



**Alfred
Hitchcock
Presents**

**MY FAVORITES
IN SUSPENSE**

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Random House
New York

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*The editor gratefully acknowledges
the invaluable assistance of Patricia O'Connell
in the preparation of this volume.*

After spending a week out in the country, a friend of mine inevitably sends me a book. Recently it occurred to me that through my vision I have spent many Sunday evenings in your house, but I have never thanked you properly. Ergo, this book, for which I don't believe my friend charges for the words he wrote, but for which it's the thought that counts.

Most prefaces soon become defensive, disavow the lengthy explanations of why certain stories have been chosen, and the neurologists quickly become apologetic. 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, & very much hope that you will too.

A suspense story is not simply a Who-does-it. It might better be called a When's-he-going-to-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; clearing one of his homicidal tendencies and allowing him to carry these crimes he has always wanted to commit out didn't release he lacked the get-up-and-go. If this is

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 Sunday 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 anthropologists 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. You will find mentioned herein: a knifing or two, suffocation, cremation, bludgeoning, one or two stranglings, a few drownings and some shootings. Furthermore there are a number of cases which defy classification since the characters meet their ends in highly original ways, having little or no known precedent. 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, explained 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.

Raymond Chandler

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what purpose? The restless urge of autumn, unsatisfying, sad, had put a spell upon them, and they must spill themselves of motion before winter came.

Perhaps, thought Nat, a message comes to the birds in autumn, like a warning. Winter is coming. Many of them will perish. And like people who, apprehensive of death before their time, drive themselves to work or folly, the birds do likewise; tomorrow we shall die.

The birds had been more restless than ever this fall of the year. Their agitation more remarked because the days were still.

As Mr. Trigg's tractor traced its path up and down the western hills, and Nat, hedging, saw it dip and turn, the whole machine and the man upon it were momentarily lost in the great cloud of wheeling, crying birds.

Nat remarked upon them to Mr. Trigg when the work was finished for the day.

"Yes," said the farmer, "there are more birds about than usual. I have a notion the weather will change. It will be a hard winter. That's why the birds are restless."

The farmer was right. That night the weather turned.

The bedroom in the cottage faced east. Nat woke just after two and heard the east wind, cold and dry. It sounded hollow in the chimney, and a loose slate rattled on the roof. Nat listened, and he could hear the sea roaring in the bay. He drew the blanket round him, leaned closer to the back of his wife, deep in sleep. Then he heard the tapping on the windowpane. It continued until, irritated by the sound, Nat got out of bed and went to the window. He opened it; and as he did so something brushed his hand, jabbing at his knuckles, grazing the skin. Then he saw the flutter of wings and the thing was gone again, over the roof, behind the cottage.

It was a bird. What kind of bird he could not tell. The wind must have driven it to shelter on the sill.

He shut the window and went back to bed, but feeling his knuckles wet, put his mouth to the scratch. The bird had drawn blood.

Frightened, he supposed, bewildered, seeking shelter, the bird had stabbed at him in the darkness. Once more he settled himself to sleep.

Presently the tapping came again—this time more forceful, more insistent. And now his wife woke at the sound, and turning in the bed, said to him, "See to the window, Nat; it's rattling."

"I've already been to it," he told her. "There's some bird there, trying to get in."

"Send it away," she said. "I can't sleep with that noise."

He went to the window for the second time, and now when he opened it, there was not one bird on the sill but half a dozen; they flew straight into his face.

He shouted, striking out at them with his arms, scattering them; like the first one, they flew over the roof and disappeared.

He let the window fall and latched it.

Suddenly a frightened cry came from the room across the passage where the children slept.

"It's Jill," said his wife, roused at the sound.

There came a second cry, this time from both children. Stumbling into their room, Nat felt the beating of wings about him in the darkness. The window was wide open. Through it came the birds, hitting first the ceiling and the walls, then swerving in midflight and turning to the children in their beds.

"It's all right. I'm here," shouted Nat, and the children flung themselves, screaming, upon him, while in the darkness the birds rose, and dived, and came for him again.

"What is it, Nat? What's happened?" his wife called. Swiftly he pushed the children through the door to the passage and shut it upon them, so that he was alone in their bedroom with the birds.

He seized a blanket from the nearest bed, and using it as a weapon, flung it to right and left about him.

He felt the thud of bodies, heard the fluttering of wings; but the birds were not yet defeated, for again and again they returned to the assault, jabbing his hands, his head, their little stabbing beaks sharp as pointed forks.

The blanket became a weapon of defense. He wound it about his head, and then in greater darkness, beat at the birds with his bare hands. He dared not stumble to the door and open it lest the birds follow him.

How long he fought with them in the darkness he could not tell; but at last the beating of the wings about him lessened, withdrew; and through the dense blanket he was aware of light.

He waited, listened; there was no sound except the fretful crying of one of the children from the bedroom beyond.

He took the blanket from his head and stared about him. The cold gray morning light exposed the room.

Dawn and the open window had called the living birds; the dead lay on the floor.

Sickened, Nat went to the window and stared out across his patch of garden to the fields.

It was bitter cold, and the ground had all the hard, black look of the frost that the east wind brings. The sea, fiercer now with turning tide, whitecapped and steep, broke harshly in the bay. Of the birds there was no sign.

Nat shut the window and the door of the small bedroom and went back across the passage to his own room.

His wife sat up in bed, one child asleep beside her; the smaller one in her arms, his face bandaged.

"He's sleeping now," she whispered. "Something must have cut him; there was blood at the corners of his eyes. Jill said it was the birds. She said she woke up and the birds were in the room."

His wife looked up at Nat, searching his face for confirmation. She looked terrified, bewildered. He did not want her to know that he also was shaken, dazed almost, by the events of the past few hours.

"There are birds in there," he said. "Dead birds, nearly fifty of them."

He sat down on the bed beside his wife.

"It's the hard weather," he said. "It must be that; it's the hard weather. They aren't the birds, maybe, from around here. They've been driven down from upcountry."

"But Nat," whispered his wife, "it's only this night that the weather turned. They can't be hungry yet. There's food for them out there in the fields."

"It's the weather," repeated Nat. "I tell you, it's the weather."

His face, too, was drawn and tired, like hers. They stared at one another for a while without speaking.

Nat went to the window and looked out. The sky was hard and leaden, and the brown hills that had gleamed in the sun the day before looked dark and bare. Black winter had descended in a single night.

The children were awake now. Jill was chattering, and young Johnny was crying once again. Nat heard his wife's voice, soothing, comforting them as he went downstairs.

Presently they came down. He had breakfast ready for them.

"Did you drive away the birds?" asked Jill.

"Yes, they've all gone now," Nat said. "It was the east wind brought them in."

"I hope they won't come again," said Jill.

"I'll walk with you to the bus," Nat said to her.

Jill seemed to have forgotten her experience of the night before. She danced ahead of him, chasing the leaves, her face rosy under her pixy hood.

All the while Nat searched the hedgerows for the birds, glanced over them to the fields beyond, looked to the small wood above the farm where the rooks and jackdaws gathered; he saw none. Soon the bus came ambling up the hill.

Nat saw Jill onto the bus, then turned and walked back toward the farm. It was not his day for work, but he wanted to satisfy himself that all was well. He went to the back door of the farmhouse; he heard Mrs. Trigg singing, the wireless making a background for her song.

"Are you there, missus?" Nat called.

She came to the door, beaming, broad, a good-tempered woman.

"Hullo, Mr. Hocken," she said. "Can you tell me where this cold is coming from? Is it Russia? I've never seen such a change. And it's going on, the wireless says. Something to do with the Arctic Circle."

"We didn't turn on the wireless this morning," said Nat. "Fact is, we had trouble in the night."

"Kiddies poorly?"

"No." He hardly knew how to explain. Now, in daylight, the battle of the birds would sound absurd.

He tried to tell Mrs. Trigg what had happened, but he could see from her eyes that she thought his story was the result of nightmare following a heavy meal.

"Sure they were real birds?" she said, smiling.

"Mrs. Trigg," he said, "there are fifty dead birds—robins, wrens, 'I suppose the weather brought them; once in the bedroom they went for me; they tried to go for young Johnny's eyes.'"

Mrs. Trigg stared at him doubtfully. "Well, now," she answered. "I suppose the weather brought them; once in the bedroom they wouldn't know where they were. Foreign birds maybe, from that Arctic Circle."

"No," said Nat. "They were the birds you see about here every day."

"Funny thing," said Mrs. Trigg. "No explaining it, really. You ought to write up and ask the *Guardian*. They'd have some answer for it. Well, I must be getting on."

Nat walked back along the lane to his cottage. He found his wife in the kitchen with young Johnny.

"See anyone?" she asked.

"Mrs. Trigg," he answered. "I don't think she believed me. Anyway, nothing wrong up there."

"You might take the birds away," she said. "I daren't go into the room to make the beds until you do. I'm scared."

"Nothing to scare you now," said Nat. "They're dead, aren't they?"

He went up with a sack and dropped the stiff bodies into it, one by one. Yes, there were fifty of them all told. Just the ordinary, common birds of the hedgerow; nothing as large even as a thrush. It must have been fright that made them act the way they did.

He took the sack out into the garden and was faced with a fresh problem. The ground was frozen solid, yet no snow had fallen; nothing had happened in the past hours but the coming of the east wind. It was unnatural, queer. He could see the whitecapped seas breaking in the bay. He decided to take the birds to the shore and bury them.

When he reached the beach below the headland, he could scarcely stand, the force of the east wind was so strong. It was low tide; he crunched his way over the shingle to the softer sand and then, his back to the wind, opened up his sack.

He ground a pit in the sand with his heel, meaning to drop the birds into it; but as he did so, the force of the wind lifted them as though in flight again, and they were blown away from him along the beach, tossed like feathers, spread and scattered.

The tide will take them when it turns, he said to himself.

He looked out to sea and watched the crested breakers, combing green. They rose stiffly, curled, and broke again; and because it was ebb tide, the roar was distant, more remote, lacking the sound and thunder of the flood.

Then he saw them. The gulls. Out there, riding the seas.

What he had thought at first were the whitecaps of the waves were gulls. Hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands.

They rose and fell in the troughs of the seas, heads to the wind, like a mighty fleet at anchor, waiting on the tide.

Nat turned; leaving the beach, he climbed the steep path home.

Someone should know of this. Someone should be told. Something was happening, because of the east wind and the weather, that he did not understand.

As he drew near the cottage, his wife came to meet him at the door. She called to him, excited. "Nat," she said, "it's on the wire-

less. They've just read out a special news bulletin. It's not only here, it's everywhere. In London, all over the country. Something has happened to the birds. Come listen; they're repeating it."

Together they went into the kitchen to listen to the announcement.

"Statement from the Home Office, at eleven A.M. this morning. Reports from all over the country are coming in hourly about the vast quantity of birds flocking above towns, villages, and outlying districts, causing obstruction and damage and even attacking individuals. It is thought that the Arctic air stream at present covering The British Isles is causing birds to migrate south in immense numbers, and that intense hunger may drive these birds to attack human beings. Householders are warned to see to their windows, doors, and chimneys, and to take reasonable precautions for the safety of their children. A further statement will be issued later."

A kind of excitement seized Nat. He looked at his wife in triumph. "There you are," he said. "I've been telling myself all morning there's something wrong. And just now, down on the beach, I looked out to sea and there were gulls, thousands of them, riding on the sea, waiting."

"What are they waiting for, Nat?" she asked.

He stared at her. "I don't know," he said slowly.

He went over to the drawer where he kept his hammer and other tools.

"What are you going to do, Nat?"

"See to the windows and the chimneys, like they tell you to."

"You think they would break in with the windows shut? Those wrens and robins and such? Why, how could they?"

He did not answer. He was not thinking of the robins and the wrens. He was thinking of the gulls.

He went upstairs and worked there the rest of the morning, boarding the windows of the bedrooms, filling up the chimney bases.

"Dinner's ready." His wife called him from the kitchen.

"All right. Coming down."

When dinner was over and his wife was washing up, Nat switched on the one o'clock news. The same announcement was repeated, but the news bulletin enlarged upon it. "The flocks of birds have caused dislocation in all areas," said the announcer, "and in London the mass was so dense at ten o'clock this morning that it seemed like a vast black cloud. The birds settled on rooftops, on window ledges, and on chimneys. The species included blackbird, thrush, the com-

mon house sparrow, and as might be expected in the metropolis, a vast quantity of pigeons, starlings, and that frequenter of the London river, the black-headed gull. The sight was so unusual that traffic came to a standstill in many thoroughfares, work was abandoned in shops and offices, and the streets and pavements were crowded with people standing about to watch the birds."

The announcer's voice was smooth and suave; Nat had the impression that he treated the whole business as he would an elaborate joke. There would be others like him, hundreds of them, who did not know what it was to struggle in darkness with a flock of birds.

Nat switched off the wireless. He got up and started work on the kitchen windows. His wife watched him, young Johnny at her heels.

"What they ought to do," she said, "is to call the Army out and shoot the birds."

"Let them try," said Nat. "How'd they set about it?"

"I don't know. But something should be done. They ought to do something."

Nat thought to himself that "they" were no doubt considering the problem at that very moment, but whatever "they" decided to do in London and the big cities would not help them here, nearly three hundred miles away.

"How are we off for food?" he asked.

"It's shopping day tomorrow, you know that. I don't keep uncooked food about. Butcher doesn't call till the day after. But I can bring back something when I go in tomorrow."

Nat did not want to scare her. He looked in the larder for himself and in the cupboard where she kept her tins.

They could hold out for a couple of days.

He went on hammering the boards across the kitchen windows. Candles. They were low on candles. That must be another thing she meant to buy tomorrow. Well, they must go early to bed tonight. That was, if—

He got up and went out the back door and stood in the garden, looking down toward the sea.

There had been no sun all day, and now, at barely three o'clock, a kind of darkness had already come; the sky was sullen, heavy, colorless like salt. He could hear the vicious sea drumming on the rocks.

He walked down the path halfway to the beach. And then he stopped. He could see the tide had turned. The gulls had risen. They were circling, hundreds of them, thousands of them, lifting their wings against the wind.

It was the gulls that made the darkening of the sky.

And they were silent. They just went on soaring and circling, rising, falling, trying their strength against the wind. Nat turned. He ran up the path back to the cottage.

"I'm going for Jill," he said to his wife.

"What's the matter?" she asked. "You've gone quite white."

"Keep Johnny inside," he said. "Keep the door shut. Light up now and draw the curtains."

"It's only gone three," she said.

"Never mind. Do what I tell you."

He looked inside the tool shed and took the hoe.

He started walking up the lane to the bus stop. Now and again he glanced back over his shoulder; and he could see the gulls had risen higher now, their circles were broader, they were spreading out in huge formation across the sky.

He hurried on. Although he knew the bus would not come before four o'clock, he had to hurry.

He waited at the top of the hill. There was half an hour still to go.

The east wind came whipping across the fields from the higher ground. In the distance he could see the clay hills, white and clean against the heavy pallor of the sky.

Something black rose from behind them, like a smudge at first, then widening, becoming deeper. The smudge became a cloud; and the cloud divided again into five other clouds, spreading north, east, south, and west; and then they were not clouds at all but birds.

He watched them travel across the sky, within two or three hundred feet of him. He knew, from their speed, that they were bound inland; they had no business with the people here on the peninsula. They were rocks, crows, jackdaws, magpies, jays, all birds that usually preyed upon the smaller species, but bound this afternoon on some other mission.

He went to the telephone call box, stepped inside, lifted the receiver. The exchange would pass the message on. "I'm speaking from the highway," he said, "by the bus stop. I want to report large formations of birds traveling upcountry. The gulls are also forming in the bay."

"All right," answered the voice, laconic, weary.

"You'll be sure and pass this message on to the proper quarter?"

"Yes. Yes." Impatient now, fed up. The buzzing note resumed.

She's another, thought Nat. She doesn't care.

The bus came lumbering up the hill. Jill climbed out.

"What's the hoe for, Dad?"

"I just brought it along," he said. "Come on now, let's get home. It's cold; no hanging about. See how fast you can run."

He could see the gulls now, still silent, circling the fields, coming in toward the land.

"Look, Dad; look over there. Look at all the gulls."

"Yes. Hurry now."

"Where are they flying to? Where are they going?"

"Upcountry, I dare say. Where it's warmer."

He seized her hand and dragged her after him along the lane.

"Don't go so fast. I can't keep up."

The gulls were copying the rooks and the crows. They were spreading out, in formation, across the sky. They headed, in bands of thousands, to the four compass points.

"Dad, what is it? What are the gulls doing?"

They were not intent upon their flight, as the crows, as the jackdaws, had been. They still circled overhead. Nor did they fly so high. It was as though they waited upon some signal; as though some decision had yet to be given.

"I wish the gulls would go away." Jill was crying. "I don't like them. They're coming closer to the lane."

He started running, swinging Jill after him. As they went past the farm turning, he saw the farmer backing his car into the garage. Nat called to him.

"Can you give us a lift?" he said.

Mr. Trigg turned in the driver's seat and stared at them. Then a smile came to his cheerful, rubicund face. "It looks as though we're in for some fun," he said. "Have you seen the gulls? Jim and I are going to take a crack at them. Everyone's gone bird crazy, talking of nothing else. I hear you were troubled in the night. Want a gun?"

Nat shook his head.

The small car was packed, but there was room for Jill on the back seat.

"I don't want a gun," said Nat, "but I'd be obliged if you'd run Jill home. She's scared of the birds."

"Okay," said the farmer. "I'll take her home. Why don't you stop behind and join the shooting match? We'll make the feathers fly."

Jill climbed in, and turning the car, the driver sped up the lane. Nat followed after. Trigg must be crazy. What use was a gun against a sky of birds?

They were coming in now toward the farm, circling lower in the sky. The farm, then, was their target. Nat increased his pace toward his own cottage. He saw the farmer's car turn and come back along the lane. It drew up beside him with a jerk.

"The kid has run inside," said the farmer. "Your wife was watching for her. Well, what do you make of it? They're saying in town the Russians have done it. The Russians have poisoned the birds."

"How could they do that?" asked Nat.

"Don't ask me. You know how stories get around."

"Have you boarded your windows?" asked Nat.

"No. Lot of nonsense. I've had more to do today than to go round boarding up my windows."

"I'd board them now if I were you."

"Garn. You're windy. Like to come to our place to sleep?"

"No, thanks all the same."

"All right. See you in the morning. Give you a gull breakfast."

The farmer grinned and turned his car to the farm entrance. Nat hurried on. Past the little wood, past the old barn, and then across the stile to the remaining field. As he jumped the stile, he heard the whirl of wings. A black-backed gull dived down at him from the sky. It missed, swerved in flight, and rose to dive again. In a moment it was joined by others—six, seven, a dozen.

Nat dropped his hoe. The hoe was useless. Covering his head with his arms, he ran toward the cottage.

They kept coming at him from the air—noiseless, silent, save for the beating wings. The terrible, fluttering wings. He could feel the blood on his hands, his wrists, upon his neck. If only he could keep them from his eyes. Nothing else mattered.

With each dive, with each attack, they became bolder. And they had no thought for themselves. When they dived low and missed, they crashed, bruised and broken, on the ground.

As Nat ran he stumbled, kicking their spent bodies in front of him.

He found the door and hammered upon it with his bleeding hands. "Let me in," he shouted. "It's Nat. Let me in."

Then he saw the gannet, poised for the dive, above him in the sky.

The gulls circled, retired, soared, one with another, against the wind.

Only the gannet remained. One single gannet, above him in the sky. Its wings folded suddenly to its body. It dropped like a stone.

Nat screamed; and the door opened.

He stumbled across the threshold, and his wife threw her weight against the door.

They heard the thud of the gannet as it fell.

His wife dressed his wounds. They were not deep. The backs of his hands had suffered most, and his wrists. Had he not worn a cap, the birds would have reached his head. As for the gannet—the gannet could have split his skull.

The children were crying, of course. They had seen the blood on their father's hands.

"It's all right now," he told them. "I'm not hurt."

His wife was ashen. "I saw them overhead," she whispered. "They began collecting just as Jill ran in with Mr. Trigg. I shut the door fast, and it jammed. That's why I couldn't open it at once when you came."

"Thank God the birds waited for me," he said. "Jill would have fallen at once. They're flying inland, thousands of them. Rooks, crows, all the bigger birds. I saw them from the bus stop. They're making for the towns."

"But what can they do, Nat?"

"They'll attack. Go for everyone out in the streets. Then they'll try the windows, the chimneys."

"Why don't the authorities do something? Why don't they get the Army, get machine guns?"

"There's been no time. Nobody's prepared. We'll hear what they have to say on the six o'clock news."

"I can hear the birds," Jill said. "Listen, Dad."

Nat listened. Muffled sounds came from the windows, from the door. Wings brushing the surface, sliding, scraping, seeking a way of entry. The sound of many bodies pressed together, shuffling on the sills. Now and again came a thud, a crash, as some bird dived and fell.

Some of them will kill themselves that way, he thought, but not enough. Never enough.

"All right," he said aloud. "I've got boards over the windows, Jill. The birds can't get in."

He went and examined all the windows. He found wedges—pieces of old tin, strips of wood and metal—and fastened them at the sides of the windows to reinforce the boards.

His hammering helped to deafen the sound of the birds, the shuf-

fling, the tapping, and—more ominous—the splinter of breaking glass.

“Turn on the wireless,” he said.

He went upstairs to the bedrooms and reinforced the windows there. Now he could hear the birds on the roof—the scraping of claws, a sliding, jostling sound.

He decided the whole family must sleep in the kitchen and keep up the fire. He was afraid of the bedroom chimneys. The boards he had placed at their bases might give way. In the kitchen they would be safe because of the fire.

He would have to make a joke of it. Pretend to the children they were playing camp. If the worst happened and the birds forced an entry by way of the bedroom chimneys, it would be hours, days perhaps, before they could break down the doors. The birds would be imprisoned in the bedrooms. They could do no harm there. Crowded together, they would stifle and die. He began to bring the mattresses downstairs.

At sight of them, his wife's eyes widened in apprehension.

“All right,” he said cheerfully. “We'll all sleep together in the kitchen tonight. More cozy, here by the fire. Then we won't be worried by those silly old birds tapping at the windows.”

He made the children help him rearrange the furniture, and he took the precaution of moving the dresser against the windows.

We're safe enough now, he thought. We're snug and tight. We can hold out. It's just the food that worries me. Food and coal for the fire. We've enough for two or three days, not more. By that time—

No use thinking ahead as far as that. And they'd be given directions on the wireless.

And now, in the midst of many problems, he realized that only dance music was coming over the air. He knew the reason. The usual programs had been abandoned; this only happened at exceptional times.

At six o'clock the records ceased. The time signal was given. There was a pause, and then the announcer spoke. His voice was solemn, grave. Quite different from midday.

“This is London,” he said. “A national emergency was proclaimed at four o'clock this afternoon. Measures are being taken to safeguard the lives and property of the population, but it must be understood that these are not easy to effect immediately, owing to the unforeseen and unparalleled nature of the present crisis. Every householder

must take precautions about his own building. Where several people live together, as in flats and hotels, they must unite to do the utmost that they can to prevent entry. It is absolutely imperative that every individual stay indoors tonight.

"The birds, in vast numbers, are attacking anyone on sight, and have already begun an assault upon buildings; but these, with due care, should be impenetrable.

"The population is asked to remain calm.

"Owing to the exceptional nature of the emergency, there will be no further transmission from any broadcasting station until seven A.M. tomorrow."

They played "God Save the Queen." Nothing more happened.

Nat switched off the set. He looked at his wife. She stared back at him.

"We'll have supper early," suggested Nat. "Something for a treat—toasted cheese, eh? Something we all like."

He winked and nodded at his wife. He wanted the look of dread, of apprehension, to leave her face.

He helped with the supper, whistling, singing, making as much clatter as he could. It seemed to him that the shuffling and the tapping were not so intense as they had been at first, and presently he went up to the bedrooms and listened. He no longer heard the jostling for place upon the roof.

They've got reasoning powers, he thought. They know it's hard to break in here. They'll try elsewhere.

Supper passed without incident. Then, when they were clearing away, they heard a new sound, a familiar droning.

His wife looked up at him, her face alight.

"It's planes," she said. "They're sending out planes after the birds. That will get them. Isn't that gunfire? Can't you hear guns?"

It might be gunfire, out at sea. Nat could not tell. Big naval guns might have some effect upon the gulls out at sea, but the gulls were inland now. The guns couldn't shell the shore because of the population.

"It's good, isn't it," said his wife, "to hear the planes?"

Catching her enthusiasm, Jill jumped up and down with Johnny. "The planes will get the birds."

Just then they heard a crash about two miles distant. Followed by a second, then a third. The droning became more distant, passed away out to sea.

"What was that?" asked his wife.

"I don't know," answered Nat. He did not want to tell her that the sound they had heard was the crashing of aircraft.

It was, he had no doubt, a gamble on the part of the authorities to send out reconnaissance forces, but they might have known the gamble was suicidal. What could aircraft do against birds that flung themselves to death against propeller and fuselage but hurtle to the ground themselves?

"Where have the planes gone, Dad?" asked Jill.

"Back to base," he said. "Come on now, time to tuck down for bed."

There was no further drone of aircraft, and the naval guns had ceased. Waste of life and effort, Nat said to himself. We can't destroy enough of them that way. Cost too heavy. There's always gas. Maybe they'll try spraying with gas, mustard gas. We'll be warned first, of course, if they do. There's one thing, the best brains of the country will be on it tonight.

Upstairs in the bedrooms all was quiet. No more scraping and stabbing at the windows. A lull in battle. The wind hadn't dropped, though. Nat could still hear it roaring in the chimneys. And the sea breaking down on the shore.

Then he remembered the tide. The tide would be on the turn. Maybe the lull in battle was because of the tide. There was some law the birds obeyed, and it had to do with the east wind and the tide.

He glanced at his watch. Nearly eight o'clock. It must have gone high water an hour ago. That explained the lull. The birds attacked with the flood tide.

He reckoned the time limit in his head. They had six hours to go without attack. When the tide turned again, around 1:20 in the morning, the birds would come back.

He called softly to his wife and whispered to her that he would go out and see how they were faring at the farm, see if the telephone was still working there so that they might get news from the exchange.

"You're not to go," she said at once, "and leave me alone with the children. I can't stand it."

"All right," he said, "all right. I'll wait till morning. And we can get the wireless bulletin then, too, at seven. But when the tide ebbs again, I'll try for the farm; they may let us have bread and potatoes."

His mind was busy again, planning against emergency. They

would not have milked, of course, this evening. The cows would be standing by the gate, waiting; the household would be inside, batten down behind boards as they were here at the cottage.

That is, if they had had time to take precautions.

Softly, stealthily, he opened the back door and looked outside.

It was pitch-dark. The wind was blowing harder than ever, coming in steady gusts, icy, from the sea.

He kicked at the step. It was heaped with birds. These were the suicides, the divers, the ones with broken necks. Wherever he looked, he saw dead birds. The living had flown seaward with the turn of the tide. The gulls would be riding the seas now, as they had done in the forenoon.

In the far distance on the hill, something was burning. One of the aircraft that had crashed; the fire, fanned by the wind, had set light to a stack.

He looked at the bodies of the birds. He had a notion that if he stacked them, one upon the other, on the window sills, they would be added protection against the next attack.

Not much, perhaps, but something. The bodies would have to be clawed at, pecked and dragged aside before the living birds gained purchase on the sills and attacked the panes.

He set to work in the darkness. It was queer. He hated touching the dead birds, but he went on with his work. He noticed grimly that every windowpane was shattered. Only the boards had kept the birds from breaking in.

He stuffed the cracked panes with the bleeding bodies of the birds and felt his stomach turn. When he had finished, he went back into the cottage and barricaded the kitchen door, making it doubly secure.

His wife had made him cocoa; he drank it thirstily. He was very tired. "All right," he said, smiling, "don't worry. We'll get through."

He lay down on his mattress and closed his eyes.

He dreamed uneasily because, through his dreams, ran the dread of something forgotten. Some piece of work that he should have done. It was connected, in some way, with the burning aircraft.

It was his wife, shaking his shoulder, who awoke him finally.

"They've begun," she sobbed. "They've started this last hour. I can't listen to it any longer alone. There's something smells bad too, something burning."

Then he remembered. He had forgotten to make up the fire.

The fire was smoldering, nearly out. He got up swiftly and lighted the lamp.

The hammering had started at the windows and the door, but it was not that he minded now. It was the smell of singed feathers.

The smell filled the kitchen. He knew what it was at once. The birds were coming down the chimney, squeezing their way down to the kitchen range.

He got sticks and paper and put them on the embers, then reached for the can of kerosene.

"Stand back," he shouted to his wife. He threw some of the kerosene onto the fire.

The flame roared up the pipe, and down into the fire fell the scorched, blackened bodies of the birds.

The children waked, crying. "What is it?" asked Jill. "What's happened?"

Nat had no time to answer her. He was raking the bodies from the chimney, clawing them out onto the floor.

The flames would drive away the living birds from the chimney top. The lower joint was the difficulty though. It was choked with the smoldering, helpless bodies of the birds caught by fire.

