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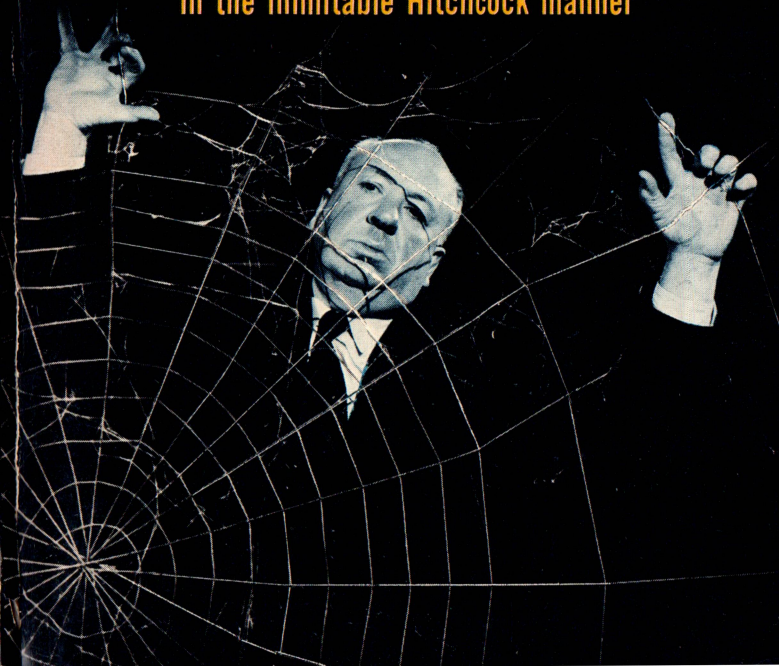
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ALFRED HITCHCOCK PRESENTS:

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MORE OF MY FAVORITES IN SUSPENSE

**Six ingenious stories and one exceptional novelette
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ALFRED HITCHCOCK
presents:

**MORE OF MY
FAVORITES
IN SUSPENSE**

A D E L L M Y S T E R Y

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Preface

After spending a week end in the country, a friend of mine invariably sends his host a book. Recently it occurred to me that through television I have spent many evenings in your homes yet I have never thanked you properly. Ergo, this book. Of course I don't believe my friend charges for the books he sends, but no matter. It's the thought that counts.

Most prefaces soon become defensive, disintegrate into lengthy explanations of why certain stories have been chosen, and the anthologists quickly become apologists. The stories in this volume have only one reason for being here and that is explained in the title. I can only say that I like them. I very much hope that you will too.

A suspense story is not simply a Who-done-it. It might better be called a When's-he-gonna-do-it. I don't think I'm giving away any secrets when I tell you that in most of these stories somebody *does* do it. So don't say you haven't been warned.

There are those who say that the reading of a mystery or suspense story has a therapeutic value cleansing one of his homicidal tendencies and allowing him to enjoy those crimes he has always wanted to commit but didn't because he lacked the get-up-and-go. If this is true, I think we have crimes to relieve

every possible suppressed desire—or at least all the normal ones. I am confident that several of these cheerful little stories will put an end to the loose talk about truth being stranger than fiction.

I don't wish to spend too much time introducing these tales. I believe it was Henry James who observed, when speaking of prefatory pieces such as this, that when a work of creative literature is introduced to the reader at great length, when fiction is too carefully interpreted, explaining and annotated, it is like having a dinner guest brought to the house by a policeman. This is the last thing I wish to do. I much prefer that you feel that this dinner guest to whom you are opening your home is a complete stranger and that there is no policeman within screaming distance.

And now, if you are anxious to curl up with a good book, perhaps we should be getting on. (My final parenthetical remark: the only things I know of that actually like to curl up with a good book are the silverfish in my basement.) When you begin reading, may I suggest you choose a time when you are alone in the house. If there are people there, get rid of them. The book is full of suggestions of how this can be accomplished. Now turn out all the lights you possibly can, look over the stories and take one before retiring. If you want to sample another, help yourself, but be careful. An overdose could be fatal. After all, this is a highly toxic book.

ALFRED J. HITCHCOCK

More of My Favorites in Suspense

Of Missing Persons

JACK FINNEY

Walk in as though it were an ordinary travel bureau, the stranger I'd met at a bar had told me. Ask a few ordinary questions—about a trip you're planning, a vacation, anything like that. Then hint about The Folder a little, but whatever you do, don't mention it directly; wait till he brings it up himself. And if he doesn't, you might as well forget it. If you can. Because you'll never see it; you're not the type, that's all. And if you ask about it, he'll just look at you as though he doesn't know what you're talking about.

I rehearsed it all in my mind, over and over, but what seems possible at night over a beer isn't easy to believe on a raw, rainy day, and I felt like a fool, searching the store fronts for the street number I'd memorized. It was noon hour, West 42nd Street, New York, rainy and windy; and like half the men around me, I walked with a hand on my hatbrim, wearing an old trench coat, head bent into the slanting rain, and the world was real and drab, and this was hopeless.

Anyway, I couldn't help thinking, who am I to

see The Folder, even if there is one? Name? I said to myself, as though I were already being asked. It's Charley Ewell, and I'm a young guy who works in a bank; a teller. I don't like the job; I don't make much money, and I never will. I've lived in New York for over three years and haven't many friends. What the heck, there's really nothing to say—I see more movies than I want to, read too many books, and I'm sick of meals alone in restaurants. I have ordinary abilities, looks, and thoughts. Does that suit you; do I qualify?

Now I spotted it, the address in the 200 block, an old, pseudo-modernized office building, tired, outdated, refusing to admit it but unable to hide it. New York is full of them, west of Fifth.

I pushed through the brass-framed glass doors into the tiny lobby, paved with freshly mopped, permanently dirty tile. The green-painted walls were lumpy from old plaster repairs; in a chrome frame hung a little wall directory—white-celluloid, easily changed letters on a black-felt background. There were some twenty-odd names, and I found "Acme Travel Bureau" second on the list, between "A-1 Mimeo" and "Ajax Magic Supplies." I pressed the bell beside the old-style, open-grille elevator door; it rang high up in the shaft. There was a long pause, then a thump, and the heavy chains began rattling slowly down toward me, and I almost turned and left—this was insane.

But upstairs the Acme office had divorced itself from the atmosphere of the building. I pushed open the pebble-glass door, walked in, and the big square room was bright and clean, fluorescent-lighted. Be-

side the wide double windows, behind a counter, stood a tall gray-haired, grave-looking man, a telephone at his ear. He glanced up, nodded to beckon me in, and I felt my heart pumping—he fitted the description exactly. “Yes, United Air Lines,” he was saying into the phone. “Flight”—he glanced at a paper on the glass-topped counter—“seven-oh-three, and I suggest you check in forty minutes early.”

Standing before him now, I waited, leaning on the counter, glancing around; he was the man, all right, and yet this was just an ordinary travel agency: big bright posters on the walls, metal floor racks full of folders, printed schedules under the glass on the counter. This is just what it looks like and nothing else, I thought, and again I felt like a fool.

“Can I help you?” Behind the counter the tall gray-haired man was smiling at me, replacing the phone, and suddenly I was terribly nervous.

“Yes.” I stalled for time, unbuttoning my raincoat. Then I looked up at him again and said, “I’d like to—get away.” You fool, that’s too fast I told myself. Don’t rush it! I watched in a kind of panic to see what effect my answer had had, but he didn’t flick an eyelash.

“Well, there are a lot of places to go.” he said politely. From under the counter he brought out a long, slim folder and laid it on the glass, turning it right side up for me. “Fly to Buenos Aires—Another World!” it said in a double row of pale-green letters across the top.

I looked at it long enough to be polite. It showed a

big silvery plane banking over a harbor at night, a moon shining on the water, mountains in the background. Then I just shook my head; I was afraid to talk, afraid I'd say the wrong thing.

"Something quieter, maybe?" He brought out another folder: thick old tree trunks, rising way up out of sight, sunbeams slanting down through them—"The Virgin Forests of Maine, via Boston and Maine Railroad." "Or"—he laid a third folder on the glass—"Bermuda is nice just now." This one said, "Bermuda, Old World in the New."

I decided to risk it. "No," I said, and shook my head. "What I'm really looking for is a permanent place. A new place to live and settle down in." I stared directly into his eyes. "For the rest of my life." Then my nerve failed me, and I tried to think of a way to backtrack.

But he only smiled pleasantly and said, "I don't know why we can't advise you on that." He leaned forward on the counter, resting on his forearms, hands clasped; he had all the time in the world for me, his posture conveyed. "What are you looking for; what do you want?"

I held my breath, then said it. "Escape."

"From what?"

"Well—" Now I hesitated; I'd never put it into words before. "From New York, I'd say. And cities in general. From worry. And fear. And the things I read in my newspapers. From loneliness." And then I couldn't stop, though I knew I was talking too much, the words spilling out. "From never doing

what I really want to do or having much fun. From selling my days just to stay alive. From life itself—the way it is today, at least.” I looked straight at him and said softly, “From the world.”

Now he was frankly staring, his eyes studying my face intently with no pretense of doing anything else, and I knew that in a moment he'd shake his head and say, “Mister, you better get to a doctor.” But he didn't. He continued to stare, his eyes examining my forehead now. He was a big man, his gray hair crisp and curling, his lined face very intelligent, very kind; he looked the way ministers should look; he looked the way all fathers should look.

He lowered his gaze to look into my eyes and beyond them; he studied my mouth, my chin, the line of my jaw, and I had the sudden conviction that without any difficulty he was learning a great deal about me, more than I knew myself. Suddenly he smiled and placed both elbows on the counter, one hand grasping the other fist and gently massaging it. “Do you like people? Tell the truth, because I'll know if you aren't.”

“Yes. It isn't easy for me to relax though, and be myself, and make friends.”

He nodded gravely, accepting that. “Would you say you're a reasonably decent kind of man?”

“I guess so; I think so.” I shrugged.

“Why?”

I smiled wryly; this was hard to answer. “Well—at least when I'm not, I'm usually sorry about it.”

He grinned at that, and considered it for a moment

or so. Then he smiled—deprecatingly, as though he were about to tell a little joke that wasn't too good. "You know," he said casually, "we occasionally get people in here who seem to be looking for pretty much what you are. So just as a sort of little joke—"

I couldn't breathe. This was what I'd been told he would say if he thought I might do.

"—we've worked up a little folder. We've even had it printed. Simply for our own amusement, you understand. And for occasional clients like you. So I'll have to ask you to look at it here if you're interested. It's not the sort of thing we'd care to have generally known."

I could barely whisper, "I'm interested."

He fumbled under the counter, then brought out a long thin folder, the same size and shape as the others, and slid it over the glass toward me.

I looked at it, pulling it closer with a fingertip, almost afraid to touch it. The cover was dark blue, the shade of a night sky, and across the top in white letters it said, "Visit Enchanting Verna!" The blue cover was sprinkled with white dots—stars—and in the lower left corner was a globe, the world, half surrounded by clouds. At the upper right, just under the word "Verna," was a star larger and brighter than the others; rays shot out from it, like from a star on a Christmas card. Across the bottom of the cover it said, "Romantic Verna, where life is the way it *should* be." There was a little arrow beside the legend, meaning, Turn the page.

I turned, and the folder was like most travel folders

inside—there were pictures and text, only these were about “Verna” instead of Paris, or Rome, or the Bahamas. And it was beautifully printed; the pictures looked real. What I mean is, you’ve seen color stereopticon pictures? Well, that’s what these were like, only better, far better. In one picture you could see dew glistening on the grass, and it looked wet. In another, a tree trunk seemed to curve out of the page, in perfect detail, and it was a shock to touch it and feel smooth paper instead of the rough actuality of bark. Miniature human faces, in a third picture, seemed about to speak, the lips moist and alive, the eyeballs shining, the actual texture of skin right there on paper; and it seemed impossible, as you stared, that the people wouldn’t move and speak.

I studied a large picture spreading across the tops of two open pages. It seemed to have been taken from the top of a hill; you saw the land dropping away at your feet far down into a valley, then rising up again, way over on the other side. The slopes of both hills were covered with forest, and the color was beautiful, perfect; there were miles of green, majestic trees, and you knew as you looked that this forest was virgin, almost untouched. Curving through the floor of the valley, far below, ran a stream, blue from the sky in most places; here and there, where the current broke around massive boulders, the water was foaming white; and again it seemed that if you’d only look closely enough you’d be certain to see that stream move and shine in the sun. In clearings beside the stream there were shake-roofed cabins, some of logs,

some of brick or adobe. The caption under the picture simply said, "The Colony."

"Fun fooling around with a thing like that," the man behind the counter murmured, nodding at the folder in my hands. "Relieves the monotony. Attractive-looking place, isn't it?"

I could only nod dumbly, lowering my eyes to the picture again because that picture told you even more than just what you saw. I don't know how you knew this, but you realized, staring at that forest-covered valley, that this was very much the way America once looked when it was new. And you knew this was only a part of a whole land of unspoiled, unharmed forests, where every stream ran pure; you were seeing what people, the last of them dead over a century ago, had once looked at in Kentucky and Wisconsin and the old Northwest. And you knew that if you could breathe in that air you'd feel it flow into your lungs sweeter than it's been anywhere on earth for a hundred and fifty years.

Under that picture was another, of six or eight people on a beach—the shore of a lake, maybe, or the river in the picture above. Two children were squatting on their haunches, dabbling in the water's edge, and in the foreground a half circle of adults were sitting, kneeling, or squatting in comfortable balance on the yellow sand. They were talking, several were smoking, and most of them held half-filled coffee cups; the sun was bright, you knew the air was balmy and that it was morning, just after breakfast. They were smiling, one woman talking, the others listening.

One man had half risen from his squatting position to skip a stone out onto the surface of the water.

You knew this: that they were spending twenty minutes or so down on that beach after breakfast before going to work, and you knew they were friends and that they did this every day. You knew—I tell you, you *knew*—that they liked their work, all of them, whatever it was; that there was no forced hurry or pressure about it. And that—well, that's all, I guess; you just knew that every day after breakfast these families spent a leisurely half-hour sitting and talking, there in the morning sun, down on that wonderful beach.

I'd never seen anything like their faces before. They were ordinary enough in looks, the people in that picture—pleasant, more or less familiar types. Some were young, in their twenties; others were in their thirties; one man and woman seemed around fifty. But the faces of the youngest couple were completely unlined, and it occurred to me then that they had been born there, and that it was a place where no one worried or was ever afraid. The others, the older ones, there were lines in their foreheads, grooves around their mouths, but you felt that the lines were no longer deepening, that they were healed and untroubled scars. And in the faces of the oldest couple was a look of—I'd say it was a look of permanent *relief*. Not one of those faces bore a trace of malice; these people were *happy*. But even more than that, you knew they'd *been* happy, day after day after

day for a long, long time, and that they always would be, and they knew it.

I wanted to join them. The most desperate longing roared up in me from the bottom of my soul to *be* there—on that beach, after breakfast, with those people in the sunny morning—and I could hardly stand it. I looked up at the man behind the counter and managed to smile. “This is—very interesting.”

“Yes.” He smiled back, then shook his head in amusement. “We’ve had customers so interested, so carried away, that they didn’t want to talk about anything else.” He laughed. “They actually wanted to know rates, details, everything.”

I nodded to show I understood and agreed with them. “And I suppose you’ve worked out a whole story to go with this?” I glanced at the folder in my hands.

“Oh, yes. What would you like to know?”

“These people,” I said softly, and touched the picture of the group on the beach. “What do they do?”

“They work; everyone does.” He took a pipe from his pocket. “They simply live their lives doing what they like. Some study. We have, according to our little story,” he added, and smiled, “a very fine library. Some of our people farm, some write, some make things with their hands. Most of them raise children, and—well, they work at whatever it is they really want to do.”

“And if there isn’t anything they really want to do?”

He shook his head. “There is always something,

for everyone, that he really wants to do. It's just that here there is so rarely time to find out what it is." He brought out a tobacco pouch and, leaning on the counter, began filling his pipe, his eyes level with mine, looking at me gravely. "Life is simple there, and it's serene. In some ways, the good ways, it's like the early pioneering communities here in your country, but without the drudgery that killed people young. There is electricity. There are washing machines, vacuum cleaners, plumbing, modern bathrooms, and modern medicine, very modern. But there are no radios, television, telephones, or automobiles. Distances are small, and people live and work in small communities. They raise or make most of the things they use. Every man builds his own house, with all the help he needs from his neighbors. Their recreation is their own, and there is a great deal of it, but there is no recreation for sale, nothing you buy a ticket to. They have dances, card parties, weddings, christenings, birthday celebrations, harvest parties. There are swimming and sports of all kinds. There is conversation, a lot of it, plenty of joking and laughter. There is a great deal of visiting and sharing of meals, and each day is well filled and well spent. There are no pressures, economic or social, and life holds few threats. Every man, woman, and child is a happy person." After a moment he smiled. "I'm repeating the text, of course, in our little joke"—he nodded at the folder.

"Of course," I murmured, and looked down at the folder again, turning a page. "Homes in The Col-

ony," said a caption, and there, true and real, were a dozen or so pictures of the interiors of what must have been the cabins I'd seen in the first photograph, or others like them. There were living rooms, kitchens, dens, patios. Many of the homes seemed to be furnished in a kind of Early American style, except that it looked—authentic, as though those rocking chairs, cupboards, tables, and hooked rugs had been made by the people themselves, taking their time and making them well and beautifully. Others of the interiors seemed modern in style; one showed a definite Oriental influence.

All of them had, plainly and unmistakably, one quality in common: You knew as you looked at them that these rooms were *home*, really home, to the people who lived in them. On the wall of one living room, over the stone fireplace, hung a hand-stitched motto; it said, "There Is No Place Like Home," but the words didn't seem quaint or amusing, they didn't seem old-fashioned, resurrected or copied from a past that was gone. They seemed real; they belonged; those words were nothing more or less than a simple expression of true feeling and fact.

"Who are you?" I lifted my head from the folder to stare into the man's eyes.

He lighted his pipe, taking his time, sucking the match flame down into the bowl, eyes glancing up at me. "It's in the text," he said then, "on the back page. We—that is to say, the people of Verna, the original inhabitants—are people like yourself. Verna is a planet of air, sun, land, and sea, like this one. And of

the same approximate temperature. So life evolved there, of course, just about as it has here, though rather earlier: and we are people like you. There are trivial anatomical differences, but nothing important. We read and enjoy your James Thurber, John Clayton, Rabelais, Allen Marple, Hemingway, Grimm, Mark Twain, Alan Nelson. We like your chocolate, which we didn't have, and a great deal of your music, and you'd like many of the things we have. Our thoughts, though, and the great aims and directions of our history and development have been—drastically different from yours." He smiled and blew out a puff of smoke. "Amusing fantasy, isn't it?"

"Yes." I knew I sounded abrupt, and I hadn't stopped to smile; the words were spilling out. "And where is Verna?"

"Light years away, by your measurements."

I was suddenly irritated, I didn't know why. "A little hard to get to, then, wouldn't it be?"

For a moment he looked at me; then he turned to the window beside him. "Come here," he said, and I walked around the counter to stand beside him. "There, off to the left"—he put a hand on my shoulder and pointed with his pipe stem—"are two apartment buildings, built back to back. The entrance to one is on Fifth Avenue, the entrance to the other on Sixth. See them? In the middle of the block; you can just see their roofs."

I nodded, and he said, "A man and his wife live on the fourteenth floor of one of those buildings. A wall of their living room is the back wall of the building.

They have friends on the fourteenth floor of the other building, and a wall of *their* living room is the back wall of *their* building. These two couples live, in other words, within two feet of one another, since the back walls actually touch."

The big man smiled. "But when the Robinsons want to visit the Bradens, they walk from their living room to the front door. Then they walk down a long hall to the elevators. They ride fourteen floors down; then, in the street, they must walk around to the next block. And the city blocks there are long; in bad weather they have sometimes actually taken a cab. They walk into the other building, then go on through the lobby, ride up fourteen floors, walk down a hall, ring a bell, and are finally admitted into their friends' living room—only two feet from their own."

The big man turned back to the counter, and I walked around it to the other side again. "All I can tell you," he said then, "is that the way the Robinsons travel is like space travel, the actual physical crossing of those enormous distances." He shrugged. "But if they could only step through those two feet of wall without harming themselves or the wall—well, that is how we 'travel.' We don't cross space, we avoid it." He smiled. "Draw a breath here—and exhale it on Verna."

I said softly, "And that's how they arrived, isn't it? The people in the picture. You took them there." He nodded, and I said, "Why?"

He shrugged. "If you saw a neighbor's house on

fire, would you rescue his family if you could? As many as you could, at least?"

"Yes."

"Well—so would we."

"You think it's that bad, then? With us?"

"How does it look to you?"

I thought about the headlines in my morning paper, that morning and every morning. "Not so good."

He just nodded and said, "We can't take you all, can't even take very many. So we've been selecting a few."

"For how long?"

"A long time." He smiled. "One of us was a member of Lincoln's cabinet. But it was not until just before your First World War that we felt we could see what was coming; until then we'd been merely observers. We opened our first agency in Mexico City in nineteen thirteen. Now we have branches in every major city."

"Nineteen thirteen," I murmured, as something caught at my memory. "Mexico. Listen! Did—"

"Yes." He smiled, anticipating my question. "Ambrose Bierce joined us that year, or the next. He lived until nineteen thirty-one, a very old man, and wrote four more books, which we have." He turned back a page in the folder and pointed to a cabin in the first large photograph. "That was his home."

"And what about Judge Crater?"

"Crater?"

"Another famous disappearance; he was a New

York judge who simply disappeared some years ago."

"I don't know. We had a judge, I remember, from New York City, some twenty-odd years ago, but I can't recall his name."

I leaned across the counter toward him, my face very close to his, and I nodded. "I like your little joke," I said. "I like it very much, more than I can possibly tell you." Very softly I added, "When does it stop being a joke?"

For a moment he studied me; then he spoke. "Now. If you want it to."

You've got to decide on the spot, the middle-aged man at the Lexington Avenue bar had told me, *because you'll never get another chance. I know; I've tried*. Now I stood there thinking; there were people I'd hate never to see again, and a girl I was just getting to know, and this was the world I'd been born in. Then I thought about leaving that room, going back to my job, then back to my room at night. And finally I thought of the deep-green valley in the picture and the little yellow beach in the morning sun. "I'll go," I whispered. "If you'll have me."

He studied my face. "Be sure," he said sharply. "Be certain. We want no one there who won't be happy, and if you have any least doubt, we'd prefer that—"

"I'm sure," I said.

After a moment the gray-haired man slid open a drawer under the counter and brought out a little rectangle of yellow cardboard. One side was printed, and through the printing ran a band of light green; it looked like a railroad ticket to White Plains or some-

where. The printing said, "Good, when validated, for ONE TRIP TO VERNA. Nontransferable. One-way only."

"Ah—how much?" I said, reaching for my wallet, wondering if he wanted me to pay.

He glanced at my hand on my hip pocket. "All you've got. Including your small change." He smiled. "You won't need it any more, and we can use your currency for operating expenses. Light bills, rent, and so on."

"I don't have much."

"That doesn't matter." From under the counter he brought out a heavy stamping machine, the kind you see in railroad ticket offices. "We once sold a ticket for thirty-seven hundred dollars. And we sold another just like it for six cents." He slid the ticket into the machine, struck the lever with his fist, then handed the ticket to me. On the back, now, was a freshly printed rectangle of purple ink, and within it the words, "Good this day only," followed by the date. I put two five-dollar bills, a one, and seventeen cents in change on the counter. "Take the ticket to the Acme Depot," the gray-haired man said, and, leaning across the counter, began giving me directions for getting there.

It's a tiny hole-in-the-wall, the Acme Depot; you may have seen it—just a little store front on one of the narrow streets west of Broadway. On the window is painted, not very well, "Acme." Inside, the walls and ceiling, under layers of old paint, are covered with the kind of stamped tin you see in the old build-

ings. There's a worn wooden counter and a few battered chrome-and-imitation-red-leather chairs. There are scores of places like the Acme Depot in that area—little theatre-ticket agencies, obscure bus-line offices, employment agencies. You could pass this one a thousand times and never really see it; and if you live in New York, you probably have.

Behind the counter, when I arrived, a shirt-sleeved man smoking a cigar stump stood working on some papers; four or five people silently waited in the chairs. The man at the counter glanced up as I stepped in, looked down at my hand for my ticket, and when I showed it, nodded at the last vacant chair, and I sat down.

There was a girl beside me, hands folded on her purse. She was pleasant-looking, rather pretty; I thought she might have been a stenographer. Across the narrow little office sat a young Negro in work clothes, his wife beside him holding their little girl in her lap. And there was a man of around fifty, his face averted from the rest of us, staring out into the rain at passing pedestrians. He was expensively dressed and wore a gray Homburg hat; he could have been the vice-president of a large bank, I thought, and I wondered what his ticket had cost.

Maybe twenty minutes passed, the man behind the counter working on some papers; then a small, battered old bus pulled up at the curb outside, and I heard the hand brake set. The bus was a shabby thing, bought third- or fourth-hand and painted red and white over the old paint, the fenders lumpy from

countless pounded-out dents, the tire treads worn almost smooth. On the side, in red letters, it said "Acme," and the driver wore a leather jacket and the kind of worn cloth cap that cab drivers wear. It was precisely the sort of obscure little bus you see around there, ridden always by shabby, tired, silent people, going no one knows where.

It took nearly two hours for the little bus to work south through the traffic, toward the tip of Manhattan, and we all sat, each wrapped in his own silence and thoughts, staring out the rain-spattered windows; the little girl was asleep. Through the streaking glass beside me I watched drenched people huddled at city bus stops, and saw them rap angrily on the closed doors of buses jammed to capacity, and saw the strained, harassed faces of the drivers. At 14th Street I saw a speeding cab splash a sheet of street-dirty water on a man at the curb, and saw the man's mouth writhe as he cursed. Often our bus stood motionless, the traffic light red, as throngs flowed out into the street from the curb, threading their way around us and the other waiting cars. I saw hundreds of faces, and not once did I see anyone smile.

I dozed; then we were on a glistening black highway somewhere on Long Island, I slept again, and awakened in darkness as we jolted off the highway onto a muddy double-rut road, and I caught a glimpse of a farmhouse, the windows dark. Then the bus slowed, lurched once, and stopped. The hand brake set, the motor died, and we were parked beside what looked like a barn.

It *was* a barn—the driver walked up to it, pulled the big sliding wood door open, its wheels creaking on the rusted old trolley overhead, and stood holding it open as we filed in. Then he released it, stepping inside with us, and the big door slid closed of its own weight. The barn was damp, old, the walls no longer plumb, and it smelled of cattle; there was nothing inside on the packed-dirt floor but a bench of unpainted pine, and the driver indicated it with a beam of a flashlight. “Sit here, please,” he said quietly. “Get your tickets ready.” Then he moved down the line, punching each of our tickets, and on the floor I caught a momentary glimpse, in the shifting beam of his light, of tiny mounds of countless more round bits of cardboard, like little drifts of yellow confetti. Then he was at the door again, sliding it open just enough to pass through, and for a moment we saw him silhouetted against the night sky. “Good luck,” he said. “Just wait where you are.” He released the door; it slid closed, snipping off the wavering beam of his flashlight; and a moment later we heard the motor start and the bus lumber away in low gear.

The dark barn was silent now, except for our breathing. Time ticked away, and I felt an urge, presently, to speak to whoever was next to me. But I didn’t quite know what to say, and I began to feel embarrassed, a little foolish, and very aware that I was simply sitting in an old and deserted barn. The seconds passed, and I moved my feet restlessly; presently I realized that I was getting cold and chilled. Then suddenly I knew—and my face flushed in vio-

lent anger and a terrible shame. We'd been tricked! bilked out of our money by our pathetic will to believe an absurd and fantastic fable and left, now, to sit there as long as we pleased, until we came to our senses finally, like countless others before us, and made our way home as best we could. It was suddenly impossible to understand or even remember how I could have been so gullible, and I was on my feet, stumbling through the dark across the uneven floor, with some notion of getting to a phone and the police. The big barn door was heavier than I'd thought, but I slid it back, took a running step through it, then turned to shout back to the others to come along.

You perhaps have seen how very much you can observe in the fractional instant of a lightning flash—an entire landscape sometimes, every detail etched on your memory, to be seen and studied in your mind for long moments afterwards. As I turned back toward the opened door the inside of that barn came alight. Through every wide crack of its walls and ceiling and through the big dust-coated windows in its side streamed the light of an intensely brilliant blue and sunny sky, and the air pulling into my lungs as I opened my mouth to shout was sweeter than any I had ever tasted in my life. Dimly, through a wide, dust-smeared window of that barn, I looked—for less than the blink of an eye—down into a deep majestic V of forest-covered slope, and I saw, tumbling through it, far below, a tiny stream, blue from the sky, and at that stream's edge between two low roofs

a yellow patch of sun-drenched beach. And then, that picture engraved on my mind forever, the heavy door slid shut, my fingernails rasping along the splintery wood in a desperate effort to stop it—and I was standing alone in a cold and rain-swept night.

It took four or five seconds, no longer, fumbling at that door, to heave it open again. But it was four or five seconds too long. The barn was empty, dark. There was nothing inside but a worn pine bench—and, in the flicker of the lighted match in my hand, tiny drifts of what looked like damp confetti on the floor. As my mind had known even as my hands scratched at the outside of that door, there was no one inside now; and I knew where they were—knew they were walking, laughing aloud in a sudden wonderful and eager ecstasy, down into that forest-green valley, toward home.

I work in a bank, in a job I don't like; and I ride to and from it in the subway, reading the daily papers, the news they contain. I live in a rented room, and in the battered dresser under a pile of my folded handkerchiefs is a little rectangle of yellow cardboard. Printed on its face are the words, "Good, when validated, for one trip to Verna," and stamped on the back is a date. But the date is gone, long since, the ticket void, punched in a pattern of tiny holes.

I've been back to the Acme Travel Bureau. The first time the tall gray-haired man walked up to me and laid two five-dollar bills, a one, and seventeen cents in change before me. "You left this on the counter last time you were here," he said gravely.

Looking me squarely in the eyes, he added blankly, "I don't know why." Then some customers came in, he turned to greet them, and there was nothing for me to do but leave.

Walk in as though it were the ordinary agency it seems—you can find it, somewhere, in any city you try! Ask a few ordinary questions—about a trip you're planning, a vacation, anything you like. Then hint about The Folder a little, but don't mention it directly. Give him time to size you up and offer it himself. And if he does, if you're the type, if you can believe—then make up your mind and stick to it! Because you won't ever get a second chance. I know, because I've tried. And tried. And tried.

Island of Fear

WILLIAM SAMBROT

Kyle Elliot clutched the smooth tight-fitting stones of the high wall, unmindful of the fierce direct rays of the Aegean sun on his neck, staring, staring through a chink.

He'd come to this tiny island, dropped into the middle of the Aegean like a pebble on a vast blue shield, just in the hope that something—something like what lay beyond that wall—might turn up. And it had. It had.

Beyond, in the garden behind the wall, was a fountain, plashing gently. And in the center of that fountain, two nudes, a mother and child.

A mother and child, marvelously intertwined, intricately wrought of some stone that almost might have been heliotrope, jasper or one of the other semi-precious chalcedonies—although that would have been manifestly impossible.

He took a small object like a pencil from his pocket and extended it. A miniature telescope. He gasped, looking once more through the chink. Heavens, the detail of the woman! Head slightly turned, eyes just

widening with the infinitesimal beginning of an expression of surprise as she looked—at what? And half sliding, clutching with one hand at the smooth thigh, reaching mouth slightly rounded, plump other hand not quite touching the milk-swollen breast—the child.

His professional eye moved over the figures, his mind racing, trying to place the sculptor, and failing. It was of no known period. It might have been done yesterday; it might be millenniums old. Only one thing was certain—no catalogue on earth listed it.

Kyle had found this island by pure chance. He'd taken passage on a decrepit Greek caique that plied the Aegean, nudging slowly and without schedule from island to island. From Lesbos to Chios to Samos, down through the myriad Cyclades, and so on about the fabled sea, touching the old, old lands where the gods had walked like men. The islands where occasionally some treasure, long buried, came to light, and if it pleased Kyle's eyes, and money obtained it, then he would add it to his small collection. But only rarely did anything please Kyle. Only rarely.

The battered caique's engine had quit in the midst of a small storm which drove them south and west. By the time the storm had cleared, the asthmatic old engine was back in shape, coughing along. There was no radio, but the captain was undisturbed. Who could get lost in the Aegean?

They had been drifting along, a small water bug of a ship lost in the greenish-blue sea, when Kyle had seen the dim purple shadow that was a tiny island in

the distance. The glasses brought the little blob of land closer and he sucked in his breath. An incredible wall, covering a good quarter of the miniature island, leaped into view, a great horseshoe of masonry that grew out of the sea, curved, embraced several acres of the land, then returned, sinking at last into the sea again, where white foam leaped high even as he watched.

He called the captain's attention to it. "There is a little island over there." And the captain, grinning, had squinted in the direction of Kyle's pointing finger.

"There is a wall on it," Kyle said, and instantly the grin vanished from the captain's face; his head snapped around and he stared rigidly ahead, away from the island.

"It is nothing," the captain said harshly. "Only a few goatherders live there. It has no name, even."

"There is a wall," Kyle had said gently. "Here"—handing him the glasses—"look."

"No." The captain's head didn't move an iota. His eyes remained straight ahead. "It is just another ruin. There is no harbor there; it is years since anyone has gone there. You would not like it. No electricity."

"I want to see the wall and what is behind it."

The captain flicked an eye at him. Kyle started. The eye seemed genuinely agitated. "There is nothing behind it. It is a very old place and everything is long since gone."

"I want to see the wall," Kyle said quietly.

They'd put him off, finally, the little caique point-

ing its grizzled snout to sea, its engine turning over just enough to keep it under way, its muted throbbing the only sound. They'd rowed him over in a dinghy, and as he approached he'd noticed the strangely quiet single street of the village, the lone inn, the few dories with patched lateen sails, and on the low, worn-down hills the herds of drifting goats.

Almost, he might have believed the captain; that here was an old tired island, forgotten, out of the mainstream of the brilliant civilization that had flowered in this sea—almost, until he remembered that wall. Walls are built to protect, to keep out or keep in. He meant to see what.

After he'd settled in the primitive little inn, he'd immediately set out for the wall, surveying it from the low knoll, surprised again to note how much of this small island it encompassed.

He'd walked all around it, hoping to find a gate or a break in the smooth, unscalable wall that towered up. There had been none. The grounds within sprawled on a sort of peninsula that jutted out to where rock, barnacled, fanged, resisted the restless surf.

And coming back along the great wall, utterly baffled, he'd heard the faint musical sound of water dropping within, and, peering carefully at the wall, had seen the small aperture, no bigger than a walnut, just above his head.

And looked through the aperture, and so stood, dazed at so much beauty, staring at the woman and child, unable to tear away, knowing that here, at last,

was the absolute perfection he'd sought throughout the world.

How was it that the catalogues failed to list this master work? These things were impossibly hard to keep quiet. And yet, not a whisper, not a rumor had drifted from this island to the others of what lay within those walls. Here on this remote pinprick of land, so insignificant as to go unnamed, here behind a huge wall which was itself a work of genius, here was this magic mother and child glowing all unseen.

He stared, throat dry, heart pumping with the fierce exultation of the avid connoisseur who has found something truly great—and unknown. He must have it—he would have it. It wasn't listed, possibly—just possibly—its true worth was unknown. Perhaps the owner of this estate had inherited it, and it remained there, in the center of the gently falling water, unnoticed, unappreciated.

He reluctantly turned away from the chink in the wall and walked slowly back toward the village, scuffling the deep, pale immemorial dust. Greece. Cradle of western culture. He thought again of the exquisite perfection of the mother and child back there. The sculptor of that little group deserved to walk on Olympus. Who was it?

Back in the village, he paused before the inn to take some of the dust off his shoes, thinking again how oddly incurious, for Greeks, these few villagers were.

"Permit me?"

A boy, eyes snapping, popped out of the inn with a rag in one hand and some primitive shoe blacking

in the other, and began cleaning Kyle's shoes.

Kyle sat down on a bench and examined the boy. He was about fifteen, wiry and strong, but small for his age. He might have, in an earlier era, been a model for one of Praxiteles' masterpieces: the same perfectly molded head, the tight curls, two ringlets falling over the brows, like Pan's snubbed horns, the classic Grecian profile. But no, a ridged scar ran from the boy's nose to the corner of the upper lip, lifting it ever so slightly, revealing a glimmer of white teeth.

No, Praxiteles would never have used him for a model—unless, of course, he had a slightly flawed Pan in mind.

"Who owns the large estate beyond the village?" he asked in his excellent Greek. The boy looked up quickly and it was as if a shutter came down over his dark eyes. He shook his head.

"You must know it," Kyle persisted. "It covers the whole south end of this island. A big wall, very high, all the way to the water."

The boy shook his head stubbornly. "It has always been there."

Kyle smiled at him. "Always is a long time," he said. "Perhaps your father might know?"

"I am alone," the boy said with dignity.

"I'm sorry to hear that." Kyle studied the small, expert movement of the boy. "You really don't know the name of the persons who live there?"

The boy muttered a single word.

"Gordon?" Kyle leaned forward. "Did you say The Gordons'? Is it an English family that owns

that property?" He felt the hope dying within. If an English family owned it, the chances were slim indeed of obtaining that wonderful stone pair.

"They are not English," the boy said.

"I'd like very much to see them."

"There is no way."

"I know there's no way from the island," Kyle said, "but I suppose they must have a dock or some facilities for landing from the sea?"

The boy shook his head, keeping his eyes down. Some of the villagers had stopped, and now were clustered about him, watching and listening quietly. Kyle knew his Greeks, a happy boisterous people, intolerably curious sometimes; full of advice, quick to give it. These people merely stood, unsmiling, watching.

The boy finished and Kyle flipped him a fifty-lepta coin. The boy caught it and smiled, a flawed masterpiece.

"That wall," Kyle said to the spectators, singling out one old man, "I am interested in meeting the people who own that property."

The old man muttered something and walked away.

Kyle mentally kicked himself for the psychological error. In Greece, money talks first. "I will pay fifty—one hundred drachmas," he said loudly, "to anyone who will take me in his boat around to the seaward side of the wall."

It was a lot of money, he knew, to a poor people eking out a precarious existence on this rocky island,

with their goats and scanty gardens. Most of them wouldn't see that much in a year's hard work. A lot of money—but they looked at one another, then turned and without a backward glance they walked away from him. All of them.

Throughout the village he met the same mysterious refusal, as difficult to overcome as that enigmatic wall that embraced the end of the island. They refused even to mention the wall or what it contained, who built it, and when. It was as though it didn't exist for them.

At dusk he went back to the inn, ate *dolmadakis*—minced meat, rice, egg and spices—surprisingly delicious; drank *retsina*, the resinated, astringent wine of the peasant; and wondered about the lovely mother and child, standing there behind that great wall with the purple night clothing them. A vast surge of sadness, of longing for the statues swept over him.

What a rotten break! He'd run into local taboos before. Most of them were the results of petty feuds, grudges going back to antiquity. They were cherished by the peasants, held tight, jealously guarded. What else was there of importance in their small lives? But this was something entirely different.

He was standing on the outskirts of the darkened village, gazing unhappily out to sea, when he heard a soft scuffling. He turned quickly. A small boy was approaching. It was the shoeshine boy, eyes gleaming in the starshine, shivering slightly, though the night was balmy.

The boy clutched his arm. "The others—tonight, I will take you in my boat," he whispered.

Kyle smiled, relief exploding within him. Of course, he should have thought of the boy. A young fellow, alone, without family, could use a hundred drachmas, whatever the taboo.

"Thank you," he said warmly. "When can we leave?"

"Before the ebb tide—an hour before sunrise," the boy said. "Only"—his teeth were chattering—"I will take you, but I will not come any closer than the outer rocks between the walls. From there, you must wait until the ebb tide and walk—and walk—" He gasped, as though choking.

"What are you afraid of?" Kyle said. "I'll take all the responsibility for trespassing, although I don't think—"

The boy clutched his arm. "The others—tonight, when you go back to the inn, you will not tell the others that I am rowing you there?"

"Not if you don't want me to."

"Please do not!" he gasped. "They would not like it if they knew—after, that I—"

"I understand," Kyle said. "I won't tell anyone."

"An hour before sunrise," the boy whispered. "I will meet you at the wall where it goes into the water to the east."

