grief. And Vridar, fighting grief, too, and feeling as never before his kinship with his fellows, would talk with Mertyl.

"War is war. What difference if a man dies in a bunk or a shellhole?"

"A lot," Mertyl said. "It's a more decent death in a shellhole."

"Yes, you're right. . . . How you feel?"

"Fine. How do you?"

"All right yet. . . . Mert, I have a secret. We leave for France in two days."

"We do? Thank God."

"You sure you feel all right?"

"Yes, I'm all right."

"It would be hell if one of us got sick and left behind. Watch yourself."

But they did not leave for France. A great somberness fixed Strumm in thought and he moved like a man sentenced to death. "The damned thing is all over," he said to Vridar. "An armistice has been signed."

"You mean—you mean we're not going to France?" Strumm swung to him in sudden rage.

"God damn it, you heard me! You heard me! It's all over, I tell you, it's all over!" And like a man from whom all hope, all interest, had gone, Strumm left the tent and disappeared.

"It's all over," Vridar said to Mertyl. "The war has stopped."

"What!" Mertyl cried. They stared at one another. "Good God, you sure?"

"Strumm said so. He's all upset." Mertyl sank to the cot.

"For Christ sake. Just when they get a man ready to fight they send him back to make snowballs. When do we go home?"

"I don't know. I don't care."

Vridar went over a hill and sat under a bank. For the soldiers in France he was glad peace had come; but what would he do now? He would be shoved back into the turmoil of living, back to his passion, back to Neloa and his child. If he had been killed she would have had ten thousand dollars and she could have lived through her grief and forgotten him and married a man closer to her heart. And now he had to go back and take up his pitiable way of life: back to his violence and hatreds, back to his fight. . . .

And he wanted to go. His love for Neloa, he realized clearly, had in it a blind and impetuous unreason and it had left him weary and sick; but it was the only way for him. In this hour he wanted to kneel to her as to an altar, and this in him, this awful abject devotion, he despised. In it there was neither beauty nor strength nor light. It was a world of darkness in which she was the terrible deity and he was the fool. . . .

And this was his fight. It had been his fight for years and

never for a single instant had he struck through to freedom and calm. In her quiet way, in her undeliberate childlike way, she had conquered him at every turn: in Annis, on the Antelope Hills, and in every bitter hour since: until she had become, not a woman but a force; not a lover and wife but a power in the universe that was unalterably opposed to his will. Hers, he felt vaguely, was the wise and ancient plan, and his was the modern frenzy reaching to unattainables. If he could have seen this matter clearly now his years ahead would have been very unlike what they came to be. But he no more had the power to chasten himself to her quiet, to the simple and unquesting valleys of her life, than he had to sit happily with her among dull people in a dull house.

And now he who had sought peace in a world of war had to turn back to warfare in a world of peace. . . . Three weeks later he was on the road home.

He and Mertyl and forty others entrained at San Diego and on the way to Los Angeles the group developed a feud. Most of these man had wanted to go to France and had wanted to fight; and now they turned upon one another. Those from San Francisco, led by an ex-pugilist, challenged those from Idaho and Montana to combat.

"You cow-state bums!" the leader cried. "Men is supposed to be tough where you come from? Yeah, you cow-milkers! Let's see how tough you are!"

He led the San Franciscans to one end of the coach. The Idahoans and Montanans upon hearing the challenge rose from their seats. The pugilist spoke again, addressing himself to Vridar.

"You ain't no officer now, you long-nosed steer-roper! You been lordun it over us grand and plenty but now we're gonna dress that nose of yourn down. . . . Say when you're ready to go!"

"Wait a minute!" Vridar said. He turned to the men around him. The numbers in the two groups, he observed, were evenly divided. They looked about equal in size and brawn. On one side of him stood Mertyl and on the other was a pow-

erful giant from Twin Falls. "What's the rules for this fight?" Vridar asked.

"Rules! They ain't no rules! When you guys is all smacked to the sawdust the fight'll be over."

"Yeah?" said the man from Twin Falls.

"Yeah! You ready?"

"Just a minute!" someone cried. "We can't all fight at once!"

"*We* can," said the pugilist. "And say, you steer-ropers, you gonna wait all night?"

"All right," said the man from Twin Falls, "let's go!"

At once Vridar was lost in a terrific brawl of curses and fists. The coach shook and glass was smashed from windows and the men fought and swore like pirates. Vridar had leapt to a seat; and as the enemy came in a tide of fists and blasphemy he hurled himself on a man and clutched and went down. He had a man by his throat and with all his power he broke the man under him and shoved him to his knees and struck him in his mouth. He drove another blow into the man's soft throat, and he went down, limp and unconscious; and when Vridar came up, a hand smote him like a sledge of iron. It spun him round and he fell backward into the aisle and warriors leapt upon him or over him as they fought. He protected his face and shook his head, trying to clear his wits; and when the dizziness left him he crawled to one side between seats; and after a moment he came up again, ready to strike. In this instant while he looked about him he saw Mertyl bring a man up over his head and break him across the hard arm of a seat; saw Mertyl's savage and bloody face; saw the man from Twin Falls measuring blows; saw a welter of men, sprawled or standing, fighting like fiends. And then there came to Vridar that madness which used to strike him in Annis, in Poplar, when driven to the wall by school bullies; and he babbled with fury that was dark and blind. He saw a man kick another, prone and helpless, in his face, and he got the man by his throat and choked him until his tongue fell out. He was lost to everything but murder now and he would have killed his enemy if a terrific

blow had not floored him. It laid him out senseless. He rolled over on his belly and was still. . . .

And when he came to the fight was done. In one end of the coach the Californians were ministering to their wounded; and in the other end were his own comrades, some bearing no mark of the struggle, some bloody and undone. Mertyl had a cut lip. Dizzy and sick, Vridar allowed Mertyl to help him to a seat.

"You hurt?"

"God no. You?"

"I don't think so. I just feel—goofy." He stretched his legs, his arms, to see if he had broken bones. On the back of his skull was a lump the size of a golf ball. "No," he said, "I'm all right. Anyone get hurt bad?"

"I don't know. I guess not."

The man from Twin Falls was standing in the aisle, looking at the enemy. He had come through unscathed and his blood was still up.

"Here, let's finish this!" He spoke to the pugilist who was licking his bruised mouth.

"Don't," Vridar said. "The war is over."

"I want a-lick that son-of-a-bitch!"

"Go to hell!" said the pugilist.

"When we get off of the train—— Hey, you! In Los Angeles we'll finish this!"

"I said go to hell!"

When they all left the train at Los Angeles, the man from Twin Falls like a hound to a scent was after his foe. But the pugilist ducked and vanished.

"The dirty yellow dog!" cried the young giant, returning to his comrades. His eyes were full of murder. "I want a-yank his heart out and stick my arm through it!"

"You done enough," someone said. "You knocked two of his teeth out."

"I wanted a-knock his jawbones out. Callun me a cow-milker, the stinkun bum! I work in a office," said the giant, and he looked around him. He shrugged. "Cows! I never milked a cow in my life!"

Two hours later they entrained for their homes. Every man of them had prowled in underground places and had found whisky. Most of them had a pint or a quart but the man from Twin Falls had a gallon jug. Hour after hour he drank from his jug and cursed the pugilist. In a voice of utter disgust he would roar, "The son-of-a-bitch!" and he would drink again.

One of the men had a broken finger which he bandaged with a sock; another had a tooth missing and other teeth which were loose and these he experimented with thoughtfully, trying to fix them solidly in place; and a third had a big welt on his jaw. But none of them had been seriously hurt and most of them were singing like children now. They drank their whisky and roared from open windows into the night.

Vridar and Mertyl sat together and drank.

"Well," Vridar said, "it's all over now."

"Yes. France got licked and now Germany is licked. They'll fight again."

"This isn't bad whisky, is it?"

"It'll do. It'll get a man drunk."

"Mert, you remember what nice boys we used to be? We were models. Look at us now."

"We were fools," Mertyl said.

"What you suppose will become of us?"

"I don't know. It doesn't matter. Life's a hell of a mess."

"What you intend to do when you get back?"

"Take to the road." He turned to Vridar. "You had to be a damn fool and get married. We could a-gone together."

"Yes, I know. I was a fool." Vridar stared for a long moment into darkness. "Mert," he said, "I wish I could go with you."

"It's all your damn fault."

"Yes, I know it. . . . Where you going?"

"Anywhere. What's the difference?"

"None."

In a little while Mertyl slept; and Vridar, full of whisky and woe, studied his brother's face. It was a large strong face but there was something weak, something loose and sensual, in

the mouth. And there was, he remembered, something terribly bitter and stricken in the eyes. Our childhood years have him licked, too, he thought. They have licked both of us. The man from Twin Falls had dropped forward over his jug and was snoring into his lap. In a little while he awoke and looked about him and cursed. He saw Vridar watching him and he came over, bringing his jug.

"You been to college, ain't you?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Mebbe you'n tell me, then. Why did that son-of-a-bitch call me a cow-milker?"

"He called us all that," said Vridar, grinning. "He didn't mean just you."

"He was lookun at me. . . . You married?"

"Yes."

"I was," the man said, looking at Vridar with strange eyes. "But my wife— Your wife didn't get the Flu?"

"No. I don't think so."

The man raised the jug to his lips but he did not drink. He set it down and left it in the aisle and went to a seat and bowed his head to his arms. In a few moments he was weeping like a child.

XIII

IT WAS late morning when the two brothers stepped down in Idaho Falls. Vridar looked at the train as it rolled out and went to the track and watched it disappear. Then they gathered their things and went to a small dark house. Prudence came running and was gathered in turn to their arms; and then she stepped back, her eyes wide and bright, and Diana came forward to their kiss. Vridar asked where Neloa was and Prudence said she was out in the yard, hanging clothes. Mertyl sat down, looking very cynical, and made a cigarette; and Vridar left the house.

He saw Neloa and he stopped for a moment and looked at her. She was very white and very thin. Among his memories of her this was to become one of the most vivid: a tall queenly girl, a very frail and lonely girl, hanging diapers to a line. He moved again and when she heard him she turned and looked at him in amazement. And then, "O sweetheart!" she cried, and he never forgot how her voice rang in his name. She came swiftly to him and was in his arms and his face was lost in her hair. "Sweetheart!" she said, her voice choked with wonder and grief.

"Sweetheart yourself!" he said and kissed her white mouth. She stepped back and looked at him.

"Darling, is it you? I can't believe it!"

"Sure it's me," he said.

She hugged against him, her hands locked behind his back as if she would never let him go. "I've been so lonesome!" she said; and she cradled her face against him, her lips seeking his throat. "Darling, I've missed you so!"

Vridar's eyes were wet now. He looked far away at the Antelope Hills and he strove to push his grief down but it was hot and overwhelming. "I love you!" he said, trembling to her touch. "I love you, love you!"

"And I love you. Darling, you glad to see me?"

"Glad? You know I am."

She yielded now to one of her rare impulses: with palms to his cheeks she drew his head down and kissed his wet eyes.

"Now," she said, trying to be gay, "you must come and see baby."

She took his hand and led him to the house. Vridar entered a bedroom with her and looked at their child.

"Isn't he sweet?"

"I guess. He looks about the same."

"Darling, he's just too sweet for words!"

And now as formerly when around Vridar she became ill at ease. He saw her distress and drew her to him.

"Sure, he's all right," he said. Neloa was looking at him.

"Darling, aren't you going to kiss him?"

"Kiss him? Oh, sure." Vridar bowed to his son and kissed a

soft red cheek. He looked for a moment into the wondering blueness of the child's eyes. Neloa took the babe in her arms.

"Lincoln, this is daddy," she said, her voice tremulous. "Son, this is daddy, back from the war!"

Vridar remembered never to have seen her so deeply moved. She was trembling and there was something almost hysterical in her movements, in her eyes. And he was filled with overwhelming tenderness and pity. He took the child from her arms and laid it on a pillow and drew her to him.

"Neloa," he said, "you've changed."

"Uh-huh," she said, smiling at him. There was something terrible in her smile.

"Haven't they been good to you?"

"Yes."

"They haven't. I can tell."

"I don't care," she said. "You're with me now. Vridar, you won't ever leave me again? Ever, *ever?*"

"Not if I can help it," he said.

An hour later he walked into the city. His father's huge profits from wheat had been invested in a garage and Vridar went into the office and looked around him. Tires and tubes lay scattered about, wrenches and empty bottles, old cans and papers and odds and ends. He smiled, thinking of his father and his uncle as business men. As mechanics they were all right: they could set a bearing or grind valves or even wind an armature; but they knew little of the fine and subtle hypocrisy of trade. . . .

He went to the repair room. Joe was under a car, soaked to his hide with grease and gasoline; and Ike, under another car, was profaning Henry Ford.

"Hello under there!" Vridar said, speaking to Joe. Joe paused in his mighty efforts and grunted.

"Is that you?" he asked.

Vridar went over and peered at Ike.

"What the hell you up to? You trying to ruin that Ford?"

"The God-damn thing," Ike said. "A Ford is a bunch a tin with four holes for spark plugs and a crank. . . . Vreed, hand me that-there crowbar." Vridar got a crowbar sheathed

with oil and pushed it to Ike. "I'll move this nut," Ike said, "or I'll split this son-of-o-bitchun Ford wide open." Vridar peered under the car and grinned. For six years, he remembered, Ike had been a blacksmith.

"Vreed," Joe said, "if you got nothun to do you might set in the office. A feller might want some gas."

"Do you leave your office open like that?"

"Sure," Ike said. "A office is just to set in anyhow."

"Don't they steal things?"

"Let the sons-a-bitches steal. They hain't enough to make anybody rich."

Vridar went to the office and in a little while Joe and Ike came. They looked as if they had been rolled in grease and sawdust. Their hair and beards were matted with oil and oil could have been wrung from their clothes. A motorist drove up outside and honked and looked in.

"He wants something," Vridar said.

"To hell with him," said Ike. "Let him come in. He ain't no bettern I am."

Vridar went out to serve the motorist but that gentleman with his ire up slammed his car door and drove off.

"You're a heck of a business man," Vridar said, returning to Ike. "You lose trade that way."

"We got plenty," Ike said. "We're busy."

"But you could make on gas and oil."

"To hell with it," Ike said. "We ain't damn lackeys. They even want us to pump up their God-damn tires."

"Well, you have to do it. That's business."

Ike grunted and made a cigarette.

"To hell with business," he said. "We're mechanics."

"Don't you realize you'll lose all your trade?" Vridar said, speaking to Joe.

"I guess we will," Joe said. But he looked helpless. His manner said clearly that he didn't know what to do about it.

"You need a manager," Vridar said. "I'm looking for a job."

"A manager?" Ike said. "I don't see what for."

"To build your trade up. I'll tell you: let me manage and

I'll guarantee to double what you're making now. If I don't you owe me nothing. If I do, pay me a hundred a month."

Ike and Joe looked at each other.

"We'll talk it over," Ike said.

And so Vridar became manager of this garage. The contracts for gasoline and oil, the buying of accessories, the care of the office: these became his duties. It was he who, studiously tactful, pumped air into tires, filled radiators, and wiped dust from windshields; who studied a competitor's methods to learn wherein the man succeeded or failed; who quieted the anger of customers when they felt they had been overcharged; and who added to the dignity of this place by having stationery printed, a new pump installed, and a great sign hung above the door. After a week he said they should have taxi service, too; and he persuaded Ike and Joe to repair a car that had been smashed in a wreck. Then he urged his family to live in the city so that Neloa or Prudence or another could step into the office while he made a call. He employed all his cunning and tact and within two months the firm's business had doubled twice. But Vridar was not happy in this work.

He was sickened by the smell of gasoline and oil. When he came home he weighed a hundred and seventy-four pounds but after three months in this garage he weighed a hundred and forty-two. He was sickened, too, by the sly dishonesty of methods which, in competition with others, he was forced to employ: the selling of cheap oil in trademarked containers, or pretending a car needed repairing when it did not. He was wretched because Mertyl had packed his things, accepted a position as a traveling salesman, and disappeared.

And besides all this, there lay ahead of Vridar now the post-war decade; and the mood of it, the change, the reckless emptiness, he already deeply felt. Nations were wrangling over the spoils; soldiers, stripped of their ideals, were coming home and finding their jobs gone. Bootleggers were laying the groundwork of their vast industry and women were lifting their skirts and painting their cheeks and bobbing their hair.

Henry Ford was crusading against the Jews and patriots were putting freedom into a coffin and spiking it down. The old ideals which had led nations into blood and fire were now ghastly silhouettes in the world's mind; and a new generation, cynical, desperate, pleasure-mad, had taken the stage.

And Vridar, with his anchors gone, with his heart lost again to its old bitterness, cared little if Red riots convulsed cities or if the Russian delirium engulfed the world. He strove to renounce all ambition and despise all doctrines and creeds. Human nature had again shown itself to be the brutal and insatiably primitive thing that it was. This war had been undertaken much in the spirit of the Crusades, and had led, like them, only to murder and rape. And he was weary of trying to understand what had betrayed the world: his own race and himself. Those who had stayed home, greedy for profits, now followed like buzzards after the crippled, the shell-shocked, and the blind who came back. And what was there that a man could love and cherish? Nothing—at least nothing that a betrayed humanity could point to. And what had led to the betrayal, what had made a Judas of all the Christian ideals? This is the question that he would have given his life to answer. And when his mother asked one day if he was not going back to college, he stared at her for a long moment and left the room. Or when she rebuked his smoking and drinking and late hours he swung to her in violent scorn.

"I'd talk, Mater, damned if I wouldn't! What did your generation do with all its cheap dogma? What have you to show? A mad world! Mater, I should think your words would gag you and millions like you! And your generation with blood on its hands tells me what to do! God damn it, I'm done with your generation and all that it stands for and I hate it clear to the bottom of my soul! It has betrayed me and millions like me! Your ideals have driven us to ruin and still you talk, talk, talk! Millions are dead now, buried by these stinking ideals of yours; and yet you sit there in your smug half-witted Christian piety and tell me not to smoke, not to drink, go to school! . . . Mater, don't tell me any more what to do.

I hate your way of life. I hate your little pompous religion and your little pompous gods. . . ."

He left the room, shaking with fury and grief, and went down to the river and hid under its bank in thought. In God's name all this! All this monstrous betrayal in the name of one in Galilee. And now, as in time of childhood, he sat with his head bowed and tried to understand. The whole vast universe around him was sweet and clean except where humanity touched it and wreaked its ideals into the shape of murder and sets its ironic monuments to the dead. And even now, from end to end of living things, men and women were turning their decalogues and singing their hymns of peace—in this Sunday as in so many that were gone; and yet, in this moment, when so many sang to God, there lay upon the awful waste of Europe the smell of death. Human legs and arms and human heads were scattered there in thousands; and graveyards covered acres; and it had all been done in the name of peace. It had all been a force, vast and primordial, deep and ancient as the sea; and it had all taken humanity by its throat and filled cemeteries with its dreams; left kingdoms rocking in its destroying power; and put a new and terrible mightiness into the Russian heart. But why it had to be or what good it wreaked with murder no one could say. Why humanity built its ideologies into colossal self-betrayal . . .

He left the bank and went to Neloa. She was sewing by a dark window and he knelt at her feet with his head and arms in her lap. She laid a hand on his hair.

"I'm sick," he said. "Neloa, I'm sick, sick. . . ."

And so Vridar's journey again turned downward; and in the next eight months he passed through the most headstrong, most devastating, period of his life. He became a bootlegger; he moved in this city's underworld with the thieves and pimps and whores; for he, like so many others, was a symbol of an old idealism, self-betrayed and dying, and of a new one fighting through cynicism to its birth. For days at a time he was never sober and he was never drunk. Late in each night he came to Neloa; but he did not abuse her now or taunt her

with the past; he was done with all that. Intellectually he was done with everything that he had been or had wanted to be; but emotionally he was still chained. With savage earnestness he set himself to the task of rooting out of his being every ideal that he had. And he turned to the underworld to learn what they dreamed and what they did and whether their ideals betrayed them. He found the way to them easy and he went steadily ahead.

XIV

OFTEN in looking back he wondered how he escaped death; for as a taxi-driver he was utterly reckless, now smashing into vehicles or bridges, now rounding a corner on two wheels. He drove a great Auburn that had no brakes and in one journey he struck a hog and hurled the beast through a fence and in another he swept like a war-tank over a herd of sheep. Once an enraged farmer pursued him with a gun. Twice he thought he had killed a man. . . .

He was driving in a black night without moon or stars and without lights. Now and then he stopped and struck a match or went to his hands and knees to learn where he was on the road; and suddenly, without warning, there was a crash. He heard a horse galloping furiously down the road. And while he sat there, wondering if he had killed the other horse of a team, a match flared ahead of him and in its patch of yellow he saw the face of a man. The match went out and the man yelled.

"I'm killed!" he roared. "Someone has killed me!"

Vridar left the car and found the man sitting in a buggy, fumbling like an intense darkness in a larger darkness. There came an agonized wail.

"I'm bleedun to death! You've killed me!"

"You sound," Vridar said, "much alive to me."

He struck a match and saw a husky young swain with

blood running down his nose. The man had blood on his hands and he was staring at it, speechless with terror. Vridar drove the man into the city and carried him into the home of a doctor; and the doctor, after a brief examination, dismissed them impatiently, declaring the man was not hurt at all. Vridar then bought salves for the man and took him to a hotel and paid for his room; and a week later the man entered the garage. He scowled at Vridar for a long moment before he spoke.

"You owe me damages," he said. "You pay or I'll sue you."

"Sue me for what?"

"Damages. I been to a lawyer. He says I suffered a—a shock, he says. He says you owe me damages."

"Oh, you suffered shock, did you?"

"Yes. And if you pay me, why then I won't sue you."

"And how much do you want for your shock?"

"Well, I don't know. The lawyer said he would sue you for ten thousand. But he says mebbe if——"

"Ten thousand! Listen——"

"But he says if you settle out of court, why it wouldn't be that much. He said——"

Vridar sat on a chair and roared with laughter. This young man's comically serious face convulsed him and he threshed the air and howled. "Beat it!" he gasped. "You're killing me!" He rose and bent over a counter, agonizing with joy. "And now," he said, spasmodic bursts shaking him, "now I'm going to sue you—for shock! I'll sue you—for a million dollars!"

"A million dollars!" said the astonished young man.

"Yes. For being on the wrong side of the road. And for shock." Vridar got his hat. "I'm going to see a lawyer now," he said.

But it was not these accidents to which he gave his thought. It was to the meaning of this new frenzy upon earth: this cynicism, this lawlessness of young people, this contempt for the old. And only once in all these months did he reach close to its heart.

On Friday afternoons he went to a small outlying hamlet

and fetched a group of teachers to their homes. They were women in their twenties: amorous, starved, and twittering. Three of them sat in the front seat with him and wanted to learn to drive and at last he yielded the wheel to a girl named Bertha Monson. She was an earnest brisk person who seemed to know what she was doing; and she drove all right until she rounded a corner and saw before her an enormous truck. Thrust out from the truck was a wooden beam, and Bertha, missing the brake, stepped on the gas and shot ahead. Like a mighty arm the beam swept windshield and glass and top from the car and the car shot off the road and crashed into a fence.

Vridar stood up and shook the glass from him and sprang out. He looked at the stricken faces of the girls. Then he lay against a bank and looked into the sky and laughed and the girls stopped their wailing and left the car and laughed with him. They all sat in a row against the bank and laughed until tears washed their cheeks.

"It was fun!" one cried. "I liked it!"

"It's the only exciting thing ever happened to me."

"Or me."

"It's bettern teaching school."

"Lord, anything's bettern teaching school."

And Vridar, staring at them, was amazed. They were strangely radiant and excited, as if, for the first time in their dull years, they had touched life. They now went down the road like a group of children out of school, delivered to a fresh and vital enthusiasm. They burst into song or tiptoed to the sky. . . .

Hail! Hail! The gang's all here!
What the hell do we care?
Oh, what the hell do we care. . . .

Vridar looked after them in wonder. They linked hands, the eight of them, and tripped down the highway, singing. . . .

Oh, mademoiselle from Armentieres
Hasn't been kissed in a hundred years,
Hinky-dinky par-ley voo!

Here, it seemed to Vridar, was the new meaning upon earth but he could not understand it in dance and song. Here was this new and cynical wonder in the hearts and minds of the young. In it he felt an intimation of the way he hungered for; of that candid arm-in-arm fellowship with life. He saw it now and knew its meaning but in an hour it was gone.

And with only the lawless and the empty around him, he became, early in March, a bootlegger. Ike, after a week of reflection, became his partner, but the uncle drank more than he sold. Together they had a jug in a secret place and they drank from the jug. Vridar's hunger for whisky grew on him and he fought against it; but he moved in nebulous ecstasy, with all life summarized as a handful of chaff. Often he and Ike went on taxi calls together, taking with them a quart of whisky; and they drove madly through the country, singing folk-ballads, or they sat on hilltops and waited for the dawn.

Vridar had a genuine admiration for Ike. He liked bold men and their hard-fisted assaults on life: the McGard clan, his own relatives, savage and hellbound. Ike was a handsome giant who had contempt for order and routine and the fixed purpose. His spirit was that of the pirate, the buccaneer; and life, until a year ago, had chained him to a farm of drouth and weeds. When he repaired a car he took with him as often as not an iron maul instead of wrenches and flashlight. But he was a magnificent blacksmith and he could draw beauty out of blows of steel upon steel.

One evening Ike sat in a Packard and fingered what he called its God-damned do-dads. He wanted to drive it and Vridar protested and Ike said he would just go outside and return. Across the street was a cafe. Ike started the Packard and maneuvered into position and headed for the street. Then something went wrong. Ike said afterward the clutch stuck; Vridar thought it more probable that Ike lost his head. Any-

way, with a sudden burst of speed, Ike shot across the street, bolted over the curb and sidewalk, struck one hundred square feet of glass window, and plowed into the cafe among tables and diners and went clear to the kitchen. There was a great uproar. The police department, the fire department, rushed to the scene; diners fled as if pursued by German war-tanks; and the owner of the cafe danced up and down and cursed. And when Vridar came to his uncle, that imperturbable fellow was sitting quietly in the front seat, fingering the gadgets on the switchboard.

"Tell them to clear the decks," he said. "I'm gonna back out now."

Ike was arrested and marched to jail but he returned in a little while, grinning like a schoolboy. He cocked his feet up and smoked.

"I'd still like to know," he said, "what all them damn do-dads is for. I never learnt about them in school."

And this, then, was Vridar's partner in bootlegging: this man who cared no more about policemen and jails than he cared for the grease in his beard. They prospered in their trade; for nearly everyone, it seemed to Vridar, was drinking whisky now. Girls bought the stuff; and ranchers, flushed with war-profits; and the young men of the town. On a Saturday evening they would come to him and he would enter the basement and dig a bottle out of a cinder pile. He would take it into an alley and set it in darkness by a wall.

And by all of this—the prevalence of drinking and by the kind of persons who drank—Vridar was amazed. He had thought only the wastrels, only the sotted and bedeviled part of humankind, debauched themselves with strong drink. He learned, on the other hand, that it was often the good folk, the respectable of home and office, who gulped most greedily and seemed most bent on finding hell. The harlots drank very little and some of them did not drink at all. The other taxi-drivers were, for the most part, sober and earnest.

There was Roy Shell, a cab-driver and a bootlegger. He never profaned and he never drank and there was about him

a strange professional dignity and a pitying smile. In all his dealings he was a man of unimpeachable integrity. His home life was charming and quiet; and when the day's work was done he took his children to his knee and told them legends or romped with them on the floor; and on Sunday he went with them to church and sang with them and prayed. Everyone trusted this man and everyone liked him. . . .

Or there was Bill Rummon, the pimp, with whom Vridar often talked. An orphan since birth, Bill had been jerked up by the hair of his head and turned loose into the world at the age of ten. And he, like Roy, was an earnest-minded fellow who saw neither meanness nor shame in what he did.

"I don't understand," Vridar would say to Neloa. "I always thought there were good people and bad people. In books they're that way. In books it's villains and heroes. . . . Now look at me. I was a good boy. And now I swill the stuff. Rummon was a bad boy and he stalks around as sober as an owl. . . . What does it all mean?" Or to Prudence he would say:

"The world isn't what you said it is. Do you know a man who preached last Sunday was stretched out last night as flat as a map?"

"I don't believe it," she said.

"Oh, don't you? Look at the Billings Packard. He hung over it all night and puked it full."

"Son, I'd be ashamed!"

"I mean James Thurstow. He bawled and said he was a good man, really. But he's the one: Brethren and sistern, we are gathered today in solemn grief at the bier of a beloved one . . . of a man whose life was a model . . . we come to mourn . . . in our infinite unwisdom we ask God——"

"Son, that will do!"

"I should think so. And there's a certain undertaker in a town somewhere near. You come in and choose a swell casket and you all stand around and say what a beautiful corpse. You mean, of course, what a beautiful casket. And when you leave, he yanks the dead guy out and nails him up in a wooden box. I mean," said Vridar, looking at the hurt in his

mother's eyes, "that he has sold the same coffin a hundred times. . . .

"Mater, why didn't you tell me some truth when I was a kid? Where are all the honest people you used to tell me about? Where are the virtuous women that men protect? And where are the men?"

The world, Prudence said, was going to the dogs. It was landsliding into hell.

"In my day," she declared with dignity, "young people were all right. It's these automobiles."

"Oh. And in your day it was the bobsled. When you went to a dance to the jingle of sleighbells you all crawled under the blanket except the driver."

"*I* never did."

"No, you drove. But the others did. And what were they doing under the blankets?"

"Well, not a thing bad, I know that."

"Fiddlesticks. A lot of persons alive now got their start under those blankets."

"Talk as silly as you want to, son. I know better."

"Well, answer me: why didn't you tell me the truth years ago? Why did you lie about human beings? Nothing you told me seems to be true. And now I'm learning the truth and you say I'm going to the dogs. Because I drink a little you think I'm a whelp of a guy."

"You've forgot all your training," Prudence said. "I trained you right."

For a long moment Vridar stared at her.

"Forgotten my training? Mater, that's exactly what I'm trying to forget."

XV

IDAHO FALLS was a thriving city of twelve thousand, with wide clean streets, with Snake River rolling under its west end. Far to the west were white or blue mountains and to the east was the blue backdrop of Vridar's home. It fed on a rich valley, famous for its potatoes and sugar beets. In the groves and corridors to the north or east lived the aristocracy; just beyond the railroad tracks lived the middle class; and to the south, flanked by warehouses, were the tenements and dark retreats. Out in an acreage of sand with weeds overtopping it and with gophers heaping their mounds was the golf course; and here on Sunday afternoons the industrial and professional baronage came and waded in sand and drove balls into jungles of thistle and redroot. Those who afforded less prestige went east or south to fish and the earthborn sat on the river bank or the bridge.

And it amazed Vridar to discover that this city had a small embryonic underworld. It seemed to be on the surface only a proud and unschooled place, set out and marked off on a plateau of routine: with doors made to open, sidewalks to tread, gutters to spit in. The countryside on weekends poured into it a flood of gingham and overalls; and after the city was searched for bargains and markets the country went home. On holidays there was noise and scattered bottles, dust and swarming children and exhaustion. There were hotels, drugstores, poolhalls, garages, shops. . . .

"And what else?" Vridar asked of Neloa. "You'd be surprised. Bootleggers, pimps, harlots, and small shysters of a dozen kinds. You know, I've been a most unaccountable fool. I never dreamed that human nature is what it is. I've always despised myself, believing I was worse than humankind. I've been an awful simpleton.

"Well, I don't know what the hell life means but I'm trying to find out. Do you care?"

"Not if it's what you want to do."

"It's what I have to do. There's no other way."

He was finding out and to this unlessoned young man with his heritage of absurd ideals there was offered one amazement after another. Save in one experience, memory of which still galled him, he had never talked with a harlot, though he had been accosted by them and had seen their hard painted faces and terrible eyes. He had thought much about them, wondering why they sold their love; and how many men, at one time or another, slept with them; and why. He was eager to study them and discover their meaning.

In his taxi he met the trains. One midnight a woman came down the steps and paused and looked at the cabmen. She came to Vridar and he drove her to an ugly old building and the woman looked at him again.

"I don't have no money with me," she said. "Come up to my room."

Vridar followed her up a dark broken stairway and she entered a room and turned on a light. He waited by the door.

"Come in," she said.

He entered the room. He thought this woman was a housewife back from a journey and he waited patiently for his fare. But the woman ignored him and took off her shoes. At last:

"Set down," she said.

Vridar went to a chair and sat. And now the woman took off her stockings and Vridar wished he was out of here. If she would pay him, he said—and she looked at him, her eyes flickering with amused pity. Her red mouth smiled.

"I don't have no money," she said; and by her tone he realized that she had said much more. He rose to his feet.

"Well, then I guess you can't pay me."

"Set down!" she cried. She was not smiling now. Her black eyes were hard and opaque. Undecided, a little angry, and feeling like a country lad at a fair, Vridar looked at her and twirled his hat.

"But if you haven't any money——"

"Money isn't the only thing, kid." She glanced at her legs, now bare to the knees; and Vridar looked at them, too, and they were, he reflected, very good to look at. The woman was now taking off her other clothes.

"I have to go," said Vridar. "I have other calls to make."

"But honey, I haven't paid you yet." Vridar stared at her, sick with disgust.

"You mean——?"

She rose and came to him, soft-footed and sinuous; she tried to put arms to his neck.

"Kid, I like you," she said, smiling up at him. "You're so young and nice. You ever kissed a woman yet?"

"To hell with kissing!"

"Listen, kid, don't push me away. I like you. . . . Listen, boy, don't you want me?"

"Of course I don't!" She stared at him genuinely surprised.

"You're a liar. Look me over, boy. Ain't I all right? Here, look at this leg." She drew her skirt up and exposed a lovely thigh. "Feel my breasts. They ain't soft yet, kid. I ain't nobody's fool." She took Vridar's hand and he allowed her to lay his hand on her breast. "Squeeze," she said.

"No. I'm going."

"Listen, kid, what the hell's the matter? Ain't I all right?"

"Sure, you're all right."

"Then be yourself. I'll take my duds off and you'n look me over. I ain't none a your fat molls. I got a body, kid, not a pile a suet."

She began to strip her clothes off. Vridar moved to the door but she sprang ahead of him and turned the key. She hurled the key and it clattered in a dark corner and was lost. And while Vridar looked at her, wondering how far it was from the window to the street, she took her clothes off and stood naked before him.

"Look at me, kid. Do I suit you or don't I?"

"Please let me out," Vridar said.

He started for the corner, bent on finding the key, but the

woman faced him at every turn, dimpling, smiling; and at last he roared:

"God damn it, let me out of here!"

"Honey, what is there ain't perfect about me? You're just afraid, kid. I'll treat you nice."

Seeing that she was determined to make him yield, Vridar shouted at her in fear and rage. His words, unwisely chosen, ringing with denunciation and contempt, brought a crisis. She sprang at him as if stung; and then, like a white flash of fury, she hurled things at him: clothes, cigarette trays, magazines. The air was full of them and Vridar dodged, lost now in amazement; he ran to the door. With all his might he tore the door open and flung it back and leapt to the stairway; and behind him in furious assault came odds and ends, curses and shrieks. When he reached his car a naked woman leaned from a window and poured at him such hysterical blasphemy as he had never before heard. Driving to a dark street he stopped and sat here for hours in thought. And after he told Neloa of the experience:

"I can't figure out what it means. You're a woman: can you?"

Neloa looked at him and smiled.

"I could make a guess," she said.

But this was in April and he knew little of harlots then. Six months later he knew about them, he imagined, all that was to be known. Though never their lover he talked with them and studied their ways, determined to understand their point of view. He discovered, of course, that most of them were very vain, very stupid, and unspeakably foul. But he liked them, nevertheless. They did not, like most persons, pretend to be more than they were. Love was not for them, as it was for him, as it was for most of the people he knew, a quaint cowardice of wooing, of twittering guilt when the lights were out. They did not lay their bodies in darkness as if love were a thief, sneaking up through a wilderness of precepts. No: everything about them was as bold and frank as sunlight.

"And did you know," he said to Neloa, "that a lot of married men sneak away now and then to sleep with a prostitute? Even farmers. Now there's John Curtin: a swell husband and father, goes to church, sings hymns, prays, nice to his wife; but he comes hell-bending down here to stretch out with a prostitute. And the queer thing about it is that John Curtin is a pretty fine man as men go.

"It's a funny world, isn't it?"

"It sure is," Neloa said. "But why does he?"

"Don't ask me. That's just what I'm trying to figure out."

By July he knew nearly all the harlots of the city; and because he drove a cab, men came to him—out-of-town men looking sheepish, acting like truant lads—to ask where they "could find a woman." With a cynical smile Vridar would ask what kind. "Oh," one would say, "just any, so's she ain't too skinny;" and another would say, "Not too danged expensive. Two dollars is all I got."

In this month there came to him two of his comrades from Battery D. They asked for whisky and Vridar gave them a pint and sold them a quart; and then, swaggering a little, they asked for women. Vridar went with them to a shabby building, dark and smelling of age. They climbed a dark stairway and were met by a harlot.

Three harlots lived in this place. One was a big surly creature with a birthmark across her mouth; another was tall and thin and never smiled; but the third was a very lovely woman. It was the third who met them now, coquetting in a flesh-colored gown of silk, with hair falling in a lustrous jungle over her breast. While she toyed with the men, Vridar looked into the room to see what was there.

The big harlot had a knout in one hand. A man, drunk, grinning like a schoolboy, was lying on the floor and the big harlot was flogging him. She struck savage blows and the man let off great guffaws of joy. Vridar stood speechless with wonder because never before had he seen a flogging in one of these dens. He stared as the man rolled in voluptuous

agony and begged for harder blows. This was a riddle indeed. And wishing to be alone to think of the matter he left his companions and went to the garage basement and sat for a long while in thought.

He revised from week to week his opinion of human nature, observing how the same impulses, the same hungers, were in all men. And yet, it seemed to him, not every prostitute had the manner of an ingénue and the heart of a snake. Now and then he saw one who had womanly warmth and a generous heart and a sense of humor. . . .

There was Lily McCoy, a Scotch-Irish lass, petite and lovely and alluring, who traveled up and down this line. She went as far south as Ogden, as far north as Butte; and stopped in Idaho Falls once in every fortnight. She did not get a room, as most harlots did, and throw her door open to every diseased or sotted wretch who appeared with three dollars in his hand. Her clientele—she called it that—was, she declared to Vridar, only the very best of people: business and professional men, bankers and lawyers and merchants.

"And I treat them decent," she said. "I don't rush them. They take their time. . . ."

Vridar liked Lily and she liked him. She was not lewd of tongue and gesture. There was about her, in fact, a quiet dignity, a simple earnestness, beyond the girlish vivacity of her charm. Her profession for her was no less worthy than that of housewife or social worker; for she gave pleasure to men and the pleasure was clean.

Vridar always met her at the train, knowing when she would come. When he first saw her she asked him into her room; and then, quietly, with dignity, she asked if he wanted his fare in money or trade. In money, he said; and she never asked that question again. But always he went into her room and sat for a while and talked; and he thought it very strange that he should like this girl, that he should respect her even, for she was only a harlot after all. He liked her, of course, because there was no shame in her, no guilt, no pious pretense

and whimwham. In so many ways she was what he was not and despaired of ever being. And while he looked at her lovely face, her small and exquisite body, it was hard to believe that so many men embraced her, so many lips sought her own. He listened gratefully and made slow revision of his opinions as she talked.

One evening she talked of her patrons. She did not give names, because a whore, she said, "can be as moral as anyone else. I have my sense of honor, of what is right." She talked of her mission in life and of what she did to make the world a happier place. And Vridar was impelled to ask a question that had been in his mind for weeks.

"Lily, tell me: why do married men go to—to harlots? I'n understand it in single men but not in the married ones." She laughed and her laugh was low and musical.

"Married men are unhappy, Vridar. That's why. Don't you know that nearly all good women are indecent? They're God-awful. And when their husbands come to me they yank their clothes off and take me in their arms and don't feel shame.

"Vridar, do you love your wife without any shame at all?"

"Me?" he said blankly. "Well, I don't know. Maybe not."

"Men idealize their wives," Lily said. "They think it's sort of terrible, you know, to love them. But I—I'm just a bad woman and it's no sin to sleep with me. God made wives to have babies. He made us——" And she laughed merrily and reached for a cigarette.

One evening when Lily came to the city she told Vridar she wanted to talk to him and he entered her room and she closed the door. She locked the door and he hardly knew what to make of that. Then she sat on the bed and told Vridar to sit by her, and he went, feeling bewildered; and she laid a hand on one of his hands.

"Vridar, I like you an awful lot and I been thinking."

"About what?" he said, looking at her.

"But first I want to tell you about *me*. I'm twenty. I was married at sixteen when I was a freshman in college. I married a big football egg and I couldn't get along with him.

He was a tub. He wanted a lot of mistresses. And he couldn't love me without getting red all over and thinking of his mother. And that's that. I have a baby back home, a boy of three." She turned to Vridar and he looked at the frank darkness of her eyes. "How much," she asked, "do you make at your job?"

"A hundred a month."

"That's nothing. That's slavery. . . . Vridar, come with me."

"With you! What do you mean?"

"Travel with me. I'll tell you. Don't think I'm going this way all my life. Some day I'm going to marry and settle down and have a home."

"But why should I go with you?"

"To help me. In four years I'n make enough to keep us. Then——"

"You mean," he asked, horrified, "that I'm to be your—your——" She clapped a hand to his mouth.

"Don't say it."

"But that's what you mean."

"I just mean we should pull together. In a few years we could travel in Europe." He stared at her, incredulous.

"But I'm married," he said, not knowing what else to say.

"I know. But you don't love your wife."

"I do."

"Honest? Then why are you so unhappy?"

"I'm not."

"Don't make me laugh. You're the unhappiest man I ever saw." She studied his face. "Well, I wish you didn't love your wife. We could have a swell time."

He stood up, feeling choked.

"But I can't. I love my wife. I love her more than everything else." He gestured helplessly. "No, Lily, I couldn't do that." She rose and faced him.

"Some day," she said, "you might change your mind." She wrote an address on a card. Vridar took the card and looked at it and turned to the door. If Lily had swung to him in furious contempt he would have felt all right; but there was

no spite in this girl. There was something very lonely and homeless and he felt a great pity as he looked at her.

"I'm—I'm awful sorry," he said; and he turned the key and let himself out.

He told Neloa of what had been said and she looked at him, her smile faint and inscrutable.

"And it's funny," he said, "but I like her. She has taught me a lot. You know she says a lot of men have never seen their wives naked. What has happened to the human race anyhow? And she told me why men go to harlots and I begin to see that she is right. Neloa, you know the biggest thing I am learning?"

"What?" she asked, still smiling.

"That there's really no such thing as good people and bad people. Lily is a harlot but I respect her. So I guess we're all much alike. Our vices and virtues are assorted differently and we show different colors but that is about all.

"And that," he said earnestly, "is a hell of a lot to have learned."

XVI

THE garage office became the lounging-place of a dozen men, and Vridar studied them day after day, trying to understand them and wondering if they were an average of humankind. Larry McInnes was a cunning rascal whose smile hid from all but the most discerning the plotting and trickery of his soul. Tall and lean, he wore roomy trousers that hung from his shoulders like a sack; and he moved about alertly, profaning and chewing tobacco and telling his lewd tales. Everyone liked him, even those whom he duped; because in this nervous scoundrel there was a generous heart and a boyish fellowship with his kind. He gave money as if his huge

pockets were full of it. He even bought a home and furnished it for his favorite whore.

Rollie James was a different sort. A more crafty and unpitying rogue Vridar was never to see. His mind was a reservoir of plots for preying on his fellowmen; but he was a gentleman and dressed like one: his hands and clothes were immaculate, his voice was soft and wellbred. Though he had about him the stealthy look of a coyote searching for a hencoop, he was held, nevertheless, in respect and he delivered many a funeral sermon in the countryside. After the sermon was done he would sell to the grieving relatives something that was worthless, something they had no use for. . . .

And there was Shorty Duff, the hunchbacked dwarf. Shorty was an armful of deformity with an ancient and sardonic face. He was only twenty-four but his face was the face of an old man and his smile was the most twisted leer Vridar had ever seen. With no neck, with his shoulders bunched up to his ears, he would come into the office, a cigarette hanging from his white mouth, a fixed and cynical spite in his eyes; and he would sit on a chair, with the hump on his back pushing him forward, and laugh in a queer strangled way at Larry's jokes. And Vridar loved this strange grotesque out of the dark ways of life. "What is there for him?" he would ask Neloa. "Nothing at all. He is something that persons grin at and draw away from. And when I see how some look at him in their pitying way I could flog their hearts out. . . ."

But Vridar did not love Shorty's brother. Ronald Duff had everything that Shorty did not have: a strong body, a handsome face, a winning smile; and this man, like Forenoon McClintock, made seduction his chief enterprise. "I'm a passionate bugger," he said one day; and apparently he was, because he ran with harlots, too. Vridar's most vivid memory of Ronald came to be of a young man out in the lavatory, yelping with pain. "A lemon's supposed to be a good test," he said, "but it just don't work for me. . . ."