He scarcely heeded the attack on the windows and the door. Let them beat their wings, break their backs, lose their lives, in the desperate attempt to force an entry into his home. They would not break in.

"Stop crying," he called to the children. "There's nothing to be afraid of. Stop crying."

He went on raking out the burning, smoldering bodies as they fell into the fire.

This'll fetch them, he said to himself. The draft and the flames together. We're all right as long as the chimney doesn't catch.

Amid the tearing at the window boards came the sudden homely striking of the kitchen clock. Three o'clock.

A little more than four hours to go. He could not be sure of the exact time of high water. He reckoned the tide would not turn much before half past seven.

He waited by the range. The flames were dying. But no more blackened bodies fell from the chimney. He thrust his poker up as far as it could go and found nothing.

The danger of the chimney's being choked up was over. It could not happen again, not if the fire was kept burning day and night.

I'll have to get more fuel from the farm tomorrow, he thought. I can do all that with the ebb tide. It can be worked; we can fetch

what we need when the tide's turned. We've just got to adapt ourselves, that's all.

They drank tea and cocoa, ate slices of bread. Only half a loaf left, Nat noticed. Never mind, though; they'd get by.

If they could hang on like this until seven, when the first news bulletin came through, they would not have done too badly.

"Give us a smoke," he said to his wife. "It will clear away the smell of the scorched feathers."

"There's only two left in the packet," she said. "I was going to buy you some."

"I'll have one," he said.

He sat with one arm around his wife and one around Jill, with Johnny on his lap, the blankets heaped about them on the mattress.

"You can't help admiring the beggars," he said. "They've got persistency. You'd think they'd tire of the game, but not a bit of it."

Admiration was hard to sustain. The tapping went on and on; and a new, rasping note struck Nat's ear, as though a sharper beak than any hitherto had come to take over from its fellows.

He tried to remember the names of birds; he tried to think which species would go for this particular job.

It was not the tap of the woodpecker. That would be light and frequent. This was more serious; if it continued long, the wood would splinter as the glass had done.

Then he remembered the hawks. Could the hawks have taken over from the gulls? Were there buzzards now upon the sills, using talons as well as beaks? Hawks, buzzards, kestrels, falcons; he had forgotten the birds of prey. He had forgotten the gripping power of the birds of prey. Three hours to go; and while they waited, the sound of the splintering wood, the talons tearing at the wood.

Nat looked about him, seeing what furniture he could destroy to fortify the door.

The windows were safe because of the dresser. He was not certain of the door. He went upstairs; but when he reached the landing, he paused and listened.

There was a soft patter on the floor of the children's bedroom. The birds had broken through.

The other bedroom was still clear. He brought out the furniture to pile at the head of the stairs should the door of the children's bedroom go.

"Come down, Nat. What are you doing?" called his wife.

"I won't be long," he shouted. "I'm just making everything ship-shape up here."

He did not want her to come. He did not want her to hear the pattering in the children's bedroom, the brushing of those wings against the door.

After he suggested breakfast, he found himself watching the clock, gazing at the hands that went so slowly around the dial. If his theory was not correct, if the attack did not cease with the turn of the tide, he knew they were beaten. They could not continue through the long day without air, without rest, without fuel.

A crackling in his ears drove away the sudden, desperate desire for sleep.

"What is it? What now?" he said sharply.

"The wireless," said his wife. "I've been watching the clock. It's nearly seven."

The comfortable crackling of the wireless brought new life.

They waited. The kitchen clock struck seven.

The crackling continued. Nothing else. No chimes. No music.

They waited until a quarter past. No news bulletin came through.

"We heard wrong," he said. "They won't be broadcasting until eight o'clock."

They left the wireless switched on. Nat thought of the battery, wondered how much power was left in the battery. If it failed, they would not hear the instructions.

"It's getting light," whispered his wife. "I can't see it but I can feel it. And listen! The birds aren't hammering so loud now."

She was right. The rasping, tearing sound grew fainter every moment. So did the shuffling, the jostling for place upon the step, upon the sills. The tide was on the turn.

By eight there was no sound at all. Only the wind. And the crackling of the wireless. The children, lulled at last by the stillness, fell asleep.

At half past eight Nat switched the wireless off.

"We'll miss the news," said his wife.

"There isn't going to be any news," said Nat. "We've got to depend upon ourselves."

He went to the door and slowly pulled away the barricades. He drew the bolts, and kicking the broken bodies from the step outside the door, breathed the cold air.

He had six working hours before him, and he knew he must reserve his strength to the utmost, not waste it in any way.

Food and light and fuel; these were the most necessary things. If he could get them, they could endure another night.

He stepped into the garden; and as he did so, he saw the living birds. The gulls had gone to ride the sea, as they had done before. They sought sea food and the buoyancy of the tide before they returned to the attack.

Not so the land birds. They waited, and watched.

Nat saw them on the hedgerows, on the soil, crowded in the trees, outside in the field—line upon line of birds, still, doing nothing. He went to the end of his small garden.

The birds did not move. They merely watched him.

I've got to get food, Nat said to himself. I've got to go to the farm to get food.

He went back to the cottage. He saw to the windows and the door.

"I'm going to the farm," he said.

His wife clung to him. She had seen the living birds from the open door.

"Take us with you," she begged. "We can't stay here alone. I'd rather die than stay here alone."

"Come on, then," he said. "Bring baskets and Johnny's pram. We can load up the pram."

They dressed against the biting wind. His wife put Johnny in the pram, and Nat took Jill's hand.

"The birds," Jill whimpered. "They're all out there in the fields."

"They won't hurt us," he said. "Not in the light."

They started walking across the field toward the stile, and the birds did not move. They waited, their heads turned to the wind.

When they reached the turning to the farm, Nat stopped and told his wife to wait in the shelter of the hedge with the two children. "But I want to see Mrs. Trigg," she protested. "There are lots of things we can borrow if they went to market yesterday, and—"

"Wait here," Nat interrupted. "I'll be back in a moment."

The cows were lowing, moving restlessly in the yard, and he could see a gap in the fence where the sheep had knocked their way through to roam unchecked in the front garden before the farmhouse.

No smoke came from the chimneys. Nat was filled with misgiving. He did not want his wife or the children to go down to the farm.

He went down alone, pushing his way through the herd of lowing cows, who turned this way and that, distressed, their udders full.

He saw the car standing by the gate. Not put away in the garage.

All the windows of the farmhouse were smashed. There were many dead gulls lying in the yard and around the house.

The living birds perched on the group of trees behind the farm and on the roof of the house. They were quite still. They watched him. Jim's body lay in the yard. What was left of it. His gun was beside him.

The door of the house was shut and bolted, but it was easy to push up a smashed window and climb through.

Trigg's body was close to the telephone. He must have been trying to get through to the exchange when the birds got him. The receiver was off the hook, and the instrument was torn from the wall.

No sign of Mrs. Trigg. She would be upstairs. Was it any use going up? Sickened, Nat knew what he would find there.

Thank God, he said to himself, there were no children.

He forced himself to climb the stairs, but halfway up he turned and descended again. He could see Mrs. Trigg's legs protruding from the open bedroom door. Beside her were the bodies of black-backed gulls and an umbrella, broken. It's no use doing anything, Nat thought. I've only got five hours; less than that. The Triggs would understand. I must load up with what I can find.

He tramped back to his wife and children.

"I'm going to fill up the car with stuff," he said. "We'll take it home and return for a fresh load."

"What about the Triggs?" asked his wife.

"They must have gone to friends," he said.

"Shall I come and help you then?"

"No, there's a mess down there. Cows and sheep all over the place. Wait; I'll get the car. You can sit in the car."

Her eyes watched his all the time he was talking. He believed she understood. Otherwise she certainly would have insisted on helping him find the bread and groceries.

They made three journeys altogether, to and from the farm, before he was satisfied they had everything they needed. It was surprising, once he started thinking, how many things were necessary. Almost the most important of all was planking for the windows. He had to go around searching for timber. He wanted to renew the boards on all the windows at the cottage.

On the final journey he drove the car to the bus stop and got out and went to the telephone box.

He waited a few minutes, jangling the hook. No good, though. The line was dead. He climbed onto a bank and looked over the country-

side, but there was no sign of life at all, nothing in the fields but the waiting, watching birds.

Some of them slept; he could see their beaks tucked into their feathers.

You'd think they'd be feeding, he said to himself, not just standing that way.

Then he remembered. They were gorged with food. They had eaten their fill during the night. That was why they did not move this morning.

He lifted his face to the sky. It was colorless, gray. The bare trees looked bent and blackened by the east wind.

The cold did not affect the living birds, waiting out there in the fields.

This is the time they ought to get them, Nat said to himself. They're a sitting target now. They must be doing this all over the country. Why don't our aircraft take off now and spray them with mustard gas? What are all our chaps doing? They must know; they must see for themselves.

He went back to the car and got into the driver's seat.

"Go quickly past that second gate," whispered his wife. "The postman's lying there. I don't want Jill to see."

It was a quarter to one by the time they reached the cottage. Only an hour to go.

"Better have dinner," said Nat. "Hot up something for yourself and the children, some of that soup. I've no time to eat now. I've got to unload all this stuff from the car."

He got everything inside the cottage. It could be sorted later. Give them all something to do during the long hours ahead.

First he must see to the windows and the door.

He went around the cottage methodically, testing every window and the door. He climbed onto the roof also, and fixed boards across every chimney except the kitchen's.

The cold was so intense he could hardly bear it, but the job had to be done. Now and again he looked up, searching the sky for aircraft. None came. As he worked, he cursed the inefficiency of the authorities.

He paused, his work on the bedroom chimney finished, and looked out to sea. Something was moving out there. Something gray and white among the breakers.

"Good old Navy," he said. "They never let us down. They're coming down channel; they're turning into the bay."

He waited, straining his eyes toward the sea. He was wrong, though. The Navy was not there. It was the gulls rising from the sea. And the massed flocks in the fields, with ruffled feathers, rose in formation from the ground and, wing to wing, soared upward to the sky.

The tide had turned again.

Nat climbed down the ladder and went inside the cottage. The family were at dinner. It was a little after two.

He bolted the door, put up the barricade, and lighted the lamp.

"It's nighttime," said young Johnny.

His wife had switched on the wireless once again. The crackling sound came, but nothing else.

"I've been all round the dial," she said, "foreign stations and all. I can't get anything but the crackling."

"Maybe they have the same trouble," he said. "Maybe it's the same right through Europe."

They ate in silence.

The tapping began at the windows, at the door, the rustling, the jostling, the pushing for position on the sills. The first thud of the suicide gulls upon the step.

When he had finished dinner, Nat planned, he would put the supplies away, stack them neatly, get everything shipshape. The boards were strong against the windows and across the chimneys. The cottage was filled with stores, with fuel, with all they needed for the next few days.

His wife could help him, and the children too. They'd tire themselves out between now and a quarter to nine, when the tide would ebb; then he'd tuck them down on their mattresses, see that they slept good and sound until three in the morning.

He had a new scheme for the windows, which was to fix barbed wire in front of the boards. He had brought a great roll of it from the farm. The nuisance was, he'd have to work at this in the dark, when the lull came between nine and three. Pity he had not thought of it before. Still, as long as the wife and kids slept—that was the main thing.

The smaller birds were at the windows now. He recognized the light tap-tapping of their beaks and the soft brush of their wings.

The hawks ignored the windows. They concentrated their attack upon the door.

Nat listened to the tearing sound of splintering wood, and wondered how many million years of memory were stored in those little

brains, behind the stabbing beaks, the piercing eyes, now giving them this instinct to destroy mankind with all the deft precision of machines.

"I'll smoke that last cigarette," he said to his wife. "Stupid of me. It was the one thing I forgot to bring back from the farm."

He reached for it, switched on the crackling wireless.

He threw the empty packet onto the fire and watched it burn.

MAN WITH A PROBLEM

Donald Honig

With dull curiosity he watched the crowds gathering far below on the sidewalk. They had become a sea of bobbing upturned faces. It was rapidly increasing in size, swelling out into the street. The hurrying newcomers moved with insect-like briskness, drawn into the rest as if by magnetic tides. The traffic was beginning to back up with a cacophony of agitated horn sounds. It all looked very tiny and mysterious and incredible from twenty-six stories up. The sounds that reached him were faint, but the excitement in them unmistakable.

He was paying little heed to the startled, gasping faces that kept popping in and out of the window to gape or plead. First it had been a bellhop, staring with a disapproving look, crinkling his nose; then an elevator operator who in a hard gravelly voice had demanded to know what this was all about.

He looked at the elevator operator's face. "What do you think it is all about?" he asked calmly.

"You gonna jump?" the man asked, intrigued.

"Go away," the man on the ledge said irascibly and looked down at the streets. The traffic was still flowing quietly, undisturbed; he had not been noticed yet.

"You won't walk away from a jump like that," the elevator man growled as his head ducked in.

A moment later, the head of the assistant manager poked through the window, the curtains flying around his distinguished, clean-shaven, rather indignant face.

"I beg your pardon," the assistant manager said.

The man waved him away.

"You're contemplating a very foolish thing," the assistant manager said, smug and comfortable in what he knew was unassailable logic.

The manager finally appeared, a fat red face that first looked down and then looked over at the man standing on the ledge, contemplating him for a moment.

"What are you doing out there?" the manager asked.

"I'm going to jump."

"Who are you? What's your name?"

"Carl Adams. And the reason why I'm doing this does not concern you."

"Think what you're doing, man," the manager said, his double chin trembling as he spoke, the strain of leaning forward out the window turning his face even redder.

"I've thought about it. Now go away and leave me alone."

The ledge was narrow, about eighteen inches in width. He stood between two windows, but there was no chance of reaching him from either of the windows. His back was against the wall, the bright sun falling full upon him. He had left his jacket inside. His white shirt was open at the throat and he quite resembled a figure prepared for execution.

Successive heads kept poking through the window. They spoke quietly to him, addressing him as Mr. Adams. Some spoke to him condescendingly, as though they had already convinced themselves he was a paranoid. They identified themselves as a physician, various hotel officials, a clergyman.

"Why not come in and talk it over?" the clergyman asked gently.

"There's nothing left to say," Adams said.

"Do you want me to come out and guide you back through the window?"

"If you or anyone else steps out," Adams said tersely, "so help me I'll jump."

"Can't you tell us your problem?"

"No."

"How can we help you then?"

"You can't. Go away."

For a while no one came to the window. And then a policeman's head popped out, looking at him for a moment, rather cynically.

"Hey, fella," the policeman said.

Adams looked at him, studying his face. "What do you want?" he asked.

"They called me up from downstairs. Said there's a guy up here threatening to take a dive. You're not really going to jump, are you?"

"Yes."

"What do you want to do that for?"

"It's my nature to do spectacular things."

"Hey, you got a sense of humor," the policeman said. He pushed his cap back on his head, sitting out on the window sill. "I like that. Want a cigarette?"

"No," Adams said.

The policeman shook a cigarette loose from his pack and lighted it. He inhaled deeply, expelling the smoke out into the sunshine where the wind snapped it up. "It's sure a pretty day, you know?"

"A good day to die," Adams said, looking at him.

"You're pretty morbid, fella. You got a family?"

"No. Do you?"

"I've got a wife."

"Well I have no one."

"That's too bad."

"Yes," Adams said. It wasn't so long ago that I did have a family, he thought. Only yesterday in fact. He had left the house in the morning to go to work and Karen had said good-by to him at the door (not kissed him, like she used to do; theirs was a kissless marriage now, but she was still his wife, he still loved only her, then and forever, would never give her the divorce, remained firm about that even though she said she would leave him eventually). And then he had come home at six o'clock and there was no wife any more, no love, nothing, only the empty bottle of sleeping pills and the note and the silent apartment . . . and Karen's body lying on the couch.

She had left the note on his pillow. It was written neatly, thoughtfully, explaining. Steve had told her he could not go away with her. Steve had deceived her. (It was that open, that blunt and brusque; she could mention Steve like that and he would know—as he had known for months now. Once he had even seen them together in a

neighborhood cabaret. There had been nothing surreptitious about it on her part. She told him that their marriage was over, spoke freely of Steve to him.)

He had gone out that night and walked the steets until after midnight, come back to the house and gone to sleep. He awoke that morning knowing immediately that his mind had been made up, that he was going to do this which he was now planning. He walked to this part of town and checked into the hotel, asking for a room near the top. He knew that what would happen after that would happen naturally, as a matter of course.

The streets were black with gaping, morbid, curious people now. The police had forced the throngs back, creating a great clearing directly below, should he decide to jump. He could see the firemen standing with their canvas life-net that looked like a round black pancake, a red circle painted in the center, but he knew that that could do nothing for a body hurtling twenty-six floors. There was no way his would-be rescuers could get at him. The fire ladders did not reach that high. A cornice protruding directly above him from the roof precluded any rescue attempts from that quarter.

"This is useless, senseless," a man was saying to him, his head leaning out of the window.

"You might think so," Adams said.

"Look, I'm a doctor," the man said earnestly. "I can help you."

"In which ward?"

"No wards, Mr. Adams. I promise you."

"It's too late now."

"If you jump then it will be too late. Now there's still time."

"You'd better go and attend to somebody who needs you, doctor. I don't need you."

The doctor disappeared. Adams stared critically down at the crowds. Already he had the strange, singular feeling of apartness, the nearness of death having established the gulf between him and other men. He was different now, apart and alone. All those people down there waiting, waiting. They'll see something all right, he thought. And those men in the room, he could hear them jabbering, plotting, scheming, figuring ways of seducing his mind, probably making frantic phone calls to experts on the subject of suicide.

He looked around, a face was out the window, staring at him. It was the clergyman again, a round, concerned, sincere face.

"Is there anything we can do for you?" the clergyman asked.

"No," he said.

"Do you want to come in now?"

"You're wasting your time, father."

"I'm not wasting my time."

"Yes you are. I'm not coming in."

"Do you want us to leave you alone to think?"

"Do as you please."

The clergyman's head disappeared. He was alone again. He watched the crowds, a soft amusement in his eyes now. The height did not bother him any longer, as it had when he had first stepped out onto the ledge. He felt close to the buildings that soared around him.

He wondered what intricate methods of rescue they were planning. Ropes, ladders, nets, dangling chairs. They would have to be very careful, he knew, because they were never quite certain what his state of mind was.

The policeman reappeared. Adams knew he would. He had been more responsive to him than any of the others and so the policeman would try again.

"You know, Adams," the officer said, sitting out on the window sill again, casually, "in a way you're doing me a favor."

"How's that?"

"Well, normally I'd be down there directing traffic. But because of you I'm up here taking it easy."

"Is that so?"

"That's so."

"You might just as well be up here. That traffic isn't moving anyway."

The policeman laughed. "That's right," he said. "Those people down there," he said with a gesture, "are expecting you to jump. They're looking forward to it."

Adams looked at him. "Looking forward to it?"

"Sure. They've made up their minds that you're going to jump and they want to see it. You going to disappoint them?"

Adams looked down, his eyes sweeping over the blocks and blocks of clustered people.

"You can't hear them up here," the policeman said, "but they're yelling for you to jump."

"Are they?"

"Uh-huh. They feel you owe them that for making them stand around here all afternoon."

"They're like a pack of hungry wolves," Adams said.

"That's right. Why give up your life just so they can have a thrill?" The policeman watched Adams' face, thought he detected a flicker of uncertainty. "Come on in," he said in a low, cajoling voice. "The hell with all those people."

"Maybe you're right," Adams said.

"Sure."

Adams wavered, his back coming away from the wall for a moment, then he fell back, covering his eyes for a second.

"What's the matter?" the policeman asked.

"I guess I'm a bit dizzy. Maybe you'd better give me a hand."

The policeman looked across the street, there were news photographers on the roof there, their cameras poised. It would make quite a picture for the morning papers.

"All right," the policeman said. "Hold on."

The crowd sent up a roar of thrill and terror when they saw the policeman climb out of the window and stand on the ledge, a few feet from the immobile man in the white shirt. They watched him edge along, carefully extending his hand.

Adams reached his hand toward the policeman's.

"I knew you would come up eventually," Adams said. "That's why I chose this place."

"What?" the policeman said, trying to maintain his balance on the narrow ledge.

"My name isn't Adams, Steve. Karen was my wife. Do you know that last night she . . ."

The terror spread over the policeman's face as he tried to draw back, but his hand was locked in the other's, and then there was a sudden lunge and sickening thrust and twist and as he began to topple softly out into space, toward the rising roar from the crowd, the last conscious thing he felt was the firm, hard hand gripping his like a vise.

THEY BITE

Anthony Boucher

There was no path, only the almost vertical ascent. Crumbled rock for a few yards, with the roots of sage finding their scanty life in the dry soil. Then jagged outcroppings of crude crags, sometimes with accidental footholds, sometimes with overhanging and untrustworthy branches of greasewood, sometimes with no aid to climbing but the leverage of your muscles and the ingenuity of your balance.

The sage was as drably green as the rock was drably brown. The only color was the occasional rosy spikes of a barrel cactus.

Hugh Tallant swung himself up on to the last pinnacle. It had a deliberate, shaped look about it—a petrified fortress of Lilliputians, a Gibraltar of pygmies. Tallant perched on its battlements and unslung his fieldglasses.

The desert valley spread below him. The tiny cluster of buildings that was Oasis, the exiguous cluster of palms that gave name to the town and shelter to his own tent and to the shack he was building, the dead-ended highway leading straightforwardly to nothing, the oiled roads diagraming the vacant blocks of an optimistic subdivision.

Tallant saw none of these. His glasses were fixed beyond the oasis

and the town of Oasis on the dry lake. The gliders were clear and vivid to him, and the uniformed men busy with them were as sharply and minutely visible as a nest of ants under glass. The training school was more than usually active. One glider in particular, strange to Tallant, seemed the focus of attention. Men would come and examine it and glance back at the older models in comparison.

Only the corner of Tallant's left eye was not preoccupied with the new glider. In that corner something moved, something little and thin and brown as the earth. Too large for a rabbit, much too small for a man. It darted across that corner of vision, and Tallant found gliders oddly hard to concentrate on.

He set down the bifocals and deliberately looked about him. His pinnacle surveyed the narrow, flat area of the crest. Nothing stirred. Nothing stood out against the sage and rock but one barrel of rosy spikes. He took up the glasses again and resumed his observations. When he was done, he methodically entered the results in the little black notebook.

His hand was still white. The desert is cold and often sunless in winter. But it was a firm hand, and as well trained as his eyes, fully capable of recording faithfully the designs and dimensions which they had registered so accurately.

Once his hand slipped, and he had to erase and redraw, leaving a smudge that displeased him. The lean, brown thing had slipped across the edge of his vision again. Going toward the east edge, he would swear, where that set of rocks jutted like the spines on the back of a stegosaur.

Only when his notes were completed did he yield to curiosity, and even then with cynical self-reproach. He was physically tired, for him an unusual state, from this daily climbing and from clearing the ground for his shack-to-be. The eye muscles play odd nervous tricks. There could be nothing behind the stegosaur's armor.

There was nothing. Nothing alive and moving. Only the torn and half-plucked carcass of a bird, which looked as though it had been gnawed by some small animal.

It was halfway down the hill—hill in Western terminology, though anywhere east of the Rockies it would have been considered a sizable mountain—that Tallant again had a glimpse of a moving figure.

But this was no trick of a nervous eye. It was not little nor thin nor brown. It was tall and broad and wore a loud red-and-black lumberjacket. It bellowed "Tallant!" in a cheerful and lusty voice.

Tallant drew near the man and said "Hello." He paused and added, "Your advantage, I think."

The man grinned broadly. "Don't know me? Well, I daresay ten years is a long time, and the California desert ain't exactly the Chinese rice fields. How's stuff? Still loaded down with Secrets for Sale?"

Tallant tried desperately not to react to that shot, but he stiffened a little. "Sorry. The prospector getup had me fooled. Good to see you again, Morgan."

The man's eyes had narrowed. "Just having my little joke." He smiled. "Of course you wouldn't have no serious reason for mountain-climbing around a glider school, now would you? And you'd kind of need fieldglasses to keep an eye on the pretty birdies."

"I'm out here for my health." Tallant's voice sounded unnatural even to himself.

"Sure, sure. You were always in it for your health. And come to think of it, my own health ain't been none too good lately. I've got me a little cabin way to hell-and-gone around here, and I do me a little prospecting now and then. And somehow it just strikes me, Tallant, like maybe I hit a pretty good lode today."

"Nonsense, old man. You can see—"

"I'd sure hate to tell any of them army men out at the field some of the stories I know about China and the kind of men I used to know out there. Wouldn't cotton to them stories a bit, the army wouldn't. But if I was to have a drink too many and get talkative-like—"

"Tell you what," Tallant suggested brusquely. "It's getting near sunset now, and my tent's chilly for evening visits. But drop around in the morning and we'll talk over old times. Is rum still your tipple?"

"Sure is. Kind of expensive now, you understand—"

"I'll lay some in. You can find the place easily—over by the oasis. And we . . . we might be able to talk about your prospecting, too."

Tallant's thin lips were set firm as he walked away.

The bartender opened a bottle of beer and plunked it on the damp-circled counter. "That'll be twenty cents," he said, then added as an afterthought, "Want a glass? Sometimes tourists do."

Tallant looked at the others sitting at the counter—the red-eyed and unshaven old man, the flight sergeant unhappily drinking a Coke—it was after army hours for beer—the young man with the long, dirty trench coat and the pipe and the new-looking brown beard—and saw no glasses. "I guess I won't be a tourist," he decided.

This was the first time Tallant had had a chance to visit the Des-

ert Sport Spot. It was as well to be seen around in a community. Otherwise people begin to wonder and say, "Who is that man out by the oasis? Why don't you ever see him any place?"

The Sport Spot was quiet that night. The four of them at the counter, two army boys shooting pool, and a half-dozen of the local men gathered about a round poker table, soberly and wordlessly cleaning a construction worker whose mind seemed more on his beer than on his cards.

"You just passing through?" the bartender asked sociably.

Tallant shook his head. "I'm moving in. When the Army turned me down for my lungs I decided I better do something about it. Heard so much about your climate here I thought I might as well try it."

"Sure thing," the bartender nodded. "You take up until they started this glider school, just about every other guy you meet in the desert is here for his health. Me, I had sinus, and look at me now. It's the air."

Tallant breathed the atmosphere of smoke and beer suds, but did not smile. "I'm looking forward to miracles."

"You'll get 'em. Whereabouts you staying?"

"Over that way a bit. The agent called it 'the old Carker place.'"

Tallant felt the curious listening silence and frowned. The bartender had started to speak and then thought better of it. The young man with the beard looked at him oddly. The old man fixed him with red and watery eyes that had a faded glint of pity in them. For a moment Tallant felt a chill that had nothing to do with the night air of the desert.

The old man drank his beer in quick gulps, and frowned as though trying to formulate a sentence. At last he wiped beer from his bristly lips and said, "You wasn't aiming to stay in the adobe, was you?"

"No. It's pretty much gone to pieces. Easier to rig me up a little shack than try to make the adobe livable. Meanwhile, I've got a tent."

"That's all right, then, mebbe. But mind you don't go poking around that there adobe."

"I don't think I'm apt to. But why not? Want another beer?"

The old man shook his head reluctantly and slid from his stool to the ground. "No thanks. I don't rightly know as I—"

"Yes?"

"Nothing. Thanks all the same." He turned and shuffled to the door.

Tallant smiled. "But why should I stay clear of the adobe?" he called after him.

The old man mumbled.

"What?"

"They bite," said the old man, and went out shivering into the night.

The bartender was back at his post. "I'm glad he didn't take that beer you offered him," he said. "Along about this time in the evening I have to stop serving him. For once he had the sense to quit."

Tallant pushed his own empty bottle forward. "I hope I didn't frighten him away?"

"Frighten? Well, mister, I think maybe that's just what you did do. He didn't want beer that sort of came, like you might say, from the old Carker place. Some of the old-timers here, they're funny that way."

Tallant grinned. "Is it haunted?"

"Not what you'd call haunted, no. No ghosts there that I ever heard of." He wiped the counter with a cloth, and seemed to wipe the subject away with it.

The flight sergeant pushed his Coke bottle away, hunted in his pocket for nickels, and went over to the pinball machine. The young man with the beard slid onto his vacant stool. "Hope old Jake didn't worry you," he said.

Tallant laughed. "I suppose every town has its deserted homestead with a grisly tradition. But this sounds a little different. No ghosts, and they bite. Do you know anything about it?"

"A little," the young man said seriously. "A little. Just enough to—"

Tallant was curious. "Have one on me and tell me about it."

The flight sergeant swore bitterly at the machine.

Beer gurgled through the beard. "You see," the young man began, "the desert's so big you can't be alone in it. Ever notice that? It's all empty and there's nothing in sight, but there's always something moving over there where you can't quite see it. It's something very dry and thin and brown, only when you look around it isn't there. Ever see it?"

"Optical fatigue—" Tallant began.

"Sure. I know. Every man to his own legend. There isn't a tribe of Indians hasn't got some way of accounting for it. You've heard

of the Watchers? And the twentieth-century white man comes along, and it's optical fatigue. Only in the nineteenth century things weren't quite the same, and there were the Carkers."