The stars were still glowing, but faintly, when Kyle met the boy, a dim figure sitting in a small rowboat that bobbed up and down, scraping against the kelp and barnacles that grew from the base of the mono-

lithic wall. He realized suddenly that the boy must have rowed for hours to get the boat this far around the island. It had no sails.

He climbed in and they shoved off, the boy strangely silent. The sea was rough, a chill predawn wind blowing raggedly. The wall loomed up alongside, gigantic in the mist.

"Who built this wall?" he asked, once they were out onto the pitching water, heading slowly around the first of a series of jagged, barnacled rocks, thrusting wetly above the rapidly ebbing tide.

"The old ones," the boy said. His teeth were chattering, he kept his back steadfastly to the wall, glancing only seaward to measure his progress. "It has always been there."

Always. And yet, studying the long sweep of the wall beginning to emerge in the first light, Kyle knew that it was very old. Very old. It might well date back to the beginning of Greek civilization. And the statues—the mother and child. All of it an enigma no greater than the fact that they were unknown to the outside world.

As they drew slowly around until he was able to see the ends of the thick walls rising out of the swirling, sucking sea, he realized that most certainly he could not have been the first—not even one of the first hundred. This island was remote, not worth even being on a mail route, but surely, over the many, many years that wall had towered, it must have been visited by people as curious as he. Other collectors. And yet, not a rumor.

The boat rasped up against an enormous black rock, its tip, white with bird droppings, startlingly luminous in the half light. The boy shipped his oars.

"I will come back here at the next tide," he said, shaking as though with a fever. "Will you pay me now?"

"Of course." Kyle took out his billfold. "But aren't you at least going to take me farther in than this?"

"No," the boy said shrilly. "I cannot."

"How about the dock?" Kyle surveyed the considerable expanse of shallow, choppy surf between the rocks and the narrow sloping beach. "Why, there isn't a dock!"

There was nothing between the walls but sand, dotted with huge rocks, and inland, a tangled growth of underbrush with an occasional cypress rearing tall.

"I'll tell you what. I'll take the boat in and you wait here," Kyle said. "I won't be long. I just want to get a chance to meet whoever owns the place and arrange—"

"No!" There was sharp panic in the boy's voice. "If you take the boat—" He half rose, leaning forward to shove off from the rock. At that instant a swell raised the boat, then dropped it suddenly out from under the boy. Overbalanced, he swayed, arms waving wildly, then went over backwards, hitting his head on the rock. He slipped under the water like a stone.

Kyle made a quick lunge, and missing, immediately dived out of the rowboat after him, rasping his

chest on the barnacled shelf of rock a few feet beneath the boat. He got a good handful of the boy's shirt, but it tore like paper. He grabbed again, got a firm grip on his hair and stroked for the surface. He held him easily, treading water, looking for the rowboat. It was gone, kicked away by his powerful dive, perhaps behind one of the other rocks. No time to waste looking for it now.

He swam to shore, pulling the boy easily. It was only a hundred yards or so to the smooth white beach, curving between the two arms of the wall that sloped out and down into the ocean. When he came out of the water the boy was coughing weakly, salt water dribbling from his nose.

Kyle carried him well above the tide mark and sat him down on the sand. The boy opened his eyes and peered at him, puzzled.

"You'll be all right," Kyle said. "I'd better get your boat before it drifts too far."

He walked back down to the surf line, kicked off his shoes and stroked off to where the boat rose and fell, nuzzling another of the large rocks that littered the space between the towering walls. He rowed the boat back, facing the sea and the swift-rising sun. The wind had dropped to a whisper.

He beached the boat and gathered up his shoes. The boy was leaning against a rock, looking inland over his shoulder in an attitude of rigid watchfulness.

"Feeling better now?" Kyle called cheerfully. It occurred to him that their little mishap was an excellent excuse for being here, on property belonging to

someone who obviously valued his privacy highly.

The boy didn't move. He remained staring back into the tangle of trees, back to where the massive walls converged in the distance, stark, white, ancient.

Kyle touched him on the bare shoulder. He pulled his hand away, fists tightly clenched. He looked at the sand. Here were the marks where the boy had risen, here the dragging footsteps where he'd come to lean against this rock. And here he still stood, glancing over his shoulder toward the trees, lips barely parted, a look of faint surprise just starting on his face.

And there, coming out of the tangled trees, a delicate tracery of footsteps led toward this rock and behind. Footsteps, slender, high-arched, as though a woman, barefooted, scarcely touching the sand, had approached for just an instant. Looking at the strange footprints, Kyle understood completely what he should have guessed when first he'd peered through that chink in the wall, gasping at the unimaginable perfection of the woman and her child.

Kyle knew intimately all the ancient fables of early Greece. And now, looking at the footprints in the sand, one of the most terrible leaped into his mind: the Gorgons.

The Gorgons were three sisters, Medusa, Euryale and Stheno, with snakes writhing where their hair should have been. Three creatures so awful to look upon, the legend said, that whosoever dared gaze upon them instantly turned to stone.

Kyle stood on the warm sand, with the gull cries,

the restless Aegean sea sounds all about him, and he knew, at last, who the old ones were who'd built the wall; why they'd built it to lead into the living waters—and whom—what—the walls were meant to contain.

Not an English family named the Gordons. A much more ancient family, named—the Gorgons. Perseus had slain Medusa, but her two hideous sisters, Euryale and Stheno, were immortal.

Immortal. Oh, God! It was impossible! A myth! And yet—

His connoisseur's eyes, even through the sweat of fear, noted the utter perfection of the small statue that leaned against the rock, head turned slightly, an expression of surprise on the face as it peered over one shoulder in the direction of the trees. The two tight ringlets, like snubbed horns above the brow, the perfect molding of the head, the classic Grecian profile. Salt water still flecked the smoothly gleaming shoulders, still dripped from the torn shirt that flapped about the stone waist.

Pan in chalcedony. But Pan had a flaw. From the nose to the corner of the upper lip ran a ridge, an onyx scar that lifted the edge of the onyx lip slightly, so that, faintly, a glimmer of onyx teeth showed. A flawed masterpiece.

He heard the rustle behind him, as of robes, smelled an indescribable scent, heard a sound that could only have been a multiple hissing—and though he knew he mustn't, he turned slowly. And looked.

Getting Rid of George

ROBERT ARTHUR

Dave Dennis' voice calling, "Laura, are you decent?" and the rap on her door brought Laura shudderingly upright and awake. She was sitting at her dressing table, still only half dressed, and she shuddered because she had been dreaming. In her dream she had been in front of the camera and the eye of the camera had slowly turned into George's eye, and winked at her—the slow, maliciously knowing wink that had been George's trademark in burlesque.

But George was dead, thank God. George had been dead for five years and she only dreamed about him when she was very tired, as she was now—so tired she dozed off in the middle of changing for the party going on downstairs.

"Just a minute, Dave," she called, but the door had already opened and the dapper little figure of the head of publicity for Foremost Films stood there. Dave's small, round face held a look of waspish anger, and he put his hands on his hips as he indignantly stared at her.

"Well, Laura!" he said. "Perhaps you've forgotten you're giving a party especially to cement good rela-

tions with the press. Which you are *not* doing by sulking up here in your room. Even though Star-Crossed Love did premiere tonight and *was* a smash, you'll certainly not influence columnists and make friends unless you show, and I mean soon."

"I'm coming, Dave." She held herself in with an effort. She loathed Dave Dennis as much as he loathed her. "I'm tired, that's all."

"A star can't afford to be tired. A star belongs to the public—and that means the press," Dave said unctuously.

"You'd better get out of here," Laura Layne told him, a dangerous sweetness in her voice. "Or I might throw this at you." Dave backed away a step as she picked up a silver statuette on her dressing table, a present from Harry Lawrence, her personal manager.

"Just a minute, Laura!" he snapped. "There's to be none of the famous Laura Layne temperament tonight, or your name will be mud for good."

"Don't worry." She turned her back on him. "I'll smile at every one of those harpies as though I didn't want to spit in their faces. I suppose Haila French and Billy Pierce are here?"

"And biting their nails waiting for you."

"I'll bet. They're pumping Marie, my maid, and Pedro, the houseboy, about what time I brushed my teeth." Her lips twisted. "Marie is on Haila's payroll, you know, to pass along any juicy little items about me she can. Pedro does the same thing for Billy. If I talk in my sleep, those vultures know about it the next day."

"They are *very* important to a star's career," Dave Dennis said. "You know that. I'll expect you in ten minutes. And— Oh yes, there's a new columnist here. From Eastern Syndicate. He wants a short interview with you. How it feels to be the woman every man yearns for."

"I'll give him Three-B. Now send up Harry Lawrence with a drink, and then I'll be down."

"On your best behavior," the little man said, and closed the door.

Laura leaned forward to stare at herself in the mirror. Thirty-five, and usually looking twenty-nine. But tonight she looked 40. Because she was tired— God, she was tired. All the re-shooting, then tonight's premiere— Well, it was over. Three smashes in a row, and she'd worked off her contract to the studio. Now she and Harry could go ahead to form their own company, and make the pictures they wanted to. He'd already negotiated a deal with United for three pictures, which meant at least a million apiece for each of them. And best of all, they could shoot them from abroad, away from all the newspaper and fan magazine phonies, chisellers, and vultures who sucked a star's blood and turned it into ink. For five years they had all been chiseling away at her, trying to learn the truth about her background, her past—the truth she and Harry had worked so hard to keep hidden.

It was a wonder those seven years before she'd hit Hollywood didn't show on her face. Seven years in cheap burlesque houses across the nation, doing a strip act with George, her husband, acting as come-

dian. George, who had taken everything she made and abandoned her when she got sick. George, whose only unselfish deed of his life had been getting himself killed in a holdup in Newark. She had never been happier in her life than when she had read about his death in the papers.

But how Haila French or Billy Pierce would love to dig up the story and plaster it across three hundred papers for a hundred million readers!

If it hadn't been for Harry Lawrence— Well, thank God for Harry! She could see him now, tall, broad-shouldered, soft-spoken, making his way among the columnists and starlets downstairs, charming everyone, sweetening even Haila French. Now she and Harry could be married—now that they had their own company. Of course, they'd have to clear it with Haila first! She'd promised Haila an exclusive if and when. And grim death was not as unrelenting as the lanky, rawboned woman who ruled the Hollywood gossip columns toward anyone who broke such a promise.

There was another rap on the door. She swung about gladly.

"Come in, Harry!"

The door opened, but it wasn't Harry Lawrence. It was a smaller man, with jet black hair and large horn-rimmed spectacles that hid most of his face. Laura had a fleeting sense of familiarity, but it was lost in her anger.

"Who are you?" she demanded. "What do you mean, coming in my room?"

"Eastern Press," the man said huskily. "Just wanted a little interview." He closed the door and gave a long, slow look around the luxurious dressing room.

"I told Dave I'd see you downstairs!"

"I figured you'd rather talk privately, Gloria."

"Why, you—" She stopped, her hand pressed to her breast. "What did you call me?"

He took off his heavy horn-rimmed spectacles and ruffled his smoothly plastered hair. Then slowly his right eye closed, then half opened again, in a long, slow, obscenely knowing wink.

"Recognize me now?"

"No! Oh, no!" Inside her mind something screamed *George! Not dead! Not dead!* "You can't be! Damn you, you're dead. It was in the papers. A holdup in Newark."

"A mistake. I let it ride. I was in the pen anyway, under another name. Got out six months ago. Took me time to find you, baby. New name, new nose, new teeth, new career. Not much left of the old Gloria Gordon of George and Gloria, Songs and Comedy. Nice place you got here. Not like those rat holes we used to play in."

Despair and hatred almost shook her physically. It was like George. Just like him, to come back even from the dead to mess up her life again.

"What do you want?" She kept her voice level with an effort. "If it's money, I'll pay you twenty-five thousand to clear out and get a divorce."

"Divorce?" George grinned one-sidedly, showing rotten teeth. "Not me. I'm your loving husband, come

back to you after a regrettable but unavoidable separation."

"I'd die first," she said with loathing. "You were a rat and you're still a rat. Fifty thousand. I'll borrow it someplace. Fifty thousand to crawl back into your hole. Don't forget I know what happened in Cleveland. You can still go to jail for that."

"While everybody reads about Gloria Gordon, burlesque stripper, now Laura Layne, Hollywood's hottest sexpot? Incidentally, I have some pictures of your old strip act the scandal magazines would really go for."

Laura closed her eyes for a moment.

"George," she said. "I'm warning you. I'll raise the ante to a hundred thousand. Take what you can get and go. I'm not a kid now and you can't push me around any more."

George put his thumbs in his belt and grinned, a knowing smirk.

"Baby, this is California. You know, community property. What's mine is yours. What's yours is mine. You're a million dollars in the bank, so let's not talk about penny ante stuff. Now come on, kiss your long lost husband who had amnesia and you're going to nurse back to health."

She jumped to her feet and George strode toward her. Then he had his arms around her and was forcing her head back.

"Take your hands off me!" she panted.

"Act nice if you want me to be nice. Come on now, kiss lonesome George." His hand closed on her left

wrist and twisted it behind her back until she bit her lip to keep from screaming. "That's it," he said, with savage humor. "Now come to your loving husband like a woman should."

Pain and loathing were a white fire in her mind. She felt her groping right hand touch the silver statuette and she realized she was lifting it, swinging, bringing it down. What she did then she didn't know—it was like those two or three other occasions when she had earned her reputation for an explosive temperament, when a red haze of rage had clouded her mind. When it cleared, she was bending over George, breathing raggedly, the statuette in her hand. And George was lying on the scatter rug in front of the fireplace, his eyes wide open as if in startled surprise, the side of his head crushed to a bloody pulp.

Then Laura realized that someone had come into the room.

She spun around. It was Harry Lawrence standing there, his back to the door, a tall glass in his hand.

"Lord!" he said. Even through the tan his strong features were pale. "Laura, what is this?"

Her hand shaking, she took the glass from him and drained half of it while he locked the door. Then, feeling her way to the chair at her dressing table, she told him.

"I see," he said when she had finished. "Your husband. God, Laura."

"I thought he was dead!"

"He is now. Lordy, but he's certainly dead now."

Of course it was self-defence, but did you have to smash his head in?"

"He wouldn't let go of me. I lost control and just kept hitting and hitting until he fell, I guess."

"Sure, I understand. But will the press boys? Or will they get bigger headlines by saying you lost your temper—again—and slugged him?"

"He was a louse," she whispered. "He was here to blackmail me."

"I know. But if you could just have fended him off until I got up here—" He took out a handkerchief and mopped his forehead. "Good Lord, Laura. Take somebody like Haila French. As soon as she learns you've been able to keep your past life a secret from her, she'll open a vendetta against you. She's likely to take George's side and paint a pathetic picture of the poor guy in jail, abandoned by you, then crawling back to you for help. And what do you do? You knock his brains out. Think how she can make that sound? And the others will follow her lead."

"Dear God, Harry!" She reached for his hand and clung to it. "That would mean—everything, wouldn't it? Our company—our deal with United—my future..."

"And maybe a term in San Quentin for you for manslaughter, or even second degree murder. Depending on how vicious Haila and Billy and the others got. Or, saying we could beat that charge, anyway the end of our company, our plans, your career."

"No, Harry, no!" She held his hand to her cheek and rubbed her face against it feverishly. "There must

be something we can do. Nobody knows him. He's here under a false name, and he's not a real columnist. If we could just get rid of him somehow—maybe Dave Dennis would help us, for the sake of the studio."

"He might." Harry considered the matter. "No, we couldn't trust him. As soon as the picture was released he'd be just as apt to spill the truth for another splash of headlines. Dave would cut his grandmother's throat for a story."

"Then what can we do?" she moaned. "If we could only get him away from here—but it's hopeless. You know I'm spied on—Marie, Pedro watch everything I do. Every place I go, columnists and photographers pop out of the bushes. I couldn't sneak a suitcase out of this house and open it in privacy, much less get rid of George."

"I know. But at least we have to get him out of sight. And you have to get downstairs. Haven't you got a trunk or something?"

"In the closet. An old wardrobe trunk. I've just kept it because it was once my mother's. It's empty."

"Good. You finish fixing yourself. I'll tend to George."

She turned to the mirror and feverishly began to put her face on, leaning close so she could not see the reflection of Harry's actions. She heard the thump of the trunk, heard Harry grunt, heard the trunk snapped shut, as she finished. She turned. The trunk stood against the wall, locked. George and the rug on which he had been lying were gone. So was the

bloody statuette. Harry looked himself over carefully, found no blood, and nodded toward the trunk.

"George is sleeping peacefully," he said. "He'll keep and I'll try to figure something. But I think we'd better break up the party and call in the police. I'm sure we can make a self-defense plea stick and messy though it will be, at least, when it's over, it's over. The longer we wait, the worse it'll be."

"No!" she said. "No, Harry! I've fought my way to the top in Hollywood and I'm going to stay there. George isn't going to spoil that. He spoiled the rest of my life—he's not going to do it again. We have to think of something. We have to!"

"All right, then. Let's go downstairs and meet the press. And smile, Laura, smile."

She smiled. She murmured light responses to dirty jokes, and gurgled with feminine laughter.

"Where is that columnist from Eastern?" Dave Dennis asked her, and she smiled sweetly. "I talked to him. I think he's rushed off to file his story."

Haila French cornered her. "You're looking pale tonight, dear," the tall, ugly woman said. "I think you're working too hard."

"I love my work, Haila darling," she murmured. "I wouldn't have it otherwise."

"And your manager?" Haila demanded. "When are you two taking the fatal plunge?"

"When we do, you shall know about it first of all," Laura laughed, and went on circulating. The faces became all one face—George's. The eyes became his eyes, winking at her lewdly, knowingly. As though

she had x-ray vision she could see through the ceiling, into her dressing room, through the locked trunk, to George, curled up inside, dead for the second time in his life—dead and still trying to ruin everything for her.

But he wouldn't, damn him, he wouldn't, he wouldn't—

Her thoughts broke off abruptly. Harry was squeezing her arm.

"Easy, Laura, easy!" he whispered. "You looked as if you were seeing haunts. I've got it. Come along—and just follow my lead. Dave is as mad as a nest of hornets, and Haila will be madder. But it's the only way we can do it."

She followed him, asking no questions. They took their place on the stairs, looking out over the big room, and Harry had his arm around her waist. Dave Dennis, his eyes glowing with bitterness, stood beside them and struck a Chinese dinner gong until the roomful of hilarious writers and starlets had gathered to listen, and were quiet.

"Folks," he said, with a little chuckle. "I have a real surprise announcement for you. I confess I just learned about it myself, because Laura and Harry only just made up their minds. So you must forgive them for springing the news on you this way. They—But I'll let Harry tell you."

Harry held her firmly, lending her his strength.

"Friends," he said, "because you all are our friends, Laura's and mine, the big news is simple. Laura and I—well, we've been in love for a long time. And now

that Laura's picture is in the can, we've decided the time has come. We're going to be married. We're going to slip away tonight and fly to Yuma and be married. Those of you who want to come are invited along, as many as the plane I'm going to charter will take. The rest of you are invited to stay, and keep this party going, because we'll be back tomorrow to pick up our things and start on our honeymoon. And we hope we have the best wishes of everyone here!"

Then the buzz and clatter of voices began and Laura braced herself as she saw Haila French plowing toward her furiously, face purpling.

"But why, Harry, why?" she whispered. "Oh, I'm glad, but why?"

"Because, Laura," he whispered back into her ear, "it's the only way we can get rid of George. Even a Hollywood star is entitled to a little privacy on her honeymoon, isn't she?"

It was a day and half a night before she saw her dressing room again. Then she slipped in through the door, a flashbulb flared, she smiled brilliantly, Harry followed her in and pushed the door shut, locking it. They had been married for twelve hours, and alone scarcely at all.

"We'll be down soon," he called. "Keep a drink hot for us."

The photographers outside faded away, down the stairs. Laura's smile shriveled and left her face a mask of desperation. "Harry—"

"Easy, Laura." He put an arm around her. "The worst is over."

"If I ever have to smile for a photographer again—"

"I know. And you never did a better piece of acting."

"They asked me—to give them a big smile. And I thought of George—waiting in the trunk here—and I smiled, Harry. I smiled!"

He held her until the nausea within her had subsided.

"Thanks, darling," she said. "I'll be all right now. What do we have to do now?"

Harry looked around the room.

"Not too much," he said. "I see Marie packed your things. There's my bag—my houseboy brought it over. My topcoat, roadmaps, gloves, camera, dark glasses. Everything, I guess. We'll tell Marie to get Pedro and your chauffeur to load my station wagon. Then we have to say goodbye to the reporters downstairs. We have to get a promise from Dave to leave us alone. And then we can get rid of George."

There was a knock on the door. "Dave Dennis, folks."

"Come in, Dave." Harry unlocked the door and swung it open.

Dave Dennis paused in the doorway, his smile a half sneer, his gaze darting from one to the other.

"Well, how are the two lovebirds? All ready for the honeymoon?"

"Yes, Dave darling." Laura's tone was a coo. "Thanks for handling so many details for us. You've been a lamb."

"That's all right." A look of gentle reproach veiled

his smouldering fury. "But I still wish you'd given me some notice. We could have had stories in all the papers for a month."

"Love and war wait for no man, Dave," Harry Lawrence said. "You know how it is."

"Well, anyway"—the publicity head's look was forgiving—"we have front page splashes in every daily paper and we can keep the pot boiling for the whole two weeks of your honeymoon—interviews, picture spreads, stuff like that. By the way, you never did tell anyone where you're going."

"We're going to Mexico." Harry Lawrence's voice hardened. "But we told you—we want privacy. No interviews, no reporters."

"Now wait a minute!" Dave Dennis' mask of good nature vanished. "You crossed me up by springing this marriage on everybody. You can't cut me out of all the angles."

"We can and we're going to," Laura said tightly. "Even in Hollywood a honeymoon should be private."

"I've already promised Haila French an exclusive on your first day of being married!" Dave Dennis said. "If you want her to hate your guts forever—including the new company you're going to form..."

"Look," Harry said, "two days! Give us forty-eight hours to ourselves and we'll play ball. Haila can have the exclusive story of that two days."

"Well"—Dave spread his small, feminine hands—"all right. Two days. Mexico, eh?"

"That's right. We're going up into the mountains to visit an old friend of mine. Do some hunting. We'll phone you in two days and let you know where. Tell Haila she can have a telephone interview, exclusive."

"All right." Dave shrugged gracefully. "All the boys and girls are gathered downstairs to drink a toast to you and I think it would be awfully nice if you said a few words, Laura."

"She will, Dave. As soon as we've told Marie to get the houseboy to load the car, we'll be down."

"Fine." Dave went out and Laura closed her eyes, drawing a deep, shuddering breath.

"It's all right, Harry, I can face them once more," she said. "I know just what I'll say." She drew herself up, she smiled brilliantly, she stretched out one hand in a gesture infinitely pleading.

"Thank you, thank you, all of you wonderful people. I can't tell you how happy we are, and what your good wishes mean to us. You've been so sweet and understanding. Now we have one more favor to ask. We're going to slip away—please, dear friends, don't try to follow us or find out where we're going. We ask only one wedding present from the world—for forty-eight hours we'd like just to be by ourselves, alone—quite alone."

Her face changed and became a tortured mask.

"Quite alone," she said, "so we can get rid of George, my first husband, the bastard."

The road stretched away into darkness, endless, with the headlights of the station wagon biting off a

constantly changing segment of it. Harry Lawrence was at the wheel, erect but with lines of fatigue on his face. Laura leaned against him, taking comfort in his warmth and nearness. Every muscle in her own face sagged from weariness.

"I think we're in the clear now," Harry said quietly, watching the empty road. "If they started out trying to follow us, and I'm betting they did in spite of your request, we've lost them. It's a good thing we didn't trust that double-crosser Dennis, though."

"Anyway, we're married." Her voice rose, threatened to break. "That's something, isn't it, Harry? And we'll stay married because we have to, because we know too much."

"We're married and I'm glad of it!" he said sharply. "And we'll stay married because we want to. George did that much for us, anyway."

"George! Dear, darling George! He got us married. And now the happy bride is starting on her honeymoon with her first husband along in her trunk as part of her trousseau."

She buried her face in her hands. Harry let her sob for half a minute, then took one hand from the wheel to shake her.

"Laura! There are headlights behind us, coming up fast."

She caught her breath. "Reporters?"

"No—listen." They both heard the rising wail of a police siren. "It's a police car."

"Harry, they've found out! Oh, God, they've found out!"

"They couldn't have. Only you and I and George know—and none of us have said anything. We can't run away from the police in a station wagon. Whatever it is, be Laura Layne—act it to the hilt."

He braked the station wagon to a stop on the shoulder and the police car screamed up behind them and stopped. Laura did frantic repair work on her makeup. Harry took out a cigarette, was lighting it as the short, thickset officer strode up beside the car and thrust a pugnacious face in the window.

"Let's see your license," he snapped. "You in a big hurry to go someplace tonight, mister?"

"As a matter of fact!" Harry's voice brimmed with good humor—"I am. We've just been married and—"

"Oh, officer." Laura's hand found the dome light and switched it on. She leaned forward and smiled. "I'm sure you'll understand. I'm Laura Layne and this is my husband. We were just married this morning."

"Laura Layne, huh?" the pugnacious look became a knowing smile. "Say, I saw your wedding on TV. The news reel, this afternoon. And the papers were full of it."

"Yes, all that publicity." She sighed, lovely, rueful, a woman in love seeking only privacy. "Now we're trying to get away for a quiet honeymoon. If we were speeding, that's why."

"Oh, sure." Harry's hand dropped quietly outside the car window and official fingers retrieved the bill it held. "I know how it is. Say, will my wife get a

kick out of hearing I almost arrested Laura Layne on her honeymoon."

"You're very understanding," Laura murmured, her smile expressing gracious gratitude. "Bring your wife to the studio sometime. I'd love to have her watch us shoot a scene."

"You bet. She'll get a bang out of that. Well, lots of luck, Mr. and Mrs. Layne."

"Thank you so much," Laura whispered, and the station wagon picked up speed as the automatic transmission shifted. The police car faded behind them. She waited until its headlights were out of sight before she spoke.

"Harry, I can't take any more. I just can't."

"You won't have to, sweetheart. We're going to turn north in a mile, toward my lodge in the mountains. We've been running south just in case Dave came after us. Now it's safe to double back. By three A.M. we'll be at the lodge. It's absolutely deserted up there this time of the year. Then we can get rid of George once and for all."

"Hurry," she whispered. "Hurry. Every mile of the way I can feel him back there behind us, in the trunk, winking at us as if he knew exactly what was happening."

He nodded, and their speed increased. She sat tensely staring at the white road unreeling ahead of them until at last her eyes closed and she slept, leaning against his shoulder.

Behind them the trunk that held George threatened once to fall off when the tailgate almost came

open on a bumpy stretch of road.

But the tailgate held and the trunk subsided. . . .

When she opened her eyes again the car had stopped. It was quiet. There weren't even any insect sounds, only the whisper of a small breeze feeling its way through the branches of tall pines. Harry had switched off the headlights and his lodge, big but old and ramshackle, was a silent silhouette against the starlit sky, a secluded mountain lake beyond it.

"We're here," he said, as she stirred. "Everything's fine. I haven't seen a headlight for an hour. We have to get George inside and hide him in the cellar, but once that's done, we'll lock up this place and let it rot. He'll be safe until doomsday."

"Thank God," she said. I've been so sure all along that George would somehow still find a way to spoil everything."

"Don't worry about George." Harry got out and began to open the tailgate. "As a matter of fact, I've rather enjoyed sneaking George out from under the noses of all those reporters. Someday I think I might even make a movie about George."

"No! Don't even say that, Harry!"

"All right, I'll forget it. Here's the key to the lodge—not that you couldn't get in through a window. I'll bring George—you go ahead and turn on the lights."

He opened the trunk and she heard him grunt, but she did not look back. She went up the gravel path and behind her his steps were slow and labored. She went up the stairs onto the wooden porch, fumbled the key into the lock as Harry came up behind her,

and swung the door open. She led the way in, fumbling the unfamiliar wall for a light switch.

"I can't find the light," she said.

"It's an overhead. Feel for a string. George is getting heavy. I'd like to get George to bed."

She groped in the inky darkness for a light cord, and had just touched it when she heard the sudden sound of tipsy voices, laughter, the stamp of feet coming into the room from the next room.

"Mexico, the man said." Dave Dennis' jeering voice froze her fingers around the light cord. "When he had a marked road map showing the way to his lodge in his topcoat pocket, and didn't bother to take out Mexican visitors' cards! All right, folks, let's welcome the happy couple properly. I think he's carrying the bride over the threshold. Get the picture, Pete."

A dozen drunkenly hilarious voices began, "Here comes the bride, here comes the bride—" A flashbulb filled the room with blinding brightness. Laura's hand jerked convulsively, turning on the overhead lights.

As the light came out, and the blinding effect of the flashbulb wore off, the singing trailed off into ragged silence.

"Jesus!" said a single awed voice, and then a woman reporter began to scream.

Harry was standing beside Laura, George over his shoulder, and George's face was only a few inches from hers. She did not see Dave Dennis, the group of reporters, or the woman who was screaming. She

saw only George's dead eye, so close to her, as it slowly opened under the effect of advancing rigor mortis, then half closed again in a lewd and knowing wink.

Treasure Trove

F. TENNYSON JESSE

Summer stayed late that year, and it was not until the last day of October that Brandon realized it had gone. Then a storm sprang up which went sweeping over the marshes, ruffling the still, grey waters of the meres and inlets, and rending the leaves from the twisted trees. After it had passed the warmth had gone from the air and only a pale, wintry sunshine lay pure and chill over the fen land. A few leaves still clung to the elms that grew about the farm-place, and, as he pushed open the gate of the farmyard, he heard the cawing of the rooks about their nests, which showed black amid the bare branches.

Brandon felt for the moment the classic melancholy appropriate to the dying year, annual reminder of the Autumn that approaches to every man. But the next moment, turning his head to look back the way he had come, he saw that between the pale brown masses of the reeds the waters were a cold, bright blue, and the crystalline notes of the robin, practising for its winter song, came to his ear. Beauty still lived in this fenny country and his heart responded gratefully.

He went across the muddy yard and met his friend Miles in the doorway of the farmhouse. Dear, good Miles—sun or rain, summer or winter, held very little message for him that was not strictly utilitarian. But Miles's ruddy, outdoor face seemed somehow to have lost its usual cheerfulness of outlook, though it would certainly not be because of anything to do with some allegorical message of the dying summer.

"Have you seen Tom and Jack?" asked Miles. "They were supposed to be ploughing in the five-acre to-day, and they're not to be found. They're so dependable as a rule."

"Tom and Jack? No. It doesn't matter, does it? I suppose they're harrowing or mulching or marling or sowing or some other of the many processes that you indulge in."

The strange expression on his host's face had not lightened.

"They've been queer," he said, "darn queer, for two days now, ever since they found that cursed treasure while ploughing the reclaimed piece of waste land over by the big dyke. This morning they looked so queerly at each other I didn't quite like them going out together. There's something odd about it, Bill. I don't like it."

Brandon smiled and began to stuff his pipe.

"Nonsense, what could be wrong with your men?" he said. "It won't be the first time a little bit of money has gone to a man's head. They'll get over it, you'll see."

But to himself he was thinking that it was a bit

queer all the same. Everyone knew Tom and Jack, they were the famous friends of the village. Damon and Pythias weren't in it when it came to friendship. They had been to the same Council school as boys, been in the same footer team in the winter, same cricket team in the summer, skated together, gone duck-shooting together, gone fishing together, fought in the same regiment through the war and had even married twin sisters, and as far as anyone knew there had never been a wry word between them. They were not men of any special ability which would have caused them to grow away from the class of life into which they had been born, but in that class they were easily first in their district. Honest, decent, intelligent men, a little slow in the processes of their thoughts, perhaps, but none the less shrewd and sound for that. Tom a year younger, slightly built and active, Jack heavy compared with his friend, but strong as a bull. Tom might be quick in his temper, but it was soon over. Jack had the serenity that often goes with men of his large build. It seemed sad and a little odd that a few, dirty, antique coins should have been able to come between them.

"Why don't you tell them," he suggested to Miles, "that their old coins are probably worth very little?"

"I have," said Miles. "But you know what these people are, they always imagine anything they dig up must be of immense value and that the British Museum would buy it for a large sum. I can understand that part of it, what I can't understand is that they should begin to quarrel over it. I should have thought

they'd have been only too glad to share it, however much or little it's worth. Besides, their working hours are not over yet, and I've never known them down tools until the right hour, generally not till after it, they're the real old-fashioned kind that doesn't like to leave a job half done."

Scarcely had he said this when one of the maid-servants came running from the passage at his back, calling to him in a loud and frightened voice:

"Come quick, sir, Tom and Jack be fighting in the barn, they're killing each other...."

Miles turned and ran through the house, out into the front garden and across it, Brandon at his heels.

The big barn stood on the slope of the field beyond, a wooden building, black with pitch, with a red fluted roof. Beside it the straw ricks gleamed golden in the late sunshine. The two men ran up the slope of the field where the trodden turf was heavy and greasy to their feet and Brandon, out-stepping his more elderly host, burst through the door into the barn.

For the first moment it all seemed very dark to him, a darkness filled with dust-motes that wreathed like steam in the rays shining through the doorway. The smell of cattle and trodden earth, and of the sweet stored hay, filled the dimness; rafters and rough wooden pillars stood out in the gloom. Then, as sight grew clear, his ears became aware of a horrible sound of sobbing that rose and fell, and the thud of blows. Two men were fighting, backward and forward, on the earthy floor. As Miles and Brandon

sprang forward, the bigger man, who was winning, rained blows upon either side of his opponent's head, and the smaller man, from whom came the noise of sobbing, suddenly crumpled up and fell to the floor, where he lay still.

"Good God, man!" cried Miles, hanging on to the big fellow's arm. "You must be mad, you might kill him."

The man turned a ravaged face to his master.

"I shouldn't care if I had, the dirty hound!" he said. "He's a thief, that's what he is."

"Tom a thief! Nonsense. Why, you'd have fought anybody else who said as much."

"Aye, I *would* have," said the man: "But not now. ... He's stolen all the money we dug up in the new field. He's hidden it away somewhere and won't say where. He's just lying and saying he hasn't got it."

Brandon had knelt down beside the unconscious Tom, whose face was running with blood; now he looked up and said:

"Well, you've nearly killed him. Even if it's true, you ought to be ashamed of yourself, and I don't believe it *is* true, Tom wouldn't do a thing like that. By God, Miles, look at his fists. Open your fists."

And he got up and advanced on Jack, who stood staring sullenly at him, his clenched fists still held before him. Jack offered no resistance as his master and Brandon pulled his fingers apart and discovered, clenched in each hand, a ragged flint stone, their ends dripping with Tom's blood. Brandon, looking at Jack's glazed eyes, said nothing; it would be little

use saying anything, he felt, to a man as changed from the self they all knew, as this man was. Instead, he said to Miles:

"We must get Tom out of this, you and Jack pick him up while I have a look round."

With surprising docility Jack bent down and picked up gently the head he had ill-treated, and he and Miles between them carried the unconscious man out through the ray of sunlight into the air.

Brandon sat down on an upturned bucket near at hand, he felt sick and ill at the sight of the blood, an idiosyncrasy of his, so unconquerable that he had ceased to be ashamed of it. It seemed to him that the dim air of the barn was laden still with the violent passions that had been released there, that the element of strangeness in this sudden hatred sickened the very sunlight that slanted in upon the spot trodden by the men's struggling feet.

Brandon was not normally a super-sensitive man, but all his life he had been the prey of moments which had taken and shaken him oddly, moments when he had seemed not through any superior gifts of his own, but because of some outer compulsion, to be aware of more than most men, of more than, ordinarily, he would have been aware of himself. Usually these strange spaces of clarity were prefaced by an unaccountable aspect of external things; a familiar tree or bookshelf would take on a look that he could only describe himself as "tilted," as though the angle of the visible world had started off in a new direction, pointing toward an unknown dimension; as though

the tree or bookshelf had lost, all of a sudden, its tree-ness or furniturehood, and become a wedge thrust into space. At the time this would seem all right to him, only afterwards, looking back, his senses still giddy, he would realize the different tilt. And, cutting across this new space where would come a wedge of light, tilted at the same new angle, which for the moment was the right angle, and in it he would be aware of, rather than see, a new and more complete aspect of something he had only imperfectly known before. A friend's motive for doing what had to him previously seemed inexplicable; the solution to some riddle in the history lecture he was working out; or sometimes even a fresh light upon a matter which had no earthly connection, as far as he knew, with himself.

He was almost hypnotized into this feeling now, as he sat there in the barn, but he shook off the dizzying sensations, like the familiar pins and needles of the children, that was stealing over him, and told himself it was due to the upset of his nerves and to the angle of the shaft of light that streamed in at the door. He got to his feet and as he did so he caught sight of a battered felt hat lying against the wall of the barn. He went over to it to take it up, he recognized it as Tom's by its peculiar light-grey colour and by the blue jay's feather stuck in the band. He bent to pick it up, but to his surprise it was so unexpectedly heavy in his hand that he almost dropped it. He ran his fingers behind the head-lining of the crown; wrapped in a thin piece of stuff he felt the

uneven surfaces of coins. So Tom had lied after all . . . he had concealed the coins. Brandon felt as when he had seen the flints concealed in Jack's fists.

He picked up the hat, and went heavily out of the barn with the hat carried between his two hands. He crossed the garden and went into the little room outside the front door which Miles used as his office.

Brandon closed the door and sat down at the table, pushing away papers and ledgers to make a clear space in front of him. Then he turned the hat up, and pulled out the pack of coins which lay, snake-like, curled round the crown. He unfolded the strip of soiled silk handkerchief and poured the coins out on the table before him. There they lay, the source of all the trouble between Tom and Jack, a mere handful of dirty, almost shapeless coins. Brandon looked at them curiously. They were so old and battered he could only just make out the head of a Caesar—which, he knew not, but the Roman look of it was unmistakable. It seemed incredible that through these coins, the passion of envy, mounting murder high, had come into being. . . . He scraped the coins together in his two hands.

And then, as he sat there, the strange sensation came flooding over him, drenching him, as it were, to the tips of his fingers and toes, so that he felt he could not move if the house caught fire about him. He felt very cold, in spite of the tingling that pervaded him, and he knew—how, he could not have told—that he was holding in his palms things so evil that his very flesh revolted, things so evil that when-

ever they were discovered and rediscovered by men they brought evil in their train. He knew, with a dreadful clearness in the midst of this dark red mist, that these things had been turned up by the plough-share, or dragged from the sea, or cast upon beaches throughout the years, and whosoever found them knew desolation and decay of everything that had been his until then. There beat at him persistently the knowledge that he must take these things out and throw them away in the place where it was least likely they would be found for generations to come. He must weight them heavily and cast them out to sea, or throw them into the still waters of some dis-used pit.

He struggled violently against the feeling of horror that held him, because he wished to see about this business as soon as might be, and by a violent effort of the will he pulled himself back into the present. The evening sun was still shining into the little room. Shaking, but with the tingling slowly growing less all over his body, he drew his hands away from the clustering coins and let them fall upon the table. He passed his palm across his wet forehead and told himself that in another moment or so he would be able to do what he had to do, and quite soon he stood up, his steady self again, although not denying he had been shaken.

It was suddenly that the dreadful idea took him. Putting out his hand he began to count the coins; he counted three times, always hoping that in his hurry he might have erred, but count as he would, the bat-

tered pieces of silver numbered thirty. Brandon leaped up, and drew away from the table, his hands shaking. He found himself saying in a dreadful whisper: "Thirty pieces of silver . . . thirty pieces . . . of silver."

The Body of the Crime

WILBUR DANIEL STEELE

The house in which Daniel was born was the kind of which we say, as we drive past it in the elm-pillared margin of some New England village: "What a monstrosity!" One day, when the Antique has caught up with the Eighties, perhaps we shall say: "What a beauty! What noble bays and airy cupolas and richness of brown scrollwork! They knew how to build their houses in those days."

Perhaps, too, we shall have matured enough to say of men like Dan Kinsman, who was Daniel's father: "They knew how to build their lives."

When the young Daniel came home from his first year away to Prep school and saw with his changed eyes the unchanging house, the weighing cornices and flying towers, squared bays, rounded bays, portecochère, all cocoa brown in the shadows of the chestnuts—"That's it," he thought, "it's not like other fellows' houses."