And there was George Pitman, a free-lance mechanic: a small man with long arms and a long thin nose. His marriage, like Vridar's, had grown from a childhood romance and now

he hated his dowdy little wife with her huge torso. Mrs. Pitman's fullness became, indeed, a legend here and many were the jests about it. For months George thought he had a child coming; but a doctor, after examining Mrs. Pitman, said she had an ovarian cyst. "He says I'm to blame," declared George, and his smile was both sheepish and proud.

His grin was proud because this man's boast was what he could do with ten half-dollars. Often he took men into the rear of the garage and laid wagers and won; and there Vridar watched, not the boyish pride of this man but the envy of those who looked on. Their eyes were bright with wonder and in their malicious jests they revealed clearly what was in their hearts. Vridar was surprised to discover how many of them were ashamed of their own organs. Much that he had heard in childhood now became clear to him: legends of Jack Barg of Annis who had to wear a rubber collar; of James Wharton who, in disgust, caponized himself; and of folktales regarding the size of a man's nose and its sexual significance. George Pitman's nose was half the length of his face. "A lot I used to wonder about," Vridar said to Neloa, "is clear now. Certainties everywhere leap at a man who has eyes to see. Take these silly sociologists and the reasons they give for divorce. I know three reasons that have never got into a textbook. . . . And one of them," he said, "is a damned short reason. . . ."

And there was Bill Rummon, the lean and lecherous pimp. His pale green eyes were as fixed and changeless in expression as the eyes of a hawk. Their only meaning was of craftiness no longer alert, of passionless amusement worn thin. But his mouth was full and alive, with a sensual fruity ripeness; and when the man talked he often paused to suck his lower lip in, drawing it in and nursing it as if it were a treat. After studying the eyes, Vridar was astonished by the mouth; and after studying the mouth he was astonished by the eyes: they seemed to have been taken from different faces.

Rummon had a woman in the rooms above the garage: a huge and terrible person who cursed and drank whisky and fed on narcotics. Sometimes she would thrust her head from

the window and shout at Rummon and he would leap up as if kicked.

Vridar despised this man but he talked with him often, determined to understand what made him. "It's my profession," Bill would say with comical dignity. "If ladies [he always spoke of harlots as ladies] sell their love they have to have gentlemen to help them. I take a commission just like a banker. I mean I handle the business end of it. . . ."

Bill had in mind a wild lovely madcap who was the talk of the countryside. Her name was Madge Eppert. Vridar hardly knew what to make of Madge or of others, much like her in reckless spirit, of whom he saw a great deal. He thought much of them and of the crazy dark patterns of love and lust. Now and then he wanted to woo them but he was Neloa's slave. If he had been bound and trussed; if he had been roped to her bed, with his arms and legs in stocks, he could not have been more hopelessly in her power. He hungered for a great clean freedom but he was a man in jail, pouring whisky upon his curse; harboring plots for his own destruction; fetching up night after night at the same dead end.

Only once during all his months here did he try to break free. He drove with Bill and Madge and another girl into the country. Bill and Madge left the car and went down the road and Vridar watched them leave the road and crawl through a fence and disappear behind a grove of trees. Then he turned to Maxine Allen, a sour girl with red hair, and put his arms around her; but she was like a woman of lead. When he touched her breast, though, she swung to him in fury and slapped his face and for a little while he was too astonished to move.

"What the hell's the matter with you?" he asked.

"You leave me alone! Don't you dare touch me!"

"What are you out here for?"

"Don't you touch me!"

He grasped her arms and shook her.

"You idiot!" he cried furiously. The girl moved to escape but he broke her across his lap and she was strangely quiet as

he held her face to moonlight. It was a face almost distorted with passion.

"Don't," she said. "I'm not that kind of a girl."

"You liar."

"I don't like you. I wouldn't do anything with you."

Her quiet scorn infuriated him. He shook her again and she wailed. With violent hands he shuttled her back and forth and from side to side and she did not resist now. She was limp and helpless and he knew that she liked to be manhandled; but he did not understand. And when, overcome again by amazement, he stopped to meditate, she swung and struck his face. She kicked wildly at his legs and yanked his hair.

"What's the matter with you?" he asked.

He crushed her to the bottom of the car and then dragged her up, his hands like steel on her naked arms; and again she was limp against him and her mouth kissed his throat. But the moment he paused in his violence, in his experimental attempt to rend her flesh and break her limbs, she was at him again, her hands like wild things in his face. And all this became too much for Vridar. Astonishment left him speechless and he crawled out of the car and stared at the girl. Her mouth was strangely savage, and so were her eyes; and what sort of person she was he could not imagine.

He left her sitting here and walked back to town.

And the more he learned during these months the more he was lost in bewilderment. The riddle of life was darker. Moving, week after week, among the outcasts, studying them, eager to know what lay in their hearts, he saw them as animals, feeding their appetites and exploiting one another. And this city, he reflected, was like other cities; and these people, the respectable and the outcasts, were like people everywhere. They were lost in an undecipherable grammar of struggle and greed. There was no grandeur here, no idealism like acid upon the dross; no chastity that was not cowardice, no pride that was not arrogant and mean. And between the two groups—the respectable who stood in sunlight and the

outcasts who moved in the dark—he could see little difference. He had seen harlots give to beggars; he had seen Bill Rummon, moist of eye, quavering of tongue, rebuke a lout who had taunted Shorty Duff. He had seen lawyers perjure themselves and their clients and he had seen a churchman steal and he had seen a bootlegger help an old woman across the street. And he himself had felt at times a dark murderous lusting or hatred of the male for the male; or wonder, childlike and suffering, for the lewd and unclean meanings in the meaningless; or a wish, deep and dark in its sickness, to give his life to make the world good. In books human beings were not as he found them now. In books right was right and wrong was wrong; the hero was a splendid fellow with his thoughts always in the upper half of his torso; and the villain was a monstrous wickedness who came to a bad end. . . .

And he was sick of his life here but there was nothing to lift him out of it and send him to pastures where growth was clean. This needed a power beyond his own will. In a night of August and in a terrible day that followed, that power came.

XVII

BILL RUMMON came to him at midnight. He wanted to go to Pocatello, he said; and when Vridar went to his taxi, he saw that Madge Eppert was already there.

"You going, too?" he asked.

"Sure I'm going," she said.

Vridar roared out upon the highway and this midnight ride in a blinding downpour was the most reckless of all his journeys in a car. He could barely see through the glass; the road was a faintly luminous streak of light; but he pushed the gas-lever clear to the floor and the car under him was a mad thing roaring through the storm. In a little while he saw the wan lights of Blackfoot like matches in a fog; and then, in a

moment of terror, he saw that the highway swung in a right angle to the left but he had no time to stop and his speed was too great for the turn. He went straight ahead with terrific power and there was a sound of flying stone and of sand in a whirlwind . . . .

He and Rummon got out in downpour. The car had driven into a great pile of sand and gravel and had buried itself to the steel frame and every wheel was spinning . . . . And after they had spent two hours digging out of this mound, Vridar lost the highway and plowed through the mud of a country lane; came to a halt on a high bank, with the car rocking under him; got out to explore and fell headlong into darkness. He fell into a great pit, knee-deep with water and mud. Against the black sky above he could see the car, swaying gently. For what seemed to him an hour he strove to get out of this hole; and when at last he came to the car, furious at Rummon for not coming to his aid, he learned that Rummon and Madge had gone. . . .

It was daybreak when he reached Pocatello. After peering into cafes or entering lobbies and staring at hotel registers, he went to a taxi office and inquired there. Yes, said a driver, he had fetched a man and a woman in two hours ago and they had taken the eastbound train. Vridar rushed to the station.

"A man and a girl bought tickets a while ago. Will you tell me what city they bought tickets to?"

"Chicago."

"Chicago? Thanks."

Vridar came out and looked south at the wet rails, thinking of Madge Eppert, speeding to Chicago and whoredom. He thought of pursuing or telegraphing the Chicago police or going to Rummon's shrew and telling her what had been done; but he turned wearily to his car and drove home. His life, years ago, had been meaningless delirium of terror and lust and now it was a senseless nightmare of whisky and harlots and pimps. What had Swift meant, what had Arnold and all the other fools meant, by sweetness and light? There

was Mertyl. . . . He had come home a week ago; and one day, looking at him, Vridar had asked:

"Where'd you get that long scar on your cheek?"

"That? Oh, a sixshooter. It was like fiction."

"What are you now, Mert? Just a woman-chaser?"

"That's enough. I listened to your lectures for nineteen years."

And now, while driving home, Vridar was remembering how Mertyl sold photographs. "There's nothing to it. First, you see a kid in the yard. You go to the mother and say, 'Are you the mother of this boy? Well, I just happened to be passing. You see, I'm in the professional photography business. He would photograph remarkably well. Enlarge well, too. You don't happen to have a photograph of him? . . .

" 'Yes, indeed, he would make up astonishingly well. There —that's it, let me study the face. It would make a splendid enlargement: the light here, see? and the shadows there . . .' "

And Vridar had said:

"The photographs cost you two dollars and you charge ten. And the whole rotten business is an appeal to a mother's silly vanity."

"Listen, Vreed, how much does the oil cost you sell for thirty cents a quart?"

"Fourteen by contract."

"All right, clean your own damned house first."

"Mert, aren't you going to school again?"

"Don't imagine. Are you?"

"I've been wondering." And to Neloa he had said:

"I'm not worth shooting and that's the truth of it. I'm a fool."

"Listen, Vridar, are we going on living like this forever?"

"No, not forever. I'll be dead after a while."

"Don't be so silly!"

And today he went into the basement and sat with his jug. "I'm just a sot," he reflected. "I used to have ideals, dreams. I wanted to be a great teacher, a great writer; and here I am, a fool with his jug." For two hours he sat here and drank, telling over and over his pitiable absurdities, add-

ing loss to loss. He wished some power would shake him out of this paralyzing apathy, this emotional rot; something to wreak upon him a new courage; a meeting of sunlight and dark. But he saw none and he could think of none. Tomorrow he would drink again, as thousands did; and the next week, the next month: through the seasons, year after year, and what could save a man from that. What could save a man from himself? Nothing had saved Thompson — Villon — Swift — Collins — Verlaine — Marlowe — Poe — Bierce — Leopardi — Coleridge — Nietzsche — and thousands. Nothing was saving thousands today. In one way and another they burned out in awful fire: in madness or drugs or drink: and among them the great in both mind and heart: these spirits homeless in an armful of flesh. They were spurts of fire in a wilderness of dark; matches flaring in cupped hands in a wind: that was all, and he would be less, infinitely; and it did not matter. Humanity was candles set upon the wasteland: most of them trimmed wicks with a round immaculate poise; and some that caught a strange brightness and burned and went out; and some that never burned at all. . . . He went up the stairs, wishing some power would deliver him to an incandescent vision, to a catharsis of fire. He left the garage and crossed the street and climbed to Neloa's room, and out of dark blunder and rage he built the crisis.

When he entered the room his son was squawling hideously. Vridar stood by the door and scowled.

"What the hell's the matter with him?"

"I don't know. He howls most of the time lately."

Vridar went over and looked at his son.

"What's wrong with you!" he shouted. "Shut it up!" He stared at the furious red face and the wide bawling mouth. He picked the child up. "Stop it! You damned little tyrant!" He turned to Neloa. "Now what in God's name is wrong with him? Don't you know?"

"Of course I don't. He just howls."

Vridar shook his son.

"Shut up, you idiot!" But the babe redoubled in agony

and volume. It was sixteen pounds of red flesh and wrath and open mouth. Vridar shook it again and roared. "Shut up, damn you, or I'll shake your head off! I won't have such a fool son! . . . It's temper," he said to Neloa. "Where the hell did he get all that temper?"

"Where!" she said. "I'd ask that!"

Vridar grasped the babe's heels and stood it, bawling in ear-splitting fury, on its head; threw it on a quilt and rolled it over and over; and shook it again. "Shut up, damn it! You monster of bad heritage!" He shook it and the child's head pitched back and forth; and then, suddenly, the child was still. Into its face, red with fury a moment ago, came the whiteness of death; and it closed its eyes like a mechanical doll and was limp.

"My God!" Vridar said. Neloa screamed and came to him, frantic.

"O Vridar, what have you done!"

Vridar sat on the bed with the limp hushed child in his arms.

"I've killed him," he said. He looked up at her and his face was as white as the child's. Neloa screamed again. She tried to snatch the babe but Vridar pushed her away. "Be still," he said. The whole world was quiet now; he could feel a great and terrible silence everywhere. Putting an ear to the child's breast he listened but he could hear nothing.

"I've killed him," he said again. "I've killed our son." He looked at Neloa. She was shaking uncontrollably and twisting her hands and moaning. "Go call the police," Vridar went on, speaking quietly. "But wait: where's Mert's gun?"

"O Vridar!"

"Go get it." He stood up with the babe in his arms. "Hurry!"

"O Vridar, get a doctor, please!"

"A doctor?" he said. He had not thought of a doctor. "You think he isn't—dead?'

"Maybe not! And for God sake, *hurry!*"

Vridar sprang to a blanket and fetched it round the child and was out of the room, taking the stairway six steps at a time. Like a wild person he was down the street with Neloa

following; and then up a stairway and bounding into a room.

"Quick!" he cried. "See if I've killed my child!"

The amazed doctor looked at him and took the child. Neloa came into the room, wailing, and Vridar turned to her and said, "Please be still." The doctor laid the limp babe on a couch and bent over it and Vridar saw the man's hands moving up and down the spine. . . . "Neloa, please."

"Oh, I can't—help—it!" Her words were choked and wild. It scared him a little to look at her.

"He's not dead," the doctor announced.

"He's—not?"

Neloa went to pieces now. She fell to the floor and screamed and Vridar bent over her.

"Neloa, please!"

"Ohhhh!"

"Neloa!" he said sharply.

"Ohhhh!"

He had never heard such agony in a human voice. Save his own, years ago, he had never seen such terrible eyes. Vridar left her and went to the child.

"Is he hurt?"

"He'll be all right. What did you do?"

"I—I shook him."

Vridar felt whipped. He wanted someone to flog him: to take a great club and knock his brains out. But he was very quiet. He was always very quiet when faced by grave danger or sudden terror. And now he smiled faintly, thinking of himself.

Going to Neloa he lifted her and she shook in his arms and fainted against him and he sank to a chair and held her and looked at her white face. He kissed her white mouth.

"It was a close call," the doctor said. "There was a vertebra out of place in his neck. But he's all right now. Just let him be quiet a while."

An hour later Vridar was back in his room. Neloa, still white and trembling, lay on the bed with the child at her side. Vridar sat across from her and stared blankly at a wall. He could see nothing and feel nothing except his dark and

terrible childhood: the deep bowl of his home, the mad river, the desolate sky; and a boy there, fighting through delirium; a young man there, riding in frenzy over the Antelope Hills. . . .

"Sweetheart, please come here."

It was all of one pattern: the drunkenness, too, and the blind rage of an hour ago: without relief, without change, the dark and terrible pattern of it, the desperate unbroken plot. It had all built to this hour; and after this hour, what? Through all his haunted years, death, like a shadow, had walked at his side: an escape, a way out. He had been seeking it: had he realized that, long ago? Had he known? . . .

"Vridar, please."

He went over and knelt by the bed and put his arms around Neloa and the child. He kissed them, and when he saw that she was weeping, he wept, too. She reached to him and he put his mouth to her hand and wept out of the awful bitterness of his life. In a little while he rose and went to the garage and entered the basement. He stared at the jug of whisky and then lifted it and hurled it crashing against a wall of stone. It was a flash of amber and glass and then it was only a handful of wet fragments and a sudden smell. He returned and knelt again by the bed. He put his lips to Neloa's palm and for a long while he knelt here, sunk in desolation that lay beyond grief.

XVIII

WELL," Vridar said, "I can look back now and see I've been a terrible fool. All my life. I've been a bootlegger and almost a drunkard. But I've learned a lot in these months. About human nature, I mean. And I have no regrets. . . .

"And Neloa, please understand this: I did nothing that I haven't told you. I was not intimate with any women. I didn't even kiss a woman. Most persons wouldn't believe

that but it's true. Do you believe me?" Neloa was looking at him. He thought there was doubt in her eyes. "Do you?"

"Yes," she said.

"Be honest. I won't go on with any doubt in your mind. I won't lie to you: life isn't worth it. . . . So be sure. That you believe me, I mean."

She was still looking at him. She was not smiling but there was a strange smile in her eyes and in her thoughts.

"I believe you," she said.

"Do you want me to swear to it?"

"No."

"All right, we'll call that settled. And except for our child don't think I'm sorry. I'm not. True, I've turned a leaf. I'm going back to school. I'm through with whisky and cigarettes, pimps and whores." He grinned faintly. "I'm going to be a good fellow, you see. A model husband and father. A good citizen, strong and solid, like a pile of beef. I'll be going to church soon. I'll be rocking my child on my knee and saying da-da and goo-goo and oo-ittle-wubbity-wart. Virtues will be sticking out of me like candles out of a birthday cake. Squeeze me and I'll break into prayer. Kick me and I'll recite the Sermon on the Mount. . . . Well, does all that please you?"

"No."

"No? Do you want me to be a rascal and a drunkard?"

"Of course not!"

"All right, then. I'll be a good fellow. I'll say heck a-mighty and gosh ding it and dang the son-of-a-gun. I'll drink soda-pop and milk and look refined and pure. And I'm going to write, too. If I say dang it and drink buttermilk, I ought to be able to write stuff that the women's clubs will adore. A violet by a mossy stone and a bird singing Christmas carols: a Sunday school professor of writing like William Dean Howells. . . .

"Well, we have enough money for this year. What we'll do after that only God knows. Only gosh knows, I mean. Maybe I can get a fellowship or something. But what you must realize, my dear, is that it's poverty for us. And I want

you to go to school. You must like books. . . . Why the hell don't you like books?" he asked, scowling at her.

"I do like books."

"You don't but you'll have to. We're settling down to business now. I'll wash our clothes and I'll scrub the floors and I expect you to read good books and to know what you're reading." He looked at her. There was dark solemn wonder in her eyes; resentment, too, and fear; and something hopeless, as if she were weary with trying to understand. He read her eyes and was annoyed.

"You needn't look that way!" he cried. "Listen, Neloa, if you don't want a-go with me you'n have a divorce. But now's the time to make up your mind. To tell the plain damned truth, I'll always be a fool, driving ahead. I'll never be a da-da papa, watering the lawn and listening to the victrola. You know that. If you don't, you ought to. And there's something else." He stared at her and considered.

"Do you know the world is in a mess? Do you know the Treaty of Versailles is nothing but a big stink and that Wilson's head has more nonsense in it than mine has? *The light streams upon the path ahead and nowhere else!* he says. Yes, and he's back in Washington now, sick and beaten. Bombs are being sent through the mail to our crooked politicians. Cities are in riot. Aliens are being shipped out as if they were spuds. The whole world is getting ready for a big mad drunk. You have only to read history to know that much. And the light streams upon the path ahead! Yes, lead, Kindly Light, we are following you all right!

"Neloa, I'm a rebel. I'll always be a rebel. That's just as sure as the skin on your face. And right now's the time to decide if you want to go with me or with someone else. . . . Well?"

"You're silly," she said. "Of course I want to."

"Darling, be sure."

"I am sure."

"And you'll never regret it?"

"No."

"No matter what happens?"

"No matter what happens."

"Come here, you idiot." She smiled and came to his lap. "And you really love me?"

"No," she said, frowning, "I hate you."

"That's the stuff. Hate me with all your might." He kissed her and she trembled in his arms. "Neloa, why do you love me? Do you know?"

"Because you're so crazy."

"Oh. But don't you think we'd be happier if we'd never met?"

"I do not."

"But look at us. We're not happy."

"We—we have our moments," she said.

And so it was that Vridar, after eight months of drunkenness and despair, found that his path had again turned and lay to the sun. Since September 6, three years before, when Neloa wreaked confusion within him, he had been spending himself in aimless blind gestures at ruin and death. He had striven to purge himself of all his ideals and dreams and to find himself in darkness and lust; but something all the while had been like a full sun on his back. He had sought in underground places for the meaning of life and had found none; and now, like a wanderer come home, he retired again to books. He dedicated his life again to the great empires of scholarship and creation. Alone with his wife and child, he would live quietly in his home, quietly behind university walls; and he would find the meaning of life there. Like Spinoza, he would dwell in the kingdom of thought and his dreams would come forth and ripen, and he would sit at last in the firelight of old age and fame. He would be a Socrates among the young, leading them gently, patiently, into calm intellectual pastures; and when death came, it would find him serenely gray and ready for the dark.

But Spinoza was laid under an awful curse and the journey of Socrates led to hemlock. Vridar thought he was done with violent fury and desolate heartache; and that he would be happy among books; and that Neloa would be happy with

him. He thought his terrible past had been shut away. He could see only five years of study, with a doctor's degree, magna cum laude, at the end: five years of exploration and growth, five years of calm. Like a child he set about to gather the harvest, to brood in deep melancholy over books, and to write his own. . . .

He did not know what frenzied fire still ran in his blood.

PART II

JULY 24, 1901

. . . . And now, as he lay under this fearful decalogue, counting its commandments one by one, he felt rather sick and lost. That they were wise and good and that they were the radiance of Heaven, these he did not doubt; but as he pondered them now, in the dark quiet of his mind, he could not see that they were a part of happiness and sunlight.

He resolved, nevertheless, to be a mighty goodness among men, a magnificent demigod in the crusade of right and mercy. He would play under the Creator's eye, within the circumference of His stern power. The angels would look down at him and be pleased. . . . But though full of peace, though sheltered by the dim immensity of justice and right, there rose in his heart a vague doubt, a loneliness, that trembled and darkened. It was a faint intimation, a shadow thrown before, of the bleak waste of effort, the regret and sunless years and nightmare, to which his promises were to lead him. . . . And at last, troubled by this that he could not understand, and by a leering and grotesque shadow beyond the decalogue, he drew quilts over him and began to weep. Two hours later he was buried and dreaming. His two hands were clenched, his cheeks were wet.

I

IN SALT LAKE CITY again, they lived in a big dark room with a gas-plate in a closet. On weekends Vridar helped launder their clothes, even washing the diapers; and he scrubbed the floor. He walked into the city and bought groceries and rode back on a trolley with his arms full. And on Sundays, if the weather was fine, he would carry the child and he and Neloa would walk in Liberty Park and breathe the Indian summer of trees. Vridar loved this city of wide streets, sprawled on a mountainside and fenced around with peaks. When he stood by his window on October days, he could see it spread below him like a great yellow jungle, with a golden valley below it and blue mountains beyond. . . . Only rarely did they go to a show; because Lincoln would fret and yelp and Vridar detested persons who brought squawling infants into theaters.

Most of his time he spent with his writing and his books. "My God," he would say, "but I'm an ignorant fool!" And he would come home with a stack of books and read in frenzied haste until midnight: now laying a book aside and opening another, now trying to read two at once; and feeling upon him the swift passing of time. From all these books he made notes. He read in one month the entire Cambridge History of English Literature; and his notes from these volumes alone were an armful. And he ranged out into philosophy and comparative religions and a score of other fields: entering a realm and searching in feverish haste; pausing to meditate, lost in wonder and dream; trying to see to the boundaries of knowledge and to the circumference of what men had explored; and then, with fresh hunger, seizing a half-dozen books and going swiftly to his room. And while he scanned pages during the long evenings he became unaware of himself, and the only world was the world of mind;

the only meaning was thought, flowing from page to page to the volume's end. When a thought touched him more intimately, like a sudden hand on his shoulder, he would pause and look at Neloa, with the thought building a troubled light in his brain.

"Listen," he would say and he would read the lines to her. And Neloa would listen and she would strive to understand. "Isn't that a swell idea?" Vridar would ask; and he would get to his feet and walk about, with the wonder of the thing holding his breath. Sometimes he was made drunk with a thought and he would pace like a man caged: he would gesture, as if reaching to meanings, or he would talk the thing out of him, building his words into a silhouette; or he would stand still and let the idea slowly possess him and fill him with light. . . .

"Neloa, listen to this. . . . Are you listening?"

"Yes."

"This man J. E. Boodin says, 'The nature and test of truth are not to be confused with the practical motive that leads to the seeking of it.' And that's true! . . . Shall I read it again?" Neloa puckered her brows, as she always did when bewildered by what he read. He repeated the line and asked: "Do you know what that means?"

"I—I don't know."

"It means," said Vridar, "that most persons test truth by the motive that leads them to seek it. It means they're not really seeking it. That explains the quarrel between Darwinism and the Church. . . . Do you see?"

"I guess so."

"This is a swell book," he said; and he turned it over and over, looking at it fondly. "It's MacIntosh, *The Problem of Knowledge* . . . . God, it's a swell book!" And again:

"Neloa, here's an idea for you. Listen." And from the big book on his knees Vridar read: " 'Mr. Marett has shown that a prayer which relies on the use of a name of power'—like God," Vridar said, glancing at Neloa, " 'is not far removed from a spell or magical incantation.' In other words, when persons pray and use such terms as God, they're just working

up the old spell of the medicine men. It's modern magic. It's true. . . . Neloa, I want you to read this book."

"What is it?"

"Conybeare, *Myth, Magic and Morals.* It shows what a monstrous lubber of silliness Christianity is." He rose, excited, and walked the room. "Do you know why Jesus never married? Do you know what the crucifixion meant? You know what the idea of virgin birth came from? You don't. You've got to read this book, Neloa. It will knock all that silly Mormonism out of you."

Neloa looked troubled.

"If I read all the books you want me to read I'd have to live a thousand years."

"Nonsense! I don't bring you many." He looked at a great pile in a corner which he had brought for Neloa to read. "Well, read the one next. . . ."

And again:

"Neloa, here's a whale of a notion. My God, listen! 'When to a man who understands, the Self has become all things, what sorrow, what trouble, can there be to him who once beheld that unity?' " He turned the book over. "This book is called *The Art of Creation.* By Carpenter. I don't know if Carpenter is a creative writer. I don't know if that statement is true. If—if it's true—well. But how the hell can the Self become all things! Damn it, that would be hypnosis. A man would have to be a Hindu, wouldn't he?"

"It looks like it," Neloa said.

"And there wouldn't be any suffering," Vridar went on, speaking to himself, really. "A unity. A union of what, I wonder. Lord, if my Self were to become all things, complete, a unit for me, what would happen to you? What would?" he asked, turning to her. "Would you be a part of the unit?"

Neloa was distressed. She was trying so hard to grasp this notion of the creative life.

"It seems to me I'd be a pretty selfish wart," he went on. "Is the creative life a selfish life? . . . I'll have to think about that."

And again:

"Neloa, I've been on the wrong track. I shouldn't be writing plays."

"Why?" Neloa asked.

"Plays are going out of fashion. This fellow—it's *Literature and Insurgency*—says the novel is the expression of modern life. Underwood. Maybe he doesn't know what he's talking about." He rose and paced, reading the book. "Damn it!" he cried suddenly; and Neloa jumped. "I want to write novels and poetry. Who the hell ever got me off on plays? . . . It was Donnaugh. Hell, I should be writing a novel."

"Well," Neloa asked, "why don't you?"

"I will. Donnaugh and his one-act plays can go to grass."

Not only did Vridar quest among books, searching the waste of their pages for the few meanings that were sharp and clear. He wrote also: with emotion surging upward in storm and pouring like driven wind over and around an idea; with the idea lost, like the core of quiet in a cyclone; with the idea typed to a page in a jungle of eloquence and rhetoric, in thickets of metaphor and simile, in sonorous orchestrations of adjectives and verbs; until, upon reading what he had typed, he was lost in sensuous wilderness. His allegory would be a pattern so rich and deep with color that he would see no meaning, no coherence, in the heaped voluptuous masses of his effort; and feel only intoxication and chaos, as when he stared at the formless tumbled glories of a sunset. For his one-act plays were purple parables draped like velvet upon the volcanic crater of an idea. They swung away in great rhythms; and their long cadenced utterance rolled in tumultuous overtones, with the puppets buried under headlong and sensuous nothingness. And his poems, too, were seething rhetoric. The first line of a sonnet would take off like a rocket and burst into thirteen lines of flame. His shorter lyrics were terrible and voiceless intensity, like a wild thing in a closed palm; and his epigrams, of which he wrote many, were a half-truth choked red in the face by bombast. And toward all of it he was dubious.

"An emotion pours out of me," he said to Neloa, "and it seems damned swell. But a month later it's cold. It's as if I set a child to play and returned to find it dead. . . ."

But this feeling Professor Will Donnaugh did not share. Vridar, he declared, was the most promising student he had ever had; and he had taught creative writing for a long while. And Donnaugh's enthusiasm grew as the weeks passed. One day he strode from office to office, waving a play by Vridar, and crying, "If Dunsany had written this they'd be shouting his name around the world!" Whereupon, feeling that he had stepped too completely out of his dignity, like a naked man out of a bathroom, he called Vridar to him and gave him a sober round-faced lecture. "Your play can be improved. This is weak. You have no dramatic suspense here. This metaphor is grotesque. Never get the idea that your work can't be improved. . . .

"Have you read Pinero?"

"Yes."

"Like him? He's a great dramatist."

"I don't like him."

"Tush. You're getting too sure of yourself. The creative spirit is humble and childlike. . . . Look, you'll have to revise that." And Donnaugh thrust a short finger at the turgid hysterical rhapsody of a nymph.

Vridar often wondered about this man. Donnaugh was short and plump and round, with a fat round face. His blue eyes, though, often flickered with cunning or were shadowed with malice. Students adored him, nevertheless, and looked upon him as a great man; and Vridar, too, liked him, with a steady affection, a warm vigorous esteem, that were to stand invincible against the years. But he was not blind to the man's tremendous vanity, and in the classroom he studied him, noting his dynamic energy and his unaffected enthusiasm for the subjects he taught; his rather pompous and oracular manner; his morbid hunger for achievement and the esteem of his fellows; and his deliberate and cunning pretense to more knowledge than he had. Because Donnaugh, like most of the instructors whom Vridar had known, strove, with

tags of Latin, words from Greek, and allusions to the far and obscure, to hold his students in awe; and most of them he held there. Beyond his booming ardor and his outpouring of dates and data was the boyish vanity of the zealot. . . .

"But none of us is perfect," Vridar said to Neloa. "We're all jackasses of a sort and I am, I know, one of the worst donkeys in Christendom. Donnaugh rolls his tongue in his fat mouth as if tasting his vowels, as if chewing his consonants. He has a lot of silly mannerisms that are intended to knock you off your legs. But he stands head and shoulders above everyone in his department. He's no Pelley: that tireless specialist in the trivial. He's no Bush: that erotic old fiddle-snort with his grand manner of a gentleman and his huge and vicarious impulses to seduction. And he's no Ackworth with his two-by-four belief in Mormonism and Milton. . . .

"I like him."

"Did he like your last play?"

"He said he did. But I don't think it's so mountainous." And at once Vridar dug among his papers and fetched out a play and read it again. "No," he said, "it's all wind and wheezes. It limps and finally sits down. Neloa, I wish you were a critic. I need a critic. As it is now I'm just writing big blurts of nonsense in the fat succulent tradition of the English landlords. It's no good. I know it's no good. . . ."

On a day in February Donnaugh called Vridar to his office. His manner was round and apple-cheeked and with a gesture at Vridar he dismissed the trivial. "Sit down," he said. Vridar sat; and for a long moment Donnaugh busied himself with stacks of paper on his desk. He was, Vridar knew, merely pawing them over, sensing to the fullest his new position. He merely sat there, plump and efficient, among his tremendous duties, happily feeling their weight in the scales of his life. Then he swung.

"You'll be graduated in June, won't you?"

"I hope so."

"And then what?"

"I don't know."

Donnaugh laughed. He laughed often but his laugh was mirthless, as if he played with consonants in his throat.

"How would you like to teach in a college?"

"I'd like it, sure. But——"

Donnaugh exploded another mirthless volley. His fair skin was dyed red and his blue eyes twinkled with jolly mischief. He pursed his mouth and chuckled. Vridar looked at him and grinned and his thought went back to Turner of his high school years.

"How would you like to teach in my department?"

"In your department! Here?"

Donnaugh shook again; his eyes were full of dancing twinkles. And then, casting off fellowship, he stiffened until he looked like a Harvard man.

"Hunter, I'm about to offer you a position here."

"You are?"

"But wait. On one condition: that you go east to school this summer. . . . Will you go?"

"Uhh–I'll try."

"That means you'll go. Go to Midwestern. Of course," Donnaugh said with charming egotism, "you should go to Harvard. It's the one school in our field. My old friend Kittredge is still there. My old friend Robinson. . . ."

Vridar's smile was not visible. This man spoke of scholars, writers, educators as his old friends.

Vridar ran home and burst into the room. "Well," he said, "look me over. I've just been offered a huge job."

"You have? O darling!"

"Yep," he said. "Dean of Education." He winked at her. "You think I'll make a good dean?"

"Vridar, tell me!"

"Head janitor."

"No! Vridar, I'll shake you."

"Come and shake me. . . . Come on, I like it. It titillates me."

"Vridar, please!"

"Donnaugh has offered me a job."

"In his department?"

"Right in the middle of it."

"O sweetheart!"

"Sweetheart yourself. I feel pretty damn mighty. I have something by the tail and I'm bracing myself. . . . All right, come and sit on your lord's lap." Neloa came over. She framed his face and kissed his mouth. "When I get a job," he said, "you kiss me. You women!"

"Vridar!" She shook him, trying to be playful.

"I have to go to Chicago," he said.

"No. . . . Darling, tell me the truth."

"That's the truth. I have to go to Midwestern this summer and learn things and then come back and teach things."

"And I—what will I do?"

"Go to the Falls, I guess. Live with my folks."

"But I don't want to."

"I know it. Damn it to hell, this is a big thing for us. You know I'm the only one of Donnaugh's students he ever offered a job to? I tell you I must be a swell guy."

"But I don't want a-live with your folks."

"Listen, Neloa, we must do what we must. We haven't enough money for you to go with me."

"But, darling, I won't live with your folks."

"All right, go to yours."

"I won't."

"Why not?"

"I hate that Antelope country!" Her vehemence startled him.

"Well, what can we do? . . . What?"

"Maybe I could get work here," she said. She did not look at him.

"You mean stay alone here?"

"Yes." She did not look at him.

"No you won't," he said. "You'll go to my folks or your folks."

"I tell you I won't go to my folks!"

"All right. Then you'll have to live in the Falls."

She looked at him now. There was something in her eyes that he never forgot.

II

NOTHING in life, save possibly a violin, could fill Vridar with such loneliness as the journey of a train. And now, smelling the dusty seats and the roadbed and the smoke and listening to the furious music of the wheels, he went back in memory to those years when, haunted and desperate, he had stood in midnight by the track to watch the monster thunder in. A train in the night with its yellow windows and its searching headlight was for him a symbol of life: of its paths and highways, its far shores, its headlong pouring to lost destinies. It was a parable of journeying unrest, a lonely mad pilgrim, seeking its sanctuary and its calm. It was the moving lighthouse of a solitary people . . . .

And as he sat by a window now, rolling through a Utah night, he strove as he had striven so many times to realize himself and his meaning in the vast and incoherent wonder of life. His mind was a backdrop and pictures came and went, and the past and the present came together and were without distance and time. There was Neloa's face as he had seen it last, her dark eyes blind with tears; and Neloa in Antelope moonlight; and his son blinking in station lights and Lily McCoy with her hand on his hand; and Kitty Murdock weeping under the timeless quiet of stars and sky and trees; and Donnaugh saying, "I want you to make a record back there. Our department is a small one and you're the first of our graduates to go to Midwestern. Make us proud of you. . . . ;" and Neloa saying, "Darling, please write every day. Oh, I'll be so lonesome. . . . "; and wheels talking under him of distance, and with night flowing past in a strange world of cloud and trees: a pageant of memory, a sweeping

of the earth into a blur of landscape, and with nothing telling its secret as it passed. Life and all memory of life rolled in upon his senses with darkness and light growing together in bewildering patterns of form and with all meaning far and above like a sea of sunlight upon clouds. And it all bore in upon him and filled him until he was choked with it; until he wanted to cry out of the awful flood of its beauty and pain; until he wanted to be lost to all consciousness and sucked into the terrific aimless destiny of the wheels. . . .

And this mood grew and possessed him hour by hour. When he reached into a bag for sandwiches or when he lay in a seat to sleep; or when, looking at the tremendous mileage of Wyoming, Nebraska, Iowa, he saw villages rise and vanish, cities unreal in blurred distance, farms unrolled in a mighty carpet from zone to zone; or when he looked at strange faces, strange pilgrims, journeying over the body of life; or when, in gazing at a picture of Neloa, he saw it as a memory of something that had come and gone like the hamlets and fences and dykes: then it was with him, this baffling intensity of darkness and terror, of sunlight and love, of madness trembling in calm; and he shook in the power of it, trying for an instant to stand apart and free; reaching into depth and closing his hand on emptiness; feeling life heaped into him and still hungering for what he could neither hear nor see, neither smell nor touch. . . .

It grew within him like time and distance, for it was all the sagas of hope and despair that men had made and it was all that history had written down. During the past winter he thought he had found peace. But books now and all memories of books were scattered like the colors of autumn and each came to an obscure spot and was lost. Because life was not in books any more than the sea was in a cistern or sunlight in a lamp. Life stood in books in the way that a human being stood in a pair of shoes; or sometimes it was in a book like a face in a beard. No: every faith, every ideal, gathered from months of reading had been rolled under with the miles; had been turned under like stubble in a plowed field; and now he could smell the richness of the loam, could

feel the wonder in its dark. And the poems were like that: a blade of grass, a flower, a leaf, dying with the seasons; a moment of certainty that was not certainty at all. But what was the depth out of which they had come? What wonder lay under the furrows?

He rose and walked from coach to coach, trying to understand. To look at the flowing world outside was only to add fire to his heart, frenzy to his mind; only to feel terrible intimations of the infinite landscapes and allegories of the unseen; only to turn back into his own spiritual emptiness, feeling rent and sick. For his mind was like a small camera and when he turned it upon the boundless he found that he had a picture of a tree or a shed. His heart was a small reservoir, haunted by the depth and distance of the sea. . . .

And so, like river-drift, drawn from its eddy into the flood, he journeyed into a great city; and past him on either side swept an endless acreage of roofs and windows, fog and smoke. Mountains of smoke rose and lay backward and through it came the smell of Lake Michigan and the breath and living of millions; and all about him was a vast confusion of lights. He was afraid of this mammoth city, built upon streets of stone: it was a sprawled and meaningless pattern of canyons and darkness. And driving headlong into it went the train, as if to split it apart and roll the halves back; but smoke in clouds entered the train and Vridar could see nothing: he could only taste the smoke and smell it and feel the journeying under him; and when the brakes howled and the journey came to its end, he grasped his bags and was poured with a tide of humanity to the station and the streets.

He found his way out, with his footsteps echoing in the high walls; pushed through a horde of shouting cabmen; and went to a bridge. He looked down at a sluggish black body filmed with green. It smelled of sewage and mud and rotting piers. He looked around him and saw that this river flowed through the city's heart and gathered the city's stink to its journey. He crossed the bridge and walked down a canyon of towers. There was nothing to see except buildings in the

image of one another and humanity moving in their shadow; nothing to hear but a great and muffled roaring that was like a roof above the din of shriek and whistle and human voice; but for one set down from Illinois countryside there was much to smell. And the city came to him in smell and came to be for him in memory a tremendous nest of odors. There was the smell of bad breath and of sweat; of buildings with their old paint and their slow decay; of stores, of fruit- and news-stands, the blackened skeleton of the elevated; of truck-horses and gasoline and oil and fog, dank and heavy, and of a breeze, moving in from the lake; all of these in a great foul blend that sickened him. When the breeze came to him he fed on it, smelling its water; but it was only a handful of lost air and in a moment it was gone.

He stopped with crags above him and set his luggage down. All the faces about him were friendless and hurrying as if their bodies were wound up in the city's clamor. They were not faces that he loved. They were too fixed, as if by ancient and inexorable routine; as if life were being drawn out of them by the stone under their feet. And when Vridar accosted a man and asked to be directed, the man's voice, like his face, was italicized by a terrible fixed indifference. The words came from something empty as if no heart beat under the voice.

Vridar took his bags and walked again until he came to a trolley line. He wanted to enter a cafe and eat and he peered into one and another but all of them frightened him. The trolley frightened him, too. When he moved to enter, it suddenly dashed away and he was struck and almost thrown down. Red with shame, he withdrew to the curb and here he observed the manner of a trolley's coming and going; and he saw that all of them, like the folk they carried, were feverish with haste.

An hour later he was riding, with his bags safely under his feet. He did not look at the city now. A glance out from time to time showed him the same unvarying pageant of ugly buildings and darkened roads; and he closed his eyes to it, hating it, refusing to see. After riding for a long while he

smelled trees and grass and on his right he saw a very beautiful park. He wanted to go into its clean jungles and throw himself on fragrant earth and sleep.

Upon leaving the car he saw that the park was still at his elbow and he stood here and considered. He took his bags and entered it and followed paths, seeking one that would come to a lost end of its own. He found one that was overgrown and wayward and he followed it and came to a grove of trees and dense underbrush. Beyond the dark leaves he saw water with moonlight upon it. For a little while he listened, wondering if he were safe here. Kneeling then, he reached to earth and filled his hands with soil, and he lay down and breathed of it and of the grass and dead leaves. He stretched out on his belly, with his mouth pressed to the leaves; and a few minutes later he was sound asleep.

III

HE AWOKE with his senses full of bird-music and looked anxiously around him, thinking for a moment that he was in the homeland of his youth. His dreams had been full of river and winds. He got to his feet and stared at warblers and wrens, and these and the smell of grass and water filled him with homesickness. He was afraid of this city and this land. But an hour later he was in a tiny room on Woodlawn Avenue and he felt less afraid. His landlady was kindly and his window looked upon a street much like the streets he had known. It would be quiet here with his books and that was enough.

After a bath and a shave he sat on his bed, trying to press his trousers by running the cloth between a thumb and finger. He had no brush, no broom, and he dusted his clothes by threshing them against a chair. He wondered if he could do his own washing and ironing or if he would have to send his clothes out. And then, sitting at his typewriter, he wrote

a letter to Neloa. "I feel all upset. I don't know why strange places make me feel like a child in a dark room. But I'll be all right. I'm going to the university to get some books and I'll lose my loneliness in the loneliness of Wordsworth. . . . Let me know, darling, how you're getting along. I must know. . . ."

He went to the campus and was amazed. Wasatch College, with all its buildings and lawn and trees, was only an academic roadside inn compared with this. The buildings here, mantled with ivy, topped with spires, were like gothic cathedrals. They had magnificent strength, a stern and awful beauty; and he felt pitiably weak, because in nothing around him, save the grass and trees, did he feel kinship. For an hour he walked trying to learn how big this university was: it seemed to cover blocks from east to west, north to south; and all the buildings without exception had the stern splendor of granite. He entered one, timidly, and smelled its classrooms and offices; read bulletins in the halls; and looked anxiously at passersby. Footsteps along the corridors had a sepulchral sound. Voices rose to the ceiling and were faint thunder there. The whole building, indeed, seemed to be sensitively alive, as if learning had become a vibrant thing in its masonry and stone.

Vridar next found the library. Almost holding his breath he went from floor to floor, trying to grasp the size and splendor of this cathedral of books. The reading-room alone seemed as large as a pasture; and as he looked into it, remembering the giggle and clamor of Wasatch, he was awed by the utter silence of this room. Even the desk-attendant whispered.

He could stand no more. Fleeing to his room he wrote again to Neloa and the emotion poured down to his fingers and he typed in haste, trying to catch this splendor that he felt. ". . . . But I can't describe it! The silence of these buildings is so deep and ancient, their dignity is so aloof, yet somehow so gentle; and all the lordly wealth of wisdom, all the glory of generations, gathered quietly within these walls! It's what I've been seeking. There *is* a great university in the world where men love truth! Professors here, Neloa, will not be small envious academic acrobats. I know they won't! Oh,

I feel it, and I am so shaken, overwhelmed! Darling, darling, I feel I am going to burst!"

He registered for a course in Wordsworth, another in Anglo-Saxon, and a third in Pope; and he went to these with an awed humility, with an aching wonder in his heart, such as perhaps no other student had ever brought to this school. Forgotten now were the disillusionments of his high school and undergraduate years. Here was a noble school; here were noble teachers within the school; and he offered his soul again. His faith was simple and terribly earnest and complete.

His instructor of Anglo-Saxon, a visiting professor from a southern school, talked over Vridar's head. He understood nothing at all. He looked about him at other students and saw that they understood; and then he looked at the instructor, studying the man. He did not like him. He could not deny what was so plainly written in the man's mouth: a loose and cynical dishonesty, a want of firmness and purpose. And Vridar fled this class and enrolled in advanced composition under Harold Denham.

But of his three classes, only one touched his heart. Miss Herrold, his instructor in Wordsworth, was an old woman who could barely move in her great burden of flesh. Her face, when unawakened, as most of the time it was, had the unpitying hardness of a turtle's back but when her face came to life, as it did now and then in a sudden picture of warmth, Vridar understood her and loved her. "She's old," he wrote to Neloa, "and the old are tragic. Her enthusiasms lie dead now like an armful of roses in a burning sun. But now and again the pile is stirred and scattered and an unwilted petal lives again. Then I understand all that she has been. . . ."