"You've got a special localized legend?"

"Call it that. You glimpse things out of the corner of your mind, same like you glimpse lean, dry things out of the corner of your eye. You encase 'em in solid circumstance and they're not so bad. That is known as the Growth of Legend. The Folk Mind in Action. You take the Carkers and the things you don't quite see and you put 'em together. And they bite."

Tallant wondered how long that beard had been absorbing beer. "And what were the Carkers?" he prompted politely.

"Ever hear of Sawney Bean? Scotland—reign of James First or maybe the Sixth, though I think Routhead's wrong on that for once. Or let's be more modern—ever hear of the Benders? Kansas in the 1870s? No? Ever hear of Procrustes? Or Polyphemus? Or Fee-fi-fo-fum?"

"There are ogres, you know. They're no legend. They're fact, they are. The inn where nine guests left for every ten that arrived, the mountain cabin that sheltered travelers from the snow, sheltered them all winter till the melting spring uncovered their bones, the lonely stretches of road that so many passengers traveled halfway—you'll find 'em everywhere. All over Europe and pretty much in this country too before communications became what they are. Profitable business. And it wasn't just the profit. The Benders made money, sure; but that wasn't why they killed all their victims as carefully as a kosher butcher. Sawney Bean got so he didn't give a damn about the profit; he just needed to lay in more meat for the winter.

"And think of the chances you'd have at an oasis."

"So these Carkers of yours were, as you call them, ogres?"

"Carkers, ogres—maybe they were Benders. The Benders were never seen alive, you know, after the townspeople found those curiously butchered bodies. There's a rumor they got this far West. And the time checks pretty well. There wasn't any town here in the eighties. Just a couple of Indian families, last of a dying tribe living on at the oasis. They vanished after the Carkers moved in. That's not so surprising. The white race is a sort of super-ogre, anyway. Nobody worried about them. But they used to worry about why so many travelers never got across this stretch of desert. The travelers used to stop over at the Carkers, you see, and somehow they often never got any farther. Their wagons'd be found maybe fifteen miles be-

yond in the desert. Sometimes they found the bones, too, parched and white. Gnawed-looking, they said sometimes."

"And nobody ever did anything about these Carkers?"

"Oh, sure. We didn't have King James Sixth—only I still think it was First—to ride up on a great white horse for a gesture, but twice army detachments came here and wiped them all out."

"Twice? One wiping-out would do for most families." Tallant smiled.

"Uh-huh. That was no slip. They wiped out the Carkers twice because you see once didn't do any good. They wiped 'em out and still travelers vanished and still there were gnawed bones. So they wiped 'em out again. After that they gave up, and people detoured the oasis. It made a longer, harder trip, but after all—"

Tallant laughed. "You mean these Carkers were immortal?"

"I don't know about immortal. They somehow just didn't die very easy. Maybe, if they were the Benders—and I sort of like to think they were—they learned a little more about what they were doing out here on the desert. Maybe they put together what the Indians knew and what they knew, and it worked. Maybe Whatever they made their sacrifices to, understood them better out here than in Kansas."

"And what's become of them—aside from seeing them out of the corner of the eye?"

"There's forty years between the last of the Carker history and this new settlement at the oasis. And people won't talk much about what they learned here in the first year or so. Only that they stay away from that old Carker adobe. They tell some stories— The priest says he was sitting in the confessional one hot Saturday afternoon and thought he heard a penitent come in. He waited a long time and finally lifted the gauze to see was anybody there. Something was there, and it bit. He's got three fingers on his right hand now, which looks funny as hell when he gives a benediction."

Tallant pushed their two bottles toward the bartender. "That yarn, my young friend, has earned another beer. How about it, bartender? Is he always cheerful like this, or is this just something he's improvised for my benefit?"

The bartender set out the fresh bottles with great solemnity. "Me, I wouldn't've told you all that myself, but then he's a stranger, too. and maybe don't feel the same way we do here. For him it's just a story."

"It's more comfortable that way," said the young man with the beard, and took a firm hold on his beer bottle.

"But as long as you've heard that much," said the bartender, "you might as well— It was last winter, when we had that cold spell. You heard funny stories that winter. Wolves coming into prospectors' cabins just to warm up. Well, business wasn't so good. We don't have a license for hard liquor and the boys don't drink much beer when it's that cold. But they used to come in anyway because we've got that big oil burner.

"So one night there's a bunch of 'em in here—old Jake was here, that you was talking to, and his dog Jigger—and I think I hear somebody else come in. The door creaks a little. But I don't see nobody and the poker game's going and we're talking just like we're talking now, and all of a sudden I hear a kind of a noise like *crack!* over there in that corner behind the jukebox near the burner.

"I go over to see what goes and it gets away before I can see it very good. But it was little and thin and it didn't have no clothes on. It must've been damned cold that winter."

"And what was the cracking noise?" Tallant asked dutifully.

"That? That was a bone. It must've strangled Jigger without any noise. He was a little dog. It ate most of the flesh, and if it hadn't cracked the bone for the marrow it could've finished. You can still see the spots over there. The blood never did come out."

There had been silence all through the story. Now suddenly all hell broke loose. The flight sergeant let out a splendid yell and began pointing excitedly at the pinball machine and yelling for his pay-off. The construction worker dramatically deserted the poker game, knocking his chair over in the process, and announced lugubriously that these guys here had their own rules, see?

Any atmosphere of Carker-inspired horror was dissipated. Tallant whistled as he walked over to put a nickel in the jukebox. He glanced casually at the floor. Yes, there was a stain, for what that was worth.

He smiled cheerfully and felt rather grateful to the Carkers. They were going to solve his blackmail problem very neatly.

Tallant dreamed of power that night. It was a common dream with him. He was a ruler of the new American Corporate State that should follow the war; and he said to this man "Come!" and he came, and to that man "Go!" and he went, and to his servants "Do this!" and they did it.

Then the young man with the beard was standing before him, and the dirty trench coat was like the robes of an ancient prophet. And

the young man said, "You see yourself riding high, don't you? Riding the crest of the wave—the Wave of the Future, you call it. But there's a deep, dark undertow that you don't see, and that's a part of the Past. And the Present and even the Future. There is evil in mankind that is blacker even than your evil, and infinitely more ancient."

And there was something in the shadows behind the young man, something little and lean and brown.

Tallant's dream did not disturb him the following morning. Nor did the thought of the approaching interview with Morgan. He fried his bacon and eggs and devoured them cheerfully. The wind had died down for a change, and the sun was warm enough so that he could strip to the waist while he cleared land for his shack. His machete glinted brilliantly as it swung through the air and struck at the roots of the brush.

Morgan's full face was red and sweating when he arrived.

"It's cool over there in the shade of the adobe," Tallant suggested. "We'll be more comfortable." And in the comfortable shade of the adobe he swung the machete once and clove Morgan's full red sweating face in two.

It was so simple. It took less effort than uprooting a clump of sage. And it was so safe. Morgan lived in a cabin way to hell-and-gone and was often away on prospecting trips. No one would notice his absence for months, if then. No one had any reason to connect him with Tallant. And no one in Oasis would hunt for him in the Carker-haunted adobe.

The body was heavy, and the blood dripped warm on Tallant's bare skin. With relief he dumped what had been Morgan on the floor of the adobe. There were no boards, no flooring. Just the earth. Hard, but not too hard to dig a grave in. And no one was likely to come poking around in this taboo territory to notice the grave. Let a year or so go by, and the grave and the bones it contained would be attributed to the Carkers.

The corner of Tallant's eye bothered him again. Deliberately he looked about the interior of the adobe.

The little furniture was crude and heavy, with no attempt to smooth down the strokes of the ax. It was held together with wooden pegs or half-rotted thongs. There were age-old cinders in the fireplace, and the dusty shards of a cooking jar among them.

And there was a deeply hollowed stone, covered with stains that might have been rust, if stone rusted. Behind it was a tiny figure, clumsily fashioned of clay and sticks. It was something like a man

and something like a lizard, and something like the things that flit across the corner of the eye.

Curious now, Tallant peered about further. He penetrated to the corner that the one unglassed window lighted but dimly. And there he let out a little choking gasp. For a moment he was rigid with horror. Then he smiled and all but laughed aloud.

This explained everything. Some curious individual had seen this, and from his account burgeoned the whole legend. The Carkers had indeed learned something from the Indians, but that secret was the art of embalming.

It was a perfect mummy. Either the Indian art had shrunk bodies, or this was that of a ten-year-old boy. There was no flesh. Only skin and bone and taut dry stretches of tendon between. The eyelids were closed; the sockets looked hollow under them. The nose was sunken and almost lost. The scant lips were tightly curled back from the long and very white teeth, which stood forth all the more brilliantly against the deep-brown skin.

It was a curious little trove, this mummy. Tallant was already calculating the chances for raising a decent sum of money from an interested anthropologist—murder can produce such delightfully profitable chance by-products—when he noticed the infinitesimal rise and fall of the chest.

The Carker was not dead. It was sleeping.

Tallant did not dare stop to think beyond the instant. This was no time to pause to consider if such things were possible in a well-ordered world. It was no time to reflect on the disposal of the body of Morgan. It was a time to snatch up your machete and get out of there.

But in the doorway he halted. There coming across the desert, heading for the adobe, clearly seen this time, was another—a female.

He made an involuntary gesture of indecision. The blade of the machete clanged ringingly against the adobe wall. He heard the dry shuffling of a roused sleeper behind him.

He turned fully now, the machete raised. Dispose of this nearer one first, then face the female. There was no room even for terror in his thoughts, only for action.

The lean brown shape darted at him avidly. He moved lightly away and stood poised for its second charge. It shot forward again. He took one step back, machete-arm raised, and fell headlong over the corpse of Morgan. Before he could rise the thin thing was upon him. Its sharp teeth had met through the palm of his left hand.

The machete moved swiftly. The thin dry body fell headless to the floor. There was no blood.

The grip of the teeth did not relax. Pain coursed up Tallant's left arm—a sharper, more bitter pain than you would expect from the bite. Almost as though venom—

He dropped the machete, and his strong white hand plucked and twisted at the dry brown lips. The teeth stayed clenched, unrelaxing. He sat bracing his back against the wall and gripped the head between his knees. He pulled. His flesh ripped, and blood formed dusty clots on the dirt floor. But the bite was firm.

His world had become reduced now to that hand and that head. Nothing outside mattered. He must free himself. He raised his aching arm to his face, and with his own teeth he tore at that unrelenting grip. The dry flesh crumbled away in desert dust, but the teeth were locked fast. He tore his lip against their white keenness, and tasted in his mouth the sweetness of blood and something else.

He staggered to his feet again. He knew what he must do. Later he could use cautery, a tourniquet, see a doctor with a story about a Gila monster—their heads grip, too, don't they?—but he knew what he must do now.

He raised the machete and struck again.

His white hand lay on the brown floor, gripped by the white teeth in the brown face. He propped himself against the adobe wall, momentarily unable to move. His open wrist hung over the deeply hollowed stone. His blood and his strength and his life poured out before the little figure of sticks and clay.

The female stood in the doorway now, the sun bright on her thin brownness. She did not move. He knew that she was waiting for the hollow stone to fill.

THE ENEMY

Charlotte Armstrong

They sat late at the lunch table and afterwards moved through the dim, cool, high-ceilinged rooms to the judge's library where, in their quiet talk, the old man's past and the young man's future seemed to telescope and touch. But at twenty minutes after three, on that hot, bright, June Saturday afternoon, the present tense erupted. Out in the quiet street arose the sound of trouble.

Judge Kittinger adjusted his pince-nez, rose, and led the way to his old-fashioned veranda from which they could overlook the tree-roofed intersection of Greenwood Lane and Hannibal Street. Near the steps to the corner house, opposite, there was a surging knot of children and one man. Now, from the house on the judge's left, a woman in a blue house dress ran diagonally toward the excitement. And a police car slipped up Hannibal Street, gliding to the curb. One tall officer plunged into the group and threw restraining arms around a screaming boy.

Mike Russell, saying to his host, "Excuse me, sir," went rapidly across the street. Trouble's center was the boy, ten or eleven years old, a tow-headed boy with tawny-lashed blue eyes, a straight nose, a fine brow. He was beside himself, writhing in the policeman's grasp.

The woman in the blue dress was yammering at him. "Freddy! Freddy! Freddy!" Her voice simply did not reach his ears.

"You ole stinker! You rotten ole stinker! You ole nut!" All the boy's heart was in the epithets.

"Now, listen . . ." The cop shook the boy who, helpless in those powerful hands, yet blazed. His fury had stung to crimson the face of the grown man at whom it was directed.

This man, who stood with his back to the house as one besieged, was plump, half-bald, with eyes much magnified by glasses. "Attacked me!" he cried in a high whine. "Rang my bell and absolutely leaped on me!"

Out of the seven or eight small boys clustered around them came overlapping fragments of shrill sentences. It was clear only that they opposed the man. A small woman in a print dress, a man in shorts, whose bare chest was winter-white, stood a little apart, hesitant and distressed. Up on the veranda of the house the screen door was half open, and a woman seated in a wheel chair peered forth anxiously.

On the green grass, in the shade perhaps thirty feet away, there lay in death a small brown-and-white dog.

The judge's luncheon guest observed all this. When the judge drew near, there was a lessening of the noise. Judge Kittinger said, "This is Freddy Titus, isn't it? Mr. Matlin? What's happened?"

The man's head jerked. "I," he said, "did nothing to the dog. Why would I trouble to hurt the boy's dog? I try—you know this, Judge—I try to live in peace here. But these kids are terrors! They've made this block a perfect hell for me and my family." The man's voice shook. "My wife, who is not strong . . . My step-daughter, who is a cripple . . . These kids are no better than a slum gang. They are vicious! That boy rang my bell and *attacked* . . . ! I'll have him up for assault! I . . ."

The judge's face was old ivory and he was aloof behind it.

On the porch a girl pushed past the woman in the chair, a girl who walked with a lurching gait.

Mike Russell asked, quietly, "Why do the boys say it was you, Mr. Matlin, who hurt the dog?"

The kids chorused. "He's an ole mean . . ." "He's a nut . . ." "Just because . . ." ". . . took Clive's hat and . . ." ". . . chases us . . ." ". . . tries to put everything on us." ". . . told my mother lies . . ." ". . . just because . . ."

He is our enemy, they were saying; *he is our enemy*.

"They . . ." began Matlin, his throat thick with anger.

"Hold it a minute." The second cop, the thin one, walked toward where the dog was lying.

"Somebody," said Mike Russell in a low voice, "must do something for the boy."

The judge looked down at the frantic child. He said, gently, "I am as sorry as I can be, Freddy." But in his old heart there was too much known, and too many little dogs he remembered that had already died, and even if he were as sorry as he could be, he couldn't be sorry enough. The boy's eyes turned, rejected, returned. To the enemy.

Russell moved near the woman in blue, who pertained to this boy somehow. "His mother?"

"His folks are away. I'm there to take care of him," she snapped, as if she felt herself put upon by a crisis she had not contracted to face.

"Can they be reached?"

"No," she said decisively.

The young man put his stranger's hand on the boy's rigid little shoulder. But he too was rejected. Freddy's eyes, brilliant with hatred, clung to the enemy. Hatred doesn't cry.

"Listen," said the tall cop, "if you could hang onto him for a minute—"

"Not I," said Russell.

The thin cop came back. "Looks like the dog got poison. When was he found?"

"Just now," the kids said.

"Where? There?"

"Up Hannibal Street. Right on the edge of ole Matlin's back lot."

"Edge of *my* lot!" Matlin's color freshened again. "On the sidewalk, why don't you say? Why don't you tell the truth?"

"We are! *We* don't tell lies!"

"Quiet, you guys," the cop said. "Pipe down, now."

"Heaven's my witness, I wasn't even here!" cried Matlin. "I played nine holes of golf today. I didn't get home until . . . May?" he called over his shoulder. "What time did I come in?"

The girl on the porch came slowly down, moving awkwardly on her uneven legs. She was in her twenties, no child. Nor was she a woman. She said in a blurting manner, "About three o'clock, Daddy Earl. But the dog was dead."

"What's that, miss?"

"This is my step-daughter."

"The dog was dead," the girl said, "before he came home. I saw it from upstairs, before three o'clock. Lying by the sidewalk."

"You drove in from Hannibal Street, Mr. Matlin? Looks like you'd have seen the dog."

Matlin said with nervous thoughtfulness, "I don't know. My mind . . . Yes, I . . ."

"He's telling a lie!"

"Freddy!"

"Listen to that," said May Matlin, "will you?"

"She's a liar, too!"

The cop shook Freddy. Mr. Matlin made a sound of helpless exasperation. He said to the girl, "Go keep your mother inside, May." He raised his arm as if to wave. "It's all right, honey," he called to the woman in the chair, with a false cheeriness that grated on the ear. "There's nothing to worry about now."

Freddy's jaw shifted and young Russell's watching eyes winced. The girl began to lurch back to the house.

"It was my wife who put in the call," Matlin said. "After all, they were on me like a pack of wolves. Now, I—I *understand* that the boy's upset. But all the same, he cannot . . . He must learn . . . I will not have . . . I have enough to contend with, without this malice, this unwarranted antagonism, this persecution."

Freddy's eyes were unwinking.

"It has got to stop!" said Matlin almost hysterically.

"Yes," murmured Mike Russell, "I should think so." Judge Kittinger's white head, nodding, agreed.

"We've heard about quite a few dog-poisoning cases over the line in Redfern," said the thin cop with professional calm. "None here."

The man in the shorts hitched them up, looking shocked. "Who'd do a thing like that?"

A boy said, boldly, "Ole Matlin would." He had an underslung jaw and wore spectacles on his snug nose. "I'm Phil Bourchard," he said to the cop. He had courage.

"We jist know," said another. "I'm Ernie Allen." Partisanship radiated from his whole thin body. "Ole Matlin doesn't want anybody on his ole property."

"Sure." "He doesn't want anybody on his ole property." "It was ole Matlin."

"It was. It was," said Freddy Titus.

"Freddy," said the housekeeper in blue, "now, you better be still."

I'll tell your dad." It was a meaningless fumble for control. The boy didn't even hear it.

Judge Kittinger tried, patiently. "You can't accuse without cause, Freddy."

"Bones didn't hurt his ole property. Bones wouldn't hurt anything. Ole Matlin did it."

"You lying little devil!"

"*He's* a liar!"

The cop gave Freddy another shake. "You kids found him, eh?"

"We were up at Bourchard's and were going down to the Titus house."

"And he was dead," said Freddy.

"I know nothing about it," said Matlin icily. "Nothing at all."

The cop, standing between, said wearily, "Any of you people see what coulda happened?"

"I was sitting in my backyard," said the man in shorts. "I'm Daugherty, next door, up Hannibal Street. Didn't see a thing."

The small woman in a print dress spoke up. "I am Mrs. Page. I live across on the corner, Officer. I believe I did see a strange man go into Mr. Matlin's driveway this morning."

"When was this, ma'am?"

"About eleven o'clock. He was poorly dressed. He walked up the drive and around the garage."

"Didn't go to the house?"

"No. He was only there a minute. I believe he was carrying something. He was rather furtive. And very poorly dressed, almost like a tramp."

There was a certain relaxing among the elders. "Ah, the tramp," said Mike Russell. "The good old reliable tramp. Are you sure, Mrs. Page? It's very unlikely."

But she bristled. "Do you think I am lying?"

Russell's lips parted, but he felt the judge's hand on his arm. "This is my guest, Mr. Russell . . . Freddy." The judge's voice was gentle. "Let him go, Officer. I'm sure he understands, now. Mr. Matlin was not even at home, Freddy. It's possible that this—er—stranger . . . Or it may have been an accident."

"Wasn't a tramp. Wasn't an accident."

"You can't know that, boy," said the judge, somewhat sharply. Freddy said nothing. As the officer slowly released his grasp, the boy took a free step backwards, and the other boys surged to surround him. There stood the enemy, the monster who killed and lied, and

the grownups with their reasonable doubts were on the monster's side. But the boys knew what Freddy knew. They stood together.

"Somebody," murmured the judge's guest, "somebody's got to help the boy." And the judge sighed.

The cops went up Hannibal Street toward Matlin's back lot, with Mr. Daugherty. Matlin lingered at the corner talking to Mrs. Page. In the front window of Matlin's house the curtain fell across the glass.

Mike Russell sidled up to the housekeeper. "Any uncles or aunts here in town? A grandmother?"

"No," she said, shortly.

"Brothers or sisters, Mrs. . . . ?"

"Miz Somers. No, he's the only one. Only reason they didn't take him along was it's the last week of school and he didn't want to miss."

Mike Russell's brown eyes suggested the soft texture of velvet, and they were deeply distressed. She slid away from their appeal. "He'll just have to take it, I guess, like everybody else," Mrs. Somers said. "These things happen."

He was listening intently. "Don't you care for dogs?"

"I don't mind a dog," she said. She arched her neck. She was going to call to the boy.

"Wait. Tell me, does the family go to church? Is there a pastor or a priest who knows the boy?"

"They don't go, far as I ever saw." She looked at him as if he were an eccentric.

"Then school. He has a teacher. What grade?"

"Sixth grade," she said. "Miss Dana. Oh, he'll be okay." Her voice grew loud, to reach the boy and hint to him. "He's a big boy."

Russell said, desperately, "Is there no way to telephone his parents?"

"They're on the road. They'll be in some time tomorrow. That's all I know." She was annoyed. "I'll take care of him. That's why I'm here." She raised her voice and this time it was arch and seductive. "Freddy, better come wash your face. I know where there's some chocolate cookies."

The velvet left the young man's eyes. Hard as buttons, they gazed for a moment at the woman. Then he whipped around and left her. He walked over to where the kids had drifted, near the little dead creature on the grass. He said softly, "Bones had his own doctor, Freddy? Tell me his name?" The boy's eyes flickered. "We must know what it was that he took. A doctor can tell. I think his own doctor would be best, don't you?"

The boy nodded, mumbled a name, an address. That Russell mastered the name and the numbers; asking for no repetition, was a sign of his concern. Besides, it was this young man's quality—that he listened. "May I take him, Freddy? I have a car. We ought to have a blanket," he added softly, "a soft, clean blanket."

"I got one, Freddy. . . ." "My mother'd let me . . ."

"I can get one," Freddy said brusquely. They wheeled, almost in formation.

Mrs. Somers frowned. "You must let them take a blanket," Russell warned her, and his eyes were cold.

"I will explain to Mrs. Titus," said the judge quickly.

"Quite a fuss," she said, and tossed her head and crossed the road.

Russell gave the judge a quick, nervous grin. He walked to the returning cops. "You'll want to run tests, I suppose? Can the dog's own vet do it?"

"Certainly. Humane officer will have to be in charge. But that's what the vet'll want."

"I'll take the dog, then. Any traces up there?"

"Not a thing."

"Will you explain to the boy that you are investigating?"

"Well, you know how these things go." The cop's feet shuffled. "Humane officer does what he can. Probably Monday, after we identify the poison, he'll check the drug stores. Usually, if it is a cranky neighbor, he has already put in a complaint about the dog. This Matlin says he never did. The humane officer will get on it Monday. He's out of town today. The devil of these cases, we can't prove a thing, usually. You get an idea who it was, maybe you can scare him. It's a misdemeanor all right. Never heard of a conviction myself."

"But will you explain to the boy . . . ?" Russell stopped, chewed his lip, and the judge sighed.

"Yeah, it's tough on a kid," the cop said.

When the judge's guest came back it was nearly five o'clock. He said, "I came to say goodbye, sir, and to thank you for the . . ." But his mind wasn't on the sentence and he lost it and looked up.

The judge's eyes were affectionate. "Worried?"

"Judge, sir," the young man said, "*must* they feed him? Where, sir, in this classy neighborhood is there an understanding woman's heart? I herded them to that Mrs. Allen. But she winced, sir, and she diverted them. She didn't want to deal with tragedy, didn't want to think about it. She offered cakes and Cokes and games."

"But my dear boy . . ."

"What do they teach the kids these days, judge? To turn away? Put something in your stomach. Take a drink. Play a game. Don't weep for your dead. Just skip it, think about something else."

"I'm afraid the boy's alone," the judge said gently, "but it's only for the night." His voice was melodious. "Can't be sheltered from grief when it comes. None of us can."

"Excuse me, sir, but I wish he *would* grieve. I wish he would bawl his heart out. Wash out that black hate. I ought to go home. None of my concern. It's a woman's job." He moved and his hand went toward the phone. "He has a teacher. I can't help feeling concerned, sir. May I try?"

The judge said, "Of course, Mike," and he put his brittle old bones into a chair.

Mike Russell pried the number out of the Board of Education. "Miss Lillian Dana? My name is Russell. You know a boy named Freddy Titus?"

"Oh, yes. He's in my class." The voice was pleasing.

"Miss Dana, there is trouble. You know Judge Kittinger's house? Could you come there?"

"What is the trouble?"

"Freddy's little dog is dead of poison. I'm afraid Freddy is in a bad state. There is no one to help him. His folks are away. The woman taking care of him," Mike's careful explanatory sentences burst into indignation, "has no more sympathetic imagination than a broken clothes pole." He heard a little gasp. "I'd like to help him, Miss Dana, but I'm a man and a stranger, and the judge . . ." He paused.

". . . is old," said the judge in his chair.

"I'm terribly sorry," the voice on the phone said slowly. "Freddy's a wonderful boy."

"You are his friend?"

"Yes, we are friends."

"Then could you come? You see, we've got to get a terrible idea out of his head. He thinks a man across the street poisoned his dog on purpose. Miss Dana, *he has no doubt!* And he doesn't cry." She gasped again. "Greenwood Lane," he said, "and Hannibal Street—the southeast corner."

She said, "I'll come. I have a car. I'll come as soon as I can."

Russell turned and caught the judge biting his lips. "Am I making too much of this, sir?" he inquired humbly.

"I don't like the boy's stubborn conviction." The judge's voice was

dry and clear. "Any more than you do. I agree that he must be brought to understand. But . . ." the old man shifted in the chair. "Of course, the man, Matlin, is a fool, Mike. There is something solemn and silly about him that makes him fair game. He's unfortunate. He married a widow with a crippled child, and no sooner were they married than *she* collapsed. And he's not well off. He's encumbered with that enormous house."

"What does he do, sir?"

"He's a photographer. Oh, he struggles, tries his best, and all that; but with such tension, Mike. That poor misshapen girl over there tries to keep the house; devoted to her mother. Matlin works hard, is devoted, too. And yet the sum comes out in petty strife, nerves, quarrels, uproar. And certainly it cannot be necessary to feud with children."

"The kids have done their share of that, I'll bet," mused Mike. "The kids are delighted—a neighborhood ogre, to add the fine flavor of menace. A focus for mischief. An enemy."

"True enough." The judge sighed.

"So the myth is made. No rumor about ole Matlin loses anything in the telling. I can see it's been built up. You don't knock it down in a day."

"No," said the judge uneasily. He got up from the chair.

The young man rubbed his dark head. "I don't like it, sir. We don't know what's in the kids' minds, or who their heroes are. There is only the gang. What do you suppose it advises?"

"What could it advise, after all?" said the judge crisply. "This isn't the slums, whatever Matlin says." He went nervously to the window. He fiddled with the shade pull. He said, suddenly, "From my little summerhouse in the backyard you can overhear the gang. They congregate under that oak. Go and eavesdrop, Mike."

The young man snapped to attention. "Yes, sir."

"I . . . think we had better know," said the judge, a trifle sheepishly.

The kids sat under the oak, in a grassy hollow. Freddy was the core. His face was tight. His eyes never left off watching the house of the enemy. The others watched him, or hung their heads, or watched their own brown hands play with the grass.

They were not chattering. There hung about them a heavy, sullen silence, heavy with a sense of tragedy, sullen with a sense of wrong, and from time to time one voice or another would fling out a pro-

nouncement which would sink into the silence, thickening its ugliness.

The judge looked up from his paper. "Could you . . . ?"

"I could hear," said Mike in a quiet voice. "They are condemning the law, sir. They call it corrupt. They are quite certain that Matlin killed the dog. They see themselves as Robin Hoods, vigilantes defending the weak, the wronged, the dog. They think they are discussing justice. They are waiting for dark. They speak of weapons, sir—the only ones they have. B.B. guns, after dark."

"Great heavens!"

"Don't worry. Nothing's going to happen."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to stop it."

Mrs. Somers was cooking supper when he tapped on the screen. "Oh, it's you. What do you want?"

"I want your help, Mrs. Somers. For Freddy."

"Freddy," she interrupted loudly, with her nose high, "is going to have his supper and go to bed his regular time, and that's all about Freddy. Now, what did you want?"

He said, "I want you to let me take the boy to my apartment for the night."

"I couldn't do that!" She was scandalized.

"The judge will vouch. . . ."

"Now, see here, Mr. what's your name—Russell. This isn't my house and Freddy's not my boy. I'm responsible to Mr. and Mrs. Titus. You're a stranger to me. As far as I can see, Freddy is no business of yours whatsoever."

"Which is his room?" asked Mike sharply.

"Why do you want to know?" She was hostile and suspicious.

"Where does he keep his B.B. gun?"