And when he studied this man, his father, it seemed for a while he had found the answer to the riddle as old in its secret wretchedness as the very

beginnings of his memory. "And *he*, he's not like other fellows' fathers."

Other fellows' fathers, Daniel had found in his year, were men who arrived cheerfully from lifting their incomes and departed grimly to lower their medal scores. Forward-moving, to-morrow-thinking young elders, eager, industrious, mobile fellows fearful of nothing but of seeming to stand still.

But here was a father apparently content to be one year where he had been the year before, possessed of but the same possessions, the same small-town friendships, the same leisurely, half-patriarchal judgship, the same pedestrian pleasures, books and dogs, pruning-hooks and garden hoes and fishing rods. And he a strong, straight man alive, not yet fifty, with black hair thick on his head, and lungs to laugh with when he wanted. Strange!

Now it came to Daniel it must be because his father was so wanting in—that's to say, so strange this way—that he had always seemed to his son so—so—Daniel groped for a word for a thing he'd never been able to give a shape or name, and had to finish lamely—seemed so "strange."

Daniel could have laughed for joy to discover, now he was grown up, that the trouble about his father was so little a one as this. For all the weight of his fifteen years, he could have skipped for lightness, to know that here was a difference from other fathers he now could grasp, even learn to condone, yes, even admire, even fight for, with fellows with more—well—say—money-grabbing dads.

Yes, Daniel could have skipped for lightness on the deep cave-green turf of the hydrangea alley, where they walked and talked that first June afternoon at home, he and his father, while mother watched them with her pale smile from her long chair in her high window.

It was curious; Daniel had always loved his ailing, beautiful mother, easily, and been near her and told her everything tellable, easily, and not thought much about it. The one he would have given his life to be able to love as easily, to be close to, friends with, whole of heart, was this other, this darkly handsome man whom he himself was so absurdly like to look at, his father.

So to-day it was as if the year of forgetting had worked a good miracle. It was a dream come true to find himself sauntering and chatting with Dan Kinsman as affectionately at ease as though they had been but two fellows, gravely estimating the apple yield in the west yard and the hay chances in the back mowing, chuckling together over the antics of Spot's pups on the barn floor, waving answer to the view halloo of Doc Martin racketing by in the antique twin-six, and, wonder of wonders at last, arm in arm, man and man, marching indoors prepared to mount and demand of mother if supper were ever to be ready—as if she, poor fragile chatelaine, could know anything about that.

But, day of marvels! An elixir must have run in the air. For here in their sight came mother down the stairs to meet them, walking by herself, suddenly,

subtly revived, the flush on her cheeks and the shine in her eyes not more for their astonishment than for her own.

So to-night there were three at table in place of two, and it was like the sort of dream in which one wakes from an interior nightmare to find everything finished that was horrid, and everything at its beginning that is right and bright. Nor did it end with the supper table; afterward she would go out abroad with them, as if greedy to share in the marvel of those two men of hers who walked of a sudden as one, and by their walking so, seemed so suddenly to have made her walk again.

What a sight it was for the evening sun to see, level and bloody rose beneath the eaves of the chestnuts! Dan Kinsman, bemused, commencing words and swallowing their ends on half-choked chuckles, even as his eyes, quick for once, kept slant track of Vivian's every oddly exuberant gesture. Daniel, beatified, accepting wonders with a new omnivorous trust. And Vivian Kinsman, unbelievable, a princess freed from some evil enchantment in exile, returned to her kingdom, leading them.

In the east yard, hidden for years, the low, excited laugh was on her lips continuously. For this border, it was: "They're too gorgeous, Dan; I love them!" For that bed: "But there never *were* such flowers!" When she came in view of father's season's pride, the bastion of man-high crimson poppies, all she could do was put her hands to her heart.

Only when she caught sight of Spot and her pup-

pies, taking the last of the sun at the barn door, was there a shadow of change in the exclamation of discovery.

"You're going to keep them all, Dan!" She drew father's eyes. "All, Dan!"

He would have temporized, laughingly: "Spot got away this time, and—"

"You're not going to drown them, Dan. I couldn't bear to think—"

The sharpness in her voice brought quickness to his.

"Why, no, of course not, Vivian. I shall keep them, of course—unless someone should want them very much—who'd give them a good home."

The sun touched distant woods. Father dared worry aloud at last.

"It'll be chilly in another second now, Vivian."

She turned back with a queer, mercurial docility, asking only, when they came to the porch steps, that she might have some of the crimson poppies for her room to-night.

"I should so love to see them in the morning, Dan, just three or four."

"You'll have an armful, that's what you'll have, dear; I'll go and get them now."

Daniel took her in on his arm, feeling tall, now his father was gone. She would go only as far as the living room for the moment, where a slender summer fire was laid, ready for the match. When Daniel had lighted it he studied the white figure lying

back deep in Dan Kinsman's chair. He said: "You're happy to-night, Mother."

She needn't answer. Her eyes, fixed on the fire, were alight with all its beginning, playing flames. And before he knew why, "Have you always been happy here with father," he demanded, "and with me?"

This must have seemed to need no answer, at first. But then she sat up and fixed the boy with her straight gaze. "Always, yes!" From vehemence it changed to mirth. "Whatever put it in your head, sonny—yes, yes, yes!" And sinking back, with a little gasp at the end of her laughter: "He's an angel, sonny, your father is, but he's an awful slow-poke; won't you go and hurry him along?"

Father had meant it when he said an armful; he had gathered a whole great sheaf of the poppies, and rather a pity, for the blooms were closed. But what matter, if Vivian wanted them; they'd open again at day. So he seemed to be thinking as he stood there, laden and bemused, in the falling night.

And so it was that Daniel, his son, came upon him, deep in a preoccupation of his own, halted a rod away, and, without lifting his gaze from the ground, said: "Has Mother liked it here in Kennelbridge, Father?"

Dan Kinsman had had a day of astonishments. Without turning anything but his head, and that slowly, he studied his dim questioner.

"It has liked your mother here," he said quietly.

The boy, given a riddle, raised his eyes to the man,

who was no more than a shadow-shape in the dusk now—and, as shadows may be, something distorted and magnified—between the blackening blood of the poppies he carried and the dyke he had torn them from. And Daniel forgot his riddle and widened his eyes. The father knew the sign of old. All afternoon he had been waiting for it, pulled between dread and the beginnings of an incredible hope. Now he wheeled, cried, "Ah, Daniel, son!" and held out his arms, careless of their sanguinary burden. And his son turned and ran.

What good is to be fifteen and a man, instead of ten and a boy, or five and a child? When Daniel, fleeing, needles in his legs and an icicle up his backbone, reached the firelight where he had left his mother sitting, it was on the knees of veriest childhood he tumbled down, to hide his face in the chair-bottom beside her, wind his fingers in her skirts, and sob it out in words aloud, at last.

"Mother—why am I—why am I sometimes—sometimes so fr-fr-frightened of my—my fa-fa-father?"

Mother had always answered his questions, till he asked this question. Her failure now, her complete, un stirring silence, doubled the magnitude of a terror till now his own shamed secret. And the doubled was redoubled by the sound of that man's feet on the piazza, coming toward the door.

He groveled. "Mother, please, hurry—hurry and tell me, tell me, Mother! What—what's there about my father—what's he done that's such a—a horror?"

Still, for answer, no word, no gesture. And it was too late; a quiet door had opened and the feet were in the room. As Daniel scrambled up and wheeled, a defending courage suffused him. He stood his ground, and, not knowing why, spread his arms across the man's way, and, not knowing what, cried: "No! Don't! Don't come!"

Through the water in his eyes he began to see his father's face hung there before him, oddly gray, the stare of it fixed, not on him, but on her behind him. And he grew aware of two things fighting in that stare, the greater one like a stunned sorrow, the lesser like a reawakening hope.

As sometimes in crisis, it was of the lesser one the man spoke now.

"This, then, Daniel, is why you said what you said out there, and sobbed, and ran away back here? It wasn't that old queerness of yours coming back then, after all?"

The husband's shock was gentler than the son's, for all evening he had had in his mind as he watched Vivian the thought of a candle when it gutters, how it will flame to its old brightness for an instant at the last.

Not so with Daniel. When he turned and knew that the reason his mother had sat there and not answered him was that all the while she had sat there in the deep chair dead, he fainted.

Doc Martin had to mop his bald head with a troubled handkerchief many times in the following days. On the third, the afternoon after the funeral, stop-

ping in at the Kinsmans' by right of the oldest and closest friend and finding Dan there all alone, he asked: "Where's Daniel hiding himself?" And if it sounded casual, and was meant to, already in the soil of the doctor's mind uneasy little roots of wonder had begun to set.

"Don't know; not far off, I guess." The answer was given with an averted face.

Why shouldn't it be? Men's faces, when they've just buried their wives of twenty years—why may they not wish to keep what's written on them to themselves? The physician mocked himself for a worrying idiot as he went on home.

But he had his head to mop again when he got to his own house, and found Daniel fidgeting up and down the piazza, inarticulate and miserably man-tling. It was all mysterious and awkward. He didn't know what he was to do or say, and especially was this so when the boy's dumbness, laboring, brought forth some mouse of words about the weather or the baseball standings. But finally, "Doctor Martin," it came at a rush, "was my mother happy, living here in Kennelbridge, with Father—and me?"

It is unfortunate that at such moments men seem to think they have to speak in the manner of oracles. As Dan Kinsman, three days before, now Doc Martin:

"Well, son, she *lived* here in Kennelbridge, with you and your father, almost exactly ten years longer than I gave her to live. Does that mean anything?"

And thereafter he wondered why the boy's eyes,

savagely troubled, followed him slantwise everywhere. He wondered more. Seeing the sun go and the dusk come, he wondered why the sensitive, naturally unobtrusive lad stayed on, apparently aimless and plainly wretched, and stayed, and made no move to go. It was after dark when Doc Martin appeared at the Kinsman place, to find Dan out in the east yard, standing, chin down, hands locked behind him.

"I thought, Dan, you might wonder where the kid was. He's over at my house. I'm afraid I've been—uh—keeping him."

Dan listened, stock-still, without comment. It became an ordeal.

"I don't know just how to say it, Dan. The boy seems badly upset. He has a lot of his mother in him, Dan—a lot of the thing that made us all love her—and—want to spank her, sometimes. That sentimental defenselessness—it went with her ailment, I've no doubt. That making a mountain of emotion out of a molehill of—not that I mean this is a molehill—but—damn it, old man! The boy—this house—this night after the funeral—I've a hunch he'd more than half like to stay over with me. Thought I'd ask you."

"Yes."

The one syllable, it sounded rough in the throat. As he went away the doctor turned twice to study the figure posted there in darkness, head heavy, face hidden. Anger? Sorrow? What? Headless, tailless business! He told himself he wished he were dead and well out of it.

He wasn't. After that night, any half-plans there

may have been of father and son going off for a summer of travel together were dropped. There was a camp in the Green Mountains where Daniel's school went, and he was packed for it by the second morning. Dan came to Doc Martin, unhappy, unused to lying.

"I wonder if you'll do something for me, old man? Drive Daniel over to the main line this noon. I shall be busy."

The doctor did it. What their parting was he never knew, for the boy had his bags out at the gate when he drove by, and the father was "busy." If the friend of them both was profoundly troubled he kept it quiet, and set himself for a gallant hour of cheer and small talk. The problem of a book for the journey seemed a godsend. They went over the news stand's library with a mutual pretense of care, but as if it were not bad enough that all the novels were detective novels, Daniel discovered after brief browsings that there was none he could be certain he hadn't read. As he accepted one at last, entitled *Murder!*, the physician had to stare.

"Lord, son! To look at you, anybody'd think you were as mild as a lamb. And here you turn out a glut-ton for crime. Don't you ever read anything else?"

Daniel went red—even redder, the doctor thought, than was asked for.

"Oh, I forget 'em faster'n I read 'em. If you asked me one single thing that had happened, a week after, I couldn't any more remember it than I could—"

He got no further. He had touched by chance on a

pet dogma of the other's; and Doc Martin, figuratively, squared off.

"Couldn't remember? Bosh! Ever tried?"

"Tried?" Daniel was confused by this vehemence.

"*Really* tried, I mean. Rolled up your mental sleeves and taken pick and spade to the humus of memory, to try and turn up some one particular thing that's buried there? It's surprising. There are authenticated records of long-term prisoners, men in solitary confinement, who, simply for something for their minds to do—"

And here they came, the classic cases, served up with a zealot's gusto; the aged criminals reconstructing verbatim the nursery tales of infancy; the old fellows repainting in minutest detail places passed through as children and thereafter wholly forgotten. And so forth. And so on.

The man with a hobby is not to be held accountable. Doc Martin, who had toiled to make talk—now his one fear was that the belated train would make up time.

"Can't remember! Actually, you can't *forget*! Nothing you've ever felt, heard, seen, no matter how tiny—you may mislay the record, but you can't lose it. No matter how dim, it's here in your cranium somewhere, indelible, forever."

The bent ear and the big eye of his audience it was cruel to give up. The train wags in, but there was still the moment on the platform.

"Theoretically, Daniel, you ought to be able to remember the day of your birth. But it would probably

take you as many as a thousand years, in a dark cell, and after all—”

After all, after the boy was up the step Doc Martin recollected something he had been two days thinking on.

“Daniel, listen! Your mother *was* happy. Her life here was a clear, quiet, happy life, with those she loved deeply. Believe me, Daniel.”

It was good for Daniel he had the book called Murder! At the end of his emotional tether he must have escape, and the surest escape was here between these covers; he knew the taste of it beforehand, as the eater of drugs knows the taste of his drug. Escape, yes. And a curious, helpless, rather horrid surrender.

Half a year ago he would not have been ashamed to have the doctor remark it; it was only of late he had begun to have misgivings of this craving for the dark excitement that surrounds the body of a crime, a craving he could never remember not to have had strong in him.

Never remember? “Bosh!” For a little while he left the book unopened, and thought of the mild old doctor and his ferocious expletive. But was it true, even a half of what he had claimed, about digging up buried things? ... If you tried hard enough? ... Took a pick and spade ... to buried things? ...

There were five hours to ride, more than enough for the book. Let it wait.

To remember things forgotten! By dim footprints in the mold of old fantasies, by broken twigs of sensation—this sort of sound disliked for no reason, that

odor as inexplicably agreeable—by clues so thinner-than-air to be able to track relentlessly—what?

“Bosh!” It was Daniel’s own bosh this time. But the light in the deeps of his abstracted eyes burned no less steadily, nor did the color of a strange excitation retreat from his cheeks and temples.

There was a station. Express, the train only slowed, going through. On the flickering platform stood an elderly woman, back to, a stoutish figure glimpsed for a split second, gray-clad, with a purple hat with a tulle quill.

“Emma!”

But then the boy lay back and derided himself. It was that purple, forward-tilted hat. Emma, his old nurse, had been dead three—no, two years. It was three years ago she came to see him, from Albany, and that was the year before she died.

Yes, yes. She came in her nephew’s car, and brought Daniel a sweater she had knitted for him. He could see her now, when he tried to get into it, there on the big circular side piazza, and her chagrin. “Mercy, when I was here last I never looked to see you grow so in two years. Remember when I was here last time, Dannie?”

“Course I do; what d’you think? And you said I used to be a caution when I was little, and you hoped I’d got over it.”

“Bless you, Dannie, and have you?”

Had he? Got over what? Three years ago he’d known what, because three years ago he’d remembered what she’d said two years before that. Some-

thing about: "I declare, you always were a caution, Dannie. The first day ever I saw you . . . saw you . . . first day ever I saw you—"

Concentrate on it! Try harder!

"—first day ever I saw you, do you know what you said . . . what you—"

In the Pullman, but unconscious of the Pullman, Daniel knotted his brows.

Don't give up. Go at it some other way. . . .

Well, they'd been in his room; he was ready for bed, and Emma had come up—she'd stayed overnight that next-to-last visit—and she'd sat there in the blue rocker and talked and talked. Talked so long that mother had called: "Daniel, Emma's tired, so you must stop asking her so many—"

But now he *had* it—the other thing—it was "question."

It wasn't "what you said." It was, complete: "First day ever I saw you, do you know *the question you asked me?* Well, most three-year-olds, they'll ask you like, 'What's a zebra?' or 'What's a airplane?' But the first thing you asked me was . . . thing you asked me was—"

No, after all, not quite complete. Why did the light of recollection close again, just there? Especially when, by thinking on it, that bedtime visit of Emma's had grown as vivid as a thing to-day.

The expression of the boy in seat No. 5 was a set scowl. A flush colored it, like anger. A "Bosh!" trembled on his lips. He had a book to read, and, by hang, he'd read it now. A book called Murder!

"Murder!"

Why, now he'd got that too!

"The first thing you asked me—I was trying to get you to go into the summerhouse and you were howling and pulling—and you asked me, "What is murder?" And if you don't call that funny for a three-year-old to be asking—"

Murder? Three-year-old? Funny? ... But leave those, for the moment.

Summerhouse! What summerhouse? So far back as Daniel, by knotting his brows to their tightest, could recollect, there'd never been at home any such thing as a summerhouse.

Summerhouse? Latticework, probably. Light through it in squares or diamonds, probably. Unless—ugh, it was chilly in the Pullman—there were vines. Vines?

The train carried the corporeal weight of Daniel Kinsman to White River Junction that summer afternoon. But the part of him that weighed nothing at all had started on an immensely longer journey, an incalculably stranger quest.

At camp, for the first while, they let him go his own gait, without nagging him or themselves. Aware of his shocking loss, they even let down the rules a little—rules, fundamentally, of good fellowship—in his case. Daniel, with his shut mouth, little appetite, and eyes fixed habitually on nothing, was no good fellow for anyone.

This was all right for a certain period. But when a week and another week had gone, and a normal

youngster should have been getting some hold on healthy life, and Daniel was still not less separate, but if anything more so, physically torpid, colorless of expression, unmistakably if incomprehensibly not among those present, the responsible began to think of doing something about it.

At length the Head sat down and wrote a letter to the boy's father, who had shut up house on Doc Martin's plea and gone off with him to the Canadian woods. But that letter was destined not to be posted. Before a stamp was on it, word came in that young Kinsman had not been seen since lights-out the night before. At the end of a day and night of combing the woods, beating the hills, a telegram was dispatched to Canada.

Locked, bolted and shuttered though the house was, Daniel knew a boy's way into it. One of the cellar windows was loose enough to let a lock-pick wire in.

Of all that Daniel had done, of all he was yet to undertake, this one act was the hardest. That he could, in the night, enter into that sealed, empty, pitch-black habitation, of which anyone might be nervous—and he, with his mother dead and his imagination whipped keen by a fortnight's flagellation, was horribly, icily afraid—gives the measure of the thing that was stronger than the house's terror, its pull.

If he were only in the house, only on the scene there, only at home! Day by day, night by night, the brown house of home kept the drag-line taut on him, by innuendo, by promise, by command. Whenever a

peephole, opened in memory, had closed again before the glimpsed stage could set itself with half the properties of old actuality— "Ah, yes, but if you were *there* it might."

And now that he was here? Now that he was actually in, his feet weighing on sightless stairs, hands guiding him along blind walls? Now what was he to do?

Nothing. When he had reached his own room, at the end of gropings that brought sweat out of his neck, he pawed for his bed, found it, and laid himself down along the middle of the mattress. There, inert—almost as inert for hours at a time as a cataleptic—he remained. How long?

By calendar it came to four days. In his consciousness the lapse of time was not measurable, it was as well a dream's forty winks as a dungeon's forty years.

Of his rare actual moves he was to all intents unconscious. Luckily it was summer, and the water not turned off; from time to time he drank. Once he bolted raw oatmeal from a box in the pantry and was ill with it. The electric current was cut, but there was the oil lantern he might have lighted long before he did, had he cared. Rather, perhaps, had he dared. Perhaps, more simply, had he felt the need. After all, his eyes were no longer concerned with this shuttered Here and Now.

They were concerned with the half-open door of a summerhouse.

Relatively, it may have been little more than a

scratching of the topsoil; actually, in that blank-eyed fortnight away at camp, he had penetrated a surprising depth into the leaf mold of his fallen memories. Most important, he had caught the trick of it, learned the heft and balance of his tools, pick and spade, a dogged mental concentration working at one with a reserveless mental surrender.

So it had become child's play, literally, by fastening on some fagend of sensuous recollection—a barked shin of escapade, sting of a punishment, taste of the sweetmeat of some reward—to restore the outlines of whole episodes in the comparatively recent years of his sixes, fives, even his fours; to relive whole days, repeople whole scenes with shapes which began by having no names, or with names wanting shapes, and watch these phantasmal beings take on identities and lineaments—and lo! Auntie Prichard, of course, the doughnut woman! Or Mary Belle—who could forget the girl with wire on her teeth?

He had learned a lot about the creature of pranks and bush-beatings that is the mind. He learned, at a price, that no lead can be too paltry to follow. So it was, retrieving a boy's face plastered with freckles and banged with red hair, he had given three hours of his last camp morning to trying to find the face a name. A dozen times he nearly had it; the muscles of his tongue knew the feel of it, yet couldn't get the sound. It made him mad. "I won't give it up, not if it takes all day!"

And, "day," there it was. Georgie Day! Who could forget Georgie Day?

Accident? In the weird business Daniel was about, there's no such thing.

Georgie Day. Well, well! Immediately, fruitless hours fruited magically. A house suddenly sprang up around the freckled rascal, and around the house a tin-can-littered yard, and in the yard a tumbling barn, and in the barn, rabbits.

Rabbits? What about rabbits? Look! here's a rabbit running, bounding high with fright across a greensward in sunshine. No, none of Georgie's; he and his have vanished from the scene. This is a wild one, cottontail, surprised among berry bushes behind the home garden, retreat cut off, scuttling across the west lawn for all its worth, and Daniel after it.

Run, cottontail! Run, boy! Bounce, bunny! Whoop, Dannie!

"Here, Daisy! Where are you, Daisy? Where's that dog?"

Daisy? Why, Spot's mother, of course, elderly, sleepy, all setter-red.

Yellow sunshine, green grass, little wild blue shadow, hunting, praying, for some hole. And a hole, a hole at last! Squarish aperture among massed leaves. Dive for it, bunny! Stop, boy! Into it, rabbit! Boy, stop dead! Don't go near there, youngster! Frown if you please, stamp, mutter; yes, you know you don't want to go near there. You know you don't.

Why not?

Pandemonium. Out comes rabbit, out comes Daisy, the lazy, surprised asleep in there. And the two of them, fleeing, pursuing, flicker past the transfixed

Dannie, and away, into limbo. For it's the squarish aperture in massed woodbine leaves, cross-hatch of lattice in their gaps, lattice door ajar—it's this he's staring at.

So it was, by uttering the irrelevant words "if it takes all day," Daniel had found the way back to the summerhouse.

Two weeks it had taken him to reach its viny exterior. Had he had a hundred years, real ones, in place of the hundred hours he could command, who knows but that he might actually have succeeded in covering the rest of the journey—might have crept or leaped at last across that one remaining rod of grass, gravel and door-sill, and been inside?

He started sanguinely. Only a rod left—the last dash—home stretch. Pooh! Thrown back from it, confused, he started again with the same assurance, only again to be set on his heels by a wall, impalpable as air, but impenetrable as glass. How many times did he relaunch the attack? In one hour of the clock he could live a score in recollection, a hundred, toward the end, when hunger and fever had whipped the pace. No longer sanguinely, but desperately, he tried one breach after another.

For now there were several; he had multiplied his points of attack. To the rabbit day he had added quickly the Emma day. It was no task by now to reconstruct that episode entire. He could commence with the breakfast table, where the new nurse was first introduced into the scheme of his cosmos. He could mount then to his room with her, suffer the

change into denim play-pants, come down, come out, and go towing around the yard at her arm's end, dazzled by the sudden wealth of her "What shall we play? Anything on earth you like, Dannie?"

So, not once, but dozens of times, he came to the spot where something in him balked, he began to howl, cleared Emma's grasp, let her go on. He could see her face in all its mystification now—and see it, more was the wonder, across the width of the rod he couldn't cross—in the doorway of the summerhouse. And he could hear her expostulating still:

"What is it, Dannie? Nothing but a toad here. You're not afraid of a toad!"

And he could feel something in his stomach's pit, that came up, and was words.

"What is murder, Emma?"

Why on earth that? What was it in him, cold and hot—not shame, not rage, not terror, alone, but like a misery of all three compounded? Or like the feeling Daniel had to this day, immensely diluted, whenever anyone in his hearing spoke of cycles or sickles or Seckles.

And, coming to that, why on earth that? Did it all come from "Seckle"? And did that come from the pear tree, down past the east corner of the barn, which, since he was recollecting, he recollected he had never liked? Recollected, in fact, that when they used to play hide-and-seek at his house, and Daniel himself was it, and one of the boys hid behind that Seckle pear below the barn, he wouldn't go there to spy him, not if he stayed it forever.

So? Why wouldn't he? Time and time again he made an effort to follow that trace, but it was of no use; there was nothing there that was important, he had to tell himself; much better buckle down to business with the shovel day.

The shovel day he had added to the rabbit and the Emma day now. Where it came in the chronology he couldn't say; though he judged from the longer time it had taken him to dig it out it must have been earlier. At any rate, it was the farthest back he could remember being frightened by his father.

He had to work on it. Again, again, stubbornly again, he would stand in a flushed twilight on the perimeter of that arc whose radius was a rod, and watch the woodbine leaves put aside, and see his father emerge from the dark interior, carrying a spade.

Well, what about it? What so fearful was his father doing? Going gardening, probably, in the evening's cool; tools may have been kept in the summerhouse. So what? Look more deeply into this! But try as Daniel would, he couldn't. Each time, at sight of man and shovel, the child gulped, turned, ran, with goblins grabbing after him, for the house and mother.

Why? Why, oh, why, oh, why?

And now at last, time lost all count of—grown to months and years, it seemed, in the black house—now at last, let down by the caving of the body beneath it, Daniel's mind began to surrender in exhaustion Daylight—what was actually the fourth daylight—

creeping through the shutter cracks in slim fans of grayness, did not waken him for a long time from the sleep into which he had sunk near midnight.

When it did he failed to fall immediately, as his habit was, into his reminiscent reverie. Lying supine, staring at the ceiling, it was the ceiling he saw this morning. He raised himself on the mattress, intending to go downstairs, but with the act a dizziness took hold of him. He lay back again and listened to his teeth knocking together. It is one thing for a man, adult and idle, to starve himself for a while; for a growing boy it is another thing.

It was the first time there had been room in Daniel's brain for a thought of failure. Was it not possible that the end of the time he could hide and have solitude was approaching? No sooner the idea, than he repelled it. With a strength of panic he drove himself back to his task. Dig or die, now!

But the pick and spade, till now so docile, developed the balkings and crotchets of a curious sabotage. To-day, when he summoned the old face of a playmate, straightway the features began to twist in the weirdest fashion, magnify, diminish, like the grotesque faces that dissolve in dreams. Or, coming on a new trail of old adventure unexplored, he found it leading him into extraordinary places, out of all color with the rest of his past—and realized with a start that it was something he had read, not lived.

And presently, frustrated, he slept again.

Each other day had been an age; this was but a dozen blinks long, a day wasted. How could Daniel

know the incalculable value of that day his mind lay fallow?

It was night once more when he arose, went into his mother's room, and lay down on the bed there. It was nearly, if not quite, somnambulism. Certainly he was unaware of any reason for the move. Whether he fell asleep and woke up, whether he slept at all, or waked at all, whether at any time he was actually, bodily, in the summerhouse, it would be now impossible to say. It can only be said that the thing till the end had all the stigmata of true nightmare.

The will to terror, to begin with. Terror sprung of its own seed, an effect wanting a cause, a shadow condemned to create the object that casts it. And with this, alternately, a weightless, boundless mobility, and a sense of being held from moving, arms pinioned, legs bound.

Nothing was very clear. Such moments as were lighted—less than pictures; mere rags of sight vignetted on the dark—were whisked away too quickly to be comprehended whole. Nor were these many. The pervading scene was a blackness in which blackness moved, giving forth but muffled sounds. Acts witnessed and no more, shadowy, separate, retreating rather than ever coming nearer.

"They're going away from the summerhouse, ma'am," or, "carrying him away"—that adverb, "away," was forever recurring. And generally somewhere near it, whether before or after, blacknesses moved on blackness with a black burden; heavy breathing, soft feet.

It must be understood there was never an attempt at sequence. No act revealed itself whole at any one time; at divers times divers fractions of it would repeat themselves, mingled with stray fractions of other acts or utterances.

Take the one set of sounds. Sometimes it ran, out there—door-creak, oath, blow, scuffle. Sometimes quite reversed. Sometimes—oath, blow, scuffle, door-creak.

And that querying cry, coming from close above, thrown down—out of a window?—into the dark, now it would be, "Dan, what are you doing? *Tom!*" Then, like as not, next time it would be: "Tom, what are you doing? *Dan!*"

It is impossible to tell it, by a tenth, adequately. For by the very mechanics of telling; nine-tenths of the formlessness is lost; fragments, released from the peculiar bedevilment of nightmare, inevitably fly together. Detached words, fractional phrases, flickering by, flitting back again; before they can be written here they must needs have formed themselves by some degree into sentences, no matter if the sentences are forever changing something of the forms. As, for instance, in the one, "Dan (Tom), what are you doing?" followed by, "*Tom! (Dan!)*"

There's the other sentence, into which at last the word "murder" has come. By the time it has crystallized itself into the sequence, "It was murder, Dan; I saw it; murder in cold blood!"—by that time the light around it has crystallized, too, in a pattern, a pattern of diamond-shaped pencils striking in

through gaps of latticework. And the strait-jacket of nightmare around one's limbs has taken the shape of the arms of the crier-out. And the crier-out is mother.

"Don't come in that door; I'm afraid of you, Dan! The blood on your hands is blood of brutal murder. Why? Don't tell me. Was it because I loved him? I love my child, here in my arms. Must I be afraid for *him* then? Must he be afraid of his father now, as long as the two of you live?"

And this cry, too, vibrant with hysteria, has a vision to go with it, a peephole vision of a close lantern, a red-flecked hand, a spade with earth-spots on it, and the tight, white, terrible mask of father's face.

So, in the telling, already this big, close lantern light has extricated itself from the little lantern light at distance. But in the dream, if it was a dream, this very separation of the two became from the first the thing, intuitively, the dreamer fought for. Wrestled for with tied hands, ran after with hobbled feet; cried to with stopped mouth.

In the beginning it was equally the one or the other that might start it; toward the end of an æon a kind of rule was established; it was the little light far off that began, and the big one then, too soon, that came and swallowed it, only to be swallowed in its turn by that blackness with black things moving in it, or the door-creak sequence, containing the scuffle, the oath and the blow.

Perhaps it was because of this that the desire of the boy's dread centered more and more fiercely on that weakling spark, and he told himself it was there that

whatever was hidden was hidden, and awaited its recurrence impatient of the other shadow-plays. And when it came, and the voice of the second woman in the bedroom—a nurse?—began, “It’s digging they are, ma’am, down there—” and with that the light began to swell, irresistibly, and stripe itself in the pattern that meant the summerhouse, Daniel fought with all his bitter, puny power against the reënwrapping arms, the relifting hysteria of mother’s “Don’t come in that door; I’m afraid of you!” and the re-opening peepshow of the red hand and the white face.

And he cried: “Yes, but go on with the other! Digging down *where*, down *where*?” till in the nightmare the lees of the sweat of his exhaustion ran in icy dribbles down his skin.

It was not till he gave up, beaten by weariness, that it suddenly gave in.

“It’s digging they are, ma’am, down there under—”

“Under *what*?”

“—under that pear tree—”

“Pear tree?”

“—with the little pears, below the barn. By the light of the lantern, ma’am—”

Lantern! By the way, where is a lantern? Now, quick!

“—they’re digging in the—”

Digging! Pick and spade? Where are they?

“—ground, burying something—”

A thing that is buried!

“—under the pear tree, ma’am.”

Ever tried? Rolled up your sleeves, taken pick and

spade—to turn up something that is buried there?

When Dan Kinsman and Doc Martin reached the house late that night, and found it black, the one last hope, which neither had dared confess to, seemed to have followed all its fellows. Red-lidded with sleeplessness, jaws ill shaven, clothing long worn, they looked the men they felt now, as unlocking the front door, they went in.

“What’s the good?”

It was the doctor that saw it, through one of the living-room windows.

“Hey! What’s up out there? Somebody with a lantern, down there behind the barn.”

They started out the door at a walk, but then ran.

They found a lantern, a spade and a garden mattock under the Seckle-pear tree, and a sprawling trench dug, and a wizen-faced, wide-eyed boy to his knees in it, holding out toward them two brown bones.

Dan spoke. “For God’s sake, what are you doing here?”

Daniel spoke. “For God’s sake, what are *these* doing here?”

Doc Martin spoke. “For God’s sake!” That was all.

It wasn’t that Dan was obstinate; it was simply that he was dazed.

“What are you doing here, son? Tell me!”

It wasn’t that Daniel was sullen; it was simply that his legs were going to go out from under him at any moment now.

“What are these, Father? You tell me!”

"Son—sonny—you're sick."

"I am sick. Who was Tom?"

"Good Lord alive! Dan! look here. Be quiet, Daniel; wait till I get through with him. Dan, how long ago was it—I mean, how old would this kid have been, that night?"

"What night do you mean?"

"Come out of it, man! That night when you heard where Tom had been the week before, and called me, and I brought the chloroform over, thinking maybe, perhaps, the dog might—"

"Dog!" High in the roof of a boy's mouth, the one syllable, echoing.

"—and you, Dan, no maybe or perhaps about it, you got him in the head with the spade, thank God, in time. What I asked you—how old was Daniel then?"

"Not old enough to remember anything. . . . Daniel, who's been telling you—"

But Doc Martin wouldn't have it. "No, man, you talk to me. How old?"

"Two, perhaps. Not three. A baby. A babe in arms, actually, come to think of it. Vivian had him there in her arms."

"Where?"

"There in the summerhouse."

"Vivian—in the summerhouse?"

"Afterward. She—she had come there."

"You've never told me."

"No. I—it's something!— Look here, Daniel, son, you'd best be—"

"No you don't, Dan. Talk! What's this about Vivian, and Daniel, and the summerhouse, afterward? Tell it, and tell it straight."

"She was ill, that's all. Frightened. And—and you know how she was about animals and things—and she didn't understand. Couldn't expect her to, not knowing anything. Hysterical. Went to the summerhouse to see—and bolted herself in."

"But when you explained?"

"That's it. I was a fool, I suppose. I tried to lie, at first. The mastiff was hers, from a pup; she adored him; it was all so sudden; I couldn't bring myself to say the word—hydrophobia. A fool."

"Yes, and a damned one."

"She said she was afraid of me, Doc. She said it was—it was—"

"She said it was murder, Father. And—it was only—*Father!*"

"Son! Lord! What's the— Hey! Catch him, Doc, or he'll fall."

"Catch him yourself, he's yours. Pick him up, fool. Starvation; don't worry too much. Bring him along."

"But if he should come to, and me carrying him. I'm afraid—"

"Don't be. Not any more."

A Nice Touch

MANN RUBIN

The phone rang three times before it woke him. It took another two rings for him to move from the dark bedroom, down the hallway, into the still darker living room, find the instrument and lift it to his ear.

"New York calling," said the operator's voice. "I have a person-to-person call for Mr. Larry Preston of Los Angeles."

"Speaking," he mumbled, his voice hung over with sleep. "Go ahead, I'll take the call."

There was a pause and then he heard her. Her voice was hurried, breathless.

"Honey, this is Janice. I woke you, didn't I? I'm awfully sorry. Only I had to talk to you. I'm half out of my mind."

Last remnants of sleep lifted, drifted from his head, silhouettes in the room began taking shape. He leaned backwards feeling for the couch next to the telephone table and settled into it.

"Take it easy," he said. "Tell me what happened." It had been almost three days since he had last spoken to her.

"Oh, Larry, it was terrible. He came to the apart-

ment tonight. A half-hour ago. He was drunk, dead drunk. He started hitting me." Her voice fell away into sobs.

"How did he find out where you were living?"

"He said he called my office. They gave him the new address. Listen, he said he wasn't ever going to give me a divorce. You should have seen him; he was crying and swearing he'd never give me up without a fight. Oh, honey, what are we going to do? I'm so mixed up, so lost..." The crying started again, this time deeper.

"Easy," said the man.

"I wish you were here with me. I need you so much. When are you coming home?" Her voice was tortured, pleading. In the darkness, he could visualize what her face looked like at the moment, drawn, frantic, the blonde hair in wild disorder.

"Soon," he said. "As soon as the picture's finished. Another month or so."

"That's too long. Let me come out to you. I'll hitchhike, I'll walk, I'll fly, anything. Only let's be together. I need you so bad."

"You know that's impossible," he chided. "Right now I can't afford any sort of scandal. I've been waiting for this break all my life."

"I know, honey. Forgive me for even asking. You're a good actor, a wonderful actor. I'd be the last one in the world to hurt your chances."

He waited until he was sure of his control. "Where is he now?"

"You mean Al? He passed out on the floor. I

don't know what's going to happen when he comes to."

The man reached for a pack of cigarettes he remembered leaving near the phone. His mouth tasted dry, lifeless. In the darkness, his hand brushed against an empty beer can almost knocking it over. Finally, he made contact with the cigarettes, then matches. The woman was crying again. He lit a cigarette and waited.

"I'm sorry," she said after a minute. "I just can't help it. I was already asleep. Since you're gone I go to bed early every night. I watch television; that's all I do."

He interrupted her, brought her back on the track. "How'd he get to you? I mean is his car outside?"

"Yeah, that gray Ford of his. I can see it from where I'm standing. It's right in front of the house."

"Anybody see him come in?" he asked, trying to keep the tone steady.

"It's almost four o'clock here. Nobody's up. And anyway, you know this street, mostly factories. You haven't forgotten all that since you're gone, have you?"

The man mumbled that he hadn't. He was quiet a long time. He could hear her waiting for him, her breath making static three thousand miles away.

"Larry?"

"I'm here."

"What am I going to do? He hurt me. What if he means it and won't give me a divorce?"

"That is a problem."

"Why are you so quiet?"

"I'm thinking," he said. He was too. Quickly, efficiently, his mind criss-crossed with thoughts. He marveled at how astute his brain became the first few minutes after sleep. Everything was so simple, so stripped to the bare essentials.

"You love me, Janice?" he asked.

"Oh, honey, darling, why do you even ask? You know there's nothing I wouldn't do for you."

"Then listen to me." He bent forward as if to make himself closer to her. "I'm afraid your husband is getting to be a pest. You gave me your word there would be no trouble, that everything was agreed to. I have a reputation to think of. My whole future's at stake."

"What are you trying to say to me?" asked the girl.

"Just that I'm tired of meeting in dark restaurants and sneaking around back alleys. I thought it would be settled by now. Instead it's as futile as ever."

"It isn't," she said, her voice begging, pleading.

"It is as long as he's hanging over our heads."

She became tearful again. "Larry, I don't know what to do. I don't like you talking like that. You scare me. Tell me what to do. I'll do anything you say."

He waited through the inhale-exhale of the cigarette, then spoke slowly, softly. He hoped the operator was off the line; it was a chance he'd have to take.

"He has to be taken care of, Janice. While he's around, you and I'll never make it."

"I don't understand."

"Yes, you do," he coaxed. "You understand perfectly. It's either one way or the other, me or him."

He heard her suck in her breath. She was caught. The protests would be there, the qualms, but he knew she was hooked.

"Larry, you sound so crazy."

"Me or him," he repeated. "I mean it. This is showdown night."

"But how? What are you asking? What do you want from me?" Her voice sounded choked, broken like someone starting to drown.

"He's lying there unconscious, isn't he? You told me after drinking he sometimes passes out for hours. It would be simple. You said no one saw him coming in. The streets are deserted. Who would ever know?"

"But how?" He could almost touch the tension in her voice, it was that fierce, that tight.

"You know the big pillow you keep on the bed? The one I bought you the time I played Atlantic City."

"Oh, Larry, no, I couldn't. I couldn't." She had caught on quick.

He continued as if she hadn't spoken. "Go get the pillow, Janice. You said he's small. You always said you could eat peanuts off his head. Cover his face, press down and hold him that way five minutes."

"Larry, I beg you."

"He's dead to the world. Make him deader."