But of his other instructors he hardly knew what to think. Wilson Albert Holley, his instructor in Pope, astonished Vridar with his knowledge. The man spouted names and dates and obiter dicta as if he had eaten and digested a library and could not breathe without delivering a part of his gorge. But beyond the knowledge stood a personality that Vridar

did not trust. The sardonic lay from end to end of the man like streaks of lean in a side of bacon. He had a thin face that had suffered, hands that gestured out of spiritual emptiness, and eyes that often flickered with spite. And he was unsure of himself, as if he had found all books meaningless, all knowledge unclean; and his twisted deprecating smile or his frequent shrug spoke from a fixed and deadly cynicism, eating at his heart. . . . "Maybe," Vridar wrote to Neloa, "it's because he has spent years studying Pope. Pope was only a hunchbacked armful of hatred and malice—but the core of his heart, seldom used and never allowed to speak, was a part of God. I don't like Holley but I may learn to; and he doesn't like me. He's a reservoir of distrust and I feel I could reach into him and pull out a handful of twisted furies. Possibly we are much alike. . . ."

Nor did he feel at ease with Harold Denham, his teacher of composition. This man had a great forehead and a grotesquely wide upper lip; drooping eyelids that gave to his intellectual face something sinister and chilling; and an aloofness of manner, of thought, that stood like a wall between him and his students. "The last of the puritans," Vridar heard a woman say. "If he'd lived in the seventeenth century he and Milton would have been chums." And to Neloa Vridar wrote: "He knocks me flat. My God, I can't understand him at all. He looks like the father of Minerva. And when he gets through with these plays of mine that Donnaugh praised there's nothing left but a wind vanishing down the sky. . . ."

But Vridar recognized, nevertheless, that these teachers in their learning and humanity and grasp stood among all his former teachers like firs among aspens. Their knowledge was a great and splendid thing. His own ignorance: "Well, darling, as a scholar I've never been stuck in long pants yet. I sit isolated in overwhelming ignorance like a monkey in the French Academy. But I'm reading day and night. . . ."

He read books by the armful, carrying them to his room and typing summaries of them into great piles of notes. In his Pope course he was doing a paper on that human

adder's quarrels; he was doing a second paper on Wordsworth's moments of illumination; and Wordsworth, whom he had never really discovered until now, swept him off his feet. He read the "Prelude" a dozen times, noting within it parallels to his own life; read, indeed, all that Wordsworth had written, both verse and prose; and Dorothy's Journal; Harper and Legouis: but it was "Tintern Abbey" that held him breathless:

> *And I have felt*
> *A presence that disturbs me with the joy*
> *Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime*
> *Of something far more deeply interfused,*
> *Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,*
> *And the round ocean and the living air,*
> *And the blue sky, and in the mind of man;*
> *A motion and a spirit, that impels*
> *All thinking things, all objects of all thought,*
> *And rolls, through all things. . . .*

He gathered hundreds of lines and typed them on cards. Some he questioned:

> *Knowing that Nature never did betray*
> *The heart that loved her. . . .*

Some he liked for the magnificent rhetoric:

> *Upon the pressure of a painful thing,*
> *The lion's sinews, or the eagle's wing. . . .*

Some because they summarized his own tortured pilgrimage:

> *No single volume paramount, no code;*
> *No master spirit, no determined road. . . .*

And some because they came into him like the thrust of a knife:

The sleep that is among the lonely hills. . . .

He sent to Neloa the titles of poems and urged her to read them at once; and titles of books; and if he memorized lines, he copied and sent them and told her to memorize them also: "Because poetry memorized is an annuity against despair and old age." And he wrote to her long letters, pouring into them not only his furious endearments but also facts and opinions, glory and dream. "I was never more drunk on whisky than I am now on books. Oh, I want to get my arms around all of them and suck them into me and take their strength. Lord, Lord, I don't know where I am! I'm a starved man and books somehow are only soup and I gorge with them and still feel empty, yet stuffed, too, as if I'd burst. I run home with an armful and read until I fall asleep; wake and read again; and think—think until my head is full of flame and all my senses burn upon the thought like acid. I'm full of Wordsworth as if I'd swallowed the man. Darling, I could vomit Hawkshead, trees, grass, lakes and all! And Pope! When I talk now I hiss; my hide twists with malice; and I can smell the venom when I sweat. But I love Pope: the man, I mean. When he took a hot bath he steamed with gall and wormwood; but I love him. Darling, I love everyone now! . . ."

And so Vridar lived in frenzied enthusiasm for seven weeks. He ate and slept among books, with one by him when he fed, with a half-dozen under his pillow when he slept. Not until his fifth week was he shaken out of himself and then for a startled moment only. He was sitting on the lawn reading Wordsworth when there came to him a woman. She stood before him and smiled and he looked at her blankly.

"What you reading?"

"Wordsworth," he said.

"You like him?"

"Yes."

"I don't. I think he's awful."

Vridar looked at her more curiously. She was about thirty and had, a swift glance told him, very shapely legs. Her face

was good to look at: a bit starved in the eyes but very soft and womanly in the mouth.

"Why do you think he's awful?"

"Oh, he bores me." She shrugged. "His Peter Bells. His Michaels. His excursions and daisies and daffodils and forsaken Indian women. The silly old puritan. . . . Why do you like him?"

"I can't say exactly. But I do."

"I think he had water in his veins. You know, I positively hated him until I learned he had an affair in France. What was her name?"

"Vallon. Annette Vallon." Vridar blushed a little for his French.

"Yes, that's it. Do you really think he seduced Annette? Or is that a silly literary fable?"

Vridar looked at the woman steadily. She met his stare with frank bold eyes and smiled.

"I suppose he did."

"I hope he did. If I ever learn that he didn't I'll hate the man. But I can't imagine Wordsworth seducing *anyone*. Can you?"

"Perhaps," Vridar said dryly, "Annette seduced him."

The woman now sat on the grass. Her skirt was pulled to her knees but she did not seem to mind. She looked for a moment at the smooth silk of her legs and said:

"I can't imagine a poet being faithful to any woman. He wouldn't be a poet, would he? He'd be a monster."

Vridar read the thought in her eyes and looked away.

"You think, then," he said slyly, "that Dante and Milton seduced women?"

"I hope they did." She shrugged; her red mouth was charmingly petulant. "After all, no one knew about Wordsworth's fling for a hundred years. The sly old fox. Fancy how his ears burned after he got back to England! And to square himself he wrote odes to duty. . . . I don't see how you stand the man."

"But he also wrote 'Tintern Abbey.' "

"Yes, indeed, while out hiking with his sister. That's an

incestuous poem but the world doesn't know it. Bill and Dorothy, with their incestuous yearnings sublimated into something that moves through all things. He was immoral. He makes me blush to think of him."

"Then I wouldn't think of him," Vridar said.

"I don't. I think of Byron."

"I have a class now. Are you going to class?"

"No. I'm going to lie here and think of satyrs."

Vridar turned away and with amused eyes the woman watched him go. He listened to Professor Herrold and he understood a little; but memory of the woman tormented him—of a woman lying on grass under trees and thinking of satyrs. And he was annoyed with himself. When again in his room he felt strange emptiness, loneliness and loss: as if he had been drinking water while other men drank wine. He was reading Wordsworth but he wanted to throw the book away and find dance and song. He wanted to lay hungry hands on a woman's flesh, on the wonder of her breasts and thighs, and to lose books and all memory of books while his lips drank from a woman's mouth. Against this notion, which possessed him in deep hushed frenzy, he fought until midnight; and then, delivered to peace, he read until dawn. He forgot about women and satyrs. His hunger was quiet again and for two weeks he fed from pages and quite lost himself in the wonder of so much to be known.

But at the end of his seventh week here, his world of books fell round him and he was again thrown back to his past. For there came to him this letter from Diana:

Idaho Falls
August 1, 1920

DEAR BROTHER:—

I must write to you about something and I don't like to but I know I should. It's about Neloa. She got a job in a cafe here as a waitress and it's one of the toughest places in town. Every night some man walks home with her and they stand on the sidewalk and talk. Sometimes they bring her

home in a car and once I saw her riding around the streets with a fellow. And besides this she paints her lips and her face and adds stuff to her eyebrows and lashes until she looks like a common street-walker. I don't like to write this but you ought to know.

Your loving sister,
DIANA.

This letter so stunned Vridar that for a long while he did not move. Nothing out of life or death could have astonished him more and he sat, white and still, trying to grasp the meaning. And there rose before him, not books and the small world he had built here, but the terrible desolation of his dead years; until the old frenzy, the old bitterness and hatred, choked him and he bowed his head. When darkness came he walked the streets: going he knew not where, nor why, and wishing he was dead. For it was too much, this agony of indecision and doubt that went with him wherever he went. He had believed beyond all question that Neloa was done with flirting. And now——

DEAR NELOA:

I have just learned that you are working in Hank's Cafe. I know that place inside and out and when I was there it was a rendezvous of whores and pimps. You will leave it at once. You will understand, if you can, that I'll not have my wife working in a den of harlots. I don't understand why you're doing this but I've never been able to understand a lot of things you have done. You've always refused to consider my feelings: it was so in Antelope; it is so now. I've offered you freedom and you won't take it. If you're to be my wife you'll get out of that cafe and get out quick.

VRIDAR.

He sent this letter by special delivery and he waited, tortured, sleepless, for a reply. His books were forgotten now. He drove himself to his notes and he wrote his term-papers but he could do no more than that. Five days passed—six—a

week; and no letter came from Neloa. He wrote again and his words to her were violent in reproach, furious in grief. And still no letter came.

While walking one night, lost to everything but his morbid love for this girl, he heard the music of violins. It came from a university building and he knew persons were dancing there. For a long moment he stood in thought. Then he entered the building and watched the dancers; and after a while he became aware of a girl who looked at him. He met her gaze and he saw in her face that she wanted him; and he went over and took her arm without speaking and led her to the dance. She hugged close to him and he knew she was deeply stirred by his arm and the music; and when the dance was done they went out on a balcony and stood in moonlight.

"What is your name?" he asked.

"Blanche Olson. . . . And yours?"

"Vridar Hunter."

"Vridar? That's a strange name."

"I suppose. Where you from?"

"Iowa. And you?"

"Idaho. Doing graduate work?"

"Yes. Are you?"

"Yes. Married?"

"No. And you?"

"I'm married."

"Oh. . . . You love your wife?"

"I suppose. How old are you?"

"Twenty-three. Why do you ask?"

"No good reason. Women should know their way around at twenty-three. I suppose you do."

"You mean——?"

"Perhaps. Shall we dance again?"

While dancing now he looked at her. She had blue eyes, and she opened them wide when she met his stare as if to show him all their innocent blueness; and there was in them, not craftiness but a desperate hunger that was like it. Her nose was a little snubbed. She had gold in her teeth.

"Well, what do you think of me?"

"You're all right."

She hugged so close to him that his leg moved between hers and he drew back a little.

"Do I embarrass you?"

"No. Hell no." Her low laugh had pain in it.

An hour later they walked in Jackson Park. Vridar saw her wondering gaze but he did not meet it; and at last she said:

"Seems like I've known you a long time."

"Does it?"

"Yes. . . . Vridar, why are you so unhappy?"

"I'm not—am I?"

"You know you are. But why?"

"No good reason."

"Do you really love your wife?"

"Of course."

"And does she love you?"

"I don't know."

Blanche took his arm. They went on a dark pathway now and Blanche stopped, with her grasp still on his arm. Vridar turned and their gaze met and for a long moment it was unwavering.

"Shall we go back?" Blanche asked.

"I don't care."

"What do you want to do?"

"I don't care."

She came close to him and put her arms to his neck.

"Well, kiss me, then."

"No." He put her arms away.

"Then you *do* care."

"I do not. But kissing—what is there in kissing?"

"Something. It's bettern term-papers." She took his arm again and led him to a bench. She sat on the bench and he sat by her and she looked at him, studying his face. "I have a problem," she said. "I wonder if you could advise me. . . . It's about my sister Rosamond."

"Oh, your sister Rosamond."

"Yes. She's twenty-eight. She—shall I tell you?"

"If you want to."

"Well, she has attacks. Dizzy spells. Then sometimes she's really sick. We went to a doctor last week. . . . Do you know much about life?"

"Not a hell of a lot," he said, glancing at her.

"Have you read Havelock Ellis?"

"Some."

"Well," said Blanche, a little embarrassed, "we went to a doctor. What do you suppose he told her?"

"Can't imagine."

"Then you *don't* know much about life. He told her—I know you're going to think this is awful silly. Are you?"

"Maybe not."

"Well, you see, Rosamond is—well, she's a virgin. The doctor said she needs a lover. He said she'll go on until she has a nervous breakdown. . . . Is that silly?"

"No, it's funny."

"I don't think it's funny. It isn't funny for high school teachers in small towns. You have the world's point of view," said Blanche, speaking with some vehemence. "The man's, I mean. But what are high school teachers to do? They can't marry men in small towns. There aren't any they'd marry. . . . Well, are they never to have love? Are they to be nothing but phonographs? What can they do?"

"God knows."

"You don't have any sympathy!" she cried.

"Of course I have." He grinned at her. "But," he said dryly, "I can't visit all the small towns."

"You don't think it's right!"

"What?"

"For high school teachers to have lovers."

"I guess it's all right if they want them."

"Well, in God's name, why shouldn't they want them? They are human beings! They have bodies, you know, as well as minds!"

"I'll grant," Vridar said, "your first point." For a long moment she looked at him. He turned and met her stare and asked: "Can't you find a lover? I mean where you teach?"

"Lord, no. Have you any cigarettes?"

"I'm sorry. I don't smoke. . . . Well, you mean you've never had a lover?"

"I never have," she said; and she spoke with such tragic earnestness that he wanted to laugh.

"You're lying," he said.

"I'm not!"

"It's all right," he said gently, "if you want to lie. The world is full of liars."

"But I've never, really. Do you want the plain truth? Would you understand it?"

"Perhaps not. I'm pretty simple."

"But you want to know, don't you?"

"If it's interesting."

"Well," she said, and sighed. "I—well, I was raped once."

"Raped!" he cried. He turned to look at her. "The hell you were. Tell me about it."

Blanche protested but he knew she wanted to tell about it. He knew she would.

"I'm all ears," he said.

"Well, when I was twenty I knew a man——"

"Don't describe him. Just call him a man."

"But I have to. He was big and strong. . . . Well, he asked me to go riding in his car and we went in the country."

"Of course," Vridar said, "you thought you were going on a picnic."

"I knew you wouldn't understand. You men never do."

"Go on with the story."

"Well, we were out in the country. Suddenly he stopped the car, said it wouldn't run. I forget why."

"A flat, I suppose."

"No, it was the motor. I remember that. He got out and tinkered with it and after a while I got out to see what he was doing. Then——"

"I suppose he'd lost all the spark plugs."

"—suddenly he swung around and took me in his arms. He just lifted me and carried me away. I beat at his face——"

"I'n see you," Vridar said. "I'n hear his teeth falling."

"Why do you say such things? You don't know how strong

he was. I struggled with all my might. After all, what can a woman do against a strong man?"

"Lie down, I guess. That's what they do."

"But I tell you he was strong! He weighed two hundred pounds! What could I do? What *could* I?"

"What you wanted to. And apparently you did."

"You're unfair!" she cried. She rose, trembling, and faced him. "I was helpless, I tell you! He just—he just crushed me. And you laugh about it!"

Vridar rose to his feet, laughing; and his laughter, mirthless, sardonic, frightened her a little. She drew away, looking at him.

"You women!" he said. "I don't understand you!"

And he turned away and went down a path, with bitter laughter marking his course through the night.

IV

THIS truth—implicit in Blanche's story and in so much that he had seen and heard—this stark fact that women liked to be raped and that men liked to rape them was like dynamite among his ideals. It was opposed to everything that he had been taught and to every notion of women that he had cherished. His scorn for it was mighty and futile; and in the next two days he wore himself out, fighting against its deep dark certainty, denying it with all his strength. And because he was spent and sick, there fell within this week the most humiliating experience he was ever to have in a classroom.

Professor Herrold, meeting him on the campus, had asked him to read his paper on Wordsworth. This, he knew, was an honor, and he felt elated; but he was also shaken and he spent a whole night going over and over his paper, and wondering if he could read it well. On the next day, sitting in the back of the room, waiting to be called, he shook with fear; and

his face was yellowish and his tongue was large and hot in his mouth. And when he faced his classmates, the paper shook in his hands.

For in his heart and mind there were not these words, telling of the poet's intimations; but the desolate hills of his childhood, the river and winds and empty sky. There was awful loneliness and he stood within it, as when a lad; and his voice which shook like his hands spoke out of terrible anguish. And as he stood here, reading page after page, with a hundred eyes studying his white face, he felt something dark and strange possessing his senses; and in his ears was the sound of river and hawk, and throughout his being lay the yellow passionless insanity of a noonday sun. It was all with him, heaped around him in this room. His voice became a strange thing that he no longer understood, that he could barely hear; and horrible sick dizziness was shimmering mist before his eyes and a rotten warmth in his blood. . . .

And suddenly without warning he broke and pitched forward. When he came to he heard voices murmuring; and it seemed to him that he was back in his homeland, with his mother talking to him after one of his nightmares. But for a moment only. In the next instant his mind was clear and he knew he was lying on a table and that persons were chafing his wrists. He knew he had fainted while reading his paper on Wordsworth. . . .

And he leapt to his feet, his face crimson now with shame. He saw the anxious gaze of Professor Herrold; and students around him, some curious, some amused; and he bolted outside and fled to his room. He locked the door and sat with his face clutched in his hands, trying to realize what he had done. There was blood on his face. It was too awful to think of and he rose, loathing himself, and looked in a mirror. His face was ghastly. And his eyes: they were the eyes of his haunted childhood, terrible in their dark loneliness and pain. "If I could die!" he thought. "Great God, if I could only die! . . ." He went to the lake, wondering if he would drown himself. For hours he sat here, his hands in the water, his gaze fixed on the gray horizon far out. Only one thought held him

in life: that of his parents who had toiled like galley-slaves to put him in school.

On the next morning a hand knocked on his door and his landlady said he had two letters. He unlocked the door and reached for the letters without showing his face. One letter was from Neloa, the other from Diana. At the envelope from Neloa he stared a long while.

Neloa Hunter
251 Broadway
Idaho Falls, Idaho

TR32
Aug
15
1920

Mr. Vridar Hunter
5476 Woodlawn Avenue
Chicago, Illinois

Then he tore the letter open and read.

Darling Boy, my heart is simply breaking tonight and I have got to pour out my feelings to you. I want you to write me at once, dearest, and tell me just how you feel and what you think of everything, then I will know what to do. Your mother has been scolding me and telling me people have been talking about me. I don't know why. She says it is because I work in the cafe and have been seen walking home with men. I realized when I went to work in the cafe that people have a bad opinion of waitresses. But sweetheart I want to swear to you that I have never said or done anything that I would be ashamed to have you see and hear. Do you believe me, darling? Two or three times I have been coming home and have met acquaintances and they have walked to the door with me and said good night and gone on. Now frankly, is there anything wrong in that? I didn't think so but I feel tonight I don't know right from wrong. I am sorry I am alive tonight because people think as they do. O sweetheart, my heart is breaking! I have thought of you every minute and I always ask myself if you will approve of

a thing before I do it. I feel that is the surest way of doing right. And now people are talking. And I have been so careful and have worked so hard and done everything I could that I thought was for the best. I don't know how you will feel but I wish you could know the truth and believe me, dearest. If you don't write at once telling me so I am *done,* that is all. If you believe anything bad I will not live to see you again. I had planned school and our future and oh, the dreams I had; and now I feel as if the world has fallen on me and I wish I could be in your arms and hear you say you know I have done my best and that you believe in me and love me!

Your broken-hearted

NELOA.

Vridar read the letter again and again and wept. The last pages were barely legible, as if Neloa had written out of agonized grief: the writing was wild, the ink was blotted with tears. With everything in his heart he believed this letter and hugged it to him. But Diana said:

DEAR BROTHER:—

Neloa is still working in the cafe and everyone here is talking about her. I thought you'd like to know.

DIANA.

And then Vridar did not believe at all. For what could it mean, this ghastly riddle, this tangle of Neloa's life and his own! If she loved him and if folk were talking about her, why did she not leave the cafe? How could she write such a letter and still walk home with men who were little better than pimps? God alone knew. It was all meaningless nightmare and he was deeply, utterly, sick of it. He had been here in school, slaving day and night, with his whole being fixed on scholarship, on achievement; and Neloa— It was too much.

With a plan in mind he turned to his typewriter and wrote. To his landlady he said:

"I want you to do something for me. I have a letter here. I want you to copy it in your handwriting. Will you?"

Mrs. Burgess was a fat stupid woman who despised her husband, a strange goaded man who wrote great piles of utopias and read them aloud to himself. She looked at Vridar now with a warm stupid smile in her blue eyes.

"You say you want me—that is, I'm to—"

"It's this way. My wife and I play jokes on each other. She's just played one on me. Now it's my turn. You see— Well, I'll read the letter and then you'll see."

"Sure," she said, "you read it."

DEAR MRS. HUNTER:

I don't like to snoop into another person's business but I think I ought to tell you what your husband is doing back here. I know if my husband was away from me and misbehaving I'd think it an act of friendship if a woman wrote and told me. So I'm writing you as a friend.

The truth is your husband is in love with a woman back here and I know he intends to run away with her. I heard them talking in his room and they plan to go to Toledo. I think you should ought to know that. I don't want to see you made a fool of and he's told me you trust him and so I'm writing you the truth.

Yours truly,

MINETTE BURGESS.

Vridar looked at Mrs. Burgess. Her blue eyes were full of gentle amazement.

"Will you copy it?"

"But you're not, are you? I mean runnun away."

"Lord, no. It's just a joke. I want a-see how she'll take it." Mrs. Burgess grinned.

"Will she believe it?"

"That's what I want a-find out."

"I see. . . . Yes, I guess I will." She got paper and pencil and Vridar watched her while she copied the letter. Once she looked up to ask: "Is your wife good-lookun?"

"Most people think so."

"But do you think so?"

"Sure, I guess."

Very soberly Mrs. Burgess copied again, almost drawing the words. When she came to the signature she asked: "You want me to sign it?"

"If you will, please."

"You want me to mail it?"

"No, I'll mail it. And thanks. It's just a joke, you know."

"I never did hear such a joke."

"Joking helps marriage to get along."

"It wouldn't help none on my man. He's crazy. . . . You noticed?"

"Well, yes, a little."

"I wish you wouldn't give him no sympathy," said Mrs. Burgess. "It just makes him worse."

Vridar posted the letter and for seven days he waited. If Neloa believed the letter, he reflected, her belief would declare her own guilt; if she dismissed it, he had nothing to worry about. And during these days he hardly ate or slept. He felt as he used to feel when, as a lad, he searched for cows on the Antelope Hills; or waited under a dead yellow sky for his mother's return; or fled into hiding and poured out his grief to God. In this great vulgar city there was no one to understand his bitter unreason and give him strength.

And a morning came when, feeling himself close to darkness, he bolted across the campus and into the office of Professor Herrold. He did not pause to knock. He flung the door open and rushed in as if pursued by devils; and Miss Herrold, too astonished to speak, rose and stared at him.

"I—!" he gasped. "Oh, I'm sorry!" He sank to a chair. "I—I need help!" he said.

Miss Herrold was very quiet. She asked what his trouble was.

"I—it's—oh, I can't understand! My whole life has been a mess! All my life I've fought against madness, alone, and I'm tired of fighting!"

"Vridar, tell me," she said.

He rose to his feet, his wild eyes looking at her.

"I—I'd better go!" he cried. "I'm sorry I bothered you." He sank again to the chair and she came over and laid a hand on his shoulder.

"Vridar, please tell me. I can understand."

"Oh, I'm a fool, a weak cowardly fool!"

"No, you're a person in trouble. Let me help you."

For a long moment he did not speak. His trouble seemed pitiably silly now; but it was more, it was infinitely more, than his despair with Neloa: it was his whole dark past, rising to blind him. . . . And then he told his tale, flinging it from him, hating its wretched details. Finally:

"I'm a fool, Miss Herrold. It's what my childhood did to me. But I can't see my way out of it and I've tried until I'm sick. I don't know what to do."

"I wouldn't take it so terribly to heart. You're young and you have your life to live." And she talked of other matters: of rare books and rare prints and old china; and she showed him one thing and another but he saw nothing at all. He was turned inward in bitter shame, wishing he had not come here, with his soul naked. He hated all these old quiet things that she loved. . . . And then she talked of persons here, a woman who had twice tried to kill herself; of a young poet who shot himself through the heart; and of the waste of human suffering that sprang from broken dreams. She spoke of her own dark heartache in times long ago. . . .

"You go home now. I'll arrange matters here for you. And you must not give way to despair. You're a very promising young man and you must not think of suicide. . . ."

"But I want to be fair to my wife. Should I leave her? Should I try not to care what she does? Am I unreasonable in asking her to behave with dignity and taste? I don't know. I can't tell what to do."

"Be patient. Perhaps she is only thoughtless."

"But we can't go on like this together. I'm willing to give her freedom, anything, except this making a fool of me."

"She is young," said Miss Herrold. "You are both young.

Your problem will work itself out in time." She reached for a book. "Take this," she said, "and read it. Try to understand it. It will help." He opened the book to the title-page: it was Cabell's *Beyond Life*. "And promise me, Vridar, you will do nothing rash."

"I promise," he said. And he thanked her and let himself out. He ran across the campus to his room; and, two hours later, he was speeding across Illinois prairie on his way home.

V

HE RODE for two days and nights into the west and during this long journey he did not eat or sleep. He tried to read Cabell's book but it annoyed him. Upon entering Idaho on the morning of the third day he was feverish with weariness and he paced from coach to coach. When the train drew into Idaho Falls he went to the sidewalk close to where Neloa lived; and as he stood here, looking at the building, she came to the street. Vridar stared at her and this picture of her he never forgot. She wore colorful clothes and her cheeks and mouth were scarlet and the mascara on her lashes almost hid her eyes. Then she saw him and stopped and their gaze met.

"Where you going?" he asked. He saw the scorn of her eyes, the sudden proud freedom of her head.

"To work, of course."

"You still in that cafe?"

"Sure I am."

Vridar was silent again, his eyes studying her; and Neloa suffered his scrutiny with queenly disdain.

"Neloa, go down and say you're quitting."

"I won't."

"Yes you will."

"And if I don't?"

"I'll have to leave you. So the choice is yours."

"I don't see," she cried angrily, "why I should! Why should I quit because *you* say to?"

"Suit yourself. I'll not wait long."

He took his bags and climbed a stairway and went quietly to Neloa's room. He sat on a bed and watched the clock. In a few minutes Neloa opened the door and came in and hatred was bright and terrible in her eyes.

"Sit down," Vridar said. She shrugged and sat. She looked at him and her mouth drew into a faint ironic smile.

"Well?" she said.

"Neloa, I thought I asked you to give up that job."

"Oh, did you? And who are you to ask me to do anything?" He knew what she meant.

"So you believed that letter."

"I—what letter?"

"From Mrs. Burgess."

The change in her was swift and amazing. The scorn left her eyes.

"So you believed it," he said again.

"Well, why shouldn't I?"

"Why should you? Neloa, you remember two years ago? I said I would be honest with you. I have been. In all my life I've never lied to you or tried to deceive you. And you said you would trust me. But you don't."

"I do."

"You don't. I had that letter sent to learn how small your faith is. You have no faith in me and I don't think you expect me to have any in you. But I can't live that way. And now there's nothing to do but leave you."

"No!" Her cry startled him. She came from her chair, trembling, and knelt at his feet.

"Please go back and sit down."

"Vridar!"

"Neloa, go on. This is no time for hysterics."

She returned to the chair and he saw her hands trembling in her lap. He wanted to take her in his arms now. In his heart was no reproach, no anger: nothing but his hopeless love.

"Neloa, why have you no faith in me? What have I done to destroy it? In what ways haven't I been straight with you?"

"I do have faith in you."

"Then why did you believe that silly letter?"

"Oh, I don't know!"

"Have I ever given you reason to doubt me?"

"No!"

"Then why?"

"I tell you I don't know."

"Neloa, if you hadn't believed that letter I'd have known you were not trying to deceive me. If you believed it, I knew you were expecting from me what you yourself gave."

"I didn't believe it."

"Don't lie. Of course you did." In her eyes now he saw both stealth and desolation. "Neloa, why did you?"

"Mertyl," she said, "believed it, too."

Vridar came to his feet.

"Oh, he did! I suppose he has been a big brother to you."

"He has been very nice to me."

"I dare say." Vridar looked at her, remembering times when Mertyl had kissed her or put an arm to her waist, and in both he had seen more than a brotherly gesture. Everywhere in life, as a matter of fact, he saw the erotic impulse disguised in friendliness and pretense. And he hated the cowardice of it.

"Neloa, go wash that junk off your face."

She looked at him and shrugged. She left the room. And while she was gone, Vridar thought of Mertyl and his way with women, comparing it with his own. Mertyl's smile was courtly, his bow gracious, his words honeyed; and all these hid his bitter contempt. All these hid more than contempt but what else Vridar could not understand. He observed, nevertheless, that most women liked empty pleasantries and detested the truth; and he wondered what Cabell meant by the third chapter of his book. . . .

Neloa returned with that in her manner which said, "Well, you've had your way, I hope you like it." There was very little color in her cheeks now and none in her mouth.

"Before I hear your confessions," Vridar said, "I'll give you mine. In the first place, I supposed we were done with philandering. I went to Chicago and lived with books. Women did not interest me at all. But after you refused to be sensible I went to a dance and danced twice with a girl and walked with her in the park. I did not make love to her and had no wish to. And that is all.

"And now we'll have your story."

"What story?"

"Of this summer. You've been working in a den. You've been running around with fellows—"

"I have not!"

"No? Well, let's hear what you have been doing."

"I have nothing to tell."

Vridar rose, impatient, and faced her.

"Neloa, don't you ever get tired of dodging? Do you mean that you haven't been with men this summer?"

"I don't know what you mean." He saw in her eyes the old fear of him, the old scorn.

"If you don't want to tell me, don't. But I can't live with you in deceit. That is not my idea of marriage."

"Oh," she cried, as if goaded, "say what you mean!"

"Have you been with men this summer or haven't you?"

"I tell you I don't know what you mean."

"Have you been walking home with men?"

"I told you in my letter about that."

"Have you ridden with men in cars?"

"No. Just home."

"You mean only from the cafe here?"

"Yes."

"Two short blocks. And never around the city?"

"Well—only once or twice."

"And why were you riding around the city with men?"

"Oh, I was just riding."

"Who were the men?"

"Just men who eat in the cafe."

"Neloa, why did you ride with them?"

"I don't know. Because they asked me to, I guess."

"You mean you ride with men if they ask you to?"

"No."

"Then what the hell do you mean? And why did they ask you to?"

"Just friendly, I guess."

"Indeed. Neloa, are you a complete fool?"

"You think I am."

"Will you never grow up? Do you think men go riding with women to see the sun set or to talk of Plato? Why don't they go riding with other men or with their wives?"

"I don't know. You'll have to ask them."

"They wanted to seduce you. You knew that."

"I did not."

"No?" Vridar stared at her, trying to understand her stupidity or her cunning. "Did any of these gentlemen kiss you?"

"No."

"Ask to sleep with you?"

"N—no."

"Oh, so they did."

"They did not."

"Don't lie, Neloa. Life isn't worth a lie. And I'm not going to sit here and be made a donkey of. You've lied before and I've forgiven you but there's an end of patience. Now for the last time: did any of these men ask to sleep with you?" She moved suddenly as if to flee. "Answer."

"Yes."

"All of them?"

"No, just one."

"And did you?"

"No!" The word was sudden and furious.

"But did you want to?"

"No!"

"And you walked home with the man after that?"

"Yes."

"You must have liked him."

"I did not."

"Then why did you keep hanging around him?"

"I didn't. He hung around me."

"Oh. Well, that's too bad. You told him to go. You said you'd call the police. You slapped his face and, darling, I can just see you slapping a lewd face. You said, 'Get the hell out of my sight—'"

"No, I didn't tell him that, either."

"I know you didn't. You were flattered. Any lewd thing with a beard can flatter you. In your world, women seem to be bitches, men dogs. And you seem to like it. You're the eternal Eve and men are the carriers of sperm. And when I step out of your sight you daub your lips and paint your cheeks—Neloa, why in God's name I love you as I do only God knows. But this I do know: I'll not go on to the end of my life this way. If I can't trust you, and I mean your dignity, good sense, then I can't live with you. For I'm a very credulous person with a great need to trust someone and to be at peace. I don't mean that I want you to live your life according to my pattern. You can have your freedom. It is your privilege to live as you wish—but not with me. If you live with me you'll have to be a person I can be proud of and have faith in. . . .

"Neloa, what else have you to tell?"

"Nothing."

"Do you swear to that?"

"I swear to it."

"Be sure. I can endure your confessions: I've done so before. But I won't endure your lies; and if I catch you in a lie hell will crack all around you. I might kill you."

"I wish you would."

"You've said that before. Neloa, you're a married woman, not a harlot. Is it hard—"

"If you keep on you'll make me one."

This statement amazed him. He drew his chair close and studied her eyes.

"I'll make you one? *I?* Listen, I ask you to remember that you're a mother and a wife and that when you chase around with men you make a simpleton of me; and when I object you say I'll make a harlot of you. God, you should burn with shame for that!" He paced the room, staring at her. There

was scorn in her mouth and in her eyes there was a bright and ominous glitter. "Am I to let you do just as you please then? Run with men if you want to? Work in cheap dens if you want to? And you'll become a harlot if I don't? Am I to be ashamed of my wife?"

"No."

"What, then? Neloa, exactly what do you want?"

"To live with you."

"But why don't you have the dignity of a wife and mother? Well, I'm sick of all this talk. It has never got us anywhere. But understand this: if you live with me, then you must live so that you will not shame me or I'll take our child and go. I mean that, so help me God." And he swung and left the room.

He walked the streets, wondering if he should leave her now; but he no more had the power to leave Neloa than he had to take his own life. The latter, indeed, would have been easier to do. Because his love for this girl was his life and breath, and the heaven of his earth; and it poured upon his senses and rolled in delirium over his heart. He wanted to take her in his arms and kiss all the loneliness and hurt from her eyes; to feel her lips on him and her arms around him; to have faith in her beyond all doubt, pride beyond all bitterness and pain. He wanted to shout to the world: "I love her, and when I think of her my thoughts do lie too deep for tears; and she loves me to the same depth and breadth and reach!" He wanted to say, "We trust each other, for our love excludes all vanity and embraces all hungers; and the poor gift of another man's love, or another woman's lies beyond our love like a small and weedy garden beyond Eden. . . ."

But all this, he felt deeply, could never be. If she would speak instead of retiring into silence; if she would deliver the storm and heartache of her being, the questions and doubts of her mind, then they could build their lives into one. If she would abuse him, reproach him, curse him even, and so make it plain what her emotions were, and her thoughts; if she would let fury purge her, if she would let hatred and love fight a clean and open battle, then with thunder and light-

ning they could clear the sky and find the sun. But she never had and he knew that she never would. Through rage and blasphemy he stripped to his soul and stood naked before her. Every thought, every doubt and pain, he made as stark and visible as a row of teeth; and when, in spiritual nakedness, he implored her to speak, she looked at him and her soul was as dark as her eyes. . . .

And he had tried other ways, too: tenderness, whimsical nonsense, patience and tact. He had drawn her to him and tried to win her to a full frank moment. But she belonged to darkness and silence; she was a child of the ancient and inscrutable night.

If only I did not love her, he thought, as he paced the streets now. If only she loved me with more than vanity and fear. And he wished now—as he had wished how many times!—to shake her to the last dark depth of her being; to awaken her to his own wild and impassioned candor, and force her to pour out to him all that she thought and felt. With this wish in mind he left the streets and returned to the room. She still sat as he had left her.

"Neloa, let's take a walk."

She rose without looking at him and went to the street and there he took her arm. They walked to the river and across the bridge and came to some dwarfed trees. He spread his coat and she sat on it and he dropped at her feet.

"Neloa, I want to talk. I love you. I love you with all my heart and I don't want to be quarreling all the time. I want us to be more than husband and wife, tolerating each other and growing old. I want us to share the same hungers and the same dreams. But, darling, that cannot be if we do not trust each other completely. I can't live in doubt. Love for me is not back-door stealth and after-midnight deceit. I abuse you, Neloa, and I say mean things but I've never deceived you and I never will. And I want you to live your life as you want to live it. If you can be happier without me, I'm willing to let you go. But if you love me and want to live with me, then I can't understand why you do what you do. . . .

"This, dear, is the way I feel. When I'm away from you

I want you to know I'm not trying to deceive you; not sneaking off as so many married men do to another woman; and above all, doing nothing to make you ashamed of me. Because to my wife I owe all that. And I want to trust you so completely that if anyone were to say, 'Neloa is deceiving you,' I could retort, 'Don't be silly!' Neloa, is that the way you feel?"

"Yes."

"Then, darling, why are you so thoughtless?"

"I don't know."

"Do you love me less than you used to?"

"No, more."

"Do you trust me?"

"Yes."

"But you didn't. Listen, Neloa: if the time should ever come when I want to go with another woman, I'll tell you so. I have my faults, God knows, but I'm not a sneak. . . . Did you mean that last letter you wrote?"

"Every word of it."

"Then I don't understand. The person who wrote that letter is not the person I met today. How do you explain it?"

"I can't," she said. "I've thought about that, too. Vridar," she said, looking at him, "it's what you do to me."

"What I do! I don't want to do anything but love and trust you." He drew her to him and studied her eyes. "Neloa, you know the one moment of all our lives I love best? It was the night, the last night we were together, before I left for San Diego. Remember? I wanted to—but our child had been born only three weeks and I thought I shouldn't. And you looked at me—not as you often look, my dear—and said, 'Sweetheart, please, I want you to.' Remember?"

"Yes."

"You loved me then and I knew it."

"I love you all the time."

"No. Sometimes you hate me. Sometimes you want to leave me. . . . Darling, why are you afraid of me?"

"I'm not."

"I'd die for you. Do you know that?"

"You just think you would."

"I know it. But I can't understand you. You seem to be two different persons."

"So are you. Do you realize that?"

"But I always love you. Nothing can ever change that. And I want to cherish you and believe in you as I used to believe in God." He kissed her lips and her hair. "You're pale now. You looked so rosy when we met."

"That was rouge," she said.

"I know. Well, I'll put some rouge on you now."

He reached for her pocketbook and opened it. He saw a letter in it and he took the letter and looked at it; and Neloa, seeing what he did, moved swiftly and tried to seize the letter. Vridar pushed her away and got to his feet. He looked at the letter and then at Neloa and he saw that she was flushed and guilty.

"May I read it?" he said.

"No! Vridar, please give it to me!" She came to him, fighting for the letter, but he pushed her away. She sank to earth and looked up at him, her eyes dark and wild. He drew the letter from the envelope and opened it and read.

Burley, Idaho
August 11, 1920

Dear Neloa, well here I am, just bumming around. I guess I'll be here until October but I'll see you in Salt Lake. You still intend to be in Salt Lake, don't you?

Love as ever,

Bob.

Vridar read the letter twice and then went softly to his knees and looked into the terror of Neloa's eyes.

"Bob who?" he said.

"Vridar, please!"

"Bob who?"

"Bob Watkins." Her hands shook. Her lips shook when she spoke. For a long moment he stared at her; and then:

"So you lied to me again. This——"

"Vridar, please!"

"And you said you'd meet him in Salt Lake? You swore to a lie?"

"I did not!"

"You did." He read the letter again. " 'Love as ever.' So you and Bob are in love?"

"No!"

"And he'll see you in Salt Lake. The same old marriage racket, Neloa, with the husband made a cuckold right under his nose. It's very sweet. A charming little romance——"

"Vridar, please don't."

"Can't you say anything but Vridar please? And Neloa, am I to go on forever being made a fool of? Is there no end? Can't you be honest and either be decent with me or leave me?" He grasped her arm and drew her to him, twisting her arm until her gaze met his. He stared at her a long moment and then he said:

"You whore!"

Her response amazed him. She broke his clutch on her arm and stood before him, trembling with awful fury. She was like a tigress, terrible in her wild and beautiful wrath; and then, with scorn like flame in her eyes, she drew to her full height.

"You!" she cried, and the word rang with hatred. "You call me—that! Ohh!" And she swung, superb in her fury, and left him and crossed the bridge; and Vridar, overcome with astonishment, watched her go.

After she had vanished he gazed at the letter in his hand. He tore it into shreds and went to the bridge and threw the handful of paper to the stream. Then he went up the street and came to Neloa's door. He tried the door but it was locked.

"Neloa," he said. There was no answer. "Neloa!" He became alarmed now. He put an ear to the door and listened but there was no sound within. "Neloa, open or I'll break the door down!" He kicked the door and Neloa came and opened it and faced him; and her manner, he saw at once, was very strange. It was so strange, indeed, that he looked around him, wondering what she had been doing; and on a table he saw a

bottle and a sheet of paper. He went to the table and Neloa stepped back and watched. He picked the bottle up and saw that it was carbolic acid; and then he looked at the paper and saw that she had been writing a farewell. Too amazed to speak he took the paper and read.

DEAR VRIDAR:

I am sick of it all and I'm going. No matter what I do, no matter how hard I try, you find fault with me. You abuse me and call me names and I won't stand for what you called me today. Please be good to our baby and never tell him what

With the letter in his hand Vridar went over and faced her.

"You mean——?"

"Yes!"

"Neloa, my God!"

He sank to a chair, trembling, and Neloa, as imperturbable as stone, sat on another chair and looked at him. Her face was very calm.

"But you didn't mean it! Tell me you didn't!"

"But I did."

"Sweetheart!" He went over to her and fell to his knees and bowed his head to her lap.

And a week later he wrote in his journal:

What a fool I have been! I have been under the illusion that Neloa and I could be honest with one another and that, alas, has been my dream. But she doesn't know and she has no power to understand what honesty means and so far as I can tell she has no need of it. And here we are, mismated, wretched, and what the future holds only God knows. And in spite of it all I am her slave, bound to her with ropes on my heart.

I begin to doubt that there can be honesty in marriage or anywhere else; for honesty is the most difficult of all things to achieve and what passes for it in the world today is fool's

gold. Hereafter I'll keep my own counsel and tell my wife what I please; and what I do not choose to tell her I'll keep to myself. That will not solve the problem; but, as in countless cases everywhere, it will evade it and perhaps allow us to muddle through to our epitaphs. And let mine be:

HERE LIES VRIDAR HUNTER WHO
OUT OF A PREPOSTEROUS WISH TO
BE HONEST BUILT HIMSELF A CROSS.

I don't know what the truth is between her and Bob. I'll never ask her. I'll never know. But this I do know: I'll never trust her again.

And Vridar never did.

VI

HE RETURNED with her and their child to Salt Lake City and he threw himself heart and soul into his work. Love for him had been an absurd and impetuous farce; and he was, he told himself, forever done with it. He would live with Neloa and he would be kind with her because he was sick of violence and feuds. And besides, her threat of suicide terrified him. He thought she had been theatrical in Idaho Falls and had staged an act to astonish and chasten him; but he could not be sure. There was in this girl something deep and terrible, and it did not, as with him, spend itself in fury and tears.

"But your talk of death," he said to her, "was a cheap threat. I want to make that plain. I suppose after this when you don't like what I do or say you'll threaten to kill yourself. But it's a mean and contemptible threat. I offer to let you go. I offer you a divorce. And you say if I leave you you'll commit suicide. But God-damned if I'm going to live

under a threat like that. Some day I'll tell you to go ahead and do it. And then what?"

"I suppose I'll do it," she said.

"Oh, you will. The hell you will!" And he stared at her for a long while.

He was in a trap, it seemed to him, and there was nothing he could do but work. He could teach and write. These were noble, these were honorable, professions and within them he could build a hermitage: alone with books that he loved, with the best that had been thought and said. He would devote himself to truth and dignity and high purpose. For love, after all, was a young man's dream, a young man's folly; and after it came ambition and achievement, wisdom and calm.

In his second week here he was called to the President's office.

Peter Matwick, president of Wasatch College, was a humorless squab of a man with a round belly, a cropped hedge of whiskers, and eyes that looked strangled. Two years before he had struck a sophomore and knocked him down; and to the students assembled on the campus around him he had shouted: "I'm running this school! When I say hazing is forbidden I mean it is forbidden!"

Vridar was admitted to the office and stood by the door, waiting. For a little while he was ignored. This, he surmised, was Matwick's way of calling another's attention to his own dignity and power.

"You wish to see me?" His tone was sharp and aggressive.

"You asked me to come."

"Oh yes, I remember. You're Vridar Hunter, the new instructor in English. Am I right?"

"Yes."

"Sit down."

Vridar drew a chair and sat and for a long moment Matwick looked at him, his weak chin hiding in his beard.

"I wanted to see you a moment. I wanted to tell you not

to get stuck up because you're teaching in college. You're young. Don't let it go to your head."

Vridar was too astonished to speak.

"It's a great honor," Matwick went on, "to teach here. Our college is an old one. We have some big men. But don't get puffed up and imagine you're a great man. You're only a boy yet——"

The telephone rang and Matwick swung to it as if annoyed but he was not annoyed at all. He spoke sharply into the mouthpiece. He rose to his feet in huge and blustering dignity. "What? . . . No! If you want a-see me, come up here. I'm a busy man. I can't run around seeing everyone who comes to Salt Lake. . . . No!" And he slammed the receiver to the hook. "All these small men!" he cried at Vridar. "They don't know what a big job is. If they had to do my work——

"Well, that's all I had to say to you. Keep a humble heart. Now you may go."