She was startled to an answer. "In the shed out back. Why?"

He told her.

"Kid's talk," she scoffed. "You don't know much about kids, do you, young man? Freddy will go to sleep. First thing he'll know, it's morning. That's about the size of it."

"You may be right. I hope so."

Mrs. Somers slapped potatoes into the pan. Her lips quivered indignantly. She felt annoyed because she was a little shaken. The strange young man really had hoped so.

Russell scanned the street, went across to Matlin's house. The man

himself answered the bell. The air in this house was stale, and bore the faint smell of old grease. There was over everything an atmosphere of struggle and despair. Many things ought to have been repaired and had not been repaired. The place was too big. There wasn't enough money, or strength. It was too much.

Mrs. Matlin could not walk. Otherwise, one saw, she struggled and did the best she could. She had a lost look, as if some anxiety, ever present, took about nine-tenths of her attention. May Matlin limped in and sat down, lumpishly.

Russell began earnestly, "Mr. Matlin, I don't know how this situation between you and the boys began. I can guess that the kids are much to blame. I imagine they enjoy it." He smiled. He wanted to be sympathetic toward this man.

"Of course they enjoy it," Matlin looked triumphant.

"They call me the Witch," the girl said. "Pretend they're scared of me. The devils. I'm scared of them."

Matlin flicked a nervous eye at the woman in the wheel chair. "The truth is, Mr. Russell," he said in his high whine, "they're vicious."

"It's too bad," said his wife in a low voice. "I think it's dangerous."

"Mama, you mustn't worry," said the girl in an entirely new tone. "I won't let them hurt you. Nobody will hurt you."

"Be quiet, May," said Matlin. "You'll upset her. Of course nobody will hurt her."

"Yes, it is dangerous, Mrs. Matlin," said Russell quietly. "That's why I came over."

Matlin goggled. "What? What's this?"

"Could I possibly persuade you, sir, to spend the night away from this neighborhood—and depart noisily?"

"No," said Matlin, raring up, his ego bristling, "no, you cannot! I will under no circumstances be driven away from my own home." His voice rose. "Furthermore, I certainly will not leave my wife and step-daughter."

"We could manage, dear," said Mrs. Matlin anxiously.

Russell told them about the talk under the oak, the B.B. gun.

"Devils," said May Matlin, "absolutely. . . ."

"Oh, Earl," trembled Mrs. Matlin, "maybe we had all better go away."

Matlin, red-necked, furious, said, "We own this property. We pay our taxes. We have our rights. Let them! Let them try something like that! Then, I think, the law would have something to say. This is

outrageous! I did not harm that animal. Therefore, I defy . . ." He looked solemn and silly, as the judge had said, with his face crimson, his weak eyes rolling.

Russell rose. "I thought I ought to make the suggestion," he said mildly, "because it would be the safest thing to do. But don't worry, Mrs. Matlin, because I—"

"A B.B. gun can blind," she said tensely.

"Or even worse," Mike agreed. "But I am thinking of the—"

"Just a minute," Matlin roared. "You can't come in here and terrify my wife! She is not strong. You have no right." He drew himself up with his feet at a right angle, his pudgy arm extended, his plump jowls quivering. "Get out," he cried. He looked ridiculous.

Whether the young man and the bewildered woman in the chair might have understood each other was not to be known. Russell, of course, got out. May Matlin hobbled to the door and as Russell went through it she said, "Well, you warned us, anyhow."

Russell plodded across the pavement again. Long enchanting shadows from the lowering sun struck aslant through the golden air and all the old houses were gilded and softened in their green setting. He moved toward the big oak. He hunkered down. The sun struck its golden shafts deep under the boughs. "How's it going?" he asked.

Freddy Titus looked frozen and still. "Okay," said Phil Bourchard with elaborate ease. Light on his owlish glasses hid the eyes.

Mike opened his lips, hesitated. Suppertime struck on the neighborhood clock. Calls, like chimes, were sounding.

"S my Mom," said Ernie Allen. "See you after."

"See you after, Freddy."

"Okay."

"Okay."

Mrs. Somers' hoot had chimed with the rest and now Freddy got up, stiffly.

"Okay?" said Mike Russell. The useful syllables that take any meaning at all in American mouths asked, "Are you feeling less bitter, boy? Are you any easier?"

"Okay," said Freddy. The same syllables shut the man out.

Mike opened his lips. Closed them. Freddy went across the lawn to his kitchen door. There was a brown crockery bowl on the back stoop. His sneaker, rigid on the ankle, stepped over it. Mike Russell watched, and then, with a movement of his arms, almost as if he would wring his hands, he went up the judge's steps.

"Well?" The judge opened his door. "Did you talk to the boy?"

Russell didn't answer. He sat down.

The judge stood over him. "The boy . . . The enormity of this whole idea *must* be explained to him."

"I can't explain," Mike said. "I open my mouth. Nothing comes out."

"Perhaps *I* had better . . ."

"What are you going to say, sir?"

"Why, give him the facts!"

"The facts are . . . the dog is dead."

"There are no facts that point to Matlin."

"There are no facts that point to a tramp, either. That's too sloppy, sir."

"What are you driving at?"

"Judge, the boy is more rightfully suspicious than we are."

"Nonsense," said the judge. "The girl saw the dog's body before Matlin came. . . ."

"There is no alibi for poison," Mike said sadly.

"Are you saying the man is a liar?"

"Liars," sighed Mike. "Truth and lies. How are those kids going to understand, sir? To that Mrs. Page, to the lot of them, truth is only a subjective intention. 'I am no liar,' sez she, sez he. 'I *intend* to be truthful. So do not insult me.' Lord, when will we begin? It's what we were talking about at lunch, sir. What you and I believe. What the race has been told and told in such agony, in a million years of bitter lesson. *Error*, we were saying. Error is the enemy."

He flung out of the chair. "We know that to tell the truth is not merely a good intention. It's a damned difficult thing to do. It's a skill, to be practiced. It's a technique. It's an effort. It takes brains. It takes watching. It takes humility and self-examination. It's a science and an art. Why don't we tell the *kids* these things? Why is everyone locked up in anger, shouting liar at the other side? Why don't they automatically know how easy it is to be, not wicked, but mistaken? Why is there this notion of violence? Because Freddy doesn't think to himself, 'Wait a minute. I might be wrong.' The habit isn't there. Instead, there are the heroes—the big-muscled, noble-hearted, gun-toting heroes, blind in a righteousness totally arranged by the author. Excuse me, sir."

"All that may be," said the judge grimly, "and I agree. But the police know the lesson. They—"

"They don't care."

"What?"

"Don't care enough, sir. None of us cares enough—about the dog."

"I see," said the judge. "Yes, I see. We haven't the least idea what happened to the dog." He touched his pince-nez.

Mike rubbed his head wearily. "Don't know what to do except sit under his window the night through. Hardly seems good enough."

The judge said, simply, "Why don't you find out what happened to the dog?"

The young man's face changed. "What we need, sir," said Mike slowly, "is to teach Freddy how to ask for it. Just to ask for it. Just to want it." The old man and the young man looked at each other. Past and future telescoped. "Now," Mike said. "Before dark."

Supper time, for the kids, was only twenty minutes long. When the girl in the brown dress with the bare blond head got out of the shabby coupé, the gang was gathered again in its hollow under the oak. She went to them and sank down on the ground. "Ah, Freddy, was it Bones? Your dear little dog you wrote about in the essay?"

"Yes, Miss Dana." Freddy's voice was shrill and hostile. *I won't be touched!* it cried to her. So she said no more, but sat there on the ground, and presently she began to cry. There was contagion. The simplest thing in the world. First, one of the smaller ones whimpering. Finally, Freddy Titus, bending over. Her arm guided his head, and then he lay weeping in her lap.

Russell, up in the summerhouse, closed his eyes and praised the Lord. In a little while he swung his legs over the railing and slid down the bank. "How do? I'm Mike Russell."

"I'm Lillian Dana." She was quick and intelligent, and her tears were real.

"Fellows," said Mike briskly, "you know what's got to be done, don't you? We've got to solve this case."

They turned their woeful faces.

He said, deliberately, "It's just the same as a murder. It is a murder."

"Yeah," said Freddy and sat up, tears drying. "And it was ole Matlin."

"Then we have to prove it."

Miss Lillian Dana saw the boy's face lock. He didn't need to prove anything, the look proclaimed. He knew. She leaned over a little and said, "But we can't make an ugly mistake and put it on Bones's account. Bones was a fine dog. That would be a terrible monument." Freddy's eyes turned, startled.

"It's up to us," said Mike gratefully, "to go after the real facts, with real detective work. For Bones's sake."

"It's the least we can do for him," said Miss Dana, calmly and decisively.

Freddy's face lifted.

"Trouble is," Russell went on quickly, "people get things wrong. Sometimes they don't remember straight. They make mistakes."

"Ole Matlin tells lies," said Freddy.

"If he does," said Russell cheerfully, "then we've got to *prove* that he does. Now, I've figured out a plan, if Miss Dana will help us. You pick a couple of the fellows, Fred. Have to go to all the houses around and ask some questions. Better pick the smartest ones. To find out the truth is very hard," he challenged.

"And then?" said Miss Dana in a fluttery voice.

"Then they, and you, if you will . . ."

"Me?" She straightened. "I'm a schoolteacher, Mr. Russell. Won't the police . . . ?"

"Not before dark."

"What are *you* going to be doing?"

"Dirtier work."

She bit her lip. "It's nosy. It's . . . not done."

"No," he agreed. "You may lose your job."

She wasn't a bad-looking young woman. Her eyes were fine. Her brow was serious, but there was the ghost of a dimple in her cheek. Her hands moved. "Oh, well, I can always take up beauty culture or something. What are the questions?" She had a pad of paper and a pencil half out of her purse, and looked alert and efficient.

Now, as the gang huddled, there was a warm sense of conspiracy growing. "Going to be the dickens of a job," Russell warned them. And he outlined some questions. "Now, don't let anybody fool you into taking a sloppy answer," he concluded. "Ask how they know. Get real evidence. But don't go to Matlin's—I'll go there."

"I'm not afraid of him." Freddy's nostrils flared.

"I think I stand a better chance of getting the answers," said Russell coolly. "Aren't we after the answers?"

Freddy swallowed. "And if it turns out . . . ?"

"It turns out the way it turns out," said Russell, rumpling the tow-head. "Choose your henchmen. Tough, remember."

"Phil. Ernie." The kids who were left out wailed as the three small boys and their teacher, who wasn't a lot bigger, rose from the ground.

"It'll be tough, Mr. Russell," Miss Dana said grimly. "Whoever you are, thank you for getting me into this."

"I'm just a stranger," he said gently, looking down at her face. "But you are a friend and a teacher." Pain crossed her eyes. "You'll be teaching now, you know."

Her chin went up. "Okay, kids. I'll keep the paper and pencil. Freddy, wipe your face. Stick your shirt in, Phil. Now, let's organize. . . ."

It was nearly nine o'clock when the boys and the teacher, looking rather exhausted, came back to the judge's house. Russell, whose face was grave, reached for the papers in her hands.

"Just a minute," said Miss Dana. "Judge, we have some questions."

Ernie Allen bared all his heap of teeth and stepped forward. "Did you see Bones today?" he asked with the firm skill of repetition. The judge nodded. "How many times and when?"

"Once. Er—shortly before noon. He crossed my yard, going east."

The boys bent over the pad. Then Freddy's lips opened hard. "How do you know the time, Judge Kittinger?"

"Well," said the judge, "hm . . . let me think. I was looking out the window for my company and just then he arrived."

"Five minutes of one, sir," Mike said.

Freddy flashed around. "What makes you sure?"

"I looked at my watch," said Russell. "I was taught to be exactly five minutes early when I'm asked to a meal." There was a nodding among the boys, and Miss Dana wrote on the pad.

"Then I was mistaken," said the judge, thoughtfully. "It was shortly before one. Of course."

Phil Bourchard took over. "Did you see anyone go into Matlin's driveway or back lot?"

"I did not."

"Were you out of doors or did you look up that way?"

"Yes, I . . . When we left the table. Mike?"

"At two-thirty, sir."

"How do you know that time for sure?" asked Freddy Titus.

"Because I wondered if I could politely stay a little longer." Russell's eyes congratulated Miss Lillian Dana. She had made them a team, and on it, Freddy was the How-do-you-know-for-sure Department.

"Can you swear," continued Phil to the judge, "there was nobody at all around Matlin's back lot then?"

"As far as my view goes," answered the judge cautiously.

Freddy said promptly, "He couldn't see much. Too many trees. We can't count that."

They looked at Miss Dana and she marked on the pad. "Thank you. Now, you have a cook, sir? We must question her."

"This way," said the judge, rising and bowing.

Russell looked after them and his eyes were velvet again. He met the judge's twinkle. Then he sat down and ran an eye quickly over some of the sheets of paper, passing each on to his host.

Startled, he looked up. Lillian Dana, standing in the door, was watching his face.

"Do you think, Mike . . . ?"

A paper drooped in the judge's hand.

"We can't stop," she challenged.

Russell nodded, and turned to the judge. "May need some high brass, sir." The judge rose. "And tell me, sir, where Matlin plays golf. And the telephone number of the Salvage League. No, Miss Dana, we can't stop. We'll take it where it turns."

"We must," she said.

It was nearly ten when the neighbors began to come in. The judge greeted them soberly. The Chief of Police arrived. Mrs. Somers, looking grim and uprooted in a crêpe dress, came. Mr. Matlin, Mrs. Page, Mr. and Mrs. Daugherty, a Mr. and Mrs. Baker, and Diane Bourchard, who was sixteen. They looked curiously at the tight little group, the boys and their blond teacher.

Last of all to arrive was young Mr. Russell, who slipped in from the dark veranda, accepted the judge's nod, and called the meeting to order.

"We have been investigating the strange death of a dog," he began. "Chief Anderson, while we know your department would have done so in good time, we also know you are busy, and some of us"—he glanced at the dark windowpane—"couldn't wait. Will you help us now?"

The chief said, genially, "That's why I'm here, I guess." It was the judge and his stature that gave this meeting any standing. Naïve, young, a little absurd it might have seemed had not the old man sat so quietly attentive among them.

"Thank you, sir. Now, all we want to know is what happened to the dog." Russell looked about him. "First, let us demolish the tramp." Mrs. Page's feathers ruffled. Russell smiled at her. "Mrs. Page saw a man go down Matlin's drive this morning. The Salvage

League sent a truck, to pick up rags and papers, which at ten-forty-two was parked in front of the Daughertys'. The man, who seemed poorly dressed in his working clothes, went to the toolroom behind Matlin's garage, as he had been instructed to. He picked up a bundle and returned to his truck. Mrs. Page," purred Mike to her scarlet face, "the man was there. It was only your opinion about him that proves to have been, not a lie, but an error."

He turned his head. "Now, we have tried to trace the dog's day and we have done remarkably well, too." As he traced it for them, some faces began to wear at least the ghost of a smile, seeing the little dog frisking through the neighborhood. "Just before one," Mike went on, "Bones ran across the judge's yard to the Allens' where the kids were playing ball. Up to this time no one saw Bones *above* Greenwood Lane or *up* Hannibal Street. But Miss Diane Bourchard, recovering from a sore throat, was not in school today. After lunch, she sat on her porch directly across from Mr. Matlin's back lot. She was waiting for school to be out, when she expected her friends to come by.

"She saw, not Bones, but Corky, an animal belonging to Mr. Daugherty, playing in Matlin's lot at about two o'clock. I want your opinion. If poisoned bait had been lying there at two, would Corky have found it?"

"Seems so," said Daugherty. "Thank God Corky didn't." He bit his tongue. "Corky's a show dog," he blundered.

"But Bones," said Russell gently, "was more like a friend. That's why we care, of course."

"It's a damned shame!" Daugherty looked around angrily.

"It is," said Mrs. Baker. "He was a friend of mine, Bones was."

"Go on," growled Daugherty. "What else did you dig up?"

"Mr. Matlin left for his golf at eleven-thirty. Now, you see, it looks as if Matlin couldn't have left poison behind him."

"I most certainly did not," snapped Matlin. "I have said so. I will not stand for this sort of innuendo, I am not a liar. You said it was a conference."

Mike held the man's eye. "We are simply trying to find out what happened to the dog," he said. Matlin fell silent.

"Surely you realize," purred Mike, "that, human frailty being what it is, there may have been other errors in what we were told this afternoon. There was at least one more.

"Mr. and Mrs. Baker," he continued, "worked in their garden this afternoon. Bones abandoned the ball game to visit the Bakers' dog,

Smitty. At three o'clock the Bakers, after discussing the time carefully lest it be too late in the day, decided to bathe Smitty. When they caught him for his ordeal, Bones was still there. So, you see, Miss May Matlin, who says she saw Bones lying by the sidewalk *before three o'clock*, was mistaken."

Matlin twitched. Russell said sharply, "The testimony of the Bakers is extremely clear." The Bakers, who looked alike, both brown outdoor people, nodded vigorously.

"The time at which Mr. Matlin returned is quite well established. Diane saw him. Mrs. Daugherty, next door, decided to take a nap at five after three. She had a roast to put in at four-thirty. Therefore she is sure of the time. She went upstairs and from an upper window she, too, saw Mr. Matlin come home. Both witnesses say he drove his car into the garage at three-ten, got out, and went around the building to the right of it—*on the weedy side*."

Mr. Matlin was sweating. His forehead was beaded. He did not speak.

Mike shifted papers. "Now, we know that the kids trooped up to Phil Bourchard's kitchen at about a quarter of three. Whereas Bones, realizing that Smitty was in for it, and shying away from soap and water like any sane dog, went up Hannibal Street at three o'clock sharp. He may have known in some doggy way where Freddy was. Can we see Bones loping up Hannibal Street, going *above* Greenwood Lane?"

"We can," said Daugherty. He was watching Matlin. "Besides, he was found above Greenwood Lane soon after."

"No one," said Mike slowly, "was seen in Matlin's back lot, except Matlin. Yet almost immediately after Matlin was there, the little dog died."

"Didn't Diane . . . ?"

"Diane's friends came at three-twelve. Their evidence is not reliable." Diane blushed.

"This—this is intolerable!" croaked Matlin. "Why *my* back lot?"

Daugherty said, "There was no poison lying around my place, I'll tell you that."

"How do you know?" begged Matlin. And Freddy's eyes, with the smudges under them, followed to Russell's face. "Why not in the street? From some passing car?"

Mike said, "I'm afraid it's not likely. You see, Mr. Otis Carnavon was stalled at the corner of Hannibal and Lee. Trying to flag a push. Anything thrown from a car on that block he ought to have seen."

"Was the poison quick?" demanded Daugherty. "What did he get?"

"It was quick. The dog could not go far after he got it. He got cyanide."

Matlin's shaking hand removed his glasses. They were wet.

"Some of you may be amateur photographers," Mike said. "Mr. Matlin, is there cyanide in your cellar darkroom?"

"Yes, but I keep it . . . most meticulously. . . ." Matlin began to cough.

When the noise of his spasm died, Mike said, "The poison was embedded in ground meat which analyzed, roughly, half-beef and the rest pork and veal, half and half." Matlin encircled his throat with his fingers. "I've checked with four neighborhood butchers and the dickens of a time I had," said Mike. No one smiled. Only Freddy looked up at him with solemn sympathy. "Ground meat was delivered to at least five houses in the vicinity. Meat that was one-half beef, one-quarter pork, one-quarter veal, was delivered at ten this morning to Matlin's house."

A stir like an angry wind blew over the room. The Chief of Police made some shift of his weight so that his chair creaked.

"It begins to look . . ." growled Daugherty.

"Now," said Russell sharply, "we must be very careful. One more thing. The meat had been seasoned."

"Seasoned!"

"With salt. And with . . . thyme."

"Thyme," groaned Matlin.

Freddy looked up at Miss Dana with bewildered eyes. She put her arm around him.

"As far as motives are concerned," said Mike quietly, "I can't discuss them. It is inconceivable to me that any man would poison a dog." Nobody spoke. "However, where are we?" Mike's voice seemed to catch Matlin just in time to keep him from falling off the chair. "We don't know yet what happened to the dog." Mike's voice rang. "Mr. Matlin, will you help us to the answer?"

Matlin said thickly, "Better get those kids out of here."

Miss Dana moved, but Russell said, "No. They have worked hard for the truth. They have earned it. And if it is to be had, they shall have it."

"You know?" whimpered Matlin.

Mike said, "I called your golf club. I've looked into your trash incinerator. Yes, I know. But I want you to tell us."

Daugherty said, "Well? Well?" And Matlin covered his face.

Mike said, gently, "I think there was an error. Mr. Matlin, I'm afraid, did poison the dog. But he never meant to, and he didn't know he had done it."

Matlin said, "I'm sorry . . . It's—I can't . . . She means to do her best. But she's a terrible cook. Somebody gave her those—those herbs. Thyme—thyme in everything. She fixed me a lunch box. I—couldn't stomach it. I bought my lunch at the club."

Mike nodded.

Matlin went on, his voice cracking. "I never . . . You see, I didn't even know it was meat the dog got. She said—she told me the dog was already dead."

"And of course," said Mike, "in your righteous wrath, you never paused to say to yourself, 'Wait, what *did* happen to the dog?'"

"Mr. Russell, I didn't lie. How could I know there was thyme in it? When I got home, I had to get rid of the hamburger she'd fixed for me—I didn't want to hurt her feelings. She tries . . . tries so hard. . . ." He sat up suddenly. "*But what she tried to do today,*" he said, with his eyes almost out of his head, "*was to poison me!*" His bulging eyes roved. They came to Freddy. He gasped. He said, "Your dog saved my life!"

"Yes," said Mike quickly, "Freddy's dog saved your life. You see, your step-daughter would have kept trying."

People drew in their breaths. "The buns are in your incinerator," Mike said. "She guessed what happened to the dog, went for the buns, and hid them. She was late, you remember, getting to the disturbance. And she did lie."

Chief Anderson rose.

"Her mother . . ." said Matlin frantically, "her mother . . ."

Mike Russell put his hand on the plump shoulder. "Her mother's been in torment, tortured by the rivalry between you. Don't you think her mother senses something wrong?"

Miss Lillian Dana wrapped Freddy in her arms. "Oh, what a wonderful dog Bones was!" she covered the sound of the other voices. "Even when he died, he saved a man's life. Oh, Freddy, he was a wonderful dog."

And Freddy, not quite taking everything in yet, was released to simple sorrow and wept quietly against his friend. . . .

When they went to fetch May Matlin, she was not in the house. They found her in the Titus's back shed. She seemed to be looking for something.

Next day, when Mr. and Mrs. Titus came home, they found that although the little dog had died, their Freddy was all right. The judge, Russell, and Miss Dana told them all about it.

Mrs. Titus wept. Mr. Titus swore. He wrung Russell's hand. ". . . for stealing the gun . . ." he babbled.

But the mother cried, ". . . for showing him, for teaching him. . . . Oh, Miss Dana, oh, my dear!"

The judge waved from his veranda as the dark head and the blond drove away.

"I think Miss Dana likes him," said Ernie Allen.

"How do you know for sure?" said Freddy Titus.

THE INEXPERIENCED GHOST

H. G. Wells

The scene amidst which Clayton told his last story comes back very vividly to my mind. There he sat, for the greater part of the time, in the corner of the authentic settle by the spacious open fire, and Sanderson sat beside him smoking the Broseley clay that bore his name. There was Evans, and that marvel among actors, Wish, who is also a modest man. We had all come down to the Mermaid Club that Saturday morning, except Clayton, who had slept there overnight—which indeed gave him the opening of his story. We had golf until golfing was invisible; we had dined, and we were in that mood of tranquil kindness when men will suffer a story. When Clayton began to tell one, we naturally supposed he was lying. It may be that indeed he was lying—of that the reader will speedily be able to judge as well as I. He began, it is true, with an air of matter-of-fact anecdote, but that we thought was only the incurable artifice of the man.

"I say!" he remarked, after a long consideration of the upward rain of sparks from the log that Sanderson had thumped, "you know I was alone here last night?"

"Except for the domestics," said Wish.

"Who sleep in the other wing," said Clayton. "Yes. Well——" He

pulled at his cigar for some little time as though he still hesitated about his confidence. Then he said, quite quietly, "I caught a ghost!"

"Caught a ghost, did you?" said Sanderson. "Where is it?"

And Evans, who admires Clayton immensely and has been four weeks in America, shouted, "*Caught* a ghost, did you, Clayton? I'm glad of it! Tell us all about it right now."

Clayton said he would in a minute, and asked him to shut the door.

He looked apologetically at me. "There's no eavesdropping of course, but we don't want to upset our very excellent service with any rumours of ghosts in the place. There's too much shadow and oak panelling to trifle with that. And this, you know, wasn't a regular ghost. I don't think it will come again—ever."

"You mean to say you didn't keep it?" said Sanderson.

"I hadn't the heart to," said Clayton.

And Sanderson said he was surprised.

We laughed, and Clayton looked aggrieved. "I know," he said, with the flicker of a smile, "but the fact is it really *was* a ghost, and I'm as sure of it as I am that I am talking to you now. I'm not joking. I mean what I say."

Sanderson drew deeply at his pipe, with one reddish eye on Clayton, and then emitted a thin jet of smoke more eloquent than many words.

Clayton ignored the comment. "It is the strangest thing that has ever happened in my life. You know I never believed in ghosts or anything of the sort, before, ever; and then, you know, I bag one in a corner: and the whole business is in my hands."

He meditated still more profoundly and produced and began to pierce a second cigar with a curious little stabber he affected.

"You talked to it?" asked Wish.

"For the space, probably, of an hour."

"Chatty?" I said, joining the party of the sceptics.

"The poor devil was in trouble," said Clayton, bowed over his cigar-end and with the very faintest note of reproof.

"Sobbing?" someone asked.

Clayton heaved a realistic sigh at the memory. "Good Lord!" he said; "yes." And then, "Poor fellow! yes."

"Where did you strike it?" asked Evans, in his best American accent.

"I never realised," said Clayton, ignoring him, "the poor sort of thing a ghost might be," and he hung us up again for a time, while

he sought for matches in his pocket and lit and warmed to his cigar.

"I took an advantage," he reflected at last.

We were none of us in a hurry. "A character," he said, "remains just the same character for all that it's been disembodied. That's a thing we too often forget. People with a certain strength or fixity of purpose may have ghosts of a certain strength and fixity of purpose—most haunting ghosts, you know, must be as one-idea'd as monomaniacs and as obstinate as mules to come back again and again. This poor creature wasn't." He suddenly looked up rather queerly, and his eye went round the room. "I say it," he said, "in all kindness, but that is the plain truth of the case. Even at the first glance he struck me as weak."

He punctuated with the help of his cigar.

"I came upon him, you know, in the long passage. His back was towards me and I saw him first. Right off I knew him for a ghost. He was transparent and whitish; clean through his chest I could see the glimmer of the little window at the end. And not only his physique but his attitude struck me as being weak. He looked, you know, as though he didn't know in the slightest whatever he meant to do. One hand was on the panelling and the other fluttered to his mouth. Like—so!"

"What sort of physique?" said Sanderson.

"Lean. You know that sort of young man's neck that has two great flutings down the back, here and here—so! And a little meanish head with scrubby hair and rather bad ears. Shoulders bad, narrower than the hips; turndown collar, ready-made short jacket, trousers baggy and a little frayed at the heels. That's how he took me. I came very quietly up the staircase. I did not carry a light, you know—the candles are on the landing table and there is that lamp—and I was in my list slippers, and I saw him as I came up. I stopped dead at that—taking him in. I wasn't a bit afraid. I think that in most of these affairs one is never nearly so afraid or excited as one imagines one would be. I was surprised and interested. I thought, 'Good Lord! Here's a ghost at last! And I haven't believed for a moment in ghosts during the last five-and-twenty years.'"

"Um," said Wish.

"I suppose I wasn't on the landing a moment before he found out I was there. He turned on me sharply, and I saw the face of an immature young man, a weak nose, a scrubby little moustache, a feeble chin. So for an instant we stood—he looking over his shoulder at me—and regarded one another. Then he seemed to remember his high

calling. He turned round, drew himself up, projected his face, raised his arms, spread his hands in approved ghost fashion—came towards me. As he did so his little jaw dropped, and he emitted a faint, drawn-out ‘Boo.’ No, it wasn’t—not a bit dreadful. I’d dined. I’d had a bottle of champagne, and being all alone, perhaps two or three—perhaps even four or five—whiskies, so I was as solid as rocks and no more frightened then if I’d been assailed by a frog. ‘Boo!’ I said. ‘Nonsense. You don’t belong to *this* place. What are you doing here?’

“I could see him wince. ‘Boo—oo,’ he said.

“‘Boo—be hanged! Are you a member?’ I said; and just to show I didn’t care a pin for him I stepped through a corner of him and made to light my candle. ‘Are you a member?’ I repeated, looking at him sideways.

“He moved a little so as to stand clear of me, and his bearing became crestfallen. ‘No,’ he said, in answer to the persistent interrogation of my eye; ‘I’m not a member—I’m a ghost.’