The weeping came on heavy this time, all the pain, all the uncertainty striving to reach across three thousand miles of telephone wire. He had patience. On

the ceiling above him, he watched the reflected headlights of a car make shadows as it drove by outside. There was the silence of night and its small sounds. He studied the glowing tip of his cigarette.

"Larry..." her voice pleaded.

"I mean it, Janice. You've wished him dead a hundred times. Now's your chance. He's been a shadow on every happy moment we've had."

"But he's a human being... my husband."

"He's a curse. That's all he is; that's all he'll ever be unless you do something now." He stopped then, letting the silence convey his impatience and anger. When he spoke again, his words were tight.

"There's nothing else I can say, Janice."

"Larry!" she screamed. "Larry, don't hang up on me. Please, Larry, I'd kill myself if I lost you."

"Then do as I say."

"Yes, yes, anything... Only I'm frightened. I need you here. I need your arms around me."

"Soon... very soon," he soothed.

"I'm shaking like I was a little girl. My face is all swollen where he hit me. I wish you could see."

"Pick up the pillow, Janice. Reach out now and take it. Let's be free of him once and for all."

"I have it. Honey, I love you. Say you love me."

"I love you," said the man. "Just imagine I'm there beside you."

"Yes, yes, together."

"Go ahead, baby. I'll wait for you."

"Larry..."

"No more words. Remember what he stands for."

Get it over with. I'll be here thinking up what to do next."

"And you'll never leave me again?"

"Never."

"Oh, God, I'm afraid..." She was weakening again.

"For me, baby. For us. I love you."

"I'll do it now," said the woman. "Wait for me."

He heard her put the phone down; then silence. He lit another cigarette and blew smoke into the blackness. He held up his hand before him to see if he was shaking, but the room was too dark. He kept the receiver pressed tightly against his ear. Faintly, the sound of music drifted over the wire. She must have fallen asleep with the radio still on. She had often done that. He thought of the small white radio on the table near her bed. How innocent the music sounded, how unrelated to the action going on. Sweat trickled down the inside of his arm. He wondered what the weather was like in New York. He smoked and waited, waited and smoked. Once he thought he heard a rustling noise, another time he thought he caught the sound of sobbing.

How long he waited he couldn't be sure. After a time the phone seemed an extension of himself, as important to his survival as an arm or a leg. The music had faded into silence. It was as if all sound, all stirring from that point three thousand miles away had been shut off. Only static, unrelieved, rhythmic, made contact with his ear. More sweat ran down his chest. His heart was beating wildly. Surely five minutes,

perhaps even ten minutes had passed. Nothing, nothing . . . then ~~her~~ voice, faint, caved-in, dead.

"Larry?"

"Janice."

"It's done, Larry. He's dead. I killed him. Just like you asked. It was like putting him to sleep. He looks so small and quiet."

"Are you positive?"

"Very. I held my pocket mirror against his mouth like they do in the movies. There was nothing. He's dead." The words sounded harsh and final. "Talk to me, Larry. It's so quiet here. Please, please, say anything."

"There's nothing to worry about."

"He's lying there so still."

"Janice, listen to me, you have to get started."

"How soon you coming home?"

"Before you know it."

"And you'll never leave me again?"

"I told you I wouldn't."

"I'm sorry, I just need to hear you say it—that's all. What do you want me to do now?"

"Take a blanket off your bed. Cover him with it."

"Then what?"

"Make sure the street is clear. Then bring the car around as close as you can. Drag him into it as quickly as possible."

"I don't think I can."

"You have to. He's small, a lightweight, you told me yourself."

"Honey, I'm so scared."

"I'm counting on you, Janice."

"I love you, Larry."

"Will you get started?"

"Yes, only tell me how it's going to be."

"It's going to be fine."

"And you'll be home in a month?"

"Yes."

"And we'll get married?"

"Sure."

"And you'll love me, won't you? You'll never leave me again?"

"No."

"And you'll be a great actor. And every night when you come home from work I'll have dinner ready. And the house will be clean. And we'll drink wine. And kiss each other all the time. Tell me it's going to be like that."

"Janice."

"Tell me. Please. I need it so bad. I killed him. I killed my poor drunken husband. He was only forty-three years old."

"Sure. It'll be just that way. Just the way you said. I'll get home as soon as I can."

"That's what I wanted to hear. I'll be okay."

"You'll manage with the body?"

"I'll manage."

"After you put him in the car, drive down the East River Drive. Make sure you keep the blanket covering him. Remember that dock we used to park on, the one near 16th Street."

"I remember. The first time you kissed me was there. Oh, darling..."

"That's the one. Drive to it. Make sure it's deserted, then dump the body over the side. After that take the car and leave it a few blocks from the house. Wear gloves. Walk back to the apartment."

There was silence.

"Janice, you hear me? It's got to be done quickly."

"I hear you," said the woman weakly.

"That's my girl."

"I did it for you, Larry. I'd never do this for anyone else."

"I know that, baby. I know," said the man petting her with his voice.

"You're part of me. I'm part of you."

"It's the same with me. Only you better get started before it gets too light."

"Will you call me?"

"In an hour. You should have it finished by then."

"I wish you were here."

"I do too," said the man. "But we've got to be realistic."

"I'll be thinking of you every second."

"Me too."

"Do you hate me for what I did?"

"No, I love you."

"Say it again."

"I love you."

"I can do anything now." She paused. "Call me in an hour."

"I said I would."

"It's getting lighter out."

"Better hurry then."

"Yes . . . Larry?"

"Yes?"

"Nothing . . . Oh, God, I'm scared."

"Steady. Steady."

"Good night, darling. Be with me."

"All the way."

He heard the click and the line went dead. Gently he put the receiver back in its cradle. The room was still dark, cool. Of all the features he liked about California, the nights were way out in front. He lit the last cigarette in the pack and crushed the empty wrapper in his clenched hand. After a minute, he picked up the phone again, dialed the operator and asked for the Los Angeles Police Department. He cleared his throat while the connection was being made. It would all have to be very convincing.

"My name is Larry Preston," he told the police sergeant who answered. "I'm an actor. I live on North Yucca Street just off Sunset. About ten minutes ago I received a long distance call from New York City. It was the wife of a friend of mine. She was hysterical, incoherent, so I don't know if she was telling the truth, but she swore she had just killed her husband. She said she couldn't take his beatings any more. She was going to carry his body to their car and dump it in the East River. off a dock on 16th Street. She sounded half-crazy. I think the New York Police should be alerted."

He described the car as a gray Ford and told the

sergeant the route she said she'd be taking. He was sorry he couldn't supply the license number. The sergeant thanked him for his cooperation and promised to call back as soon as they heard any word from the New York Police and hung up.

He sat motionless another minute going over in his mind all the questionable points of his story, so that if he were called to testify the pieces would link in perfect symmetry. When he was satisfied it jelled enough to ward off the slightest hint of complicity or collusion, he took a final drag at his cigarette and crushed it out in an ash tray. Then he stood up and walked through the darkness to the bedroom. He slid into the bed and pulled the covers around him. The sheets were still warm. He lay very still, his eyes on the ceiling, hardly breathing. Sleep was gone.

Next to him the brunette stirred, changed her position. "Who was that?" she asked.

"A friend," he answered.

"You were gone a long time," said the girl, her voice still creamy with sleep and promises.

"Had some business to finish."

"Did you get it done?"

His eyes grew accustomed to the room and he saw her long dark hair on the pillow, caught the scent of her expensive French perfume. He touched her hair, winding a strand around his finger.

"I think so," he said.

"I missed you," said the brunette.

"Tell me more." He dropped his hand and began to stroke her back gently. Her name was Darlene and

she was under contract to M-G-M as an actress, and already the Hollywood columnists were linking them as an item.

"Hmmmm, you have a nice touch," she said.

"Don't I, though." He smiled and continued to trace his hand gently, caressingly along the curve of her back until she purred and reached for him again.

Composition for Four Hands

HILDA LAWRENCE

part 1

They wheeled her chair to the big bay window in her bedroom. She'd been fed and bathed. She'd had what they called her forty winks. They said it was a beautiful afternoon and wasn't she lucky to have such a nice window? Then they left her. It was Saturday. She knew it was Saturday, because school-children were playing in the little park across the way and the florist had come with her weekend roses. She'd bought the house because of that little park. Nice for a child. The park and the big, rambling gardens. For swings and playhouses, later for tennis courts. . . . It was Saturday. Ralph, her husband, was home from the bank, and he'd helped with her lunch, spooning the broth so carefully, calling her his little baby. Not speaking to her, though; to the nurse. He'd said: "Miss Sills, she's all I've got now. She's my little baby girl, and she's all I've got."

Miss Sills had looked as if she had wanted to cry. Her hand had gone out as if she had wanted to touch his beautiful white hair. She had said: "You mustn't brood, Mr. Manson. No matter how miserable you are, you must make yourself look happy for her sake. She's terribly sensitive, she feels things."

She could hear things, too. Sometimes they forgot that. When they spoke directly to her, they raised their voices and made gestures, as if she were deaf. But when they talked among themselves, they acted as if she weren't there. They seemed to think she couldn't hear unless they put their faces close to hers and waved their hands. That was all right; she wanted them to talk among themselves. The more they talked like that, the better. When they left the room, she wanted to know where they were going. She wanted to know where they were every hour of the day. And the night. The night.

They left her, and she heard their footsteps going down the hall; Ralph's turned at the rose guestroom. That was where he slept now. She'd heard the doctor tell him to sleep there, to be within call. Whose call? Not hers; she couldn't open her mouth. She could open it, but she couldn't make a sound. The nurse's call. Miss Sills'.

Miss Sills had a cot at the foot of her big bed. If Miss Sills called to him in the night, he could be there in less than a minute, down the hall or across the sleeping porch that ran along that side of the house. I suppose they talk among themselves, downstairs, and say that I may die in the night, she thought. I

wonder if I can smile. I don't know, they never bring me a mirror. They never put my chair anywhere near a mirror. But if I can smile, then that's what I'm doing now inside. Careful. Be careful.

Miss Sills' footsteps went beyond the rose room to the head of the stairs, went down, and were lost in the thick rugs of the lower hall. Going for her afternoon exercise. Soon I'll hear the front door close, and then she'll wave to me from the garden. Then I'll see her across the street, in the little park, walking with long, easy steps, swinging her arms. Beautiful, beautiful motion. And pretty soon Emma will come in to sit, chirping and smiling and talking. Talking, talking, talking. But I'm used to Emma. She's been with me so long she's almost like a member of the family. She will tell me about the prices of things, pretending I still keep house. The butcher, the fruit man, the farmer with his wagon—robbers all, but what can a person do? And Emma will say: "My, but you look fine today. There's color in your cheeks."

Rouge. Miss Sills had put it on. You couldn't stop her. Rouge and curling irons and manicures. She said it was good for morale. *Morale*.

Emma would sit in the low chair, neat as a pin in her afternoon uniform, and talk about tea and dinner. And she'd have her tatting. Emma did tatting now. She used to knit, but they made her stop—because of the needles. The needles were the right shape, as nearly the right shape and size as anything could be, anything you'd be lucky enough to get your hands on. Lucky enough if your hands, if only your hands—

Hands. Emma's old hands, worn and rough because she made her living with them, but strong. Emma's old hands that didn't need strength, gripping the lovely needles. Rolling them between her fingers, turning them over and over, beautiful, beautiful motion, wasted on Emma.

Emma must have seen her watching the needles; she must have seen a look in her eyes, because she'd said, "No, no, Miss Nora, you mustn't think of such a terrible thing." Emma couldn't possibly know what she really was thinking, nobody could know. Nobody except—no, that wasn't possible. Or was it? She'd wondered and worried, driven herself half-crazy, until she overheard them talking when they thought she was asleep. Miss Sills said: "She wanted Emma's needles today. Emma saw the look. I don't like that, Mr. Manson, I don't like it at all. She couldn't hold them even if we put them in her hands—she can't even hold a hankie, not yet, not now. But I don't like it. In these cases you sometimes get a sudden change—temporary, of course, like a muscular spasm. She could do herself a serious injury if she got hold of anything like that, anything with a point. So I told Emma to stop the knitting and work on something else. Like tatting. You can't hurt yourself with a little celluloid bobbin."

He said: "Hurt herself? How dreadful! But I'm afraid you're right. I saw her watching your pencil when you were writing the drugstore list. She wanted it, she craved it. A pencil! What could she do with a pencil?"

"I don't know. We can't get into her poor mind. But really, Mr. Manson, we've got to be alert every minute. We've got to prepare ourselves for a physical change. You know she could put her—I hate to say this—she could put her—well, she could hurt her eyes. In the state she's in, I mean her emotional state, she may think of herself as useless, a burden to you. A self-inflicted injury—oh, it's too awful, the poor thing! Maybe she doesn't even want to *see!*"

His warm hands covered her then. He said: "Guard her, Miss Sills, don't let anything happen. She's all I have. Those lovely eyes, have you noticed how they—follow? They're the only thing about her that's alive."

That was why Emma gave up knitting for tatting, which she hated. That was why Miss Sills no longer wore pencil and pen clipped to her apron bib. A self-inflicted injury. . . . Don't think about it, she told herself. You're lucky, you're very lucky, because they guessed wrong. Think of something else, make yourself think, hard, hard. Think of your hands, your fingers; think of a substitute for a pencil. Anything, anything that will turn and roll between useless fingers, turn and roll and give them strength. Secret strength that must be kept hidden. If you were a soldier in a hospital, they'd put something in your hands and help you turn and roll it. In a hospital they'd help you. That's why you're not in a hospital, that's why you're home. You heard them: "She'll be more comfortable in her own home with the people she loves." Self-inflicted injury; you heard that, too.

You're lucky again because you can't laugh. You're lucky because if you once started, you couldn't stop. You'd give yourself away. Self-inflicted injury, when all you want to do is to keep your life, not lose it. Keep it, such as it is, keep it until— Why, I'm crying. Those are tears on my hands. I didn't know I could cry. Think of something else. Quick. . . . Bruce will be coming on the four-fifteen. Better not think of that, either. Every afternoon, bending down to look into your face, kissing your hands, telling you how well you look, teasing, pretending. . . . Stop that. Stop that.

Look at the fringe on your steamer rug. Old, happy rug; kind, thick fringe. Thick! Almost as thick as a pencil! Try it, try it while you're alone, hurry before—before Emma comes. Before anyone comes. Before they all come tramping back from their walks, their exercise, from the station. There, you almost did it that time. Almost. But don't worry because it seems impossible now; someday you'll make it. Try. Try again. There's a good thick strand, lying across your left wrist. See if you can touch it with your other hand. See if you move your wrist, your arm, your arm, try. . . . No. No, but don't cry again, that's getting you nowhere. Keep trying, and thank God your mind is all right. That's what they aren't sure of, your mind. That's where you're ahead of them; that's how you'll win in the end. One of these days one of your hands will reach the fringe and close over it. One of these days you will take the fringe in your hand and open and

close your fingers. Roll the soft, thick fringe between your fingers, endlessly, over and over, until they are strong enough to hold a pencil. Pencil. You'll never even see another pencil. You know that. But your fingers will be ready for whatever comes. It doesn't matter if you never walk again, if you never speak again. All you need is two fingers. Two? No, one. One will be enough, one finger can point. You can pretend to be writing with one finger, a pantomime. You can make it clear and unmistakable if you are ever alone with the right person. . . . But how will I know which person is right? I'm not sure even now. How will I know which one is both right and safe? Now, now, don't cry. It takes away the little strength you have. Now, now, don't be a baby. "My little baby girl," he said. . . . There's Emma.

Milly Sills crossed the park and hurried to the Larchville station. The four-fifteen from New York was pulling in, and the platform was filled with families and dogs. She had time only to set her beret becomingly awry before George Perry and Mr. Bruce Cory came shouldering through the crowd. Milly and George, who lived, with his father and mother, next door to the Mansons', had been friends for some time. She eyed Mr. Cory rather hostilely, but had to admit he was a handsome devil for—what was it, fifty? Emma had told her that the other Mr. Cory, Mrs. Manson's first husband, had been about ten years older than Mrs. Manson, and she was forty-two. And Bruce Cory was that Mr. Cory's twin. Well, handsome devil for fifty-two or whatever it was. Not

fat, not an ounce. He made old George look like a puppy.

"Damn," Milly said under her breath, "it looks as if George and I can't be alone for even five minutes these days." She waved, and they waved over the other commuters' heads. She made rapid plans for the evening. Maybe a movie, maybe dancing, maybe both. "I'll work on him," she decided. "I don't care if he does look grim. He'll have to get over that. I, for one, won't have it. I, for one, am having too much as it is."

However, she noted, there was nothing grim about Bruce Cory; with the polo-field skin and the squash-court figure. She watched his approach with admiration and appropriate distrust. He walked as if he had oiled hinges.

"Mr. Perry, I believe," she said to George when they came up to her. She hooked an affectionate arm through George's and gave him a pinch, but he didn't seem to feel it. To Bruce Cory she gave the smile she kept in reserve for patients' relatives.

"Hi," George said. "I ran into Mr. Cory in the smoker."

Cory returned her smile with a look of approval that traveled from her white canvas shoes to her white beret. She felt herself liking it. George had given her one look, a quick one, with absolutely nothing in it. But nothing.

They moved across the platform. "Cab or walk?" George asked.

"Walk," she said. "This is my airing."

Cory was instantly solicitous, looking down with a worried air. "Are you having any fun?" he asked. "Or is it all perfectly deadly?"

Having any fun, she jeered silently. What a thing to say! I know you, my friend. To date you've given no trouble, but there's one of your kind on every case. . . . She gave him the smile she kept in reserve for that kind, the one that said: "When I go downstairs at midnight in my bathrobe, I'm going for hot cocoa—get it? Cocoa." Aloud, "Everything's fine, Mr. Cory, thank you," she said.

"Anything happen after I left this morning? Any change?"

"No change. No change is considered fine in cases like this. We can't ask for more than that for a while. But she had a good lunch—good for her, I mean—and she seems to be making an effort in other ways, too."

"Splendid! What kind of effort?"

"Well, she seems to notice things. I haven't said much about it except to Mr. Manson, but I do feel encouraged. I think she's trying to concentrate. You know, listen. She seems to realize that she's helpless, and her eyes—"

Cory spoke sharply. "What about her eyes?"

"Oh, nothing like that, Mr. Cory!" He did love her, they all did. In her way she was lucky. Some people had no one, had to go to city hospitals and wear dark, shapeless robes all day long because they didn't show the dirt or the food that got spilled. Mrs. Manson had real silk and fine wool, and there wasn't

a single minute when somebody wasn't trying to anticipate her wants, read her thoughts. Read her thoughts—if she had any. That was something they weren't sure about.

"Oh, no, Mr. Cory, there's nothing wrong with her vision. I only mean she notices more and tries to watch everything we do, although she can't turn her head, not yet. But I'm pretty sure she'll be able to do that soon. I even told Mr. Manson so." Then, because Mr. Cory still looked unhappy and unconvinced, she added: "Cheer up. It could be worse. Think how poor Mr. Manson feels."

Cory nodded. "Good little Sills," he said. "We were lucky to get you."

They walked on in silence.

Tonight she would be free from eight to twelve. Once a week she had a night like that. Sometimes she went home, a fifteen-minute walk across town, lugging a suitcase of laundry for her mother to do. It wasn't necessary, but her mother liked to do it. Her mother always met her at the front door and took the suitcase before she kissed her. She dumped the clothes into the washing machine as if she were fighting a plague. Then she sat in the rocker she kept in the kitchen and double-dared anybody to come within a yard of the machine. The washer was a Christmas present from Milly, and the capable, elderly maid was a present, too. But Mrs. Sills chose to regard the washer as her own invention and the maid as an indigent relative, not right in the head. "Maybe I ought to go home," Milly thought. "I

missed last week." Then she looked at George. Still grim. A face like granite. Jealous, she gloated. What do you know! Her heart suddenly warmed. "Movies tonight, George?"

"Not tonight."

"What's the matter with you?"

"Toothache."

"Of course you've seen the dentist?"

"No."

"Well, of course you will, won't you?"

"Maybe."

Fool, she thought. Why do I bother? Suit yourself, lie awake all night and suffer. See if I care. . . . Later, when she remembered that, she felt as if she'd been daring an ax to fall on her neck. Because George didn't go to the dentist, and he did lie awake. He got up at three in the morning to spit a poultice out the window, and she cared a great deal.

Now Cory was saying something and she turned with elaborate interest. "I beg your pardon, Mr. Cory. I didn't get that."

"I asked you what you thought of Doctor Babcock," Cory said carelessly.

"I have every confidence in Doctor Babcock," she said primly. "So has Mr. Manson."

"I know he has. Babcock's the only one who's lasted. I understand you've worked with him before?"

It was a question, not a statement. She was pleased. He doesn't know how green I am, she thought. I must be doing all right. Maybe none of them knows.

... Her reply was short but lofty. "Oh, my, yes." One tonsillectomy.

She remembered the night, a little less than two weeks before, when Doctor Babcock had routed her out of bed. He didn't tell her what the case was, and she turned it down, because she'd just wound up six weeks with a simple fracture, age twelve, who slept all day and demanded comics all night. She said she needed sleep. But he told her he was desperate, his patient was unhappy with her present nurse. He was perfectly frank; he admitted the woman was difficult and would probably be unhappy with Florence Nightingale. It was like Babcock to drag in Nightingale. Then he'd said the patient was Mrs. Manson. At that, she'd gone with him, at once, at one o'clock in the morning.

She'd been glad of her decision ever since, and it had nothing to do with the fact that good old George's house was practically in the Manson back yard. Mrs. Manson liked her, she could see that. And Babcock looked pleased. That meant a lot. Her first really important case. If she made good, there wouldn't be any more spoiled kids and old women. If she made good, she could stay with Mrs. Manson until the end. The end? Well, stay until something happened one way or another. Or until Milly herself couldn't take it.

"What did Babcock say this morning?" Cory was pressing her arm.

"He didn't come, Mr. Cory. He called up right after you left. He said he'd drop in this afternoon. I

don't like to be away when he comes, even when Mr. Manson and Emma are there, but if I don't go out at my regular hours, I get dopey. And that's not good for Mrs. Manson."

"What about another nurse? I don't know why we haven't insisted on that."

"Not a chance. I suggested it myself, and if you'd seen the look in her eyes— She's terrified of people, even old friends who come to inquire. We've had to stop all that. We have to be awfully careful, even with the people in the house. Like Hattie, the cook. The cook's all right when she keeps her mouth shut, but the other day she burst into tears and talked about Mrs. Manson's son."

"About Robbie?" At her nod, Cory looked away. "Bad," he said.

"Bad? It was criminal. George was there; he saw the whole thing. But we didn't tell a soul. No use getting Hattie fired. We simply gave her—we laid her out. She won't do that again."

"You can tell me about it, can't you? Forget that I'm Robbie's uncle."

She answered eagerly, appealing to George, forcing him into the conversation. "Of course we can tell Mr. Cory, can't we, George? You do it; you know the background better than I do. You see, I didn't know about Robbie's birthday, Mr. Cory. How could I? If I'd known, I'd have got Hattie out the minute she started. Tell it, George."

George complied, slowly and reluctantly. "It isn't much," he said. "But it was a nuisance. You know

I'm in and out of the house a lot these days, at odd hours. And you know I practically lived in the place when I was a kid. Mrs. Manson never let them fill in the hedge."

Cory said, "Yes, I know." He knew that the Perry cottage backed on the Manson garden, and that the dividing hedge still showed gaps made by small boys in a hurry. He knew all about the childhood friendship and that George was a few years older than Robbie, and that after they outgrew the swings, the play-houses, and the gym apparatus, they didn't see much of each other.

"We went with different crowds when we grew up," George said. "Naturally. You know how that happens. This last year I hardly ever saw him. He was twenty-one and I was twenty-six—that makes a lot of difference. To say nothing of Robbie's unlimited money." In spite of himself he emphasized money.

"Forget that," Cory said. "Go on with your story."

According to George, his mother said it would be nice if he began to hang around the Mansons again—second-son stuff. And Mrs. Manson seemed to like it. At least, he said, she didn't have a relapse. Not until the Hattie episode. He'd been dropping in for several weeks when that happened, having drinks in Mrs. Manson's room, talking about anything that came into his head, never mentioning Robbie. Nothing ever upset her when he was there alone, even though he was pretty sure she didn't hear half he said. She just looked at him, accepted him, and that was

all anybody hoped for. Then the cook business happened.

"Small thing in its way," George said, "but a fine example of the chances you take when you don't control the people who go to see her."

He said he'd been doing his usual routine that afternoon, rambling on about the weather, the pretty sky, and see how the leaves are turning, Mrs. Manson. Thanksgiving on the way, Halloween before you know it, and so on. Then Hattie came in with a lamb chop and a piece of chicken on a plate. Raw. A custom of the house, a scheme to coax Mrs. Manson into thinking. Emma's idea. Here are two pieces of meat. You may have one for your dinner. Which? Emma swore it worked; she said Hattie could tell which one Mrs. Manson wanted by the way she looked.

George said he had reached Halloween in his therapeutic travelogue, pumpkin faces, and so on, when Hattie burst into tears and started to babble.

"I was sunk," George said. "I'd forgotten that Robbie's birthday was all tied up with pumpkins. But Hattie hadn't. She carried on about the jack-o'-lanterns they used to put in his room on birthdays. They did that from the time he was three until he was eighteen. Then he made them stop it. Did you know that?"

"Yes," Cory said. "They all babied him."

"Exactly," George agreed. "Well, that's all, but it sent Mrs. Manson right up to the taking off place and turned me into an old man. Hattie still comes in

with her plate of raw meat, but she doesn't talk."

The little park was straight ahead, and across the park the big house stood in its bright fall garden. Milly thought of the motionless figure she had left by the window, and her steps dragged. She listened half-heartedly to the conversation. They were getting along all right without her; George was warming up, for him. Giving out information instead of hoarding it, treating Cory like an equal. Now he was saying something in a soft voice about a dreamy kid.

"Always was," George said. "Always lived in another world. Robbie had his mother's features, but he didn't have her—excitement. Of course, I never saw his father; but taking you as a model, I'd say Robbie wasn't like a Cory, either."

It was an obvious compliment, George's voice was deferential and admiring, and Cory flushed. Milly said to herself, "Good old George, he'll get a job out of Cory yet."

"When my brother died," Cory said quietly, "I rather hoped she'd remarry. I was glad when she did. No, Robbie wasn't like my brother. Robbie was—himself."

George said: "I don't like to think about it. I don't even like to talk about it."

But Milly thought about it as they entered the park and crossed under the yellow maples, between flaming beds of scarlet sage. The maple leaves were gold, the gold of new coin. A boy with all the money in the world, with anything— "Do you think they'll ever find out what he did with it?" she asked vaguely.

Cory didn't answer. He said. "Is she in her window?"

"She should be," she told him. "We put her there as usual, Mr. Manson and I, just before I came out. She likes to watch the park—at least, I think she does. I told Emma not to touch her, to wait until I came back. It's sort of queer—" She stopped to challenge her own words and to wonder why they suddenly asked for challenge.

"What's queer?" Cory was smiling. "The window? Or Emma?"

She answered slowly. "Neither. I only mean she's funny about being touched. I don't think she likes it, and we're pretty sure it isn't a question of pain. But when I get back from my walks and go to her room, I always feel as if she's been waiting for me. For *me*. Almost—well, anxiously. And I've only been on the case a little while; it isn't as if I were an old friend. I guess it's the uniform. People seem to trust nurses." I've said something idiotic, she told herself instantly. Cory had given her a quick, sharp look, and George was rolling his eyes to heaven. As if I'd pulled a boner, she thought, as if I were feeble-minded. I'll show them.

"And the more fools they," she said briskly. "I mean, for trusting nurses. I can count cases on all ten fingers that would curl your hair. Helpless patient plus renegade husband, son, brother, doctor, lawyer, friend. Take your choice. Willing female confederate, uniform from a theatrical place. Object, money. And believe me—" She stopped again, appalled.

Why don't you pack up and get out before you're fired? she mourned to herself.

"Brilliant girl," George said to Cory. "And simply crazy about Mill Sills, R.N."

They turned in at the gate.

Mrs. Manson was still by the window. She'd seen them turn into the park and cross, talking.

Emma had seen them, too. "There, now," Emma said, "there's Mr. Brucie and George Perry with Miss Sills. I'd say she went to the station to meet them, wouldn't you?" Emma smiled and nodded and waved. She looked as if she were glad to see someone who could smile and wave in return. And talk. Poor Emma. Talking, talking, talking, and never being quite sure that she was heard.

"You're lucky, that's what you are," Emma insisted. "And I want you to remember it, and appreciate it. A nice young girl like Miss Sills to look after you. A daughter couldn't do more. And Mr. Bruce Cory, giving up his beautiful New York apartment to come out here and cheer you up, for old times' sake. Giving up his gay city life, when we all know he hates the country. He's popular, too, he is. In the gossip columns nearly every day, but in a nice way. No café society for Mr. Brucie; he runs with the cream de la cream."

She stopped listening to Emma. There were other things to listen to.

The front door opened, and they walked across the strip of floor that was bare. Then they walked on the rugs. Then the sound of their voices. Ralph's

voice, low, greeting them. Then another door, the library. They were going to have a drink before they all came up, trooping in full of smiles. "How wonderful you look! You keep this up, and you'll be out for Christmas!" Out? Out where? Out beside Robbie.

Doctor Babcock encouraged them to talk like that. He himself talked like that, rocking back and forth on his strong legs. They all did that, rocked; they thought it made them look as if they had nothing on their minds. But she'd seen the look Babcock had given Ralph the day before. She'd been keeping her eyes almost closed, as children do when they pretend to be asleep, looking between her lashes. Babcock had looked at Ralph and shaken his head. Hopeless, the look had said. And he'd shrugged and raised his eyebrows in answer to an unspoken question of Ralph's. The shrug and brows said, "Hopeless, except for a miracle."

They were all watching for a miracle, for a sign of change. She saw it in their faces, heard it in their voices. They knew what to watch for; they discussed its improbability as if she were already dead. And one of them knew how much that kind of talk meant to her. One of the people who came to her room was quietly alert, lying in wait for a sign that showed she understood. She had read the speculation in one pair of eyes. She was much cleverer than that; she was careful to let her own eyes show nothing. If the miracle came, she knew she must hide it. The first sign of a twitch, the first small movement, one finger,

one muscle in her body, and the news would go all over the house, over the town. And that would be the end of her. "Have you heard about Mrs. Manson? Too bad, just when she was beginning to show improvement." Maybe it would happen before that. In a panic, in a sudden panic—

She looked at the rug, at the fringe lying across her knees. She looked at it until her eyes burned. "Emma," she implored silently, "Emma—"

"Now, what's wrong with your nice rug?" Emma scolded. "I declare, you're looking as if you wanted to eat it up! Could that mean you're cold? No, your face is nice and warm. Let Emma feel your hands. So that's it, hands freezing. Well, we'll tuck them in a little wool nest. There you are. Oh, my poor Miss Nora. Oh, my poor lady."

The hands were covered, that was luck again. Or was it something else? Was she projecting her thoughts, making Emma think what she wanted her to think? Good, simple, childish Emma and her good, simple mind. Could her own mind possibly direct Emma's? Concentrate! If you can do that, who knows what may happen? If you can will Emma to come and go, you may have a minute alone. A minute alone when you need it. A minute alone when the time comes. . . . Don't think about that now, she's watching you. Close your eyes. Somebody said the eyes are windows of the soul. If that's true, close them.

The thick fringe, the good thick fringe, was in the palm of one hidden hand. She closed her eyes and

dreamed about it lying there, afraid to try anything stronger than a dream.

They came in, all four of them, through the door that was beyond the half-circle of her vision, all four and a fifth. Ralph, Brucie, George Perry, Miss Sills, and another one. A strange one. She closed a door in her mind; she'd been away on a journey of her own, crawling inch by inch, even walking, in her dream world. When they filed across the room and stood in a line before her chair, she saw who the fifth one was. Doctor Babcock. She made herself look down at his feet, she could just manage it, turning her eyes down until they hurt. He was wearing overshoes. That was why she hadn't known his muffled tread. It was raining, then. Yes, it was growing dark outside, there was rain on the windows.

Miss Sills said brightly: "We're going to have a little party. As soon as George builds up the fire. See, here's George! He says he wants a drink, but we're going to make him work for it. And here's another man—picked me up at the station, he did, claiming he lives here now. Shall we give him a drink, too?"

Miss Sills was flushed and happy. *She's in love with one of them. Which?*

Ralph had a tray, and he put it on the tea cart that held the medicine and rubbing oils, the strong glass feeding tube, the lipstick, the firm, cylindrical lipstick. A tray of drinks. One for her? There was a rattle of coal in the grate, then a sound of smothered laughter. Miss Sills and George. It was George she loved.

Bruce bent to kiss her cheek. "How's our baby?" He drew her hands from beneath the rug and massaged them gently, smiling down into her face. "We started to have drinks downstairs, and then Ralph got this idea. Babcock came in and said it was okay. See the glass of milk? Look. Funny color." He took it from the tray and held it before her. "Milk plus. The plus is rum. Good for girls."

The fringe was lying across her knees, wasting its beautiful potentialities.

Doctor Babcock didn't wait for the others. He took his drink, raised it in a toast to the rest, and gulped half of it. "Good for boys," he said.

They laughed. Even Emma. Emma said, "Doctor, you never give me any medicine like that!" They laughed again, and Emma's shrill cackle rose above the rich, masculine rumbles and the light, applauding ripple that nurses always save for doctors.

Ralph handed the drinks around, Scotch and soda in the hunting-scene glasses. The glasses she'd bought at Tiffany's six weeks before. Only six weeks? Only that? The day she had lunch with Robbie at the Plaza. The day—

Ralph's strong brown hand held the milk close to her mouth. His other hand held the feeding tube. He said: "No dreaming, darling, this is a party. For you. Now take a nice long swallow for the old man."

She closed her lips, made them tight.

He coaxed. "Come, darling, it's good. Bruce made it himself. See? I'll take a swallow first."

Brucie's face, full of mock chagrin. His laughing

voice. "What's the idea—testing for poison?"

Awful, awful, awful to say a thing like that. To say it out loud, to make a joke of it. To say it, to say it.

Miss Sills, crossing the room rapidly, coming to her chair. "Hey!" Miss Sills, rattling off a long sentence, addressing them all, meaningless words ending with the same letters. Pig Latin. Robbie used to—Pig Latin.

Miss Sills was telling them not to say things like that. Miss Sills was all right. Watch Miss Sills closely, make sure. If Miss Sills is all right, then—

They both took her hands, Ralph and Brucie.

"Baby," Ralph said, "forgive us. We're clumsy fools. You've always been such a good sport, we sometimes forget we must be careful now. You understand?"

Brucie kissed the hand he held and placed it on top of the rug. On top. He took the milk from Ralph. "Let me," he said. He slipped the feeding tube between her lips.

The drink was all right. It tasted good. Rum and milk. Nothing else, simply rum and milk with a little grated nutmeg. She should have known there would be nothing else. Poison would be ridiculous, unintelligent.

Emma fussed with her sewing basket and said she was going. "Going to see that the table's set properly. Doctor Babcock's having dinner with us. He invited himself when they told him it was steak. You're going to have steak, too, a special treat. I'll cut it up

myself, nice and fine. Nice and rare, to build you up. What do you want, Miss Nora? Oh, dear, tell Emma what it is you want? I can feel you asking."

Concentrate. Hard, hard. The rug, the rug over your hands, both hands. The fringe.

They all watched, they crowded her chair, looking at her, at Emma, at one another.

Doctor Babcock said, "Emma, I'm afraid you'll have to go unless you—"

Emma crowed. "I know! Don't tell me what I'm to do and what not to do! It's her hands! See how she looks at them! She likes them covered up, wrapped up in that old rug. I found that out this afternoon, and I'm no doctor. They get cold, no activity, you might say. It stands to reason—you don't need college to know that. There you are, my pretty girl, my smart, pretty girl!"

She closed her eyes because the relief was almost unbearable. It works, I can make her do what I want her to do. The fringe was thick and firm between her hidden fingers. Look as if you were sleeping, look as if you were sleeping, and concentrate.

"Wheel her chair to the fire, and leave her alone for a bit." Emma, firm and arrogant with success. "She'll be happy by the fire and knowing you're all with her. No loud talk and laughing, mind you, none of your wicked jokes. Surrounded by her loved ones, all cozy and warm, that's what she needs."

Miss Sills: "Who's the nurse around here? Let me see your credentials, madam."

Soft laughter. Her chair moving forward, the

warmth increasing, the door closing on Emma, the hushed regrouping of other chairs, the crack of coal in the grate, the ring of ice cubes against glass. Low voices talking about football. She didn't have to listen to that. She could travel back and pick up the threads. The threads would make a tapestry, and the tapestry would show the figures.

The day she bought the glasses with the hunting scenes, Fifth Avenue was all the world's great streets in one; the day was all September days together. She remembered to put a bag of cracked corn in her purse for St. Patrick's pigeons, and she sent her car to a garage, because she wanted to walk. Once she saw her reflection in a window and preened like a girl. "I look thirty," she said to herself, "and why not? All the other women have only painted faces and lovers, but I have Ralph and Robbie."

It was too early for lunch. Robbie couldn't make it until one. That was ridiculous, and she'd told Ralph so; when a bank is practically a family business, it ought to make concessions to the young squire. But Robbie wouldn't have it that way. She'd asked him once why he worked so hard, and he'd said it was because he hated it. "You have a frightful conscience," she'd said. "You got it from me, you poor thing, but I'll make it up to you."

Walking up Fifth Avenue, she planned a surprise. She'd tell him he needn't stay at the bank after the first of the year. By that time Ralph and Brucie would know he wasn't lazy. She'd tell him he could go abroad and write. These youngsters who wanted

to write! It was the Left Bank or sterility. No good telling them they were wrong, no good telling them that a kitchen table in Brooklyn and a stack of paper are all a writer needs.

McCutcheon's. Dinner napkins. Big, heavy, luscious dinner napkins with fat, rich monograms. She didn't need them, she had too many, and hardly anyone used them any more. But square, solid piles of damask carefully wrapped in muslin and reaching to the top of the closet shelf, that was a beautiful sight. And practical in case you felt like giving a buffet supper for a couple of hundred people. You might feel like that. For instance, you might have a wedding. She ordered two dozen.

Tiffany's. Just to look around, that's all. Everybody did that. Look around like a tourist, ogle the diamonds. Beautiful diamonds, solitaires, very practical in case you had an— She hurried to the floor where the glassware was, struggling to keep her face straight, and ordered three dozen highball glasses with hunting scenes. Practical if you felt like giving a hunt breakfast. No, that's champagne. Or doesn't it matter? It does. She ordered the champagne glasses, too.

The Plaza. The hacks, the coachmen, one old fellow with a wilted orchid pinned to his coat. Some girl last night, some pretty young thing with her best beau, jogging through Central Park. Maybe the girl got engaged; maybe she gave it to him and told him to wear it for luck.

The waiter captain. Robbie had phoned that he'd

be a little late and she wasn't to wait. The captain gave her the message. "Mrs. Manson, Mr. Cory said you were to go ahead. He suggested a nice old-fashioned."

She ordered the drink. One-fifteen, one-twenty. Then she knew he was there even before he bent over the back of her chair and kissed her neck. Demonstrative, for Robbie.

"Toper," he said.

"Robbie!" He looked dreadful. "Robbie, what have you been doing to yourself?"

"Working for your living. Why?" He rubbed a hand over his face. "Maybe I forgot to shave."

"You did not! Robbie, if I positively didn't know you were in your own bed at ten, I'd say you'd spent the night in sin. Tell me what's wrong. Don't lie to me, tell me!"

He said he was tired, that was all. Tired, so help him. "Do you want me to cross my heart in a joint like this?" He wouldn't look at her. He ordered his lunch without the menu; shirred eggs, black coffee. Drink? No, no drink.

She talked, talked her head off, told him about the new napkins, the new glasses; but he wasn't listening. He was sick, he must be dreadfully sick. "Robbie, where does it hurt? Now, don't be childish. You've got a pain somewhere, and I want to know. It can't be your appendix, that's out. What *have* you got left? I always forget which of yours came out and which of mine. No tonsils, no appendix, no—no—Robbie, your heart!"

"I still have that," he assured her. And he laughed; too loud, too sharp. He parried every personal allusion and kept the conversation on her weakness for linen and crystal, her transportation of cracked corn from Larchville in a Bergdorf bag, when she could buy a paper sack of it from a little man who hung around the cathedral for that very purpose.