Vridar let himself out and went to a quiet spot to think. So this was a college president: this strutting Mormon, this humorless prig! This was the man who summoned the members of his faculty before him, and stood, short and hostile, with a clenched hand thumping his desk. This was the man who preached a gospel of sainthood and Zion and a chosen people. . . .

"I despise him," Vridar said to Neloa. "He has the imagination of a gopher looking out of its hole. I wonder if all college presidents are like him."

"I don't know," she said.

"If they are, God knows where I'll teach. I see I'll not get along here. If he thumps his stodgy fist at me I'll land on him. The clown! So I'm not to get stuck-up! His college is a big place, is it? He has big men here, does he? Sure. Poxson himself will weigh half a ton. . . ."

And then Vridar was amused; because a more quaking and scared person, a more profoundly humble person, never faced a group of students. When he entered a classroom, notes in hand, he was so frightened he was sick. He would sit at his desk and look at thirty faces, a few of them chastened, a few

of them honestly stupid, but most of them dubious or cynical. It was the cynical faces that filled him with terror: the sorority girls, the fraternity men, well-groomed, skeptical, bored. If he had been less sensitive to the meaning in eyes, around mouths; if he had been less unerring in reading the casual gesture, then teaching would not have been agony; but while he talked he read responses as clearly as he read his notes, and a sudden vulgar yawn, a wearied turn of the head, a sneer, would fetch him up and scatter his thoughts into darkness. He would lose the outline and meaning of what he was saying. And often he would break into sweat and his face would burn and then run white, with drops cool and terrible on his brow; and he would fight desperately for control. He would try to shake off the sudden paralysis of his mind. And his students, aware of his strange manner, would stare at him, some of them sympathetic and ill at ease, some of them with leering relish; and the awful silence of the room, for Vridar at least, was like a sentence of death.

When the hour drew near for meeting a class he would prowl about the campus, trying to forget himself; or he would go to a lavatory and cool his wrists in water and comb his hair and try to urinate when he felt no need. He would return to the office and look at a clock; and again he would go from place to place, fighting, with desperate sunken effort, to be superbly at ease. But nothing that he did, nothing that he forced his mind to dwell on, gave to him the poise he sought. And when the bell rang and he approached the classroom, books in hand, he would pause, striving for calm courage and a lucid mind; and he would open the door and stalk in.

For he was not in this year the bitter and scathing teacher of a later time. As an instructor of youth, he wished to be honest and forthright, with none of the clowning, none of the evasions and bluffing and theatrical gestures, of many teachers whom he had known. He remembered his own empty years in high school and college, when his thoughts ranged the pastures and his heart hungered; and he wanted to give to his students, not only knowledge and outline and form,

but a greater vision and a surer faith. And in all this, it seemed to him, he was a most dismal failure.

Donnaugh, chairman of his department, said he was not. "You're doing fine, Hunter. Your students like you. I'm proud of you. When you get your doctorate I want you here." Donnaugh had written to Vridar's instructors in Midwestern to inquire how he did; and he showed Vridar the replies. "He is immature," Holley wrote. "I did not know he was so young. He overworked terribly but that is a fault of youth. Of his ability to do graduate work I think you need have no doubt; and this goes for Harvard or any other school. . . ." And Miss Herrold wrote: "His paper for me, though it offered no measure of what he can achieve in scholarship, was, nevertheless, the best paper I received. It showed in abundance those rarest of all qualities, sensitivity and imagination; and convinced me that Mr. Hunter can do anything that he chooses to undertake. . . ." Vridar read these letters with his heart pounding and their praise sustained him for a little while. But his doubt of himself was as deep as his life: he was nothing, when all was said and done, but a preposterous fellow who broke into sweat and lost his words and wished someone would kick the life out of him.

"If I'm a good teacher," he said to Neloa, "God pity the others!"

And he would sit until after midnight, reading books, making his piles of notes; for his dream still was to be a great teacher in a great school.

Night after night he read, adding to his knowledge, adding to his journal the sayings of famous men; until he felt, as he said to Neloa, that he could vomit books. "Reading is like overeating. After a while you need a physic." He looked at her and added: "I need someone to talk with."

He had no one. When his mind was full he talked to Neloa and she listened; but she rarely answered and he often wondered how much she understood. She would stare at him with a strange smile in her eyes and he would pour at her the tides of his enthusiasm or despair. He would rant about

the injustice or vulgarity of his race; or he would rhapsodize on a new poem he had found; or he would burst into cloudy metaphysical rhetoric about Plato or Leibnitz. "I need a friend. I need someone to talk with." And he looked at his colleagues, seeking a friend.

There were only two who seemed to share in any degree his headstrong questing and his extremes of hatred and love. One of them, John Agnew, was a very small and delicate man with delicate hands. He was handsome in a frail neurotic way and girls in his classes adored him. They thought him romantic and dangerous and they trooped into his office —which Agnew shared with Vridar and another—and sat on a desk and giggled; and Agnew with princely weariness talked to them of love. The girls were excited and they would fall, twittering, to one another or kick at Agnew and look at him in a way which Vridar understood.

One afternoon Vridar remained in the office and talked with Agnew and he discovered that there was only one subject that drew this man's interest. Sex was the north star of his being and all his emotions were a compass, fixed unchangeably upon that star. Never before had Vridar seen a man so patiently and deeply set upon the erotic. And he talked with him in many days thereafter, intent on reading Agnew's mind and heart; and Agnew, with quiet and decorous charm, revealed himself hour by hour. . . .

"You're married, aren't you?" he asked, after telling of his own unhappy years.

"Yes."

"Get along with your wife all right?"

"I guess so. We have our ups and downs."

"Oh, to be sure." The black eyes studied him. "You strongly sexed?" asked Agnew suddenly.

"How the devil should I know?"

"How often do you make love?"

"How what?" asked Vridar, turning in his chair. Agnew's face relaxed into a smile.

"You're not ashamed of love, are you?"

"I hope not."

"Now, I," said Agnew quietly, "love my wife three or four times a day. And when I want to. If she's washing dishes or frying a steak—"

"You damned liar!" said Vridar, rising in astonishment.

"Indeed," Agnew said. "We're mated that way. It took me a long while to find a mate."

"I should imagine!"

"You read Havelock Ellis?"

"Some."

"Remember his Irishman?"

"Yes. But I'm dubious."

"I've known such men." Agnew's smile was a little pitying. He was, Vridar could tell, proud of himself. He lifted a delicate hand to his black hair. "I look all right, don't I?"

"Yes, you look all right."

"I feel all right."

"No wonder," Vridar said, "the girls flock around you."

"No wonder at all," Agnew declared. "Women, you know, can feel virility in a man. It's intuitive with them. Now," said Agnew, lowering his voice, "take some of these professors around here. A full-sized kiss would flatten them out. It would put some of them in a hospital." He lit a cigarette and quietly smoked. He was warming to his subject now. "You know why so many married women are unhappy?"

"I had never thought much about it."

"Because," said Agnew, "their husbands are once-a-week boys. And I mean boys. They have the vigor of a sparrow and the intensity of a pile of cotton. . . . Mrs. Agnew has no interest in other men."

"I can believe that," Vridar said dryly.

"Well," said Agnew, with a gesture of his small white hands, "that's my point. Show me a married woman interested in other men and I'll show you a husband who disgraces his beard." Vridar remembered what Lily McCoy had told him. "Tell me," Agnew said, "are you normal?"

"What the hell do you mean now?"

"Don't answer if I embarrass you. I mean do you make an art of love or a punishment?" Vridar flushed and stared at the

man. "On this matter of love," Agnew went on, "I've read everything written. I mean the scientific literature. Have you read Gourmont's *Philosophy of Love*?"

"No."

"It's a good book. You know, Hunter, the trouble with marriage today? It's this: most men have an old grandmother inside of them. When they kiss a woman they expect to hear God crying, 'Hey there, what are you doing?' They're ashamed to be animals. They're ashamed to think of love and read decent books about it. And so they sneak off and tell dirty stories to one another: that's their way of making up for what they miss. For they do have sense enough to realize they are missing something. . . . Isn't it so?

"But women, they'd be decent if men would let them. And another thing: most persons are ashamed of nakedness. Imagine it. Now my wife," he said, "has a very beautiful body. Often I have her strip naked and walk before me: I like to look at her, for a beautiful woman is the most beautiful thing on earth. I get the same aesthetic pleasure from watching her that I get from smelling a flower or reading a poem or looking at a Holbein face. All civilized life is art and all art is sexual at its source. The puritans, of course, think art is a subtle disguise of what they are ashamed to think of. That's the reason they're always howling for subtlety and why they call a spade a peony. But art consists in making plain what in our cowardice we have tried to hide. . . .

"Does it sound unreasonable?"

"To tell the truth I hadn't thought much about it."

"It's terrible, Hunter. Our shame for a thing as lovely and fine as sexual rapture is unspeakably foul. And the monstrous nastiness of all these erotic legends you hear everywhere. A man who tells dirty stories, Hunter, is a man with a leprous fancy, a rotted mind. Shame has built into him its disease and stink. . . .

"Well, I have to read some themes now."

Vridar chose books without knowing what he chose and left the office. He went home, reflecting on what Agnew had said. Was love for him a matter of stealth under bed-

clothes, a shameful and a silly thing? Am I, he asked himself, a person with a cancer at the heart of my existence?"

"Am I?" he asked of Neloa, after telling her what Agnew had said. "You used to tell filthy stories. Why did you? Was it shame?"

"I—I don't know," she said.

"Well, I never in my life told an obscene story; but for all that, I am, I imagine, a big puritanical stink. But I won't be always. I won't go through life with my mind ashamed of my body. Be patient, my dear. I had a ghastly childhood and even yet I have only the vaguest notion of what it did to me. But I'm cleaning house and before I'm done with things my house will be clean."

Of what Agnew had said in this afternoon and in others he thought a great deal. Some of it was, it seemed to him, pretty empty and foolish; but under most of it lay a great bedrock of truth. For Agnew, nevertheless, he felt no affection and he turned to the other colleagues who shared his office. Jacob Arlow was a Jew. He was quick and nervous of movement and he walked as if he had springs in his heels. When unamused, his face was cynical and suspicious; but in moments of hilarity Jacob was an irrepressible boy, with the most infectious laugh Vridar had ever heard. His laugh was a choked gurgling as if the man's throat was a fountain of mirth.

"Why didn't we get acquainted sooner?" Vridar asked.

"That's wnat I wondered. I sized you up. You looked like the only human being around here."

And thereafter they were much together. Vridar liked this Jew's searching mind and his warm impulsive heart. He liked his spontaneous enthusiasms and his simple joy of living, his whimsical irony and his wit. For many years he was to be Vridar's closest friend.

"You like Donnaugh?" Jake asked one day.

"Sure, I like him."

"I can't stand his damned Beowulfian laughter."

"It's insincere," Vridar admitted. "He doesn't know how to laugh. But neither do I."

"I wouldn't get too friendly with him. He'll stick a knife in your back one of these days."

"All right. If he does I'll carve him up with an axe."

"Save me," said Jake, "a piece of the dark meat. Give the rest to Grendel."

Jake fancied himself in love with a Mormon girl. He told Vridar of his doings with her, and of how, when weather permitted, they sneaked into a glen on the northern mountainside and held a tryst among the leaves. Jake wanted to marry her but thought that Jews should marry Jews.

"Did I ever tell you how I first met her?"

"No."

Jake rose to his feet, giggling. When he laughed he hunched his shoulders up and almost closed his eyes; and he seemed to be full of giggles from his head to his feet. And Vridar would laugh, too; and if Jake's tales were funny, as invariably they were, Vridar would drop to his desk, bawling with agonized joy. . . .

"It was at a party," Jake said, the words gurgling out of him. "I guess—I guess I was the only one really drunk. I saw this girl. I wanted her. And I plotted for two hours, wondering how I could get her." He rose and walked about, his shoulders bunched up, his face red, his eyes choked with joy. "And then—then I got the notion she lived in this apartment—and if I could hide there—I could—" Vridar now howled with glee; and Jake, with his face red and strangled, his eyes twinkling, was unable to go on. He walked around, giggling and tortured. "Well, I resolved—I resolved to hide. But where? Where? I looked all around me. I saw a piano stool. I went over—and sat—behind that stool! And oh I was quiet, hoping no one would see me! I must have sat there for two hours. I wanted everyone to go home. . . . And when they all rose to go, I was tremendously happy. . . ." Again his voice died and he walked about in giggling anguish. "I—I watched them get their coats and hats—and there I sat—peering at them over that stool!" Vridar burst into violent

howls and struck his desk and Jake shook from head to feet. "And then—then one of them asked—where—where is Jake? I saw them look all around and I was very quiet and thought I was hidden. Then—"

"Shut up!" Vridar cried. "You're killing me!"

"—then a fellow came over and—and kicked the stool away. What—what you squatting there for? he asked. And I was furious. I grabbed the stool and—and put it in front of me again—and—"

"Shut up!" Vridar roared.

Vridar loved this man; but with a terrific conflict storming within him, with neither books nor teaching leading him to peace, there was little in Jake's paganism that he could use. What he sought was a sharp and tremendous awakening and there was none to be found in the academic quiet of this school. He had no love for peace that was stagnant; no need of truth that was a dead thing in its own web. And on an evening in May he said to Neloa:

"Tomorrow I'm going to Provo with the psychology class. I'm going through the asylum again."

VII

VRIDAR did not know why he wanted to see imbeciles and lunatics. He knew only that the sanity of persons around him seemed monastic and sterile and he felt that the deepest meaning of life was to be found in the dark and lost. Donnaugh was forever saying, "Don't say you want to *take* a course in English; say you want to *pursue* a course in English. . . . Don't say not *as* great as. Not *so* great as. . . . Aggravate doesn't mean to vex: it means to add to. . . ." And grammar, it seemed to Vridar, was as unimportant as neckties and salad-forks. Agnew could talk only of sex and virility. Jake Arlow, in spite of his zest and humor and spontaneity,

did not know what he wanted or why. And Vridar's other colleagues bored him.

And so he turned now, as he had turned two years ago, to the strange sorcerous fancies behind prison walls. With a group of students and the professor of psychology and the superintendent of the asylum, he went from ward to ward and from floor to floor; and with idiocy and madness all around him he felt at home. He understood the lunatics: they belonged to the wild darkness of his world. The idiots he did not understand or like: that big lout who had tried for months to tie a simple knot in a string; that heavy-jawed youth with the death of memory in his vacant stare; that shapeless girl who grinned and slobbered; old women who were huddles of rag and bone and emptiness. Here was a hydrocephalic head, there one shaped like a bullet; there a mouthful of grin and black teeth; there a silent hulk of a man, laboring with tremendous patience to solve the workmanship of a scrubbing-brush: he felt no kinship with these. They were only forms in a black void, lost to sunlight and growth. They were the simpering and grinning footnotes to the record of syphilis and epilepsy and cretinism. . . .

And Vridar observed now, as formerly, that these student-visitors were amused. They grinned at one another and exchanged winks; they were patronizing; they asked dishonest questions. And as he watched them, Vridar's thought went back two centuries when lunatics were baited and tormented like bears and roosters, and it was a Sunday diversion to humiliate a fool or make a lunatic yell. And he felt great sympathy for these pitiable imbeciles, and he felt contempt for these smug students, and even for this professor, who loped about, grinning, like the master of ceremonies in a three-ring circus.

They went to other wards and all around Vridar now were men and women lost in the small darkness of their worlds. There sat a small sickly woman who wept day and night over imaginary guilt; and there one who folded and unfolded a handkerchief in her lap, her gaze forever on the floor; and there a third, who stared with terrible earnestness at a far

wall. Up and down a corridor walked a man, talking to himself: he was dramatizing something, and now and then he grinned or cocked an ear to his vast dim audience, or gestured at his peopled spaces. And standing by a door was a man who took Vridar's arm.

"I'd like to speak to you," the man said.

"All right."

"I want you to get me out of here. I'm all right. I'm as sane as you are. They've stole my money and locked me up here. . . ." On and on the man talked, his eyes imploring Vridar, his story plausible and earnest. But when Vridar looked at the man's eyes, he saw there what in times gone he had seen in his own. He turned away, feeling deep and awful pity, feeling his own darkness rise within him. As he passed down a hall a woman threw her arms to his neck and clung to him desperately, her mad lips trying to kiss him; and the doctor and two attendants broke her clasp and dragged her away. . . .

It was all heartbreaking: not for these visitors who giggled like truants in a holiday; but for Vridar who had fought through darkness and walked on the bitter haunted shore of this world. There was no person in this ward whom he could not understand. These tumultuous cycles of elation and depression: he knew them to their core; and these frenzied hallucinations, these hysterias, or these quiet sunken orgies of eternal grief. He knew this ambition, denied, and set now in feverish dramatizing of itself to magnificent achievement; this patient fixed meditation on wrong; this wild excitement that sprang from two forces in deadly and inexorable conflict. They all lay within him, close to his heart. And he despised the cool professional commentaries of this doctor, this psychologist, who talked of madness as if it were something to be explained by textbooks; of white volcanic furies as if a sane mind could understand them; of case-histories and symptoms in the manner of entomologists speaking of bugs. He wanted to shout:

"You stupid asses, you belong back there with the halfwits! Talk of what you call paranoia and say it is delusion,

persecution, inflated ego! Call that man a manic-depressive and say he runs from extreme to extreme! Call that woman catatonic dementia and say she got bogged in negativism! But you're saying nothing! You're using textbook jargon to describe what you'll never understand because you've never felt it. You sane people! What do you know of that dark underworld of human emotion, that black and beautiful empire in which the mind is flame, and sensitivity is a filament of lightning, and all being is piled into one incandescent bonfire? What you call madness is nothing but a vast and sensitized consciousness with all impressions heaped to the blinding focus; and you don't understand it because you are sluggish organisms bedded in habit. The sane person is the fire burning in smoke and never leaping into flame; the banked fire, smouldering through life. He's a person plodding through a dark tunnel, carrying a lantern. And what does he know of these rockets of flame about him, these bright and terrible showers of chaos? Nothing.

"Your knowledge of all this is the mole's knowledge of the hawk."

Here personality rioted in wild fancy and dream, and here the sane and cabined mind reflected within a grin and uttered platitudes: the domestic hen summarizing the eagles; the lapdog cataloging the wolves. And Vridar wanted to kick this professor of psychology in his huge buttocks; and say, "You big unimaginative horse! Is all this for you only a handful of pedantic symbols? Have you never in a single moment reached to the quivering and terrible wonder of it? never felt the strange deep impulses, the haunting intimations, the sudden light? . . ." He wanted to kick this fat round superintendent and say, "How can you live month after month with beauty and terror and have no record of it in your face? You fat housecat!"

For Vridar was shaking. He was like a wild thing, freed from restraint and prison and returned to his kind. This was his world and here was his fellowship. Poetry trembled on the borderland of all this and great music was its voice. Genius was disciplined madness. "You think," he wanted to

cry, "that insight springs from a stomach full of beans and cabbage and a brain full of maxims! The horoscope of achievement is only mediaeval astrology for you. You have chemistry now instead of alchemy, churches instead of gods, and professors instead of prophets. And the terrible significance of all that you completely miss. . . ."

It was at the end of a hallway that a man came to him, his eyes burning with intensity that could have set fire to words.

"I'm writing a book," he said to Vridar. "It will be the greatest book ever written. It's about Polyphemus. You know Polyphemus?"

"Yes," Vridar said, "I know him."

"He ate the whole earth. Then he ate God and all the angels. He ate the Holy Ghost. Then he married Leda. They peopled the earth again and every person had a little bit of God in him. . . . You see?" he asked, excited. "Do you see?"

"Yes," Vridar said.

"It will be a great book. It will eat all the bibles up and all the holy writings just as Polyphemus ate all the men and women. It will digest all the good and pass off all the bad. Just as human beings do with food. You see? It will eat up all the gardens and trees and the whole sky. It will be the greatest book ever written. Nothing impure will be left and everything will smell sweet." He looked at Vridar, as if wondering about him. "You know who I am?" he said.

"No. But I can guess."

"Can you?" asked the man joyfully. "Who am I?"

"You are Polyphemus."

"Yes," the man said, "I am Polyphemus." Vridar went down the corridor and looked back. The man, still proud and olympian, stared after him. "I am Polyphemus!" he said.

Vridar found the students in a small room, crowded round a vat, and he heard the doctor explaining a new method of treatment. It was a warm bath. Then Vridar knew a patient was in the tub and he elbowed through; and he looked at the person in the tub; and he stepped back as if struck. The

patient was a young woman. She was bound in the tub and was lying there in warm water, with only her face out; and Vridar stared spellbound at the quiet agony of her face. For this woman at whom he looked was Kitty Murdock.

He left the group and found his way outside and he was shaking so that he had to sit down. After a little while he went down a long broad street and into the city and took a train home. Kitty Murdock: that wild volatile person with whom he had danced at the Odeon, with whom he had spent an unforgettable hour in Liberty Park. Her words came back to him now. "Vridar, look at the stars. Did you ever look at the stars much? Can you get any meaning out of all that? Or anything? We sit here now but what do we mean? What does life mean? Doesn't it hurt when you think about it? . . . We'll never be wise, will we? You'll always be a mad angel, trying to fly when there's nothing to fly to. . . ."

And then:

"And we'll always be lonely. We'll always live alone."

"And some day we'll kill ourselves."

"And the world will say we were crazy. The world is stupid, isn't it? The world eats and sleeps."

"And snores."

"And builds asylums. . . . Well, kiss me good-by. . . ."

When Vridar entered his rooms he was white. He sat on a chair and Neloa came in from the kitchen and looked at him. Then he paced the room and while he paced he looked at her and spoke.

"You remember Kitty Murdock? She was one of the girls I was engaged to down here. I saw her today. They have her down in Provo, stretched out in a tub of water, and the wise boys standing by her are murmuring of what-is-what. A manic-depressive, they say. She might as well be the song of Orpheus for all they know. But they've bound her to a tub and stuck a label on her. Darling, can you imagine a milk-cow giving lessons to an antelope?

"Well, there she is. She felt more deeply and knew more about life than all the professors in this school put together. But she went too close to truth and will never come back.

"Neloa, I've reached a decision today. Isaiah and Jesus, Plato and Nietzsche, Chopin and Ibsen and Dostoievski—they were all mad. Howells and Trollope, Brahms and Polk were sane. Wordsworth was mad in his young years. After he became sane he wrote 'The Excursion.' Well, I refuse any longer to be interested or to try to be in the cab-horses of civilized life. You may as well understand that now. I'll never plant roses in the back yard or buy Japanese prints or leave a calling-card or give a commencement address. My love is with the queer and the outcast and from this moment on I am taking my place with them. And I'm telling you now so you can make up your mind. You will never find peace with me. I'm not going to fight any longer against being what I deeply am; and what I am is nothing for any sane woman to live with. . . .

"Darling, think the matter over and then tell me what you want a-do." A week later he asked: "Have you made up your mind?" And Neloa said:

"Of course. I'm going with you."

"But after this I'm going to be what I am, see what I can see, feel what I feel. Do you understand what all that means?"

"I don't care what it means. I'm not afraid."

"But you'll never be happy with me."

"I don't want to be happy. I just want to be with you," she said.

VIII

NELOA was pregnant again. "Pretty soon," Vridar said, "I'll have as many kids as Roosevelt had. We'll have a house full and a whole assortment sleeping out in the coal-shed. . . ." He looked at her, thinking of Dock Hunter. "All I got a-do," declared Dock, "is hang my pants on a

chair. Just hang my pants on a chair and I knock my missus up."

"We can have an abortion," Neloa said.

"No. I'll just have to settle down to a job and support my herd. But if you start having twins, damned if I won't leave you. . . ."

Leaving Neloa with his parents, who had sold the garage and bought a grocery store in Salt Lake City, Vridar went to Chicago again. Of his salary he had saved half and he said they could starve for a year on that. "Soon as I get a place back there I'll send for you."

"Vridar, don't keep me waiting."

"I won't."

He had been in Chicago only a week when he met Blanche Olson.

"Hello," she said, and he knew she was glad to see him.

"Hello," he said.

"Vridar, aren't you glad to see me? I thought you liked me."

"Perhaps I do."

"You busy now? Let's walk." They went down the midway and entered Jackson Park. "You know whom you remind me of? Jonathan Swift. You're just as bitter as he was."

"I'm not bitter."

"You are. You hate women."

"I hate women? I'm crazy about them."

"Then why don't you get crazy about me?"

"I'm married," he said.

"What if you are? Marriage doesn't mean anything to most men."

"It still means a lot to me."

"Vridar, you remember what I told you about my sister? . . . Well, she's worse. The doctor says she simply must get a lover."

"Well, what about it? You don't expect me to volunteer, do you?"

"Sometimes," said Blanche, "you can be very stupid. Did you know I teach in a town of one thousand?"

"You told me that."

"And I'm twenty-four."

"All right, you're twenty-four."

"You know what a high school teacher's life is like in a small town?"

"I can imagine."

"Then why don't you show a little sympathy? . . . You know why I came to Chicago?"

"To take some more stupid courses in education. Last year you studied charts. This year you will study graphs."

"No. Vridar, are you really stupid?"

"Blanche, is it really impossible to find words for what you want to say?"

"No."

"Then say it."

"All right, I *will* say it. I came to find a lover."

"Oh. And are you having any luck?"

She stopped and drew her breath sharply. She was annoyed.

"Do you," she asked, "find me so unattractive?"

"I hadn't thought about it."

"I have lovely legs," she said. "Men adore legs."

"Oh, do they?"

"I took a prize with my legs and it was a swell prize. You ever watch men on a sidewalk when a trolley comes up? They all look at the legs of the women who get on and off."

"I shouldn't wonder. These short skirts, they show plenty to look at. If ugly legs were a capital crime nine-tenths of the women would be shot."

"I wouldn't be shot." She drew her skirt above her knees and thrust a leg out. "How's it look?"

"All right."

"Make you want a-see more?"

"Not noticeably."

They returned to the campus. Vridar looked at her and she colored a little.

"Well, I wish you luck. You ought to find a lover with legs like yours."

"I can," she said, annoyed again. "Don't think I can't."

"I know you can."

"Vridar, every night I walk in Jackson Park."

"Oh, do you?" he said, grinning.

"If some evening you're unable to study— Well, Mr. Swift, we could look at the moon."

"That would be swell. We could sit on a bench and look at the moon."

"And you could hold my hand. It's not a nice hand but it's very cuddling. I think it would fit into yours."

"It might," he said, still grinning.

"In some hour, when you're weary of books, remember. . . . Well, good-by."

"Good-by."

In every evening for a week he sat with his books but he could not forget that out in Jackson Park Blanche was waiting for him. He would enter the night and walk, striving to forget her and his hunger; he would go to the library and strive to lose himself there. And he would think of Neloa, too, and wonder about her. If she had been honest with him —but what did it matter? Perhaps there was no honesty on earth. Perhaps every woman deceived her husband, perhaps every man betrayed his wife. Perhaps marriage was only polite whoredom. In most of the cases known to him it seemed to be only that. . . .

And in this manner, night after night, he reasoned with himself. Once, twice, a third time, he started for Jackson Park and turned back. Then he would take Neloa's letters and spread them before him and read them, one by one: trying to tell what she meant and what she did not mean, what was cunning and what spoke out of her heart. . . .

You know, I sometimes wonder if Dr. Snade is not right when she says emotions and passions cannot be governed by intelligence. When I think what a hard old time we are hav-

ing to get along and be something in the world, and how selfish, cross, little and mean the people we meet every day really are, and what a hell of a world it really is, I find it takes more than intelligence to keep me sane. I have a hard time reasoning myself out of crying. But I am not discouraged and I know we will win in the end. . . .

When I have to chastise Lincoln he feels so badly about it and kisses and loves me so pitifully that I weep. Dr. Snade is very kind to me. She admires you very much, dearie, and thinks you will be a great man. Now don't get all puffed up. . . . Mert says he is going to get stewed. I guess he has dropped Marjorie cold. Write me all your troubles, sweetheart, and I will understand them and sympathize, though I am so far away. . . .

I saw Ruby Johnson yesterday. She dresses so nice, has her eyebrows pulled to a narrow line and her hair and hands just so. I wish I had more time to keep myself looking pretty. You forgot to send a list of novels for me to read. And those French short stories, did you take them? I want to begin studying French. . . .

I am almost afraid you will become so interested in your work you will not miss me. I am glad you find comfort in your books but I am selfish enough to want you to miss me sometimes. Now and then I feel that my being born was a big mistake. I have never had a place in the world and have always been where I was not wanted. Perhaps if I had never come into your life you would now have a woman you could love and admire, a woman equal to yourself. It is terrible to feel that I stand in the way of the person I love most and would do anything for. But, dearest, I still have hope of becoming the one thing in life for you. Make a companion of me, dear. You never have. It has been my fault, I guess, but God knows I have tried. I feel like a big volcano all the time, just ready to erupt. You make me afraid to ask you things; and I am interested, dear, so just go ahead and tell me things or I'll always be ignorant. Dr. Snade says I must keep up with you. I want to be educated enough to keep your respect and be able to entertain your friends and hold a con-

versation with them that you will not be ashamed to listen to. That, darling, is my dream. Good night, and try to think kindly of your

NELOA.

Again and again he read her letters, until he knew them by heart; again and again, trying to reach to their truth. What in them was said lightly and what had been left unsaid? The sincerity of them he could not doubt: it rang in them like a bell from end to end. But there was her deception, her stealth, of a year ago; and the more he thought of the matter, the less certain he became of anything. If he could have believed in her utterly, he would have dismissed Blanche Olson and turned to his books.

As a matter of fact, he was completely baffled. When with Neloa, he saw cunning in her eyes, faint contempt around her mouth; and often he hated her and wished he had never seen her. It was then that she stung his pride to fury. But when away, as now, he turned to her overwhelmingly, forgetting all his desolate hours and remembering only his love. When with her he wanted to strike her down; when away, he wanted to kneel at her feet.

And this was his struggle. This it was that tortured him day and night. Rather than be a simple fellow, deceived again by a woman, he preferred death; but he did not know how to strike back, how to free himself. He believed deeply as he believed few things that if Neloa were not pregnant, a handsome flattering cavalier could seduce her. And this was the conviction that maddened him. For he was no cavalier himself: he scorned gracious emptiness and the unctuous tongue. But Neloa liked pleasant insincerities. And how, he asked, could any person so credulous, so unaware of the disguised motive, be sure of what lay in his heart?

Night after night he sat in his room, his face sick and white, trying to see a way out. Between him and Blanche stood these letters and if he went to her he would have to walk over them, sheet by sheet. And he could not go. Again and again he tried and he could not.

To Neloa he wrote:

The only facts I can get hold of are these: you lied to me, you deceived me, you nearly drove me out of my wits. These and one other: I love you. But I cannot for the life of me understand how you expect me to trust you when you have done so much to destroy trust. If we ever come to that companionship you speak of you will have to speak from your heart. You will have to be honest in what you want. You have no more interest in books than I have in President Harding. How can we get anywhere until you distinguish what you feel from what you pretend? I am trying to vomit my murderous hatred and pain into a catharsis. I want to cut my way out of this black emotional wilderness in which I have been for twenty-six years. But I can't do it as long as you are a wooden Indian. So sit down and write out of you all that you think and feel and believe. Be honest and to hell with the cost.

Vridar waited a week and during this time he gave himself to his studies. On the seventh day a letter came. It was the most remarkable letter that Neloa had ever sent or was ever to send. It said:

DEAREST:

You have set me a rather difficult task. I can't imagine why you have asked me to write as you have, I only know you have asked it and that is enough. I shall try to tell you just how I feel. And will you understand me or will you think again that I am trying to deceive you?

I frankly admit that I often wonder if you love me at all. Didn't you have a fancy for me and don't you regret now? You have told me so many times that I have disappointed you; that you could learn to forget me or even to hate me; that your marriage was a mistake. In view of all this, is it strange if I sometimes doubt? You often think, dear, that it would have been better if you had married a girl with an education equal to your own. I realize I am not your equal in that respect. But I believe I can become your equal if I have

the chance. It is hard for a woman to try to make a home, raise a family, and at the same time keep up with a very studious man; but that is my one wish now. I want to do all three and do them equally well. Please help me.

I will admit, sweetheart, that I don't know much about human nature. You are a great puzzle to me and I often despair of ever understanding you at all. You will have to help me understand. You tell me so little of what you feel that I can never hope to know much about you unless you change. My actions depend a lot on the impression you give me. So long as you make me think you distrust me, I can never open my heart. You have never known how much I long to be able to tell you everything and to feel that you want to know and will understand; and I want you to believe that my sympathy for you is deep and that my interest is the same as yours. And I'll be so happy, darling, if such a time ever comes.

Now, sweetheart, knowing as much of you as I do and in view of all the hurts you give me and the mean things you say, if you and I were back in 1917 and you were to ask me to marry you, I'd say yes so quick your head would swim. Never think for a minute I am sorry for that. In spite of our quarrels I am happy and my suffering is mostly because *I know you are not happy with me.*

I think I get bigger and broader each year for I think more of other people and less of myself. I am still extremely selfish. Perhaps you do not know that I am very jealous of you. I think you like to flirt but I try not to blame you because I guess that was born in you. I think you must have flirted last summer just a little and I know Blanche thinks more of you than any single girl should think of a married man; and not in a motherly way, either. Still, dearest, thinking this and knowing you are human after all, I would not object to your seeing her this summer and taking her out if you care to. I have enough faith in you to believe that you will not wrong me. I trust you so much that I think you could do anything and then make me believe it was the only thing you could do.

And if you had such faith in me I'd rather die than destroy it. But you have not. And it puts a million little devils in me to know that I am distrusted and spied on. That is the only way I can explain last summer. I worked last summer not because I wanted to but because I wanted to help us go to school. I thought you would understand my motive. And when people began to tell lies about me, you don't know how it hurt. I often lay awake all night, crying and thinking about it. Then I learned that your mother believed the stories and I swear to God there wasn't a word of truth in them. She spied on me. She used to go down the other side of the street and hide in doorways and watch me and follow me home. She thought I never knew it. Well, dear, that is what made me act the way I did. *I decided there was no use being a good woman because nobody would believe you good anyway.* And I knew all the time that you distrusted me, too. You had Diana following me. She showed it in every act. More than that, I caught her in several lies. I knew you were writing to her and I was so bitter I thought of suicide several times. I had to take aspirin and soothing syrups to sleep and I felt so bitter toward you and didn't want ever to see you again. But I have learned that what others say about you doesn't matter; it's what you think of yourself.

Do you understand any better now or have I made things worse? You don't know how much I love you and I suppose you will always doubt my love. But when we get a home of our own, away from your relatives and mine, then we shall get to know each other and greater love will come. That is my dream and I am happy with it. I trust you; I am praying that you trust me. Please understand my faults and shortcomings, dearest, and help me to grow big. That is the prayer of your

NELOA.

On a bench in Washington Park Vridar sat with this letter from morning until late afternoon. The first readings shook him deeply; but after a while he distrusted everything that Neloa said. It was the sort of letter, it seemed to him, that

she imagined he wanted her to write. The line to which his gaze returned again and again was the underlined one: *I decided there was no use being a good woman because nobody would believe you good anyway.* It was as if she had said, You believe in me and I'll be good; you distrust me and I'll go to the dogs or kill myself. . . . This statement angered him; but what he was to do he might, nevertheless, not have done if three circumstances had been different.

One of these was his outraged vanity. Always with him was the thought, not that he was a man, pursuing and ravishing as other men pursued and ravished: no, but that he was a creature of curd and whey. No other man of his age, at least among those whom he knew, but had taken a dozen or a hundred women. And what sort of person was he that he should forever spurn these girls who offered themselves?

His second wish, darkly hidden like the first, was to embrace every lovely woman alive. This sprang in part from the roaming hunger of the male; but it came, too, from those lonely haunted years when girls terrified him. But in this year it was not fear of women; it was bitter and implacable distrust of his own manhood. For many years he had looked upon himself as a physical weakling and he had never given himself to Neloa with the voluptuous intensity of his heritage. Within him always stood the thought: does she find me as satisfying as her other lovers? It was a dark and blundering question; but even so, there was, he had learned, abundant reason to ask it. That vanity which supported some men, and which led them to the vision of themselves as a great lover, Vridar did not have; for his imagination was too lively, and he looked at love and its ways and perceived that love for the resourceful and intelligent person could be vastly different from what it was for the stupid fellow who obeyed his instinct and slept. . . .

And the other circumstance was his family. Both his mother and sister, puritans to their marrow, and with their hearts delivered to Isaiah and turned from Solomon, treated Neloa as if she were little better than a harlot. This Vridar did not perceive. He was lost within a family integrity and bound

heart and soul to its stern and unpitying code; and he listened to what Prudence said, to what Diana said, and believed them wise. And they both said he would never be happy with Neloa and that his marriage had been a grave mistake. If his family had taken Neloa to its heart, Vridar's future would have been quite different; for in this hour he would have seen clearly what he now had no power to see. . . .

And here on a park bench, on the afternoon of July 10, 1921, he made another decision: he would be like other married men. He would be an adulterous sneak. And after an hour with his mistress he would lie about it and he would take to his wife, as some men did whom he knew, a box of candy or an armful of roses. For his dream of honesty between husband and wife—the last of his great dreams—was dead.

IX

WELL," he said, "I came."

"It took you a long while to make up your mind."

"Two weeks."

"You must not have wanted to come very much."

"Perhaps I didn't."

"And perhaps I don't want you now."

"No? The hell you don't."

And the strange person that Vridar was is shown now by what he did. If Blanche had been hungry for him, he would, beyond all doubt, have spurned her. He would not have been both disgusted and terrified. But finding her indifferent or affecting indifference, his wrath mounted and his vanity rocked him with storm. He took her hand and jerked her toward him.

"Remember your story of the big strong fellow who raped

you? You liked it, didn't you? You women are that way. It takes a brute to make you swoon!"

"Vridar, let me go."

"Listen, you asked me to come. I am here."

"But you needn't break my arm!"

"You'll be lucky if I don't break your neck!"

"Vridar, why are you so savage?"

"Savage? Do you want a man or a housecat?"

Blanche drew to her full height and smiled.

"I want a man."

And now he felt weak. He took her arm and led her away but he was frightened and sick.

They followed paths, searching this park for a small lost jungle. They peered guiltily into clumps of underbrush; sought a refuge under a high bank; and went to a far dark grove of trees. And steadily Vridar felt more ridiculous.

"I don't see," he declared, "why the world makes such a hell of a fuss about sin. Virtue, in the city at least, seems well protected."

"But not in the country," she said.

"Oh no, there they have buggies. But you were in an automobile?"

"Please forget it."

They looked around them as if defeated.

"How can a man sin in Chicago?" he asked.

"I think I know a place."

She took his arm and they went up a path and at a bench she stopped. She sat on the bench.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"There's the place," she said, and nodded at a tangle of darkness. "But Vridar, I don't think I want to now. I'm—I'm afraid."

"Fiddlesticks," he said; and while he stood here, looking at her, he examined his emotions. He was excited but it was not amorous excitement. He seemed to have no more wish to embrace this girl than he had to jump into Lake Michigan. And he wondered what was wrong with him.

"Come on," he said.

"No, please wait a little."

He sat on the bench and put an arm around her. He drew her to him and kissed her but there was no fire in his kiss.

"I guess I'll go home," he said.

"No, please don't."

He decided to work up an erotic frenzy. He kissed her lips and throat and then pulled her clothes down and kissed her breast. Drawing her to him, he cupped her firm breasts in his palms and kissed her bare arms.

"O Vridar, don't! Ohhh, please!"

And in all this he was as frigid as a polar cap. He was playing a part, knowing what he should do, and doing it with fine amorous fury; but his emotions were as dead as charred wood on a grate. He pretended, nevertheless, to be excited, and he kissed her with what she took to be savage hunger; and she gasped and struggled to be free. But Vridar persisted, letting instinct guide him; and he crushed her to him, kissing, exploring; and his thoughts were as hard and naked as trees in December. Now and then he turned away from her and looked into darkness and grinned. Because all of this, it seemed to him, was deeply, utterly silly. He wondered what life had done to him and why he could not, like other men, take a woman and be done with it. And Blanche, aroused now, clung to him, her hot wet mouth seeking his throat.

"Let's go," he said, fighting against hysterical laughter; and he rose and led her away.

They went into jungle and Vridar fell to hands and knees and crawled under a low leafy ceiling and Blanche followed him. He took his coat off and spread it on the grass and leaves. Kneeling, he drew her to him and laid her on the coat and he saw that her eyes were bright as stars. He felt the quivering wonder of her flesh.

"Vridar?"

"Yes?"

"Please be careful. Don't hurt me."

Again he wanted to laugh. The mirth in him was sardonic and mad and he wanted to stand up and roar at the sky. Then he gathered her to him and laughter was like a flood

in his being, wild nonsense in his mind. Under it was a deep and ghastly alarm; for he not only felt no passion: he was impotent with fright that stood beyond the laughter, as water lies dark and deep under a surface stirred by wind. He lay against her and sought her mouth. He strove with everything in him to come awake; to leap from this emotional paralysis to frenzy; to be a man and claim his own. And as he fought, he swung between self-loathing and laughter, the one destroying him, the other defining the terror of his sardonic mind. What, he wondered, did other men do when a girl waited. Some took her, of course, and others, like himself, were thumbscrewed by furious impotence. Some, like himself, were sickly warped idealists, laughing all passion out of them, mocking their birthright. . . . And all the while he kissed Blanche, hiding from her the terrible conflict within him; and little by little he lost the brilliant focus of his thought. Little by little he pushed memory and grief away. . . .

Blanche patted her hair and looked at him. She seemed to be quietly astonished and deeply pleased.

"Nobody," she said, "ever—I mean—— Well, you're so big."

He stared at her, not understanding what she meant; and then her meaning came to him and his laughter spilled in a great shout. He got to his feet, roaring, and looked down at her.

"Why are you laughing?"

For a long moment he stared at her. Then his laughter burst again, wild and uncontrolled, and he turned away and went roaring through the park. She called to him but he did not turn. He was convulsed. Her statement, it seemed to him, was the funniest, the most quaintly ironic, he had ever heard. And when he came to his room he was still choked with mirth and he lay on the floor and howled. But he was not laughing at that statement at all. This he did not know until he sat up in intolerable heartache and laid his cheek to a photograph of Neloa and wept.

And hours later he wondered if he had dreamed. Had he

actually prowled in Jackson Park or had he been sitting here all the while? He could not be sure. It all escaped him and went off into darkness and life was a monstrous den of lunatics and lust. Its heart was a dynamo and its brain was a switchboard and he was a tangle of filaments in a mechanized plan. Disgust rose to choke him and his laughter was dead.

He sent a brief letter to Neloa:

Here is a check for eighty dollars. Come at once.

VRIDAR.

For three days he wandered about like a man in a trance. He went to his classes but he understood nothing of what was said. On the fourth day he met Blanche.

"Let's take a walk," she said.

"What for?"

"I want to tell you something." They went into Washington Park. She was excited.

"Well?"

"Vridar, I'm in trouble."

"Trouble? What do you mean?"

"I'm pregnant."

"Nonsense! Good God, you haven't had time to find out. Anyway, you aren't."

"I was sick this morning."

"Sick!" He tried to laugh and failed. "Sick?"

"Vridar, you love your wife?"

"Of course I love my wife."

"But you love me, too."

"Hell yes. I love all women."

"Vridar, be serious."

"I am. That's my biggest fault. I'm so damned serious I'm ridiculous."

"If you don't love your wife why don't you divorce her?"

"But I do love her! That's my other biggest trouble." And he added: "Listen, Blanche, the first move you women make is to get a man to lie with you. Your second is to get him to marry you. Your third is to get children. Your fourth is to

choose your sons-and-daughters-in-law. Your fifth is to be a tyrant in an armchair. And your sixth, the only decent move you ever make, is to die. . . . Let's go to my room."

"No, I don't want that now. I want you."

"All right, let's go."

"No, I want you all the time."

"Come tonight, then."

"No!"

"All right, don't come. But I'll be waiting."

At midnight she came and an hour later he urged her to leave.

"I should say not. I'm going to stay all night."

"Listen, you hike along or I'll kick up a hell of a rumpus."

She sat on the bed and drew on her stockings and shoes.

"Vridar, haven't I got lovely legs?"

"They're all right."

"Kiss them. You've never kissed them."

"I never will."

"Other men do. Vridar, you're not much of a lover."

"No? The hell I'm not!"

"You aren't. You should know how other men make love. They kiss women here—and here."

"Oh, do they!" He rose, feeling murderous. "Hurry up and beat it! I'll twist your damned head off in a minute!"

"Vridar, you're afraid of women."

"Hurry and get out. Listen, Blanche, I can be dangerous."

"I know it. That's why I want you. If you only knew more——"

"Are you going or shall I throw you out?"

He went with her to the door and watched her go up a quiet dark street. Then in the bathroom he shaved and steamed himself in a hot bath and looked at his eyes. They were morbid eyes and they made him afraid. Again sick with disgust he put on his one baggy suit and walked north into the city and everything about him was hushed in smoke and sleep. He went for fifty-seven blocks and turned westward and crossed a bridge and entered a station. An hour later he

heard the low thunder of a train and in a few minutes he stood in a great vaulted room with Neloa in his arms.