“‘Well, that doesn’t give you the run of the Mermaid Club. Is there anyone you want to see, or anything of that sort?’ And doing it as steadily as possible for fear that he should mistake the carelessness of whisky for the distraction of fear, I got my candle alight. I turned on him, holding it. ‘What are you doing here?’ I said.

“He had dropped his hands and stopped his booing, and there he stood, abashed and awkward, the ghost of a weak, silly, aimless young man. ‘I’m haunting,’ he said.

“‘You haven’t any business to,’ I said in a quiet voice.

“‘I’m a ghost,’ he said, as if in defence.

“‘That may be, but you haven’t any business to haunt here. This is a respectable private club; people often stop here with nursemaids and children, and, going about in the careless way you do, some poor little mite could easily come upon you and be scared out of her wits. I suppose you didn’t think of that?’

“‘No, sir,’ he said, ‘I didn’t.’

“‘You should have done. You haven’t any claim on the place, have you? Weren’t murdered here, or anything of that sort?’

“‘None, sir; but I thought as it was old and oak-panelled——’

“‘That’s *no* excuse.’ I regarded him firmly. ‘Your coming here is a mistake,’ I said, in a tone of friendly superiority. I feigned to see if I had my matches, and then looked up at him frankly. ‘If I were you I wouldn’t wait for cock-crow—I’d vanish right away.’

“He looked embarrassed. ‘The fact *is*, sir——’ he began.

“‘I’d vanish,’ I said, driving it home.

"The fact is, sir, that—somehow—I can't."

"You *can't*?"

"No, sir. There's something I've forgotten. I've been hanging about here since midnight last night, hiding in the cupboards of the empty bedrooms and things like that. I'm flurried. I've never come haunting before, and it seems to put me out."

"Put you out?"

"Yes, sir. I've tried to do it several times, and it doesn't come off. There's some little thing has slipped me, and I can't get back."

"That, you know, rather bowled me over. He looked at me in such an abject way that for the life of me I couldn't keep up quite the high hectoring vein I had adopted. 'That's queer,' I said, and as I spoke I fancied I heard someone moving about down below. 'Come into my room and tell me more about it,' I said. 'I didn't, of course, understand this,' and I tried to take him by the arm. But, of course, you might as well have tried to take hold of a puff of smoke! I had forgotten my number, I think; anyhow, I remember going into several bedrooms—it was lucky I was the only soul in that wing—until I saw my traps. 'Here we are,' I said, and sat down in the armchair; 'sit down and tell me all about it. It seems to me you have got yourself into a jolly awkward position, old chap.'

"Well, he said he wouldn't sit down; he'd prefer to flit up and down the room if it was all the same to me. And so he did, and in a little while we were deep in a long and serious talk. And presently, you know, something of those whiskies and sodas evaporated out of me, and I began to realise just a little what a thundering rum and weird business it was that I was in. There he was, semi-transparent—the proper conventional phantom and noiseless except for his ghost of a voice—flitting to and fro in that nice, clean, chintz-hung old bedroom. You could see the gleam of the copper candlesticks through him, and the lights on the brass fender, and the corners of the framed engravings on the wall, and there he was telling me all about this wretched little life of his that had recently ended on earth. He hadn't a particularly honest face, you know, but being transparent, of course, he couldn't avoid telling the truth."

"Eh?" said Wish, suddenly sitting up in his chair.

"What?" said Clayton.

"Being transparent—couldn't avoid telling the truth—I don't see it," said Wish.

"I don't see it," said Clayton, with inimitable assurance. "But it is

so, I can assure you nevertheless. I don't believe he got once a nail's breadth off the Bible truth. He told me how he had been killed—he went down into a London basement with a candle to look for a leakage of gas—and described himself as a senior English master in a London private school when that release occurred."

"Poor wretch!" said I.

"That's what I thought, and the more he talked the more I thought it. There he was, purposeless in life and purposeless out of it. He talked of his father and mother and his schoolmaster, and all who had ever been anything to him in the world, meanly. He had been too sensitive, too nervous; none of them had ever valued him properly or understood him, he said. He had never had a real friend in the world, I think; he had never had a success. He had shirked games and failed examinations. 'It's like that with some people,' he said; 'when-ever I got into the examination-room or anywhere everything seemed to go.' Engaged to be married of course—to another over-sensitive person, I suppose—when the indiscretion with the gas escape ended his affairs. 'And where are you now?' I asked. 'Not in——?'

"He wasn't clear on that point at all. The impression he gave me was of a sort of vague, intermediate state, a special reserve for souls too non-existent for anything so positive as either sin or virtue. *I* don't know. He was much too egotistical and unobservant to give me any clear idea of the kind of place, kind of country, there is on the Other Side of Things. Wherever he was, he seems to have fallen in with a set of kindred spirits: ghosts of weak Cockney young men, who were on a footing of Christian names, and among these there was certainly a lot of talk about 'going haunting' and things like that. Yes—going haunting! They seemed to think 'haunting' a tremendous adventure, and most of them funked it all the time. And so primed, you know, he had come."

"But really!" said Wish to the fire.

"These are the impressions he gave me, anyhow," said Clayton modestly. "I may, of course, have been in a rather uncritical state, but that was the sort of background he gave to himself. He kept flitting up and down, with his thin voice going—talking, talking about his wretched self, and never a word of clear, firm statement from first to last. He was thinner and sillier and more pointless than if he had been real and alive. Only then, you know, he would not have been in my bedroom here—if he *had* been alive. I should have kicked him out."

"Of course," said Evans, "there *are* poor mortals like that."

"And there's just as much chance of their having ghosts as the rest of us," I admitted.

"What gave a sort of point to him, you know, was the fact that he did seem within limits to have found himself out. The mess he had made of haunting had depressed him terribly. He had been told it would be a 'lark'; he had come expecting it to be a 'lark,' and here it was, nothing but another failure added to his record! He proclaimed himself an utter out-and-out failure. He said, and I can quite believe it, that he had never tried to do anything all his life that he hadn't made a perfect mess of—and through all the wastes of eternity he never would. If he had had sympathy, perhaps—He paused at that, and stood regarding me. He remarked that, strange as it might seem to me, nobody, not anyone, ever, had given him the amount of sympathy I was doing now. I could see what he wanted straight away, and I determined to head him off at once. I may be a brute, you know, but being the Only Real Friend, the recipient of the confidences of one of these egotistical weaklings, ghost or body, is beyond my physical endurance. I got up briskly. 'Don't you brood on these things too much,' I said. 'The thing you've got to do is to get out of this—get out of this sharp. You pull yourself together and *try*.' 'I can't,' he said. 'You try,' I said, and try he did."

"Try!" said Sanderson. "*How?*"

"Passes," said Clayton.

"Passes?"

"Complicated series of gestures and passes with the hands. That's how he had come in and that's how he had to get out again. Lord! what a business I had!"

"But how could *any* series of passes——" I began.

"My dear man," said Clayton, turning on me and putting a great emphasis on certain words, "you want *everything* clear. I don't know *how*. All I know is that you *do*—that *he* did, anyhow, at least. After a fearful time, you know, he got his passes right and suddenly disappeared."

"Did you," said Sanderson slowly, "observe the passes?"

"Yes," said Clayton, and seemed to think. "It was tremendously queer," he said. "There we were, I and this thin vague ghost, in that silent room, in this silent, empty inn, in this silent little Friday-night town. Not a sound except our voices and a faint panting he made when he swung. There was the bedroom candle, and one candle on the dressing-table alight, that was all—sometimes one or other

would flare up into a tall, lean, astonished flame for a space. And queer things happened. 'I can't,' he said; 'I shall never——!' And suddenly he sat down on a little chair at the foot of the bed and began to sob and sob. Lord! what a harrowing whimpering thing he seemed!

"'You pull yourself together,' I said, and tried to pat him on the back, and . . . my confounded hand went through him! By that time, you know, I wasn't nearly so—massive as I had been on the landing. I got the queerness of it full. I remember snatching back my hand out of him as it were, with a little thrill, and walking over to the dressing-table. 'You pull yourself together,' I said to him, 'and try.' And in order to encourage and help him I began to try as well."

"What!" said Sanderson, "the passes?"

"Yes, the passes."

"But——" I said, moved by an idea that eluded me for a space.

"This is interesting," said Sanderson, with his finger in his pipe-bowl. "You mean to say this ghost of yours gave way——"

"Did his level best to give away the whole confounded barrier? Yes."

"He didn't," said Wish; "he couldn't. Or you'd have gone there too."

"That's precisely it," I said, finding my elusive idea put into words for me.

"That *is* precisely it," said Clayton, with thoughtful eyes upon the fire.

For just a little while there was silence.

"And at last he did it?" said Sanderson.

"At last he did it. I had to keep him up to it hard, but he did it at last—rather suddenly. He despaired, we had a scene, and then he got up abruptly and asked me to go through the whole performance, slowly, so that he might see. 'I believe,' he said, 'if I could *see* I should spot what was wrong at once.' And he did. 'I know,' he said. 'What do you know?' said I. 'I know,' he repeated. Then he said, peevishly, 'I *can't* do it, if you look at me—I really *can't*; it's been that, partly, all along. I'm such a nervous fellow that you put me out.' Well, we had a bit of an argument. Naturally I wanted to see; but he was as obstinate as a mule, and suddenly I had come over as tired as a dog—he tired me out. 'All right,' I said, 'I won't look at you,' and turned towards the mirror, on the wardrobe, by the bed.

"He started off very fast. I tried to follow him by looking in the looking-glass, to see just what it was had hung. Round went his arms

and his hands, so, and so, and so, and then with a rush came to the last gesture of all—you stand erect and open out your arms—and so, don't you know, he stood. And then he didn't! He didn't! He wasn't! I wheeled round from the looking-glass to him. There was nothing! I was alone, with the flaring candles and a staggering mind. What had happened? Had anything happened? Had I been dreaming? . . . And then, with an absurd note of finality about it, the clock upon the landing discovered the moment was ripe for striking *one*. So!—Ping! And I was as grave and sober as a judge, with all my champagne and whisky gone into the vast serene. Feeling queer, you know—confoundedly *queer*! Queer! Good Lord!”

He regarded his cigar-ash for a moment. “That’s all that happened,” he said.

“And then you went to bed?” asked Evans.

“What else was there to do?”

I looked Wish in the eye. We wanted to scoff, and there was something, something perhaps in Clayton’s voice and manner, that hampered our desire.

“And about these passes?” said Sanderson.

“I believe I could do them now.”

“Oh!” said Sanderson, and produced a pen-knife and set himself to grub the dottel out of the bowl of his clay.

“Why don’t you do them now?” said Sanderson, shutting his pen-knife with a click.

“That’s what I’m going to do,” said Clayton.

“They won’t work,” said Evans.

“If they do——” I suggested.

“You know, I’d rather you didn’t,” said Wish, stretching out his legs.

“Why?” asked Evans.

“I’d rather he didn’t,” said Wish.

“But he hasn’t got ’em right,” said Sanderson, plugging too much tobacco into this pipe.

“All the same, I’d rather he didn’t,” said Wish.

We argued with Wish. He said that for Clayton to go through those gestures was like mocking a serious matter. “But you don’t believe——?” I said. Wish glanced at Clayton, who was staring into the fire, weighing something in his mind. “I do—more than half, anyhow, I do,” said Wish.

“Clayton,” said I, “you’re too good a liar for us. Most of it was

all right. But that disappearance . . . happened to be convincing. Tell us, it's a tale of cock and bull."

He stood up without heeding me, took the middle of the hearth-rug, and faced me. For a moment he regarded his feet thoughtfully, and then for all the rest of the time his eyes were on the opposite wall, with an intent expression. He raised his two hands slowly to the level of his eyes and so began. . . .

Now, Sanderson is a Freemason, a member of the lodge of the Four Kings, which devotes itself so ably to the study and elucidation of all the mysteries of Masonry past and present, and among the students of this lodge Sanderson is by no means the least. He followed Clayton's motions with a singular interest in his reddish eye. "That's not bad," he said, when it was done. "You really do, you know, put things together, Clayton, in a most amazing fashion. But there's one little detail out."

"I know," said Clayton. "I believe I could tell you which."

"Well?"

"This," said Clayton, and did a queer little twist and writhing and thrust of the hands.

"Yes."

"That, you know, was what *he* couldn't get right," said Clayton. "But how do *you*——?"

"Most of this business, and particularly how you invented it, I don't understand at all," said Sanderson, "but just that phase—I do." He reflected. "These happen to be a series of gestures—connected with a certain branch of esoteric Masonry— Probably you know. Or else—— *How?*" He reflected still further. "I do not see I can do any harm in telling you just the proper twist. After all, if you know, you know; if you don't, you don't."

"I know nothing," said Clayton, "except what the poor devil let out last night."

"Well, anyhow," said Sanderson, and placed his churchwarden very carefully upon the shelf over the fireplace. Then very rapidly he gesticulated with his hands.

"So?" said Clayton, repeating.

"So," said Sanderson, and took his pipe in hand again.

"Ah, *now*," said Clayton, "I can do the whole thing—right."

He stood up before the waning fire and smiled at us all. But I think there was just a little hesitation in his smile. "If I begin——" he said.

"I wouldn't begin," said Wish.

"It's all right!" said Evans. "Matter is indestructible. You don't think any jiggery-pokery of this sort is going to snatch Clayton into the world of shades. Not it! You may try, Clayton, so far as I'm concerned, until your arms drop off at the wrists."

"I don't believe that," said Wish, and stood up and put his arm on Clayton's shoulder. "You've made me half believe in that story somehow, and I don't want to see the thing done."

"Goodness!" said I, "here's Wish frightened!"

"I am," said Wish, with real or admirably feigned intensity. "I believe that if he goes through these motions right he'll go."

"He'll not do anything of the sort," I cried. "There's only one way out of this world for men, and Clayton is thirty years from that. Besides. . . . And such a ghost! Do you think——?"

Wish interrupted me by moving. He walked out from among the chairs and stopped beside the table and stood there. "Clayton," he said, "you're a fool."

Clayton, with a humorous light in his eyes, smiled back at him. "Wish," he said, "is right and all you others are wrong. I shall go. I shall get to the end of these passes, and as the last swish whistles through the air, Presto!—this hearthrug will be vacant, the room will be blank amazement, and a respectably dressed gentleman of fifteen stone will plump into the world of shades. I'm certain. So will you be. I decline to argue further. Let the thing be tried."

"No," said Wish, and made a step and ceased, and Clayton raised his hands once more to repeat the spirit's passing.

By that time, you know, we were all in a state of tension—largely because of the behaviour of Wish. We sat all of us with our eyes on Clayton—I, at least, with a sort of tight, stiff feeling about me as though from the back of my skull to the middle of my thighs my body had been changed to steel. And there, with a gravity that was imperturbably serene, Clayton bowed and swayed and waved his hands and arms before us. As he drew towards the end one piled up, one tingled in one's teeth. The last gesture, I have said, was to swing the arms out wide open, with the face held up. And when at last he swung out to this closing gesture I ceased even to breathe. It was ridiculous, of course, but you know that ghost-story feeling. It was after dinner, in a queer, old shadowy house. Would he, after all——?

There he stood for one stupendous moment, with his arms open and his upturned face, assured and bright, in the glare of the hanging lamp. We hung through that moment as if it were an age, and then

came from all of us something that was half a sigh of infinite relief and half a reassuring "No!" For visibly—he wasn't going. It was all nonsense. He had told an idle story, and carried it almost to conviction, that was all! . . . And then in that moment the face of Clayton changed.

It changed. It changed as a lit house changes when its lights are suddenly extinguished. His eyes were suddenly eyes that were fixed, his smile was frozen on his lips, and he stood there still. He stood there, very gently swaying.

That moment, too, was an age. And then, you know, chairs were scraping, things were falling, and we were all moving. His knees seemed to give, and he fell forward, and Evans rose and caught him in his arms. . . .

It stunned us all. For a minute I suppose no one said a coherent thing. We believed it, yet could not believe it. . . . I came out of a muddled stupefaction to find myself kneeling beside him, and his vest and shirt were torn open, and Sanderson's hand lay on his heart. . . .

Well—the simple fact before us could very well wait our convenience; there was no hurry for us to comprehend. It lay there for an hour; it lies athwart my memory, black and amazing still, to this day. Clayton had, indeed, passed into the world that lies so near to and so far from our own. And he had gone thither by the only road that mortal man may take. But whether he did indeed pass there by that poor ghost's incantation, or whether he was stricken suddenly by apoplexy in the midst of an idle tale—as the coroner's jury would have us believe—is no matter for my judging; it is just one of those inexplicable riddles that must remain unsolved until the final solution of all things shall come. All I certainly know is that, in the very moment, in the very instant, of concluding those passes, he changed, and staggered, and fell down before us—dead!

SENTENCE OF DEATH

Thomas Walsh

Item One, the grimmest and most important item, was the body of a respectable middle-aged pharmacist named Carl Sawyer. Item Two, the usual emotional item, was an attractive blond woman, apparently his widow, who was sobbing hysterically over him when Cochran and McReynolds arrived from the precinct house. Item Three—which, to Cochran and McReynolds, explained everything at first glance and completely—was a rifled cash register. Item Four, the familiar professional headache, was a store crowded with excited and talkative neighbors.

It appeared at first that every one of these people was quite willing to furnish Cochran with detailed and significant information; it developed later, when he had attended to the necessary elimination, that just four of them had actually seen anything. Mrs. Sawyer and a chance customer named Ellen Morison had witnessed the shooting; two others—a husband and wife—glimpsed a man who sprinted out of the drugstore immediately afterward, and raced away in a car which he had parked thirty or forty feet distant, in heavy shadow. This couple agreed, however, on one or two distinguishing facts about the car; and Ellen Morison, a slim and alert young girl with

brown hair, intelligent dark eyes and a sensible if excited voice, described the man.

She informed Cochran that fifteen or twenty minutes ago, when she had entered the drugstore, the man had been standing in front of Mr. Sawyer. They were so close together, just a bit left of the cash register, that at first she had taken him for a friend of Mr. Sawyer, and had assumed that Mr. Sawyer was chatting with him; then the man had turned quickly, apparently in panic, looked at her quickly, fired twice at Mr. Sawyer and slapped his left hand out and down at the cash register. It was her opinion that the man was about twenty-eight years old, perhaps older; that he had blond hair, a slim build and a very sharp, narrow jaw. She seemed to be breathless and considerably upset at this time, which was quite natural, but because she remembered the right things about the man—not too many of these, just the striking and obvious details—Cochran was inclined to accept her as perhaps the most dependable witness.

The married couple, who had observed the man from the side and in motion, were the only people who had seen the car. They described it to Cochran as either a black or a dark blue sedan with a dented fender—the right rear fender. One of them thought that the man had been wearing a brown suit and brown shoes; the other, that he had on slacks and a gray sports jacket. They both declared, like Ellen Morison, that the man had been hatless. They both remembered the blond hair.

McReynolds, in the meantime, had attempted first to compose Mrs. Sawyer and then to question her. Both attempts failed. She did not appear to understand who McReynolds was or what he wanted; she would just shake her head dumbly and blindly at him, as if she were still in a condition of severe shock. Cochran left her alone. He was sure then that they wanted a man of a certain age, build and complexion; one who owned or who had access to a cheap sedan with a dented fender; who had a gun; and who, in all likelihood, had also a police record.

He and McReynolds set out to locate this man. They checked pictures and records downtown; they settled on a few possible suspects; they rounded up and detained four of these; and then, two days later, Mrs. Sawyer picked one of the four immediately and hysterically from a line-up.

The married couple supported Mrs. Sawyer's identification, even though, in Cochran's opinion, they could not be half so sure of it as they insisted they were. Ellen Morison would not corroborate. She

was the only witness who had impressed Cochran to any extent, and she admitted now that the man they showed her looked something, not too much, like the man who had shot the druggist. She was not prepared to swear that he was the man . . . or that he was not. She told Cochran uncomfortably that she remembered the other man as being older and taller. This one——

She shook her head. McReynolds became impatient with her; Cochran, who suspected that bereaved women like Mrs. Sawyer, after and because of their bereavement, often hit out at the first convenient and likely target, reserved judgment on the identification and went out to do some routine checking.

He discovered these facts: The man Mrs. Sawyer had identified—a tough and surly young truck helper named Johnny Palica, who had a couple of minor arrests to his discredit—lived with a brother-in-law who owned a cheap black sedan. On the night in question, last Thursday, Johnny Palica had been permitted to use the sedan, which had a couple of deep scrapes on the back fender, and had kept it out from early evening until after midnight. Just driving around, he admitted uneasily to Cochran; he had his girl with him. What did anyone do when he had his girl with him? He kept to himself, didn't he? Well, then——

The girl corroborated his story—only the girl. She was not an impressive or disinterested witness. There were still three people who identified Johnny Palica—who, indeed, were more certain of him now than they had been previously—and two of these people also identified the brother-in-law's car. There was another witness, Ellen Morison, who could not seem to make up her mind definitely about him. It was a shaky defense, very badly handled, and the jury convicted. After the conviction, which made the death sentence mandatory, Cochran began to avoid McReynolds for some reason; and then one afternoon he discovered suddenly, with a shock of acute physical discomfort, that McReynolds was beginning also to avoid him.

Each of them knew that an identification made under circumstances of great excitement and tension was not always trustworthy. And apparently each of them, because of a highly developed instinct in such matters, disliked this one. They did not discuss it with each other—it was not their province—but they did not forget about it either. Then March came, and on March fifth, at half past two in the afternoon, Cochran received a phone call which for some time, and in an uneasy and illogical manner, he had been anticipating.

"You remember the Morison girl?" McReynolds asked him, quiet enough about it—perhaps too quiet. "The one who couldn't make up her mind about this Johnny Palica?"

"Who?" Cochran said. But, of course, he remembered her immediately; he pretended not to because he did not want McReynolds to get any ideas about him. "No. I don't seem to— Wait a minute. That one?" He rubbed his mouth carefully. "What's the matter now? What's up?"

McReynolds said stolidly, "Big news. She just told me that Palica isn't the guy. She claims she's positive. You better hustle around here, Ray. I think we're in trouble."

So Cochran got a cab for himself. He found McReynolds and Ellen Morison in an upstairs room at the precinct house, with a busy and impatient young man named Wilson who was somebody unimportant on the district attorney's staff; and he was informed by Wilson that last night, outside a tavern on Third Avenue, Miss Morison saw—or thought she saw—the man who had actually murdered Carl Sawyer. She was positive about him, Wilson added dryly, because he had turned his head and glanced at her exactly the way he had glanced at her that night in the drugstore. She did not think that he had recognized her. When she came back five or ten minutes afterward with a policeman, he was gone. A bartender in the tavern remembered him. Unfortunately, however, the bartender was unable to furnish any useful information about him. That seemed to be it, Wilson said. A long silence followed.

Cochran was waiting for McReynolds to break it; McReynolds, who looked a bit pale and haggard that afternoon, appeared to be waiting for Cochran.

At last Cochran said, "Well," uncertainly, and sat down on a corner of the desk with his hat pushed back, his lips pursed and his palms on his knees.

"Exactly," said the district attorney's man, as if Cochran had made a very shrewd and penetrating remark. "The whole thing is almost childishly simple. Last night Miss Morison happened to see someone who bore a superficial resemblance to our friend Palica. So immediately—"

Cochran said, "We never found the gun."

"Granted. I wish we had too. But when we've been able to convince a jury without it, I don't see—"

McReynolds said suddenly, angrily and pugnaciously, as if the words burst out of him, "Wait a minute now. Me and Cochran are

responsible for him; not you, mister. And I've kind of been sweating a little blood over it lately, if that means anything. I don't like this thing. I never did."

He went that far. Cochran—they were boosting each other along now—took his right palm from his knee, turned it over, examined it and decided to go a bit further.

Cochran said, "I've seen nervous and hysterical women like Mrs. Sawyer identify cops who were just put into a line-up to fill it out. Sure, that married couple agreed with her; witnesses like them always go along with the first person who makes up her mind. I kind of agree with Mac here. Let's talk this over."

Ellen Morison, who appeared nervous but determined, glanced at him and said quietly, "Thank you. I'm beginning to feel better. I testified at the trial that the man who shot Mr. Sawyer—the man I'm telling you I saw outside that tavern last night—seemed to be older and thinner, and a lot taller, than the man you arrested. I was treated then as if I didn't know what I was talking about. I wasn't sure, or I told myself that I wasn't sure. But now I am. And now I want something done about it."

The man from the district attorney's office stopped looking annoyed and angry, and started looking concerned and worried. More discussion ensued; then it was decided that the first thing to do, if they wanted a reasonable standard of comparison, was to give Ellen Morison another and longer look at Johnny Palica. The lieutenant, who had been careful enough to disassociate himself entirely from this interview, was called in. The lieutenant phoned downtown, and then downtown made arrangements with a Captain Mooney.

At half past eight the next morning, Cochran and the girl drove up to—to that place, as Cochran had begun to think of it, very uneasily—and found Mooney waiting for them. They shook hands and conferred briefly; then Mooney glanced sidewise, without much facial expression, at Ellen Morison, and conducted them out of the visitors' room and into a corridor which had high barred windows.

They went by two men who were dressed in the uniform of prison guards; they stopped in front of a steel door which was unlocked from within, and they waited for several moments, even though they had Mooney with them, in front of another door just beyond the first, and quite as massive and powerful looking, until the one through which they had been admitted was closed and locked.

Afterward there were more doors, more prison guards, more cor-

ridors, and finally a courtyard and another and rather isolated building. When they entered that building, Cochran, who did not have to be told what it was, touched his lips in a nervous and delicate manner with his tongue. He did not look at Ellen Morison. He did not make any attempt to speak to her.

They stopped presently outside a room. It was this kind of room. It had yellow composition walls and a brown baseboard. It had a cheap oak table with a soiled blotter on it and a clean ash tray; it had two chairs, one window and one powerful ceiling lighting fixture. In this room there was a peculiar but unmistakable sort of presence waiting for Cochran. He knew why; he and McReynolds were chiefly responsible for it. He entered.

Ellen Morison, who was not to talk to Johnny Palica, but only to observe him through a grille concealed in the outside door at normal eye level, remained in the hall; but Captain Mooney entered behind Cochran, glanced at him and went out through another exit. Almost as soon as Cochran was left alone, the harsh light in the room and the intense stillness made him restless and uncomfortable. Several minutes passed; to Cochran they seemed to pass with extreme slowness. Then there were steps in the inside corridor, and Cochran jabbed his hands into his hip pockets, turned and braced himself, at least physically, for this.

Mooney came in. "All right now," Mooney said, in the simplest and most matter-of-fact tone. "In here, Johnny. You remember Ray Cochran, don't you?"

Cochran spoke the first words that came into his head. "Sure," Cochran said, his lips feeling like wet flour. "Sure, he does. . . . Come on in and sit down, fella. How've you been?"

He had intended to shake hands here, but he stopped awkwardly after starting the gesture, because Johnny Palica did not appear to recognize him. Because of that, and of what it meant, the tone which Cochran had decided to employ—official, authoritative, but not unfriendly—became, after the first moment or two, a shabby and ridiculous pretense. There was no necessity for it. Johnny Palica was whiter, quieter and much more nervous than Cochran remembered; and as soon as he recognized Cochran, he made a desperate and pathetic attempt to ingratiate himself.

There was no more toughness or defiance in him. He was well broken. Not by Mooney, not by a couple of months' imprisonment, but by a certain idea and a certain date which Cochran and

McReynolds had arranged for him. He grinned anxiously, and when it seemed that Cochran was not going to respond to the grin, he widened it in a slow, clumsy manner, with much effort.

"Fine," he said. "I'm okay, Mr. Cochran. I'm— You got some news?"

It was the first time he had ever addressed Cochran by that title; it was a small thing, and it was intolerable. Cochran began to sweat at the same time, because he had been warned by Mooney not to excite Johnny Palica and not to tell him anything about the girl until they had one or two definite facts to go on; he muttered that there didn't seem to be anything new in this thing, not yet. Headquarters, he added, just thought Johnny Palica might want to go over his story about that night again. If he did—

He did. He nodded violently. So Cochran put a couple of questions to him, the answers to which he and McReynolds had already checked, in so far as was humanly possible, months ago; and then Cochran pretended to listen intently to what Johnny Palica said to him, and even checked everything off, detail by detail, in a pocket notebook. "Sure, sure," Cochran muttered, even when the words had no particular application to what had preceded them. That was another thing, he'd add huskily, which he and McReynolds would check right away. They'd talk to Johnny Palica's girl, of course. And they'd go back carefully over the whole affair. They'd—

He would have done anything, said anything, promised anything, to get out of that room quickly, to remove himself from the way in which Johnny Palica kept watching him. As if he wanted help and reassurance from somewhere, Cochran thought savagely; not as if he expected it; as if he just wanted it. And then, when Mooney concluded the interview, when Cochran picked up his coat and mumbled something hearty and cheerful and got out of there, it was worse than before. In the outside hall, Ellen Morison was waiting for him.

She was quite pale, her eyes looked extremely odd, and apparently she did not want to talk to Cochran any more than Cochran wanted to talk to her. All she did was to shake her head at him. Of course, Cochran thought, she meant that he and McReynolds had the wrong man in here. That— He turned away from her. He did not ask himself whether she was right about Johnny Palica; before he had half completed his turn something much worse had happened to him. He felt it.