She gave up. She'd get him alone that night; she'd go to his room whether he liked it or not; she'd make him tell her what was wrong. "Home for dinner, Robbie?"

"You bet."

That was all. He phoned for her car and waited until it came. He handed her in and strode off, across the street, into Central Park.

"Nora, we're going down to dinner, darling. Miss Sills will stay until Emma comes." Ralph.

"No roller-skating in the halls, baby. It's bad for the carpet," Brucie.

"Lucky Mrs. Manson, to be able to sleep so gracefully. You're better, my dear lady, I know it, I can see it. I've been waiting for it. I think I'll speak to the masseur. Perhaps we can lengthen the treatments. If I had your fine spirit and this charming room, I wouldn't mind a touch of invalidism myself!" Dr. Babcock.

"Thanks for the drinks, Mrs. Manson. Good-night." George Perry.

"Thanks for getting out of here, all of you, and quick." Miss Sills.

"That's right, slam the door. Deliver me from men

in a sickroom!" Miss Sills again, patting her shoulder. "I thought they'd cheer you up, but you don't look too cheery. Hear me tell Babcock to get out with the others? I don't know the meaning of fear. I'll say anything. If he fires me off this case, I'll come straight back. I'll climb the ivy and crawl through the window. Baby this and baby that. Don't you make any mistake about whose baby you are. You're ~~mine~~ mine."

Miss Sills was all right, she must be, she had to be. When the time came, Miss Sills would stand fast. She was young—how young? Twenty-four or -five? But she was physically strong, and she'd been trained to think and act fast. Stand fast. Stand. At bay? No, not at bay. It wouldn't come like that. It would come in the dark, on silent feet, as it had come before. Come when she was alone. But if there were no time to lose, if minutes, even seconds, were precious, it would strike without waiting, without warning.

If it came like that, Miss Sills would have to die, too. Not Miss Sills, not a young girl who'd done nothing!

"Isn't that rug too hot now? Mrs. Manson, I think the rug's too hot with the fire going full blast. Here, let me take it. You're roasting. You look like a little red beet."

Take the rug? Take the fringe away? No! No!

"Now what have I said that's wrong? Don't you like being called a little red beet? Golly, honey—I mean, Mrs. Manson, I wish I knew what you wanted. You do want something, don't you? I wish I—say, has it something to do with your rug? Emma said

you'd taken a sudden fancy to it. Did I guess right? Right! Well, then, it's yours. You keep it. I'll just move your chair back from the fire. That's better, isn't it? You know something, Mrs. Manson? One of these days you're going to smile at me, and that's the day I'm waiting for."

Dear Miss Sills. Be careful, Miss Sills. Don't be too good to me. . . .

At nine o'clock that evening Alice Perry walked into her son's room. George was reading in bed, and he looked up at her without speaking when she entered.

"Sulking, George?" Alice Perry's hair was like cotton batting, and her round face was fresh and firm. Her voice was firm also.

"No. Toothache."

"You've seen a dentist?"

"No. It'll go away."

"Sometimes you act like a child, dear. You'll find a package of those small poultices in the medicine cabinet. Use one tonight, and see a dentist in the morning. I shouldn't have to tell you that." She walked about the small room, rearranging chairs, replacing books on shelves, frowning at a bowl of yellow chrysanthemums. "Who brought these in here? You?"

"Yes, I like the color. Nothing wrong with that, is there?"

"No, of course not. But you're clumsy with flowers. These are much too stiff, and the bowl's all wrong.

Never mind that now, I'll do them over tomorrow. George?"

"Yes, Mother." He put his book aside.

"You stopped there on the way home, didn't you?"

He didn't need her half-look at the windows that faced the Perry back yard, the gaping hedge, and the Manson garden. "Yes, for a little while."

"How is she?"

"Tut, tut. I can remember when you gave me the devil for saying 'she.' Like this: 'If you mean Mrs. Manson, say so.' Sure I stopped. I had a couple of drinks." He was entirely good-humored and smiling. "Mrs. Manson is the same."

"Still helpless? I mean, still dependent?" She added, "Poor creature."

"Still all of that. No speech, no movement."

"Ralph Manson tells me nothing. Bruce Cory is just as bad. I ask every day, by telephone or in person. I knew Nora Manson when she was Nora Cory. I took you to call when she moved here and Robbie was a toddler and you weren't much more. Ralph and Bruce know that as well as they know their own names. Yet sometimes I think they don't want me in the house."

"No." He answered carefully. "You mustn't make it a personal issue. I think they feel it's better for her to see no one outside the immediate family. If she's beginning to be aware of her condition—and they think she is—why—"

"Why what, George?" She laughed. "Talked your-

self into a corner that time, didn't you? *You* see her, don't you?"

"Yes. But luckily for me, my connection with the family is on a different plane. I represent bicycles in the hall, peanut butter on the piano keys, stuff like that. All very wholesome and nostalgic in the right way."

"And exactly what do I represent, you silly?" She ruffled his hair.

"Now, Mother, use your pretty little head. You're another woman, and you're healthy, and you haven't had any trouble. Also, and very important, you were there that day; if she sees you, it's bound to—upset her. They don't want that. They want her to live as she does, from hour to hour, in a sort of merciful stupor, segregated from the past. Because if she ever does get well, she'll have plenty of time to mull things over. She'll have a whole lifetime to look back on, and she won't see a pretty picture. Let her have this, whatever you call it, hiatus. If she gets well and looks back on *this*, it'll seem like heaven."

"George, you get more like your father every day. You treat me as if I didn't have good sense. . . . I don't think she's going to get well."

"Why not?"

"Those specialists from town. They came and went. If they'd been hopeful, we'd have heard about it. But there hasn't been a word, at least not what *I* call a word. And now there's only Babcock. She's lost her mind, hasn't she? Frankly, she never had much of one to lose."

He picked up his book and flipped over a page. If he meant it for a signal of dismissal, it wasn't heeded.

"Cat got your tongue, Georgie?" She was amused, standing by the bed, looking down and smiling.

"Toothache. No, she hasn't lost her mind."

"Then what do they call this—this state?"

"Shock and paralysis, one bound up with the other. Some cases have been cured."

"Have they? Well, I'm glad to hear it."

She walked to the windows, examined the chintz curtains and admired the design. "This was a good buy," she said. "I'm a good shopper." The rain fell lightly against the glass. She tapped the pane with immaculate little fingers. "Your father went to the movies. On a night like this, he must be crazy. Or bored. I asked him which, and he looked as if he couldn't decide what to answer. Funny man."

"He likes the rain," George said. "He likes to walk in it."

"The ground is soaking." She hummed and tapped the pane, peering out into the dark, dripping gardens. Then: "George, the lights are on in her room. Why, at this hour?"

"Masseur. This is the time he comes. She sleeps afterward."

"Sedatives, of course?"

"Yep." He looked up from his book, startled by the sudden sound of curtain rings traveling across the rods. "What's the idea?" he asked agreeably. "I like them the way they were. I like to look out."

"There's nothing to see."

"Sure there is. The rain. I like it, same as the old man."

"It's depressing. And there's a draft. These windows never did fit properly. Shoddy building in the first place, but what can I do? Your father's satisfied as long as the roof doesn't leak on his bed. . . . That girl went out a while ago, George. I saw her from the kitchen window. I think she saw me, too. She came around the side of the house and looked over here. Then she went away in a hurry."

"Name of Sills, Mother. Miss or Milly, take your choice."

"Now, George, there's absolutely no need for that frozen stare. You know how I feel. She's not—she's not your type. You've had every advantage, I've seen to that, and you can thank me for it. I honestly think it would kill me if you threw yourself away on an ordinary—"

"Easy, Mater. How do you like the Mater touch? That's my fine education." He looked contrite at once. "Listen, Ma, I've got a toothache, I don't feel like talking. Run along now, like a good egg."

"Don't think you can get around me with that 'egg.' Are you going to slip out and meet her later?"

"I hadn't thought of it, but since you've given me the idea—"

"George! I can't imagine where a girl like that goes at night. It was nearly half past eight when she left. I must say it looks very odd."

"This happens to be her night off. She usually goes home to see her mother. She's nuts about her mother.

And her father, unfortunately dead and unable to speak for himself, was an honest-Injun college man. Now you know it all. So how about me bringing Miss Sills over here some afternoon? She has time off in the afternoon, too."

"Really, George!"

"Well, why not? I'll tip her off to wear the Sophie original, and you won't be able to tell her from a lady."

He was pleased when the door slammed on his last words. For a while he stayed where he was, stretching his long legs and staring at the ceiling, prodding his tender jaw with a pessimistic finger. Then he got up and went down the hall to the medicine cabinet in the bathroom.

The poultices were there—everything was always where she said it would be. He tucked one of them over his aching tooth, laughed to himself in the mirror, and returned to his room. There he drew back the curtains, raised a window, and stood looking out into the dark, wet night. Far across the stretch of gardens the lamps on the Mansons' street were a chain of dim yellow halos. There was almost no traffic; an occasional car crept warily over the shining asphalt and was lost in the blur of rain and trees and lights that marked the shopping center across the park. The rain hung like a veil a few inches before his face; he felt as if he could part it with his hand and look through to something that was now obscured.

Mrs. Manson's sleeping porch filled the center of

a landscaped vista. He remembered when she'd had that vista made. She'd said she wanted to watch them while they played. Watch him and Robbie. Two men had put ladders against the trees and swung in the branches like monkeys while she directed them from the ground. A great day for him and Robbie, with branches falling from the air and the servants running around in circles.

Now her room was bright with lights; but as he watched, they went out, one by one, until a single lamp burned. He knew that room so well that he knew where each lamp was and what it looked like. The one that was left stood on a small table by the glass door that opened onto the porch. The bulb was purposely weak. It was meant to give comfort to sleepless eyes, nothing more.

Two figures came to the glass door and stood there, a slight woman in black and a stocky man in white. He knew their silhouettes and their unvarying ritual; he didn't need their black and white for identification. Emma and the masseur; a last-minute chat, whispered amenities, compliments given and taken by two people in the pay of the same household. The masseur moved like a chimpanzee disguised as a man or a man disguised as a chimpanzee. But Milly said he was good. The best in the business, she said.

George watched the man take his leave. He could count every invisible step, every foot of the upper hall, stairway, and lower hall, and give to each its allotted time. So much for the hat-and-coat routine, so much for the walk to the front gate, so much for

crossing the street to the park, for the left turn toward the station, which would bring him into view again.

His bare elbows were on the dripping windowsill and the wet wind was making his tooth jump, but he was too intent to notice. It was the final, hissing exhalation of his breath that startled him out of his absorption. What am I doing this for? he asked himself. What am I breathing heavily about?

The man, whose name was Breitman, had come into view on schedule and was moving in the right direction for the station, head lowered, trunk forward, long arms hanging wide. What am I doing this for? George asked himself again. What's the big idea of keeping tabs? The guy could have stopped for a drink with Manson and Cory—he sometimes does. So what? . . . His eyes returned to the glass door. The single lamp had been moved back. Its light was as faint as the glow of a distant city reflected in the sky, but it was enough to show the passing to and fro of Emma's slight, black figure. She raised and lowered the linen shades that covered the glass panes of the door, then raised them again and opened half of the door. She disappeared and returned with a painted screen, which she dragged into place before the open section. He smiled, because he knew she was making faces and talking to herself. When Emma took charge of things, she always told herself she was the only person in the house who saw that Miss Nora got what was good for her. The screen wasn't Emma's job, it was Manson's or Cory's, even Milly's; but Emma beat them to it when she could. Once or twice

he had been in the house at bedtime and tried to lend a hand; but Emma had brushed him aside and tossed him out with a few choice words. Well, he thought, tonight she's having it her way, and tomorrow the family will pay and pay. And so will I, he decided, touching his cheek and preparing to wince. But the tooth wasn't too bad; in fact, it was much better. He returned to his bed and book and settled against the pillows.

The wet wind blew in at the open window, spattering the curtains that were such a good buy. He told himself they could take it. It was good to be under the covers, in an empty room, with thoughts instead of people for company. The upstairs telephone extension rang faintly. It was at the end of the hall, outside his mother's room. He didn't notice how many times it rang; his mind was far away, across the dark, wet gardens, across the little park with its dripping trees, as far away as the Sills' cottage. When he thought of the phone again, it had stopped ringing. The whole house was silent.

Emma wedged a hassock and a low chair against the screen, settled the backs of her hands on her hips, and quietly dared the result to fall down. The screen stood firm. She examined the remainder of the room, properly darkened for a restful night; the fire banked with ashes, her work; the roses on the windowsill, her work; chairs in place, tables cleaned, also hers. Hot milk in a vacuum jug on the bed table and the bottle of sleeping pills beside it. The milk was Hattie's work. But everything to hand in case it was

needed. The milk and the pills weren't needed, not now. Sleeping like an angel, breathing nice and regular. When she was like that, Miss Sills didn't want her to have a pill. Miss Sills had said she was the one to decide whether or not a pill was necessary and nobody but herself was to touch the bottle, either. She had said accidents could happen and sometimes did. "Not when I'm around," Emma had said coldly.

The mantel clock said nine-thirty. A good long wait before Miss Sills came back, Emma reflected, unless the rain drove her home early, which wasn't likely. Young people made out like they could walk between the drops.

She rubbed her eyes furtively. She was sleepy, and she longed for her own bed with its overabundance of thick quilts and the paper sack of hard white peppermints under the pillow. But she put them out of her mind, and her heart warmed with a martyr's glow. I'll wash my face with cold water, she told herself. That'll keep me awake. I'll just run down the hall to the lavatory—take me a couple of minutes, no more.

There was a bath adjoining the bedroom, but she obstinately chose to accept Miss Sills' instructions about that. Miss Sills said it was a private, not a public bath. Emma turned up her nose at the gleaming tile and spotless basins. Like a hospital. You could do an operation in it.

She gave a last, quick look at the figure on the bed. So flat, so thin, so still. Dark lashes smudged the pale cheeks; dark hair lay across the pillow. The old

rug was spread over the eiderdown—she'd wanted it that way, you could tell. It was too hot, but Miss Sills could take it away later. And that massage, it was a punishing treatment. Those poor thin arms and legs, you'd think they'd break in two.

Emma went quietly down the hall, stopping once to peer over the stair railing. The lower hall was dim. Her sharp old ears identified and placed the faint sound of music under the hardier sound of rain and vines blowing against the landing window. They were playing the radio down there, in Mr. Ralph's little study at the far end of the hall. Turned down low and the door shut. The masseur's report must have been good; otherwise, they wouldn't be playing the radio. If the report had been bad, they'd be glooming in and out of her room, keeping her awake with their talk about how well she looked and how she'd be horseback riding in another month. Not fooling a cat, either. Laughing and smiling all over. That's how they acted when the report was bad. A child would catch on.... And I'm no child, she added, even though they think so. I can read them like a book. That goes for Breitman, too, and I'll tell him the same the next time I see him.

She sent an indulgent smile down the dim stairs and pattered softly to the lavatory at the end of the hall. The afternoon towels hadn't been changed. Her job, and she'd forgotten it. Well, considering the company and all the extra work, you'd think Miss Sills would be kind enough to— Someone had left a tube of toothpaste on the washbasin. Miss Sills! Her

brand and the top not screwed back on.

She studied the tube for almost a minute, then squeezed it in the middle and twisted it awry. That'll show her what cooperation is, she gloated. But when she admired her work, she felt uneasy. The result was so clearly a piece of thoughtful malice that she tried to straighten out the tube. But it broke and covered her hands with paste. She hid it in the towel hamper. The wastebasket was too public.

After that she was wide awake and decided she didn't need cold water on her face. She started back.

Across from the lavatory a closed door stood in a deep recess. Every day she looked at that door and said a prayer under her breath. Now she looked at it again, and her eyes filled. The hall light lay softly on the smooth, waxed panels; but no amount of waxing and rubbing had been able to erase the old deep dents at the bottom or the new scars that bit into the area around the lock. That lock was new, too. It was so new that it glittered like gold.

The deep dents were made long ago by small, stout shoes kicking for admittance to an attic that was always locked a week before Christmas and kept that way until late on Christmas Eve. But no matter how careful they were, little Robbie managed to be around when the bulky packages were carried up the back stairs and smuggled through the attic door. No matter how quiet they tried to be, he always heard them and came on the run. As far back as the first rocking-horse time, when he couldn't run without falling down. The rocking-horse time was the

first; then the scooter, then the tricycle, then the bicycle and the sled, not to mention all the other things, like railroads and trucks that cost too much and were big enough to ride in. Well, maybe they did spoil him. What happened later must have been their fault. A child grew up to be what you let him be. Yet—

She raised her eyes to the lock. The scars were deep. Once again she saw frenzied hands working against time with whatever tools they'd been able to find in the cellar chest. Once again she heard the heavy breathing of men doing something they never had done before, heard the hopeless clatter of a screw driver as it slipped through sweating fingers, heard the loud, insistent ringing of the front doorbell. Above it all, the ringing of the bell. . . . How long ago? Six weeks ago. Yes, six weeks.

Emma turned from the door and went back to the room, walking slowly, with bent head. She was more than sleepy now; she was old and beaten, and she knew it. If she woke up dead in the morning, she wouldn't care. As she found her way to a chair by the banked fire, she told herself she wouldn't care at all. The light from the single lamp found and lingered on the rose-colored jug and the bottle of pills that stood on the bed table. Before she closed her eyes, she sent a long, compassionate look across the room to the figure lying under the blankets and rug. It was still. Of course it was still. But something that could have been a shadow rippled over the rug at the fold where the hidden hands lay. It could have

been the shadow of the ivy that swayed in the wind outside the glass door. She told herself it was the ivy and the lamplight, and that satisfied her.

Emma went to sleep with her hands folded under her neat black apron, sitting upright in her chair. Sometimes she stirred in her sleep, because she was running away from a horror. She was running up the attic stairs, followed by bells and voices. And all the while she knew she was running in the wrong direction, but she couldn't turn back.

She heard Emma moan in her sleep like a tired and laboring animal, and the sound dragged her up from the depths of a beautiful dream. She was dreaming that her fingers had wrapped themselves around the fringe at last, had turned and twisted and grown strong. She fought to keep the dream, clinging in her sleep to the heavy strands, because they made a chain that bound her to life. No dream had ever held the ecstasy of this one. She could almost feel pain. She could almost persuade herself that her hands—

It was no use. She was awake. That was wishful thinking, she told herself despairingly; that was childish. She couldn't afford to be childish.

She opened her eyes and looked at Emma. Emma sat in shadow, the fireplace was dark, the corners of the room were darker. She couldn't see the clock, but Emma's presence and the screen, the jug, and the sleeping medicine told her it was still too early for Miss Sills. The screen, with its flanking chair and hassock, was Emma's work. Miss Sills could make it stand without support.

And there were four pills left in the bottle. It was easy to count them, four pills neatly covering the bottom. That was correct. She knew how many there ought to be; every night she counted them. The dose was one, and it was placed in her mouth and followed by a drink of the hot milk. When she couldn't see the bottle, or when the number of visible pills was uncertain, she refused the milk. There were too many opportunities for slipping extra pills into the jug. Sometimes the jug was brought by one person, sometimes by another, all the way from the kitchen, with stops en route to talk or answer the telephone. And sometimes there were as many as six people in her room at one time, all talking and moving about. And too often she was in her chair by the window, turned away from the table.

Four pills; that was right for tonight. Unless a new prescription had come and— Stop that. Stop. Don't waste emotion on imagination. Save the emotion for the things you know. Let the things you know feed you and make you strong. Listen to the rain on the roof, on the porch. Faint and clear and clean and measured. Like fingers on the keys of a typewriter in a distant room with a closed door. See how everything falls into place when you make your mind behave? Always make your mind remember the things it must. Try again. Begin again with the rain.

The rain has nothing to do with us, but it seems to belong. Perhaps because it sounds the way the typewriter keys used to sound. Night after night, before that day.

It didn't rain that day. That was the day of sun and St. Patrick's, and McCutcheon's and Tiffany's and the Plaza. . . .

She didn't go home when she left the Plaza; she shopped for another hour and then drove to the bank. Maybe Robbie would drive home with her, maybe Ralph, maybe even Bruce. There was no earthly reason Bruce couldn't drive out for dinner at least, and she'd tell him so. It was about time he paid them a little attention. A good dinner and a good talk. She'd ask his advice about Robbie. And she'd tell him he could leave early for whatever it was that kept him so close to town. Probably a girl, and a young one at that. He always looked foolish when she asked him what he did in the evenings. A very, very young girl, with plucked eyebrows. Men like Brucie are invariably trapped in the end by girls young enough to be their daughters.

When the car stopped at the bank, she had her own trap set for Bruce. She'd tell him how much she missed the long walks and rides they used to take together. She'd tell him he was almost as dear to her as his own brother had been. No. No, that wouldn't do. That might sound as if— She felt the color surge to her cheeks. Hussy, she said to herself, what a mind you've got.

She entered the bank and walked briskly to the offices in the rear. I'll simply tell Bruce that I'm worried about Robbie, she decided, that Robbie looks like the devil. Maybe he's noticed it himself. I'll remind him that he's Robbie's only relative and that,

while Ralph does his best, it still isn't quite enough. And we'll have something very special for dinner, just the four of us, me and my three men. I'll make it a gala. I'll wear my new dress and that crazy rouge I haven't dared try yet.

She was beaming when she went into Ralph's office. Ralph wasn't there.

Miss Harper, his secretary, was doing her nails and looked embarrassed. "Mr. Manson left about an hour ago," Miss Harper said. "Can I do anything for you, Mrs. Manson?"

"No." She hesitated. "Do you know where he went? Home or the club or what?"

"He didn't say, Mrs. Manson, but I think he went home. He filled his brief-case, and when he does that—"

"Yes, I know." Ralph and his homework. Ridiculous, but he got a big kick out of being an executive, even after hours. Nice old Ralph, doing his best to act like a Cory and a banker and doing it too hard. "What about my son? Do you think the bank will bust if I take him home with me? I've got the car."

"Mr. Robbie didn't come back after lunch," Miss Harper said. "I believe he—I heard Mr. Manson and Mr. Cory mention it." Miss Harper's embarrassment had turned into something stronger. She didn't seem to know where to look.

"Mention it in what way? You mean they needed Mr. Robbie and couldn't locate him? They knew he was with me."

"Oh, I don't know anything about it, Mrs. Manson!

Nobody said—I mean, I simply heard Mr. Cory ask where Mr. Robbie was, and Mr. Manson seemed to think he—I really don't know anything about it, Mrs. Manson."

She told herself Miss Harper was an idiot, a mal-adjusted, fluttering, stammering little fool. "It's all right, Miss Harper, thank you." She wanted to say that Robbie could come and go as he liked in his own father's and grandfather's bank. "I'll go in and see Mr. Cory. Perhaps he'll ride home with me."

Miss Harper started to say something about Bruce, discarded the sentence before it was fairly launched, and substituted a noisy and frantic hunt through her desk. "My bag and gloves," she explained, waving them as if they were a last-minute reprieve. "I know you'll excuse me, Mrs. Manson, but I've got to rush, I really have. Heavy date, you know, heavy date." She smiled falsely and scurried out of the office.

She followed Miss Harper slowly, aware of a sudden and unaccountable depression. Perhaps the gloves and bag *were* a reprieve. Miss Harper's pale eyes had shown an absurd relief when she held them up.

Bruce's office door was closed, and when she got no answer to her knock, she went in. Empty. All at once she was too tired to question even herself. She nodded to a clerk, who stopped at the open door with a startled look, and then she went back to the car.

All the way home she told herself she had been too happy in the morning. When that happened, you

always ate dust in the afternoon. For no good reason, for no reason at all. Of course there was no reason. She planned dinner all over again, confident that all three would be home when she got there. All three, even Brucie, Brucie, coming out with the others for a surprise. But why, after all these months, why a surprise? Was it a silly anniversary or something? Had she forgotten one of her big-little days? No, she hadn't forgotten.

On the station side of the little park she saw Alice Perry walking with her head down. Alice looked dejected, not brisk and trim as usual. Poor Alice. Always too ambitious, always expecting too much of her two Georges, husband and son, never satisfied with the small, pleasant comforts of her life.

She raised her hand to beckon, then remembered something Ralph had said. She hadn't agreed with him then, but she dropped her hand now. He'd said: "Go easy on the indiscriminate lifts, darling. In bad weather it's all right, but you stop for anybody and everybody, and it looks patronizing. Especially to people like Alice Perry. She's apt to think you're rubbing her nose in your fine car."

She'd been indignant. "I've known Alice Perry since George and Robbie were children. I like her, and you're crazy, darling."

"All right, I'm crazy. But Alice doesn't like you. She wants what you have."

She'd laughed. Maybe Alice did want what she had, but that was only because Alice was born discontented. It wasn't a personal thing. They'd always

been friends of a sort, as two women are when their children play together. Now she turned from the plodding figure and pretended not to see it. I don't feel like talking to her anyway, she told herself. I don't feel like talking to anybody. I want to get home in a hurry.

Emma let her in. Emma was wearing her hat, she'd been to the stores, and just got back. No, she didn't know if Mr. Ralph or Mr. Robbie had come home. She didn't know anything about Mr. Brucie. She'd look in the coat closet and find out in a minute.

"Don't bother," she told Emma. "I've got something for you to do. I'm going to call Mr. Bruce in town and ask him out for dinner. A very special dinner, because I feel that way. I want you to huddle with Hattie. Open all that stuff you've been hoarding, stuff like caviar, use all the eggs and cream and butter in the house, and get more. See if that man has pheasants. And don't tell me anything about it. I want to be surprised."

She went to her room and, still wearing her outdoor clothing and dialing with gloved fingers, called Bruce's apartment on her own phone. Why am I acting as if this were a life-and-death performance? she wondered. But Bruce's apartment didn't answer. She tried his club. He was expected for bridge, and she left word that he was to call her as soon as he came in.

The upper hall was quiet; the doors were all closed. They weren't home, you could hear them through walls and doors. She drew her bath and laid

out the new dress. Diamonds? No. Plain gold? Chic. Or sapphires? Yes, sapphires because her eyes—Hussy.

She was in the bath when she heard someone come into her room. "Ralph?" she called.

"It's Bruce, dear. I'll wait here until you come out."

"How perfectly wonderful! You're a mind reader! I've been trying to get you. You've got to stay for dinner."

"That's what I came for. Take your time, Nora."

"What's the matter with your voice? Got a cold?"

"No. I don't know. Yes, I guess I have."

"I'll fix that. I know the very thing. Is Ralph with you, or Robbie?"

"No. I came alone."

"Bruce, I went to the bank today. Am I screaming too loud? Anyway, I went to the bank after lunch with Robbie. I'm worried about Robbie, he looks awful. But you'd all gone. That crazy Miss Harper—I don't see how Ralph stands her.... See Robbie anywhere around?"

"I haven't looked. How are you anyway, Nora? It's been so long—"

"Your fault." She left the tub and got into her dressing gown. "Be with you in a minute. If you want a drink, ring for Emma. This is going to be a party."

She went into the room and saw him bending over the laid fire. He was putting a match to the paper, and when he turned to greet her, his face was stiff and white.

"You really are sick!" She ran across the room and

touched his cheek. "You are, and I love it. We'll keep you here tonight and take care of you. Brucie, if you want to marry a little fool, go right ahead. She'll be better for you than that creeping, crawling gentleman's gentleman. That man doesn't know the first thing about—"

Bruce was looking over her shoulder, and she turned. Ralph was coming in. Ralph didn't speak; he didn't have to.

They can't both be sick, she told herself. Not both of them, not all of them. Something's happened. They've got bad news, and they're here to tell me. The bank— No, Robbie! I knew it. I've known it all day.... She wrapped the dressing gown close; she was bitterly cold with a sweeping, numbing cold that rushed from all sides. She found a chair by the crackling fire and sat erect. "All right," she said. "Don't waste time. Let me have it. He's run away, hasn't he? He can't be dead."

"Dead?" Ralph's voice was startled, his face accusing. "Whatever makes you think— Bruce, will you?"

"Yes," Bruce said. "Nora, you haven't seen Robbie since you two had lunch?"

"You know I haven't!"

"Did he say anything to you—about us, about the bank?"

"No, no. But he looked dreadful. Go on, Bruce!"

Then he told her. Ralph stood by the window with his back to the room. As Bruce spoke, she knew it was right that he should be the one to tell her. Bruce and Robbie had the same blood.

He told her that almost two hundred thousand dollars had been stolen from the bank over a period of two years, a job so carefully contrived that no one had known about it until yesterday. There was no doubt about Robbie. She barely heard the damaging phrases, words like "estate" and "trustee"; she heard only that there was no doubt about Robbie. The Board was convinced.

Bruce and Ralph had asked the Board for a few days' grace. They were going to talk to Robbie—that was why they were both there. But Robbie hadn't come back from lunch, and that had forced their hands and frightened them a little. They had both looked for him. "He wasn't at any of his old hangouts," Bruce said. "So I came here, because I was pretty sure he'd turn up, if only to see you. I don't think he's made a bolt."

"I don't believe it," she said.

"I find it hard to believe myself. But it looks—Apparently it began when he first came to the bank. We're going to give him every chance."

"He didn't do it."

"I want to believe that, too. We'll soon know, Nora. He'll tell us; he's no liar."

"He didn't do it. He wouldn't know how. Find him—both of you go and find him. How long have you been in the house, and what have you done?"

Bruce said he had come alone on the three o'clock train, let himself in with the key he always had had, and seen no one. Then he'd gone for a walk and just returned.

Ralph said he had come on the following train, found Robbie's room empty and no one about, and locked himself in his own room to think. Ralph's hands, on the back of a chair, were white around the knuckles.

"Ring for Emma," she said.

Emma came. She had a menu in her hand and began to read it aloud the minute she crossed the threshold. "Turtle soup," she said. "I don't care whether you want to be surprised or not, you've got to listen. A good turtle soup with sherry, not too heavy for what comes after and nice for a coolish evening. Then a small fresh salmon—" She stopped. "What are they saying to you, Miss Nora? What's happening here?"

"Have you seen Robbie?"

"I told you before, I haven't seen a soul until now. I was out from lunch on. But if you want to know if he's home, I guess he is. Or was. Hattie says she heard the typewriter going a while back. Up in the attic."

Bruce said quickly, "Attic?"

"Where else? That's where he keeps his machine, that's where he does his writing, the young monkey. Sometimes, when he comes home early, he just slips in and goes up there."

Ralph said: "I'll check. I'll go right away. That'll be all, Emma."

Emma stood where she was. "It will not be all," she said. "It's my right to know what's happening here."

They stood in a tight little group before the attic

door and watched Ralph put his hand on the knob. The door was locked.

"He's taken the key," he said over his shoulder. He sounded as if he were swallowing a scream.

"Scream," she cried, "scream, get help. Scream, scream, or I will. Get that door open!"

Bruce ran downstairs. He was gone for a lifetime, in which Robbie was conceived, born, bathed and fed, sung to in the evening dusk, played with in the morning sun. She leaned against the wall and bore him again with pain.

Bruce returned with the cellar tool chest. The front doorbell rang and rang through the house.

"I'll pay, I'll pay," she heard herself say. "Restitution, recompense, I don't know the word. He didn't do it, but I'll pay."

"Stop that," Bruce said. "Somebody go down and send that woman away. Mrs. Perry. She's at the door. Somebody send her away."

Something heavy and metallic slipped through his fingers and clattered to the floor. She went down on her knees before the locked door. They were all on their knees, even Emma, pounding with tools, boring, prying, calling his name.

She knew her lips were shaping his name now. She tried to tighten them. Useless. She tried again. Better. Now she had her lower lip between her teeth, holding it fast. The muscles in her face were rigid, under control.

Could I do that yesterday? she wondered. Could I have done that a few days ago? Am I getting stronger

or am I dreaming again? Don't dream; don't. You'll know when the times comes. Concentrate on facts, on things that have body and substance. If you don't, you'll lose your mind. Concentrate on anything. The bed, the lamp, the jug, the glass bottle. Never take the medicine unless you are able to count the pills. Remember that. Never take it unless you can count, and take it only from Miss Sills. If you could talk, what would you say first? If you could walk, which way would you go? No, no, think of something that is real.

This room is real; it has body and substance. The jug of milk, the bottle, the painted screen, all real. There are gray clouds and black birds and green rushes on the screen. That's right, that's right. And there's one small bird deep in the rushes at the bottom, sitting on a nest. Find the small bird on the nest. Low on the left, near the floor—you know where it is. Find it. . . .

There was a gloved hand lying on the floor under the screen.

It moved along the floor, in the space beneath the frame, a bright-yellow hand with thick, spread fingers. Another hand crept out and moved beside it. They minced to the right and then to the left, feeling their way, like two blind, gluttoned things.

Her lips curled back from her teeth.

The two hands traveled to the end of the screen and stopped. A few inches above them another hand crept around the frame and curled and slipped and

clung. Then another. Four thick, yellow hands close together, beckoning....

"I don't know why you want to leave before your time's up," Mrs. Sills said to her daughter. "It's not half past ten yet. What do you think I cut that cake for? Not for myself, I can assure you. Stale bakery cake is good enough for me. I made that cake for my only child, who brings me a bundle of messy old uniforms and says it's such a bad night that she'd better be going out in it. Going where?"

Milly was unimpressed. "Don't give me that cake routine again. You're fifteen pounds overweight from four-layer chocolate fresh out of the oven. And I'll take my laundry to the Steam Hand, if you don't like it. I hate rain, and you know it, and George has a toothache."

"I begin to see the light," Mrs. Sills said. "George has a toothache, and Mrs. Perry won't let him out. So you haven't any place to go except to see your old mother. When I was your age, I had four or five on the string and glad enough to come running when I called the tune.... Are you going to marry him, or am I being personal?"

Milly said nothing.

"Don't do it," her mother said, "unless you can afford a place of your own. Don't do it unless he can support you. None of this career-after-marriage business, because when the babies begin to come and you have to stop work, they always get mad—because they miss the extra money and won't admit it. And don't economize on cheap furniture; it doesn't pay in the

end. No veneers—good solid walnut or cherry. I'll give you half of my silver. . . . Was that George you called up a while ago?"

"Yes."

"I couldn't hear, because you lowered your voice. I don't know what you have to tell a man that your own mother can't know about."

"You couldn't hear because I didn't say anything. He wasn't home—or wouldn't answer the phone."

"Toothache!"

"Good-night, Mother." Milly started for the door.

"Have I said something wrong?" Mrs. Sills wondered wistfully.

"Not a word." Milly gave her mother a kiss and a hug. "I'm going to stop at Marge's to return a library book. Then I'm going straight back to my nice, sick baby, and I don't want any other kind for a long while. Now you know, and I'll drop in tomorrow afternoon on my exercise. If I can. Be good." She closed the front door and went down the short path to the sidewalk.

The rain fell steadily, evenly, meeting the pavement with a hiss but sinking into the sodden grass without a sound. . . . You'd think it had a home under the grass, she thought. You'd think it had a special place to go. Worms. Nothing under grass but worms. But under this particular grass, under this very super Mrs. Nathaniel-Sills-and-daughter grass, there are also bones. Cat, dog, canary, and goldfish bones, in shoeboxes and matchboxes, all rotted and gone. I have the soul of a poet. . . . After that it was too easy

to think of another kind of grass, trim and parklike, where the same rain was sinking into the earth and finding—

She ran past the lighted drugstore on the corner, turned and ran the length of a block to Marge Foster's shop. "Hi," she said in a breathless voice that she tried to make casual.

Marge, sorting rental cards at her worktable, looked up. "Put that umbrella in the stand before I drown. What brings you out in all weathers?"

Milly slid her book across the table. "I make it twenty-four cents due. Here's a quarter, and I want change."

"You kill me," Marge said. "I can remember the day when you patronized Carnegie's Free. Why don't you go back there? Sit down. How are you, honey?"

"So-so." Milly pulled up a chair. Miss Foster's Lending Library and Gift Bazaar was empty except for the proprietress and Milly. "Terrible night. George is sick. He says. Mother's going to give me half her silver. She says. What do you know, Marge?"

"What do *I* know? You're the one who lives the life."

"I'm gaining weight—they feed me swell. On some cases you share a bowl with the dog."

"You're lucky. You look wonderful." Marge gave the rain-blurred windows a rapid survey. "I don't feel like business, I feel like talking to an old school tie. Put your feet up and relax." She crossed to the door, locked it, and returned. "And they call me money-mad."

Milly settled her feet on the edge of a bookshelf. "I ought not to stay, honestly. I'm not due back till twelve, but she's acting kind of funny tonight. Got a cigarette?"

"Here." Marge pushed the box across the table. "Milly, you know I'm as safe as houses. I wouldn't open my mouth about anything you told me."

"I haven't got anything to tell. Match? Thanks. What's the matter with you? You look as if you didn't believe me."

"Sure I believe you. George Perry's mother was in this afternoon, looking for 'a little love story, nothing modern.' The whole time she was here she was talking at the top of her lungs about how her son is the light of Mrs. Manson's life. Is he?"

"Of course not. Half the time he's there she doesn't even look at him. If I know you, Mrs. P. said something else and you're working up to it. What?"

"Well, she did want to know how well I knew you. Casual-like. Quote: 'Are you very friendly with that little nurse of Mrs. Manson's? I believe Mrs. Manson has become quite attached to her.' I don't think she loves you."

"She doesn't even know me. I'm taking my time about that. What else?"

"She thinks Bruce Cory is too good-looking. She sort of hinted that he liked Mrs. Manson too well before she up and married his brother. To say nothing of marrying Manson, too. And now that he's hanging around again, using her illness as an excuse— Her

and her little love stories! Milly, is Mrs. Manson going to die?"

"Not if I can help it." Milly turned and looked at the dripping windows. They showed a strange, new world. But the single, wavering blur of light was only a street lamp that stood on the curb; the twisted shape that rapped on the pane and sprung away and rapped again was nothing but a branch. "Not if I can help it," she repeated. "I'm a good nurse. I know that. And Babcock must think so, too, or he wouldn't have wanted me. Not for a patient like Mrs. Manson." Milly's voice grew soft. "She's a darling, she's a pet, and I worry about her all the time. I want her to get well. I want her to get even half-well. The minute she shows a definite improvement, they want to take her away somewhere, a change of scene. Any kind of change ought to help. But I don't know. The other day I dressed her up in her jewelry, rings, bracelets, clips—stuff to knock your eyes out. But she no like, I could tell. Had to take it all off and lock it away. Emma says it was on her dressing table, ready to put on, the day Robbie died. Maybe that's why she doesn't like it."

"I like the way you say 'died.' All right, but you don't have to look at me like that. Is Emma nice to you? In books, the servants are terrible to nurses."

"She's okay. She isn't like a servant; she sort of runs things. She's been there years and years. Emma was the one who found her."

"I know." Marge removed her glasses and polished them thoroughly. "Change of subject coming up.

Somebody was in here yesterday asking about you."

"Who?"

"I don't know. A woman. She looked sort of familiar, but I couldn't place her. This shop is like a railway station. Strangers drop in maybe once or twice a year, motorists and so on, people from New York buying a book for a weekend present. Maybe she was somebody like that, just a face I'd seen once before. Anyway, she didn't know you, didn't know your name. She wanted to know if I was acquainted with the nurse at Mr. Manson's."

"Maybe somebody who used to know them. Didn't like to inquire at the house. You know, tragedy and all that."

"Maybe. They came from New York themselves years ago. But I got the idea it was you she was interested in."

"Me? No. You know everybody I know. Funny. What did she say?"

"Nothing much. She just ambled around, bought a couple of Halloween cards, and acted friendly in a pushing way. You know, the great big smile that goes with spending ten cents. First she asked how Mrs. Manson was getting along—lots of people ask me that, because they know I know you or they've seen you in here. Then she wanted to know where you lived."

"For heaven's sake! I'm getting a reputation."

"Think so? Wait. She said, 'Does the young lady live in Larchville, or did they get her from New York?' I said Larchville. And I also said what do you

want to know for, but in a nice way, of course. And she said she thought maybe she knew you and was just making sure. She did a lot of smiling and hemming and hawing and said she thought maybe you'd trained at the hospital with her cousin or somebody. She said she was interested in young nurses starting out who'd trained where her cousin had."

"Crazy. No sense to it. Who's her cousin?"