X

FEELING that his vagrancy had been a mistake and that he would never discover himself in adulterous love, Vridar turned again to books. Two personalities within him—the poet, credulous, self-pitying, and lost to unattainable ideals, and the thinker, ruthless and sardonic—were becoming day by day more irreconcilable; and he was disintegrating in the struggle and knew it. He resolved to search books again and to discover some faith that would sustain him, some philosophy to reconcile the feuds between his mind and heart. "Surely among the great men," he said to Neloa, "there was one who found a faith intelligence can live by."

This period of his life in which, as never before, he gave himself to the searching of books, ran from August of this year until an August two years later. During this while he read in nearly all fields, and the volumes that he borrowed and returned to library shelves numbered hundreds. He made notes until he had a trunk full of typewritten cards: in philosophy, in comparative religions, in history, in sociology, in the sciences. And he kept a journal, recording, day by day, his pilgrimage in search of a god.

Besides all this, he carried a full course of graduate study. For a small dark two-room apartment, he was caretaker of a big gloomy building, stoking the furnace, scrubbing the hallways and stairs, carrying the garbage out, letting rooms and collecting rents. He studied French and German, too, and labored on theses. He spent his Sundays writing on a novel. And in every day, despairing of his health, he went to the school's gymnasium and worked furiously with dumb-bells and bars, or swam, or ran for two miles on the indoor track. From early morning until midnight he drove himself to the

last ounce of his strength. At the end of the first year, blindness threatened him; and his health in spite of and in part because of his punishing exercises became steadily worse; until he lived through every day on the brink of collapse.

Whatever else can be said of him—and much not to his credit can and must be said—it cannot be recorded that during these bitter years he spared himself. He scrubbed the floors in his own apartment and laundered their clothes, including the diapers of their second child, born two months after Neloa came; and he helped Neloa in other ways, often when he had no time to give. And if she stood on the margin of his life, helpless and unhappy, it was not because he loved her less. It was because Vridar Hunter, during these years, and even more now than formerly, was a driven and desperate person. He had no standards, no code, no guide: his dreams had betrayed him, and all his convictions, he suspected, were false. And his hunger for truth, for one fixed certainty in the chaos around him, drove him day and night, without a moment's pause or a moment's peace.

Early in this year he made these notes:

It is the task of philosophy, someone has said, to answer three questions: What can I know? what ought I to know? what can I hope for? My reading of Kant discovers an answer to none of them. If you lift his thoughts out of their rhetorical jungle you have nothing left. His twelve categories are only twelve monstrous dogmas, related to behemoths. He was forever pursuing his *Ding an sich* in the black wilderness of his moral consciousness, like a whale after a fish; and he spouted tremendously; and when he was done, the sea leveled off and was as calm as before. I don't know what was wrong with him: perhaps he was a small man or perhaps his wife despised him. Anyway, he was a fine stick of dynamite under the Cartesian nonsense—and that is all. I'll read Spinoza next.

On scholarship: Karpf says Shakspere's line, "the toe of the peasant comes so near the heel of the courtier," refers to the

myth of Orvandill's frozen toe which Thor hurled at the heavens. Most scholarship is just about as silly as that.

Went to hear Irving Babbitt of Harvard, thinking I might learn something. The smooth-lipped person who introduced him laid me out: after the rhetoric, the ladies-and-gentlemen-I-have-the-honor, it was, "Professor Babbitt of Harvard University!" It reminded me of Meredith's egoist: you see he has a leg. (Perhaps two.) Ladies and gentlemen, I have the vast and staggering honor of introducing Professor Irving Babbitt, Ph.D., M.A., B.A., and high school and grade diplomas. Jones, write those on the blackboard. . . . And Babbitt went round and round his subject like a man running round a house, looking for a door. Bonnard, says I, thou knowest how to decipher old texts; but thou dost not know how to read in the Book of Life.

I adore this from *The Anatomie of Absurditie:* "I can but pittie their folly who are so curious in fables, and excruciate themselves about impertinent questions, as about Homers country, parentage, and sepulcher; whether Homer or Hesiodus were older; whether Achilles or Patroclus more ancient, in what apparrell Anacharsis the Scithian slept, whether Lucan is to be reckoned amongst the poets or historiographers, in what moneth in the yere Virgill died . . . peradventure they had found necessary things if they had not sought superfluous thinges. . . . "

Is anything sillier than the prefaces which scholars write for their books? Harper's, Gerould's, endlessly. I'd say, "Certain dull persons helped me a little. Professor Phoodle of Harvard found a comma out of place and Professor Oggleswock of Princeton fooled around with my index; and my wife, without whose patience and sweet charity and infinite reasonableness. . . . But no. I desire to acknowledge my indebtedness to one without whose unwisdom in beginning this work and pigheaded obstinacy in pursuing it I could never have added these pages to the confusion of libraries: myself."

I observe: 1, students who see other students carrying books think they are industrious; 2, professors think students who sit before them and stare wide-eyed are listening; 3, students think professors will give them higher marks if they laugh at their stale jokes; 4, professors think students who ask a lot of questions are interested; 5, students think most professors are sexless. I think a college professor is a man who knows a lot and is eternally wondering what.

As a novelist let this from Alfred de Vigny's *Journal d'un Poète* be my motto: "After clearly perceiving that study of books and striving after nicety of language merely lead us into paradoxes, I have resolved never to make any sacrifice save in favor of conviction and truth."

I like this. Walter Paston in 1479 said: "And yf ye wyl know I was maad Baschyler. I was maad on Fryday was sevynyth, and I mad my fest on the Munday after."

Well, I've plowed through tomes of Spinoza. He said the one substance is God, that He is the infinity of infinities, and God is infinite in the infinity of His infinite attributes. In short, he threshes mightily in his wits to come to the conclusion that God is nature, which is much like arguing that oak is wood. Spinoza was a great and generous man who devoted a lifetime to the obvious. A critic says Spinoza's greatest defect was his omission of the "intellectual emotions." Now what in the name of Christ are they? Does he mean a frostbitten flame? I am going to read Locke next.

I love blunders in translation. A Frenchman translated Congreve's *Mourning Bride* as *L'Épouse du Matin*. Janin did "Out, out, brief candle" as *"Sortez, chandelle!"* That's nice. But best of all is Cibber's *Love's Last Shift* as *La Dernière Chemise*. There is sweetness and light for you.

My motto now is Swinburne's, "Hope thou not much, and fear thou not at all."

Today said Professor Miss Warnshaw: "Herbert says one rule of good riding is that the rider always hold his eyes between the ears." That got a great laugh. "Not between his own ears," says she, glad she got a laugh, though she didn't play for one that time. And a class of thirty graduate students whooped. I often wonder what a sense of humor means to most persons. . . . And Prof. Breverton in speaking of the Spanish influence on Massinger said: "I used to try to read the Spanish plays but I found that a little slow——" and his large limpid eyes, the twist of his mouth, showed he expected a laugh; and he got it. Students always laugh when a professor tells anything that deprecates his own ability. Rochefoucauld was right. A New York columnist is building a fortune and a reputation on that psychological truth and one other: humanity's snoopy love of gossip.

Subjects for a Ph.D. thesis: What did Tissot eat for breakfast; Why do widows see "favorable indications of character in well-developed calves" (*see Le Père Goriot*); How many words did Gerbert and Otric waste on whether mortal or rational has a greater extension; Is the whole Christian religion, as Schopenhauer declared, in the face of Raphael's Saint Cecilia (God pity that face!); and Why didn't Wordsworth have any sense of smell? These should please Mencken.

Well, I've learned: Xenophanes said we couldn't know if we knew truth; Parmenides said the nature of man made the discovery of truth impossible; Democritus said man is incapable of absolute knowledge; Epicurus said truth could not be ascertained through reason; Pyrrho said we must suspend judgment. We read too little of the Greeks.

Kepler complained that Aristotle's false theories were a thief of his time. These philosophers are thieving mine. Note Locke: he divides simple ideas into four classes, complex into three. Can anything be sillier? But when he declared the infant's mind to be a tabula rasa he hit a nail on the head. His division of knowledge into three kinds is another gro-

tesque trinity that has an ancient and a phallic odor. These philosophers are tight-rope walkers: the only time they learn anything is when they fall off the rope.

But I'm not giving up. I'll search books until I find a key to the locked door. But door to what? I'm going to read Leibnitz next.

I think a metaphysician is a man who is trying to figure out what he has never heard of.

XI

VRIDAR had seen Dennis Altrock in the University's corridors and had looked at him with interest; for he was the strangest graduate student in this school: a huge gorilla of a man with very long and hairy arms. His face was ape-like, too, with an insignificant nose, large sensual lips, and small gray eyes full of simian alertness. His hair was short and roached. And he wore baggy trousers and went about coatless, with his shirt open, with a thicket of hair pushing above his shirt.

Vridar little suspected that this man was to became one of his closest friends. It was not a friendship of his making. He preferred, indeed, to live alone without friends; and when Altrock spoke to him one afternoon, he resented the man and tried to ignore him. But Altrock, huge and uncouth, childlike in his ways, and with no sense of niceties in conduct, would not be dismissed. He walked home with Vridar, talking to him; and on the next day he went with him, and on the third. "I don't like him," Vridar said to Neloa. "I wish to hell he'd leave me alone. He follows me all the time now and talks endlessly. Either he knows everything under the sun or he's a huge bluff. . . ."

But Altrock was not a huge bluff. He was a wolfish

reader who had explored every field and who had kept most of what he had read. He could talk for hours about any period of English literature, or Greek or Latin or French or German; or about New Testament scholarship, trees and flowers and birds, volcanology of Swaziland or the luminous organisms of the sea, the habits of spiders and ants and wasps or the philosophy of Buridan and William of Auvergne, or the theories of Wundt and Westermarck, or the Hamburg-Elberfeld system of charity or the socialism of Engels. He amazed Vridar into complete and abashed silence. Again and again, after being both astounded and annoyed, Vridar would allude to some remote realm, some small fact buried by the centuries, some name in a footnote; and Altrock would overwhelm him with an hour's lecture on the subject. Often, too, Vridar would slip quietly to a library to deny or verify what Altrock had said; but never once, even in the smallest matters, did he find him wrong.

This man lived in a dirty little room and fed on milk and honey and cheese. He had taught in three colleges and had been dismissed from all of them. He did not understand why. But Vridar knew. This man had no sense of irony, no understanding of himself or of others: he was nothing but a strange weird machine that devoured and cataloged and gave off what he had taken in, without change of any kind. For most persons he was an insufferable obtuse bore, talking mightily and to no end.

"You have never learned to listen," Vridar once said. "Don't you know that a person who hasn't learned to listen will never amount to a snort in a wind? It's the most difficult lesson of all to learn."

Such rebukes made Dennis look unhappy. His mouth twitched and his small eyes glanced about, as if seeking enemies; but after a long moment he was talking again. He often annoyed Vridar or bored him or enraged him. In the gymnasium he would walk about, looking at his huge arms, his mighty legs; or now glancing with frank and withering contempt at Vridar. With the humorless vanity of a child he would say, "I guess I'n lift about ten times as much as you

can." Or he would say, "If we were to put on the gloves, I guess you wouldn't last very long."

"No? Listen, Dennis, I've flattened bigger hulks than you. I'd knock that unimportant nose off your mug."

Altrock grinned out of vast tolerance.

"I guess you'd better not try it," he said.

Altrock was Scotch. One day Vridar borrowed a nickel for a package of gum and months passed and he forgot the nickel. But Dennis did not forget it. And at last he said:

"I guess you don't remember the money you borrowed from me."

"What money?"

"That nickel you borrowed from me on 63rd Street."

Too astonished for words, Vridar proffered a nickel and Dennis took it hastily. He dropped it into the toe of a sock that he used for a pocketbook. And Vridar, still looking at him, reflected that he had had this man over to Sunday dinner at least a dozen times.

"Dennis, I've heard legends about the Scotch but I never believed them until now. Do you want interest on that nickel?"

"A debt is a debt," Altrock said.

Vridar also despised Altrock's way with women. Dennis was a great lusty animal, sensual and vigorous and unashamed. He never told obscene tales or spoke of women as if they were all legs and uterus; and his clean-mindedness Vridar liked. But Dennis, nevertheless, took all the women he could lay his big dirty hands on, and took them with enormous vigor, as if he had a right to. And when he told about them his eyes would shine in lustful memory and his tongue would lick his full red mouth.

He seduced his landlady, a woman with gray in her hair; and then one of her lodgers, a dark-eyed person who was all magnetism and venom; and then the wife of a neighbor. In plain truth, though, these women all seduced him. Dennis was not a Forenoon McClintock; he did not pursue women or offer gifts and there was nothing sly in his manner. He

merely took those who came to him, as years ago, when a boy in Texas, he had taken a Negress. . . .

"A Negress is best," he said one day, his eyes shining as if he were remembering rare old wines. "All white men prefer Negresses." His manner of speaking, like that of Agnew, was aloof and scientific. "Nobody knows why. I think they titillate more."

"Nonsense!" Vridar cried, shame in him like suffocating heat.

"And another thing," Dennis went on, missing now, as always, the reason for Vridar's indignant protests, "another thing is that they're more natural. There's no shame in a Negress. . . ."

They were in Altrock's room and a woman now entered, robed only in a clinging gown. She looked at Vridar and her eyes were so bold and searching that he hated her. Dennis drew the woman to his lap and kissed her breasts.

"Be good," she said. "I got a-save up for my husband. He'll be home tomorrow night."

Dennis yielded and she left the room.

"She's passionate," he said; and passionate, Vridar had observed, was this man's favorite word. "Last night when I got through she wanted me to again right away. I told her I had to wait fifteen minutes."

"And I suppose," Vridar said dryly, "you waited."

"Sure. I had to. Any man has to."

During these years there gathered in Washington Park on Sundays and often during the evenings a huge crowd. The thousands who came here were, it seemed to Vridar, a microcosm of the United States. There were evangelists, crusaders, and social workers; evening idlers from factory and home and shop; students from the University; thieves and erotic grotesques and pimps and harlots; and women who rode in great cars and men who wore diamonds and twirled walking-sticks.

Vridar spent many hours studying these persons and wondering about them. He liked the sunken violence of the

speakers. A rebel himself, and hating, during this time, the society in which he lived, he listened with deep sympathy to these men who spoke out of their hearts. The headstrong denunciations here fed his rebellious soul and intensified his struggle; until this place came to be, quite as much as any other, his university and his classroom. For here was the strangest assortment of zealots and cripples and halfwits, of sneaking plots and high purpose, of poverty and wealth side by side, that he was ever to see. He studied these persons with hungry, searching interest and he learned more from them than he had ever learned from books.

It was here on a Sunday afternoon that a man came to Dennis and struck him.

"You son-of-a-bitch!" the man shouted. "What you been doing with my wife?"

Then Altrock knocked the man down and the man leapt to his feet and disappeared. A few moments later, Dennis was turning a hat over and over in his hands.

"It's a good hat, isn't it?"

"Looks like it. Where'd you get it?"

"It's his, Harrison's. That's the lawyer I told you about."

"Oh, your neighbor!"

A crowd gathered. Eyes looked curiously at Dennis and Dennis looked at the hat. He put it on and wore it thereafter, and wearing the hat of this man whose wife he had seduced gave to him deep and savage pleasure. And Vridar reflected again on the strange dark nature of humankind.

And it was here at midnight that Dennis and Vridar sat under a tree, talking of Hume's philosophy, of the French whores Dennis had seen in France during the War, of an early morning when he thrust a bayonet into a German soldier and broke it off, when there came to them six young men.

"Where you from?" one asked.

"Texas," Altrock said.

"Oh, you come from where men is tough!"

Dennis rose to his feet; and then, before Vridar could cry out, a man dropped behind Dennis and another man struck

him in his mouth. The men fled and Vridar pursued three who went east and Dennis chased the other three who went north. After Vridar had gone a hundred yards the men turned and knocked him down; and when he tried to rise, fists and heels were like raining stones in his face. Then the men fled and Vridar got to his feet and heard Altrock shouting. He went to Altrock and saw that he had a jackknife in his hand and that an open blade was red.

"I got this in one of them," Dennis said, grinning. "But I think I missed his heart."

Vridar wanted to laugh. Such a big earthy fellow he had not seen in a long while.

"You fool. Do you want to be up for murder?"

"I don't care," said Dennis simply. "When I was sixteen I killed a man with a pitchfork."

"The hell you did! Well, shut that damned knife. Wipe it off and put it away!"

Dennis wiped the blade on his trousers.

"You're covered with blood," he said. "They hurt you?"

"Not much. Take me home."

Vridar entered his rooms and Neloa sprang up with a cry and came to him. He went to a mirror and looked at himself.

"Sweetheart, what you been doing?"

"Oh, a bunch of good young Americans piled on me." He washed blood from his face and looked at the blood on his clothes. "This," he said, "comes from reading Leibnitz. You don't understand what I mean but it does. To hell with his entelechy of the monad, his innate ideas, his nisi ipse intellectus. Theodicy, my eye!"

Neloa stood by, helpless, her gaze fixed on his bleeding mouth.

"Listen, Neloa, I can't understand Altrock. I guess he's just a big natural man. In everything he's my opposite. But he writes swell poetry. Just the same, he'd as soon stick a knife in a man as eat his honey and cheese. How would anyone explain a poet who did that?"

"I don't know. Vridar, you're still bleeding!"

"I don't care. I want to understand Altrock. I'm an Amer-

ican and he's an American and we're both melting in the same pot. But why are we so different? I wish I could understand that." He sat on a chair, holding a wet rag to his bleeding mouth.

"Out in Washington Park, Neloa, I see thousands of people. Not a single one is happy. Everyone is seeking something he can't find. What is it that human beings want? Why are they becoming so cynical? Why are they turning more and more to crime? Why is it that I want to become a crook in an underworld?"

"I can't imagine," she said.

"I don't know what it is," he said despairingly. "I can't find an answer in books. What is the relationship between metaphysics and Altrock? Why do human beings like to punish other human beings? That, Neloa, is the core of the whole modern problem.

"But I have found no answer to it in books. . . ."

XII

FINDING in philosophy nothing that he could use, Vridar turned to religion; and discovered, a little to his amazement, that the Old and New Testaments were largely a patchwork of ancient superstitions. The first was also, of course, a romantic history of the Jews; but the second was only a fabulous rehash of a thrice-told tale. With his interest aroused, he read next on the historicity of Jesus: Annet and Toland, Lessing and Reimarus and Griesbach, Strauss and Eichhorn and Schleiermacher, Bauer and Renan, Holtzmann and Keim. And while he was engaged in these readings, two Mormon missionaries came to his door. They had been instructed, they declared simply, to fetch him back to his Church.

They were typical missionaries of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints: beardless, earnest, untaught. Nei-

ther of them had completed his high school studies. Neither of them knew any more of the Bible than of the *Tractatus Logices* or the *Opus Tripartitum* of Eckhart. And Vridar, upon learning of their mission, grinned at them and told them to sit.

"So you're here to make a Mormon of me, are you? Well, fire away."

One of the lads grinned and the other scowled at his hands. Said the first:

"We'd like to know why you left your church."

"Why? Because its doctrines are childish. They would insult the intelligence of a mole."

"But you still believe in God, don't you?"

"What do you mean by God?"

"Why—why the divine father. The person who rules the universe."

"I see no evidence of such a person."

"You don't?" The man was surprised. "Why, there's the Bible. There's the Book of Mormon."

"You mean you prove a cow exists by pointing to grass?" So the argument ran for an hour. And then:

"The trouble with you so-called religious people is that you don't know what you believe. You couldn't tell me whether Johanna is a Book in the Bible or a woman's name. Have you really read the Book of Mormon?"

"Sure," said the smiling one, "I've read it."

"Do you know what the canonical gospels are?"

"No, I guess I don't."

"Of course you do. They're the gospels in the New Testament. But you've never heard of the apocryphal and pseudepigraphical gospels?"

"No, I never did."

"Or the Talmud?"

"It seems I've heard of that. But I can't be sure," said the young man, looking very thoughtful. "Have you?" he asked, turning to his comrade.

"No." This young man still scowled at his hands.

"Well," said Vridar, "there may be a God. But if there is,

He's not the bloody villain of the Old Testament. There may be a life hereafter, but you Mormons don't have a monopoly on it. I used to believe in all that. But we're living in an age of science and I want the truth." He looked at these men. It was absurd to argue with them. They were only boys who had inherited the dogmas and superstitions of their parents. Religion for them, as for nearly all their fellows, was an easy and lazy and selfish way to heaven.

"I'll tell you," he said. "There's a Catholic priest out in Washington Park. Debate the matter with him. Find out how little you know."

The men rose, distressed, and looked at him.

"Then," said one, "you don't want a-be a Mormon any more?"

"Of course not. It's the silliest of all the Protestant religions."

"It's not. It's the truth in these-here latter days. Joseph Smith——"

"Tell that to the priest."

And on an evening two days later Vridar heard one of these young men argue with the priest. It was pathetic. It was ridiculous. Because this beardless lad had only a handful of faith and no reason to support it; and the crowd jeered him and he broke into sweat and lost his temper. He howled at the throng and said they would all be damned eternally if they did not become Mormons. And the throng booed. Vridar felt great sympathy for this earnest and deluded youth and he despised the cynicism of those who mocked him. He felt desolate and empty because he had lost something; he was adrift from his people and his Church and he had found nothing to take their place. And while he pondered this matter and searched books, he saw the birth and growth of a strange, yet very ancient, phenomenon.

Among those who came to these forum meetings was the most amazing person Vridar had ever seen. His name was Ezekial Tolles. He was a tall gaunt skeleton, ragged and foul, and with a mouthful of rotted teeth. His breath was an un-

bearable stench. His fingernails were very long, with filth packed under them; his eyes were crazed with earnest purpose; his uncombed matted hair fell to his collar. And he stuttered in his speech and convulsed his face and choked.

Tolles was a Catholic. Within his field—that of Church doctrine and scholarship—he was a man of great learning, and his memory was as extraordinary as Altrock's. Unschooled, he had, nevertheless, taught himself Greek and Hebrew and knew them well. He knew much of the Bible by heart and could recite it, chapter by chapter, for hours at a time. When he lost himself in zealous fervor he stuttered only a little; and his learning, his opinions and faith and hope, poured out of him in quaint and forceful rhetoric.

In his heart Tolles was only a child. In him there was no bitterness, no irony. He never worked, having no strength for labor; and at night he slept where he could: sometimes in the park, often in sheds or hallways; and he ate what was given him or what he could find in garbage heaps. And when, as infrequently occurred, he was given a pair of old shoes to replace his rags of leather, or a pair of trousers or a shirt, his gratitude was simple and childlike. For he had no vanity, no pride; and in spirit was most like the traditional Jesus of anyone Vridar had known.

But for nearly all the persons who came here he was only an unclean and homeless lunatic. They taunted and jeered him. They asked him questions and ridiculed his answers and whooped at his stuttering. And Vridar closely observed everything that Tolles did and the attitude of persons toward him; studied him with quiet pity; and learned to love him. He took his part often when the man was distressed by jibes or silenced by scorn. He talked with him in countless hours. He saw in him what he himself had once been. Because Tolles, clearly enough, had been driven to religious fanaticism by a sense of guilt: some perversion or some incestuous wish had driven this man to an apostleship in the clan of the Christ; and Tolles cherished the notion, as Vridar once had, of prophethood. He had fixed his whole being on a devout

and rigorous messiahship, and in him lived the spirit of Jesus and St. Paul, of Luther and Calvin and Joseph Smith.

Tolles was always at these meetings. He would come in shambling gait, dragging his long legs: six feet and two inches of skeleton and fervor, rags and dirt. He would rout anyone who engaged him in serious argument; and then he would smile as a child smiles and his morbid shining eyes would look around him; and if he saw a sympathetic face, he would lope toward it, his whole body trembling. And Vridar, sensing the terrible hunger of the man, wondered if he had never thought of women. Tolles never spoke of them and seemed never to look at them. But Vridar looked beyond the simple self-denial of the man and knew that he wanted a woman's love.

Among the hundreds of women who came here, there was a small withered creature with crossed eyes, and with a thin twisted neck, livid with scars. She hungered for love, too, and Vridar knew it; for he had carefully watched her, noting every small thing that she did. She had an alert mind. She had read widely in many fields. But when men looked at her it was to grin or to shrug, or to stare, as Dennis Altrock did, in profound and utter astonishment.

Vridar resolved to do something for Tolles. He thought the man would be happier with a wife; and he went to him and said, "Come here, I want to talk with you," and Tolles came with him, his brilliant eyes full of questions.

"Tolles," Vridar said, when they were alone, "why don't you marry?"

"Muh-muh-muh-marry?"

"Yes. You need a wife." The man looked helpless and a little terrified.

"Buh-buh-buh-who?"

"Haven't you ever found a woman who would marry you?"

Tolles shook his head. His grin was sheepish and pathetic.

"I know one," Vridar said.

This statement electrified Tolles. He began to shake.

"Huhhhoo?"

"Myrna Farner. You know her, don't you?"

"Yesss! Does she luh-luh-luh-love me?"

"I don't know. Ask her."

And this astonishing man, shaking now like a reed in a wind, swung at once to the group and explored it; and a few moments later, Vridar saw him and Myrna withdraw to a tree and sit. An hour passed and the two of them sat there, and Vridar watched them, hoping that for both, life hereafter would be less unkind. Then Tolles came to Vridar and he was so excited he could not speak.

"Will she?" Vridar asked.

Tolles nodded his head in a tremendous affirmative.

"Fine. And do you really want her?"

The man's answer was another vigorous head-nodding. And now, without any shame at all, Tolles confessed that she would marry him if he bathed and cleaned himself up. Vridar grasped the long slender dirty hand. It was very soft and weak in his clutch.

"I wish you happiness, Tolles. There's no one for whom I wish more."

"Thanks," Tolles said. His eyes were like stars.

But no part of all this is the strange phenomenon that Vridar saw. It came later. Tolles, day by day, questioned certain dogmas of his Church, until he was overwhelmed by dark and awful doubts. He talked of this matter to Vridar and Vridar said little; because what Tolles questioned seemed to him very trivial. He disliked a few of the rituals, as well as certain pronouncements by the popes; and after two months of torment he resolved to leave the fatherhood of Rome and found an order on his own principles. And he did.

And it was the birth and growth of this that Vridar witnessed, and perhaps nothing that he had ever seen or was ever to see, in books or in life, was to leave him so thoughtful or to teach him more. For this ragged, filthy man in afternoons and evenings preached his new gospel; and one by one he gathered converts; and a year later he had six hundred. Many of these, it is true, were dubious, and a few came to laugh and make fun; but there were, as Vridar counted them, more than two hundred who were deeply sincere. Nor

were all of these social outcasts. There was a lawyer among them, a shrewd and unhappy man who sought a faith he could live by; and a dentist, a half-dozen university students, and several business men. If only the simple-witted had followed this new prophet, Vridar would not have been amazed; but when he saw intelligence and worldliness enrolling with Tolles, he was left speechless by the implications and the truth.

Tolles held his services in the park. One of his converts furnished him with sacramental wine; and at dawn of Sunday mornings, when the trees were full of birds and the eastern sky was a lake of amber, he would hold mass. He did not stutter now and when he spoke in Latin he was superb. His most faithful would gather close to him and he would stand with the bottle of wine between his legs. Tolles tried to convert Vridar and offered to make him a cardinal in the new order.

"There you go!" Vridar said, grinning. "You're already mixing your politics with religion." Tolles looked whipped.

"I—I should be ashamed of that, shouldn't I?" he said.

To Neloa Vridar said:

"I've learned more than from all my years in a university. I understand now what sort of a man Jesus was and why he preached. I understand Calvin and his horrible doctrines; and all the rest of them. Long ago I felt all of it myself. There is little more, I think, that life can teach me about this matter."

"Why not ask him over to dinner sometime? I'd like to see him."

"But he stinks so."

"How old is he?"

"About thirty, I guess."

"Did he marry that woman?"

"Not yet. He says they're engaged. She goes about the city now, making converts. . . . Isn't it funny?" he asked, looking queerly at Neloa. "You see, my dear, all any man needs is the right woman to take the prophet out of him. That's the

case with any fanatic. In some weird crazy way they're dodging sexual hunger. Did you know it?"

"You're a fanatic," Neloa said.

"Yes, I guess I am. I have a sense of guilt, I suppose. All religious leaders of the past felt guilty. They were trying to put themselves right with God. I know it. I went through it. And it's damned funny, isn't it?"

"I guess it isn't very funny to them."

"It would be if they had a sense of humor."

"Well," Neloa said, "you have a sense of humor. Why are you still a fanatic?"

"There you go," he cried, "trying to make me over! Give me time. I no longer believe in the saint-and-sugar-beet doctrine of Mormonism. And some day, Neloa, I'm going to write a book about all this. I'll show the cockeyed world a prophet in the making."

"Nobody would want to read it," Neloa said.

"Listen!" he shouted. "Haven't I told you to stop trying to change me? You may be a Mrs. Clemens but I'm not another Mark Twain. You're not going to tailor me to the fashion of romantic piddle and twiddle. Can't you understand that?"

"I ought to. You tell me enough. But why write books if nobody will read them?"

"Well, I won't be a Sunday school fabulist. Are you reading that volume by Freud?"

"I've read some of it."

"Read all of it. I fought against him for five years. I'm done. He licked me with the truth. Sit in your lap of legends old, Neloa. Be a nickel-plated Christian. But I'm going to follow the truth if it leads me to hell——"

"You make me tired," Neloa said. "You never believe the same thing twice. In one year it's this and in the next year it's something else. How do you expect me to keep up with you?"

"I'm exploring," he said. "Columbus didn't find America by sitting on his rump in Spain. Of course I'm changing. Ponds stand still but rivers run."

"Yes," said Neloa, "they just run."

"All right, they don't stink. You know that surly missionary who came to see me? I thought at first I smelled his breath. Then I thought you must be cooking cabbage. But I know now that I smelled his mind."

XIII

VRIDAR now definitely renounced all orthodox religions; because they all sprang, it seemed to him, from guilt and vanity and fear. The one part of him, the idealist and poet, often walked alone and wept. It wept out of pity for human heartache and love for humankind. And the second personality, intellectual and unpitying and ruthless, excoriated the first and silenced it with contempt. The one turned to Jesus, the other to Machiavelli. The one wept over *Green Mansions* and *Tess* and the life of George Gissing; and the other sat in deep admiration at the altars of Schopenhauer and Bismarck. The one, reflecting on the brief lonely pilgrimage of Keats, shook with pain and grief; and the other, fresh from the *Leviathan* of Hobbes, was ready to crush empires.

And it was during these months that he seriously deliberated a life of crime. He thought of spurning everything in the smug social order and entering the underworld where motives were as frank as a sword. Dennis was ready to go with him.

"I mean it," Vridar said one evening, while sitting with Dennis on a park bench. "To hell with these respectable hypocrites. To hell with this government. Mooney was railroaded to jail and will rot there. Sacco and Vanzetti will be murdered. Justice? Where is it? Freedom? Did you read Gerould's article in *Harper's*? She said this is no longer a free country and hundreds of letters of protest came in. And look what is being done right now to the Jew and Catholic and Negro. Knights of the invisible empire, realms and their kleagles, domains and their grand goblins—and the imperial

wizard! Magazines illustrating seven kinds of kisses and Negroes beaten until they give their land away.

"I tell you, Dennis, Freud is right. Sadism is the strongest motive in this country today. Why do men like to flog and lynch Negroes? Because men are brutes and their sex-life is rotten. The Inquisition, witch-burning, lunatic-baiting, and now the flogging of the black: it all springs from brutal lusting and it all passes under the name of religion or patriotism. And what chance is there to be honest and decent? Where is there any honesty except among crooks? They pretend to be only what they are, apes with most of their hair gone. And the more I see of respectable persons the more I admire the frank decency of the murderer. The more I see of good women the more I respect whores. . . .

"I tell you this country is headed for a crash. It is built on delusions. And I'm sick of it. I'm sick of dinky Machiavellis like Ford and dull scoundrels like Harding; and of such wolfish Sunday school teachers as Thayer. I'm not going on like this. I'd rather rob banks than rob factory drudges of their wages. I'd rather cut Morgan's throat than be a cardinal in purple or the beet-and-sugar preaching president of the Mormon church. In this life you have to be a social outcast before you dare be honest. . . . "

During these furious tirades Dennis seldom spoke. Vridar's outraged idealism he did not share; for he had never worshiped at the feet of Jesus or believed that human nature is good. And if he agreed, if he felt himself drawn to the dark hinterlands, it was because he saw, simply and clearly, that most virtues were vicious or because he was profoundly antisocial or because he felt no deep passion, no love, no faith. He was boyishly eager to rob someone. The cracking of a man's skull meant nothing to him.

And Vridar knew that if Dennis took to crime, he would not do so, as Vridar would, as Vridar must, in protest against the brutal indecencies of civilized life. He would do it as he would sit to a feast or embrace a woman or read a book. He was unmoral and Vridar's enormous wrath did not fire him at all.

"I know a man," he said, "we could start on. That Jew who comes to the Bug Club."

"That fat ass with the big diamond in his tie?"

"Yes. The one with the gold on his walking-stick."

"I know. The one who jeers the speakers and struts around and talks in pig-English of his wealth."

"That's the guy. Let's crack him on his head."

"All right. God will give us violins for busting him."

Dennis rose, excited. He said he would go at once and prepare a sandbag. He crossed the park and after an hour he returned and drew the sandbag from under his coat. Vridar took the weapon and examined it: it was like a small column of stone.

"Let's go," Dennis said. "I'll lay him out and you get the diamond."

They went to the forum meeting and saw the Jew and Vridar observed the way in which Dennis eyed the man. There was no question about it: he was ready, even eager, to break this fellow's skull.

An hour later the Jew left and Vridar and Dennis followed him. The Jew took a path into darkness where trees stood and Dennis stepped forward and Vridar grasped his arm.

"No!" Vridar cried. "Listen, I hate the son-of-a-bitch but I'm not ready for this yet. Let me think."

Dennis was annoyed. He peered into darkness and then looked at the weapon in his hands.

"He's gone now," he said.

And too, when they sat on a bench in this park, talking of one thing and another, Vridar looked at the girls who passed. He hungered after them. But his hunger was not all lusting, nor indeed, for the most part, chiefly that. It was a vague and terrible hunger for a way of life that was not his: for certainties, noble ambitions, and dreams. Dennis was not erotic at all. When busy with ideas he gave no heed to women and seemed unaware of them; but if Vridar, wearied by so much talk of philosophy and art, religion and science, human misery and despair, said to Dennis, "Let's pick up

some girls," then the man would get to his feet, as eager as a bull, and look around him.

At the north end of this park was a great open space and sometimes late in the evenings they walked here. It was a trysting-place for midnight lovers. Once, in a Saturday night, they counted forty-seven couples, dotting this field like cocks of hay in a meadow. And when Vridar and Dennis walked among them, a few did not move at all, and some sat up, looking very foolish, and others got to their feet and went away.

Toward all this Vridar was a little furious but Dennis was philosophically calm. Vridar said it was immoral and the police ought to clean them out of here; but Dennis grinned wearily and said it was all right. "They're just doing what I'd like to be doing," he said.

One night when leaving this field they took a jungle path; and Vridar, unable to see where he walked, stepped on a man. The man sat up and cursed and then Vridar saw the woman.

"You bastard!" the man howled. "Get out of here!"

They passed on and Vridar began to laugh. This situation —of a man fetched up suddenly and delivered to fury— seemed to him deliciously ironic. He told Dennis it was a small and cunning masterpiece of life. "There was a man, his wits scattered, and with Mother Nature as his personal attendant; and I stepped on him!" He sat down, howling with laughter.

But for Dennis there was nothing humorous in that. For him, indeed, there was nothing humorous in anything; and the ironic, the grotesque and furious clash of irreconcilables, he understood least of all.

"And you don't see anything funny in that? And you read Anatole France! Why, damn it, this is as delicious as his salamander scene!"

"You're morbid," Dennis said.

Vridar rose and wiped the mist from his eyes.

"Life, my friend, is not a calm pasture where sheep graze.

But you seem to think it is. You're a ram and you eat and copulate."

"And you," said Dennis, "don't eat enough and don't copulate enough."

"No?"

"You sure don't."

"You remember what Swift said? A mind worth having wears its body out. Your mind, dear fellow, will never wear yours out."

"I'm a man," said Dennis; and he blew his great chest up. "If we had a decent society in which only those bred who are men, I'd be chosen. You'd be exiled to an island."

"Yes, you big studhorse? Listen, Dennis, you set too much value on beef."

"Well, come on, let's go. Let's get that Jew tonight."

At the forum meetings there was a girl who quietly wooed Vridar. Her name was Miriam Boyd. She was short and too plump but very attractive to the men who came here. Her mother, a huge furious tyrant, once strode across the park and glared round her at the men and took her daughter home.

"She won't let me marry," Miriam said. "I'm twenty-six and still a virgin but a hell of a lot she cares."

"You sick of being a virgin?"

"Well," she said, and her smile was bitter, "I'm fairly tired of it."

Dennis instructed her in the names of all the flowers and trees and shrubs in the park; talked to her in Latin or German as if she understood; and recited to her endlessly from the poets. And one day Miriam said:

"Tell me some big words. I'm ignorant."

Dennis was pleased. He narrowed his eyes and puckered his mouth and Vridar knew he was thinking of huge words.

"Saccharimeter. You know that one?"

"Lord, no."

"It's an instrument for measuring the amount of sugar in a solution. Ultimogeniture, where the youngest son inherits the estate. Xenogenesis, the notion that an offspring is unlike a

parent. Protevangelium, the first announcement of a savior, as in the third chapter of Genesis. Chauvinistic, a patriot like Henry Ford. . . . That enough?"

Miriam turned to Vridar.

"Don't you know any big words?"

He shook his head. He was annoyed.

"Dennis knows all of them."

But Miriam was not interested in Dennis; and when spring came she sought Vridar one evening and with a twisted smile said:

"Come on, teach me some French."

He walked with her through the park, not knowing at first what she wanted. She led him to dark undergrowth and then he knew and he faced her, his hands on her shoulders.

"No, Miriam, love under the bushes and dykes sickens me. I don't want it. It's not what I want."

She shrugged. She threw his hands off.

"Then what do you want?"

"Oh, a way of life that is decent and clean."

"You beast!" she cried, as if he had struck her. "Then you don't think I'm decent and clean! You cur!"

"Listen," he said.

"You dog! Insult me that way! If I were a man I'd break your neck!"

"But you didn't understand me," he said.

"Ohhh, you! Me unclean? You lousy lowdown——" She looked around her for something to strike him with but her eyes were blind with rage and tears. "Go!" she yelled. "You sneaking dog!"

"But I tell you——"

"Go, I said! Police! Help!"

Vridar turned quickly and walked away. When he entered his rooms Neloa was in bed and he undressed in silence and lay at her side.

"I feel crazy," he said. "Can a man be insane and not know it?"

"I don't know," she said.

When a mood like this was upon him, Vridar yielded, and

more frequently as the weeks passed, to clowning: sometimes making weird faces and talking in a jargon of nonsense syllables; sometimes capering in grotesque antics, as if possessed by devils; or sometimes delivering his conflict into parody or puns or epigrams. In all of these he was a man beside himself, with his two personalities in desperate feud. Neloa often laughed until she wept; or she would lie through half the night and listen to his spontaneous wild overflow of nonsense; or, weary of his monologues, she would fall asleep.

And now he said:

"According to a pretty legend Patrick Henry said, Give me liberty or give me death. Well, he's dead. And sin, my dear, is what we want to do and wish we didn't; and virtue is what we had to do and wish we hadn't. Remember what Kitty Murdock said to me? Don't you ever feel any pain round your heart when you think of life and try to understand what it means? Do I? All the time, all the time. Darling, an optimist is a man who thinks he loves his wife; a pessimist is a man who knows he does. Neloa, I'm a pessimist. . . .

"Are you listening?"

"Yes, of course."

"I feel tonight as if I'd swallowed Calvin and Casanova and they had one another by the throat and Calvin's hands were just a little larger. But whether I digest them or not, life will go on and we'll civilize all the savages so that afterwards we can reform them and our opinion of our enemies will still be the only trustworthy summary of ourselves and poets will still eat beans and politicians will kiss babies and civilization will still find an analogue in a man when he looks at a lovely woman: for he approves the modesty of her clothes and wishes he could see more. Professor Blinn said today that when he addressed a group of stuffed shirts he felt like a lion in a den of Daniels and that's exactly the way I've felt for years, with you, my dear, as the mightiest Daniel of them all. When I reflect on myself, numbering my scruples one by one, I cluck contentedly like a hen mothering her brood and spread my feathers; and the next thing I know I'm

caught in a rain. And so it goes. And then I hide away to write a poem but there's something about poetry that stinks and I'm beginning to smell it and poets I think are a bunch of asses and I'd put them all in skirts and glasses, for Plato at least in one particular was right and there was a faint odor in his day blowing down from the east out of a lot of Homeric similes stuck like a lot of—like a lot of dead windmills in a wind. . . .

"Darling, do you sleep?"

"Not yet."

"What I mean is that a poet is a person with a spectacled emotion and I'd like to know what ever got me fixed in rimes and rhetoric. What I write is like a mixture of acid and buttermilk and the acid comes to the top and the buttermilk sours, for my mind is like a sword in bright sunlight and my heart is like a plate of butter in a hot oven and an enemy is a person who sees your motive before you see it and a friend is one who pretends he is blind. Is there a truly admirable person in the whole world or would we despise everyone of them if we knew all his thoughts and dreams? I suppose we would. It all sounds like staphylorrhaphy or some of Altrock's other monstrous words or an ichthyosis of the moral skin with virtue patched and plastered from her head to her heels but still chirping sweetly and with the night coming in great modest darkness to hide the folly of women and the impuritanical heavy breathing of the men. And every last man of us thinks

"When lovely woman stoops to folly
And shoots her virtue under par,
It is a dandy thing, by golly,
If I'm the man she's stooping for,

but if I or any other John Doe is not the man she's stooping for, then it's

"Pin a scarlet letter on her,
Bawd and trull, for motherhood

Must live in chastity, doggone her,
And every virgin must be good.

"Neloa, still listening?"

"Yes. Go on."

"A woman cursed me tonight because I would not lie with her. The world would have cursed me if I had. So I'm cursed going or coming or standing still."

"And did you want to lie with her?"

"Not as I figured it. But I'm a bad egg and some morning I'll hatch out on the breakfast plate of a millionaire and he will roar, 'Waiter, what kind of egg is this?' And the waiter will say, 'That, Sir, is one of these modern cynical eggs: too eager for birth, it got strangled in its shell. . . .'

"Well, let's go to sleep."

XIV

WHEN spring came to Chicago it heaped its glory on the campus and the parks, and in early morning it was a warm and languorous intimation in the sky. But the streets it left untouched and as Vridar walked them, feeling the stone under his feet, he felt overpowering hunger for mountains and valleys, the smell of canyon streams and of fir and willow and hillsides of aspen, and the clean richness of plowed earth. And in this spring he said to Neloa:

"Let's go home this summer. It will cost us less than to live here."

"To Antelope?"

"Yes."

"But I don't want to see that country again. Never!"

"I know. But I can't stand this city any longer. It's driving me mad. Neloa, to get up in mornings and smell the dew and the green growth and a hint of rain! To sit under a fir tree

and smell the cones and the river! To lie on the ground and stretch out and sleep!

"Neloa, let's go."

And they went, and Vridar felt tremendous relief when the smoke of Chicago lay behind him in the sky. His homeland came to him in memory as a beautiful thing, a refuge of solitude and peace. He thought he would find strength and calm where he had suffered agony, vision where he had seen only the dark; but when the mountains of Wyoming came in sight, and the vast gray deserts, he shook with the old fear. "I'm sorry I came," he said to Neloa, and for two hundred miles he did not speak again.

He stared at this country, hating and yet loving it; seeing in it both terror and peace; smelling in it the ancient and the young. The loneliness of this earth was part of him. Sagebrush and pale sky, hillsides of cedar, great reaches of solitude—they were all written upon his heart and mind. Within the picture of them stood a thousand terrible scenes of years long past: of Neloa on the Annis butte, with the smell of cedar in the morning; that hour when his father pushed the sheep's head back and cut its throat, and the smell of burning sage in the kitchen stove, mixed with the odor of blood; or those hours when he sought a shelter and wept, with the smell of dead leaves like incense. And when he reached his homeland he was sick. His parents were here, and Mertyl and Diana; and he greeted them but hardly saw them; for he had eyes only for the wilderness of the meadow, the Bridwell place, the haunting blueness of Burns. And he hated all of it with sick and passionate hatred.

For a week he suffered quietly and then burst into storm. He cursed this country and he blasphemed God. He drove his mother to tears, his father to silence, and Mertyl to scorn.

"I want to work!" he cried. "Give me something to do!"

He went with Mertyl to the benchland to set posts and it was here that he nearly severed his foot with an axe. When he drew the blade out a jet of blood shot upward, boiling and red; and he smelled it and fainted. He came to, vomiting with sickness and shame, and Mertyl tore his shirt off and

bandaged the wound. Then Mertyl went for a horse and when he returned he fetched a bottle of wine.

"Drink this," he said.

Vridar drank the wine. He was lifted to the pony and borne to the house and Joe and Prudence came to look at the wound. It would soon heal, Joe said. Vridar examined his foot and saw that the axe had cut more than half way through the bone of his instep. He tried to move his toes but the cord of the big toe and the one next to it had been severed. Joe poured iodine into the wound and then chewed a quid of tobacco until it dripped juice and banked it upon the iodine.