Later that afternoon, McReynolds also appeared to feel it. He did not discuss the thing logically with Cochran; he just nodded a couple

of times, swallowed once, got his hat and drove over with Cochran to interview Mrs. Sawyer.

They discovered that something had happened to her, too, because she was no longer a pink and cunning little woman with demure blue eyes and fluffy gold hair. She had aged noticeably; and by gradual degrees, as Cochran talked to her, she became withdrawn, bitter, nervous and finally hysterical again.

She was still sure that it was Johnny Palica who had murdered her husband; now, Cochran reflected hopelessly, hatred and loneliness had done their usual sort of job on her. So he and McReynolds did not tackle the two supporting witnesses; that was useless unless and until they had first shaken Mrs. Sawyer. That evening McReynolds went downtown and started rechecking the files for another picture and description that might approximate Johnny Palica's; and at almost the same hour Cochran and Ellen Morison established a vigil over on Third Avenue, outside the Shamrock tavern.

They would park there, in Cochran's coupé, for five or six hours a night—the late hours—and for seven nights a week. They would stay there until half past one in the morning, with elevated trains rumbling overhead monotonously, with March wind lashing at them, and then Cochran would drive the girl home and go home himself after a cup of coffee somewhere. But he would not sleep any too well—the coffee, perhaps, or perhaps other things. He would remain restless for a while, doze again, and then rouse suddenly with the conviction in him that someone had been shouting his name just now, at an infinite distance, but quite clearly. He never managed to hear the voice—not as sound—but at the same time he recognized it, and in the end it came to have its own sort of existence for him.

He knew what it wanted from Mr. Cochran. He knew that much the first time it happened to him, and every time afterward, but he could not do anything helpful because, if there was going to be any appeal made on the basis of new evidence, he and McReynolds needed this other man. They could not find him. They could not imagine how to find him. They had twelve weeks at first, and then ten, and then eight, and then six. But nothing came up, either at headquarters or outside the Shamrock tavern.

Occasionally, after his end had dried up on him, McReynolds spent a couple of uncomfortable hours with them, but for the rest of the time Cochran and the girl had no company but themselves. At that period Cochran could have described the girl well, at least partially, although he himself did not seem to retain any personal or in-

dividual impression of her. She had dark hair, of which at times he had a vague sort of recollection, and the softness and delicacy around the mouth which had never been particularly attractive to him in other girls. He liked her all right, but he did not think about her as he had thought about one or two other girls. There was no opportunity. On those endless and monotonous evenings they rarely conversed at length because the appalling significance of their watch made ordinary conversation nearly impossible; and yet, despite that, they achieved a kind of intimacy which would have seemed very new and unusual to Cochran if he had been in any position to consider it.

Every so often, instead of just sitting there and waiting for the right man to show up, she worried him by attempting to force a resemblance between the person they wanted and some unimportant client of the Shamrock tavern. And so once, in their sixth week, he explained impersonally to her that it was rather silly to get excited about this, because the only thing they could use here was patience and more patience and again patience. You couldn't rush these things, Cochran said. You waited them out. They generally came to some sort of conclusion in the long run.

But she noticed at once that Cochran did not commit himself, here and now, as to the sort of conclusion they were going to reach outside the Shamrock tavern. She sat back in her corner of the seat and then glanced at him.

She said, "I suppose they do. Only this time"—she put her lips together for a moment—"they simply have to work out in the right way. Not that I'm discouraged about anything; I can't make myself believe for one minute that a mistake like this, a cruel and vicious mistake, is going to be—well, permitted. We'll find him. You wait and see."

"I hope we do," Cochran said. But when he looked out at Third Avenue—shabby, rain-swept, deserted, watery yellow light spilling across the black pavement in front of the tavern—he felt heavily depressed. "We've got a chance, anyway."

She said, with a confidence that surprised Cochran, "Oh, we've got more than that . . . much more. Things don't happen that way. If they did, there wouldn't be much point to the whole mess."

"Maybe there isn't," Cochran said.

"Of course that's silly," Ellen Morison said. She was very calm about it. "Or out-and-out horrible. We've just got to believe that certain things are true and important. If we don't—"

"What things?" Cochran asked; it was the first discussion that had

interested him even slightly. "You name a couple. I'd like to find out about them."

So it was that, of all subjects, they began arguing the most profound and imponderable one. They would argue it from exactly opposed viewpoints—not with the technical skill and finish of philosophers, but from each of their individual accumulations of judgment, experience and intuition. If she knew half the things he knew, Cochran would say darkly, or if she understood half the facts about the uglier side of human nature, she wouldn't talk so much about this or that being permitted or else not permitted. Things happened; that was all you could say about them.

She was earnest at first, and then irritated, and then scornful, but, of course, she never convinced Cochran. What he did admit—reluctantly and not to her—was that it might be pretty comforting to see this as Ellen Morison saw it, to believe in reasons for things, to be sure that someone, somewhere, was keeping an eye peeled in Ray Cochran's direction or Johnny Palica's.

An idea of that kind would have provided him with some useful insulation. He admitted so much, again privately; and then, little by little, and very stubbornly, he became a bit weaker in regard to his own arguments, and a bit more responsive in regard to hers. Friday night at about half past ten, he had just declared that perhaps people did achieve happier and more useful lives when they shared Ellen Morison's belief, and not his, but that didn't prove anything at all, as Cochran saw it. True was true. And if—

A man who did not resemble Johnny Palica at all parked in front of them and went into the Shamrock tavern. Cochran glanced at him and dismissed him, but Ellen Morison froze up, made some sort of breathlessly inarticulate sound and grabbed at Cochran.

He got out of the car slowly, his heart thumping. He said, "All right. You stick here. We don't want him to know anything about you yet. I'll be back as soon as I get a better look at him." Then he walked around the front of the coupé and into the tavern . . . and went numb.

The man whom Ellen Morison had just identified for him was at least four inches taller than Johnny Palica, noticeably older, noticeably stouter; there was, apart from his blond hair, not even the slightest physical similarity between them. *What is this?* Cochran asked himself very quietly. Something broke in him. He strode back to the coupé to that girl, but what he felt for her at this moment was a mixture of cold rage and ferocious contempt.

Did she understand, Cochran demanded thickly, what she had been doing for the last six weeks to him and McReynolds? Did she have any idea of how she had put them up on the rack, and kept them there, and twisted the wheel night after night until each of them was just about out of his head?

She looked very pale and excited, but not as if she understood what he was talking about.

"What's the matter?" she said. She was still breathless. "Why don't you— He's the man, Cochran! I know he is! Do you think I could ever—"

"Then where's the mistake?" Cochran almost shouted at her. He began pounding his fist, with an impression of infinite restrained force, against the roof of the car. "How did anybody ever take this guy for Palica? You kept telling us all along that they looked like each other. That's the thing we were going to spring on everybody. That's all we had."

"But he does!" She pushed her head out anxiously at him. "Of course, he's grown that mustache. That's what you—"

Cochran spun away from her, maddened; then he got into the car blindly, closed the door, cradled his arms in front of him on the steering wheel and laid the right side of his face against them. That way he did not have to so much as look at her.

"He grew too," Cochran said. His voice hated her. "He grew four inches. Me and McReynolds were the dumbheads; all along the district attorney's office had you down for just what you were. We figured you knew what you were talking about. We were stupid enough to go through hell because somebody like you—"

She faltered out several jerky sentences. Why was he talking like this? Hadn't they waited together for the man all these weeks? And now wasn't he in their hands?

Cochran would not answer her. The only clear idea in his mind was that if this man had looked like Johnny Palica, they might have got the witnesses to admit confusion and perhaps error. This way no one—not Mrs. Sawyer, not the married couple, not the district attorney's office—would even consider him. So—

The girl shook him again. Then she whispered painfully, "Listen, Cochran. Will you please, please listen to me? I tell you—"

The man came out of the Shamrock tavern, had a bit of trouble in starting his car—Cochran would scarcely have noticed him otherwise—and pulled out into Third Avenue. After a few moments,

Cochran—a good, careful cop—turned on his ignition and pulled into Third Avenue after him. They drove north. By now, of course, Cochran was following him more by training and dogged instinct than because of any remaining hope in this angle. He still hated the girl; he still felt that she had first argued with him, and then convinced him, and then—most shameful of all—got him almost ready to believe Ray Cochran was something a lot more significant than an ordinary precinct detective who had been instructed to straighten something out, and who had torn himself into little pieces because he was unable to manage it. Always merry and bright, Cochran thought savagely, that was the ticket. There were reasons for everything—oh, sure! Good and logical reasons, if you were stupid enough to understand what they were. If—

Twice she attempted to speak to him; twice Cochran would not listen to her. Then the sedan in front of him turned into a side street that seemed hazily familiar. He followed. He saw, halfway along this street, an apartment house which was also vaguely familiar to him, and then, when the sedan parked in front of it, he recognized that building with a complete and paralyzing shock.

He whispered something. He drove past the sedan, past the man who was ringing a bell in the apartment vestibule, and parked several houses away. He noticed without hate, with a complete detachment, that Ellen Morison was looking white, scared and miserable. What was the matter with her now? Cochran asked himself. What was she—

He got her out of the car. He told her where to phone McReynolds, and what to tell him; then he moved back carefully to the sedan which he had followed up here from the Shamrock tavern. All his thoughts had become quick, sharp and decisive. His heart had begun to thump heavily again. An old car with a new paint job, Cochran saw now; no marks on it. Of course. Not so much as a scratch on the rear fender. But he and McReynolds would find the shop where that paint job had been put on, and where the right rear fender had been hammered out; and then, Cochran told himself grimly, he'd get that married couple to identify this sedan if he had to knock their heads together.

He left the sedan and secluded himself in a dim hallway just down the street from it. The girl came back, and Cochran waved her over imperatively to him, but he did not bother with explanations because he had very little time or attention for her at that moment. He got

out two cigarettes and smoked them in extraordinarily long draughts; then McReynolds and a couple of precinct men cruised past him in a department car. Cochran whistled twice. McReynolds stopped.

They discussed matters for a moment or two, Cochran explaining why he was up here, McReynolds grasping the explanation almost immediately. After that the precinct men went around to the rear entrance and to the fire escapes, and Cochran and McReynolds entered the apartment house after ringing a bell on the top floor—which was not the floor they wanted. They went up two flights, rapidly. They each took deep breaths. Then Cochran rang a bell on that landing, and after some delay the door was opened about three inches and Cochran put a palm against it, shoved and walked in.

The blond man with the dinky little mustache was in there. Cochran walked up to him, gave him a very tight, ugly smile, and hit him. Cochran hit him very hard, and for no apparent reason at all. He just felt that way. He felt fine. At the same moment, McReynolds did what he was supposed to do. McReynolds took care of Mrs. Sawyer.

Of course, after the event it was all obvious. Then Cochran told himself that he and McReynolds should have paid much more attention to the story Ellen Morison had told them. Hadn't she said that when she entered the drugstore, Mr. Sawyer and the holdup man were standing and talking together like old friends? And hadn't Mrs. Sawyer got all excited and hysterical when he and McReynolds had gone back to question her as to how sure she was about Johnny Palica? What should have been at least indicated then was that she could be making some attempt to cover up the real killer, and that, consequently, she herself might be involved in the murder.

It was also clear that Ellen Morison had walked in at just the wrong moment. Mrs. Sawyer and her masculine friend had thought up a perfectly simple and effective method through which to rid themselves of a husband who was getting along in years, and who owned a profitable business. They had attempted to arrange everything so that Mrs. Sawyer, who was supposed to be the only close witness, would describe a man to the police who did not resemble the gentleman friend in any respect; and then Ellen Morison had appeared just when the gentleman friend had nerved himself up to it, and had got himself into so much of a panic that he was unable to postpone it.

And so, on that first night, Mrs. Sawyer had pretended grief and horror, and had refused to understand McReynolds' questions, be-

cause it was necessary for her to learn as quickly as possible what Ellen Morison remembered about the man. If she had differed too much with the girl's description, which was fairly accurate, she might have started Cochran and McReynolds nosing around; and so she agreed with it, and identified Johnny Palica.

She did that to cover herself, obviously, and to keep the police busy on another angle. And then the married couple supported her identification, and Johnny Palica was unable to prove his whereabouts, and everything had begun to work out very nicely for Mrs. Sawyer and her friend. Until he had done the one thing he should never have done—until he had visited Mrs. Sawyer at home, very late at night, in the same apartment house where Cochran and McReynolds had questioned her weeks ago.

As soon as Cochran had recognized the apartment house, he had asked himself the natural question: What connection was there between this man and an attractive little woman like Mrs. Sawyer? Only one answer had seemed at all feasible. It explained immediately why Mrs. Sawyer had identified Johnny Palica, and why Ellen Morison had refused to identify him. Now Cochran was unable to understand why he had never considered that particular aspect before; and even after McReynolds and the other two men had got Mrs. Sawyer and her masculine friend—screaming at each other, blaming each other—into the department car and had started downtown with them, the whole thing continued to exasperate Cochran as the evidence of a colossal personal stupidity.

"Because in something like this we always check on the wife or husband," he insisted to Ellen Morison, who was still waiting downstairs for him. "Always! We'd have done it this time if you hadn't been there to back up her story. But when you saw the whole thing happen just in front of you— Well, how were we going to question it? What for? It wasn't reasonable."

"But I suppose this is," Ellen Morison said. She looked very tired and miserable. "Now everything's fine. If those two make you ashamed of the whole human race, that doesn't matter at all. It's just—" Her mouth twisted. "Get me away from here, Cochran, please. I'm scared. I don't want to hear anything else about this. All I—"

She began shivering. Cochran soothed her. There was a perspective you attained in such matters, Cochran said; the one important thing was that you did not permit an event of this nature to throw you off balance, to make you cynical, to— He stopped there; he re-

membered suddenly that not too long ago he had been arguing a similar question from another position. Ah, forget it, he thought angrily. Who understood why things like this happened the way they did? Who wanted to? He could go this far with Ellen Morison—they worked out pretty well frequently. They had worked out now, hadn't they?

It did not strike him at once that he had gone much further with her than he had ever gone with anyone else. When it did strike him, he decided that perhaps there was some sort of significance there. He got her into the car and patted her hand tentatively and murmured to her. On other nights, Cochran decided, and under different conditions, they could argue the verities, but just now he would have to be very firm and sensible about this.

He was. He started the car and got her away from there. They drove aimlessly at first, with Cochran very quiet and reassuring with her, and then he took her home and went home himself. He slept fourteen hours with nothing disturbing him, not even the garbage trucks or the morning traffic, and when he woke up at last, he discovered that he felt fine and comfortable, and that he was thinking about Ellen Morison. *Say*, Cochran thought slowly, *what is this?* But he knew. He knew almost as soon as the question completed itself.

SPRING FEVER

Dorothy Salisbury Davis

Sarah Shepherd watched her husband come down the stairs. He set his suitcase at the front door, checked his watch with the hall clock, and examined beneath his chin in the mirror. There was one spot he sometimes missed in shaving. He stepped back and examined himself full length, frowning a little. He was getting paunchy and not liking it. That critical of himself, how much more critical of her he might be. But he said nothing either in criticism or compliment, and she remembered, uncomfortably, doing all sorts of stunts to attract his eye: coy things—more becoming a girl than a woman of fifty-five. She did not feel her twelve years over Gerald . . . most of the time. Scarcely aware of the movement, she traced the shape of her stomach with her fingertips.

Gerald brought his sample spice kit into the living-room and opened it. The aroma would linger for some time after he was gone. "There's enough wood, dear, if it gets cold tonight," he said. "And I wish you wouldn't haul things from the village. That's what delivery trucks are for . . ." He numbered his solitudes as he did the bottles in the sample case, and with the same noncommittal attention.

As he took the case from the table, she got up and went to the door

with him. On the porch he hesitated a moment, flexing his shoulders and breathing deeply. "On a morning like this I almost wish I drove a car."

"You could learn, Gerald. You could reach your accounts in half the time, and . . ."

"No, dear. I'm quite content with my paper in the bus, and in a town a car's a nuisance." He stooped and brushed her cheek with his lips. "Hello there!" he called out as he straightened up.

Her eyes followed the direction in which he had called. Their only close neighbor, a vegetable and flower grower, was following a plow behind his horse, his head as high as the horse's was low, the morning wind catching his thatch of gray hair and pointing it like a shock of wheat.

"That old boy has the life," Gerald said. "When I'm his age that's for me."

"He's not so old," she said.

"No. I guess he's not at that," he said. "Well, dear, I must be off. Till tomorrow night, take care of yourself."

His step down the road was almost jaunty. It was strange that he could not abide an automobile. But not having one was rather in the pattern. A car would be a tangible link between his life away and theirs at home. Climbing into it of an evening, she would have a feeling of his travels. The dust would rub off on her. As it was, the most she had of him away was the lingering pungency of a sample spice kit.

When he was out of sight she began her household chores—the breakfast dishes, beds, dusting. She had brought altogether too many things from the city. Her mother had left seventy years' accumulation in the old house, and now it was impossible to lay a book on the table without first moving a figurine, a vase, a piece of delft. Really the place was a clutter of bric-a-brac. Small wonder Gerald had changed toward her. It was not marriage that had changed him—it was this house, and herself settling in it like an old Buddha with a bowl of incense in his lap.

A queer thing that this should occur to her only now, she thought. But it was not the first time. She was only now finding a word for it. Nor had Gerald always been this remote. Separating a memory of a particular moment in their early days, she caught his eyes searching hers—not numbering her years, as she might think were he to do it now, but measuring his own worth in her esteem.

She lined up several ornaments that might be put away, or better, sold to a junkman. But from the line-up she drew out pieces of which she had grown especially fond. They had become like children to her, as Gerald made children of the books with which he spent his evenings home. Making a basket of her apron she swept the whole tableful of trinkets into it.

Without a downward glance, she hurried them to the ash-box in the backyard. Shed of them, she felt a good deal lighter, and with the May wind in her face and the sun gentle, like an arm across her shoulders, she felt very nearly capersome. Across the fence the jonquils were in bloom, and the tulips, nodding like fat little boys. Mr. Joyce had unhitched the horse. He saw her then.

"Fine day this morning," he called. He gave the horse a slap on the rump that sent him into the pasture, and came to the fence.

"I'm admiring the flowers," she said.

"Lazy year for them. Two weeks late they are."

"Is that a fact?" Of course it's a fact, she thought. A silly remark, and another after it: "I've never seen them lovelier, though. What comes out next?"

"Snaps, I guess this year. Late roses, too. The iris don't sell much, so I'm letting 'em come or stay as they like."

"That should bring them out."

"Now isn't that the truth? You can coax and tickle all year and not get a bloom for thanks. Turn your back on 'em and they run you down."

Like love, she thought, and caught her tongue. But a splash of color took to her cheeks.

"Say, you're looking nice, Mrs. Shepherd, if you don't mind my saying it."

"Thank you. A touch of spring, I suppose."

"Don't it just send your blood racing? How would you like an armful of these?"

"I'd be very pleased, Mr. Joyce. But I'd like to pay you for them."

"Indeed not. I won't sell half of them—they come in a heap."

She watched his expert hand nip the blooms. He was already tanned, and he stooped and rose with a fine grace. In all the years he had lived next to them he had never been in the house, nor they in his except the day of his wife's funeral. He hadn't grieved much, she commented to Gerald at the time. And little wonder. The woman was pinched and whining, and there wasn't a sunny day she didn't

expect a drizzle before nightfall. Now that Sarah thought of it, Joyce looked younger than he did when Mrs. Joyce was still alive.

"There. For goodness' sakes, Mr. Joyce. That's plenty."

"I'd give you the field of them this morning," he said, piling her arms with the flowers.

"I've got half of it now."

"And what a picture you are with them."

"Well, I must hurry them into water," she said. "Thank you."

She hastened toward the house, flying like a young flirt from her first conquest, and aware of the pleased eye following her. The whole morning glowed in the company she kept with the flowers. She snapped off the radio: no tears for Miss Julia today. At noon she heard Mr. Joyce's wagon roll out of the yard as he started to his highway stand. She watched at the window. He looked up and lifted his hat.

At odd moments during the day, she thought of him. He had given her a fine sense of herself and she was grateful. She began to wish that Gerald was returning that night. Take your time, Sarah, she told herself. You don't put away old habits and the years like bric-a-brac. She had softened up, no doubt of it. Not a fat woman, maybe, but plump. Plump. She repeated the word aloud. It had the sound of a potato falling into a tub of water.

But the afternoon sun was warm and the old laziness came over her. Only when Mr. Joyce came home, his voice in a song ahead of him, did she pull herself up. She hurried a chicken out of the refrigerator and then called to him from the porch.

"Mr. Joyce, would you like to have supper with me? Gerald won't be home, and I do hate cooking for just myself."

"Oh, that'd be grand. I've nothing in the house but a shank of ham that a dog wouldn't bark for. What can I bring?"

"Just come along when you're ready."

Sarah, she told herself, setting the table, you're an old bat trying your wings in daylight. A half-hour later she glanced out of the window in time to see Mr. Joyce skipping over the fence like a stiff-legged colt. He was dressed in his Sunday suit and brandishing a bottle as he cleared the barbed wire. Sarah choked down a lump of apprehension. For all that she planned a little fun for herself, she was not up to galloping through the house with an old Don Juan on her heels. Mr. Joyce, however, was a well-mannered guest. The bottle was May wine. He drank sparingly and was lavish in his praise of the dinner.

"You've no idea the way I envy you folks, Mrs. Shepherd. Your husband especially. How can he bear the times he spends away?"

He bears it all too well, she thought. "It's his work. He's a salesman. He sells spices."

Mr. Joyce showed a fine set of teeth in his smile—his own teeth, she marveled, tracing her bridgework with the tip of her tongue while he spoke. "Then he's got sugar and spice and everything nice, as they say."

What a one he must have been with the girls, she thought, and to marry a quince as he had. It was done in a hurry no doubt, and maybe at the end of a big stick.

"It must be very lonesome for you since Mrs. Joyce passed away," she said more lugubriously than she intended. After all the woman was gone three years.

"No more than when she was with me." His voice matched hers in seriousness. "It's a hard thing to say of the dead, but if she hasn't improved her disposition since, we're all in for a damp eternity." He stuffed the bowl of his pipe. "Do you mind?"

"No, I like the smell of tobacco around the house."

"Does your husband smoke?"

"Yes," she said in some surprise at the question.

"He didn't look the kind to follow a pipe," he said, pulling noisily at his. "No, dear lady," he added when the smoke was shooting from it, "you're blessed in not knowing the plague of a silent house."

It occurred to her then that he was exploring the situation. She would give him small satisfaction. "Yes. I count that among my blessings."

There was a kind of amusement in his eyes. You're as lonesome as me, old girl, they seemed to say, and their frankness bade her to add: "But I do wish Gerald was home more of the time."

"Ah, well, he's at the age when most men look to a last trot around the paddock," he said, squinting at her through the smoke.

"Gerald is only forty-three," she said, losing the words before she knew it.

"There's some take it at forty, and others among us leaping after it from the rocking chair."

The conversation had taken a turn she certainly had not intended, and she found herself threshing around in it. Beating a fire with a feather duster. "There's the moon," she said, charging to the window as though to wave to an old friend.

"Aye," he said, "there's the moon. Are you up to a trot in it?"

"What did you say, Mr. Joyce?"

"I'd better say what I was thinking first. If I hitch Micky to the old rig, would you take a turn with me on the Mill Pond Road?"

She saw his reflection in the window, a smug, daring little grin on his face. In sixteen years of settling she had forgotten her way with men. But it was something you never really forgot. Like riding a bicycle, you picked it up again after a few turns. "I would," she said.

The horse ahead of the rig was a different animal from the one on the plow that morning. Mr. Joyce had no more than thrown the reins over his rump than he took a turn that almost tumbled Sarah into the sun frames. But Mr. Joyce leaped to the seat and pulled Micky up on his hind legs with one hand and Sarah down to her cushion with the other, and they were off in the wake of the moon. . . .

The sun was full in her face when Sarah awoke the next morning. As usual, she looked to see if Gerald were in his bed by way of acclimating herself to the day and its routine. With the first turn of her body she decided that a gallop in a rusty-sprung rig was not the way to assert a stay of youth. She lay a few moments thinking about it and then got up to an aching sense of folly. It remained with her through the day, giving way at times to a nostalgia for her bric-a-brac. She had never realized how much of her life was spent in the care of it.

By the time Gerald came home she was almost the person he had left the day before. She had held out against the ornaments, however. Only the flowers decorated the living-room. It was not until supper was over and Gerald had settled with his book that he commented.

"Sarah, what happened to the old Chinese philosopher?"

"I put him away. Didn't you notice? I took all the clutter out of here."

He looked about him vacantly as though trying to recall some of it. "So you did. I'll miss that old boy. He gave me something to think about."

"What?"

"Oh, I don't know. Confucius says . . . that sort of thing."

"He wasn't a philosopher at all," she said, having no notion what he was. "He was a farmer."

"Was he? Well, there's small difference." He opened the book.

"Aren't the flowers nice, Gerald?"

"Beautiful."

"Mr. Joyce gave them to me, fresh out of his garden."

"That's nice."

"Must you read every night, Gerald? I'm here all day with no one to talk to, and when you get home you stick your nose into a book . . ." When the words were half out she regretted them. "I didn't tell you, Gerald. I had Mr. Joyce to dinner last night."

"That was very decent of you, dear. The old gentleman must find it lonesome."

"I don't think so. It was a relief to him when his wife died."

Gerald looked up. "Did he say that?"

"Not in so many words, but practically."

"He must be a strange sort. What did she die of?"

"I don't remember. A heart condition, I think."

"Interesting." He returned to his book.

"After dinner he took me for a ride in the horse and buggy. All the way to Cos Corner and back."

"Ha!" was his only comment.

"Gerald, you're getting fat."

He looked up. "I don't think so. I'm about my usual weight. A couple of pounds maybe."

"Then you're carrying it in your stomach. I noticed you've cut the elastic out of your shorts."

"These new fabrics," he said testily.

"They're preshrunken," she said. "It's your stomach. And haven't you noticed how you pull at your collar all the time?"

"I meant to mention that, Sarah. You put too much starch in them."

"I ran out of starch last week and forgot to order it. You can take a size fifteen-and-a-half now."

"Good Lord, Sarah, you're going to tell me next I should wear a horse collar." He let the book slide closed between his thighs. "I get home only three or four nights a week. I'm tired. I wish you wouldn't aggravate me, dear."

She went to his chair and sat on the arm of it. "Did you know that I was beginning to wonder if you'd respond to the poke of a hat-pin?"

He looked directly up at her for the first time in what had seemed like years. His eyes fell away. "I've been working very hard, dear."

"I don't care what you've been doing, Gerald. I'm just glad to find out that you're still human."

He slid his arm around her and tightened it.

"Aren't spring flowers lovely?" she said.

"Yes," he said, "and so is spring."

She leaned across him and took a flower from the vase. She lin-

gered there a moment. He touched his hand to her. "And you're lovely, too."

This is simple, she thought, getting upright again. If the rabbit had sat on a thistle, he'd have won the race.

"The three most beautiful things in the world," Gerald said thoughtfully, "a white bird flying, a field of wheat, and a woman's body."

"Is that your own, Gerald?"

"I don't know. I think it is."

"It's been a long time since you wrote any poetry. You did nice things once."

"That's how I got you," he said quietly.

"And I got you with an old house. I remember the day my mother's will was probated. The truth, Gerald—wasn't it then you made up your mind?"

He didn't speak for a moment, and then it was a continuance of some thought of his own, a subtle twist of association. "Do you remember the piece I wrote on the house?"

"I read it the other day. I often read them again."

"Do you, Sarah? And never a mention of it."

It was almost all the reading she did any more. His devotion to books had turned her from them. "Remember how you used to let me read them to you, Gerald? You thought that I was the only one besides yourself who could do them justice."

"I remember."

"Or was that flattery?"

He smiled. "It was courtship, I'm afraid. No one ever thinks anybody else can do his poetry justice. But Sarah, do you know—I'd listen tonight if you'd read some of them. Just for old times' sake."

For old times' sake, she thought, getting the folder from the cabinet and settling opposite him. He was slouched in his chair, pulling at his pipe, his eyes half-closed. Long ago this same contemplativeness in him had softened the first shock of the difference in their ages.

"I've always liked this one best—*The Morning of My Days*."

"Well you might," he murmured. "It was written for you."

She read one piece after another, wondering now and then what pictures he was conjuring up of the moment he had written them. He would suck on his pipe at times. The sound was like a baby pulling at an empty bottle. She was reading them well, she thought, giving them a mellow vibrance, an old love's tenderness. Surely there

was a moment coming when he would rise from the chair and come to her. Still he sat, his eyes almost closed, the pipe now in hand on the chair's arm. A huskiness crept into her voice, so rarely used to this length any more, and she thought of the nightingale's singing, the thorn against its breast. A slit of pain in her own throat pressed her to greater effort, for the poems were almost done.