"She very carefully didn't say, even when I asked." Marge lighted a cigarette. "Know what I think? I think she was a snooper, a busy-body, one of those women who try to get the dope on other people's troubles so they can brag to the bridge club. She had a face like bridge-every-afternoon; sharp. Also heavy around the hips, too many of those bridge desserts. So when she said your name had slipped her mind and wasn't it Johnson or something like that, I closed up like a clam."

"Right. Thanks."

Marge was thoughtful. "You know, there could be something behind it, Milly. Something like family trouble, for instance. She might be a relative of the Cory family, still sore about Manson's marrying the money Cory left. Or she might be an old friend of Cory's—I mean the first husband."

"Did she look like the kind of girl friend a Cory would have? They say Bruce is the living image of his brother. Was she the kind of woman a man like Bruce Cory would—look at?"

"From what I've seen of him I'd say no, but fast. Her clothes weren't any better than mine. She was all

right, you understand, but she didn't have the kind of manner you expect in a woman connected with a Cory or a Manson. But you can't always tell about boys like Cory or Manson."

"What a brain," Milly admired. "Sensational!" She dragged her feet from the shelf. "After eleven. I ought to start back."

"Aw, wait. I've got coffee. It's on the hot plate."

With the coffee they had bakery doughnuts, which tasted better than four-layer chocolate because they came out of a paper bag.

It was ten minutes to twelve when Marge locked the shop door behind them. They walked to the corner before they separated. Marge stood on the curbstone and watched Milly cross the deserted street and strike out in the direction of the park. The slight, rain-coated figure and the big umbrella were swallowed in mist and fog. The rain had turned into an aimless drizzle.

Marge went home and tried to remember where she'd seen the woman who was interested in young nurses. The woman was beginning to fill her mind. . . . Not a one-shot customer, Marge decided. I'm sure of that. Maybe somebody who just moved to Larchville, one of those people you stand next to at the grocery store. Maybe. Green coat and hat. Drop a brick out any window this year, and you'll hit that same green coat and hat.

Milly let herself in. One light was burning in the hall, the one they always left burning when she was out. It was a signal for her to put the chain on the

door. It meant everyone else was in. She fixed the chain, turned out the light, and crept upstairs.

The doors along the upper hall were closed. All except Mrs. Manson's at the front. Light came from that doorway, a dim, straight shaft on the dark hall carpet, like a path cut through shadows. She stopped in the lavatory and brushed her teeth with just water, because she couldn't find her toothpaste. Her hooded coat and umbrella were dripping, so she hung them on the lavatory door.

Emma was asleep in a chair before the dead fire, but she'd done her usual job on the glass door and screen. Milly grinned at the screen, anchored with chair and hassock. One of these nights Emma would use the bureau, too.

She walked to the bed. Mrs. Manson was awake, wide awake. Her face was white, and her eyes were glittering. "Hey," Milly said softly, "what's the idea?" She remembered then that the door to the hall was open and went back to close it. We're about to have a little one-sided argument, she told herself, but we needn't let the whole house in on it. "Hey," she said again, "you're bad tonight. What makes you so bad, honey—I mean, Mrs. Manson?"

Mrs. Manson's eyes met hers.

"Now, wait," Milly said. "One thing at a time. You don't like something, I can see that. Well, we'll take care of it, we'll toss it right out, whatever it is. But the pulse comes first." She drew the cold hands from under the rug and held one limp wrist.

The eyes clouded; then the glitter returned. They

gleamed like the eyes of an animal caught in a trap that was imperfectly sprung. Milly had seen a squirrel once—

The pulse was too rapid. She held the cold hands in hers. "You're frightened," she said. "I know. But it's all over now. Milly's here. Still, I don't know why your hands should be freezing, you've got plenty of blankets and the room's exactly right. Nervous about something? Now, now, you mustn't be." She sat on the edge of the bed and talked softly and persuasively. "I bet I know what happened," she said. "You had a bad dream. And because you're sick and sort of helpless, you couldn't throw it off. Now me, when I have a bad dream, I practically kick myself out of bed and wake up screaming. They're terrible, aren't they? But everybody has them once in a while, pal—I mean, Mrs. Manson. I mean, you're not the only one."

No, that wasn't it. According to Mrs. Manson's eyes, it wasn't a dream. They said so, as plain as words. They said they had seen something.

Milly felt a prickle along her spine. Got me doing it now, she thought. Not that I haven't been getting ready for it. Bones in boxes.... For two cents I wouldn't look over my shoulder, even at Emma.

She rubbed the hands gently. They were like ice, but Mrs. Manson's forehead was beaded with perspiration. Get busy, Milly told herself. Get to the bottom of this, but don't let her see that you're worried. She couldn't possibly have seen anything. There's nothing to see. Maybe she heard—

"Listen, honey, I'm going to wake Emma up and

send her to bed. And maybe Emma can tell me what—what you want.” She went to Emma and touched the old woman’s shoulder. Emma was a heavy sleeper. Milly had to shake her awake.

“Well,” Emma said, “Is it time for you already? I must have dozed off.”

“You must have taken one of Mrs. Manson’s pills. What happened in here while I was out?”

“Nothing.” Emma was indignant. “You don’t have to glare at me like that, Miss Sills. Everything was as quiet as you please. We slept like a baby, same as if you’d been here.” Emma looked at the bed. “She’s all right. Even I can see that.”

“You’re as blind as a bat,” Milly whispered. “She’s anything but all right. No, Emma, don’t go over there now. I want to talk to you.”

Emma struggled to her feet, blustering and protesting. “I’m sure I don’t know what you’re getting at, Miss Sills! I can see as well as you can, and I say she’s all right.”

Milly said: “Please keep your voice down, Emma. Who was in this room tonight?”

“Nobody. What do you think I am? I wouldn’t let anybody in. Mr. Manson and Mr. Cory stopped for a minute or two before the masseur came, but you know that as well as I do. And that’s all.”

Milly observed to herself that the whole town of Larchville could have trooped in and out while Emma was having her doze. Aloud she said: “Did Breitman say anything while he was here? Did he say anything about her condition?”

"Not a word. He never does. He's very close-mouthed. He and I talked the same as we always do, nothing more. Miss Sills, I—" Emma began to break. Milly's stern young face was full of foreboding. "Miss Sills," she wavered, "if anything's gone wrong, while I—Miss Sills, what's gone wrong?"

"Mrs. Manson is frightened, and I want to know why. At first I thought she'd had a nightmare, but now I'm not so sure. I think she may have overheard something. Or she may have been—remembering things again. That's always a bad business when you're alone at night, to say nothing of being sick. . . . Exactly what did Breitman say?"

"Nothing. Nothing about her. He never spoke her name once. We talked about the weather. He said the country was nice after New York, and he liked to come out here. That's all."

"Didn't say anything that she could misunderstand? Mention any names at all?"

"No, Miss Sills. Just the ordinary talk, like we always have. She wasn't frightened then, Miss Sills, I know it. Because after he left, I washed her face and covered her up good, and she was nice and drowsy. I was thinking maybe she wouldn't need her pill to-night and how that was a good thing." Emma's hands were limp against the folds of her black apron, but her voice said she was wringing them mentally. "I'd like to stay here tonight," she beseeched. "I could sleep in a chair. If she's going to have trouble, then this is where I belong."

Milly softened. "No. You get your regular sleep.

But I promise to call you if I need anything."

"Mr. Manson?"

"I'll call him, too, but not now. The fewer people in here the better. Run along, Emma. Say good-night to her, but make it snappy and happy."

Emma hesitated. "You know that second bell on the wall over there rings in my room, don't you? My own room, not the kitchen. It rings right over my bed, nice and loud. If you should—"

"I will." She eased Emma to the bed and watched the old hands gather up the younger ones and fold them under the rug.

When Emma looked down at the face on the pillow, she obviously didn't trust her voice. But she covered the staring eyes with one of her hands, gently, as if she were telling a wakeful child it was time to sleep.

Milly closed the door behind Emma and went back to the bed. The room seemed darker with Emma gone, darker and quieter. Even larger. I'm crazy, Milly told herself. A fine state of mind I'm getting into. Missing Emma, thinking of Emma like the Marines. This is what they told us in training. That is what they said would happen sometime, and I thought they were bats. They said there'd come a time in the night, in the wards and in homes, when you were on duty alone and felt as if you were being watched. Not by a patient, by something else. They said it was a natural thing and not to be frightened. That's what they said. But some of the older nurses, the old war horses who'd seen everything, they said it was death watching you. Waiting for you to turn

your back.... She turned around slowly, looking into every corner of the room and listening. What she saw was luxury and security, what she heard was silence. She bent over the bed. "Never let the patient know you're nervous," they said. That's what they said.

She smiled. "Time for the nightcap," she said, "and maybe I'll join you." She took the bottle of pills and reached for the jug of hot milk. "I'll get the bathroom glass for myself. I can use some of this milk. I'm worn thin; we had too much company today." She smiled steadily. "You probably feel worse than I do—you can't tell people to shut up, and I can."

She knew Mrs. Manson was watching her hands as they uncorked the jug and filled the cup. She replaced the jug and shook a single pill into the palm of her hand, talking all the while. "If the sun comes out tomorrow, I'm going to park you on the sleeping porch. Tomorrow's Sunday, you remember that, and old George will be home all day. Maybe he'll hang out his window with his face all tied up like the Robber Kitten. He says he has a toothache. Well, we'll make fun of him and he won't know it.... Here you are. Open wide."

Mrs. Manson refused. It was more than mutiny; she tightened her lips in a straight, hard line, and her eyes blazed. The muscles in her throat were like cords.

Milly stared, holding the milk in a hand that shook. Her eyes widened with delight. Mrs. Manson's throat muscles were the most beautiful things

she had ever seen. They were strong, pulsing, and controlled. For the first time.

She exulted. "Well, what do you know about that! You ought to see yourself! You're still a bad girl, and don't think I'm not mad at you, because I am, but I do believe you've turned the corner! You hear that? You're better! You couldn't make those mean, ugly faces a week ago. You couldn't even make them this morning. Well, am I tickled!"

But there was no responsive smile, and that was what she wanted most of all. Response. Anything that would prove cooperation and receptiveness and settle the question of a clouded mind.

"Mrs. Manson, smile. Smile just once, and we'll forget about the nightcap."

The agony in the eyes that returned her look was almost more than she could bear. Mrs. Manson was trying to smile, but she might as well have tried to run.

Milly said: "Never mind, never mind, baby. Forget it."

She rolled the pill about in the palm of her hand; it was a capsule, and it rolled lightly and evenly. What am I going to do now? I can't force her—not when she looks like that. But I've got to make her understand that I'm on her side, that the things I ask her to do are the right things. I've got to find out why she's terrified. She can't go through the night this way. Neither can I. If I try the milk again, if I try selling myself with the milk—

Aloud, she said: "Mrs. Manson, please take the

milk. I won't bother you about the pill. I know you hate it even though it's good for you. But please take the milk. This is my job, Mrs. Manson, I need it. Doctor Babcock might send me away if he found out that I couldn't—couldn't persuade you. And I don't want to go away. Please, Mrs. Manson, just a little milk for my sake."

Mrs. Manson's eyes filled with tears. They gathered slowly and clung to her lashes. Only when there were too many did they begin to fall.

Milly put the milk back on the table and dropped the pill into the bottle. "I want to help you," she said miserably, "but I'm helpless myself. I can't think of anything to do. Can't you give me a sign of some sort? Can't you look at something in the room that will give me a clue?"

Mrs. Manson's eyes blazed with hope. It was a look that even a child could have read.

"There, now," Milly rejoiced. "You see? We're all right, we're fine. We're getting this thing licked, aren't we? Is it something in the room that frightens you, something I don't know about?"

The eyes met hers and held, like a hand reaching out to take another hand. They directed her to the bed table. There was nothing on the table but the milk jug, the cup of cooling milk, and the small glass bottle. And two linen handkerchiefs, neatly folded. The same things that were there every night.

It couldn't be the handkerchiefs. They were her own, marked with her initials, N. M., in a little circle of flowers. There was nothing frightening about a

handkerchief. She shook them out. They were clean, empty, fragrant. She touched one of the wet cheeks and studied the table again, following the direction of the eyes, pinning the look to a definite place. The pills?

"Now, you're not afraid of those pills, Mrs. Manson. You've had them every single night. They're the same as always; we haven't changed them." She turned the bottle between her fingers. "See? Same druggist and everything. Same old stuff. Four little pills for four more nights. . . . Well, I'll be! I've hit it, haven't I?"

The look had changed; it was eager, urgent, full of horror. It was almost like speech. It warned and pleaded and prayed. Mrs. Manson had been in the depths, she was still there, but she was emerging.

Afraid of the medicine all of a sudden, Milly marveled. I'll fix that right now. She got her handbag put the bottle in it, holding the bag so Mrs. Manson could see every move. "See?" she said. "Just as good as thrown out. And tomorrow I'll tell Babcock you like it the same as you like poison." Poison. That crack about poison when they were all having drinks in the afternoon; that might have started it. Lying alone, half-asleep, half-awake, listening to the rain, thinking back. When she returned to the bed, she said: "Those pills are okay, silly. I'm just humoring you because I think you're nice. All right now?"

No, Mrs. Manson wasn't all right. She still looked at the table; her eyes still talked. Her lips, stiff and dry, struggled with the shape of a word. Mrs. Man-

son was seeing something that only she could see, and she was trying to tell about it. It was hopeless, and she knew it, but she was trying.

Suddenly Milly was engulfed and defeated. This was hysteria, this was something she couldn't fight alone. Manson? Cory? She looked at the bedroom door, at the glass door. George? Beyond the glass door and the porch, across the garden, George was safe in his own house. She went to the screen and walked around it, unconscious of the horrified eyes that followed her. It was cold on the porch, and the wind was wet and mournful. It sighed in the trees and the ivy, and touched her face with damp fingers.

George's room was dark, the whole cottage was dark. She looked to her left, along the length of sleeping porch. The porch ran to the end of the house, wide and shadowed, overhung with trees and vines. Mr. Manson's room opened on it, so did Bruce Cory's. But their rooms were dark, too. There were no lights showing in any of the rooms that she could see.

Mrs. Manson must have been all right when they went to bed, she thought, or they wouldn't have gone. They'd have waited for her or called Babcock. Then she knew what she wanted to do. Call Babcock. It was only a quarter of one. He wouldn't mind, he was used to late calls. And it was later than this the night he came to her house and asked her to take the case. He was crazy about Mrs. Manson.

She went back to the room, smiling easily. "I'm going downstairs to get you a drink of water. Ice water. You won't mind if I leave you for such a little while."

She didn't wait for an answering look in Mrs. Manson's eyes. She wanted to get away, to hear Doctor Babcock's reassuring voice, to hear his booming laugh. He'd tell her that hallucinations were common in cases like Mrs. Manson's; he'd say he'd be right over.

She closed the door quietly and went down to the first floor, hugging the stair rail, not turning on lights. She didn't want to wake the others. Not unless it was necessary. At the rear of the hall she fumbled for the kitchen door. There was no sound anywhere. And I used to have ideas about Bruce Cory, she scoffed. I had the repartee all ready. He doesn't even know I'm alive.

When she was safe inside, she closed the door behind her and found the light switch. The kitchen phone looked beautiful in the clear, strong light.

Doctor Babcock's housekeeper answered after a long wait. Milly knew the woman slightly, but she didn't identify herself. "Doctor Babcock, please."

"He's not here."

Her heart sank. "Do you know where he is? It's fairly important."

"No, I don't know. He got a call around ten, and he hasn't come back. You want to leave a message?"

"No. No, thanks. I— Did he say how long he'd be?"

"He said he didn't know. He said he might be a long time, and I was to lock up. I wouldn't be surprised if it was a confinement."

"Oh. Well, I guess—well, if he comes in during the

next hour or so—" She thought of Babcock ringing the bell, rousing the house, Emma, Hattie, Mr. Manson, Bruce Cory. She saw Emma and Hattie peering from behind doors, Mr. Manson and Bruce Cory, bathrobed and tousled, stumbling down the stairs. She began to have doubts. They might think she'd been forward, calling the doctor without consulting them. And suppose, after all that, they went to Mrs. Manson's room and found her asleep. Asleep in spite of herself, exhausted by her own imagination. That happened sometimes. They'd think *she* was the crazy one.

"Well?" The woman's voice was impatient. "Are you still there, and if you are, what do you want me to do?"

"Oh, I'm sorry. No, there's nothing, thank you. I'll see Doctor Babcock in the morning." She hung up. She could call again. In another hour, if Mrs. Manson was still awake. She filled a glass with water from the refrigerator bottle and went back the way she had come.

She watched the door, waiting for Miss Sills to return. Miss Sills was taking more time than she needed for a glass of water, and that was good. It was good if it meant that Miss Sills had stopped in the kitchen to make cocoa for herself. Sometimes she did that. If she did that tonight, if she drank cocoa that she herself had made, then she wouldn't be thirsty, then she wouldn't drink the milk in the jug. Sometimes she drank what was left of the milk in the jug. Everybody knew that. Miss Sills told everybody about it and

laughed. If she drank the milk tonight—

When the hands had come, she had tried to scream. She screamed silently in her heart and soul while Emma slept by the fire. She watched the dark, shapeless mass that crept from behind the screen and cavorted on the floor, dragging its thick, yellow hands. Hands where feet should be. It was big enough to stand alone, strong enough, but it didn't stand. It rose and fell like a strong black jelly and made a sound like laughing. Then it went away.

The clock on the mantel ticked on. Minutes passed, uncounted. She watched the screen.

Then the door to her room opened quietly, and she turned her eyes in an agony of hope. *Emma, Emma. Try to hear me, Emma.*

She watched the silent approach over the soft rugs, the deft opening of two capsules, the addition of their contents to the jug of milk. The refilling of the capsules with her talcum powder, the refitting of the halves, the return to the bottle. She was ignored as if she didn't exist. She might not have been there. She was the same as dead then. . . .

"Here you are," Milly said. "Did you think I'd run away?" She held the glass of water to Mrs. Manson's lips. "Right out of the ice-box. Now, you and I are going to sleep whether we feel like it or not. I'll leave the light on. And I won't go to bed. I'll do my sleeping in a chair, right where I can see you and you can see me. Now, don't look at me like that. It's all right. I've done it lots of times before, and you never knew it."

She moved Emma's chair to the bed; any chair that Emma selected for herself would be comfortable. Mrs. Manson watched. The eiderdown from the cot, an extra blanket for her shoulders.

The chair faced the bed; it was nearer the foot than the head. Its back was to the screen.

Before Milly settled down to what she told herself was a sleepless night, she opened both sides of the porch door. George's room was still dark. She sent him a wan smile across the garden and returned to the chair. It wasn't too bad; it was almost as good as a bed.

Then she got up again.

She knew there was another cupful of milk in the jug, and she was thirsty. She filled the empty water glass with the milk and saluted Mrs. Manson before she drank.

Miss Sills was nodding. Soon Miss Sills would be asleep. A deep sleep. In the morning Miss Sills would have a headache.

In the morning I will be dead. . . .

How will it happen? It couldn't have been planned for tonight—no one could have known she'd drink the rest of the milk. It was a lucky break. The way had been prepared for a lucky break, and it had come. And it wasn't needed, it wasn't necessary at all. It was simply an extra precaution, a weapon in reserve, devious, typical.

How long will I have to wait now?

Not long. This is too good to miss. It would have been better if there'd been more time for frightening

me. It must have been a wrench to give that up. I see the whole thing now, I know the plan. I was to be frightened out of my wits until that grew tiresome and wasn't exciting any more. Then, when the time was right, when I was alone or with Emma only, I was to be killed. How? Perhaps smothered. Smothering will be easy.

Emma left me alone tonight. There was plenty of time then. Emma was asleep tonight, over by the fire, out of sight of the screen. There was time then, too. But I had to be frightened first, because that was exciting. That would have gone on night after night until it got to be a bore. Or until a foolproof opportunity came. An opportunity too good to miss. Like tonight.

Were Miss Sills and I being watched? Yes, of course we were. But what difference does that make now?

Soon the hands will come back and move along the edge of the screen. The black shape will rise from the floor and stand up, and one of the hands will uncover the face, and I will see it.

The face is being saved for the end, like a big scene. Like a scene at the end of a melodrama, when the audience is supposed to be surprised. It won't be played for my benefit; the face knows that I know now. It will be played for the excitement the actor gets.

I know even about the hands. I know what they are. Moving along the floor, under the screen, close together as if they belonged to an animal.

That is too vile.

Miss Sills is asleep. Her head is bowed. She sleeps like a little girl.

When they find me in the morning, will they say I turned in my sleep and smothered myself? "She turned in her sleep—the pillow. It's the miracle we've been waiting for, but we didn't know, we didn't think—"

Will the police believe that?

Miss Sills sleeps like a little girl.

Can they do anything to her? Can they accuse her of negligence? Or will someone suggest that she was in love with—

Waiting is dreadful. Why is it taking so long? . . .

At last. . . Miss Sills. Miss Sills. *Miss Sills!*

part 2

It was Hattie who screamed. The sound ripped through the quiet house, rose and fell, and left in its wake a deeper silence than before. It dragged Emma from the refuge of sleep.

Emma's room was separated from Hattie's by the bath they shared. She knew where the scream came from, but the hush that followed it was endless and shocking. She told herself that everybody was dead. There was no breath in the house; when people are sleeping and breathing in a house, you always know it. She sat up in bed and turned on the light. She wanted to see the clock although she was convinced she had no more need of time.

It was three o'clock. She covered her mouth with

a thin, gnarled hand, to keep herself from screaming, too. Then she heard other sounds, doors opening and closing, feet on the floors above and on the stairs. Feet on the kitchen floor, a chair overturned. Voices. Someone knocked on the door to the kitchen.

"Emma?" It was Mr. Cory.

She managed to say, "Yes, sir?"

"We want you out here."

She opened the door. "Mrs. Manson, Miss Nora—"

"We want you in the library," he said.

She put on her robe and slippers and pinned up her scant braids, taking her time because the next few minutes would tell her something she didn't want to hear. When she reached the library, Hattie was already there, alive, and wrapped in a blanket. She looked for the others—Mr. Cory, Mr. Manson, Miss Sills. Mr. Cory was standing by the fireplace, Mr. Manson was telephoning, Miss Sills was absent.

"Miss Nora?" Emma faltered. "Miss Sills?"

"Miss Sills is all right. Everybody's all right except Mrs. Manson."

"Not—"

"We're trying to get Doctor Babcock. Mrs. Manson is unconscious, and Miss Sills quite rightly refuses to accept the responsibility. We don't know what—Emma, can you do anything with Hattie? Nothing she says makes sense."

Emma turned on Hattie. Hattie's shrill, wailing voice rose above the telephone conversation, but they heard enough of the latter to know that Doctor Babcock wasn't home.

She hadn't slept well, Hattie said; the ivy had kept her awake. All night long it had been making noises at her window, scratching against the wooden shutters, and she'd listened to it for hours before she'd made up her mind that she couldn't stand it another minute. She'd got out of bed then, not turning on a light, and found the scissors in her workbasket.

"I was going to cut it off," she said. "The ivy. I could see it moving back and forth, a long, black, ugly-looking thing out there in the dark. Like a snake. So I was going to cut it off. And then—" She stopped short when Manson left the phone.

"I got hold of Pleydell," Manson said. "He's younger than I like, but he's the best I could do. Get on with it, Hattie."

"Yes, sir. So I was going to cut it off. I was half out the window and had it in my hand when the arm came down."

Cory looked at Manson. Their faces were white, but they smiled and shrugged. "There's no reason you should listen to this again," Cory said to Manson. "Why don't you wait at the door for Pleydell? He hasn't far to come. Emma and I—"

Manson left gratefully.

Emma said: "I don't want to hear the rest of it. She's crazy. I want to go upstairs. I want to see Miss Nora."

"No," Cory said. "We've got to kill this thing right now. Your window is only a few feet from Hattie's. You may be able to persuade Hattie that she—"

"Nobody's going to persuade me, now or ever!"

Hattie wailed. "And not Emma Vinup either! I tell you I saw an arm, a long arm, six feet long if it was an inch. It could've choked me to death and would've done it, too, only I frightened it away!"

"Away where?" Cory's voice was soft.

"Don't ask me. Away, that's all. I think up."

"Up where?"

"How do I know?" Hattie thought it over. "If it went down, it would've gone down to join its body. And I'd've seen a body if there was one, because it would've been standing on the ground right in front of me. There wasn't a body. There was only this arm, hanging down like the ivy, right in front of my face. Six feet long if it was an inch, with a yellow glove on."

"Yellow! Hattie, listen. It was dark, it was—"

"A yellow glove, Mr. Cory. There's some light out there, you get a little light from the street lamp. I saw that glove like I see you. It swung sideways, like it was looking for something to hold onto, and it hit me in the face." Hattie touched her cheek with a fat finger, and her eyes rolled. "Not hard, but I felt it. Like it didn't know I was there."

Cory turned to Emma. "Doesn't that sound like some kid warming up for Halloween?"

"Not," said Emma, "at three in the morning. This is a nice residential district. It was something she ate. Go back to bed, Hattie. I'll come in and see you later." The look she gave Cory said that she was in control and he was less than nothing.

When Hattie had gone, trailing her blanket and

sniffing, Emma made sure the door was closed. Then she said: "Mr. Brucie, what happened upstairs? What happened to Miss Nora? Was it Hattie screaming like that?"

"It must have been."

"But could she hear it? Her door's always closed at night. I've heard Hattie many times before. She did break her record tonight, but that's a long way off. I don't know, I—"

"The porch door was open," he reminded her. "And Hattie's window is on that side of the house. I think we can assume it was Hattie's work."

"Unconscious." Emma was thoughtful. "I never knew her even to faint. Never. Even when Robbie—you know that as well as I do! She never was the kind to faint and carry on."

"But she's sick now, Emma."

"Are you telling me? And there's something else, too." Emma frowned. "She was upset tonight, what you might call wild-eyed. Miss Sills thought she'd had a nightmare." She told him about Miss Sills' return at midnight. "Miss Sills was sharp with me, too, as if I'd done something. Me! I'd lay down my life, and you know it. Miss Sills said Miss Nora was terrified, that's what she said."

Cory walked to one of the long windows. "Lights on over at Perry's. . . . How terrified? When a woman can't speak, can't move—"

"It was the way she looked. She looked awful." Emma faltered. "It could have been a bad dream—but it wouldn't go away when she woke up. She

couldn't shake it off. Miss Sills sent me down to my room. She said she could handle it better alone. I don't know what she did, though."

"That was midnight?"

"Yes. Twelve or a little after. Mr. Brucie, what does Miss Sills say?"

"Miss Sills seems to know less than anyone else. She didn't hear Hattie. She didn't know anything was wrong until I woke her up. She wasn't easy to wake, either. And Nora—" He prowled about the room.

Emma fought for patience. "If it's a cigarette you're looking for, then for mercy's sake, sit down and let me get it." She found matches and cigarettes in a table drawer. "Here. You heard Hattie yourself, didn't you?"

"Of course. My door was open and the back stairs—I went to Mrs. Manson's room at once."

"I'd have thought you'd have gone to the place where the scream came from."

"You'd have thought nothing of the sort. You'd have done as I did. . . . What are you listening to?"

"Somebody came in the front door without ringing the bell. Can that be the doctor so soon?" She opened the library door. Voices came down the hall. "George Perry, wouldn't you know it, and the new doctor, too. He looks too young. I'm going upstairs. I can be useful." She was gone before he could stop her.

George wore a raincoat over his pajamas and galoshes on what he said were bare feet. He breathed as

if he had been running. "I saw your lights on," he said to Cory. "I was looking out my window. If you're going to search the grounds, I can help. That's what I came for."

"Do you know what you're talking about?" Cory asked mildly.

George said: "I think I'd better sit down. I'm winded. Sure I know. If you're trying to keep this thing a secret, you're out of luck. I met Pleydell on the porch, and he told me, but I didn't need that. I got an eyeful myself, and I'm not surprised that Mrs. Manson passed out."

Cory studied George closely. "Exactly what do you think you saw?"

George colored. "I don't know," he admitted. "Listen. I'm far from being the kind of guy who hangs out windows spying on the neighbors, but—"

He told Cory he'd gone to his window to spit out a dental poultice, and he looked ridiculously young when he said it. "I looked across the grounds to this house because—well, there it was and there I was, and I saw something moving. Back and forth, under the porch. I thought it was a dog, a big dog, maybe a collie. But there aren't any big dogs around here. So I kept on looking." He said the dog prowled close to the house, as if it were stalking something, and that was all right, because the place was full of moles and so on. Then it disappeared. By that time he was wide-awake and he went to get a cigarette. When he returned to the window, the dog was on the sleeping porch. "No wonder Mrs. Manson fainted, big brute

like that, strolling around the porch, walking in her room, place half-dark."

"Do you have a theory about how a dog could climb that porch?"

"The tone of voice is all right with me," George said agreeably. "I didn't see him go up, but I saw him come down. He came down like a monkey. Maybe he was a monkey. I saw him swing over the railing and hang on the vines. Come to think of it, I didn't actually see him hit the ground. By that time I was falling around my own room, looking for my shoes. Maybe he was a monkey or maybe he was the Hound of the Baskervilles. I don't know or care, much, except that he ought to be found and shot. He gave me the creeps. . . . How's Miss Sills?"

"There's nothing wrong with Miss Sills."

"I'm glad to hear that." George's voice was faintly chiding, and he looked as if he had more to say, all of it censorable. But when he continued, he was mild enough. "And how come Pleydell instead of Babcock? Not that I don't think Pleydell is good. I do. My mother had him once, and he saw through her like a window. But I thought Babcock had this house staked."

"Babcock's out on a case."

"Pleydell says Hattie woke the dead."

"Yes. Now see here, George, don't talk about this to anyone but me. You'll have us in the papers, and there's been enough of that. To say nothing of demoralizing the neighborhood. You know our Hattie."

"I sure do. I used to help Hattie set traps for nonexistent mice. This time, according to Pleydell, she saw an arm six feet long."

"Pleydell talks too much. So, apparently, does Manson."

"So, and I'm not kidding, will my mother. Wait till she hears this one! I slid a note under her door, telling her where I'd gone. In case you wanted me to stick around for a while and help search. You know, in case we decide to take it seriously."

"Now, George—"

"In case we found something that looked like paw marks. The ground is soaking, so they'd show. Or something like torn leaves, broken twigs, and so on. Or footprints. It could have been a cat burglar, you know. Man instead of dog; object, Mrs. Manson's jewelry."

"All insured."

"But not enough to pay for being frightened out of your wits. I'd feel better if you and I slipped outside and took a look around. We could take a quick look and satisfy ourselves."

Cory was indulgent. "Stop romancing, George. I'm satisfied now."

"I'm not," George complained. "Some of the porch ivy is hanging loose, and it wasn't like that this afternoon. I saw it just now by Hattie's window."

"It's too dark to see anything like that, and you know it."

George put his hand in his pocket. "Not with this," he said. He played his flashlight around the

room. "I used it when I came across the garden. I saw what I saw, all right."

"Put it away, George, and grow up."

"That's what my mother always says," George agreed. "Grow up. Oh, well."

They sat on without talking. The doorbell rang once, and Cory answered it. When he came back, he said it was Babcock. Babcock had finally returned to his house and found the message Manson had left.

George ambled about the room. He showed a mild interest when Pleydell, young, red in the face, and clearly unrecovered from a snub, came to the door and asked to be taken to Hattie. Cory led him away. After that, George's wanderings took him to the garden windows. He whistled softly. His father and mother, armed with flashlights, were picking their way across the wet grass, turning into the path that led to the front door. His father was only half-dressed, but his mother was gloved, hatted, and veiled. He went back to his chair and waited for the bell to ring.

Milly said she didn't need anything. Mr. Manson said: "Yes, you do. Come downstairs for a drink when you're through in here." Then he left to answer the doorbell.

Milly stood by the bed with Emma and Doctor Babcock, touching the smooth covers to reassure herself, talking softly, although there was no need for that now. Mrs. Manson was mercifully asleep.

Babcock listened, one plump hand embracing his

chin. When she finished her story, he said: "Absurd. And dreadful."

"I didn't hear a thing," Milly said. "It wouldn't have frightened me if I had. I've heard Hattie give out before—she does it when she thinks she sees a bug. But poor Mrs. Manson—"

"There, there," Babcock said. "It's all over now."

Milly looked at Mrs. Manson's closed eyes. Pleydell had been wonderful. He brought her out of the faint, or whatever it was, and talked as if he gave her credit for being adult and sensible. He described what he called Hattie's nightmare as if he'd dreamed it himself, and he made Emma laugh with him. Mrs. Manson listened, her eyes never leaving his young face. Then he gave her a sedative, but not from the bottle on the table. His hand went toward the bottle, but her look stopped it in mid-air. So he took a bottle from his very new bag and held it for her to see. Even then she refused; she looked at Emma as if she were talking to her. And Emma said: "I'll sleep here, I'll sleep in the same bed. And it won't be the first time, either." After that it was all right; now Mrs. Manson was asleep, and Emma was sitting on the bed and yawning and all but telling them to get out.

Babcock touched Milly's arm. "Come, Miss Sills, there's nothing more for you to do here. You heard what Mr. Manson said. A small refresher—you've earned it, and I need it. A long, trying day, a miserable night." He led her from the room and guided her along the hall as if she were ill.

She was relieved, she'd been afraid he'd blame

her for sleeping. He was being fair and understanding. Two wonderful men, Pleydell and Babcock. She was lucky.

All the doors along the hall except two were open; there were lights in the rooms. On the right, the rose guestroom adjoining Mrs. Manson's bath—the room Mr. Manson used now. Rose blankets thrown back, rose sheets dragging on the floor, the porch door open and the curtains not drawn. Mr. Manson had left that room in a hurry. A funny-looking room for Mr. Manson to be sleeping in.

Robbie's room on the left. That one was locked. It was always locked. It would be dark and dusty if you could see inside. Were the sheets still on Robbie's bed? Plain white sheets, wrinkled where his body had lain; soft white pillows showing the print of his head? No. No, that bed would be smooth, because he hadn't slept in it.

Beyond Robbie's, the room Bruce Cory used. A brown room, an English-looking room, like those you saw in English movies. Plain dark furniture, heavy and handsome; brushes and jars on the big chest, tortoise, ebony, and crystal. Expensive. Mr. Bruce Cory got out of bed like a Boy Scout, no matter who screamed. No matter what. Sheets folded back, dark-brown blankets neat and tidy. The lavatory next door. Then the stairs that went down to the kitchen.

Across the hall from Bruce Cory's, Mr. Manson's suite that he wasn't using. But someone had been in there. Lights in the bath and in the dressing room. Drawers pulled out of the dressing-room chest. As if

somebody wanted something in a hurry. Handkerchiefs on the floor, a dark-blue scarf trailing from an open drawer. Everything dark blue and cream. . . . Wanted what in a hurry? A revolver in the handkerchief drawer? That could be. A scream in the night. . . .

The second closed door was next to Mr. Manson's suite. The attic door. Doctor Babcock's hand pressed her arm. "My arm must be shaking," she decided. "My knees are. And my head aches." She smiled at Doctor Babcock, to let him know how she was grateful. The wide stairs to the first floor were straight ahead.

"Take things easy tomorrow," Babcock said. "Don't worry about your patient, she's in good shape. Take long walks, think of pleasant things. We can't have *you* cracking up!" They went down.

She had seen George's father before, puttering in his flower beds, a graying, gangling replica of George. His old tweed topcoat, worn over pajamas, was wet and wrinkled. He looked cold and unhappy as he huddled by the fire. Alice Perry was a familiar figure, too, and also from a distance. Alice Perry was complete, from pearls to corset. No one introduced them.

Milly went to a chair by a window, out of the circle of light. Cory brought her a drink. When she had time to look around, she saw Pleydell in a far corner, making himself small in a huge chair, looking like a choirboy waiting for words from a bishop.

It was after four o'clock; it could have been four in the afternoon except for the dark windows, the

lamps, and the assorted clothing. George looked like a perfect fool. She'd tell him so when she got the chance. And he was grinning. There was nothing to grin about.

Alice Perry was laughing, a brisk, efficient, party laugh. "Ordinarily I sleep like a baby," she declared, "but tonight I was restless. Of course, I heard George prowling, but I thought it was his poor tooth. Then I heard my big George, also prowling. Such men! That was when I got up and found little George's amazing note. Of course we came at once—the neighborly thing to do. Dear Mrs. Manson. I'd cut Hattie's wages if she were mine."

Everyone laughed.

"The villain was the wind," Cory said. "George says the ivy's down. Of course that's what she saw."

"Oh, naturally, the wind," Alice Perry agreed. "Our poor chrysanthemums, absolutely beaten to the ground. I showed you, dear, as we came over. George dear, *big* Georgie, didn't I show you?"

Mr. Perry nodded.

"The wind was pretty stiff," Manson said. "Frightful racket in those old trees, almost human. So human that for a minute I thought Hattie was a particularly big blow."

Everyone laughed again. Hattie is a very comic character, Milly thought. All you have to do is mention Hattie's name, and everybody howls.

Babcock took it up. "The wind was bad in town, too. I didn't like it at all."

"The wind, the wind," George chanted. They all

looked at him. He was playing with his flashlight, turning it on and off.

"Put that thing away," Alice Perry said. "It looks silly, and your hands aren't clean."

"The wind, the wind," George said again. "I am forcibly reminded of a little blue-and-gold copy of *A Child's Garden of Verses*. Robbie and I each had one; we learned some of the stuff by heart; we were very, very cute. I quote. Title: *The Wind*. Line: 'And all around I heard you pass—like ladies' skirts across the grass.' Did it sound like that to any of you, or am I just being sentimental?"

They laughed at George almost as much as they'd laughed at Hattie. Even little Pleydell made a co-operative sound, but he kept it up too long.

Milly looked at him with sudden anger, and he colored. Why do I always get interested in fools? she asked herself. Why am I down here, anyway? Why doesn't George introduce me to his parents? Why do I stay, like a dope? Because I am a dope. She got up. "Excuse me, everyone," she said. "I belong upstairs."

They began to talk again before she left the room. She heard Babcock say something about the masseur. His report had been a good one. Babcock had called him in town. They were going to try the treatment every night. Mrs. Manson was responding. George said something about Hattie and the masseur.

Milly closed the door on a fresh burst of laughter. George had started them off again. He had an I.Q. of six.

She was halfway up the stairs when George came after her. He didn't say anything, but he put his arms around her and held her close. It was better than putting a ring on her finger. It was the first time he'd ever done that. His I.Q. rose to the height of heaven; exactly heaven.

"Be over in the morning," he whispered.

That light is the sun. The Sunday-morning sun. That is Emma over there. Emma, coming out of the bathroom with the vacuum jug, the cup, the glass. All clean, dry, sparkling; everything washed away. No traces left. Nothing.

Watch Emma through your lashes. The old trick.

Emma is rubbing the damp places on the carpet, blotting out the prints of four hands. She is brushing dried leaves from the floor and talking about the wind. Soon nothing will be left of the night. She is destroying me.

There is a crack in the bowl of the lamp. Will she see that? A new crack in my fine lamp. She won't like it, she'll be angry, she'll talk about it. Emma or Miss Sills, either will do. Emma or Miss Sills, bending over the bed, saying: "What a shame. Something happened to her lamp, and she liked it so much. Does anybody know what happened to her lamp?"

My lamp was knocked to the floor by two thick yellow hands in a hurry. And after that there was not enough light. Not enough to see in, not enough safely to kill in. No sound, except the thud of the lamp and the breathing of two people. Not my breathing. I held my breath in the dark, and it was the same as hiding.

Two people breathing, Miss Sills in the chair and the other at the head of the bed. Slow, drugged breathing from Miss Sills; rapid, frightened breathing for the other.

She waited for Miss Sills to wake. Miss Sills hadn't heard the lamp go over, but she'd heard something. Or felt something. She'd stirred in her sleep and moaned. Poor Miss Sills. No, rich Miss Sills. Rich, powerful Miss Sills, who had given her the gift of another day.

The four hands had scrabbled over the floor to the screen and safety. Frightened off, but playing the part to the end. If Miss Sills had waked, she'd have seen a shapeless mass on all fours. She would have screamed as Hattie screamed. Then: "My dear Miss Sills, you are not yourself. It's been too much for you. A few weeks' rest—" Then there would be no more Miss Sills. Then there would be no more.

Will the lamp be taken away before someone sees the crack, someone who is all right? And if so, what excuse will be given? . . . Never mind that, you know the lamp will go. Forget the lamp, try to remember the rest of it. There may be something, some small thing.