"Those cords won't grow together," Vridar said.

"Sure they will," Joe said.

"Damn it, I know they won't."

"Fiddlesticks," said Joe. Only last year a surgeon had cut a great stinking cancer out of Joe's throat. The surgeon said he would die but Joe said, "Me die? Nonsense." And to Vridar now, "It will be well in a jiffy," he said.

Vridar looked at his bandaged foot and remembered with shame that he had fainted.

"I can't stand the smell of blood. Why is that?"

"You don't know?" Prudence said.

He looked at her, wondering what superstition she had in mind.

"Well, why?"

"It's something happened before you was born."

"Nonsense. This is an age of science."

Prudence sat on a chair and looked at him.

"Don't talk science to me, son. You was afraid of blood when you was only a babe. Why, when you was a year old, if you saw blood you'd howl your head off; you'd go into fits. But if you hurt yourself and saw no blood, you didn't seem to care."

"When I was only a year old?"

"Yes. I don't care what science says. I know. The day Mother died, it was the most awful of my life. She filled big rags with blood. She soaked the bed. She coughed streams

of blood from her lungs. And all day and all night, I had to take care of her alone. And the house, it was full of blood."

"But what has that to do with me?"

"Just listen and I'll tell you. And the look in her eyes when she died! It was the most awful thing I ever seen. And that look, it's the same you had when you was born, and when you was a child. It's always been with you, that horrible insane expression she had, that awful wild darkness. And that's why——"

"Was I born then, Mater? I mean when she died."

"Born! I should say not. I'd been carrying you six months when Mother died. And your science, son, it can say what it will. But I know, I know. There's things your science don't understand yet."

"You may be right," Vridar said. "But I'm going to conquer this fear."

"You can't. It was born in you."

"Is that why I don't like to eat meat? I haven't eaten any for a year."

"It's all right to eat meat," Prudence said. "God put it here to eat."

"Oh, God put hell! Stop talking to me about your old imbecile of a God!"

"Son, how you talk!"

"Oh yes, how I talk. Well, I'm done with that brutal old monster. To hell with Him!"

"Son, stop that!" Prudence turned white. "Some day God will strike you dead!"

"All right. If He's that kind of a small petty killer, let Him strike. But He hasn't the courage, Mater. Anyone who would sneak around as He did, dropping stones on his enemies. . . . Bah! I despise the bloodthirsty old idiot! Stop talking to me about Him!"

Unable to work now, and unable to sit in idleness, Vridar resolved to read the Bible again. He read it a half-dozen times during childhood. It, too, like the country here, was

in his blood and nerves and brain; and what it had done to him, in what ways it had made his struggle more severe, he could only guess at.

"Neloa, bring me that book of monsters. I'm going to have at it again. I'm going to see if there's anything in it an intelligent person can believe. . . . "

And for three weeks he read the book carefully, studying the obscure passages, pondering its folklore and its history; and bearing in mind, as he turned the pages, the thesis of Matthew Arnold in *Literature and Dogma.* He made notes. He studied the records of degeneracy, superstition; the savage brutal deeds; the scourging and prophecy and whoredom. And from time to time he spoke to Prudence from his notes.

"Do you really believe that this infernal book is the word of God?"

"Son! I want you to stop talkun that way!"

"Answer me: do you believe the thing?"

"Of course I do!"

"Have you ever read it?"

"Why, yes. Not as much as some mebbe."

"And you believe in this God who strolled down to sit on his rump and eat a steak?"

"Son!"

"Who liked the smell of burning flesh, who commanded Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac and was tickled pink to see that Abe was afraid of Him, who ordered the firstborn sons given to Him, who instructs in the sacrifice of animals to Him, who encourages His people to go to war, who approved the louts when they cut off the toe and thumb of their captives, who—"

"Son, that will do!"

"Mater, those Jews certainly believed in fertility and this book is largely a record of spawning. Did you know God said it's all right to hike into a neighbor's field and eat all you can?"

"He never said it."

"He did. And He says it's an abomination for a man to wear a woman's or a woman a man's clothes."

"It should be," Prudence said. "It's an abomination to me."

"And you're not to eat pig. You know that?"

"I believe that. The Lord didn't mean us to eat pig."

"You Mormons say, 'Follow the truth and it shall make you free,' but in this book it says 'Trust the Lord and lean not on your own understanding.' Well, Mater, this book is the work of a sadistic people who created in their own image a monster of a god. It records every damned sexual perversion ever heard of. Daughters seduced their fathers. Men seduced wives and killed the husbands. There's sodomy and syphilis and everything else rotten and diseased. And you think such a book came from God."

"It's not all translated correctly," Prudence said.

"Fiddlesticks. This is a history of ignorant and superstitious Jews who fought and whored like hell-benders. It has neither mercy nor wisdom nor kindness of heart, nor even good cow-sense. The god of it is a sly, plotting, wicked reprobate. If he is a god, then I'm the holy ghost and a hierarchy of angels besides."

"I don't want a-listen," Prudence said. "You make me sorry I ever sent you to school."

"I do?" He stared at her. "The hell I do. What you want me to be—a hypocrite?"

"I've heard enough. Please say no more."

Vridar looked around for his father but Joe had slipped out, his eyes full of pain. It grieved Vridar to see his mother's white face and the awful regret in her stare, but it enraged him, too; for a more headstrong unyielding person had never walked in shoes. She had a will of iron and scruples like bridge beams.

"Mater, do you want me to do my own thinking or don't you?"

"You're not thinking. You're just following what a silly science says."

"Of course I'm thinking. I'm doing my best."

He told of his readings in biblical scholarship and one evening he delivered a monologue on what he had learned.

Diana, roundfaced and sober, and looking like the Sistine Madonna, stared at Vridar with pity and pain; and Joe and Prudence stared at him with resentful unbelief; and Mertyl with weary unconcern.

"Nearly all the ritual in the Old Testament," Vridar declared, "was taken from ancient folklore. And the history of the Jews themselves is so shot through with myth and so embroidered with lively imagination that we can't tell if there's a pound of truth in a ton of it. But I want to tell you about the folklore.

"Take the story of creation. A Babylonian epic contains an account of Marduk, the first man, whose name the Jews corrupted to Merodach. The Enuma tells how the first inhabitants, Anu, Bel, and Ea, entered their Eden, Ea being their word for God. And all the peoples of western Asia had a story much the same. Their revelations they found on tablets, just as Joseph Smith is supposed to have done. On the seven Tablets of Fate were written the commandments of God; and in the Old Testament we have the history of Jacob's family recorded on seven celestial tablets; in Revelations we have the seven seals. And in all these ancient mythologies the tablets were written by the Urim and Thummim and Joseph Smith got his notion from that fact. And the commandments written on those tablets of fate are almost identical with those which God is supposed to have given to Moses. The first is the same, to fear God and obey his viceroy on earth; and from that came the vicious notion of the divine right of kings.

"And in all these old religions we find the same superstition in regard to numbers. Seven and thirteen and three run through the Bible. The first was the number of planets and so we have seven days in the week and seven deadly sins. Or perhaps the idea came from the seven stars in the Pleiades. Thirteen became an unlucky number because the thirteenth sign of the zodiac was the raven. The number three would embarrass you and I'll not go into it. But remember, the Jews got all this superstition from the Babylonians and a devil of a lot more.

"Take the Marduk-Osiris legend: from that the Jews took the story of Moses; and that story is the same in a lot of mythologies: secret birth, exposure of the babe, and deliverance. The same thing is told in the Indian legends of Buddha and Krishna; the Persian Zoroaster; the Chinese Fohi; the Egyptian Erman. It becomes the mystic symbol of the exodus from Egypt: that is, in the dragon combat and the killing of the dragon and the passing through the sea. It is worked into the Bible in a dozen places. Or take the biblical festivals: Easter, or the spring festival, is the Babylonian celebration of victory over winter; the story of the flood is found in a lot of religions and was a celebration over a water-god. The Babylonian death and resurrection festival is the Jewish festival of the Queen of Heaven in Jeremiah, forty-fourth chapter.

"Well, shall I go on?"

"I don't believe a word of it," said Prudence; "but go on."

"All right, take the story of creation. That in Genesis is almost the same as the Phoenician, the Egyptian, the Persian, and the Babylonian; and it doesn't differ much from the Chinese and Japanese. There was darkness and God created the earth and made man of clay. There was water everywhere. But in the Babylonian story, which is much more sensible than that of the Bible, God was struggling against the power of darkness, and the light meant his victory, not light as we know it. The Jew who wrote Genesis had a terribly literal mind and fell into the ridiculous notion of a firmament which divides waters from waters and of light created before the sun and the moon, and all the rest of it. But my point is this: the whole story of Genesis was stolen from other mythologies. Notice, for instance, that in Judges the stars are fighting; in Isaiah the stars are mighty rulers; and so on. All that, too, was taken from the old religions.

"Now take the notion of paradise. Eden, or Quedem, was also swiped from the Babylonians——"

"Son, I don't like to hear you talk that way."

"Well, it's true. The Jews stole damned near everything. The notion of paradise itself comes from the Persian. The tree of life and the tree of knowledge come from the Baby-

lonian, except that the Babylonians called it the tree of death. Why the Jews thought knowledge would lead to death, nobody knows. I guess they related knowledge and sin. The idea of the apple comes from the Babylonian tomato or from the ancient notion of love-apples as magic love-charms. The rivers of paradise are to be found in a dozen ancient superstitions.

"Now take the story of the fall. It's found in the Avestic mythology. Even in Mexican mythology the first woman is tempted by a snake. In the Indian, too. In the Chinese it's a dragon. The epic of Gilgamesh tells how the first man was happy until seduced by a woman. And in all the mythologies man is booted out of his paradise and becomes a sinner. For, you see, there used to be an old notion that the first man was a pure fellow and that woman was the root of all evil. It's a notion that we still have.

"Or take the flood. It was stolen hook, line and sinker from the Babylonians. In their story God warns Xisuthros to get ready for a big storm and take into his boat pairs of animals and the like; and when the flood is over he sets a bird free; and he hiked out and built an altar and offered sacrifices. Well, there are stories of the flood in most mythologies; or of Babel or the patriarchs or of Samson or of David and Goliath or of Solomon and the babe which comes from an old Egyptian fable; or of Job which comes from a very ancient poem; or of Daniel among the lions which was a legend before ever the Jews were heard of.

"Well, I could go on and on. There's almost nothing in the Bible that belongs to the Jews. It's a terrible rehash of ancient stuff and it's pretty silly for any intelligent person to believe it. Yet you expect me to. You expect me to sit on my mind and believe in the most awful jumble of superstition that ever came together in one book."

"You talk very well," Prudence said quietly. "You might convince a person who don't think much. But I've thought it all out. I know not a single thing you said is true."

"Damn it," Vridar cried impatiently, "you know nothing of the kind! If that isn't true, then it isn't true that water runs down hill or the sun shines or birds fly. It *is* true. And

I'm telling you, Mater, that I'm done with your stupid Bible now and forever. I'm done with all organized religion. Say you're sorry you ever sent me to school. Say anything you will.

"But I'm telling you this: if I ever try to persuade one of my sons to believe as I believe, may I be torn limb from limb and boiled in sulphuric acid until the stars fall. For trying to make our children into our image is the most damnable crime, except one, of the modern world. Murder and rape in comparison are nothing but the work of petty hoodlums.

"I'm done with superstition," he said, getting to his feet, "now and forever. I want the truth."

In his journal he set these notes.

Mertyl: very materialistic. Scorns the welfare of his race or pretends to. Relies, it seems to me, too blindly on psychological theories. We are hardly on speaking terms and it looks as if our roads lie apart.

Diana: has commonplace ideals, ideas, religion, morals. Still reads cheap literature. Rides much horseback for the sexual excitement but would knock you dead if you told her that. Pretends to scorn sex. The idea of a lover would turn her inside out. Her method is to steal a small titillation under guise of accident, mischance, friendship. Most women are like her.

Dad: says were he to live again girls would get it. Never sowed any wild oats and regrets it but does not admit the regret. Says his sons have never been sons. Is disillusioned in education, business himself: a lonely man, fighting a lonely fight against cancer and old age.

Mater: she feels very close to Mert now and I am glad for I have always been her favorite son; but I don't like

the way they talk about Dad. Neither understands him. She is a great woman with great courage and an utterly generous heart.

Myself: I have come to believe that duty is the greatest thing in life. Of myself I am aware: 1, that I am neurasthenic; 2, that I am more completely without an anchor than I have ever been; 3, that much in me I do not understand; 4, that I must soon settle my course in life and find a philosophy I can live by.

Am sorry I came west. This summer has been all disappointments. The Hebrew God is more despicable than I ever imagined. My family is estranged. The way ahead of me looks dark.

XV

AND so Vridar returned with his family to Chicago and again paid for two small dark rooms by being caretaker of an old and bug-infested building. He felt the degradation of this office; for he had to stoke the furnace and sweep the hallways, dump the garbage into pails in the back yard, and fight bedbugs and lice. And no matter if he was writing on his novel or reading a book he had to answer a summons when it came.

The signal from tenants above was a certain number of raps on an iron pipe that ran from the ceiling to the basement and passed through Vridar's living-room. There were sixteen apartments and there were fifteen signals, running from one blow to fifteen. And it was the woman in apartment fifteen, a huge and imperious creature, who was forever pounding on the iron. Vridar would climb to the fourth floor and knock and she would swing the door open and abuse him.

"Heat, man! I want heat! You think I'm paying for frost?" Or again:

"When my groceries come, fetch them up."

"Listen, I'm not a delivery truck."

"You're the janitor, ain't you?"

The word stung him. He wanted to say, "No, I'm a graduate student in a big university. And what are you but a vulgar pompous housewife?"

Or again:

"Boy, the bedbugs is eatun me alive! Was you asleep down there?"

Twice in every week he entered apartments and sprayed these parasites. He would yank paper from the walls and see them packed in brown layers, often a half-inch deep; or he would roll mattresses back and stare at them in the coils of springs. Under the coils he would hold torches and the bugs would scamper in swarms. Or he would saturate bedding with liquids to chase the lice away.

All his tenants save three were arrogant and stupid. The women blew fuses out with faulty irons or asked him to run errands or leaned from the windows and spit into the street or the courts. They talked with Neloa and she learned where they came from; and under this roof, Vridar decided, he had a cross-section of the United States. He spoke of them and entered them in his record as the States in which they were born. It was Kansas who, while Vridar was writing on his novel one Sunday morning, blew out a fuse and hammered on the iron pipe. Vridar climbed to the third floor and rapped. Mrs. Kansas opened the door and scowled at him.

"What's the matter your fuses? They all blow out."

"You have a faulty iron," he said.

"I do not. Don't tell me a brand new iron is no good."

This woman had blown out a dozen fuses and Vridar was annoyed.

"I won't put in another fuse until you have your iron repaired."

"What's that? Listen, Robert, you hear this man?" Kansas

himself rose and came to the door. He was short and bald and had an ugly temper.

"Say that again," he said.

"I'm not putting in any more fuses."

"Listen, you kike, what you mean talkun to my wife that way! You get down there and put in a fuse!"

"Go to hell!" Vridar said.

He went to his room and called Adolph Klars. Adolph and his daughter Sally, who had married a Jew, had recently inherited a fortune and had bought a dozen old apartment buildings. They lived in a hotel overlooking the lake and rode behind a chauffeur; and Adolph wore diamonds and a beaver coat and carried a stick. To Klars one day Vridar had said, "Understand this, I'm not a common janitor so don't try to lord it over me. I don't care a hoot in hell for your diamonds and your social air. . . ." And now over the telephone he said, "One of your tenants, Jones in number ten, just called me a kike. If he doesn't apologize within twenty-four hours you'll have to get another manager."

Klars came over. He was a big kingly looking fellow with illiterate speech.

"But Jones," he said, "is one a my best tenants. Mr. Hunter, don't you think—"

"No. He'll apologize or move."

"But I just seen him. He says—uh—you insulted his wife."

"Nobody could."

"You mean—Mr. Hunter, what *do* you mean?"

"I mean I'm sick of the big stupid asses. If I'm going to run this building I'll run it."

"Yes, yes, of course. Well. And you're sure—?"

"An apology or move them out."

"Well, this is—umm— They always pay their rent promptly, don't they?"

During this evening Jones came to Vridar's room. His face was red.

"I understand you think I insulted you."

"You called me a kike. Listen, Jones, you may be the Duke of Whomton for all I know but in that case you ought

to live on the lake-front. If you stay in this building you'll act like a gentleman."

"Well, I didn't know. Klars just told me. I thought you was just a janitor." The statement made Vridar furious.

"What of it? A janitor is a man, isn't he? And you're not the Earl of Barchester Towers, are you? Where'd you get the notion that janitors are not human?"

"Well, never mind that. What do you want?"

"An apology."

"And if I won't?"

"You'll have to get out."

Jones stared at him for a long moment, his face red with anger. He thrust forth a hand.

"Well, I apologize. I can't afford to move now."

"You apologize like a gentleman."

"I—what do you mean by that?"

And so for two years Vridar's absurd pride suffered shame and outrage here. At daylight he would rise and take the garbage quietly away; mop the entrance and sweep the stairways; and then sigh with relief and bathe. He hated this work but he had to do it. His underwear was so ragged that when he went to the gymnasium he hid in a dark corridor and undressed in haste; his shirts were so ragged that he never took his coat off when anyone but Neloa could see; and he had worn the same suit for nearly three years. And Neloa, too, had little to wear. Her underthings she made of flour sacks. Her stockings, save one pair, were of cotton. She had no hat.

Vridar could have bought more clothes if he had bought fewer books. His wish to own books obsessed him. Often he went to secondhand bookshops and spent hours, turning volumes over, wondering if he should buy. If he saw an old favorite, forlorn and unused, he had to buy it. He *had* to buy *Pierre et Jean* and Daudet's *Premier Voyage;* Artsybashev's *Sanine;* Heine's works in German; *Frau Sorge;* the *Letters* of Lamb; Hazlitt's *Spirit of the Age* and the poems of Keats—all these and more. When he came home, hugging

a book dear to him, he would feel guilty, knowing well that he had no money to spend for books. "I couldn't leave it," he would say. "My God, leave *Gulliver's Travels* on that dirty dark shelf!" And one day, "Neloa, I've found the *Arabian Nights* complete, Payne's edition for only thirteen dollars. . . . Shall I buy it?"

"If you want to."

"But should I? Thirteen dollars, that's a lot to us. Lord, you think we should?"

"I guess we'n afford it," she said. And he almost ran to the store, afraid that the volumes would be gone. He carried them home and sat on the floor with them for two hours, hugging them to his heart.

And so childlike was he in this matter that he never saw how distressed Neloa was or supposed for a moment that she thought him unwise. For his great passion in these years was not whisky and was not women; it was a deep, an overwhelming, hunger for books. He dreamed of them. He saw himself in a great library of his own, with books everywhere; and he was reading them, searching them for a plan of life that was clean and good.

He was bent over *Hydriotaphia* one morning when he looked up to see Dennis Altrock staring at him.

"Hello," Vridar said. "Where've you been?"

Dennis was excited. He trembled.

"I want to tell you something," he said. Vridar walked with him to the park.

"Well, what's on your mind?"

"I'm in a mess. You remember Ellen Mavis?"

"Of course. You've seduced her, I suppose."

When Dennis was excited, his gaze roved from side to side and up and down, following crazy orbits. It was his most striking mannerism. And now Vridar watched the man's eyes move as if they followed gnats in the air or saw writing on the sky.

"It's this way. Ellen and Jack asked me to spend a week with them at the dunes. I went, just as a friend."

"And ended up as a lover. Men often do that."

"Well," said Dennis, still gazing round and round the sky, "one night she came to my tent and crawled in with me——"

"The hell. And I suppose you shoved her out."

"No." Dennis grinned. "Well, it's a funny situation. I wanted to tell you about it. She and Jack have been married two years. They were married just after he graduated from Yale."

"Yes, go on."

"In all that time," said Dennis, his mouth twitching, "they never copulated."

"Nonsense!"

"It's the truth. Jack actually didn't know what he was supposed to do. Ellen tried to explain. She brought books and charts. She showed him pictures. No wonder he's bitter, is it? He hates women."

"Well, he certainly got a dose of Christian training. I read about a case like that the other day. In fact, there was a fellow in Idaho who went to school with me who was that ignorant. . . . Well, I suppose Ellen thinks you're king and prince and caveman, all rolled into one. Is she in love with you?"

"Yes."

"No wonder. No wonder she wept on my shoulder that night. No wonder he told me he hated women. What a world, Dennis, what a world! Are you living with her now?"

"Yes."

"And Jack, where is he?"

"Oh, he hit the trail."

"I should think so. Well, you ought to please her. She told me she liked hairy men and you have enough hair for a mattress. Why do women love hair?"

"It's a sign of virility," Dennis said. He looked at the thick yellow growth on his hands and arms.

"Well, Dennis, fetch your bride over and see us."

An hour later Vridar told Neloa of the matter.

"Can you feature it? I tell you, my dear, that if any of us knew a small part of the truth about human beings we'd

be silenced for life. What would you do with a man like Jack?"

"I don't know."

"Would you boot him out?"

"I think I might."

"If it's better to burn than to marry, that fellow ought to be a grand goblin in heaven. You know, there are a lot of Jacks in the world. I didn't miss by more than a mile myself. I can understand the poor devil. I'd like to talk with him."

"He must have been awfully stupid," Neloa said.

"No, darling, just well-trained."

XVI

ONE evening Vridar said to Dennis Altrock, "You're so damned sane you're indecent. How did you get that way? From reading books?" And Vridar in this autumn read almost day and night and each book added to his hunger and his bewilderment. Each book told him more clearly that the author himself had been unhappy: a distracted man, searching for what he could never find. But Vridar added, nevertheless, to his piles of notes, and set within his journal a record of his agonized pilgrimage.

Three months ago I was done with religion. Now I'm done with metaphysics. I'm sick of the nonsense of excessus mentalis et mysticus; with Lully's stupid Duodecim Principia Philosophiae (this silly fellow's dream was to convert the Moorish world to Christianity); with the superabundans sapientia mysticism of Jews; with Cabanis who said thought was a secretion of the brain; with Fichte's internal and external necessities; with Schelling's five transcendental systems of fog; with Spencer's adolescent and ghastly transfigurations of realism; with Gioberti's primum philosophicum which con-

tains the primum ontologicum; and with all the rest of them except Schopenhauer, Leopardi, Hume, and Plato. Plato was either a great man or the world's most stupendous fool. Leopardi says it is life among men, not philosophy, which inspires hatred of men. True. And he should have added: it is hatred of men that inspires philosophy.

I still cannot eat meat. France's Coignard says: "An honest man cannot without disgust eat the flesh of animals, and nations cannot call themselves civilized as long as slaughterhouses and butchers' shops are to be found in their towns." It's a nice irony to see a bishop stuffing his belly with rooster. And why do we make a symbol of the tiger? He does not build cathedrals or yelp with gonorrhea or wage war in the name of right.

Am getting along with my novel: the story of a Mormon girl whose betrothed goes on a mission. Among life's tragedies count Mormon girls whose sweeties hike out to preach sainthood and discover that not all, or even the loveliest, girls are to be found in Antelope and Bountiful, Moroni and St. George.

This fetched me up: "Most dangerous of all was a gift of sincerity that deceived himself. He could assume an opinion or express an emotion at will, with such genuine fervor that he himself forgot how recently he had acquired it." I wonder if I am that way. I have known persons who are.

Says Radcliffe: "It is the first proof of a superior mind to liberate itself from the prejudices of country or of education." My mind may be only average but that is a job I'll have behind me before I am forty. It's a hell of a big job.

Wise Joubert: "The true science of metaphysics consists not in rendering abstract that which is sensible, but in rendering sensible that which is abstract." That remark and these Christians around me call to mind Crabb Robinson's story of the Brahmin who so devoted himself to abstract meditation that he forgot his moral duties, and was thereupon trans-

formed into a monkey. Well, as Disraeli's Lothair says, I perceive that life is not so simple an affair as I once supposed.

The apple-woman in *Lavengro* is swell: she attributed the vices and follies of her life to being able to read; her mother, she said, who could not read, lived respectably and died in peace. If ignorance is necessary to peace of mind, then of what value is intelligence? Some one tell me.

Hazlitt, I think, has the most penetrating mind in English literature. "How few of the infinite number of those that marry and are given in marriage, wed with those they would prefer to all the world: nay, how far the greater proportion are joined together by mere motives of convenience, accident, recommendation of friends, or indeed not infrequently by the very fear of the event . . . and a man no longer lives to himself, but is a body (as well as mind) chained to another, 'Like life and death in disproportion met.'" And, adds Rolland's Grazia: "Happy marriages are very rare. You cannot bind together the wills of two people without mutilating one of them, if not both, and it does not even bring the suffering through which it is well and profitable for the soul to pass." Am noting all I find on marriage. Most of it, significantly enough, agrees with Meredith, that we have a decent visage and a hideous rear.

I observe also what men have said of women. Dekker says there's more deceit in them than in hell. Meredith says, ask for information of how innocence and uncleanness may go together. Query: out of what comes the American man's veneration of womanhood? Says Eliot: "There is no point on which young women are more easily piqued than this of their sufficiency to judge the men who make love to them." Says Eugénie de Guerin: "There is nothing fixed, no duration, no vitality in the sentiments of women toward one another." Says Shelley: "Possession, which, when unassisted by real, intellectual love, clogs man, increases the ardent uncontrollable passions of women even to madness." And so on, endlessly.

Women are the severest judges of women: because, I dare say, they all regard themselves as competitors in the monstrous biologic game of kisses and birth.

I'd like to know who wrote:

> Quid superbit homo? cujus conceptio culpa,
> Nasci poena, labor vita, necesse mori!

When I reflect on those lines I like to look at Bonnat's Martyrdom of St. Dennis. It sums up the whole inhumanity of man to man.

Says Holmes: "We frequently see persons in insane hospitals, sent there in consequence of what are called religious mental disturbances. I confess that I think better of them than of many who hold the same notions, and keep their wits and appear to enjoy life very well, outside of asylums." And I.

Says Kingsley: "What are we all doing from morning to night, but setting up our own fancies (prejudices, he should say) as the measure of all heaven and earth, and saying, each in his own dialect, Whig, Radical, or Tory, Papist or Protestant, 'When it pleases Heaven to open your eyes you will see as I do!' " He packed the whole modern world into that statement. Why, for instance, does a man who teaches Shakspere or Milton or Wordsworth for thirty years come to believe that this writer is the greatest of all? Because, I imagine, he must dignify his appalling waste of time. A thing, someone has said, is first expedient, then profitable, and then divine. That is the evolution of morality for you. In this country today men are busy affixing the seven seals of heaven to advertising. Within ten years some fat and overfed Christian will declare that advertising is the greatest (I mean the noblest) work of God.

Beethoven once wanted to read something and picked up a novel by Scott. "This man," he said, "seems to be writing for money," and threw the book away.

Much to Neloa's amusement I still refuse to eat meat. H. G. Wells says the sensitive abstain from meat because of the butchery: I wonder how many who eat meat would do so if they had to do the butchering. Meredith says eating meat was never to his taste. But Gissing in *Ryecroft* declares there is an odd pathos in the literature of vegetarianism. Of course: there is the same odd pathos in all idealism. I say, "There's a weird irony in a race that preaches tenderness and mercy and devours everything that smells good in a frying-pan." And if we're to eat meat, why not also eat one another? A fat babe, banked with dumplings and floating in soup, would perhaps be as dainty a morsel as mourning-doves' tongues. Or a tender young human shoat, baked whole and buried in mushrooms. But every person invests himself with divinity and sets God up as his press-agent.

Says Royce: "The skeptic is not always an interesting person; but then, you must remember, as a skeptic he doesn't want to be interesting. He only wishes to be honest." I've never seen a person whom honesty does not offend—including, I dare say, myself. We spend a dull stupid evening and say to the hostess, "I had a splendid time." And why? Do human beings prefer dishonesty? I don't believe it. I think their vanity has become so delicate a thing that it shrinks, like a sea organism, from all but foam. What the hell has turned us into a race of theatrical counterfeits? I'll tell you: I'd like to take a bunch of Park Avenue clowns and strip them naked and send them to an afternoon tea. Fancy a scion of the Vanderpilks, with his honest and naked buttocks thrust out behind, with a simian thicket on his chest, saying to a haughty naked monkey-lady with thin flanks, "I think your appointments are adorable; N'est-ce pas? Ah, nugae canorae!"

My novel is pretty damned bad: I mix the simple and sardonic and get a broth of acid that simmers. On one Sunday the simpleton in me writes; on the next, the Jonathan Swift. Well, Mill says the habit of analysis wears away the feelings. Let mine all wear away.

Theodore Parker says democracy means not, I'm as good as you are but You're as good as I am. Alas, Theodore, but it doesn't. Go read Eliot: after a feast persons are likely to declare that the good of life is wonderfully fairly distributed!

Says Joubert—and how I sit at his feet! "The proofs of the existence of a God have made many men atheists."

And Trollope asks, "Gentle reader, did you ever feel yourself snubbed?" I have, and recently, but not by another ape. My readings in astronomy did it to me. What can teach a man such humility as an effort to grasp the magnitude of space? I felt as if I had crawled through a fountain-pen.

Ruskin tells of a Russian prig who dined in Paris: his name, let us say, was Teufelbotsky. He was charged fifteen francs for two peaches. "Oh," said he, "peaches are scarce, I presume." "No," said the waiter, "but Teufelbotskys are."

And I adore this: a story was told at a formal English banquet of the absent-minded college professor who, upon being informed that he had a son, asked impatiently, "Well, what does he want?" A duchess, eyes shining, leaned over the table and said, "Come, finish it! I just love naughty stories. What *did* the boy want?"

And I adore this (which I have found in Holmes, Reade, and Bojer): of the man who, in grave danger, promised the Lord anything he possessed if He would aid him; and who, upon being admonished by a friend for his rashness, declared, "You think I'm serious? Wait till I get on dry ground and catch me giving Him as much as a tallow-candle!"

But my favorite of all is that story of a Frenchman, found in Bulwer's *My Novel*, who spent all his evenings with his mistress. The husband of the mistress died and a friend of the lover said, "Congratulations! Now you can marry the woman you have so long adored!" "But alas," said the poor fellow, profoundly dejected, "and if I do, where shall I then

spend my evenings?" That is the most penetrating anecdote I've ever read.

Today by chance I came upon the curse which the Jews laid upon Spinoza: "By the sentence of the angels, by the decree of the saints, we anathematize, cut off, curse, and execrate Baruch Spinoza, in the presence of these sacred books with the six hundred and thirteen precepts which are written therein, with the anathema wherewith Joshua anathematized Jericho; with the cursing wherewith Elizha cursed the children. . . ." But I can't go on: it makes me puke. Such religion is the pus and dung of earth. . . .

Am reading Marx: he was a great and noble man. Communism, as employed in Russia, is possibly, it seems to me, the nearest approach yet made to the teachings of the Christ; and for that reason, of course, is anathema to "Christians" quite as Spinoza, great and noble fellow, was to the Jews.

Except for the faint light of Marx, I've found nothing yet in books to sustain me. . . .

These notes were made in November. When Christmas came, Vridar's eyes failed him and he was sunk in despair.

XVII

HIS eyes for a long time had been giving him excruciating headaches. To kill the pain he took aspirin, sometimes as many as forty grains in a day. Dark spots floated in his vision like swarms of bacteria; and when he stared at a page, he could see words and then only a fog of darkness; and out of the darkness the words for a moment would stand sharply and then waver and blur, and the page would be a sheet of gray. And when he closed his eyes he saw intensely bright colors: purples and reds and greens in strange brilliant pat-

terns, deeper and more luminous than those of a sunset. "I guess I'll have to see a doctor," he said. "I'll have to borrow the money from dad."

And he went to Burgess Reed, professor of ophthalmology in the Rush Medical College; and Reed, with his assistant, Doctor Allen Montrose, examined him. A week later Vridar wore glasses but they did him no good. He returned to Reed and that man, tall and stately and weary, examined him again. There was nothing the matter, he said. "How is your nose?"

"My nose? It's all right, I hope."

"Perhaps you need an operation on your nose."

So Vridar went next to Doctor James Spurgeon and this great nose specialist dipped a cauterizing iron into acid and took a part of the bone out of Vridar's septum. And Vridar went home, praying that his trouble was done, and waited until his nose healed. But his eyes were no better. It seemed to him, indeed, that they were worse. Again he went to Reed and Reed called in two other specialists and they all peered into Vridar's eyes and nose and ears. "Perhaps," said one, "it's his teeth."

"Any abscessed teeth?" asked Reed.

"I don't know."

"You'd better have them x-rayed."

And Vridar had his teeth x-rayed and took the negatives to Doctor Bixby Greenwood, famous dental surgeon. Greenwood studied the negatives. "These six," he said, "will have to come out. There are four others but perhaps you can save them." He thrust a needle into Vridar's gums and a few minutes later bent over him, instruments in his hands. Vridar looked at the gleaming tools and shivered. And before he knew what Greenwood intended, a blow shook him, and he heard something strike the floor across the room.

"What was that?" he asked anxiously.

"A tooth," Greenwood said. With a chisel and maul, the surgeon had knocked one of Vridar's teeth clear across the room. Such highhanded methods, it seemed to Vridar, were too like the old custom of trepanation when holes were

knocked into men's skulls to let devils out. He felt sick and wished he was out of here.

"You going to knock the others out?" he asked.

"Oh no." Greenwood smiled. "I can't get at the others that way."

Now the surgeon grasped forceps and set them on a molar and pulled. He almost lifted Vridar out of the chair. There was no pain but the crunching in his jawbone and the smell and taste of blood were worse than pain. Greenwood broke this tooth off. "Damn it!" he said.

"What's the matter now?" asked Vridar anxiously. He would not have been surprised to see his jawbone in the surgeon's forceps.

"Get ready," said Greenwood to his nurse. "I'll have to dig it out." And for twenty-seven minutes by the clock on the wall, Greenwood was busy, digging out the roots of this tooth. Sweat ran down his face. He whispered profanely in his breath or now and then let off a mighty oath; and the nurse sopped into the hole with cotton, her face very grave. A deathly sickness filled Vridar. He fought desperately to keep his wits, his courage, but suddenly he fainted. When he came to, the nurse was bathing his forehead and she gave him something to drink; and from time to time he drank of what she gave while the surgeon worked. He was in this chair two hours and forty minutes.

"The worst teeth I ever saw," Greenwood said. "Take these. The pain may bother you later."

Vridar took the tablets and sat here for a little while, spitting blood. On the long ride home, he would hold in his mouth as much blood as he could, and then leave the trolley and spit it out and wait for the next car. And the pain did bother him: he paced the floor all night.

The pulling of these teeth cost him thirty-five dollars; the operation on his nose cost him twenty-five; the x-ray examination and glasses and the services of Reed cost him forty-seven; and his eyes were no better. He waited patiently, hopefully, for two weeks and went to Reed again.

"I can't use my eyes," he said. "I still can't see words."

Reed looked at him wearily.

"I find nothing wrong. Do you have syphilis?"

"Lord, no."

"Just the same you'd better go to Doctor Brown."

And Vridar went to Doctor Brown and paid fifteen dollars for a Wassermann test. There was no evidence of syphilis. . . .

"To hell with doctors!" he shouted to Neloa. "They've whittled up my nose, yanked out my teeth, x-rayed me and bloodtested me and taken all my money! And I'm right where I started from, minus a half a pound of bone! What do doctors learn when they go to school? Have you any notion?" And later he said:

"I'll find out what's wrong with my eyes. See if I don't."

A more terrible winter than this one, Vridar had never spent. For his doctor's thesis he had undertaken a study for which it was necessary to read three hundred novels; and they were big fat novels, bloated with words. Besides all this reading to be done, there were his courses and the reading for them, for reports and term-papers and examinations; and there were all the books in science and aesthetics and history that he had planned to read.

But he could not read at all. Even in the classroom he sat with his eyes closed; and the notes which he made he made blindly, without ever looking at the paper on which he wrote. He yielded again and again to frenzy and cursed everything under the sun. In the long evenings, and sometimes in the afternoons, Neloa read to him: patiently, quietly, with never a word of complaint. She read novels to him, one after another, week after week, and the slow uninspired toil of it maddened him. She read to him while he cooked the meals and set the table and cleared the dishes away. In the novels by Scott and Dickens, Trollope and Reade, Disraeli and Gaskell, Bulwer and Blackmore and Black, there were vast stretches of emptiness, chapters in which words buried a handful of meaning, and sermons that lay in level dullness from page to page; but he had to listen to all of it, had to sit in darkness and make his piles of notes. . . .

"Stop!" he would cry. "That insufferable romantic windbag! Where'd the notion come from that Scott is a novelist? If he's a novelist, I'm the world's classic bound in morocco. . . ." Or again:

"That's enough, Neloa! Don't read me any more Dickens for a week. If you were to squeeze all the self-pity out of his volumes they wouldn't be any bigger than one of Martial's epigrams. . . ." Or again:

"God-damn that Trollope! I won't listen to any more of his beefsteak bellyaches if I never get a degree! That's eleven of his and if I listen to another I'll be raving mad. Don't ever mention his name. . . ."

There were three novelists whom he listened to patiently and without a word of protest: Austen, Peacock, and Meredith. "They all had brains," he said. "Scott wrote because he wanted to be a feudal lord, Thackeray because he wanted to be a duke, Dickens because he wept over himself and hid his weak mouth in a beard. Hardy because he had an erotic and insatiable love of virgins." And often he would say, "Read that again," or, "Write that down for me. If you wish to win a man's heart, allow him to confute you. Disraeli, the sly rascal, knew his queens."

And one evening:

"What was that, darling? Read it again."

" 'All of us are weak in the period of growth, and are of small worth before the hour of trial.' "

"Fine. Meredith had more to say than all of them. Neloa, read what you've written down for him." And Neloa got a notebook and read:

" 'Shallow souls run to rhapsody. A little yielding to desperation shoots us to strange distances. Like all rapid phrasers, Mrs. Mountstuart detested the analysis of her sentence. It had an outline in vagueness, and was flung out to be apprehended, not dissected.' "

"That is superb. . . . Go on."

"That's all I have from Meredith."

"Don't you have the statement 'It's unwise to check either

an oath or a sneeze?' Well, no matter. Read some more of the notes."

" 'The many are sacrificed to the few; that ninety-nine in a hundred are occupied in a perpetual struggle for the preservation of a perilous and precarious existence, while the remaining one wallows in all the redundancies of luxury that can be wrung from their labours and privations.' "

"That's Peacock?"

"Yes."

"That man had brains but I guess no one reads him today. They read Scott. Go on."

" 'If you were behind the scenes in the scientific world I can assure you, you would find as much party-spirit, and unfairness, and jealousy and emulation there, as anywhere else.' "

"Who's that?"

"Kingsley."

"Well, he's right. I learned that in a year of teaching. Read the notes from Gissing."

" 'And why should any man who writes, even if he write things immortal, nurse anger at the world's neglect? Who asked him to publish? . . . Every day the world grows noisier; I, for one, will have no part in that increasing clamour, and, were it only by my silence, I confer a boon on all. . . . Dozens of my books were purchased with money which ought to have been spent upon what are called the necessaries of life.' "

"I, too," Vridar said. "Damn fools, both of us."

" 'It is so difficult for human beings to live together; nay, it is so difficult——' "

"I wish the hell he'd cut out that naying stuff!"

" '—so difficult for them to associate even under the most favourable conditions without some shadow of mutual offense. Even love, in the largest and purest sense of the word, is no safeguard——' "

"That's true of us, Neloa. We're wearing one another out."

"I don't think so."

"I do. I hate what you love, you hate what I love. . . . Go on."

" 'Inability to read has always been my horror; once, a trouble of the eyes all but drove me mad with fear of blindness—' "

"That's enough, dear. I can't stand any more tonight."

And so it was, through the long winter months. Sometimes he clowned to let the desperation out of him; or played on the floor with his sons; or walked in falling snow. In nearly every evening, too, he experimented with his eyes. He read of a way to strengthen eyes and sent his last five dollars for a set of instructions and exercises; and these, for eight weeks, he faithfully observed, rule by rule: now looking at lines, now shutting his eyes and remembering black, now straining his eyes from side to side and up and down; until one evening when, disappointed and furious, he hurled the outfit through a window.

"To hell with it and to hell with the fool who invented it!"

Or he would talk to Neloa of the English faculty here.

"James Breslow Thurman is a great man, perhaps the greatest I've known. Do you understand what I mean? I don't mean like Ford or Coolidge or Douglas Fairbanks. I wish you could see Thurman. Imagine an old brown tough parchment. Imagine that all the wisdom and suffering of earth were distilled and the parchment soaked in it and then dried and used as the covering of a man's face; and you have Thurman. Except the eyes. You see such eyes only once in a lifetime. It's not their color or the big hedges they stand under: remember what Thoreau said, that he had never seen a person fully awake? Well, Thurman is awake. In his eyes is enough wakefulness for ten thousand men. And what you feel in him is the intense bright wakefulness and the humanity. I love him. I guess I'm a hero-worshiper, like Carlyle; but men like me have to worship something and Thurman is one of my gods. . . .

"Well, I like Breverton, too; but he knows no more of human nature than a babe knows of Joshua. When he dismisses a class he sits at his desk and stares at the students, quaintly

surprised, as if wondering how they survived. And it is a feat to survive his lectures. He pours information at you like water over a dam. He always drags his handkerchief out by one corner and raises it as if astonished to find it so long. If a student asks a question, Breverton's gaze travels over the class, as if to get an idea whether the question is worth answering. He distrusts you. That's because he has no power to tell honest men from frauds. But he's a great scholar and that's more than can be said of a lot of fatheads who publish in *Modern Philology*. . . .

"Well, John Roe Down is Irish. He has small keen eyes full of unhappiness and suspicion. He detests me: I don't know why. He plays favorites. Did I tell you the trick I pulled on him last summer?"

"No. I don't remember it."

"Well, another chap and I took his course in bibliography and we handed in the same term-papers, word for word. The other chap got an A; I got a B. And why? Because the class gave him a beer-supper on the lake front and it was the other fellow who invited him. Funny, such pettiness in a scholar. It tickles me to see him look between his fingers at the legs in the front row; and then look at the ceiling, as if rebuking his lust. He goes to dances and acts like a well-bred fox that smells chickens and can't see them. But I like him. . . .

"And there's George Marion, the novelist. He's a grand fellow to look at and has a grand classroom manner. He grunts and groans, but in a New England manner, and takes his glasses off and coughs gently at a book as if surprised by its dullness. He says I'd make a good critic but a hell of a novelist."

"Maybe it's true," said Neloa.

"Nonsense! If I'm not a better novelist than he is I'll eat a whole edition of his works bound in vellum. He belongs to the milk-and-ipecac school of Howells. Well, just the same he's a grand fellow under his Cabots-and-Lowell New England frost. New England, as Holley says, is where the Cabots

speak only to Lowells and the Lowells speak only to God.

"Where the Cabots speak only to Lowells
And the Lowells speak only to God,
Does Jesus still speak to the fishers?
You think so? Good gracious, how odd!"

Vridar heard Lorado Taft say of a friend that he had a hundred poems by heart; and Taft said he envied such a rich and invisible treasure, untaxed and undiminished, and ready to serve anywhere and at any time. "Then why the hell doesn't *he* memorize a hundred poems? I'm going to." And Vridar, during these weeks, got by heart a hundred poems and then another hundred: all of the odes by Keats, Wordsworth, and Dryden; several of Browning's monologues; and a hundred and eighty lyrics from Chaucer to Masefield. While lying in bed at night, sleepless, he would say them in his breath; and he was surprised to learn how light and feeble most of them came to be. Only the odes of Keats and a half-dozen lyrics were not worn thin. "Memorizing," he said, "is the test of a poem." And Neloa, too, learned about twenty, including the Ode to the Nightingale, which was Vridar's favorite. This ode he repeated a thousand times and it did not fall apart into a handful of rhetoric and a foolish sentiment.

And in nearly every evening while listening to Neloa he experimented with his eyes. It was late in April that he made his discovery. He had been reading through a green eye-shade and he now smoked some glass and read through it.

"Damn it!" he cried. "I know what's wrong. My eyes haven't enough pigment. It's the light." He gazed at Neloa for a long while. And then: "Can you imagine such asses as those doctors? What do they learn when they go to school?"

By exercising great care he could read a little now. In his eagerness he strained his eyes again and the headaches, the nausea, returned; but he took aspirin and went ahead. His temperature was two degrees under normal; his pulse rate

was forty-one. But he did not care for he was again in his kingdom of books, searching, deliberating, and making his piles of notes. And one evening he came upon this:

But I will tell you my belief, that all the battles and wars that ever were in the world have not caused the fifteenth part of the misery and tragic suffering that have been caused by this very thing you are laughing at—those false ideals formed before marriage.

For an hour he pondered these words; and to Neloa he said:

"My whole training was a mess, a stinking shame from start to finish. It gave me a thousand silly and sickly ideals. And the worst of it, Neloa, is that a lot of it is still in me. I'm still an incredible fool. But that's the first victory: recognition of what I am; because most persons never even get that far. And I'm going to fight out of it and destroy it before it destroys me. All my life I've been an awful fool. I know it. I still am. But right from this moment on I'm going to crush my emotions and give my intelligence light and air.