She stopped abruptly, a phrase unfinished, at a noise in the room. The pipe had clattered to the floor, Gerald's hand still cupped in its shape, but his chin now on his breast. Laying the folder aside, she went over and picked up the pipe with a rather empty regret, as she would pick up a bird that had fallen dead at her feet.

Gerald's departure in the morning was in the tradition of all their days, even to the kiss upon her cheek and the words, "Till tomorrow evening, dear, take care."

Take care, she thought, going indoors. Take care of what? For what? Heat a boiler of water to cook an egg? She hurried her chores and dressed. When she saw Mr. Joyce hitch the wagon of flowers, she locked the door and waited boldly at the road for him.

"May I have a lift to the highway?" she called out, as he reined up beside her.

"You may have a lift to the world's end, Mrs. Shepherd. Give me your hand." He gave the horse its rein when she was beside him. "I see your old fella's taken himself off again. I daresay it gave him a laugh, our ride in the moonlight."

"It was a giddy business," she said.

"Did you enjoy yourself?"

"I did. But I paid for it afterwards." Her hand went to her back.

"I let out a squeal now and then bending over, myself. But I counted it cheap for the pleasure we had. I'll take you into the village. I've to buy a length of hose anyway. Or do you think you'll be taken for a fool riding in on a wagon?"

"It won't be the first time," she said. "My life's full of foolishness."

"It's a wise fool who laughs at his own folly. We've that in common, you and me. Where'll we take our supper tonight?"

He was sharp as mustard.

"You're welcome to come over," she said.

He nodded. "I'll fetch us a steak, and we'll give Micky his heels again after."

Sarah got off at the post office and stayed in the building until Joyce was out of sight—Joyce and the gapers who had stopped to see her get out of the wagon. Getting in was one thing, getting out an-

other. A bumblebee after a violet. It was time for this trip. She walked to the doctor's office and waited her turn among the villagers.

"I thought I'd come in for a checkup, Dr. Philips," she said at his desk. "And maybe you'd give me a diet."

"A diet?" He took off his glasses and measured her with the naked eye.

"I'm getting a little fat," she said. "They say it's a strain on the heart at my age."

"Your heart could do for a woman of twenty," he said, "but we'll have a listen."

"I'm not worried about my heart, Doctor, you understand. I just feel that I'd like to lose a few pounds."

"Uh-huh," he said. "Open your dress." He got his stethoscope.

Diet, apparently, was the rarest of his prescriptions. Given as a last resort. She should have gone into town for this, not to a country physician who measured a woman by the children she bore. "The woman next door to us died of a heart condition," she said, as though that should explain her visit.

"Who's that?" he asked, putting away the instrument.

"Mrs. Joyce. Some years ago."

"She had a heart to worry about. Living for years on stimulants. Yours is as sound as a bullet. Let's have your arm."

She pushed up her sleeve as he prepared the apparatus for measuring her blood pressure. That, she felt, was rising out of all proportion. She was ashamed of herself before this man, and angry at herself for it, and at him for no reason more than that he was being patient with her. "We're planning insurance," she lied. "I wanted our own doctor's opinion first."

"You'll have no trouble getting it, Mrs. Shepherd. And no need of a diet." He grinned and removed the apparatus. "Go easy on potatoes and bread, and on the sweets. You'll outlive your husband by twenty years. How is he, by the way?"

"Fine. Just fine, Doctor, thank you."

What a nice show you're making of yourself these days, Sarah, she thought, outdoors again. Well, come in or go out, old girl, and slam the door behind you . . .

Micky took to his heels that night. He had had a day of ease, and new shoes were stinging his hooves by nightfall. The skipping of Joyce with each snap of the harness teased him, the giggling from the rig adding a prickle. After the wagon, the rig was no more than a fly on his tail. He took the full reins when they slapped on his flanks

and charged out from the laughter behind him. It rose to a shriek the faster he galloped and tickled his ears like something alive that slithered from them down his neck and his belly and into his loins. Faster and faster he plunged, the sparks from his shoes like ocean spray. He fought a jerk of the reins, the saw of the bit in his mouth a fierce pleasure. He took turns at his own fancy and only in sight of his own yard again did he yield in the fight, choking on the spume that lathered his tongue.

"By the holy, the night a horse beats me, I'll lie down in my grave," Joyce cried. "Get up now, you buzzard. You're not turning in till you go to the highway and back. Are you all right, Sarah?"

Am I all right, she thought. When in years had she known a wild ecstasy like this? From the first leap of the horse she had burst the girdle of fear and shame. If the wheels had spun out from beneath them, she would have rolled into the ditch contented.

"I've never been better," she said.

He leaned close to her to see her, for the moon had just risen. The wind had stung the tears to her eyes, but they were laughing. "By the Horn Spoon," he said, "you liked it!" He let the horse have his own way into the drive after all. He jumped down from the rig and held his hand up to her. "What a beautiful thing to be hanging in the back of the closet all these years."

"If that's a compliment," she said, "it's got a nasty bite."

"Aye. But it's my way of saying you're a beautiful woman."

"Will you come over for a cup of coffee?"

"I will. I'll put up the horse and be over."

The kettle had just come to the boil when he arrived.

"Maybe you'd rather have tea, Mr. Joyce?"

"Coffee or tea, so long as it's not water. And I'd like you to call me Frank. They christened me Francis but I got free of it early."

"And you know mine, I noticed," she said.

"It slipped out in the excitement. There isn't a woman I know who wouldn't of collapsed in a ride like that."

"It was wonderful." She poured the water into the coffee pot.

"There's nothing like getting behind a horse," he said, "unless it's getting astride him. I wouldn't trade Micky for a Mack truck."

"I used to ride when I was younger," she said.

"How did you pick up the man you got, if you don't mind my asking?"

And you the old woman, she thought; where did you get her? "I worked for a publishing house and he brought in some poetry."

"Ah, that's it." He nodded. "And he thought with a place like this he could pour it out like water from a spout."

"Gerald and I were in love," she said, irked that he should define so bluntly her own thoughts on the matter.

"Don't I remember it? In them days you didn't pull the blinds. It used to put me in a fine state."

"Do you take cream in your coffee? I've forgotten."

"Aye, thank you, and plenty of sugar."

"You haven't missed much," she said.

"There's things you see through a window you'd miss sitting down in the living-room. I'll wager you've wondered about the old lady and me?"

"A little. She wasn't so old, was she, Mr. Joyce?" Frank, she thought. Too frank.

"That one was old in her crib. But she came with a greenhouse. I worked for her father."

Sarah poured the coffee. "You're a cold-blooded old rogue," she said.

He grinned. "No. Cool-headed I am, and warm-blooded. When I was young, I made out it was the likes of poetry. She sang like a bird on a convent wall. But when I caged her she turned into an old crow."

"That's a terrible thing to say, Mr. Joyce."

The humor left his face for an instant. "It's a terribler thing to live with. It'd put a man off his nut. You don't have a bit of cake in the house, Sarah, to go with this?"

"How about muffins and jam?"

"That'll go fine." He smiled again. "Where does your old fella spend the night in his travels?"

"In the hotel in whatever town he happens to be in."

"That's a lonesome sort of life for a married man," he said.

She pulled a chair to the cupboard and climbed up to get a jar of preserves. He made no move to help her although she still could not reach the jar. She looked down at him. "You could give me a hand."

"Try it again. You almost had it that time." He grinned, almost gleeful at her discomfort.

She bounced down in one step. "Get it yourself if you want it. I'm satisfied with a cup of coffee."

He pounded his fist on the table, getting up. "You're right, Sarah. Never fetch a man anything he can fetch himself. Which bottle is it?"

"The strawberry."

He hopped up and down, nimble as a goat. "But then maybe he doesn't travel alone?"

"What?"

"I was suggesting your man might have an outside interest. Salesmen have the great temptation, you know."

"That's rather impertinent, Mr. Joyce."

"You're right, Sarah, it is. My tongue's been home so long it doesn't know how to behave in company. This is a fine cup of coffee."

She sipped hers without speaking. It was time she faced that question, she thought. She had been hedging around it for a long time, and last night with Gerald should have forced it upon her. "And if he does have an outside interest," she said, lifting her chin, "what of it?"

"Ah, Sarah, you're a wise woman, and worth waiting the acquaintance of. You like me a little now, don't you?"

"A little."

"Well," he said, getting up, "I'll take that to keep me warm for the night."

And what have I got to keep me warm, she thought. "Thank you for the ride, Frank. It was thrilling."

"Was it?" he said, coming near her. He lifted her chin with his forefinger. "We've many a night like this ahead, Sarah, if you say the word." And then when she left her chin on his finger, he bent down and kissed her, taking himself to the door after it with a skip and a jump. He paused there and looked back at her. "Will I stay or go?"

"You'd better go," she choked out, wanting to be angry but finding no anger in herself at all.

All the next day Sarah tried to anchor herself from her peculiar flights of fancy. She had no feeling for the man, she told herself. It was a fine state a woman reached when a kiss from a stranger could do that to her. It was the ride made you giddy, she said aloud. You were thinking of Gerald. You were thinking of . . . the Lord knows what. She worked upstairs until she heard the wagon go by. She would get some perspective when Gerald came home. It seemed as though he'd been gone a long time.

The day was close and damp, and the flies clung to the screens. There was a dull stillness in the atmosphere. By late afternoon the clouds rolled heavier, mulling about one another like dough in a pan. While she was peeling potatoes for supper, Frank drove in.

He unhitched the horse but left him in the harness, and set about immediately building frames along the rows of flowers. He was expecting a storm. She looked at the clock. It was almost time for Gerald.

She went out on the front porch and watched for the bus. There was a haze in the sweep of land between her and the highway, and the traffic through it seemed to float thickly, slowly. The bus glided toward the intersection and past it without stopping. She felt a sudden anger. Her whole day had been strong up to this peak. Since he had not called, it meant merely that he had missed the bus. The next one was in two hours. She crossed the yard to the fence. You're starting up again, Sarah, she warned herself, and took no heed of the warning.

Frank looked up from his work. "You'd better fasten the house," he said. "There's a fine blow coming."

"Frank, if you're in a hurry, I'll give you something to eat."

"That'd be a great kindness. I may have to go back to the stand at a gallop."

He was at the kitchen table, shoveling in the food without a word, when the heavy sky lightened. He went to the window. "By the glory, it may blow over." He looked around at her. "Your old boy missed the bus, did he?"

"He must have."

Frank looked out again. "I do like a good blow. Even if it impoverished me, there's nothing in the world like a storm."

An automobile horn sounded on the road. It occurred to Sarah that on a couple of occasions Gerald had received a ride from the city. The car passed, but watching its dust she was left with a feeling of suspended urgency. Joyce was chatting now. He had tilted back in the chair and for the first time since she had known him, he was rambling on about weather, vegetables, and the price of eggs. She found it more disconcerting than his bursts of intimate comment, and she hung from one sentence to the next waiting for the end of it. Finally she passed in back of his chair and touched her fingers briefly to his neck.

"You need a haircut, Frank."

He sat bolt upright. "I never notice it till I have to scratch. Could I have a drop more coffee?"

She filled his cup, aware of his eyes on her. "Last night was something I'll never forget—that ride," she said.

"And something else last night, do you remember that?"

"Yes."

"Would you give me another now to match it if I was to ask?"

"No."

"What if I took it without asking?"

"I don't think I'd like it, Frank."

He pushed away from the table, slopping the coffee into the saucer. "Then what are you tempting me for?"

"You've a funny notion of temptation," she flared up, knowing the anger was against herself.

Joyce spread his dirt-grimed fingers on the table. "Sarah, do you know what you want?"

The tears were gathering. She fought them back. "Yes, I know what I want!" she cried.

Joyce shook his head. "He's got you by the heart, hasn't he, Sarah?"

"My heart's my own!" She flung her head up.

Joyce slapped his hand on the table. "Ho! Look at the spark of the woman! That'd scorch a man if there was a stick in him for kindling." He moistened his lips and in spite of herself Sarah took a step backwards. "I'll not chase you, Sarah. Never fear that. My chasing days are over. I'll neither chase nor run, but I'll stand my ground for what's coming to me." He jerked his head toward the window. "That was only a lull in the wind. There's a big blow coming now for certain."

She watched the first drops of rain splash on the glass. "Gerald's going to get drenched in it."

"Maybe it'll drown him," Joyce said, grinning from the door. "Thanks for the supper."

Let it come on hail, thunder, and lightning. Blow the roof from the house and tumble the chimney. I'd go out from it then and never turn back. When an old man can laugh at your trying to cuckold a husband, and the husband asking it, begging it, shame on you. She went through the house clamping the locks on the windows. More pleasure putting the broom through them.

An early darkness folded into the storm, and the walls of rain bleared the highway lights. There was an ugly yellow tinge to the water from the dust swirled into it. The wind sluiced down the chimney, spitting bits of soot on the living-room floor. She spread newspapers to catch it. A sudden blow, it would soon be spent. She went to

the hall clock. The bus was due in ten minutes. What matter? A quick supper, a good book, and a long sleep. The wily old imp was right. A prophet needing a haircut.

The lights flickered off for a moment, then on again. Let them go out, Sarah. What's left for you, you can see by candlelight. She went to the basement and brought up the kerosene lamp and then got a flashlight from the pantry. As she returned to the living-room, a fresh gust of wind sent the newspapers out of the grate like scud. The lights flickered again. A sound drew her to the hall. She thought the wind might be muffling the ring of the telephone. When she got there, the clock was striking. The bus was now twenty minutes late. There was something about the look of the phone that convinced her the line was dead. It was unnerving to find it in order. Imagination, she murmured. Everything was going perverse to her expectations. And then, annoyed with herself, she grew angry with Gerald again. This was insult. Insult on top of indifference.

She followed a thumping noise upstairs. It was on the outside of the house. She turned off the light and pressed her face against the window. A giant maple tree was rocking and churning, one branch thudding against the house. There was not even a blur of light from the highway now. Blacked out. While she watched, a pinpoint of light shaped before her. It grew larger, weaving a little. A flashlight, she thought, and wondered if Gerald had one. Then she recognized the motion: a lantern on a wagon. Frank was returning.

When she touched the light switch there was no response. Groping her way to the hall she saw that all the lights were out now. Step by step she made her way downstairs. A dankness had washed in through the chimney, stale and sickening. She lit the lamp and carried it to the kitchen. From the window there, she saw Frank's lantern bobbing as he led the horse into the barn. She could not see man or horse, only the fading of the light until it disappeared inside. When it reappeared she lifted her kerosene lamp, a greeting to him. This time he came around the fence. She held the door against the wind.

"I've no time now, Sarah. I've work to do," he shouted. "He didn't come, did he?"

"No!"

"Is the phone working?"

She nodded that it was and waved him close to her. "Did the bus come through?"

"It's come and gone. Close the door or you'll have the house in a shambles." He waved his lantern and was gone.

She put the pot roast she had prepared for Gerald in the refrigerator and set the perishables close to the freezing unit. She wound the clock and put away the dishes. Anything to keep busy. She washed the kitchen floor that had been washed only the day before. The lantern across the way swung on a hook at the barn, sometimes moving toward the ground and back as Joyce examined the frames he was reinforcing.

Finally she returned to the living-room. She sat for a long time in Gerald's chair, watching the pattern of smoke in the lamp-chimney. Not even a dog or cat to keep her company. Not even a laughing piece of delft to look out at her from the mantelpiece; only the cold-eyed forebears, whom she could not remember, staring down at her from the gilt frames, their eyes fixed upon her, the last and the least of them who would leave after her—nothing.

It was not to be endured. She lunged out of the chair. In the hall she climbed to the first landing where she could see Joyce's yard. He was through work now, the lantern hanging from the porch although the house was darkened. It was the only light anywhere, and swayed in the wind like a will-o'-the-wisp.

She bounded down the stairs and caught up her raincoat. Taking the flashlight she went out into the storm. She made her way around the fence, sometimes leaning into the wind, sometimes resting against it. Joyce met her in his driveway. He had been waiting, she thought, testing his nerves against her own, expecting her. Without a word, he caught her hand and led her to his back steps and into the house. "I've an oil lamp," he said then. "Hold your light there till I fix it."

She watched his wet face in the half-light. His mouth was lined with malicious humor, and his eyes as he squinted at the first flame of the wick were fierce, as fierce as the storm, and as strange to her. When the light flared up, she followed its reaches over the dirty wall, the faded calendar, the gaping cupboards, the electric cord hanging from a naked bulb over the sink to the back door. There were dishes stacked on the table where they no doubt stood from one meal to the next. The curtains were stiff with dirt, three years of it. Only then did she take a full glimpse of the folly that had brought her here.

"I just ran over for a minute, Frank . . ."

"A minute or the night, sit there, Sarah, and let me get out of these clothes."

She took the chair he motioned her into, and watched him fling his coat into the corner. Nor could she take her eyes from him as he sat down and removed his boots and socks. Each motion fascinated her

separately, fascinated and revolted her. He wiped between his toes with the socks. He went barefoot toward the front of the house. In the doorway he paused, becoming a giant in the weird light.

"Put us up a pot of coffee, dear woman. The makings are there on the stove."

"I must go home. Gerald . . ."

"To hell with Gerald," he interrupted. "He's snug for the night, wherever he is. Maybe he won't come back to you at all. It's happened before, you know, men vanishing from women they don't know the worth of."

Alone, she sat stiff and erect at the table. He was just talking, poisoning her mind against Gerald. How should she get out of here? Run like a frightened doe and never face him again? No, Sarah. Stay for the bitter coffee. Scald the giddiness out of you once and for all. But on top of the resolve came the wish that Gerald might somehow appear at the door and take her home. Dear, gentle Gerald.

She got up and went to the sink to draw the water for coffee. A row of medicine bottles stood on the window-sill, crusted with dust. Household remedies. She leaned close and examined a faded label: "Mrs. Joyce— Take immediately upon need."

She turned from the window. A rocker stood in the corner of the room. In the old days the sick woman had sat in it on the back porch, rocking, and speaking to no one. The stale sickness of her was still about the house, Sarah thought. What did she know of people like this?

He was threshing around upstairs like a penned bull. His muddy boots lay where he had taken them off, a pool of water gathering about them. Again she looked at the window-sill. No May wine there. Suddenly she remembered Dr. Philips's words: "Lived on stimulants for years." She could almost see the sour woman, even to her gasping for breath . . . "Take immediately."

Fix the coffee, Sarah. What kind of teasing is this? Teasing the dead from her grave before you. Teasing. Something in the thought disturbed her further . . . an association: Joyce watching her reach for the preserves last night, grinning at her. "Try it again, Sarah. You almost had it that time." And she could still hear him asking, "Which bottle?" Not which jar, but which bottle.

She grabbed the kettle and filled it. Stop it, Sarah. It's the storm, the waiting, too much waiting . . . your time of life. She drew herself up against his coming, hearing his quick steps on the stairs.

"Will you give us a bit of iodine there from the window, Sarah? I've scratched myself on those blamed frames."

She selected the bottle carefully with her eyes, so that her trembling hand might not betray her.

"Dab it on here," he said, holding a white cuff away from his wrist.

The palm of his hand was moist as she bent over it and she could smell the earth and the horse from it. Familiar. Everything about him had become familiar, too familiar. She felt his breath on her neck, and the hissing sound of it was the only sound in the room. She smeared the iodine on the cut and pulled away. His lips tightened across his teeth in a grin.

"A kiss would make a tickle of the pain," he said.

Sarah thrust the iodine bottle from her and grabbed the flashlight. "I'm going home."

His jaw sagged as he stared at her. "Then what did you come for?"

"Because I was lonesome. I was foolish . . ." Fear choked off her voice. A little trickle of saliva dribbled from the corner of his mouth.

"No! You came to torture me!"

She forced one foot toward the door and the other after it. His voice rose in laughter as she lumbered away from him. "Good Lord, Sarah. Where's the magnificent woman who rode to the winds with me last night?"

She lunged into the electric cord in her retreat, searing her cheek on it. Joyce caught it and wrenched it from the wall, its splayed end springing along the floor like a whip. "And me thinking the greatest kindness would be if he never came home!"

The doorknob slipped in her sweaty hand. She dried it frantically. He's crazy, she thought. Mad-crazy.

"You're a lump, Sarah," he shouted. "And Mr. Joyce is a joker. A joker and a dunce. He always was and he will be till the day they hang him!"

The door yielded and she plunged down the steps and into the yard. In her wild haste she hurled herself against the rig and spun away from it as though it were something alive. She sucked in her breath to keep from screaming. She tore her coat on the fence hurtling past it, leaving a swatch of it on the wire. Take a deep breath, she told herself as she stumbled up the steps. Don't faint. Don't fall. The door swung from her grasp, the wind clamoring through the house. She forced it closed, the glass plate tingling, and bolted it. She thrust the flashlight on the table and caught up the phone. She clicked it wildly.

Finally it was the operator who broke through. "I have a call for you from Mr. Gerald Shepherd. Will you hold on, please?"

Sarah could hear only her own sobbing breath in the hollow of the mouthpiece. She tried to settle her mind by pinning her eyes on the stairway. But the spokes of the staircase seemed to be shivering dizzily in the circle of light, like the plucked strings of a harp. Even the sound of them was vibrant in her head, whirring over the rasp of her breath. Then came the pounding footfalls and Joyce's fists on the door. Vainly she signaled the operator. And somewhere in the tumult of her mind she grasped at the thought that if she unlocked the door, Joyce would come in and sit down. They might even light the fire. There was plenty of wood in the basement. But she could not speak. And it was too late.

Joyce's fist crashed through the glass and drew the bolt. With the door's opening the wind whipped her coat over her head; with its closing, her coat fell limp, its little pressure about her knees seeming to buckle them.

"I'm sorry," came the operator's voice, "the call was canceled ten minutes ago."

She let the phone clatter onto the table and waited, her back still to the door. Ten minutes was not very long ago, she reasoned in sudden desolate calmness. She measured each of Joyce's footfalls toward her, knowing they marked all of time that was left to her. And somehow, she felt, she wanted very little more of it.

For only an instant she saw the loop he had made of the electric cord, and the white cuffs over the strong, gnarled hands. She closed her eyes and lifted her head high, expecting that in that way the end would come more quickly . . .

THE CRATE AT OUTPOST 1

Matthew Gant

The wind whistled through the valley, and the pyramidal tent that signified Outpost 1 quivered before the blast. As always, sentry Rudd placed his hand before the oil burner that feebly lit the interior of the tent, shielding the yellow flame from the stray gusts that whipped through the torn canvas. And, as always, he cast a quick, nearly guilty look at sentry Dennison, who lay fully dressed on a narrow cot in the rear of the tent.

"It won't fizz out," Dennison said. He lay on his back, his hands resting behind his head, and his eyes stared at the sloping ceiling. Occasionally he wiggled his fingers and watched with amusement the play of shadows on the canvas overhead.

"I know," Rudd said, biting his lip and looking away.

"Then why do you do it?" Dennison said.

"I don't know," Rudd said. He spread his hands.

Outside, the wind sank for a moment and from far off came the barking of dogs. Rudd shivered and drew the frayed collar of his parka close about him. He stole another quick look at Dennison, and then his eyes shifted to the corner of the tent just to the left of the doorway flap.

The crate was still there.

"What are you afraid of?" Dennison asked. "It won't move."

"I don't know," Rudd said, and then he flared for a moment. "It's our job. We must see the crate."

He stood up defiantly and strode to the crate. It squatted on the corner, four feet high, four feet long, four feet wide. It was of wood, nailed securely across the top.

Rudd remembered the last nailing detail. They had come in during the warm weather and ripped out the rusting nails with their hands. One of them had howled when a nail slipped and gashed his palm. The naildriver was the biggest man Rudd had ever seen. He pounded the new, shiny nails with the heel of his rifle, and soon the crate was nearly as good as new.

And while they had changed the nails, a two-striper had stood over the detail, with a rifle that shone dully in the flickering gloom of the tent.

Rudd had seen many nailing details come and go. The thought filled him with pride. Ever since they had landed on the island outpost, he and Dennison had been assigned to see the crate.

"You can see it from your bed," Dennison said, breaking the thoughts. "There's no rule about seeing it from your bed."

"I don't care," Rudd said. "It's easier to see from here."

Dennison said, "Ah-h-h," and the sound turned into a yawn. "Wake me when the two-striper comes," he said.

Rudd flinched. He wanted to tell Dennison that he was not to sleep on duty. Rudd was not supposed to see the crate alone. When the two-striper had told them the order, this had been emphasized:

"Never see the crate alone. Always make sure you're both seeing it at the same time. One man alone can't be trusted."

And both Dennison and Rudd had nodded, gravely.

But it was always the same. Dennison would sleep until the two-striper reached the flap and, cursing, tried to find the tent buttons. And Dennison would be on his feet, gripping his rifle, when the two-striper finally strode to the tent's center and reviewed his sentries.

Once Dennison hadn't been lucky. The two-striper had found the buttons quickly and the soft mud outside had cushioned his steps, and he was inside before Dennison woke. Dennison had to stand on his feet for a very long time after that.

And the two-striper had lectured him about the crate.

"Do you know why you're here, soldier?" the two-striper had asked Dennison.

"Yes," Dennison said. "To see the crate."

"And why see the crate?" the two-striper persisted.

"So nobody gets it," Dennison answered, his face reddening under the softly-spoken questions.

"And why should nobody get it?" the two-striper probed.

Dennison had stammered then and Rudd wanted to help him out, but he didn't want to have to stand for a very long time also. Besides, he did not know the answer.

"Because," the two-striper snapped. "That's why, you fool."

And Dennison repeated, "Because." And the two-striper imposed the sentence and left.

Later that night Rudd had whispered to Dennison, who stood there, his rifle clutched tight in his hands. "Are you awake?"

"Yes," Dennison had said.

"I was wondering," Rudd said. "I was wondering about something."

"You're always wondering about something," Dennison said. "What's it this time?"

"I was wondering because why," he said, his voice still a whisper in the pitch-black tent.

"Because why what?" Dennison asked harshly. "Because why what, you fool?"

"Nothing," Rudd said, and he turned to see the crate though it was too dark to make it out.

But gradually he found the nerve to ask, and Dennison, who had been in the service far longer than he, and who was once a two-striper himself, finally told him.

"Because the crate was once owned by the enemy, long, long ago," he had said, and even Dennison, who slept when he should have been seeing the crate, let his eyes creep to the flap in case the two-striper, or, even worse, the yellow-bar were near.

"The enemy," Rudd had said, involuntarily, his eyes bugging.

"Shut up, you fool," Dennison hissed.

And many, many seasons of warm to cold had gone by before Rudd had asked more questions and learned more about why the crate had to be seen.

Dennison did not know the whole story, for no man did, he said.

But the facts were these: the crate contained an enemy weapon, an old and very powerful weapon, which must never be allowed to fall into his hands again. And during bad times, such as now when

the dogs were out barking in pursuit of enemy smell, the crate had to be seen all the time so that nobody got it away.

It was as simple as that.

And from that time on, Rudd had felt the pride of his job, and he wondered even more strongly how Dennison could sleep when he ought to be seeing.

Especially during bad times, when the dogs were barking.

Rudd had never heard so much barking as these past nights. He wished, sometimes, he were back with the others, not at Outpost 1. Once, last warmth, he had become ill and a doctor had visited him, a one-striper. Before he had left, the doctor had told him of the others.

"They are sick-afraid," he had said. "They say the enemy is nearer."

But though for a moment Rudd, too, was sick-afraid, he laughed at the doctor. Doctors knew so little, especially about the movement of soldiers.

But when he told Dennison of it, Dennison didn't laugh. He sat and stared through the open flap at the sun sinking behind the peaks.

And now, the dogs were barking as never before. And the two-striper had come in twice this night, instead of once, and even though their share of oil had been burned up, he had brought more. "See the crate," he said, shortly, as he left.

And Rudd saw the crate, and even Dennison lay there on his bed, his eyes wide open.

They were not relieved until the sun was high the next day.

And that night when they returned to the tent, the two-striper handed them each a bullet for their rifles. It was the first time either man had ever held a loaded rifle.

"See the crate," the two-striper had said fiercely before he left, "see the crate." And Rudd noticed the dark circles under the two-striper's eyes.

"These are bad times," Rudd said to Dennison, staring at him anxiously.

"Bad," Dennison repeated.

"Do you think—?" Rudd started.

"Do I think what, you fool?" Dennison said. But his voice was not sharp at all.

"Do you think the enemy is coming?"

Outside the wind howled again, howled loud, but even over the howl came the sound of the dogs.

"I don't know," Dennison had said, at last.

Rudd quickly put his hand over the oil burner to shield it from the wind, but this time Dennison didn't say anything. Things were bad, Rudd knew.

He stood straight and he thought: I will do my job. He walked to the crate and leaned on it.

"Don't touch it, you fool," Dennison said.

"But why?" Rudd asked, puzzled. He had touched it many times before, feeling the creaking wood and sometimes he had peeled splinters of wood from the crate and used them to make pictures in the mud outside.

"Ah-h-h," Dennison said. "Just don't."

And Rudd walked away, ashamed.

Suddenly the outside quivered with noise. The dogs were nearby now, and there must have been dozens of them, yapping and howling, and Dennison said, "Listen."

"The barking is loud," Rudd said.