Hattie. How much later was that? One minute, two minutes? Who thinks of time in that kind of dark? The new doctor that Ralph called in was too young, too inexperienced, but kind and instinctively wise. He'd known at once that it was useless to offer the pills from her own bottle, but he didn't try to find out why. His bottle was a new one, and he'd let her

see him open it. A safe, new bottle, and with Emma in the room all night as well as Miss Sills. . . . That's enough, that's enough, go back to Hattie. Maybe Hattie—

The new doctor said Hattie screamed because she had a nightmare. But Miss Sills said Hattie had been frightened by the ivy outside her window. They believed what they said; it was what they'd been told. But Hattie knew every leaf on that vine, every loop and tendril. What Hattie had seen was a black shape with four hands, but she would be talked out of it. If only Hattie would talk first, talk everywhere, to everybody. Even to tradesmen. Tradesmen gossip and pass things along. Had there been light enough for Hattie to see the hands? If Hattie talked about the hands, and it reached the right person— Who is the right person this time? Who knows about the hands?

Who knows? You do. You saw him making them. It was a secret, a joke. He told you he was making them for a present. He said, "Who's always asking for two pair of hands?" He laughed when he said it.

Think, think. There was someone else who knew, someone who came into the room and saw. Who? Who came in? . . . Now, now, you're doing it the wrong way again. You're letting your mind wander, you're seeing his face. That's bad for you. You're hearing his voice again. Stop for a minute and think of something else. Call yourself the nice names Miss Sills calls you. It isn't a foolish thing to do. Go on. Call yourself a good girl, a honey, a baby. . . . I'm a good girl, a honey, a baby.

Now go back to last night. Maybe you've overlooked something, something that will talk for you, point a finger for you. Soon. *Soon*.

The lamp that rolled to the floor. The darkness. The waiting. The scream. Then nothing. Nothing, nothing, nothing. Give up.

"You're awake," Emma said. "That's fine. And Miss Sills has brought your breakfast. You slept like an angel, and that's because you knew I was beside you."

Emma fed her, using a spoon and the glass tube, chirping and fluttering, full of importance. "Telephone ringing like mad—everybody heard about your fright and wants to say they were sorry. Only ten o'clock, and people come to call already. Doctor Babcock, the Perrys, and that nice little new doctor. But he went away again. Mrs. Perry brought a lovely jelly for your lunch and a bottle of sherry. Now eat this egg, and I'll let them all come in to see you."

Miss Sills arranged her chair. "Too cold for the porch," Miss Sills said. "I think we'll sit in the window. All cozy in the sunny window, and you can doze like a little cat. You need more sleep, you know. . . . Look, Emma, she wants that old rug. All right, you can have it when we get you settled. You're spoiled, that's what you are. Next week I'm going to use discipline."

Emma put the breakfast tray in the hall, and they wheeled her to the window. She heard the others coming, walking softly as befitted people who knew she had weathered a bad night.

"Let me see your feet, the lot of you," Emma said. "I saw you out in the garden, and I'll have no more things tracked in on my clean floor."

"Things?" George Perry.

"Leaves and grit all over. Tramping in and out of here last night, and I had to clean it up on my knees."

They surrounded her chair, smiling, paying their compliments. She was brave, she'd behaved like a soldier. She was a fine woman, getting better every day, no doubt about it. She was good-morning, Mrs. Manson; she was dear Mrs. Manson, who frightened them so. She was okay, Mrs. Manson, okay. . . . She closed her eyes, because she didn't want to see their faces. The voices told her where they stood and sat.

Miss Sills, on the window seat, spoke to someone. "No, don't take the rug away. I know it's hot, but she wants it."

"Is she asleep, Miss Sills?"

"Only relaxed. It's a good sign. She's always like this when you come in. Don't stop talking, go right ahead. She likes to hear voices around her, doesn't she, Doctor Babcock?"

"Oh, quite, quite. And what, may I ask, is the immediate future of the good neighbor's sherry?"

Ralph, doubtful, hesitating. "Well, I suppose we might—"

"It's eleven o'clock," Doctor Babcock said. "We had a hard night."

"You men! That's a *special bottle* for Mrs. Manson!"

"Emma, do you think—"

Emma, full of pleased complaints at the social turn of affairs, brought the house sherry from the dining room. The voices murmured on. Emma rattled glasses, rustled back and forth, and finally subsided. "I'm thankful to sit down. My legs ache. I'm an old woman, but nobody thinks of that. A person needs two pairs of hands around here."

Listen! Listen! All of you listen! Emma's quoting someone, Emma's teasing—can't you hear? Watch Emma's eyes, watch where Emma's looking. Say it again, Emma. Emma, say it again!

"Thank you," Emma said. "I don't care if I do. I'll get as giddy as all get out, but I like a nip now and then."

"You may have anything your heart desires, Emma. The house is yours."

"I'm glad to know that," Emma said, "because I want something this minute."

Then it came.

Emma said, "I want your permission to get rid of that lamp by the bed."

"What's wrong with it?"

"It's awkward, that's what. The shade's too big. It gets in the way."

Emma. Look at the lamp. Look at it.

Is Emma—no, wait, don't open your eyes. They're moving about; someone has come to stand behind your chair. Careful. Someone is waiting to see if you—*Take your hand away from my neck. Can't you wait for the dark?*

"Hey!" Miss Sills was beside her. "Hey, what goes

on here? What have you got to shiver about? You're as warm as toast. Easy, honey, easy. All right now?"

"Lamp," George said. "That reminds me. Say, is it all right to talk about last night?"

"Why not?" Doctor Babcock. "Last night is already forgotten. Lamp, did you say?"

"Yeah. At what I figure was a crucial moment, somebody turned it out."

"What are you talking about?"

"The lamp Emma doesn't like. I was hanging out my window, and suddenly this room went dark. For about two or three minutes. The little one by the screen was already out. But the big one by the bed went out, stayed out, and came on again."

"You're crazy," Miss Sills said. "It was on when I went to sleep, and it was on when Mr. Cory woke me up. Wasn't it, Mr. Cory—or am I the crazy one?"

"Nobody's crazy, and George is right. The lamp was on the floor when I came in. I fell over it." His voice was rueful. "But I got it back on the table, and it worked, thank God. That was a bad minute."

"Floor?" George was puzzled.

"Floor?" Miss Sills repeated. "Well, I didn't hear it fall. I didn't hear a thing. I ought to be fired. All I know is that Mr. Cory nearly shook my teeth out trying to wake me up and Mr. Manson was running around in circles. Excuse me, Mr. Manson."

"My dear Miss Sills, that's libelous. I ran in a very straight line, in the wrong direction. Straight down the back stairs, because I'd recognized Hattie's clarion call. Then halfway down, I heard Cory begging you

to show signs of life at the top of his lungs."

Doctor Babcock was torn between grief and laughter, sighs and chuckles. "Dreadful, dreadful, but not without an amusing side."

"I didn't hear a thing," Miss Sills repeated. "I ought to be fired, but please don't."

"You ought to have more sherry." Bruce, walking to Miss Sills. "Here, all's well that ends well. And speaking of Hattie, have any of you good people ever heard a moose?"

They seized Hattie's name, hugged it and tossed it about. Hattie was a moose. She looked like a moose. The left profile? No, silly, the right! And isn't there a wart, too? On the nose? Stop, stop, I haven't laughed so much in years. Dear Mrs. Manson would love this, we must tell her when she's better. Hattie is a moose with a wart. Hattie—

Emma called from across the room. She sounded happy. "Look! Look here! This lamp's got a crack in it. It's not fit to use; it's not safe. This lamp's going to the White Elephant Sale at All Saints'." The cord and plug struck the carpet softly.

"Emma, how perfectly wonderful!" Mrs. Perry said. "Mr. Manson, do let us have it. I'm chairman this year, and it's simply dreadful the way people won't give us things."

"I don't know, but I don't see why not."

"I can't tell you how grateful— George dear, will you carry—George, stop whistling. Not nice, when poor Mrs. Manson—Georgel!"

George said: "All right. But how do you suppose

a heavy lamp like that managed to fall over? Could that be the wind again?"

"Wind? Oh, undoubtedly. She couldn't do it herself, poor lamb."

"Blowing leaves and little sticks, not to mention grit and mud. My nice clean floor. We'll have to keep that porch door shut," Emma said.

"By all means keep it shut," George said.

"George, what are you mumbling about?" Alice Perry asked.

"I'm quoting poetry to myself. My little blue-and-gold book."

"Well, stop it. No one's interested."

"I am. Listen. Still the pretty one about the wind that rips the ivy off the porch and blows a fifteen-pound lamp around. 'I saw the different things you did, but always you yourself you hid.' . . . I think we ought to go home."

Chairs moved at once, quickly; glasses were set down on tables and mantel; voices mingled; sentences overlapped. Mr. Perry, you haven't said a word. George darling, no more sherry. The lamp, Mrs. Perry, don't run off without your white elephant! Lovely, lovely, and all for foreign missions, it means so much. George, I said no more sherry, it gives your eyes a funny look. Thank you for calling, thank you. Yes, we're on our way, Miss Sills. Don't look so pleased, we're all going. These little sherry parties are good for all of us. George? George, I'm not going to speak to you again.

Gone. Everything gone.

Emma collecting the glasses. Emma washes everything, the fingermarks, the muddy prints. Emma gave the lamp away. Nothing left, nothing, and the prints on the floor were clear, even I could see what they were. . . . Emma saw the crack in the lamp, and they said it was the wind.

All but George! There was something in his voice, wasn't there, wasn't there? He knows there was no wind, not enough for that, doesn't he? George, remember the wind; you made a joke of it, but you know it isn't a joke, don't you? Keep remembering the wind, remember the little book with the poems in it. I gave you that book, George. I gave one to you and one to Robbie. Robbie and George, George and Robbie. They were always together. . . . George!

George is the one who knows about the hands, George saw them when I did, George is the one I was trying to think of! George is the right person, the safe person!

Emma knows the phrase about the hands, but that's all. Stop, go slowly, make a list like a shopping list. What do you need?

You need Hattie to have seen the hands; you need Hattie to talk. You need George to hear. You need Emma to use the phrase again. You need George to hear. You need—you need George to remember. . . . But if Hattie—

That hand on my neck. I thought my heart would stop then.

Listen. Emma.

"You can carry these glasses down to the kitchen

on your way out," Emma said to Miss Sills, "but don't you go waking her up to say good-bye. I'll sit right beside her all the time. She won't lack for anything if she wakes, and if she looks hungry, I'll see to her lunch. No need for you to hurry yourself. The doctor says you're to take it easy. And don't stop in the kitchen gossiping with Hattie. If you want the truth, that woman hasn't got all her buttons. That's a pretty coat. I always favored red. Get along now."

"Yes, Matron," Miss Sills said. . . .

Miss Sills is going for a walk, wearing her red coat. Watch for Miss Sills. Open your eyes and watch for Miss Sills. No matter which way she goes, you can see the red coat. Look at the children in their Sunday clothes. Dark blue and brown for the big ones, pale blue and pink for the little ones. Nurses, parents. Young parents, full of pride. Who is that woman in the green coat and hat?

Emma, don't talk. Emma, be quiet! Emma, that woman in the green coat and hat!

"So you've decided to wake up and take notice, have you? I'll set my chair right here beside you. I know you—you were playing possum for the others, but the minute you knew you were alone with old Emma, you decided to wake up. That Miss Sills, there she goes, over to see her mother, I expect. Well, bless my soul, look at that rug! What happened to that, I want to know! I tucked it in myself, as tight as tight. You can't have—bless my soul, you're all tied up with fringe. A person'd almost think—but no, you can't do that. . . . There, that's better. That won't hurt my

girl again. Such an ugly, big red mark. . . . Miss Nora, you aren't even listening to me. What are you looking at? What's out there? Same old thing that's there every day, unless it's Miss Sills. Of course, if you can't even listen to your old Emma. . . . Well, I hope you're satisfied. There she is traipsing along like she didn't work for a living same as the rest of us!"

It is! It is! Miss Byrd. The nurse I had before Miss Sills. She wore that green coat when she went away! She came back! She came back, she had to come back. She knew something was wrong, she couldn't hide it, I could see her trying to hide it. She knew, or saw, or guessed; she watched everybody; she was uneasy. She showed it in the way she watched and listened. So she was sent away. . . . The patient is unhappy, Miss Byrd; we'll have to make a change. You understand that this is no reflection on your work. There's no criticism of you, Miss Byrd, none at all, but the patient isn't happy, and we can't have that. Mr. Manson thinks perhaps an extra check—we're very grateful. . . . She hadn't looked surprised; she'd almost smiled. She'd looked as if she'd expected it.

Miss Byrd. Everybody laughed at the Byrd because she looked like a hawk.

Miss Byrd, Miss Byrd, I'm up here in my window. Listen. That girl in the bright-red coat is my new nurse. Stop her, Miss Byrd, say something, anything. Make friends with her. Her name is Sills, Milly Sills. She's a nice child, she'll be courteous and kind. Talk to her—you'll know how to do it. Tell her what you know. What do you know, Miss Byrd? What did you

see or hear? She's almost there, Miss Byrd, the girl in the bright-red coat and no hat. She's there, see, she's there! In front of you, in front! Say good-morning, say it's a lovely day, ask her the name of the park, ask anything. Stop her, Miss Byrd. *Miss Byrd!*

Now, now, close your eyes again. Don't cry.... You're a good girl, you're a honey, you're a baby. You're my good, good girl.

The lamp is gone; the tracks on the floor are gone. Miss Byrd—forget Miss Byrd. You have another day, this day. How much of this day do you have? Six hours? Six hours until dark. Spend them to the last minute, not on hope, not on fear. Spend them in preparation for tonight. Tonight you will be going—

This is the time to climb the attic stairs again. Climb the attic stairs the way you did before, and raise your head when you get to the top. The way you did before. That is a preparation of a kind.... Climb.

Alice Perry circled her living room with the lamp in her hands, measuring the table tops with speculative eyes. "Nobody but Nora Manson would have cupids and a ruffled shade. At her age! For a young girl's room, yes; rather sweet for a young girl, but Nora Manson! Cupids!"

"That thing's Dresden," George said mildly. "Bruce Cory gave it to her last Christmas, and she bawled him out. It cost like the devil." He went to a window and looked across the hedge. "Emma's too openhanded with other people's property when other

people can't talk. . . . Did you happen to see Cory's face while that was going on?"

She said: "I wasn't watching him then. George, this crack won't show when the lamp is properly placed. It might look rather fine against the right kind of wall. A soft, gray wall. You know, if I thought people wouldn't— George, don't you think it will be perfectly fair if I—"

"Sure," George said. "Give the White Elephant Sale a buck and tell the All Saints' ladies you took a piece of junk off their hands."

Alice sat down with the lamp in her lap and gave her son a bright smile. "Where's your father, dear?"

"Upstairs, lying down until lunch. I think I'll do the same."

Alice smiled again. "What's wrong with you, dear? Toothache, too much sherry, plain meanness, or are you in love with Nora Manson, too?"

"God help me," George said, "and I'm not swearing." He took the chair opposite his mother. "Say some more. Don't stop."

"Well, Bruce Cory's in love with her. I've always thought so, and I made up my mind to watch him this morning. Ralph Manson must be blind. Love, hate, sometimes you can't tell, but the way Bruce Cory looked at her! If Ralph Manson would come off his high horse and pay a little attention to his wife and her brother-in-law, he might see what I did."

"What did you see?"

"Well—oh, nothing. I simply mean—oh, you wouldn't understand."

"I might."

"No. You've always made a heroine of Nora Manson. I've often thought you cared more for her than you did for me. But I never interfered. I've always wanted you to have the best."

"This," George said, "gets crazier and crazier. I haven't been in that house a dozen times in the past year. At least, not until Robbie—"

"Now what have I said that's wrong?" Alice sighed. "Such a long face. Don't you like to talk to your own mother?"

"Robbie, I was thinking about Robbie. Sure I like to talk to you, but when Robbie's name popped up—"

"Morbid, dear."

"No. I have a conscience about Robbie. I didn't know he— Listen, there's something I've always wanted to ask you. Did you see Robbie that last day?"

"I? Certainly not."

"But you went there to call that afternoon for the first time in months. You got as far as the front door, and they stopped you. I've always wondered how you happened to choose that particular day and hour."

"I have an idiot child," Alice mourned. "I did *not* choose that particular day and hour, and I was *not* stopped. I simply had a feeling that I wanted to see Nora Manson, so I went over. But when I was told it was inconvenient, naturally I went away."

"Not far, though."

"Not—"

"I was coming down the street from the station when you left their porch. You walked around to

the side of the house and looked up at the attic window."

Alice flicked the ruffled shade with a careless finger. "Very well then, so I did. And the explanation is childish, so you ought to understand it. When they opened the door, I heard Nora Manson crying, and it worried me. Although we'd grown away from each other, I never once let myself forget that we both were mothers of sons."

"You didn't have a hunch about what was going on? You didn't see anything? That little trek to the attic window was unadulterated mother-for-mother instinct?"

"George dear, I don't expect you to understand my feelings. Wait until you have a child of your own. I hardly knew what I was doing. I don't even remember now."

"I can help you out there. You looked up at the attic window and then you got down on your knees and hunted in the grass. I was practically enchanted. Four-leaf clovers?"

She said, "Why haven't you mentioned this before?"

"It never came up before. That day, Robbie's day, is shrouded in a black cloud that seems to cover everybody. The way people act, you'd think the world stopped then and everybody stood still."

"All right, but don't look like that." Her eyes shifted from George to the garden window. "I did see him. Robbie. I was sitting in that window, and I saw him run up the path to the house. 'He's home early,'

I thought. 'What a pity Nora isn't there.' I'd seen her drive off in the morning, all dressed up for town. Then after a while I went to my room to change for my little walk, and quite by accident I noticed that their attic window was open. Robbie, I thought, working at his writing when he ought to be out in the sun. And then the most extraordinary thing happened. I saw something fly out the attic window and fall in the grass. Something shiny. I was really agog. But I didn't do anything about it. I took my little walk, and then I felt like seeing Nora Manson. And I call this a silly conversation!"

"It was the key."

"What?"

"The key to the attic. Robbie locked himself in and tossed it out."

She didn't speak at once. Then: "You didn't see me pick it up."

"No. I saw you get up and go home. You're right about this conversation. Why are we having it? It's ancient history, dead and buried. Like Robbie. Who started it, anyway?"

She said, "You started it."

"Maybe I did. Well, nobody ever found that key. Manson had a new lock put on."

"I saw it this morning. . . . Here we sit as if I didn't have a thing to do. I ought to be getting lunch, and I don't feel like it. Look at my hands—disgusting! Dishwater! I don't know why other women can afford maids and I can't. There's no better manager in Larchville than I am, yet I never have a cent left

over. Money! It makes me sick."

"Maybe you think too much about money."

"Well, if I do, it's because I'm the only one around here who thinks at all. Look at you and your father. Look at Ralph Manson. Look at this house and look at theirs. I knew Ralph Manson when he was nothing but a clerk in that bank, and now he practically owns it. All a man needs in this world is a little ambition to get ahead, a little common sense about the future, like—"

"Like what?"

"Like not falling in love with a penniless nobody, and you know what I mean.... If she dies, he'll be rich."

"No," he said easily, "if she dies, Cory will be richer. It's Cory money. And with Robbie gone, too—"

She fretted. "I really must do something about lunch. George, how rich is Bruce Cory?"

"Rolling."

"More than Ralph Manson?"

"Manson has a damn' big salary, and he's in with the moneymaking crowd. It all helps."

"That's what I thought.... George, what's out there, what are you looking at?"

He was at the garden window. "That's Milly's red coat. She's going for a walk. She doesn't usually go at this hour."

"You heard them pampering her, didn't you? Rest, drink this, eat that, take care of yourself, you're precious. Manson, Cory, and Babcock. Men!"

"What do you think of Milly, Mother?"

"I'll do my thinking about that when the time comes. George, are you sure you really—"

"I'm sure."

Milly picked up the gold-and-scarlet ball that rolled between her feet and tossed it gently to the fat blue reefer with brass buttons. It came back at once, this time to her stomach. She returned it again. "You're an apple dumpling," she said, "but that'll be all today."

She had reached the far end of the park; there were no more benches, but across the street, where the buses stopped, the Larchville Women's Civic League had built a circular seat around the trunk of a spreading maple. Home was a few minutes away, with possible roast chicken and certain chocolate cake. And talk. But she wasn't hungry, and she didn't want talk. Not the kind she'd have to give, and take.

I won't be able to hide a thing, she told herself. I never can. Her mother would worry and say it wasn't safe. She'd try to make her leave the case. I won't go home, she decided.

Hattie was bats, pure bats. Washing the sherry glasses and rolling her eyes toward her bedroom. "You can go in and see for yourself, Miss Sills. That ivy's still hanging there, a fresh break in the vine. A long, thin piece like a snake, not like an arm. The arm was an arm, not ivy."

She'd listened to Hattie with amazement and disbelief. She'd said, "What's all this about an arm?"

Hattie had described, explained, and relived the

night. The arm had a hand on the end of it, a six-foot arm and a yellow-looking hand. Or light-looking. A big hand, all spread out. A starfish-looking hand, like in the aquarium. "It came down and swung in front of my face, and then it went up."

"Up?"

"Up where it came from. I don't know where that was, but that's where it went. I wasn't asleep, Miss Sills, I wasn't dreaming. And what's more, I heard feet over my head. But nobody listens to me, not even the doctors. 'Don't let Mrs. Manson hear you talking like that, or we'll have to give you a bad-tasting tonic.' If I hadn't waked up when I did, we'd've been robbed."

"By a starfish hand, yellow-looking?"

"I hope you never have to laugh out of the other side of your mouth," Hattie had said.

Now Milly walked to the seat under the tree and sat down. When she thought of what her mother could do with Hattie's hand, she quailed. No, she couldn't face that. She'd rest a while and then go back. Nobody knew what Emma would do next. She might let the Perrys in again. That had been too much. Mrs. Manson had looked dreadful.... Mrs. Perry, saying, "So you're Miss Sills?" And turning away. Mr. Perry, patting her shoulder and saying nothing. George—

A voice beside her said, "You have a good heart."

A woman in a green coat and hat was smiling at her. "I hope you don't mind if I sit here, too. I was watching you in the park. You're nice with children

—that's what I meant by a good heart."

Milly flushed. "Thank you."

The woman was familiar in an indeterminate way. Sharp, thin face, thickly powdered, and a spotted veil. The rouge and powder were like a mask.

"You're Mrs. Manson's nurse, aren't you?"

"Yes, I am." She looked at the woman again. Nervous hands, roving eyes. Hypochondriac, following nurses around? She'd change her clothes the next time she came out. The uniform showed under the coat, the white shoes.

"I saw you leave the house. I was sitting in the park. . . . I used to know Mrs. Manson slightly. How is she?"

Hypochondriac with curiosity bump. "She's much better, thank you," Milly said. "Now run along," she added silently. "You make me feel as if I were under a microscope."

"I'm glad of that," the woman said quietly. "I heard somewhere that she'd had a bad relapse. I'm glad it isn't true."

"Oh, no. She's much, much better."

"I know them all," the woman went on. "Not intimately, but I know them. The Mansons, Bruce Cory, and those people next door, the Perrys. And Doctor Babcock."

Milly shifted uneasily. There was too much emotion under the quiet voice. Is she trying to tell me something? she wondered. Or does she want me to tell her? Suddenly she remembered the anonymous customer in her friend Marge's book store, the wo-

man who'd tried to buy information about Milly with a ten-cent greeting card. Finish this as soon as you decently can, she told herself, and move on.

"I'm sorry I don't know your name." The woman's smile was stiff and strained. "It seems rude to be talking to you without knowing. But mine is Byrd. B-y-r-d. I live in New York, but I often come out here because it's so pretty." As she talked, she watched Milly's face. "Byrd," she repeated. "Miss Byrd."

Milly smiled and said nothing.

"Is Emma well? I know Emma, too."

"Emma's fine."

A bus lumbered to the stop, and Milly looked at her watch. "Glendale bus, that means it's—golly, I've got to run." She got up.

Miss Byrd took her arm. "I'd appreciate it if you'd—what I want to say is—Miss—Miss—if you'd give me just a minute of your time!"

"I'm awfully sorry, Miss Byrd, but I'm due at my mother's. See you again sometime." She ducked into the crowd that surged toward the bus, crossed the street, and walked rapidly in the wrong direction for home. Miss Byrd looked like the kind of woman who'd compromise on a nurse's mother.

Marge's apartment was a few blocks farther on. She rang the bell, but there was no answer. After that she walked on small, empty side streets and bought herself a chocolate bar and a tube of toothpaste in a shabby store that smelled of kerosene. . . . If Miss Byrd washed her face, she might look human.

But then, she might not, either. She might look—

She told herself to stop thinking about Miss Byrd. She walked on, eating the chocolate, killing time, putting off her return. What am I stalling about? she wondered. Why don't I go back where I belong?

Climb. You'll have to climb.

The attic door was open, the last tool clattered to the floor. Her hands were aching, they were all she could feel. Emma was behind her. Ralph and Bruce were crowding ahead of her.

"My hands hurt," she said. "Give me your hand to hold, Ralph. Bruce, give me yours. Don't leave me."

Ralph said, "Here, darling, but I wish you wouldn't—"

Bruce said, "She can't stop now."

There was a draft on the attic stairs, coming down to meet them, blowing her robe, lifting the hair from her forehead. She thought: We're wrong about this, we'll have champagne tonight in celebration of being wrong. He's writing up there, he locked the door because he hates to be interrupted, and he's dead to the world in some silly plot and can't hear us. She called his name, laughing, but no sound came out of her mouth.

Ralph said, "There must be a window open."

Bruce said: "There is. I saw it from the street."

She answered them in her mind: "You fools, of course there's a window open. The boy has to have air. It's always suffocating in that place."

The climb was endless, there had never been so

many steps before. It was years before they came to the turn halfway up. Emma panted behind them. It was hard on Emma. What was? Only the stairs, that's all, the stairs. Emma was old.

Ten to one he went to sleep, she waghered' silently. They give him too much to do down there at the bank, he hates figures, they wear him out. He was exhausted, and he came home early and went to sleep on that old sofa he won't let me throw away. Ten to one— Why are you saying ten to one, even to yourself? You never talk like that. . . . You're talking like that because you don't want to think. Well, you'd better think. Think hard, and be ashamed of yourself for even listening to their monstrous story. Monstrous? Criminal! You could sue, you could easily sue the whole lot of them for saying the things they did. Ten to one.

"Bruce," she said, "you're going too fast."

"We're crawling, Nora. You're holding us back."

"No, no! Ralph, Bruce, keep my hands!"

The attic floor was level with her eyes now. It was washed with gold from the western windows. She raised her eyes.

"What's the boy doing?" Emma's head appeared beside hers. "Robbie, you stop whatever you're doing and come straight down here!"

Robbie's shoes, above the sunny floor, were swinging in space. His brown shoes, his—he—

She went the rest of the way alone and stood before him. When she wanted to see his face, she had to

raise her head, because he was hanging from the rafters.

Emma looked up when she heard the clatter of the lunch tray. "You didn't have to bring that," she said. "I was going to ring for one of the others. You're back too soon."

"I got bored." Milly put the tray on the table.

"It looks good," Emma said. "That jelly looks good. She's a fine cook, Mrs. Perry. Maybe she'll teach you one of these days." Emma's eyes had the mating look.

"Move your workbasket, Emma. No tatting in the soup, please. Thanks. Why don't you ask me to save you a piece of wedding cake? You're slipping."

"What are you so high and mighty about?"

"I'm not." Milly slid out of her coat. "Yes, I am, and I don't know why. I hate everything. Maybe I need sleep." She walked around to the front of the chair. "Hello, there. Haven't I seen you somewhere before?"

"Bless my soul, is she awake? Must have just happened." Emma joined Milly at the chair, and they smiled steadily.

"We look nice and rested after our little nap," Emma said. "And we're going to eat every crumb and spoonful of our lunch, because if we do, then maybe we can have our lovely sherry before dinner. Can't we, Miss Sills?"

"I wouldn't know about that. I'm only the night nurse. I don't come on until seven."

Emma chortled. "Isn't she a one, Miss Nora?"

Aren't you a lucky girl to have Miss Sills around? I never thought I'd laugh again, not in this house. I never—" Emma caught her guilty tongue between her teeth. "Miss Nora, I—I'm going to get another lamp, and I'm the only one who knows how to do it." She hesitated at the door. "What about you? Did you have lunch at your mother's?"

"I'm not hungry. And hurry up. It'll be dark in about five hours."

Milly unfolded the heavy napkin, spread it carefully, and admired the lavish monogram. She patted the thin, still hands under the steamer rug. "Don't get wrong ideas about Emma and me," she said. "We're crazy about each other. And now let's eat whatever Hattie felt like sending up. This is beef broth, as if you couldn't see for yourself. And this is a sweetbread, as if you couldn't see that, too. And here we have the madam's jelly, shaking in its shoes. Want to start with dessert and work back, just for the—for the fun of it?"

Mrs. Manson's eyes looked steadily into hers.

She returned the dessert spoon to the tray and dropped the prattle and the professional smile. What she saw in Mrs. Manson's eyes filled her own with dismay. Mrs. Manson was looking at her from the bottom of a pit.

"Mrs. Manson?" she said quietly. "Mrs. Manson, I haven't given you what you need. I've tried, but everything I've done is only what anybody else could do. You need more than that, every day you seem to need more. It isn't only that you're sick and unhappy.

I'm not very old, Mrs. Manson, but I've seen a lot of sick people, working in wards with the kind of people you never even passed on the street, never even dreamed of. And now, in the last few days, I'm beginning to see a resemblance between them and you. That's awful, Mrs. Manson, but I have to say it. You and I are friends, we both know that, and friends tell each other the truth. You're more than sick and unhappy. All day and night you live with your eyes on death, watching, waiting for—the nod. That's not right. You don't have to die. There's no medical reason for it. No reason at all unless you want to, and if that's the case, then I can't stop you. If you want to get well, you can. You're better than you were—they're not kidding when they tell you that. And you know me, I wouldn't kid you ever, not if they paid me for it. Not you, I wouldn't. You're my friend. Mrs. Manson, I want you to stop looking like that. I won't let you die if you'll help me."

Mrs. Manson's eyes closed for an instant, and her breast rose and fell as if she were climbing.

"That's better," Milly said. "And it's all right to cry. You'd been crying when I came in, but I didn't want to say anything before Emma. Golly, Mrs. Manson, I wish I knew someone who was an old friend of yours, like someone you went to school with. Someone who's your own kind. A person like that might be able to help me. A person like that could tell me what your mind is like and how you used to act when things went wrong. I've got a feeling you always act the right way, no matter what. And that

scares me. It means that whatever is wrong is terribly wrong, and acting right and thinking straight can't change it."

Miss Sills, Miss Sills, don't let anyone hear you say that. Not today, not tonight. Tomorrow you'll be safe, but not today or tonight. Don't talk to anyone until tomorrow. Tomorrow you'll be interviewed, that's when you must talk. Tomorrow, tomorrow morning. . . . Miss Sills, Miss Sills, there was a woman in the park. I know she could help us both, I know it in my heart. But she didn't speak, I watched and she didn't speak, and you walked by.

"I told you it was all right to cry," Milly said. "Take a look at me, it's getting to be like the common cold. There now. I'm getting fresh again and that's all right, too. No more sad talk until tomorrow. What do you want first, jelly or soup? Soup? Oke."

Emma came in with a lamp, looking like a child who has made a beautiful thing out of something nobody wanted.

Milly crowed. "Bring that thing around here, Emma. I want Mrs. Manson to see it. Glory be, and they sent the other one to the White Elephant Sale! If ever I saw a white elephant in the beaded flesh—"

"It's my own property," Emma said indignantly. "I've had it for years, and I take good care of it. I like beads."

"Where did you get it?"

"At the White—never you mind. It gives me a nice, soft light, easy on the eyes. How are we coming on?"

"Fine."

"You going out again this evening? Doctor Babcock said you could. He said you should take things easy."

"What's behind the unselfish build-up?"

"Well, I thought if you were going to be in, I might slip out for a while myself. My sister's daughter just had her first—only five pounds for all her trouble. Still and all, I thought I'd like to hear my sister brag."

"Go ahead. I don't want to go out again. And five pounds is okay, so let her brag."

"You, and not even married yet. You never did tell me where you went this morning and what you did."

"I didn't do anything, just walked. Bounced a ball with a cute kid. Oh, sure, and I got picked up, too."

"If you did, then you invited it."

"Not me, not this one. This was a woman, and she said she knew—now, now, Mrs. Manson, please."

"Maybe that spoon's too full. It looks too full to me."

"Don't rile me, Emma. She picked me up at the bus stop. She said she knew you, Emma. She asked how you were."

Miss Sills! Emma! Emma, listen. This is what I prayed for. Listen, Emma, it's Miss Byrd, I know it's Miss Byrd. Emma, ask questions, ask—

Emma said, "I know everybody in this town, and everybody knows me and how I am." She smoothed her apron and looked at the clock. "I promised Hattie— What was the woman like?"

"Ordinary, except for her face. Too much make-up."

"Don't know her."

"Green coat and hat."

"I know seven, eight women with green coats and hats. All my friends know how I am. You might as well give up that jelly, Miss Sills. Can't you see she don't want it? I'll give it to Hattie. Well, I promised Hattie I'd take the front door and the phone while she has a rest. If you want me, ring. I'll come back later, anyway." Emma took the lunch tray when she left.

Milly tucked in the edges of the steamer rug and moved her chair beside Mrs. Manson's. Mrs. Manson closed her eyes again; it was the same as closing a door. There was nothing to do about that.

Behind Milly, the door to the hall was open and the house was as quiet as the room. The roses on the table were dropping their petals; they weren't lasting. Not the way they should. Only one day old, and they were dying.

The chair was low. From where she sat she could see the yellow trees against the sky. Now and then a leaf fell, drifting slowly as if it knew the first, lone journey downward from the sun led to the end.

It was silly to shiver in a warm room. The fire was ready for lighting if she wanted it. All she had to do was walk across the room. But it was too much trouble, too much effort. I'm tired, she thought, and why shouldn't I be? Maybe I can sleep. At least I can try. Her head dropped forward, and she sighed.

They sat side by side with closed eyes, but only one of them slept. The clock ticked on, the minutes passed, but only one of them counted.

It was after four when Doctor Babcock came in. Milly woke and saw him standing before her. She got to her feet, stumbling, only half-awake. "Doctor Babcock, I'm sorry! But Mrs. Manson seemed to be resting, and I—"

He waved her apologies aside. "A charming picture, Miss Sills, charming; and no harm done, no harm at all." His hand took one of Mrs. Manson's. "Any change? I'm afraid we're in a state of depression."

She stood behind Mrs. Manson's chair and nodded. He was a fool to talk like that where she could hear.

He went on. "But that's to be expected—yes, we expected that. And Emma says there's an aversion to food."

"I wouldn't call it that. I think she does very well, considering. Doctor Babcock, if it's warm tomorrow, can I wheel her out on the porch?"

He thought it over. "Not yet, Miss Sills. This lovely room, the sanctuary of four walls—I think we'll be happier here. The outdoors is sometimes—frightening."

Since when? Milly answered silently. Put them out in the sun and air as soon as they can sit up, that's the way I heard it. "Yes, Doctor Babcock," she said.

Doctor Babcock left Mrs. Manson and made a slow tour of the room, examining everything small enough to handle. Even Emma's workbasket was looked into.

Milly adjusted the rug again and whispered to Mrs. Manson. "The way he's looking at things, you'd think he was going to put us up at auction."

Doctor Babcock made another turn around the room and came to a stop behind Mrs. Manson's chair. "Miss Sills," he said, "I'm distressed. About you. I'm not happy about you, not at all happy. You're beginning to show the strain. Now, I want you to understand that this is no reflection on your capabilities, but I truly believe you need assistance, or even better than that, a little rest."

"No, I don't," Milly said. "I mean, thank you, but I'm not tired and we don't want another nurse. Mrs. Manson and I get along fine, we're used to each other, we can practically talk. You don't want anybody else, do you, Mrs. Manson? See, she says no. That look means no. She says you're very kind, Doctor Babcock, but Miss Sills is my one and only dream girl and she's all I need." A fine line to give the boss, she mourned; every word a step home to mother, and sitting by the phone all day waiting for a call to take care of more tonsils. "But whatever you say, Doctor Babcock. I only mean—"

He smiled broadly. "No explanations, my dear. I understand. We'll wait and see how things develop. Now, about Emma. I've suggested to Emma that she sleep in her own bed tonight. I don't want Mrs. Manson relying too much on Emma. Someone unconnected with the past, a stranger like yourself, a—dream girl, did you say? Ah, yes, a dream girl is what we need!" His laughter filled the room.

No tonsils today, she decided. "Any instructions, Doctor Babcock?"

"No. Everything as usual."

When he left, she returned to her chair beside Mrs. Manson. She studied the pale face and closed her eyes until Emma came. It was four-thirty then.

Emma lighted the fire, and they both sat before it. Mrs. Manson had shown no interest in the fire; she'd looked at it once and closed her eyes again.

"We'll leave her where she is," Milly said softly to Emma. "It's the only privacy she has, sitting off by herself like that. It's all right for a little while."

Emma held her hands to the blaze. "I've got the blues," she whispered. "I can't get Robbie out of my mind. He's been walking behind me all day."

"Is today anything special?" Her own voice was low.

"No, just a Sunday. He was always around all day Sunday, running up and downstairs, slamming doors. Hattie says she heard him last night."

"Hattie's crazy. You said so yourself."

"I know I did. And so she is. But—"

Milly looked over at the chair. "Are you awake, Mrs. Manson?" She turned back to Emma. "No, this time she's really asleep. She never tries to fool me, she knows she can't. We can talk if we're careful, you know. . . . Robbie. I don't know much about Robbie. George keeps changing the subject, and the papers were careful not to say more than they had to."

"They always do that when it's money and banks and prominent people. But she paid up, every cent.

There's no reason you shouldn't know about it. Nobody lost a penny through us. We paid."

She could hardly bring herself to believe it even now, Emma said. "Robbie was spoiled, we know that. But why would he steal a lot of money that he didn't need or even spend? Nobody could ever prove that he spent a penny more than his regular income. Why would he steal money, then, and where did it go? Not so much as a nickel ever showed up."

What's more, she said, they'd never been able to find a single person who'd ever seen him in the wrong kind of company. No gambling, no horse racing, no bad women. There was no sense to it, none at all, and as for what he did afterward—

Emma described what she knew of Robbie's last day. "He came home while I was at the stores," she said. "I'd have spotted something wrong if I'd been home and seen him. But I was at the stores, and Hattie had the kitchen door shut and didn't hear him come in. And when I came back, I started to work right away. I was busy phoning for the extra things Miss Nora wanted for a special dinner. She was counting on Mr. Brucie to come. I was planning a wonderful dinner, like she wanted, and then they told me."

Her tremulous whisper led Milly step by step. They stared into the fire as Emma filled the hall with running feet, crouched before the attic door, and emptied the dusty tool chest on the floor. They heard the door-bell ring above the sound of tools.

"Mrs. Perry was calling," Emma said, "and the

man with the pheasant, because Hattie was afraid to open the back door. That pheasant was in the icebox for over a week—we had to give it away. . . . He'd written her a little note. It was in his typewriter. He said, 'I never was any good, but you wouldn't believe it.' No love or nothing. She saw it before we did—we couldn't help that. We were trying to—you know, you—you have to cut the rope. . . . I gave that boy the first bath he ever had."

Milly's hands went out to Emma. "Don't talk any more," she whispered. "That's enough. I know how you feel."

"You know? In a million years you wouldn't know. And it wasn't enough that I saw him as I did. I had to be the one to find her, too. Lying at my feet, the same as dead, and Mr. Ralph and Mr. Brucie out of their minds. She'd be dead this minute if it hadn't been that Doctor Babcock had come to call. . . . I don't know what we've done, it's like a punishment."

"Hush."

The coal crackled, the firelight was on their faces. They drew together, the bent black figure and the straight white one. On the other side of the room a shaft of setting sun came in at the window and found the chair.

Hattie came in at five-fifteen with her plate of meat, an uncooked lamb chop and a slice of turkey breast. Her mouth was set in an obstinate line. She had clearly been told to keep it shut, and just as clearly she was going to make somebody suffer.

"That's a poor-looking chop," Emma said. She took

the plate and crossed to the chair. "Open your eyes, Miss Nora, time to wake up. Hattie's here with your dinner meat, and if you want my advice, you'll take the turkey. The lamb that gave that chop could ill afford to spare it."