"And what I've been thinking is this: our love for one another is a blind and unreasoning thing. It will destroy us if we don't destroy it. And right here and now I propose to smash the bond and give both of us a chance at a decent life. I mean I'm going to leave you."

"You're not!"

"I am. Listen, darling, it's this way: are we going on like lost and defeated children or are we going to use our brains? We're two strangers in a dark room. It is terrible, it is cowardly, it is blind, this trying to live together. There are men you could be happy with. I don't think there are any women I could be happy with. But I'm not going on this way, sacrificing you to my selfish insane vanity. And in God's name," he cried, "don't make it harder! It will take all the courage I have."

"If it's so hard to leave me, why don't you stay?"

"Oh, you don't understand! I can never make you happy

and I don't want you to live all your life as you have lived the last years. Darling, won't you be reasonable? Let's not talk like children. We're not mated. I love you but you should never have married me. Even if you had stayed on Antelope——"

"No! I wouldn't give one year with you for a thousand on Antelope!"

He stared at her, a little amazed.

"Honest? You mean that?"

"I mean it, so help me God!"

"But why?" he asked, desperately. "I can't understand. I keep your world in an uproar. Neloa, I'll never settle down. You'll never have a home with me. You belong in a decent home with husband and children. I belong—nowhere. And besides, I've made up my mind that my duty is to my art. I'm going to let nothing stand in its way. Nothing, darling, nothing. And when I say that——"

"You mean I stand in its way?"

"Yes. You can't help it. The life you want, the things you want, stand in the way. You try not to let them. But I see, Neloa, that you're not happy with me and I know as I know my own name that you will never be. And I'm not reproaching you. God knows I want to see you happy. But look at me, a stranger in my own home: no time to play with my kids, no time to do anything but go ahead in the terrible way I've always gone. I realize I'm no husband and no father. And I must make a choice between being that or being a writer and I've made the choice."

"You mean—you mean you're going?"

"Yes."

"O sweetheart!"

He went over and knelt at her feet.

"Darling, don't make it harder! I'm—I'm doing what I think is the most courageous thing. I—O Neloa, please!"

This was said in August. For a month Vridar argued and implored; but of what he would do, of what he must do, he had no clear notion. He knew only that he, and Neloa no

less, were being crucified by a love stronger than death. To destroy one another, slowly, inevitably, seemed to him the way of cowardice, and he set his heart mightily on laying for her, no less than for himself, a clean way to freedom. And his life sought its dark narrow channel and moved inexorably to its greatest crisis.

PART III

SEPTEMBER 2, 1917

Now is the moment when, if we could take
Enchantment by the arm and find the trails
Leading to temples and the holy grails,
Our love could flee the wrong and fear and ache
And loss of one irrevocable mistake;

And, kept too long within its petty jails,
Nighthawking in the dark, could set its sails,
Daringly like pilgrims, and come wide awake!

Victorious we could be now; but you,
Retired to dreams, have missed the road ahead.
In future years, tonight may always be
Declaring what might have been for you and me;
And what we could have done but did not do,
Restoring to silence what was never said!

I

IT WAS on the second of October in this autumn of 1923 that he saw Athene Marvell for the first time. In this year he taught two sections of freshman English and his office was in a large room with the other assistants. On this day he was sitting at his desk, reading Shelley, when he became conscious of eyes watching him. He looked up to meet a steady gaze and for a full minute he and a stranger stared and did not speak. And then:

"What are you reading?" she asked

"Shelley's *Alastor.*"

"You like Shelley?"

"Yes. Do you?"

"Very much." And she said there was a splendid line in *Alastor:* "Her voice was like the voice of his own soul, heard in the calm of thought."

Vridar looked away and thought of this line. Yes, it was great poetry: he knew that; and why, in heaven's name, had he read this poem a dozen times without discovering it! He looked at her again.

"Where you from?"

"Vassar."

"Oh," he said, thinking of his own wretched training.

"And you?" asked this girl.

"Wasatch College. It's an average high school. . . . What other poets do you like?"

"Keats and Browning and Milton and Dante. Catullus."

"Milton? I detest him."

"Why?"

"The Latinized monster. He had a conscience as big and sick as a hospital." Again they stared. "What," he asked, "is your favorite English lyric?"

"I'd never thought. What is yours?"

"I don't know. Cynara, probably."

"Cynara? I love it."

And that was enough. This was the first woman he had known—and except Jake Arlow he had never known a man—who liked that magnificent poem. For most persons it was only an obscene lamentation; for Vridar it was the last word in heartbreak, like Cowper's poems to Mary Unwin, the letters of Keats to Fanny. . . .

In the next afternoon they talked again; and in the next. A week later Vridar did an astonishing thing. Casting all doubts to the wind he sat at his typewriter and wrote this letter to Athene:

DEAR ATHENE:

For three days now I've wanted to write to you as I feel. To most persons, more hard-headed and practical than I, this letter would seem to be the last word in bellyache; but the motive that prompts it springs, I feel, from the best that I am. My distrust of human beings tells me to refrain; my observations of you tell me to proceed. And here I go.

Six years ago I married, blindly, madly: it was a childhood romance. I was brought up by a puritan mother and I was taught in almost every day to believe in the goodness of women; until my attitude toward them came to be idolatrous in the extreme. I came to feel, indeed, that they were different in kind from men in all those respects which have become a part of tradition. My disillusionment in the girl I was to marry was, in consequence, complete and overwhelming but I married her because I loved her.

For six years now I have been held midway between desertion and suicide, yet have yielded to neither, finding them both cowardly. My wife has many virtues: she is saving, neat, willing, and has more than human patience. She is beautiful. She reads to me many hours in each day and reads well and heroically. She tries to see life as I do, tries to accept my interests and tastes; and fails, poor kid, miserably. Children, two of them, now complicate the problem.

Duty is the cardinal point in my philosophy of life. I detest

the man who is cowardly enough to desert his family; but at the same time I detest the man who, because of false notions, is cowardly enough to crucify himself. But I cannot see clearly what I should do. I need a friend, wiser than I, more dispassionate; but I have none. I have a friend here in the city, a brilliant man with a mighty heart; but he is a pagan and has no power to understand those elements which have fostered my struggle. I suspect at times that my idealism may be very stupid and that all idealism may indeed be; but I cannot yield it until I find a way of life that offers greater decency and peace. Now don't misunderstand me: I am in the words of Bojer no stunted ascetic; but neither, on the other hand, do I see why sex must be dragged into every situation of life. Some may say I am "sublimating" my desires. Perhaps I am. But it must be possible in this world to love beautifully, with sex functioning in full power, but purged of its smoking-car filth.

Now my struggle, as you must see, is between certain ideals on the one hand, and, on the other, a life which reduces all ideals to sickly impotence. I am not an angel beating my wings in void. I am, in fact, a rather cynical and bedeviled, a rather crazed person, seeking something that is worthy of a deep and fixed loyalty. My need to love and to trust completely in some unalterable goodness is the great need of my being. But where is that goodness? What does the frantic pilgrim anchor to?

In Black's *Princess of Thule* the heroine marries a man who does not understand her. One day she is found in a cemetery, weeping. Her husband tells a friend of the matter. "About what?" asks the friend. "Why, because so many people had died." Now for some there is in that only infinite silliness; for me it has infinite pathos. "There are many whose imagination never went the length of constructing any ideal, except that of a moor covered with grouse. There are others who have educated themselves into a useful indifferentism or cynicism. Unfortunately, it is the nobler natures who suffer most." Black said that a long time ago. I don't want to be a cynic but right now I am moving, and a large part of the

world is moving with me, in that direction. Yet what is to stop us? Where is there a faith that intelligence can live by? I don't want to retire to Olympus with Meredith's Comic Muse nor to live in that wallpapered optimism of those who dodge truth and build around them a fortress of self-esteem. But what is there between the two?

Well, that is enough. I seek your friendship, believing you are sensitive enough to understand this problem which millions faced before I was born; believing, too, that you share it. If I am wrong, disillusion me without delicacy or insinuation. If you feel this is a sentimental wail, hit me hard. But I have only one life to live and it is short and I don't want to thresh blindly forever in this endless catharsis that has no power to purge.

VRIDAR HUNTER.

And to this letter what was Athene's response? It was exactly what Vridar had thought it would be.

I accept your friendship [she wrote] in the spirit in which you offer it. I, too, find life meaningless, and I, too, seek loyalties worthy of respect. Except doubtfully in books I find none. . . .

And this was all that Vridar wished. Because never, during this while, or in the weeks that followed, did he think of her as a woman. She was a spirit, an ideal. She was a symbol, as unfleshed and bloodless as the word itself; and all that he wished, all that he hoped for, was a person in whose integrity he could place absolute trust; a person to share his wild imagination and his dreams; to explore, as he was exploring, the dark and poignant mysteries of life. He wanted, too, a friend whose perception of excellence in poetry, in art, was sharp and unerring; and Athene Marvell, it seemed to him, was such a person. Her insight into poetry was so much quicker than his, and her own poetry was so much better, that he listened humbly, almost abjectly, to what she said. He hungered for certainties and distrusted his own judgment in

everything. And gently and wisely, Athene led him from poet to poet, from darkness to light.

When he talked with her in the office, or when on his way home he walked with her to the street where she lived, he was never conscious of her as a woman, of himself as a man. He was lost in the bewildering chaos of his ideals. She was a voice that spoke, and he listened; or he spoke, and she understood. And if he had been asked two months after he met her to describe her face, to tell what she wore, he could not have done so. He could have told only what she said. He could have told that she discovered for him Hertha and The Man Against the Sky, a half-dozen fine lyrics by Christina Rossetti, Baudelaire and Catullus—these and more like them are all that he could have told. They were two spirits, delivered to the abstract, and Vridar never for a moment thought of kissing her, or of talking of anything but art and ideals.

One evening he said:

"My dream is to become all clear intelligence. I want to crush my emotions. I want to be all clear functioning mind. For our emotions betray us and make fools of us. Mine have always done so. I want to put my heel on them and keep it there and be master of myself. I'm sick of being a weathervane. . . ."

And he spoke so earnestly, so fiercely, that Athene was silent and he thought she was convinced. He knew little during these early weeks of what she thought of his tremendous declarations or of her bewilderment. In one hour he would chart a course and in the next he would repudiate it. In one moment he would scorn romantic love, declaring it to be the darkness of earth; and in the next he would hang it upon the stars. He would declare writing to be the greatest, the noblest of all professions; and then he would dismiss it as vanity and rhetoric and pompous sham. Athene would argue and protest and upon her protests he would pile his scorn or he would demolish them with his nimble and specious dialectic. . . .

And so he lived for eight weeks, trembling in new hope and

strength, feeling a clear and steady sunlight upon his path. But he could not go on forever, drunk with poetry and ideals. The platonic ecstasies passed and they found themselves in love.

II

IN SIMPLE truth, though, Vridar was not in love with Athene at all: he was in love with those ideals which in his mind she symbolized. And he confused the two. And even after he became aware that Athene was a woman, and not a spirit out of Shelley, wandering far aloft, and that the relationship for her was not wholly platonic, he persisted in his romantic worship of an ideal. He even realized, after eight weeks, that she wanted him to kiss her, and he resented this, for he had been living above flesh and spurning it. It happened one evening in the hallway of the building where she lived . . . He knew by the way she looked at him that she wanted him to kiss her and he was disappointed and annoyed; but he said:

"Shall I kiss you?"

"If you want to," she said. Her voice was surprised and hurt.

He gave her a swift unimpassioned kiss, quite the sort he would have given to an angel; and then felt that he had degraded their friendship. Besides, kissing her, or thinking of her as a woman, made him feel guilty toward Neloa. He was determined, heart and soul, to be honest with Neloa. He had told her of Athene and of what they said when together. In October:

"Well, I've met a woman who understands poetry. She teaches here. She's a fine critic." He looked at Neloa. Her eyes were watching him intently and they were baffling eyes to read. "Do you care? I mean my talking with her."

"I guess not, if you just talk. But you'll be kissing her one of these days."

"Nonsense. It's only a friendship." And in November:

"I walk home with Athene nearly every evening. She's a very fine person. You'd like her. Anyone would."

"I suppose you mean," said Neloa scornfully, "that she likes you. I suppose you intend to ditch me now."

"We're just friends. I've never thought of her except as a friend."

"But you will if you keep fooling around with her."

"I won't. We talk of books and nothing but books."

"Oh, yes? Well, you'n find nearly anything in books."

And in December, after the kiss:

"Listen, Neloa, I want to make a confession."

"Oh, so I was right."

"Understand one thing: I'll be honest with you, no matter what it costs. Even if you learn to hate me, I'll always lay my cards on the table."

"Yes?" she said, incredulous. He didn't like her voice or her eyes.

"Yes. And here's the confession: Athene and I love each other."

"Oh, you do!"

"Yes, we do." Neloa laughed and her laugh was bitter. "I've told you," Vridar went on, "that we're not mated. Ten thousand times I've told you that. But you want to go on and make a mess of both our lives."

"You mean," Neloa asked, "that you don't love me any longer?"

"No. I do love you. I'll always love you. That's my tragedy but you don't understand."

"Then why do you want to leave me?"

"You don't understand, Neloa. I've tried to explain. You can't understand a man who would leave the woman he loves and go with another because his duty demands it."

"Duty!" she cried, and her scorn was overwhelming. "Why call it duty?"

"What would you call it? . . . Lust?"

"Yes."

He was furious. He paced the room, trembling with rage and despair.

"I might have known you'd say that! That's what the world would say! And you and the world, what do you understand?—except that human beings breed and die! Duty for you is buying food and diapers and sticking to your wife at any cost."

"And what does it mean to you?"

"Honesty with myself. It means simply this, my dear, that my work and the way in which I can best serve my race are my first loyalty. It means I'm a coward if I let anything stand in the way of that. But that sort of courage you don't understand and the world doesn't understand——"

"But why," she asked, quiet now in the face of his anger, "don't you leave me and go alone? Why get another woman if they understand so little?"

"I've told you why. I must have a critic. I must have someone whose heart is fixed in the same direction as mine."

"You mean you must have a bed-partner."

He swung to her, shaking with wrath.

"You'd put it that way! You'd drag everything into the bedroom! You can't understand anything——"

"I understand," said Neloa, "far more than you know."

"What, in God's name? It's all right with you for me to go on and be a small dink in a small place! If I never write a book in my lifetime, it's all right with you! Little enough you'd care!"

"But I don't see why you can't write books and live with me."

"Of course you don't! You think books are written out of lemon pie and clean bedspreads! Great books are written out of blood and suffering——"

"You suffer enough. You've done nothing but suffer ever since you married me."

"Shut up!" he howled. "There's no use talking! And I wish to God I didn't love you! Then I wouldn't have to tear my damned heart out and throw it at your feet to be a free man!"

"You're right," Neloa said. She shrugged. "I don't understand. I don't understand why you love me and want to leave me."

"No? And that thick head of yours doesn't understand why I want to leave you because I love you!"

"No, my thick head certainly doesn't. And no other woman could understand that, either."

"And does that surprise you? Women, what the hell *do* they understand, anyway?"

"But this—this Athene, she understands."

"Go ahead. Be as mean as you want to. But remember this: I'm being honest with you. I'm not dodging behind your back. And if you know another husband of whom you can say that, shout his name."

"But other husbands don't leave their wives if they love them."

"Nor afterward, the cowardly hounds! They run out and find a mistress. And here's another truth, Neloa, that will go over your head like an eagle: any man who wants to leave his wife or any wife who wants to leave her husband and does not is the dirtiest coward of all. And that includes a lot of your married men of forty.

"Anyway, what I want to know is this: why the hell do you want me to stay? You don't love me much. You don't think I'll ever give you a home or swell clothes or a race-track in society. A lot of women are dumb brood-mares who plot the best marriage they can; but if you did any plotting, nothing has come of it. I'll never be able to do much for you. I'll always be a poverty-stricken fool chasing dreams. So why live with me?"

"Because I want to."

"Would you live in an attic all your life and wear rags to give me a chance to write?"

"Yes."

"And live without friends? Be an outcast?"

"Yes."

"I don't believe it. And if you did you'd grow into a bitter old woman. What if I never made a go of it? What if at the

end of our lives you looked back on nothing but dirt and emptiness?"

"But we wouldn't."

"We might, damn it! I don't have a halter-rope on success. Even now you complain about not having clothes and you want a victrola. All right, with my last dollar I'll buy you a victrola. And you want a lot of friends. You like that big cockeyed ox up front and his tum-tumming on a banjo and his trying to write popular songs. And I hate popular songs: they're the most halfwitted banality on earth. And you like Horner, and what will he ever be but a talking-machine that plays the latest records? And you like that big vulgar monster of a nurse. And why not admit it?

"Neloa, the simple truth—and in the name of Jesus, I've told you this until I'm sick—the simple truth is that our levels of life are different. I despise fine clothes and manners and pomp and strut and empty talk. You hate the only way that I can ever have. You hate loneliness and living in starvation with books; but it's my life. In the name of God, let's be honest. Let's get down to bedrock and face this situation and meet it with courage. I'm sick of your pretending and of my hope that you're not pretending. I'm sick of detesting you in one minute and worshiping you in the next. I'm sick of pinning wings on you, only to see you go down in a vulgar sprawl. You like obscene stories and I hate them. You like obscene minds and I hate them. So let's be sensible and do what in all decency and courage we ought to do. I'm through with our mad heartbreaking life together. The God-damned skies can fall but I've made up my mind and I'm going straight ahead and neither hell nor high water can stop me!"

But Vridar was afraid, nevertheless, of blundering and it was over this fear that he agonized most. It was this and his deep and dark, his fatally tragic, love for this Antelope girl. He loved her with every violent surging ounce of his blood and heart and knew it; but he was ready—or believed, at least, that he was ready—to leave her and never see her

again. This, as he saw matters now, was the only way of courage and strength.

He wished—and in this he was wholly sincere—to see Neloa happy; and he realized that she had never been happy with him and would never be. She did not, it is true, look a day older than when he married her six years ago. In her prettiest dress she was a stunning vision of loveliness: no wrinkles had gathered to her eyes, no bitterness to her mouth. When he thought of her in another's arms, in another's home, jealousy rose and choked him; but he crushed it down. . . .

"The whole matter with me," he said to Athene, "comes down to this: duty and courage. I care for nothing else."

And Athene, saying little in these weeks, and more bewildered than he ever supposed her to be, would look with gentle pity at his white face. She was terrified by the wild darkness of his moods, by his stricken and abject loneliness; but he did not know.

"I talk with her night after night. I reason with her. I try to make her see what is best for both of us. She has threatened me with suicide and last night she said if I leave her she'll become a harlot. My God, what can I do?"

"I don't know," Athene said. Her eyes were very strange.

"But I'm going on," he said desperately. "I've been a coward too long. Perhaps Harriet threatened Shelley with suicide but that didn't stop him. He went. He had the courage and he went. And a world stinking of piety has condemned him ever since. Critics have written about the *ethical paradox* of Shelley. The asses! Athene, it's a hell of a world. People take the fruit of suffering and spurn the sufferer. His lines to a skylark the fools take to their hearts, but Shelley, no. They don't understand. They don't know that all that Shelley suffered is in that poem. If Shelley was immoral, then that poem is immoral from the first line to the last.

"Athene, I'm going on. We must. All we need is the courage. . . ."

And he asked himself again and again, in day and in night, if he had the courage. "Yes!" he would cry, and then be stricken by doubts. It was these doubts that led him to

write to Mertyl who was now in Baltimore; to explain to him the situation; to say: "It's my duty as I see it. If I am not mistaken, that is enough." And Mertyl sent this brief reply:

I have always thought it was an unwise marriage and if you have the guts I think it would be well to make the break. But I don't think you have the guts.

That settled it. Nothing between the sea and the sky could have stopped Vridar now.

III

HIS one fixed thought, standing within his mind at all times like a light, was to be honest and courageous. With earnestness that was frenzied he set his heart on both; nor did he ever doubt in the six terrible months ahead that he was being honest with Neloa, with Athene, with himself, or believe that his courage was less than he wished it to be. "I don't give a damn," he would cry to Athene, "what the world thinks of me! The only thing that matters is what I think of myself!" And to Neloa: "I won't be a coward! I won't stick around until we tolerate or despise one another, as married persons usually do! And everything that I believe and think and feel is said in that. . . ." And the matter came for him to embrace the whole integrity of his character and every ideal and thought which he cherished; and he could see only one thing to be done and he was willing to pay the price.

But this time, nevertheless, when noble purpose burned within him like fever, and when his courage stood invincible against all odds, was the most cowardly of his life. It was never, even in its must lucid moments, a deliberate cowardice. There was no furtive plotting. There was no weighing of his happiness against another's, nor, indeed, any thought of happiness for himself. No: it was the cowardice of

idealism that had neither flesh nor bone; of the blind and self-pitying earnestness of the zealot, the crusader, who stood in the terrible shadow of God. It was the cowardice to which the dishonest morality of his country and training and time had delivered him.

For this man had come out of a nightmare of loneliness, twenty-eight years of agony and the dark; and he was lost to himself, with all his ideals lying behind him in terrible memory, and with no anchor, no light. He still refused to admit the truth of himself or of his fellows: the superstition and cunning and greed, and all the dishonesties masquerading as high purpose, all the vanity pretending to be what it was not. Intellectually, he did; but emotionally, no fundamental truth had yet touched him. In the way of his kind, he lived in absurd and pitiful disguises; he had buried deep in his heart all impulses that seemed unworthy; and he refused to let his heart beat in the common and vulgar rhythms of truth. He had read Freud, and he had seen, and his mind but not his emotions had admitted, that most of Freud's premises were sound. There had come to him, like showers of flame out of darkness, the bright and swift intimations of what was true; and all these, as he read, gathered into appalling certainty, until he began to see his own pitiable soul stripped, one by one, of its masks, and the souls of his fellowmen, too; and in despair he laid the book aside. Reading Freud was like coming from underground into sunlight; and objects, instead of being alluringly vague in outline, uncertain in quality or kind, were starkly naked in truth. "If Freudianism," he said to Neloa, "ever becomes part of our social consciousness, all allegory will be dead. Art will become the parable of the skeletons."

Instead of going boldly to the truth now, he turned back in disgust. He turned back, feeling sick and undone. For there would come to him, white and terrible as acetylene flame, these intimations out of darkness; and he would read and meaning would gather to its light; and he would catch in an awful moment of certainty his erotic love for his sister or the ancient death of his brutality and cunning or the wild and un-

disciplined impulses of his blood and heart. These were the dark gods of D. H. Lawrence and they filled him with heartache and despair. And he would lay the book aside and walk, despising himself and humankind. He would lift his self-pitying heart in prayer to the sophistries of Spinoza, to the vast and cloudy nonsense of Plato; or from ten thousand sources in the world of books he would call to his defense the specious arguments of vanity and pride. "I'm not just an animal!" the coward in him would cry; and his mind would answer, *"That, and nothing more."*

"I've no wish to copulate with my sister! It's silly!"

"Incestuous thoughts lie in the heart of every grown person alive."

"But a man doesn't want to be intimate with his own kin!"

"He's a bull with his daughter, a bitch with her son."

"It's preposterous to say a babe is erotic!"

"If there's no truth in Freudianism, why does it make you furious? To get an explosion you have to pull a trigger. . . ."

And one evening he said to Athene:

"You ought to realize at once that there are two quite distinct personalities in me. Let's call them X and Y. X is credulous; believes in human beings; seeks only what he calls the beautiful and good. But Y—do you know what Y is like?"

"I've seen him," Athene said. "I'm not sure I like him."

"Y is an ironic realist. He knows what human beings are like and looks at them in the detached spirit of the scientist. X sees the earth peopled with fallen saints, struggling heroically to regain their heaven. Y sees a vast spawn of apes with the jungle in their hearts. For X human beings are generous and warm-hearted; for Y they are more ferocious than the tiger and more venomous than the snake. . . .

"Don't you like Y at all?"

"Not much. He has no heart."

"If he has enough mind he doesn't need a heart. Well, my ambition is to become all Y, all searching unpitying mind. I want to stick this God-damned X under my heel and crush him. I'm sick of his bellyaching about beauty and goodness

and progress. I'm sick of his trusting persons and forever getting stung.

"But you're in love with X."

"Yes, of course."

"Telv," Vridar said. "In my thoughts he is Telv."

It was these two personalities, unreconciled, bitter, almost vindictive in their feud, that made Vridar dishonest in these months. He could not have been otherwise. When with Athene —and when, indeed, with Neloa—the one personality or the other was in power. In one hour he was a lonely person with haunted eyes and a great love and sympathy for humankind; and to its service he would have given his life. . . .

"All I want, Athene, is to be with you and my work. I'll not care about poverty. I'll not care if I'm an outcast. Will you?"

"No," she said, but she hesitated.

"I feel an awful loneliness tonight. It's the great and tragic loneliness of humanity; for no matter where you go, in what country, in what home, you'll find that terrible being shut up with self. Is there no escape from it?"

"With one another. We can build our lives into our work."

"And you want that, Athene? More than all else?"

"Yes, more than everything."

Or within his home he would watch Neloa and it was this part of him that loved her with hopeless love.

"Neloa?"

"Yes?"

"Do you hate me yet?"

"I guess so."

"I don't hate you. I'll always love you, always."

"Bosh!" she said.

"You must not have loved much if you can hate so quickly."

"What is there left to love? You go out and see her and then you want to come home and love me!"

"It's true," he said simply. "But I love you, that's why.

Neloa, do you care if I lie on the bed a few minutes with my head in your lap?"

"Why should you?"

"I want to. Darling, please."

"I'm not your darling! Call her your darling now."

He went to the bed and lay down with his head in her lap. He reached for an unwilling hand and brought it to his lips. She drew her hand away. He looked up and saw the pitying scorn of her eyes.

"Hate me," he said. "But I love you, my dear. I'll love you to the end of life."

Or when the other personality held him in power:

"Listen, Athene, I sometimes think you want to be nothing but a society matron after all. Do you find sorcery in a silver tray with a calling-card on it?"

"You're unfair," Athene said. "Every woman, I suppose, is a little interested in those things. But neither that nor anything like it is my chief interest."

"Have you ever examined the motive behind social aspiration?"

"I haven't thought much about it."

"Or about anything? You haven't a notion, I trust, that I'll ever turn a critical eye on a butler or finger a cane down the park avenues? Do you imagine there's anything between us after all? And tell me: where did you get your romantic notion about love? What makes you think that moonlight is an inseparable part of your destiny?"

Athene gave him a steady searching stare. When his intelligence was sharp and ruthless, she hated him, and he knew she hated him; and the knowledge turned his whole mind into a sardonic epigram.

"Have you ever pondered the relationship between darkness—and most love, of course, is made in darkness—and the wearing of clothes? Do you imagine our jungle ancestors mated chiefly by moonlight? Well, many garden odors are, of course, a faintly pleasant aphrodisiac."

Athene looked helpless. She looked as if she wanted to get away from him. He grinned and studied her face.

"You seem," he went on, "to have lived in a nunnery. But gardens and moonlight, when all is said and done, have so little to do with love. Of much greater importance are taxes and bad breath and ipecac. . . ."

Or when with Neloa:

"It's funny, isn't it? Here we are, with our marriage ark tossed up like a rowboat on a reef. We're in mid-ocean and we don't even have oars. Don't you think it's pretty funny?"

"No. But you seem to."

"It *is* funny, Neloa. Now think a moment. Two persons fall in love. That means chiefly that they want to get a license to copulate. They think they'll coo like finches until they die. And a few years later they find themselves with their faces flattened against a wall and the devil kicking their pants. Don't you think that is funny?"

"But you," she said, "are in love again. I guess you think you'll coo longer this time."

"No. That's the funniest thing of all. You took all the cooing out of me."

"There wasn't much in you," she said.

"That's right. I've never filled the bedroom with murmuring sweetness. But do you think any man does?"

"I guess so. They're not all like you."

"If none of them were," he said dryly, "I'd be happy. The unique thing is the only happy thing."

"I suppose," said Neloa scornfully, "that *she* is unique."

"God no. But she isn't happy, either. She's beginning to find out what a fool I am."

"Fetch her to me. I'll tell her."

"Would you? Neloa, why, if you think I'm such an ass, do you want to stay with me?"

"I don't know. I'm a fool, too, I guess."

And when the two personalities possessed him they rent him with conflict and bred violence and hatred. Then he cursed and wished himself dead. When he was in these moods, Neloa was driven frantic, and Athene, too, and neither knew

what to do with him. He terrified both. He heaped abuse upon everything under the sun and blasphemed until he was spent and sick. For between these two personalities, there was no friendliness, no peace; the one was exiled into dark idealism, the other into tremendous scorn; and it was impossible for him to be honest with Neloa and Athene and with himself. Honesty he hungered for, and courage, but the paths to them were lost. He could only go ahead blindly, as he was going now, and let the weeks build to a crisis.

IV

THIS was in January. It became known in the department that Vridar and Athene were much together. They sat together in the classrooms and they were together in the library study-rooms and the halls. And knowledge of all this Vridar saw in the eyes of his instructors: eyes amused or pitying, or solemn with doubt. To Athene he wrote:

I think it best for us not to meet at all. Out of an interval will come to you a clearer recognition of what you should do. If doubts and duty, or a combination of these, declares the folly of pushing our relationship, I shall accept your judgment. Let time clarify. We must determine what is the most honorable thing to do. . . .

And Athene wrote in answer:

I think you are right. If we meet less frequently or not at all, we'll see more clearly what is the best thing to do.

And so for two months they rarely met but they wrote to one another long letters, and these record all their doubts and despair, their loneliness, their struggle to be honest. A subject Vridar touched on again and again was doubt of himself.

It would be cowardly to leave his family, he said, if nothing was to be achieved thereby except pleasure for himself. "If I don't have the stuff in me of a writer, then I should stay where I am and mow lawns and play bridge. And how, in God's name, am I to know? Now and then I deeply feel the power in me; in other moments I seem to be only an appalling egoist with an armful of chaff. This uncertainty is driving me mad. For there is no answer to it; or, if so, where?" And Athene wrote:

If you fall short in achievement you will think you could have served better where you were. There is only one answer. Search yourself, feel beyond the shadows, look at past achievement in an effort to measure your capacity, and so find something for faith to rest on. In my moments of strength I see the future as something that must be achieved by suffering, struggle, and doubt even; and in my moments of weakness we seem to be only two romantic fools. You feel that only the strong should be individualists, forgetting that only the strong can be. Only the strong can face the future with heavy odds against them. I see it this way: courage to recognize and admit mediocrity in oneself is a mark of greatness; and on the other hand, it is stupid cowardice for one who knows he has wings to refuse to use them. I can say I believe in you; but that, I realize, is not the certainty we need. . . .

Or he would write of his children, declaring they would be as well off if they never saw him again. "I've been a hell of a father. I've been too turned within, too wretched, to give them a father's care. And besides, the paternal affection in me seems dead or unawakened." And to this:

Although you deny a strong affection for your sons, they are much closer to you than you will admit. Their education, and the appeal to the best in your wife, are what worry you. If you are to miss the star you aim at, you had better have fulfilled old responsibilities. Often I think if we had parted a month ago, we would have been wise. The generosity in

you and your fear of doing the wrong or the cowardly thing keep you in doubt. I think you cannot stand the strain of another year. Most of your agonies, I know, you keep to yourself and I want to share them; for we must see our way through this in common understanding if we are to see it at all. . . .

Most of Vridar's agony, it is true, he did keep to himself; but now and then he poured his heart out.

Great God, I've suffered today! I'm desperate! If suicide were not cowardly, that is the way I would take. For I know deep to the bottom of my soul that you wish to get away, that you wish you had never met me. I know! I'm sick of reaching to you and finding you are not there. My thesis on which I have worked two years has fallen through. My eyes are worse. My doubts multiply. Athene, I don't want you unless your conviction of right is deep and unshakable. As it is now, I'm only a pitiable boy who reaches to you, and you're only a mother who pats my head. I'm sick of that!

Postscript by Y: X, the insufferable fool, spent a bad night but will kick out of it. Don't be alarmed. I'll poke an ironic finger at his prodigious bellyaches and fetch him around. He will write again in this mad and chattering vein; and he will plan, laying great ideals to his feet like a carpet; and he will hate and blaspheme until he is white. But I'll let you know, my dear Miss Marvell, how his pulse trots. And believe me, dear lady, in this affair which so distresses both of us, your faithful

Y.

And Athene, ignoring Y's postscript, replied:

It is the bitterest thing of all to know that in your hour of deepest need I am somewhere alone, thinking of you. Believe to absolute knowing that you can come to me anywhere

at any time and be sure of my response, as I am sure of yours. Please see me today for just a little while.

It was in this evening that Vridar went to her home. She was living with a married friend, Janice Storr; and both Janice and her husband Arthur, a small immaculate prig, Vridar heartily despised. They affected radical points of view and talked in measured rhetoric of the unhappiness of the working-classes, the benefits of old-age insurance, the yellow dog contracts. And two days later Athene told Vridar that Janice found him unschooled and uncouth. He listened to her and hid his fury and when alone he wrote this letter:

I care no more about Janice Storr or her opinion than I do about the earth under her—which is hard on the earth, for I love it. Her superficial brain, her shadow-boxing with theories, her fatuous desire to please: all these I detest in her as I detest mucus and dung. But what concerns me is not this empty and pitiable friend of yours but what I saw clearly in your eyes and heard in your voice. In telling, you rebuked me; because you, too, find me unmannered and wanting in grace. Let me make it plain: you wish I had more of what your friend clearly perceived I do not have.
That I am unpolished, I admit; and I do not take pride in my boorishness. I do not dislike formal clothes and manicured toenails merely to dislike. I prefer a woman beautifully gowned to one who is dirty and vulgar: yes, provided that her refinement does not feed on vanity and scorn. Give her a parlor to sit in if her husband has not exploited the weak to get it. The ugliest thing in life for me is persons sitting in immaculate duds and talking their superficial cant of the suffering of the world. I hate them with inexorable hatred. Am I clear?

I prefer one dirty unclean fellow talking in a drizzling rain to the unhappy and homeless of Chicago to all the cat-loving Janices that Christ could crowd into another ark. I prefer the respect of one honest man, doing a man's work, to seventeen thousand Janices sent from hell to add silly

chatter to confusion. Now I care nothing for Walt Whitmans and I take no stock in Bobby Burnses. My place, nevertheless, and understand this, is with the common people. There are murderous Fourniers among us who carry squirrels on their shoulders; Marats who rear doves; and thousands of women who kiss cats and hate their own kind. Let them be. Blood and revolution will record them in the footnote where they belong.

And that is my answer, with this added: if there is any Janice in you, our ways lie apart.

He posted this letter and at once wrote a second, but the second was written by Y. It said:

DEAR HARDY'S SUE:

Here is an analysis. The most striking omission in you of the values which make for a sane life is a sense of humor. What you have runs to the funny and superficial, rather than to the ironic and profound. You perceive incongruities, deficiencies in outline and form, certain improprieties; and the aesthete in you notes and smiles. You miss the distortions, the posturings of vanity, the ego's cluck and strut. In any serious preachment of the gospel of love, comedy lies in great abundance; but not for you. Our own affair, dear lady, is high comedy, and we are, from any rational point of view, two side-splitting clowns.

And, too: you have not learned that thorough deliberation makes any action impossible; because resolves, when deliberated, are revised or endorsed by different moods; and the Ironic Muse allows only fools to arrive at certainty. Nor do you understand this X whom you profess to love. He, who loves humanity, avoids it; you, who rather despise it, want to be a butterfly in its suns. The great lovers of humanity have always withdrawn from it. X is wholly unconventional and you are conventional to your bone. A Harvard professor once said the crowning glory of civilization is a group of per-

sons in elegant clothes talking in a drawing-room. You fall hard for all such sophomoric trivia. The life of X is not fenced around with murmured nothings and salad-forks. You are afraid of public opinion and he cares no more about it than about the sneeze of a Mrs. Vanderbilt.

Now all of this you should understand. Love him if you must but realize that he is all fury and dynamite. I, who sit on Olympus, you scorn, and that is very well. But do not scorn this attempt to clarify for you the headstrong fanatic whom you profess to love. For my part, I find him amusing and sometimes intolerable; and quite the sort whom romantic schoolgirls would adore. I find in him the artist and zealot and martyr of all ages: a sometimes lovable, a sometimes most incredible, fool: humorless, drunk with ideals, and wholly mad. Out of his sort you make the Shelleys; out of my kind come the Bismarcks.

As always, in this unhappy affair, your faithful

Y.

Athene's answer to this X read with his heart pounding, and Y, aloof and amused, read, too, and smiled.

I do ask at times if it is all worth the effort. But the thought of poverty or of social ostracism does not bother me. I am not sure that I love you as deeply as I desire to and I fall in a rage with myself for sleeping soundly when I know you are pacing the streets. I don't doubt my affection for you; I doubt my depth. I have never loved anyone to the point of great sacrifice; and I wonder if any of the girls who have wanted you would still want if they knew what their love would have to face. I doubt it.

Call me a moral coward. But I like the ideal figure of Emily Brontë: the world has never learned more about her than the barest facts. It seems to me that many of our greatest have left little knowledge of themselves for condescension to pity. I guess that is caring what the world would think. But to

me the beauty of Shelley's elopement is that no one knew how it came about and no letters remain.

I ask: If Vridar were to die, would I return to the herd? Indecision in this whole matter is playing hell with me. Every step of the way I have refused to decide anything until you forced me. I have wished I had the courage to renounce you but I cannot because I cannot convince myself it would not be cowardly. As it is now, you have fought desperately to awaken my latent radical tendencies and you are worn out. It is time for me to stand on my own feet. Ever since we met you've been holding me up and leading me and giving me courage. But, damn it, when I think of your children I'm shaken. If we strike out together at so much cost to others, *we must be right,* and who is to say? It is a matter I cannot settle in a few weeks nor perhaps even in a few months. . . .

For weeks Vridar had known of these doubts in Athene, these hesitations; he had known she wished deeply they had never met. And this knowledge filled him with despair. Not that he ever questioned the wisdom or the courage, or even the honesty, of leaving his family and going with her—until her own doubts led him to question. In his heart was a vision of Shelley and he never wavered or thought of turning back.

And now, after reading her letter—which was a farewell, he knew, if he wanted to make it so—he entered an afternoon of storm. He walked bare-headed in wind and sleet and came to a drugstore and bought a pint of whisky; drank of it and went west with the wind to Washington Park. And all night he wandered here. The wet snow soaked him to his hide and he was cold; and when his whisky was gone, he bought another pint and drank again. Once in crossing a street he was struck by an automobile and left for dead. "I'm all right," he thought, lying in a pool of mud. "A drunkard never gets hurt. . . ."

Dawn was coming now. Entering a wet jungle he took his clothes off and twisted the water out of them and shook them in the wind. Then he left the park and walked the

streets. A smoky field of light was spreading in the east above the gray waste of Lake Michigan. He was standing on a corner, shaking in the wind, when he saw Athene. She was running toward him and he knew it was Athene but he did not care. She came up and looked at him with anxious eyes; she grasped him and saw that he was wet and she moaned with grief, her head on his wet breast.

"I knew!" she cried. "I knew you were out in the night! O Vridar!"

"What?" he said.

"Vridar, tell me! What is wrong?"

"Nothing," he said.

"Tell me! Has she——?"

"No."

"Thank God! Then what is it?"

"Nothing. I'm just out strolling."

"And you've been out all night! I knew it!"

"How?" he asked, speaking without interest.

"I just knew. I felt it. I couldn't sleep. . . . Oh, I thought you had killed yourself!"

"Oh, did you?"

"And I thought—I was afraid——"

He came to life and swung to her and looked at her eyes. He understood now. He knew now what he had seen in her wild stare.

"So that's it!" he said. "You thought I'd killed myself. And you—you were afraid a newspaper would get hold of your letters. Was that it?"

"Yes," she said.

He swung and left her. She came after him, crying for him to stop; but he pushed her away and went on. He turned once and saw her far down the street, under rain and fog, staring after him. And he despised her. For in this whole matter he had no wish to spare himself and he was not afraid of public opinion. And to learn that Athene, believing him dead, had entered the night to recover her letters—such cowardice was not a part of him.

Going to the basement he stoked the furnace and stood

in its heat, drying his clothes; and then he carried the garbage out. Upon entering his rooms he set a half-pint of whisky in a closet. Neloa was preparing breakfast and when she looked at him there was triumph in her eyes.

"All night," he said, "I've walked in the rain."

"You must have quarreled," she said. "Or maybe you're falling in love with a third woman."

"No, my dear. Just convinced that all you women are alike."

"You mean you're finding out she's no better than I am. That's too bad."

"Byron was right. He slept with you and then booted you outside. You think of men until you're pregnant and then you think of cradles."

"Oh, you don't say."

"Women live with their viscera and chiefly with the lower half of that."

"Indeed. Well, I'm glad you've found it out. If we're all alike you just as well stay with me."

"A sensible man doesn't stay with any of you. He lives alone."

An hour later Vridar sent this letter to Athene:

By insured mail I'm returning everything I have of yours. I don't want mine. What I've written the stupid world may read any time it chooses. You are free. We cannot go on together if either of us is afraid of the world because most cowardly things will be said of us and we'll have few friends. To go with me a woman must have courage to face anything and that courage, quite obviously, you do not have. Good-by and good luck.

And Athene wrote in answer:

I will come to you in the way you want me to come. Everything that I am or might be must go with you or must die. I cannot accept the freedom you offer; if I did so I'd not

love and I do love. I do have the courage. I'll face anything. I've fought this thing through and this is my answer and I am ready.

V

VRIDAR now set about to give Athene enough courage to face scandal and the world. "This stinking pious world," he said, "loves persons who suffer and cry to God. It does not love and has never loved persons who get down off their cross and chop it into firewood. If we are convinced we are right, then we must be ruthless. We must burn our bridges and shut off all retreat."

"That," said Athene, "would not be a worthy way. If we want to retreat we should."

"No. In moments of weakness persons always want to turn back. The ruthless mind must chasten the doubting heart. In great achievement it has always done so. The pilgrimage to higher things has always left behind it the bones of the dead. . . . "

And night after night he reasoned with her or spurned her and she remained unconvinced. She could not forget his children, his wife. She did not have his ruthless and indomitable will.

"But why always talking about my children? I'll take care of them. I'll educate them."

"But your love for them, what of that? You cannot be with them."

"I know it. But I can't have everything. And besides, I'm not one of these doting fathers. I don't regard it as a miracle that I sired a son. And I think children ought to be taken from their parents. If they were, nine tenths of the world's misery would disappear."

"Just the same, I can't feel right about it."

"You're sentimental."

"Perhaps. But I can't destroy in a moment what twenty years have built."

"Athene, you're dodging again. If you want to leave me, say so."

"I don't. I'm merely trying to look into the future. You think there isn't much paternal love in you but it's dormant, that's all."

"With me it's not a matter of love. It's a matter of duty."

"Oh, I know. It is with me, too. But if I take a father from his children, what have I to give? How can I know I'm worth it?"

"How can I know *I'm* worth it? We're taking our chance. If we have the courage, we're worth it; and if we haven't we're not."

"Anyone could say that. You could justify anything by that."

"It's hopeless," he said. "I don't want you if you'll forever be turning to might-have-beens."

"And you, won't you ever?"

"No!"

And little he knew himself in that!

This whole question of his worthiness, not Athene's question but his own, filled him with desperate heartache. In a thousand hours and almost in as many ways he strove to see himself clearly and to judge of his power. He would read his verse, his prose; he would sit in brooding meditation, trying to sense his depth and reach.

"What if I do become a writer of consequence? What will that mean? It is all vanity and ego and withering nonsense."

"But nothing we know of is greater than a great person."

"What of it? Flies perhaps envy wasps but what the hell do wasps amount to? Let the wasp aspire to the eagle, the eagle to the stars; but even the stars are only a mad journey in a darkness."

"Yes, but it's not the achievement that counts. It's being true to the best in us."

"Yes? But how do we know what is best in us? Who got

the notion that writing books is a decent thing to do? It smells pretty damned indecent to me."

"You don't mean that."

"I do mean it!"

"You don't. To be true to yourself you must write."

"I'm not so sure. Authorship is probably another Sahara of sand."

In April the doubts and questions between them reached a small crisis. Vridar took Neloa to a dance. Now and then he had taken her to a theater or to a dance because her unhappiness tortured him. But in this evening she outraged him and he hated her; and he called Athene and she met him at midnight in the park. . . .

"She wanted some ice-cream. I had only fifty cents and told her so. She chose a twenty-five cent dish and ordered two. The bill when it came was sixty cents. Well, I suppose I'm a fool about such things but I was burnt up with humiliation. I told the waitress I was short a dime but would bring it in a moment. And Neloa said, 'Oh, go get it now!' I knew what she was thinking: that others watched us, that they thought us cheap. I said, 'But it should be only fifty cents. It says so on the menu.' And she said, 'Do you expect all that service for nothing?' And then I saw red. God-damn it, I bought the clothes she was married in! And she said I was cheap!

"And I'm sick of it all. What a mess, what a fool's life! If I had no children, I would kill myself tonight. For I'm sick, Athene, sick! I won't go on this way. And every time I see you, you have a new litter of doubts. You will argue us both into lunacy. We've got to settle this matter and settle it in a hurry or say good-by and be done with it. I tell you I can't go on this way!"

And now Athene spoke to him gently, quietly, and the pain and bitterness left him. The self-pity left him, and he became all mind, sharp and ruthless. He despised himself for his confession; for everything that in twenty years he had said and done. And as he listened to her he became annoyed, for

he did not want gentleness and pity; he wanted to be scourged.

"Listen, are you always going to be submissive? I want a woman whose mind will strip me to the bone and help me to a decent strength. Haven't you understood that?"

Athene was furious. He had never before seen her in a rage.

"Listen, are you trying to unmake what you've done to me? When I try to lose self in you, then you reproach me! I think you're not worth it! Damn it, I think you want me to be a woman! A coquette, a siren, a come-hither thing!

"Listen, my dear, one part of you is laughing at both of us all the time. One part of you, the poet, is frenzied; the other is sardonic. If I appeal to the poet, you try to murder me with epigrams. If I appeal to the thinker, you say I have no feeling, no heart. Now just what in hell do you want anyhow? You'll force me to my old conviction that the only way to handle a man is to be unattainable. I know: my partial surrender is cooling you. You don't want me when you think you can get me. Is that it? Then you scrutinize our love and laugh.

"But understand this: whatever happens, you have shaped me to an attitude of life toward which I can never be false. I'll live by that. And right now you make me doubt, not your nobility—I'll never doubt that—but the worthiness of your interest in me. Well, if most women do not seek goodness, neither do most men. Always till tonight you've stood immeasurably above other persons; tonight you're at their level. And don't think I can't be all mind if I try. But you wouldn't want me then. And I wonder, Vridar, if you really know what you do want."

He shrugged, feeling sick and worthless.

"I don't know," he said. "I wish you would hate me. I wish the world would hate me. Then I'd have a definite foe, out in the open. As it is now I fight the dark."

It seemed to him upon reflection that he was not being ruthless enough. Athene had the strength to follow but not to lead and he realized now that he would have to take to

himself most of the responsibility and find in himself most of the courage. "If honesty and right are to survive in this world," he wrote in his journal, "they must have dictators and the dictators must show to cowardice and stupidity no quarter. Every generous heart must have a small Machiavelli in the mind. Otherwise, it breeds only compromise and distortion." And he resolved to hold Athene unwaveringly to the course they had chosen and he decided that sexual intimacy was the only thing that would fix her heart and mind.

With him this decision was not related to passion at all. He had never wished to embrace her; he had never been deeply shaken when she stood against him, his arms to her waist. Sexual passion in him, when aroused, was a violent hunger, and he sank under it, with all his blood wild and undone. But in this matter between him and Athene, between him and Neloa, he was so bent on worthiness, on high and splendid courage, that all sensual pleasure was exiled to the dark. If it lived in him, if it ever reached out to Athene, as, indeed, it did, he was unaware. Nor did his decision have anything to do with joy: like Wordsworth's ode to duty, which, in many ways, had inspired him to these ends, it was stern and unpitying; it was the shadow of God and right.

"Call me an ordinary male," he said. "I accuse you of being shallow. Sexual embrace for you is a sonnet, as it is for a lot of poets."

"Vridar! You know that isn't true."

"You're bogged in platonism."

"Oh? And who taught me but you? You were the platonist. It was you who said we'd have only a beautiful friendship."

"That was months ago. We decided it could not be. You helped to decide that."

"I'm not so sure. You've decided nearly all these things."

"Please don't sidetrack this thing. I was speaking of your shallow emotions——"

"And you're dishonest in talking that way."

"Then why——"

"Because I don't want it like that."

"Oh, nonsense. You want to be banked around with tulips."

"Now you're being silly."

"You're romanticizing. We have to be realists in this matter. We can here. Here are trees and flowers and birds——"

"And human beings everywhere."

"We could find a place. You're dodging, Athene. What is your real objection?" She looked at him, ill at ease, her eyes doubting him. "Tell me. Let's be frank about it."

"Well," she said, "you don't really belong to me yet."

"How? What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean. You still live with your wife."

"Oh, damn that argument! I'm sick of it. That is plain confounded casuistry. Four walls don't make a wedlock. . . . "

Night after night they met and argued. They had come —and this he perceived unerringly—to a crisis: if Athene did not yield now she would never yield. They would go on, week after week, adding evasions and doubts to their problem.

"You may as well say, my dear, that you don't want intimacy with me."

"That's not true. You're the only man with whom I do want it."

"Thanks. I'm overwhelmed by the evidence."

"Now you're being unworthy again."

"You know what I've a mind to do? I've a good mind to rape you. That's what you want. That's what any woman wants deep in her heart."

"Oh. Has someone told you that?"

"You women tell me in everything you do. . . . Well, shall I?"

"There's no use talking when you're like this."

"I'm serious. It has taken years to drive that recognition down my pious throat. If a man breaks you to it, you idolize him."

"You really think so?"

"I know it. But I don't imagine I could. If a woman fights against a man I'm the sort of kindergarten oaf who thinks she means it. Some biology goes deeper than my sense of what is decent. Right now I know you want me to take you and I'm a fool not to do it. . . . Well, shall I?"

"If you insist."

He turned away, feeling helpless.

"But I don't want you that way."

"I knew you wouldn't," she said.

And three nights later:

"Listen, Athene, I speak now as a realist: if we are going to make a go of this, we need more than idealism and rhetoric. Do you understand that?"

"I know what you mean. But if we must be intimate to keep one another, our relationship is not worth keeping."

"And I retort that if our relationship is so damned timid and wavering it is not worth keeping. Then let's say good-by and be done with it."

"You don't mean that."

"I do. It's my solemn conviction that we've been miserable cowards. If this thing doesn't mean enough to mean everything, then for me it means nothing."

"You're an extremist, as usual."

"As you please. But I'm done with argument. If we're to be only friends, all right. If we're to build our lives together we'll start right now. I know. You think I'd be a traitor to my wife. But I'll tell her, damn it. From start to finish in this matter I've laid my cards on the table."

"No, you won't tell her. If we do this, it's to be between us."

"Why?"

"Because I want it that way. I insist."

"But I think I ought to tell her."

"No. I'm too sensitive about such things."

"Well, all right," he said at last. "Tomorrow afternoon we'll go to a hotel."

This was late in April. From time to time, but not often, they met in intimacy of flesh; and these meetings did for Athene what Vridar had known they would. They fixed her heart and courage. She was now ready to renounce relatives and friends and face the scorn of the world. She had been wavering but now her courage was magnificent.

And Vridar, with Athene ready to follow where her heart led, turned to his most difficult task. He had to reason with Neloa and give her philosophy and strength; and also—but this he only vaguely realized—he had to tear out of his being this girl whom he had worshiped for eighteen years. This he imagined he could do; and so, indeed, he might have, had he not been lost among ideals. The Y of him said, When there's a sickly adolescent to be hanged, hang him; but the X of him recoiled. The poet in him, the child, the zealot, still sat at Neloa's feet.

And because of forces beyond his control, motives that blurred his recognitions, he entered into the most terrific struggle of his life. Not his sufferings in adolescence, not his agonies of self-pity and rage during his courtship, were such frenzied heartbreak as that of the weeks ahead. This fight he made alone. Athene had been driven to decision and was ready; and Vridar perceived, however obscurely, that it would be ironic, it would be pitiably silly, to go to her and say, This struggle is killing me. I want my wife, I want you. I want, I need, you both.

Hour after hour he talked with Neloa. She had never been convinced that he loved Athene or would go with her; but on a morning in June she became convinced. She rose from a chair, shaking as he had never seen her before; and she looked at him and tears filled her eyes; and in a voice of utter despair she cried, "O sweetheart!" The cry went into him like a knife. No bitterness in life, no pain, had ever equaled the bitterness and pain of this moment. In silence he looked at her and knew that she loved him; and there was nothing to be said, nothing to be done. If she had scorned him, if she had heaped abuse upon him. . . . But to have her cry out of that awful heartache; to know, after all these years of doubt and loneliness, that she loved him: and to have love spring within him to answer love: these two: these who had loved in childhood and still loved, with dark and terrible passion—this he could not endure. He rose like a whipped thing and left the room.

In this hour, in these weeks to come, it was only thought

of duty that kept him alive. He wanted to kill himself and his wish was deep and hopeless. If he could have done so, he would have laid down his life to make these two women happy; and he would have done it gladly, in utter content. If he could have done so, he would have turned time back to the last October, revoked all that had happened since then, and gone with Neloa to the end. But he owed a great debt to Athene now. She did not know of his desperate love for Neloa. She did not know of his desperate struggle now. And how could he go to her and say, "I've blundered. I love my wife with a love I can't shake, can't destroy. I must go with her." How could he say, "I'm sorry, deeply sorry. But I'm a fool, born to the tragic, and you must learn to despise me as you should have despised me from the first." Or how could he say to himself, to his own integrity, his idealism and self-esteem: "You had the courage once to break free and give your life to service. You have faltered. You haven't the strength, the courage, and you have failed." And he could not. He was caught between two forces that he could neither understand nor conquer: an unreasoning love on the one hand, a conviction of duty and courage on the other. He had set the stage and shaped the plot. "All these matters," he said to Athene, "Shelley and Mary discussed in the graveyard. He had children. I suppose he loved Harriet, too. But honesty called to him and he went."

VI

AFTER that one moment, the only moment in all her years with Vridar in which she stood spiritually naked, Neloa retired again into scorn. It was her defense and Vridar knew this and he prayed that scorn would support her. He invited her hatred and abuse.

"I've told you I'm not worth loving. It's time you came to your senses."

"I know it! Great God, I've known it all the time! You're made of clay and cheap clay at that!"

"I admit it. I'm a scoundrel at heart."

"I feel sorry for her," Neloa said; and she had said this many times. "The silly fool! I'd like to meet her and tell her some things."

"I wish you would. If you both hated me I'd not say a word. But don't claw. I'm not worth a fight."

"I know you aren't. But don't fret. I'll just tell her the plain damn truth and be friends with her."

"Do it by all means. I ought to go alone. I ought to be punished from sunup to sundown and flogged while I lie in bed."

"You're not worth a woman's love."

"I know that. You've told me ten thousand times."

Or he talked with her about what she would do.

"You'll marry again."

"Of course I will. You don't think I'll break my heart over an egg like you, do you?"

"I hope not. It would be awfully silly."

"Don't worry yourself. I won't. I'll get a decent man next time."

He looked at her, thinking of her in the arms of another. It was this furious jealousy that he had to fight against.

"Any man you please," he said, "as long as he's decent with our kids. I won't let any man abuse my kids."

"Oh, won't you?"

"No."

"Listen, that's my business. I'll pick the man I want. I didn't pick your woman for you, did I?"

"No. But the kids are not going with me. Neloa, understand this: the man you choose will treat my kids right or there'll be hell in your camp. There'll be murder."

"Yes?"

"Yes!"

"But why should you pick my husband if I don't pick your wife?"

"I'm not picking him! Let me take the kids and you'n have any man you want."

"Oh no, you don't. The kids go with me."

"Then they must have a stepfather who will love them." He rose, shaking. "Understand that. I've seen some stepfathers. No son-of-a-bitch knocks my sons around."

"No?"

"No!"

And she came to the usual question.

"If you feel that way why don't you stay with us?"

Or now and then, because Neloa wanted them, Vridar invited guests in. They were tenants in this building of which he was still the janitor. Ash Bingham and his wife Dolly were a strange pair. Ash was enormous and fat and had a glass eye; Dolly was a short plump dumpling of a woman with one leg four inches shorter than the other. They had been in vaudeville. The consuming desire to Ash was to write popular songs and when he came to Vridar's room he brought his banjo and strummed and sang. His one eye would turn about, looking now at Vridar, now at Neloa; and the other eye remained fixed.

Ohhh, it ain't a-gonna rain no more, no more,
Oh it ain't a-gonna rain no more!
How in hell can the old folks tell
It ain't a-gonna rain no more!

"How much you think the guy made off a that song? You think that's a swell song? I got one as good or I'm a big cheese. Ain't I, Dolly?"

"You're sure a big cheese," Dolly would say, smiling, with gentle pity in her smile.

Then Ash would fiercely thump his instrument and turn his good eye on Vridar. He would gather fresh ardor. And often when he sang he would shut his good eye and leave the other to stare straight ahead, fixed and unblinking.

Ohhh, a man laid down by a sewer
And by a sewer he died,
And the coroner said I guess by gosh,
I guess it's sewercide!
Oh, it ain't a-gonna rain no more, no more. . . .

Neloa was greatly amused by his clowning and Vridar was pleased because there was so little joy in her life now.

And there came to their rooms often a nurse and midwife named Kate Ryan. She, too, was almost lost in flesh and fat, but she was a spry woman and carried within her a great hunger for men. To Vridar one day Neloa said, "You know when you went in to fix Kate's radiator? She says she could hardly stop throwing her arms around you. She's mad about you."

"The hell she is."

"Of course," said Neloa, speaking out of one of her rare moments, "I don't understand that. I've never understood why women chase you."

"Neither have I. Why don't you ask the women?"

"I asked Kate. She doesn't know, the big silly."

Vridar did not like Kate and he did not like Neloa's close friendship with her. She had a lewd and spermy mind and she made obscene jest of everything related to love. She had a husband in New Orleans.

"Once in a long while he blows in to see me, his breath smelling of raw eggs and raw oysters. He makes love like the very devil for one night and then he's off again. Boy, he's sure some man when he's all steamed up. . . ."

And there were the Haddocks. Albert Haddock had been shell-shocked in France and was now a graduate student, living on his government pension. His wife Maude, much larger than he, was a stupid, unhappy woman with a cynical smile. The thoughts of both Albert and Maude, like the thoughts of Kate, ran to obscene little parables. Vridar saw that Albert was infatuated with Neloa, and Neloa a little with him, and that Maude looked on in cynical astonishment.

In his journal Vridar wrote:

Last night Kate and Albert and Maude were in. Said Kate, "Today I saw a white woman with a Negro." "The hell," said Albert. "Well, maybe she had a little Negro in her." "Not yet," said Kate, "but she soon will have." And they all laughed at that.

Neloa is trying to bring Albert to her feet; and will, I imagine, because he seems to like her feet and her legs: he stares at them often enough. I made the remark that I was going to get Neloa some malted milk and eggs so she could put on some weight. Said Albert, "You know what I'm thinking?" I suppose I looked blank because he added, "I'll bet Neloa does." Perhaps she did. The underground deviousness of filth eludes me.

Yesterday Neloa was talking with Kate. Haddock, it seems, cut Kate's hair; and while cutting it he said, "I cut Mrs. Johnson's, too." Said Kate, "Oh, I thought I cut hers." I could see nothing funny in that. I said so. And Neloa, vexed, exclaimed: "Well, you dumb egg!" I remembered then that Mrs. Johnson had recently given birth.

I don't understand Neloa's love of the dirty. I can understand filth in a person who is sexually perverted; in men whose frigid wives deny them; in any person who has made a stinking thing of love and in whom shame is the smell of a dungpile. But I don't understand Neloa's eager joy in it. It burns me up; for I've laid almost twenty years of worship at the feet of this girl. She and Haddock are getting pretty intimate. How intimate they have been I do not know. It is, of course, none of my business.

Vridar never reproached Neloa for her relations with Haddock. Perhaps these were only gentle flirtations in the halls or only friendship in the evenings when he was away. But his jealousy was frenzied and made nightmares of his sleep. He was trying with all his strength, with all his courage, to set Neloa free and let her go her own way. He was trying des-

perately in every hour to take her out of his heart and his life and to build a new life without her. But he fought furiously and in vain.

And during these weeks he was, in spite of all he could do, a coward with Athene. For now, having fixed her purpose and her courage, he was turning back into his old bondage, into his bitter dead years. She suffered patiently and waited; but on an evening late in July she spoke out of the anguish of her heart and he sat like a whipped child under her stinging rebuke.

"Listen, Vridar, what do you mean by your sheepish statement that this is not your night out? You sound like a pitiable dog, double-leashed: to me and to her. Don't you realize that I don't want the gestures of love and the cheap disguises? The trouble with you is that you have lost the conviction you are right. You know that. Until you find it again there's no use to think of our going on. There's only one life I want to live; but I could go with you and not have you, and I could leave you and you would always be with me. And I won't be tortured any longer! I won't, I tell you, I won't!"

"Please!" he said. Her voice was hysterical.

"But I can't stand it any longer! There's only one way to be honest with me: take me into your heart and keep me there or let me go! I know now that you love your wife. There's no use pretending you don't. And if you don't want me, in God's name say so! I won't stand this doubt any longer!"

"But I do want you."

"You don't! You're deceiving both of us. Is it because I'm not so lovely as your wife? The smell and touch of me and the sound of my voice are still strange. Is that it? The love between us has sunk no roots. But we can quickly undo all that we have done——"

"But that would be cowardice. That would be to admit that I'm a slave to unreason. I can never admit that."

"Well, I'm tired, Vridar. Take me or let me go. I can't endure this any longer. More and more of late you come to me and you don't want to come. Your heart is with her.

Don't you think I can see that? Great God, don't you think I have any pride? I've been trying to be fair and generous but I won't be a fool."

With his mouth white and his heart sick he faced her.

"With all the strength I have, Athene, I'm fighting to be honest with both of you. If you want to leave me, I shall not say a word. But I'll not go back to her. I'm going to leave her if it kills me and nothing in life is any more certain than that. But I must do what I must. I must do what I can to put her on her feet. She threatens me with suicide. I think the threat is a bluff to hold me; but I don't want to blunder this thing and you don't want me to. I don't want to suffer the agony that Shelley must have suffered. God knows I'd do the right and brave thing if I only knew what it is. I have desperate struggles that I tell you nothing about because I wish to spare you. I have scorn and torment in my home from morning until sleep again. I'm doing my best. I talk with her and try to reason with her every day. I'm drawing on every ounce of courage that I have. If I lie in that, may God strike me dead.

"But if you think it best to leave me, do so."

"I don't want to leave you."

"Then you must be patient a while longer. As soon as I think she will do nothing rash, I'll come to you and we'll go."

"Then you will never come. She will always threaten you."

"Not if I can teach her to hate me. I'm trying to."

"But dear, that isn't the real trouble."

"What isn't the real trouble?"

"Her threats. That's not it."

"Then what is the real trouble?"

For a long moment Athene's gaze was steady and searching.

"It is this: you've turned away from me and back to her."

"It's not true!" He considered. "No," he said, "it isn't true."

He lied but he did not know that he lied. He had turned back to Neloa and he had been struggling in her power like a thing in a trap. And she knew it. Two weeks ago she had begun to work in a fashionable downtown cafe. Vridar was

not in school now and he cared for their sons. She was paid nine dollars a week and she received almost that much in tips; and all this she spent. She bought cosmetics and hair-waves; she bought inexpensive dresses until she had a closet full of them; she bought hats until she had seven. She affected long nails and polished and colored them. She rouged her cheeks and mouth, put mascara on her lashes, and perfumes and powders on her body and clothes. And Vridar watched her and said nothing. He felt that he had no right to speak, though believing, nevertheless, that she was being ridiculous. She now treated him with gentle scorn.

"How do I look?" she would ask; and he would sit like a doleful clown, lost in his own tragic melancholy, and stare at her.

She told him of men who proposed to her in the cafe; of men who gave her large tips; of men who strove to kiss her or drive her into the country after work; and of men who followed her home. And Vridar wanted to yell, "Get that stuff off your face! You're my wife and this is your home!" But he had no right to say that. He had maneuvered and plotted and this radiant girl who smiled at him and said, "Good-by, my dear. I'll be home, I guess," was part of the result. She mocked him and pitied him and he writhed in silence and said nothing at all.

But one morning, seeing her so lovely, so vital with warmth and womanhood, he wanted to take her in his arms and kiss her; and she rebuked him with magnificent scorn.

"Go to *her*, my dear. She's your sweetheart now." And Vridar, pitiably silly fellow that he was, caught and held between two forces, stood in helpless indecision and looked at her. "Have you quarreled?" Neloa asked; and her eyes for a moment were large and bright.

"No."

"You getting tired of each other so soon?"

"Go to hell."

"I learned something," she said. "I thought you said she was a middle-aged woman?"

"I never said it."

"Well, I saw her yesterday. She's just a schoolgirl, poor silly thing."

"Where did you see her?"

"That's my business, darling. I see a lot of things."

"A lot of men, you mean."

"I sure do. And you'd be surprised to know how many want to sleep with me."

"A lot of men sleep with anything."

"Oh, I don't know. You think I look so bad?" And she turned round and round on her high heels and smiled at him. "For a woman with two sons I could look a lot worse. Darling, don't you think so?"

Vridar restrained his jealous fury and let her do as she pleased. He was convinced now that she did not love him and never had and that she wanted to leave him. This was his blundering mistake. Not now, not until it was too late, did he realize that she was trying desperately in a woman's way to hold him. This, to be sure, was only part of her motive. She liked the sort of work she was doing and the gay life of the cafe and the interest of men. She was still a child and her delight was a child's delight.

And Vridar, thrown back in spite of his most heroic efforts to his old idolatry of her, lived through the terrible days in utter heartache. Athene knew he was close to a breakdown, close to wild and uncontrolled insanity; and she wrote, unknown to him, to a great psychiatrist in Boston, asking advice. Two or three times in every week she saw him and she was very patient and gentle. But as the days passed Vridar found himself only the more hopelessly lost, with Neloa as the lovely and tyrannical queen of all his thoughts; and it is hard to tell how this struggle would have been resolved if another man had not entered the plot.

He was a German immigrant and his name was Heinrich Timm. For two weeks Vridar did not see him. Neloa spoke of him and she said she was going to marry him when she got a divorce.

"Do you love him?" Vridar asked.

"Oh, I don't know. But he'll be good to me. He's crazy about me."

"And our kids, will he be decent with them?"

"I guess so."

"You guess so! To hell with guessing! You'll have to know." And on the next day he said: "Before my kids go to him I'll have to see him. I want to size him up."

"All right, darling, run over and see him."

But Vridar did not. He sat in jealous misery, thinking of this man. He wanted to kill him. He wanted to say to him, "I love this woman as you will never love her. Be good to her or I'll cut your heart out." And so terrible was his madness in these weeks that he could have done precisely that.

But he did nothing for two long weeks. Most of the evenings he remained at home and Neloa went out with the nurse, Kate Ryan. He did not know where they went. He did not ask. And after trying in vain to play with his sons or to read a book, he would sit through the long evenings with his head bowed, his ears hearing the clock. Sometimes she borrowed Ash Bingham's banjo and took it with her and early in one morning when she returned the banjo was broken. He did not ask what she had been doing or how she had broken it. "It's none of my business," he thought. "I'll be fair with her. . . ." But a day came when he could endure no more and he broke and went mad.

VII

HE CAME home on an afternoon early in September and found Neloa there with Kate and Heinrich Timm. Timm was playing the victrola which Vridar had bought for Neloa. Kate, enormous and calm, was listening to "Dream Daddy" and Neloa was sitting on a couch by the window. When Vridar came in she looked startled. He glanced at her and at

Timm and went to the kitchen but he did not remain there. He returned to the doorway and stood there with his arms folded and looked at Timm.

Neloa did not introduce the man. In one moment she smiled at Timm's broken English; in the next she looked alarmed, as if a hand had touched her, and the smile left her face. Timm had come in and taken possession of this room as if he lived here and as if Neloa was his wife. All this Vridar sensed at once. And he saw, too, that this man was both arrogant and vulgar; his witticisms turned to the obscene; and his loud laugh was a laugh of self-approval. And Vridar's heart sank. How could he give Neloa to such a man as this!

He stood in the doorway, helpless with misery, his gaze fixed unwaveringly on Timm. This was the sort of man he had always despised: a loud empty fellow in love with himself. Timm's cockiness, it seemed to Vridar, was amazing. He played the victrola and chattered, or he did dance steps, or he approached Neloa as if she belonged to him in the way of his necktie and his shoes. His nonsense made Neloa smile, even made her laugh, save in those moments of alarm when her eyes turned to Vridar.

"Vutt ish the matter?" Timm asked, cranking furiously at the victrola. He fell to his knees and looked under it as if astounded. "Vutt can ze matter be? Neloaha, do you unterstan? Mein Gott, vass ist? I feel all—all like a vummun mit her panz down. Ja!" He glanced at Vridar. "Der Geschmack ist verschieden," he said.

This thrust made Vridar furious. But he did not speak. Neloa did not understand it but she laughed like a child in pain and Kate roared as if she were all diaphragm and sound.

"Ich can nicht unterstan," said Timm again, and with elaborate curiousness he looked behind the victrola and all around it. "Haben Sie die Güte zu tell me, Kate. Es muss etwas los sein. Himmel!" Again he glanced at Vridar. "Mein Schätzchen, nicht wahr?"

Vridar ignored the question. He knew now what he had known all the while. He knew that Timm and Neloa had lain

in sexual embrace and this certainty filled him little by little until it was the only recognition in his mind. He turned away, with his senses swimming. If, years ago, there had been no lovers before him and if he had not suffered such anguish of hurt vanity and pride, he might have saved himself now. But there was no ironic Y to whisper, "She has done only what you and Athene have done." He was thrown back in overwhelming darkness to all that he had suffered as a child and as a young man. It was all with him now. It was heaped around him in violent madness and it held him as a man is held in the moment of death.

He paced the kitchen, realizing darkly that he was close to ruin. He knew that he would have to fight out of this, and quickly, or be forever lost. And as soon as Timm and Kate left, he entered the room where Neloa was sitting alone. He stood before her, trembling; fighting against this dark possession of his senses; and he looked at her but he could not see her clearly.

"So you have already given yourself to him."

"I have not!"

"You still lie to me. After all these years you still lie."

"I'm not lying!"

"You are. Neloa, please don't lie. You've lied so much."

She rose, with terror bright in her eyes, and tried to face him; but she could not. She sank to the couch and trembled. Vridar drew close to her and spoke again.

"Neloa, don't lie. You've given yourself to him."

"All right! And what if I have?"

"Nothing. Just this, I mean: that—that you should give yourself to a vulgar man like that. For you don't love him, Neloa. If you loved him it would be different. But for you, the girl I worship, to hold herself so cheap. May God curse me. May my heart be torn out of me and fed to the wolves. You, whom I'd die for, to be so cheap. Your hair, your feet, everything about you is dearer to me than my own life. And all of it, all of it, you treat like a common harlot. You—I have no right to speak. I'm not rebuking you. I'm just saying that

I'd rather you had killed me. If you'd chosen a man you can respect, a man worth you. . . ."

He stopped, overcome. He could not see her now. She was lost and he was lost and he no longer understood that he was here in a room, speaking to her. He looked around him but he could not understand. There was no meaning; and he and this girl, here in the silence, with only her eyes alive of all things around him—there was no meaning in them. For he was not here but in Antelope, kneeling at her feet, begging her to say it was not true; and he was in Idaho Falls, lying with her on a bed, with his face in her hair and his heart in her heart; and he was alone on the gray hills, listening for a cowbell: all these years were in this moment and buried him and there was nothing else. He swayed and the world turned black and unknown to himself he dropped and lay still.

When he came to he was in a bed in the room where he slept alone. Perhaps Mertyl had put him there. Mertyl had come two days before and had grinned at him with thoughtful pity. Or perhaps Albert had put him here. He sat up in bed, wondering what the time was, and if Neloa was asleep in the other room. He left the bed and went tiptoe to Neloa's room and saw that she slept. He went over and knelt by her. He kissed her hair spread in blackness over the pillow and one of her hands. He looked at his sons: they were asleep, too. For perhaps an hour he knelt here, looking at Neloa's face and kissing her hair and wondering why his love for her was so deep. Then he returned to his room. He sat on the bed with his face in his hands.

Rising at last he entered the hall, moving quietly, wondering what he intended to do. As nearly as he could tell, he intended to kill his family and himself. But how? he asked, softly, patiently, within his mind; and looked for a weapon. He had no gun and he could not use a knife. Going to the basement, he searched there, lost to himself and lost in wonder about what he would do. A force stronger than his own will was leading him and he was a child, eager to obey. He found clubs but he could not use a club. He would have to

kill them in a swift clean way, without blood and pain; and with a club he could not kill himself. "How can I do it?" he asked, speaking aloud. Going to the furnace, he read the meters; he saw piles of newspapers and these he baled; and all the while the thought of murder was a waiting and patient thing in his mind. When the baling was done he explored again and climbed the stairway and went into empty rooms, looking for a gun. He went into Neloa's room and looked at her.

Then he put on his clothes and left the building and walked the streets. He stared at the houses, wondering in which one Timm lived. It seemed to him now—but the thought was very quiet—that he ought to murder Timm. Then he knew that he did not want to kill this man. Returning to his room he sat on the bed, trembling, and wished deeply that he had a gun. Daylight was coming now. Going to the bathroom he thrust his head under a faucet and let cold water pour over the back of his neck; and he let it run over his wrists and the veins in his temples; but it was of no use. Water had no power to cool this fever in him. He wanted to look in a mirror but he did not dare: he was afraid of his eyes. Taking all his clothes off, he sat waist deep in cold water but he did not feel the cold. He was annoyed and he let the cold water flow away and sat in hot water but he could not feel the heat. He could not be sure which was hot and which was cold and he thought perhaps they were both tepid. Leaving the tub, he rubbed himself vigorously and dressed; and he was wondering all the while where he could find a gun. . . .

When he entered his rooms, Neloa was getting breakfast. He sat on a chair and looked at her; and little by little the drugged patience left him and he was a wild man, goaded to more than he could endure. He began to shake, and he shook so that he stood up; and sweat burst from him and his face was like wet chalk.

"Listen!" he cried, and his voice shook like his body. "My kids can't go with that man! You go with him if you want to! But if you go with him, the kids stay with me!"

Neloa had withdrawn from him but now she rose to her

fullest height, like a snake ready to strike, and came toward him.

"You can't take my children away from me!" Her voice rang. Her eyes were terrible with fury and hate. "I'll die first! You'll have to kill me first!" And Vridar faced her with rage more terrible than her own.

"My sons can't go with him!"

They stared at one another and Neloa faltered and broke. The fury left her and she looked haunted. She sank weakly to a chair, still looking at him; and Vridar spoke out of the bitterness and despair that choked him.

"For eighteen years I've loved you! I've been a fool, a fool! You've put me through hell! But my sons are going to have a decent life and I mean that if I have to commit murder! I won't let them go with Timm!"

For a long moment he was silent, looking at her.

"If you want to go with him, go. But I'll take my sons and educate them. If I have to I'll give my life to them. But they'll never live with that man and that's final."

Again he was silent. Then he said:

"I could never have left you. I know that now. For months I've fought to get away and I couldn't! I couldn't! You have me under your heels! You've had me there for all these years! All these years, great God, I've been bound to you with chains! And I couldn't have gone with Athene! I could have died and only that. And now—you, the very heart of my life, have given yourself to him when there was no love. No dignity, no pride. And I must go now. If during these God-damned months you had been proud and silent, refusing to stoop to meanness, I would have been yours to the end of life. The whole past would have been wiped out. But now—now I must go. This is the end." And he swung and found the rear door and left the house.

He had not gone more than forty yards when he heard her call his name. She cried *Vridar!* and the cry was ringing and wild and he stopped as if he had been struck. He turned. She stood on the back porch and she looked like a strange wild queen; and high in her right hand she held a full glass. And

while he stared, transfixed, she cried, "Look!" and drained the glass. Then with a magnificent gesture of disdain she hurled it at him and it rolled to his feet.

For another long moment he could not move; and in this awful moment he doubted, not knowing whether she had drunk poison or had pretended to. And when at last he came to sudden quick life, he seized the glass and smelled of it and the smell was of lysol. He dropped it and leapt to the porch and he swung the screen door so violently that it was torn from its hinges. In almost the same instant he was standing before her and she was sitting on a chair, her arms folded, her face set in a strange smile.

"Great God!" he said. "Neloa!"

He sprang from the room and leapt up the back stairway, six steps at a time; and on the third floor he yelled, "Mertyl, come quick!" and turned back, leaping down the stairs; paused on the second floor and swung wide the door to Haddock's apartment; shouted, "Haddock, come! In God's name, quick!"; and in less than ten seconds was facing Neloa again. She sat as he had left her, smiling, her arms folded on her breast.

"Great God!" he said. "Neloa!"

The next few minutes were nightmare and he was a wild man who had lost all touch with life. And yet he moved swiftly, unerringly, without a lost movement or a lost word. It was madness all around him and in his mind and heart; and it was clarity, too, as vivid and certain as a blade; and he cut through the darkness, knowing everything that he did and everything that he must do, and yet knowing nothing at all. He sprang first to the closet and seized the half-pint of whisky he had put there; and before Mertyl came in, he poured it down Neloa's throat. He leapt to the closet again and came out, smashing eggs into a bowl; poured milk over the eggs; crushed the eggs and the milk with his hands; and grasped Neloa and poured the bowlful of stuff down her. Albert was here now. Mertyl was here. But their presence Vridar felt only vaguely; for his whole being was fixed on Neloa and he was imploring her to fight.

"Sweetheart, please! In God's name, please, please!"

But she did not want to help herself and he was frantic. She did not resist but she did nothing to aid him. He raced about the kitchen, looking for other things to pour down her; he sent Albert scurrying for a doctor; he called Mertyl to his side. "Help me make her vomit!" he shouted, and he dragged Neloa to the sink and thrust a finger down her throat; and failing in this to make her vomit, he shoved a greasy rag into her throat and shook her and called to her all the while to fight out of it. But she was scornful of his efforts and she laughed. Her laugh was wild and desolate. It was so bitter that he was horrified and he shook her with all his might and talked to her, begging her not to die. Finding nothing else, he dissolved soap in warm water and poured it down her. There was foam on her lips now. She was bending over the sink and he was by her, his arms around her, his stricken eyes watching her face, his wild voice shouting in her ears.

"Sweetheart, please help! In God's name, please! I'll do anything! I'll be your slave! I'll give up writing, everything! Neloa, I love you, love you! Please, please, for me! . . ."

She was retching now but she could not vomit. He took soft grease and poured it into her mouth and with her eyes shut, her body shuddering, she swallowed it.

"Darling, fight! For me! Great God, I'll do anything!"

She raised a hand and wiped foam from her lips. She was convulsed with agony and she sank, trembling, in his arms; and he lifted her; and in this moment she spoke.

"Not even for you now," she said. "Not even for you."

If the words had been a knife that laid his heart open he could not have cried with more intense agony. He glanced around him for poison, intending to drink it, but he could see none. Gathering her in his arms—for she could no longer stand—he carried her to the other room and laid her on the bed.

"Where's that doctor?" he yelled.

Everything was dark now. The world was mad and there was nothing in it but horror and death. Mertyl cried to him that they would take her to a hospital and Vridar grasped her

and with Mertyl's aid carried her down the hallway and to the street and put her in a car. He got in with her and held her in his arms and the car went down the street. It came to the Midway and stopped and Vridar yelled, "Go on! For Christ sake, go on!" It waited here for what seemed to him ages. He broke into hysterical profanity and cursed until he choked and his vision darkened; and after they had crossed the Midway and were going down Sixtieth Street the driver stopped and said he was out of gas. Vridar sprang out and called to Mertyl to help him and together they carried Neloa down the street. They were white with exhaustion but they ran with her and came to a hospital and carried her inside and laid her on a bed in a small room. Then Vridar ran down a corridor, shouting for a doctor; and found a doctor and laid hands on him, trying to drag him to Neloa; and the doctor threw his hands off.

"Come quick! My wife is dying! She's drunk poison!"

"I'm busy," the doctor said sharply.

"Come please! I'll give you anything! I'll give you my life!"

"I'm busy, I told you! You'll have to wait."

"But I can't, she's dying!"

Frantic, Vridar ran through the hospital, seeking other doctors. He found others and begged them to come but they all said they were busy. Then he leapt up a stairway and found nurses and implored their help; and some of them looked at him in amazement, some in pity; but none of them would come to his aid. He laid shaking hands on their arms and out of a white mouth he begged them, his voice ringing and wild; but they all said he would have to wait. Wait, with Neloa dying! He became so desperate that he ran to every person he could find and his voice was so crazed that he terrified the persons. He followed them. He ran up stairways and down and up again. Not for a second did he pause in his wild effort to find help. And he was completely out of his wits now. This hospital was only a morgue and these white-frocked nurses and doctors were creatures of death. They were intimate with death. They lived with it and watched it and their hearts were as dead as the dead things around them.

Sweat was pouring off him now. It was running down his body and his arms and it was drenching his clothes. His mouth was bloodless and wet and his eyes were such eyes as nobody here could look at. And still he ran, a trembling drenched apparition, imploring help. Then Mertyl came to him and said, "The doctors are working with her now."

"They are! Thank God, thank God! Mert, will they——?"

Mertyl looked at his brother's awful white mouth.

"I don't know," he said.

Vridar ran to a door and looked in and saw doctors busy with Neloa. All the emotion of his being was now gathered and banked around his heart; and he felt that at a touch, a word, it would blow him to pieces; and in the power of it he shook so that he could not stand and had to lean against a wall. He bowed his head and moaned. The frenzy in him was waiting—waiting to break and destroy. He stood by the wall, shaking uncontrollably. There was froth on his lips and in his mouth and he tried to spit it out and could not. He wiped it off his lips and shook it from him. And he knew—this he realized in the deep dark part of him—that he was at the point of breaking, and that if he broke, he would go mad and never return. He fought against this darkness, this sucking at his mind, this terror of blood pouring through his heart; and now, as in former years, he tried to speak, wishing to break the silence; but he could not speak. He could only shudder and moan.

And then Mertyl came to him and spoke.

"Buck up, old man," Mertyl said.

"You mean—you mean——?"

"It's all over."

For one long moment Vridar wavered. In this instant he could have been swallowed by darkness, hopelessly, forever; or the awful flood could have poured out of him in violent grief. And in this long moment he stood, transfixed, between the two. Then with a cry he broke and fell as if he had been struck, and out of him, in grief that was screaming, came the desolation of his soul.

VIII

MOST of what he did in the next two days—or, indeed, in the next two months—he could never remember. Darkness closed in and he was lost. His grief was the deep and tearless grief, nameless, unreal, of the person who walks from a death-cell to a scaffold. It was the same horror, fixed in ghastly calm. Because for him the whole world now was mad and he saw it around him, not as human beings and machines, but as aimless movement; heard it as meaningless patter and cry; smelled it as lysol and hospitals and morgues. It was in a building advertised as A Home for the Dead that he faced a coroner and a jury; but he was so sunk in darkness that the questions he did not understand and did not answer; and he looked at the coroner and the men and did not see them at all. Mertyl took him away from here. Mertyl took him to a hotel, and he and Albert spent the night with him, giving him drugs to make him sleep. News reporters came but they looked at Vridar and asked no questions and quietly let themselves out. And it was in this night—or was it in the next morning?—that he stole away with only one thought in his mind. He went to his dingy little apartment and looked in, expecting to see Neloa there. He entered and softly called to her; and when he heard echoes in the walls he thought she was here; he was convinced she was here; and he ran from room to room, looking into closets, calling her name. "Neloa!" he said, and he listened, as years ago he had listened for cowbells. From room to room he went and he felt among her clothes to see if she was hiding there; or looked under the bed; or went to the back porch. Here he saw the glass. He went out and took it and smelled of it. Then he knew she was not here and he began to shake and there was only one thought in his mind. He went, trembling, into the kitchen and searched for poison; looked among all the dishes

and in the stove; in closets and in trunks. Finding no poison he looked for a knife but all the knives were gone. Then, as quickly as it had come, the wish left him and he was convinced that Neloa lived. He went to the bathroom, searching for her; entered the basement and looked into boxes and behind bales of paper and the furnace; returned and climbed the stairways and searched in all the vacant apartments and rooms. From place to place he went, whispering her name. Then he came to her clothes again and felt of them and kissed them; and he was still seeking, quietly, desperately, when Albert found him and led him away.

On this day—or was it on the next?—he was taken by Mertyl to A Home for the Dead. A man here was very friendly and full of jest and whistling and Vridar was afraid of him. Then he understood that Neloa was somewhere near and he wanted to see her. He told Mertyl he wanted to see her and Mertyl went to a man and the man led Vridar into a hallway and opened a door.

And Vridar expected now to see Neloa alive. He had no power to understand that she was dead. And now he shook terribly as he stepped into a great room and closed the door behind him; and he stood here by the door, shaking from head to feet, and looking across the room. He saw Neloa across the room and she was very quiet and he did not understand. "Neloa?" he said. He waited; and then, "Neloa?" Very slowly he tiptoed toward her, his eyes on her face. She was lying in a white gown with her arms at her side. Half across the room he stopped and gazed at her; and again he said, "Neloa?", but very softly now; and again he tiptoed. He came to her side and looked down at her. Her eyes were closed. There was a smile on her white face and it was the smile that he had known and loved; and there was brown stain on her lips, her chin; but he did not see the stain. "Neloa?" he said.

Then he heard a sound and listened for a long moment, with wonder taking him; and he screamed, so sudden and terrible was his joy. "Neloa, I knew you weren't dead!" He

bent over her, waiting for her eyes to open, her lips to speak. For a full minute he waited, scarcely breathing at all; and then he felt surprise and the surprise grew into astonishment, for Neloa did not open her eyes or speak. He bent lower, his face close to her heart; and in this body that he worshiped, looking so queenly under the white gown, he heard a strange gurgling. Swiftly he touched her hand and it was like ice; her white cheek, her throat; and shrank back, horrified. Then he sank to his knees with one arm reaching over and around her, with his hands searching for her life; and his hands came to her hair, spilled about her, a black mass under the whiteness of her; and he clutched it and smelled of it and it was alive. He buried his face in her hair, smelling of it, breathing of it, until he felt again, deeply, that she was not dead; but when he looked at her he saw only the awful white calm of her face and arms. Again he touched her flesh and found it cold; again buried his face in her hair and sucked its familiar and fragrant life into him, trying desperately to make her live as her hair lived. It was the same hair in which, night after night, he had laid his face, breathing of it; the same which, in all their bitter years together, had hung around her and been his.

A man knocked on the door and he was startled and rose to his feet. Then he remembered. He remembered that scissors had been given to him and he drew them from a coat pocket and from her proud head he cut a small armful of this which still lived. He shoved it into his pockets, filling them with it. Then he kissed her cold white arms and hands, her burnt mouth, and the eyelids upon her closed eyes; and he patted her gently and said, "Neloa, I love you." He crossed the room to the door and stopped and looked at her again; and all the anguish of his heart broke into a cry. He ran back and put his arms around her and knelt, with his cheek to her cold cheek. And he was still here, kneeling, holding her close, when two men came and led him away.

A little later he was in a car with a man, going through the city. Was Mertyl with him? When looking back on this

hour, Vridar could never be sure. The man talked but Vridar did not understand what the man said. The day was wet and gray, with rain falling, and with Lake Michigan rolling in gray surf. Vridar rode along the shore and looked at the desolate waters. Somewhere, in another car, Neloa was riding, too; and Vridar could think only of her, alone in a cold hearse, going through this gray wet city; and of these surging waters, beating at the piers. And then the car left the shore and in a little while it stopped. Vridar got out and saw that he was in a lonely place with a strange building. With the man he entered this building and he heard a great roaring and at first he thought he heard the lake. Then he knew he was listening to a furnace; he knew this was the crematorium; and he saw a long box and knew that Neloa was in the box. He went to the box and laid his hands on it; and when the man came to him he said: "I'd like to be alone with her just a minute."

The man left the furnace room and Vridar stood alone, with his hands on the box where Neloa slept. He knelt to the coffin and bowed his hand and made this vow:

I'll try to go on and do my work and care for our sons. I'll try to have the courage and strength. I will take seven years—because we lived seven years together. I will spare myself nothing and I will be honest with myself and others. If at the end of seven years I think I have failed and that your sacrifice was made for nothing, I will follow you into death. All this, Neloa, I swear by the love I have for you. And you, darling, wherever you are, let your spirit be with me and support me.

He rose, shaking, and three men entered the room.

"Are you ready?"

"Yes," he said.

A great iron door was swung wide and Vridar looked with horrified eyes into a red and raging furnace. The men grasped the coffin and raised it and Vridar with an awful cry sprang to stop them; but two other men came in and held him and he saw the coffin shot into the flame and saw the great door

close. With sickness overwhelming him he fought toward light and air. Behind him he could hear the roaring of flame and he was so sick he vomited and two men held him and one of them wiped froth from his mouth. And again he rode by a desolate shore, under a desolate sky. Wind whipped at the car and rain was driven against the windshield. Wind was driving over the lake and water was piled in long reefs and heaped to foaming crests and spilled. Far out were boats, tossing against a gray sky.

And the stately ships go on
To their haven under the hill. . . .

And in Vridar was the sound of driven waters and of hungry flame; these and the echo of an iron door. There were stately ships, there were havens, but not here, not here. There was only a waste of sky here and a waste of sea; and blind rain on the windshield; and blind streets. Neloa was out in the sky now, a part of the desolation; and this was the great backdrop of their lives together and of their farewell. She was beyond reach and at peace and he was still here in the anguished darkness of a wild earth. Never again would he hear her voice or feel her touch—never, in all the eternities of time. And the absolute finality of such a farewell he could not understand. He forgot the beating rain and the sound of the furnace and the sound of the sea. He bowed his head, drawing away into utter loneliness; and he wished with all his heart that he had been with her in the flame, that he could be with her now in the sky. . . .

But O for the touch of a vanished hand,
And the sound of a voice that is still!

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