Mrs. Manson looked at the plate. For the first time, she seemed unwilling to play their little game.

"Serve them both, Hattie," Milly said. "Two dinner trays, one for me, too. We'll decide which we want then. It's all right, isn't it, if I eat up here to-night?"

"No reason why you can't," Emma said. She bustled to the door. "Come along, chatterbox. I'll bring up that sherry, too, Miss Sills. A nip of sherry, a nice fire— Hattie!"

The sun was low in the sky; long shadows came into the room. Milly moved aimlessly from window to porch door, from door to bed to fireplace. Once she returned to the bed, for no reason that she knew. She smoothed the covers as if she were removing the outline of a body, not preparing to receive one.

The room slowly filled with dusk, but she ignored the lamps. She sat by the fire, wondering if the radio would bother Mrs. Manson if she played it softly. There was a radio within reach of her hand; she stretched out her hand, but let it fall almost at once. Nothing she could think of was worth doing.... I used to like the autumn, she thought, but this year it's different. It used to be full of—I don't know, promise or something—but this time I feel old, and I'm not old. Tonight I'm so old that I can't look for-

ward. I can't think of anything I want, and I've always wanted something. Now that I don't want anything, what's the use?

She looked at the still figure, shrouded in dusk. Sleep, she said to herself, sleep, Mrs. Manson. You think too much when you're awake, I know. Those attic stairs—Emma says they're dreadful. How could she do it? . . .

Miss Sills, Miss Sills, go home, Miss Sills. It's growing dark. Your mother has a house; go there. All day I've seen the night getting ready. The things that could have held it back—Hattie, the lamp, Miss Byrd—are gone. Go home, Miss Sills. Miss Sills, so young and so wise, leaning forward to look into my face, telling me how frightful life can be. Little Miss Sills, my friend, go home. You don't know what comes and goes in this house. . . .

One by one the others drifted in, Mr. Manson, Bruce Cory, George. There were no highballs this time; they seemed to know that talk and laughter were out of place this time. This time.

Milly offered chairs, but they were declined. Someone turned the radio on, and the soft, invoking voices of a Negro choir filled the dusky room. *Abide with me: fast falls the eventide*. The voices and the dark together were unsupportable.

"Turn that off," Milly heard herself say. "I don't like it." She was startled by the sound of her voice. It cracked like a whip. "It's gloomy," she said defensively. Some tactless fool, she thought. If I knew which one, I'd give him what for.

The music stopped. George walked around the room, turning on lights. Bruce Cory said, "I'm sorry, Miss Sills."

Why did I do that? she wondered. *Miss Sills, this is no reflection on your capabilities, but you're beginning to show the strain.*

Mr. Manson said: I'm afraid we came at a bad time. Is anything wrong?"

"No, Mr. Manson. I guess we're tired, that's all. It's been a tiring day."

"We'll go. Babcock was here, wasn't he?"

"Yes, he was. But he didn't say anything in particular. He stayed only a little while."

"Cory and I went into town for an hour or so. I wish I'd—well we'll get along and let you rest. Anything you want, Miss Sills? You don't make many demands. I wish you did."

"No, sir, I don't want anything."

They left, Manson and Cory, but George stayed.

"Come out on the porch," George whispered. "You can, can't you? I want to talk."

The garden was dark; across the autumn grass, patched with fallen leaves, the Perrys' lights gleamed through the trees. Mr. Perry was working on his side of the hedge, a stooped, black figure in the stream of yellow lamplight, curiously alone. "His flowers," George said vaguely. "Come along this way." He led her to the far end of the porch. She knew Hattie's room was directly beneath them.

"I've got the wind up," George said.

"Same old wind you're always talking about? I

didn't come out here for that."

"Milly, listen. I'm not kidding. There wasn't any wind last night. That lamp didn't blow over; it couldn't. It was knocked over, by you or Emma or somebody else. And I don't mean Mrs. Manson, either. Do you think Emma did it?"

"No. She'd tell everybody right away and start paying off, week by week. And it wasn't me. You make me feel funny, and I was bad enough before."

"Listen. I prowled around here at the crack of dawn, also before I came in just now. I was looking for prints. I wasn't sure that what I saw last night was a dog. It ran on all fours, but it was too big. If it was a cat burglar making a fancy getaway, then we ought to tell the cops. And if it was a dog, we ought to tell them just the same. A dog that walks into second-floor bedrooms and knocks over fifteen-pound lamps ought to be tied up—or shot."

Milly rested her arms on the railing and looked down into the dark tangle of ivy. There was a light in Hattie's window. The ivy was broken; she could see the loose, limp rope of leaves and stem.

"I know that poem, too," she said slowly. "I can even quote a different line."

"You're catching on," he said. "But let me. I do it prettier. 'Are you a beast of field and tree, or just a stronger child than me?'"

They drew together; his hand was on her shoulder, her face was close to his.

"George," she whispered, "where were you at ten-thirty last night?"

"Bed. Why?"

"I called you up from home, but nobody answered."

"I heard the phone, but I didn't do anything about it. . . . I've got you close, Milly. Don't shiver."

"Who's shivering? You haven't said anything about finding prints."

"I found some, all right. Of shoes, men's shoes. Manson and Cory were out there this morning with Babcock. Their prints are all over the place now."

"But you didn't see anything the first time—I mean, at the crack of dawn? You didn't, George, did you?"

He was a long time answering. His hand left her shoulder and pressed her cheek. "I'm going down to the barracks and talk to Ferd Pross. There was something funny going on around here last night. Ferdie will know what to do."

"George, you did see something! What was it?"

"Something stood in the flower bed under Hattie's window, either before or after climbing the ivy. The same thing that got into Mrs. Manson's room. It was frightened off—my guess is the lamp—and I don't know where it went. But at one time during the night it stood in soft, wet earth, ran along the porch, swung over the railing, and tore the ivy. That's one of the things I'm going to tell Pross."

"What—what's the other?"

"It left the wrong kind of tracks. Wrong for an animal, wrong for a man. They were spaced as an animal's would be, four nice clear prints, front and

back. And big. Maybe I ought to laugh, but I don't feel like it. Because they weren't feet, and they weren't paws. They were hands."

She heard herself say, "Hands?"

"Yeah." He went on, softly, "So: 'Are you beast of field and tree, or just a stronger child than me?' If that's some guy's idea of a practical joke, Ferdie and I can act funny, too. Of course they aren't there now; they got stepped on this morning. Ferdie may try to tell me I'm crazy, but I'm not."

"George, what did they look like? Were they—like a starfish?"

He said, "How did you know that?"

She quoted Hattie, "But she said only *one*."

"That can be all right, that can still make sense. It could have been reaching down to get a grip or a foothold. When she yelled, it swung back to the porch, out of sight. Then when she left, it dropped to the flower bed and vanished. Don't ask me where or how. One set of prints was all I could find. Maybe it floated."

"I'm not afraid," she said.

"No reason to be. A dirty trick by some heel whose mind didn't grow as fast as his body. Just keep the door locked. I'm pretty sure that was a one-night stand." He kissed her briefly. "This is no time for prolonging pleasure. I've got to get down to see Ferdie. Maybe somebody else saw the thing and reported it. Maybe Ferdie will hang around here tonight." He kissed her again. "Maybe I'll drop in myself."

He had reached his side of the hedge when a sudden recollection made him stop and look back at the house he had just left. *You need two pairs of hands around here.* Who said that? When? Hattie? No, Emma. This morning, Emma. That was right, but it wasn't enough. It was older than that, it went farther back. Two pairs of hands. Now, what does that—

His mother was in the living room, knitting. "Well?" she asked.

"No dinner for me," he said. "I've got to see a man about a dog."

"Knowing you, dear," she said thoughtfully, "I suspect that's vulgar."

It was six-thirty when Emma brought two dinners on a large tray. Emma and Hattie had surpassed themselves, but Mrs. Manson wouldn't eat. Milly cajoled, begged, and threatened, but Mrs. Manson refused to open her mouth. Even the sherry, which she ordinarily liked, brought no response. When they saw it was useless, they put her to bed. She fought that, too, if it could be called fighting. The mutiny was in her eyes. It was the same look Milly had seen the night before when she'd refused the hot milk and the sleeping pills.

"You run along, Emma," Milly said. "Maybe she'll change her mind when she sees me eating."

After several half-hearted offers to stay, Emma agreed to go. "If you want anything, ring for Hattie; but don't expect any conversation—she's still not talking. And she knows my sister's telephone number, in case, which I hope not."

Milly ate her dinner with elaborate and false enjoyment, and drank a glass of sherry. Mrs. Manson watched without expression. When the tray had been placed in the hall and the fire built up, there was nothing else to do. Emma's lamp shed a dim light on the bed and the inevitable steamer rug. The porch door was closed, and so was the door to the hall. The room was too hot, but Mrs. Manson liked it that way; at least, they thought she did. They thought, they thought, they thought. Would there ever come a time when anyone knew what she wanted?

Milly went to the window seat and huddled on the cushions like a child, with her arms around her knees. The lights across the park looked far away.

Emma has gone, and Miss Sills is asleep. Curled like a kitten, her head in her arms. How long will it be before she wakes? How long before Emma comes home? One hour? Two?

Emma. Does it mean anything that Emma is out? Each time, Emma was out. Each time the house was empty except for Hattie, in the kitchen with the door closed. Except for Hattie and me and—

Why does my body ache? Perhaps because it is fighting or because I'm thinking of the last time it was alive.

Why did I go up there the last time? If I hadn't gone, I'd be living tomorrow. I'd be walking tomorrow, riding, driving, going to the theatre. My heart would be empty, but I'd be living, and perhaps in time someone else would have learned what I learned. In time to do something. Someone else, even a curi-

ous stranger; it couldn't have stayed hidden forever.

Why did I go up there? You know why. You went because you always turned the knob; every time you passed, you turned the knob slowly and quietly, knowing the door would be locked, but turning the knob because you had to. And that time the door opened.

And you told yourself you were alone in the house!

It's all right, it's all right. This is preparation of a kind, too.

Climb again. . . .

The knob turned soundlessly, and the door swung open. She stood at the foot of the winding stairs, looking up, listening to the soft footfalls above. Someone else had found the unlocked door.

Hattie? No, Hattie was in the kitchen or in her own room. Emma? Emma had gone to market; she'd seen her less than ten minutes ago, haggling over fish. Ralph? Brucie? Brucie had promised to come out. No, too early for them. They were in town, at the bank.

Someone who knew their daily plans and schedules had broken in. She was supposed to be at the Civic League meeting, but the pity in the other women's faces had driven her home.

She started up the stairs, shaking with fury, not fear. Robbie's attic, his own place, his last place on earth. She moved without sound, hugging the wall, hesitating only once, asking herself what she would do or say when she reached the top. She told herself she ought to call the police. I ought to call the po-

lice but I don't want—I don't want the story in the papers. They'll reprint the pictures, they'll—

Why don't I go to my room first and see if he's taken anything? If he has, I'll tell him he can keep it. I won't prosecute. I'll reason with him. I'll tell him to go, go quickly. I'll explain how we feel about the attic.

But if he has my jewelry, why did he go to the attic?

Hattie. It must be Hattie, looking for extra blankets. It has to be Hattie.

Then she heard the laughter, low, almost bubbling, happy, victorious, and familiar. She covered her mouth with her hand and crept forward.

At the top of the stairs she crouched behind the partition. There was sun on the floor again. Robbie's old toy trunk, filled with broken treasures, had been brought from its corner, and it was open. Herself unseen, she watched the hands as they lifted the packages one after the other, lovingly. There was no look of surprised discovery on the face. It was the face of one who had returned to gloat.

She stood erect. "Thief," she said quietly.

The answering voice was as quiet as hers. "This is unfortunate."

Neither moved. They looked at each other over the open trunk. A golden bar of sunlight slanted through the western window and fell between them, a metaphoric pale that placed the other one beyond the limit of civilized mercy and protection.

When she could force herself to look down again,

she saw that the money in the trunk was incredibly green. The building blocks were drab and dull beside it, the once-bright trains and trucks, the painted wagons, and the battered wooden animals were ghosts. The money was real.

She said: "I misjudged you. I didn't know you had the mind for a thing like this. I thought you were reliable and capable. I even thought that you lacked imagination. I didn't know you could plan and execute a thing like this. Did you do it alone, or did someone help you? I can't understand how you did it alone."

"No imagination? Yes, everyone thinks that. Dull and pompous. Yes, I did it alone. I've always been underestimated."

"Why did you do it?"

"Because I like money, and I don't like rich women who inherit theirs. Because my own efforts never got me quite enough of my own. I thought a secret nest egg would be very pleasant, doubly pleasant when I found I could arrange it with complete safety to myself. I still think so."

She told herself to wake up. She spoke aloud, but didn't know it. "Why don't you wake up?" she said. "Why doesn't somebody wake me up?" She looked from the face to the trunk again. There were splashes of brilliant yellow among the clean greens and faded blues and reds.

She said, "He made those—for Christmas, I think. He made them for a joke, like a stocking toy. They were supposed to be funny. You think they're funny

now, don't you? I don't. I—" She put her hands to her head. "I'm the dull one," she said, "but then, I never had to be anything else. I never had to worry about anything, or work to live. There was always someone to take care of me and do my thinking for me. But now I want to think for myself."

"Don't."

"But I want to know how you did it. I used to hear people talk about the way we managed the bank. They used to laugh and say it looked wide open, that the Board of Directors and even the watchmen thought they could go anywhere and carry off anything—until they tried."

"It wasn't difficult. I'm capable and reliable. You said so yourself."

"You are also— You killed him."

"I did."

"Why? Wasn't there anyone else you could use?"

"There may have been. I didn't look very far. He was there; he was made to order. That's how it started. Then he had the effrontery to spot me, *me*, the last person in the world they'd have thought of! So I had no choice. He had Cory blood—the inquisitive, shrewd, banker blood. He'd taken me in completely, I didn't know he could even add. Fortunately, he couldn't hide his feelings, and I saw the end in time. So I did a little talking in the right places."

"That's what was wrong with him at lunch. He wouldn't tell me then." She could have been standing before a counter of merchandise, accepting and rejecting. One finger lay along her cheek. I will not

scream, she thought, I will not scream, not yet, not for days and days. I will not scream now.

"That's why he came home early," she went on. "To tell me the truth. He had been openly accused, and he knew—"

"Don't burden yourself with details. They don't matter."

She thought that over. They don't matter. The details don't matter. Why don't they? I know, I know why. Because I won't have any use for them. I'm to kill myself like Robbie; disgrace and shame will make me follow my son. Mrs. Ralph Manson, of Larchville, whose son— "You don't know me," she said.

"No?" The low laugh bubbled up again.

She pretended not to hear it. She took a step backward—a small, unnoticeable step. "Tell me one thing more," she said. "Didn't he—defend himself?"

"Oh, yes. That surprised me. I'd always thought of him as a spoiled brat, without stamina. But he was no coward."

"Thank you. You see, some of the details do matter, after all. And the open window? I wonder now why you didn't close it. Wasn't that—dangerous for you? He might have cried out."

"You're underestimating me again. I opened the window afterward. You know, you're taking this almost too well, so I'll give you the rest of it. Bodies stay warm. In a place like this, he would have been warm for an uncomfortable length of time—for me. So I opened the window to—you understand?"

"Yes, I understand. Haven't we all been stupid? You came in the front door?"

"Certainly. You've also been stupid about that, leaving it unlocked to save your servants. I made sure, of course, that there was no one in sight."

"It's only unlocked in the afternoons," she explained carefully. "I always thought that afternoons, in a place like this—I'm glad it was you who typed that note."

"I thought it was a good note, under the circumstances. I'm not much of a writer. He could have done a better job himself, but we didn't have time for that. And speaking of time, there isn't much of it left now."

"No," she agreed. "Emma will be coming soon. I saw her in the market, and she knows I'm home."

There was tolerant curiosity behind the soft voice. It was more human than the fresh peal of bubbling laughter. "I'm glad she knows you're in the house alone. But how, exactly, do you think that can help you?"

"Help me? Emma? I don't need Emma for what I'm going to do. I'd rather she didn't come. This is all mine."

"Wait. What do you think you're going to do?"

"I'm going to the police. I'm going to hang you higher than that rafter."

The air churned. Between her and the sun a human, black projectile rose and catapulted forward. She closed her eyes when it struck.

When her body rolled against the wall at the turn

in the stairs, like a log jammed in midstream, she knew she hadn't long to wait. Strong hands turned her over and sent her the rest of the way. A thin scream came from nowhere.

She opened her eyes to nothing. After an endless search she saw a lighted lamp in another world. Soon it became familiar; it was her lamp, her room. Her bed.

Living, she told herself. Why?

Voices drifted through the gloom, like recorded voices on an old record. Thin, without bodies. But when she tried, she could see bodies standing in a row at the foot of the bed.

"At my feet, on the floor, at my feet. I came in, and I heard a sound, and I ran. I knew where it came from. Unconscious, I said to myself, or dead."

"Lucky for us that we happened to be—"

"She should be dead. She should be dead. I don't understand it."

"I've been afraid—"

She was lying at the foot of the attic stairs again, hearing Emma scream in the lower hall, looking up at the figure bending above her, reading the eyes that looked down into hers, watching the quick retreat to the top of the stairs so that whoever came—Forget that now, she told herself. Listen to the voices, listen to every word. One of them will tell you what you must do.

"Shock and paralysis. I beg your pardon, you were saying?"

"She telephoned, she told me to come as soon as I

could. I thought she was ill. When I came, she asked me to wait while she went upstairs. After a while I followed. I was uneasy, disturbed—”

Who said that? Who? Listen.

“And the attic door was open. Obviously she’d found the key. She was preparing to take her life in the same way. I struggled with her, she was demoralized, raving. She fell. When I heard Emma and the rest of you, I—”

Liar, her mind said. Thief, murderer, liar. You flung me like a sack of meal, but the other came and you couldn’t finish. Wait until I tell them that.

“At my feet. Lying there on the floor. Oh, Mr. Ralph, Mr. Bruciel!”

“Quiet, please. Miss Byrd?”

“Yes, Doctor Babcock?”

“A close watch for the next five hours. At the slightest change, call me.”

“All of us will watch. Babcock, it was Providence that you were—”

“Providence? Not at all. The dear lady had been on my mind, I felt that a little call— But I must warn you, this will be a hopeless vigil. She will live from hour to hour—perhaps.”

“Will she talk to us before she—”

“There will be no speech, no movement.”

“No speech?”

“We’ll get another opinion, we must. You understand how we—”

“Naturally another opinion. I was about to suggest it myself. Mr. Cory, not too close, please. When and if

consciousness returns, she must see no one—strange.”

“Strange? I? But she’ll expect to see me, she knows I’m here, she asked me—”

The voices faded, the figures melted away.

So that’s the story! . . . She could feel the bitter laughter in her throat. Wait until I tell mine. Not now, in a little while. When I’m alone with someone who will believe me.

Why aren’t my bones broken? Perhaps because I didn’t fight. Why don’t I feel pain? They said I should be dead. Yes, I should be. I would be if the others hadn’t come when they did. I will be, unless I tell. They said no speech, no movement. That’s not true, either. I can talk and I can move. I—

It’s true.

The light from Emma’s lamp was a dim pool on the bed table. In it were the bottle with its four pills, the vacuum jug, a clean, folded handkerchief, the jar of talcum powder. Undisturbed, still in the same positions. . . . No one has come while I’ve been away, she thought. It’s too early. Is the door locked?

Miss Sills’ cap is white against the dark window. Her stiff white skirt, her square-toed white shoes. Small, square white shoes like a summer Sunday morning. Sunday School. Clean them with the shoe white; you can do that yourself. Now wipe the edges of the soles—no, no, not with the sponge, there’s too much whitener on the sponge. Using the cloth, that’s what it’s for. Stand them on the window sill, one behind the other; they’ll dry in no time at all. . . . I never spoiled a child in my life.

The door to the hall is closed, the door to the porch is closed. Miss Sills and I are closed in. The doors may be locked from the outside, we may be locked in. The door to the hall—

The door to the hall opened.

She watched the white figure emerge from the shadows on silent feet. It had no face. It was covered with white. Two arms reached down to her.

Miss Sills.

Miss Sills said: "Hey! Sorry. But what's the big idea? Why the pussyfoot, why the disguise?"

He said something through the mask.

"Sure," Miss Sills said. "That's sensible. I don't mean to yell at you, but I was only half-awake. I don't mind admitting you scared the—you scared me for a minute. I thought we had Martians." Miss Sills went to the bed and turned back the covers. She bent down. "He frightened you, too, didn't he? That's a shame. I should have stayed over here. But it's all right now. You really did frighten her. Take that thing off, and come out in the open for a second. See, Mrs. Manson? It's only Breitman."

Only Breitman.

"He has a cold, Mrs. Manson. He caught it last night when he left here. He's only taking precautions for your sake. He'd just as soon scare you to death, but he draws the line at a sneeze."

Only Breitman.

He talked to Miss Sills while he worked; she couldn't hear all he said. Miss Sills stood at the foot of the bed, her cap awry, her stiff skirt wrinkled

where her arms had hugged her knees. She watched him and laughed with him. He wore a wrist watch. It said eight-thirty.

When he was through, he went to the fire, and Miss Sills gave him a glass of sherry from the bottle that was still on the mantel. He slipped the mask under his chin when he drank. Miss Sills laughed again. She knew Breitman; they had worked together before. Breitman was the best masseur in the business, she said.

When Breitman left, Miss Sills followed him to the door. She sounded as if she were sorry to see him go. Miss Sills was lonely, she liked people, she liked life around her.

After Breitman left, Milly went to the end of the hall and looked down the main stairs. The lower hall was dim. She crossed to the head of the kitchen stairs. No light or sound there, either. Hattie had gone to bed. Or slipped out. Usually on Sunday nights Hattie moaned hymns with the door open.

They're getting mighty casual around here, she complained to herself. You'd think they'd tell me when they go out; you'd think they'd ask me if I wanted anything. She returned to the room, rinsed Breitman's glass, and looked for something to do.

There was nothing in Emma's work-basket, no mending or darning, only the tatting, which looked so effortless in Emma's hands and turned into a cat's cradle in her own. Even Mrs. Manson was all right. Mrs. Manson was taking one of her little jaunts into another world; she was seeing something far

away, far away and high up. Maybe a mountaintop; she'd traveled a lot in Europe. Well, whatever it was, there was peace in her eyes. Peace, or something just as good. There was no fright.

She went to the porch door and rested her forehead on the cool glass. No lights over at the Perrys'. Half past nine. They couldn't be in bed. Gone to the movies. Mr. Perry liked movies. George said he liked the tough ones. George said that sometimes when the old man thought he was alone with his flower beds, he flattened his back against the hedge and made like standing against a warehouse wall. Fist in pocket, making like a gun. A lookout. The old man was cute, poor thing. Acting tough all by himself and saying, "Yes, dear," the rest of the time.

Maybe George was with Ferd Pross, the State Trooper. He and Ferdie had gone to Boys' High together. He could tell Ferdie anything and know he wouldn't be laughed at. George was up in the air, all right; he couldn't fool her. And so am I, she admitted, and I'm not fooling myself either. . . . Why doesn't George talk to Manson and Cory? Maybe he has; maybe they're doing something about it this minute.

She was suddenly relieved. That's why they're out, she decided. That's why they didn't say anything to me. They didn't want me to know they were worried.

She went to the fire. It was burning itself out. Nearly ten o'clock. It would last until bedtime, until Emma came back.

She sat in Emma's chair, and planned a spring offensive against George's mother, the whole thing to take place in the Sills' back garden, which was big enough and had two dogwood trees. Let's say the first of May, and no veil—I'd feel like a fool in a veil after this cap. No bouquet; let the dogwood handle that. A white prayer-book and high heels, even if I do fall flat on my face. And Mrs. Manson in her chair, under the trees. With me. Beside me. Mrs. Manson will give me away. Oh, oh, trouble ahead. Now listen, Mother, I've been everything a daughter should be. I hate to talk like this, but you force me. And I do think that, on this day of all days, you might at least try to understand and have a little consideration. Who am I fighting with? What's all the rush? ... Maybe I'd better tell George.

She was almost sorry when Emma came in at eleven. By that time everything had been settled but the chicken salad; veal or no veal.

"Hello," she said. "Have a nice time?"

Emma said: "It's blowing up outside, a nasty, damp fog all over. I hate it. But you're cozy enough in here. You sound real happy, too."

"That's the voice that breathed o'er Eden."

"Whatever that may be. Well, I just looked in for a minute. I'm going down to my bed. I'm beginning to feel my neuralgia. That fog. Will you be going down yourself, for hot milk?"

"I don't know." They looked at the bed. Mrs. Manson's eyes were closed. "If she stays like that, I won't. Better not to start anything."

"Well, if you do, don't lock up. They're still out. No trouble?"

"Breitman got himself up in a mask, because he's playing with the idea of influenza. Frightened her at first, the big gorilla. But aside from that, everything's fine."

"George come over?"

"No. Haven't seen a soul."

"Well—" Emma opened her handbag. "Your mother sent you a note." She drew out an envelope and gave it to Milly.

"My mother? But how did she know—"

"Sent it to my sister's. My sister's boy took it. Don't be so fussy. You've got it, haven't you? Well, I'm for bed. Be sure you ring if you want me." Emma was still talking when she closed the door.

Milly stared at the envelope in her hand. The address was lettered in pencil: "THE NURSE. KINDNESS OF EMMA. PERSONAL." She took it to the lamp by the bed. Mrs. Manson was watching her.

"So you're curious, too?" Milly said. "You don't miss much, do you?" She held the envelope before Mrs. Manson's eyes. "That's not from my mother, and you know it as well as I do. Emma's out of her mind. Well, there's only one way to find out. May I sit on the edge of your bed, madam, if I promise not to bounce? . . . Well, what do you know, there's something in it. Feels like money, like a quarter or something." She opened the envelope and took out a key. "Look!" she marveled. She held the key to the light

before she put it on the bed table. "Wait till I read it, then I'll tell you."

The note also was in pencil. Across the top of the first page a sentence in capital letters said: "DO NOT READ THIS UNLESS YOU ARE ALONE." She winked at Mrs. Manson. "This is going to be good. Wait."

She read to herself, frowning, engrossed; she forgot Mrs. Manson. She was alone with the crackling paper in her hand.

"I won't sign my name to this, but you will know who I am. I said you had a good heart. There is something wrong in that house. I know it. It isn't a thing I can take to the police, because I haven't proof of anything, only what you might call convictions. Too many things have happened in that house, and those people are not the kind that have such things happen to them. Also, I cannot go to the police because they would have to take my name, and then if they investigated and found nothing, my name would leak out, and that would be the end of me. Even now I think somebody watches my apartment at night.

"Once I knew a lady who feared for her life. I don't mean myself, and people thought she was imagining things, even the police thought she was. But it was proved that she wasn't. Your patient has the same look this other lady had. That's what I mean.

"It is not my wish to get you into trouble or danger, but I've no one else to tell this to. I couldn't find out your name, because I was afraid my interest would become known to the wrong person. I'm not sure who the wrong person is.

"This key fits the attic door. It was made from an impression. Never mind how I came by it. Now, this is why I'm sending it to you. Every time there is no one in the house but the patient and her nurse, and maybe the cook in the kitchen, somebody walks in the attic. I've heard them, because my hearing is very acute, even when they walked softly. Sometimes in daylight, sometimes at night. The patient has heard it, too. She knows what it is, but she can't tell you. That's when she has the same look as the other lady I told you about."

Milly turned the page with a shaking hand. It was ridiculous, it was crazy. It could be true. She read on.

"I couldn't use the key myself. I never had a chance. Never mind why I never had a chance—just let us say I came into possession too late. But if you know someone you are sure of, give the key to them. And tell them to be careful. Tell them to watch everybody, to trust nobody. But go to the attic.

"Maybe someday I will see you again. You didn't think much of me, I could see that; but I don't blame you. I've been half out of my mind and very nervous and not myself. But you'll understand that later.

"I remain, Your Friend."

She folded the letter and put it in her pocket. "Mrs. Manson," she said, turning slowly, "do you mind if I—*Mrs. Manson!*"

Mrs. Manson didn't hear.

One of Mrs. Manson's arms was uncovered. One hand was inching forward through space, the fingers opening and closing, taking handfuls of air, curling

around the air, holding it, letting it go. The hand crept on until it reached the bed table and dropped. It struck the lid of the powder jar; the lid spun on the rim of the table and fell soundlessly to the carpet. The jar overturned.

"Mrs. Manson." Milly's voice was a whisper.

Mrs. Manson's hand covered the key. Her mouth twisted and stiffened and relaxed. Her eyes met Milly's. I can't talk, her eyes said, but this is the smile you've been waiting for. Her eyes blazed and talked.

"Don't," Milly said. "Don't try. Let me. Mrs. Manson, do you know who sent that key? It's the other nurse, isn't it?"

It was.

"Do you know what she means? She says it's a key to the attic. I know it is—you've proved that. But do you know what she wants? She wants someone to go up there, she says you—"

There was no need for more. Mrs. Manson's eyes blazed their verification.

"Shall I go? Shall I go now? There's no one home."

Mrs. Manson tried to say yes, but fear and pity struggled with frenzied hope; the fear and pity and hope were as clear as printed words, clearer than speech.

"There's no one home," Milly whispered. "This is a safe time. It's better for me to go myself, now. If we wait until I call George— Mrs. Manson, we'll never sleep if I don't go now. If we wait, we might

not have another chance. . . . But I don't know what I'm supposed to find, or see. I don't know what's there. I—"

Mrs. Manson's eyes led her to the hand covering the key. Covering the key, lying in the spilled powder.

"Mrs. Manson! Can you move one finger, can you write in that powder? Can you write even one word?"

Their breathing was like thunder in their ears. One finger. One. It moved, slowly. One word, one. The word grew, letter by letter. It was "trunk."

Milly took the key. There was a flashlight in the table drawer. She took that, too. She went to the hall door and looked at the outside lock.

"There's no key here. I can't lock you in, but I promise to hurry." She returned to the table and blotted out the word with her palm. She was smiling. "I'm going to put that hand back where it used to be, too," she said. "Just for fun. And here's my watch, right here, under the light. So you can see how quick I am, so you won't stew."

She didn't look back.

The house was still silent. The attic key was stiff in the lock, like all new keys, but the door opened without a sound. She closed it behind her and climbed the stairs, following the flashlight beam.

Trunk. Trunk. What trunk? Attics are full of trunks. How will I know which one? What will I find? How will I know it's what I want, even when I see it?

She came to the top and turned her light around the room. There was a table holding a covered typewriter. There was a leather sofa with broken springs. There were cardboard boxes, hampers, discarded luggage, a dusty rocking-horse, three bicycles that told how fast a boy grows. There was a round-topped trunk with something painted on the side in large, red, crooked letters. Robbie....

The hand crept from under the rug and found its laborious way to the table again.... Don't let anything happen, she prayed. I am on my knees. Heaven, I am on my knees. Don't make her pay for me.... The fingers curled once more. Her face was dark with pain. It would be a longer word this time.

She looked down into the trunk. The flashlight beam dug into the corners, picked out the colors and shapes. She saw bundles of paper money, play money for keeping store. Building blocks, trucks and trains, battered little wagons. When she took one of the bundles in her hand, she saw the money was real. She knew what it was then.

She looked from the money to the four gloves. Big cotton gloves, covered with thick bright-yellow paint, with bleeding hearts and arrows on the cuffs. She made herself take one of them in her hand. The paint was soiled and cracking, but it had been fresh and new not too long ago. At one time they had been what her mother called furnace gloves. You bought them at the five-and-ten and wore them when you did things like carrying out ashes. They were padded on the inside; two of them had room enough for

hands. They were stiff and firm; the fingers were spread, but you could wear them on your hands. The other two were fastened to shoes, pulled over a pair of old shoes, filled out as if they held hands, but fastened to a pair of shoes. Like starfish.

She crept down the stairs in the dark. When she reached the hall, she heard the front door open and close softly.

Mrs. Manson watched her as she closed the room door behind her and moved a chair against the knob. Her hands left wet prints on the chair, but she didn't know that.

When she went to the bed, she said: "Don't worry about that chair. It's just a—well, it's a precaution."

Mrs. Manson's eyes questioned her steadily.

"Yes," she answered, "I saw it. Mrs. Manson, I can't use the phone. The one in here is disconnected—you know that, don't you? It was done before I came. And the others aren't safe. I won't kid you, Mrs. Manson, but don't be frightened. I'll think of something. I saw everything you wanted me to see. You saw it, too, didn't you? You went up there and saw it, too, and that was when you fell. I know you didn't fall, not like they say. But don't be frightened. It'll be all right. I'll think of something."

She left the bed and went to the porch door. She didn't open it. She dropped the latch into its slot, a flimsy latch that wouldn't keep a child out. A latch that a hairpin—

The Perry cottage was still dark. They could have come home while I was up there. It doesn't mean

they're still out, just because it's dark. They could be home, in bed.

The street lamp shed a faint light along the edge of the garden, contesting the fog. There were no figures out there; no one moved along the hedges or under the trees. If Ferd Pross had agreed to watch, he hadn't come. But it wasn't much after twelve. He might think it was too early. Too early for a prowler, that's what Ferd might think.

She went back to the bed and sat down. "I have an idea," she whispered. "I'm going to turn out the lamp. You won't mind the dark, will you, if I hold your hand? This is what I mean about the dark. Last night George saw the lamp go out. Maybe he'll see it now, maybe he's watching. If he is, then maybe—"

She reached for the lamp and saw the new word cut into the film of powder. It gleamed up from the polished wood. *Murderer*.

"I know," she said. "Mrs. Manson, *can you write the name?*"

His father and mother had gone to bed; their doors were closed. George closed his own quietly and went to the window without turning on the light. Mrs. Manson's lamp was still on. So far, okay. He went to his desk and groped for a cigarette. He smoked it, sitting on the edge of his bed.

Ferd Pross hadn't laughed. He'd looked as if he'd wanted to, but not for long. They'd gone for coffee at the dog wagon, and Ferdie had listened and asked questions. He'd promised to watch the house. He'd said, "I'll do it myself, part of the time anyway, and

I'll put a man on when I leave." He added, "If anybody but you gave me a line like this, he'd get the alcohol routine."

George had answered, "Not me, Ferd, not this time."

"What do you think it is, George?"

"I don't think. Not now. Not yet."

He went to the window again, raised it and leaned out. There was no one in sight. The fog was low on the ground; the lights along the distant street were dim; but he knew he would see Ferdie when he came.

"Give me half an hour or so," Ferdie had said. "I'll be around, front or back."

Maybe I'm sticking my neck out, George told himself. Maybe they gave all his things away. Maybe she wanted all his stuff out of the house, and they gave it to some playground outfit. Maybe some kid just happened to get hold of—

No. Not a kid, not a trick like that. An overgrown lout? . . . Stop thinking with your mind closed, walk right into forbidden territory and see if you can find a way out. Now, then, suppose Robbie—

No, no, no. Wait a minute. Don't say no so quick; you've been saying no all day. To yourself. Who are you fooling? Say yes for a change, and see what you get. Suppose Robbie—

He shivered and went back for another cigarette. The first one had burned down to his fingers. When he returned to the window, the street was still empty. The garden was empty. Mrs. Manson's light—

Mrs. Manson's light went out while he watched.

Out and on, out and on. Out.

By that time he almost knew the answer was yes.

He dialed the barracks on the hall phone. Pross? Pross, a calm voice said, had left. Had he said where he was going? No, he hadn't said anything, but he'd made a couple of phone calls and sounded excited.

He thought of the phone calls he would like to make, but he was afraid to use the time. But when he saw his mother standing in her doorway, he gambled with a handful of minutes.

"Listen," he said, "this is more important than it sounds. That afternoon when Robbie came home early, did you see anyone else? Anyone, *anyone*."

"Did you wake me up for that? Is that all you can say, after staying out all night and leaving me alone with your father?"

"Please, Mother," he begged. "Quick, did you? Anyone, anyone at all."

She told him, divided between curiosity and anger. "And what's wrong with that? George, you're hurting my shoulder!"

"Sorry, sorry. Was it before or after Robbie came home?"

"A few minutes after. But why *I* should be half-killed because—*Georgel*!"

"Stay where you are," he said. "I mean it."

The fire was nearly dead. It was the only light; it was almost no light at all. Milly reached for Mrs. Manson's hand in the dark. "That business with the lamp was a signal," she lied softly. "I told George that if I ever wanted him, for anything, I'd do that.

I wish I could see your face, Mrs. Manson. I'd like to look you straight in the eye and tell you what I think of you. I'll tell you tomorrow."

She knew they both were listening. If the porch door opens, I'll hear it, she thought. She'll hear it, too. If the door opens, there'll be a light along the edge, from the hall. Unless the light—

"Do you want to hear about my wedding?" she whispered. "It's going to be in the spring, and you're in it. If you want to be. I've got it all planned in my head. We'll be the talk of the town. We'll—"

She heard the latch on the porch door. Something was pressing against the glass, a dark shape.

"Mrs. Manson?" She put her lips to Mrs. Manson's ear. "I'm going to carry you. I'm going to carry you to the window seat. You'll be all right there. George will be here in a minute. No, Mrs. Manson, don't cry now. No, Mrs. Manson, not now."

The porch door opened. She stood with her back to the window seat, making a wall of her body and outstretched arms.

It swayed across the floor on all fours; she knew how it would look if the lights were on. She could hear the soft padding of the four starfish hands as they moved over the thick carpet to the bed.

She tried to kill it with her mind. She willed it to die. Beast, beast, I'm killing you.

She heard the bed shake as the body lunged.

Light burst. From the ceiling, from the hall, from the porch, it flooded the room. She was blind with light. Sound crashed and reverberated. George's voice

rose above a hideous clamor. George shouted, "Ferd!" From somewhere, Ferd answered.

She began to see, then. The grappling, rolling figures on the floor began to take shape. She reached behind her and covered Mrs. Manson's eyes with her hand.

George, Ferd Ross, battered and bleeding. Babcock? Babcock and young Doctor Pleydell. How did Pleydell—

They rose and fell in a heaving mass, separating, coming together, a swollen sea of speechless men, young and old, with one objective.

Cory. Cory had a gun. George flung himself at Cory's arm. Milly gathered her strength and screamed. "No, George, no!"

The end of the time had been reached when they dragged the black shape from the floor. They took away its masquerading cape. They made it stand alone and let its face be seen.

She turned and hid her own face on Mrs. Manson's breast.

She knew it was George who came to stand beside them. She knew his hand with the high-school class ring that he wore because she always made fun of it. There was powder on his hand; he saw it when she did, and he rubbed it off on his coat. She knew then that Ralph Manson's name and story were no longer written on the table.

Someone said her name softly. A new voice. "Miss Sills." She raised her head, afraid to believe. Then she cried as she had never cried before. . . .

She was in her chair, in the window, waiting for morning. Morning was almost there. They had left her again, but not all of them. The ones she loved had stayed.

They said it was all right to think now. They said she could think all she wanted to. They said she could sit up all day and night, forever, if she wanted to. And think herself black in the face because she was a good, good— Stop that, she told herself. You don't have to do that any more.

That young man, the State Trooper. He was the one who'd called Babcock and Pleydell. He'd told them what he thought and asked them if his theory were possible. Medically possible, emotionally. And Babcock said he had been thinking the same way, had almost come to the same conclusion. . . . The Trooper said he didn't want a car for Christmas. Would a big red bow look too silly on a windshield? Ask Bruce. No, not now, later.

Bruce. Bruce had thought like Babcock. The first night had been too full of individual anachronisms. Miss Sills had been too hard to wake; not compatible with Miss Sills. The other one—she still couldn't say his name, even to herself—the other one who had given too much attention to the porch door, the lamp, the litter of twigs and leaves on the floor. Bruce, trying desperately to prove himself wrong, had mapped out and timed a possible route, using the porch door as entrance and exit, starting from the rose room, allowing for the flight to the garden, the return. Then, at dinner, he'd told them all he was going into town.

But he'd gone to Robbie's room and waited in the dark. . . . Robbie's room was the right place. Thank you, Bruce.

"Want anything?" Bruce asked now.

She shook her head. Her eyes told him she had everything. It was still hard to talk.

George Perry came in from the porch with Milly Sills. His look of confusion was not improved by his temporarily vertical hair. He bent over her chair. "What does a woman mean," he asked, "when she says 'no veal'?"

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