"No, not the barking. I can hear them gnashing their teeth."

Rudd listened and he heard, too, and he thrilled to the sound. "The enemy will never get to us, not with those dogs of ours," he boasted.

And through the sound came the clomping of a man's heavy boots, running in thick mud.

"The enemy!" Rudd said, his hands tightening over the stock of the rifle, his hand reaching for the bolt.

But it wasn't the enemy. It was a one-striper, the runner from the others.

He stood swaying in the center of the tent, a huge man with a black beard, his eyes red-rimmed and circled with the same sort of black lines, though even deeper, as those about the two-striper's.

"Is this it?" he panted, pointing to the crate. It had been many seasons since Rudd had seen the runner, and he looked much older, and Rudd felt sorry that the runner didn't even remember the crate.

"Yes," he said. "That's it."

The runner stood there and the tent was still. He bent once and lightly moved his hand toward the crate, and then drew it back quickly. He spun on his heavy boots and faced the sentries.

"You must run," he said. "We are beaten."

"Beaten?" Rudd said. "I don't believe it."

Dennison stared at the runner and then he sat on his cot and started to pull on his boots. "Come on," he said to Rudd, "we don't have all night."

"But—"

"Beaten," the runner insisted.

"And the crate?" Rudd said. "The crate?"

"Destroy it," the runner said. "Quickly. You have no time. You must go to the hills when you have finished. Do you have enough oil?"

Rudd stared at the lamp which flared full and strong.

"No, you fool," Dennison said, "not for the lamp. For the crate. The enemy must not get the crate."

The runner handed Rudd a can of oil, and with his bayonet, ripped it open. He stood at the flap for a long moment, and then he raised his hand to his eyes. "Good-by," he said, "and hurry."

Rudd stared at the open can of oil, and then he started to pour it on the wooden slats across the top of the crate. The barking was frantic now, yards away it seemed.

Dennison tore the can from his hand. "No," he panted, "there must be something inside the wood that can't be destroyed this way, wet packing or metal or something. We'll have to remove the top." He reached for the wood and started to pull at the slats.

"No," Rudd said. "We're not allowed to. We must see the crate, not the inside."

But Dennison would not be stopped, and Rudd watched as the slats groaned and pulled up sharply. Some cracked in Dennison's hands as he clawed at them, and suddenly, the last two slats came up together and the top was off.

They moved back a pace and looked down. There was a sheet of yellowed paper, with five black marks on it, over the inside of the crate, and Dennison reached out and grabbed it away and they both leaned forward to see.

They looked up at each other, and there was a frown on each forehead. Inside the crate were box-like things, most of them the length of a man's hand span, maybe a little longer, not quite as wide, and two, three fingers deep. Each one was covered with cloth.

There were steps outside now, and the dogs were no longer near, their barking off down the valley.

Dennison screamed once, in rage and fear, and he sprinkled oil frantically on the top of the box-like things and he sprinkled oil on the yellowed paper with the five black marks, and he thrust the paper into the oil lamp until a corner caught fire.

Then he threw the burning paper on top of the crate, and they both raced from the tent for the hills.

And as Rudd ran, he was sick-afraid, and even many seasons later while he hid in the woods, he still remembered with cringing fear the crate, and sometimes when he found himself drawing in the mud, the thing he drew was the five black marks that had been on the yellowed paper covering the things inside—

B O O K S

MY UNFAIR LADY

Guy Cullingford

I was sitting in a nook in the woods reading a paperback, when this little girl parted the leaves and looked in at me. At first sight she seemed no better or worse than the usual run of small females, a set of indeterminate features framed in towy pigtaails which had a long way to go to reach her shoulders. She was wearing a fairly clean dress, bare legs and sandals.

"Excuse me, mister," she said, staring at me good and hard.

"Certainly," I said amiably. "But the wood's big enough for both of us, and I daresay we'll get on better at a distance."

I went on with my reading. And though I kept my eyes on the printed word, I could feel hers like a pair of gimlets boring into me.

"How about leaving me in peace?" I said. "Be a good girl."

She made no attempt to move. She was following her own line of thought, not mine. After a moment, she said, "There's a gentleman being unkind to a lady under that tree." And she turned a bit and pointed.

I felt myself getting hot under the collar, and I said, "That's none of my business or yours either. Run away home, you nasty prying little girl. I don't want to know you."

She stayed put, not budging an inch. For a full minute she remained silent, twisting one ankle round the other.

Then she said, "How'd you like it if someone stuck a knife into you?"

"What!" I leapt to my feet, slamming the book shut. "Why didn't you say that in the beginning? Where's this? What—what tree'd you say?"

She was off like a shot with me right after her. We went about twenty feet down the slope, and then the tail of the girl's little dress vanished into a tangle of undergrowth. I scrambled after her. But when we got to the foot of the tree, I stopped short, silently staring.

There the woman lay, on last year's leaves with her head supported by a beech trunk. The knife must have found the heart, for she was just as dead as the leaves, although she hadn't been there as long. There's always something pretty shocking in sudden death, and she couldn't have been more than twenty. She must have been a good-looker, too. The haft of the knife was still in place, and suddenly I felt sick at my stomach. I turned away to throw up and realized with a start that the kid who'd brought me there had vanished; she must have melted away while I was busy taking in the situation. I hadn't time to be sick. It suddenly dawned on me that I was in a serious position. That wretched little girl was as valuable to me as her weight in diamonds; she was my one and only alibi that I'd visited the scene of the crime and nothing more. So I had to find her again as soon as possible.

I bolted down the slope, right to the bottom where there was a kind of paddling pond crammed full of children. But though I darted here and there, and there were dozens of little girls, there wasn't a trace of the one I wanted. I tell you, I stood still, and the sweat trickled down my face. I suppose ten minutes elapsed before I gave up the search. Then I had to ask myself a question. What do I do now? I was all for racing away as fast as my legs would take me. If I'd had a hat I could have pulled down over my eyes, I don't think I should have hesitated to do that. But I was bare-headed, and I'd been behaving, in the light of later events, in what might well have been described as oddly by any interested onlooker. There were several mothers who must have spared a moment from watching Bobbie get his pants splashed on to make a mental note of my interest in little girls, perhaps were even ready to have a word with a policeman. And, by heaven, there was a policeman ready made for them, standing in the shade of the trees, no doubt presiding benignly over the

frolics of the young, and all set to prevent any casualty amongst the waders.

I had a horrid vision of myself on the run—the man the police wanted to interview in connection with the murdered girl. Well, in a choice of evils it's my motto to choose the lesser. I headed for the policeman, as if in his stalwart frame lay my only hope of salvation.

"Officer," I said in a voice that broke with uncertainty, "Officer, I want to report a crime."

That shook him. He was a youngish man, and he looked as if all his blood had suddenly drained into his boots. But he pulled himself together and asked me a few questions, and soon we were making it up the slope together, my heart pumping a great deal harder than was called for by the incline.

Of course, later on I got passed on to higher authority for questioning, first a detective sergeant and then an inspector, then both together. I stuck to my story, and they seemed to me to be decent fellows. They almost believed me.

What really rattled them was one of those fantastic coincidences which would be quite inadmissible in fiction. When the constable first bore me off to the police station, I was still clutching that confounded paperback, and when they took it off me, there on the cover, for them to see, was a blonde with a dagger in her heart. I hadn't even noticed the subject of the luridly painted cover until I had it pointed out to me. In the absence of any more substantial clue, blood or strands of hair or incriminating fingerprints, they had to make the most of that. In defense, I stuck to the little girl who had drawn me into my predicament; she was all I had.

"Pity you don't know her name," commented the inspector, a shade dryly I thought.

"I don't go round asking the names of strange little girls," I said. "I'm not fond enough of them for that."

The inspector nodded. "Mind you," he said, "if what you're telling us is the truth, there's no need to be alarmed. If the kid's above ground we'll find her, don't you worry."

"Then I'll not worry," I said.

"Lucky the schools haven't broken up," said the sergeant. "We'll go through them with a fine-tooth comb till we find her, that is . . ." He paused significantly and scratched his nose. I could see he wasn't convinced.

I got to know the sergeant quite well during the next twenty-four

hours—and the local schools. As far as the children were concerned, our arrival was a welcome interruption, but the teachers were less approving. Finally, at Omega Road Girls' School we struck oil.

After a short talk with the head-mistress, we were shown into a classroom of the correct age group. There were about four and twenty little darlings present, with the one we were after practically indistinguishable from the rest—except to me. She was seated at a desk, second row from the front. We had been warned not to upset the little dears, so the sergeant in a voice flowing with milk and honey asked them if they'd any of them ever seen this gentleman (pointing to me) before anywhere. Up shot a forest of hands. Only one in the second row remained at desk level. You can guess whose.

"Where?" asked the sergeant.

"Pleasir, pleasir," they chanted in unison, and one being singled out by the head-mistress for a solo speech said, "Please, Ma'am, we all saw him at the paddling pool in Hammer Wood on the afternoon the young woman got done in."

The head-mistress shot me a frosty look, as if I should be held responsible for any psychic damage done to these innocents. At once I asked the sergeant for the privilege of half a minute's private conversation. We cowered behind the blackboard, and I whispered into his ear that the one who hadn't put up her hand was the one we were after. He emerged brushing his moustache, first one side, then the other, and said, "I want to ask the little girl in the second row who didn't put up her hand if she has ever seen this gentleman before?"

"Speak up, Ruby Gant," said the head-mistress, cooing at the little wretch. "No one's going to hurt you, dear."

The child's indeterminate features registered no expression whatever. She took her time about it, studying me with a sort of vacant earnestness.

"I never seen him in me life, Miss Birch," she finally said. "I don't know that gentleman at all, and . . ." here the lips parted in a grin to disclose a set of tiny, regular teeth . . . "I don't know as I want to."

A giggle ran round the class, and Miss Birch did nothing to suppress it. Instead, she asked mildly, "You weren't at the pool with the others, then?"

"No, Miss Birch, Ruby wasn't at the pool with us," said a child who was seated behind Ruby Gant. "She said she had to go straight home."

"Is that right, Ruby?"

"Yes, Miss Birch. I wanted to look after me baby brother, so our mum could get a rest."

You could practically see the halo above that flaxen crown.

"I have always found Ruby a very truthful little girl," remarked Miss Birch, sotto voce to the sergeant.

That was that. I ask you, what could I do about it?

They had to let me go in the end, for there wasn't a shred of real evidence. They couldn't trace any connection between me and the murdered girl, and it wasn't any good bringing a prosecution on the strength of a lurid book jacket. Although I was told dozens of women volunteered to give information on my personal appearance down at the pool that afternoon. You know, the usual thing, the wild and glaring eyes, the maniacal frenzy, etcetera, etcetera. I never varied my story, however much opportunity I was given, and there was nothing known against me, and I was in steady employment.

As far as I could see, they would never nail anyone else for the wood-killing either. Like most of those girls who are found murdered, she was not known to have had any men friends. Apparently, she ran to type, quiet and reserved and self-respecting. Well, she was now, anyway, poor thing. The knife was of a common sort which might be found in the possession of any boy scout. Although it had been sharpened to a fine edge, there were no fingerprints on it. As for fallen leaves, they don't measure up to flower beds when it comes to holding the impression of a distinctive shoe heel. If I'd done the murder myself, I couldn't have made a neater job of it.

Finally, the C.I.D. had to admit themselves beaten, and I left the police station for the last time without a stain on my character. Huh! I lost my job, I lost my place of residence, I lost my friends. And, in addition to all this, no girl in that district would be seen dead with me. Though for weeks afterwards, had girls permitted me to escort them, they would have been the safest girls in the world. I never took a step without police protection, very, very unobtrusive. The smallest squeak would have brought the man on my tail to my side.

All the same, I wasn't moving from the neighborhood, not yet awhile. I found a fresh dwelling with a deaf mute for a landlady, a fresh job at half the pay, and there I stuck, waiting for time to pass which is reputedly a great healer.

But I was waiting with a purpose. When three months were up, I found myself alone again—without police protection, that is. Then

I thought it was safe to get busy. They say a child's memory is short, and I didn't want to leave it too long. I started to hang about the Omega Road Girls' School, at four o'clock when the kids were coming out. I marked my prey; three months had made very little difference to her, and I herded her off from the rest of the flock. As a matter of fact, it was as easy as pie because she left the others at a road junction and trailed off on her own. I guess it was like that the day at the pool; she was strictly an individualist. I had decided to use guile, and had been toting round with me for days a big bag of toffees.

"Hey, Ruby," I said, catching up with her and offering the bag. "Have a sweetie."

She recognized me at once. She didn't look scared at all, but she shook her head and said, "My mum says I'm never to take sweets from strangers."

"I'm not a stranger. I'm the man you nearly put behind bars for life, don't you remember?"

"Serves yer right. You shouldn't have spoken nasty to me."

Then she showed her teeth in the famous grin. You could see she didn't bear me an ounce of spite.

"Besides . . ." she said.

"Besides what?"

"I didn't want to get meself in trouble. I didn't want to draw attention to meself, see."

My God, she'd got it all there in her little brain-pan at the age of eight or thereabouts. She didn't care a fig what became of me; it was her own skin she was intent on preserving.

She undoubtedly knew who had killed the girl . . .

I tried not to show any excitement, and I said as casually as I could, matching my step to hers: "Then you saw the chap who did it. I thought it was one of your lies!"

"Don't be saucy. Of course I saw 'im. Leastways, I saw his back. He was bending over."

"You mean you never saw his face at all. Well, that's no good, you couldn't pick him out."

"I could and all, if I wanted to. Wears a blue suit."

"So does my Uncle Bert. What the hell! Why every—"

"You shouldn't swear. My mum says it's not nice."

"You and your mum! I'll tell you what your mum is, she's as big a liar as you are if she says you were at home minding the baby when you were busy snooping at people in the wood."

"She can't keep her eye on the clock all the time, can she? Not with my young brother she can't. And I wasn't snooping, Mister Clever. I was playing 'ouses under the trees."

"And you say you know this chap?"

"I didden say I knew 'im. I said I could put my finger on 'im if I liked."

"Then why don't you?"

"It's none of my business." She brought it out with an air of secret triumph.

But it was my business all right, and my particular business to keep on baiting her until I got the response I wanted. I've often heard little girls doing it to each other, and nine times out of ten it works.

So I gathered my resources together, and packing all the scorn I could into my voice, said; "Huh! Ruby Gant, you don't know a thing!"

"I do."

"You're just making it up."

"I'm not."

"Yes you are. You never saw the chap at all, or if you did, you wouldn't know him from Adam."

"I told you 'e'd got blue clothes on."

"Well, where does he live?"

"I dunno where 'e lives, but I know where 'e is this minnit."

"You're a nasty story teller!"

"No I'm not."

"Yes you are."

I was thoroughly into the spirit of the thing, when she suddenly capitulated.

"If I take you to where he is, then will you believe me?"

"Now you're talking," I said. "You take me to him and I'll believe you."

She looked at me hard with that intent yet somehow vacant stare which was part of her make-up.

"If I do, will yer swear not to tell anyone?"

"Of course I will."

"Then say it after me."

"What is it? What have I got to say?"

She licked her grubby first finger and held it up in the air.

"See my finger's wet . . . go on and say it."

I licked my own finger and followed her instructions.

"See my finger's dry."

"See my finger's dry."

"Slit my throat if I tell a lie." Here she drew her finger ominously across her scraggy little throat.

I repeated the childish oath. I hadn't the faintest intention of sticking to it. I'd have been an outright fool if I considered I owed any allegiance to that child.

But my having taken the oath seemed to satisfy her. She said, "Come on, then."

She pranced off and I followed her as I'd done once before. The only difference was that now she wore a skimpy cloth coat and we were on the pavements and not in the path in the wood.

She led me from this by-road into another and yet another until at last we came out on the High Street. There were lots of people about shopping, but she didn't moderate her pace, but slipped between them like an eel, while I blundered after. I must have looked odd chasing after that scrap of a kid, as if life depended on it. But I wasn't conscious of making a fool of myself; my heart was thumping wildly, because I felt sure I was on to something important.

Finally, we came to the crossroads where the High Street joins the main arterial road coming from the city.

Ruby Gant came to a sudden standstill, which brought me right up on her heels.

She dropped back to my side, and looking up at me, gave the faintest flick to her thumb.

"There 'e is, then. What did I tell yer?"

There he was, with his back to us, blue suit, white gloves and all, directing the home-going traffic, the young cop I'd given myself up to that day in the wood, by the paddling pool.

I stood gazing stupidly at him, my mind in a whirl, for perhaps ten seconds. Then I turned to Ruby. You know what? The little devil wasn't there. She'd played the same trick on me as before. She must have moved like greased lightning.

It was hopeless to look for her amongst the crowd. A child as small as that could take cover anywhere. She might have darted into the nearest chain store for temporary refuge, or be halfway home already.

So there I was, up a tree. I turned about and began to walk slowly back along the High Street, mechanically dodging the busy shoppers while I mulled what had happened over in my mind. Was Miss Ruby Gant stringing me along in her own inimitable fashion? And was this last audacity—pure invention on the spur of the moment—a final thumb at the nose at me, for venturing to criticize her past conduct?

Did her fiendish ingenuity prompt her to select a policeman as the supreme example of improbability? Was she even now giggling away at the idea of it?

Did she really know who had murdered the girl in the wood? Was the blue suit merely a product of her fertile fancy, or had it some basis in fact?

It was a matter beyond dispute that the cop had been right on the spot, or as near as makes no difference. It would have taken him less than no time to have slipped down the slope from the fatal tree into position as guardian of the pool. Just because no motive had come to light for the murder of the girl, it didn't follow that there was none.

When I was a boy I was never keen to tangle with the forces of law and order, and I could therefore imagine what effect the idea of mixing it with a policeman would have on one of Ruby's age and environment. You notice that I don't say tender age. Still, it was nice to think that there might be some reason for what that kid had done to me, besides the mere gratification of a childish spite.

Now that I harked back, I had a vivid mental picture of the blood draining out of the policeman's face when I first reported to him my discovery of the crime. Was ever cop so squeamish, however inexperienced?

But even if Ruby had made me a present of the killer, what good was it likely to do me? I shouldn't like to see the expression on the sergeant's face if I'd be so foolish as to trot round to the police station with this new theory.

And suddenly I saw the whole thing from the point of view of the police, and knew myself that it was only a pack of lies, or rather, that mixture of truth and tarradiddle in which Ruby specialized.

Well, let bygones be bygones, I thought. Thanks to Ruby, I should always be a man with a past . . . no need to allow her to complicate my future.

I felt that I needed a drink to strengthen my resolution, even if it was only a strong black coffee, and as this feeling happened to coincide with my passing one of the local milk bars, I pushed the door and went in.

It was one of those narrow affairs like a tramcar, with tables in front and the works at the end. I was nearly up to the counter, when I saw something which pulled me up dead.

There, perched up on a stool, with her back three-quarters-wise to me, was that demon-child. She had her skinny elbows planted on the counter, and her monkey paws round a beakerful of something.

But she wasn't drinking. She seemed to be in a sort of ecstasy, gazing up with rapt adoration at the face of the Adonis presiding over the counter. The man was sleek and dark and as handsome as a rattlesnake. You know the type.

There was a loud sort of buzzing noise in my ears. I stood perfectly still, and deep down inside me I had that sudden hideous conviction of truth without proof such as a chap gets sometimes.

I added my stare to Ruby's.

The man must have just finished buttering some slices of cut bread ready for sandwiches, because he still held the knife loosely in his right hand, whilst with the index finger of the left he was absent-mindedly testing the sharpness of the blade.

He was not interested in either of us.

All his attention was centered on the pair of young girls who sat at the table next to the counter, chattering away together in the animated way girls have if within ten yards of any personable male. His eyes, half-narrowed, feasted on them as on some delectable prospect.

Then, as if drawn by a magnet, he released the knife, and came forward, brushing past the entranced Ruby, to collect their empty cups.

As he bent over them in his regulation short white jacket, murmuring who knows what sweet inducements, he revealed to me the back view of a pair of pants of a peculiarly revolting shade. I decided not to stop for refreshment.

I did a rightabout turn, and was out of those surroundings in less time than it takes to say 'Blue Murder.'

Oh yes, I agree there are loose ends. There are several things I should like to know myself.

For instance, just when did Mistress Ruby catch up with him?

Did she track him down systematically by his choice in suiting? Had she known him before? Or was it one of those odd chances, beginner's luck, as you might say?

How long was he prepared to go on stuffing her up with free ice cream, hot chocolate and what have you, to keep her on his side?

And what was going to happen when he stopped?

Or when . . . well, never mind.

These questions, or any variants on same, are likely to go unanswered as far as I'm concerned.

When two tigers get together, that's no place for me.

COMPOSITION FOR FOUR HANDS

Hilda Lawrence

PART ONE

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 play-houses, 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 can 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. No 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 birth-

days. 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 dee lah 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.

Brucie 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."

Bruce'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 Bruce.

"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?"

Bruce 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."

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 yourself 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 harder 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 Bruce 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 maladjusted, 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 ex-

cuse 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. When they were 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."

"Brucie, 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 time 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 go-

ing 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 busybody, 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 girl 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 and 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, 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 hands and covered her up good, and she was nice and drowsy. I was thinking maybe she wouldn't need her pill tonight and how that was a good sign." 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. This 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 and 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. Manson 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 eider-down 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 TWO

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 go 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 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 cooperative 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 for 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 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— George!"

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 woman 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. "Glen-dale 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. Brucie, 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 wagered 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 doorbell 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 tonight?"

"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 forward. 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 practi-

cal 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 curious 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 foot-falls 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 police 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 others came and you couldn't finish. Wait until I tell them that.

“At my feet. Lying there on the floor. Oh, Mr. Ralph, Mr. Brucie!”

“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. Use 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 didn'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, 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 my 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 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'd 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—*George!*"

"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 hall 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 Pross, 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 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 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'?"

NEW MURDERS FOR OLD

Carter Dickson

Hargreaves did not speak until he had turned on two lamps. Even then he did not remove his overcoat. The room, though cold, was stuffy, and held a faintly sweet odour. Outside the Venetian blinds, which were not quite closed, you saw the restless, shifting presence of snow past street-lights. For the first time, Hargreaves hesitated.

"The—the object," he explained, indicating the bed, "was there. *He* came in by this door, here. Perhaps you understand a little better now?"

Hargreaves' companion nodded.

"No," said Hargreaves, and smiled. "I'm not trying to invoke illusions. On the contrary, I am trying to dispel them. Shall we go downstairs?"

It was a tall, heavy house, where no clocks ticked. But the treads of the stairs creaked and cracked sharply, even under their padding of carpet. At the back, in a kind of small study, a gas-fire had been lighted. Its hissing could be heard from a distance; it roared up blue, like solid blue flames, into the white fretwork of the heater; but it did little to dispel the chill of the room. Hargreaves motioned his companion to a chair at the other side of the fire.

"I want to tell you about it," he went on. "Don't think I'm trying to be"—his wrist hesitated over a word, as though over a chesspiece—"highbrow. Don't think I'm trying to be highbrow if I tell it to you"—again his wrist hesitated—"objectively. As though you knew nothing about it. As though you weren't concerned in it. It's the only way you will understand the problem he had to face."

Hargreaves was very intent when he said this. He was bending forward, looking up from under his eyebrows; his heavy overcoat flopped over the sides of his knees, and his gloved hands, seldom still, either made a slight gesture or pressed flat on his knees.

"Take Tony Marvell, to begin with," he argued. "A good fellow, whom everybody liked. Not a good business man, perhaps: too generous to be a good business man; but as conscientious as the very devil, and with so fine a mathematical brain that he got over the practical difficulties.

"Tony was Senior Wrangler at Cambridge, and intended to go on with his mathematics. But then his uncle died, so he had to take over the business. You know what the business was then: three luxury hotels, built, equipped and run by Old Jim, the uncle, in Old Jim's most flamboyant style: all going to rack and ruin.

"Everybody said it was madness for Tony to push his shoulder up against the business world. His brother—that's Stephen Marvell, the former surgeon—said Tony would only bring Old Jim's card-houses down on everybody and swamp them all with more debts. But you know what happened. At twenty-five, Tony took over the business. At twenty-seven, he had the hotels on a paying basis. At thirty, they were hotels to which everybody went as a matter of course: blazing their sky-signs, humming with efficiency, piling up profits which startled even Tony.

"And all because he sneered at the idea that there could be any such thing as overwork. He never let up. You can imagine that dogged expression of his: 'Well, I don't like this work, but let's clean it up satisfactorily so that we can get on to more important things'—like his studies. He did it partly because he had promised Old Jim he would, and partly *because* (you see?) he thought the business so unimportant that he wanted to show how easy it was. But it wasn't easy. No man could stand that pace. London, Brighton, Eastbourne; he knew everything there was to know about the Marvell Hotels, down to the price of a pillow-case and the cost of grease for the lifts. At the end of the fifth year he collapsed one morning in his office. His brother Stephen told him what he had to do.

"‘You’re getting out of this,’ Stephen said. ‘You’re going clear away. Round the world, anywhere; but for six or eight months at the shortest time. During that time, you’re not even so much as to think of your work. Is that clear?’

"‘Tony told me the story himself last night. He says that the whole thing might never have happened if he had not been forbidden to write to anybody while he was away.

"‘Not even so much as a postcard,’ snapped Stephen, ‘to anybody. If you do, it’ll be more business; and then God help you.’

"‘But Judith—’ Tony protested.

"‘Particularly to Judith,’ said Stephen. ‘If you insist on marrying your secretary, that’s your affair. But you don’t ruin your rest-cure by exchanging long letters about the hotels.’

"‘You can imagine Stephen’s over-aristocratic, thin-nosed face towering over him, dull with anger. You can imagine Stephen in his black coat and striped trousers, standing up beside the polished desk of his office in Harley Street. Stephen Marvell (and, to a certain extent, Tony, too) had that over-bred air which Old Jim Marvell had always wanted and never achieved.

"‘Tony did not argue. He was willing enough, because he was tired. Even if he were forbidden to write to Judith, he could always think about her. In the middle of September, more than eight months ago, he sailed by the *Queen Anne* from Southampton. And on that night the terrors began.”

Hargreaves paused. The gas-fire still hissed in the little, dim study. You would have known that this was a house in which death had occurred, and occurred recently, by the look on the face of Hargreaves’ companion. He went on:

"‘The *Queen Anne* sailed at midnight. Tony saw her soaring up above the docks, as high as the sky. He saw the long decks, white and shiny like shoe-boxes, gleaming under skeins of lights; he saw the black dots of passengers moving along them; he heard the click rattle-rush of winches as great cranes swung over the crowd on the docks; and he felt the queer, pleasurable, restless feeling which stirs the nerves at the beginning of an ocean voyage.

"‘At first he was as excited as a schoolboy. Stephen Marvell and Judith Gates, Tony’s fiancée, went down to Southampton with him. Afterwards he recalled talking to Judith; holding her arm, piloting her through the rubbery-smelling passages of the ship to show her how fine it was. They went to Tony’s cabin, where his luggage had

been piled together with a basket of fruit. Everybody agreed that it was a fine cabin.

"It was not until a few minutes before the 'all-ashore' gong that the first pang of loneliness struck him. Stephen and Judith had already gone ashore, for all of them disliked these awkward, last-minute leave-takings. They were standing on the docks, far below. By leaning over the rail of the ship he could just see them. Judith's face was tiny, remote and smiling; infinitely loved. She was waving to him. Round him surged the crowd; faces, hats, noise under naked lights, accentuating the break with home and the water that would widen between. Next he heard the gong begin to bang: hollow, quivering, pulsing to loudness over the cry: 'All ashore that's going ashore!'; and dying away into the ship. He did not want to go. There was still plenty of time. He could still gather up his luggage and get off.

"For a time he stood by the rail, with the breeze from Southampton Water in his face. Such a notion was foolish. He would stay. With a last wave to Judith and Stephen, he drew himself determinedly away. He would be sensible. He would go below and unpack his things. Feeling the unreality of that hollow night, he went down to his cabin on C Deck. And his luggage was not there! He stared round the stuffy cabin with its neat curtains at the portholes. There had been a trunk and two suitcases, gaudily labelled, to say nothing of the basket of fruit. Now the cabin was empty.

"Tony ran upstairs again to the purser's office. The purser, a harassed man behind a kind of ticket-window desk, was just getting rid of a clamouring crowd. In the intervals of striking a hand-bell and calling orders, he caught Tony's eye.

"*'My luggage—'* Tony said.

"*'That's all right, Mr. Marvell,'* said the harassed official. *'It's being taken ashore. But you'd better hurry yourself.'*

"Tony had here only a feeling of extreme stupidity. *'Taken ashore?'* he said. *'But why? Who told you to send it ashore?'*

"*'Why, you did,'* said the purser, looking up suddenly from a sheet of names and figures.

"Tony only looked at him.

"*'You came here,'* the purser went on, with sharply narrowing eyes, *'not ten minutes ago. You said you had decided not to take the trip, and asked for your luggage to be taken off. I told you that at this date we could not, of course, refund the—'*

"Get it back!" said Tony. His own voice sounded wrong. 'I couldn't have told you that. Get it back!'

"Just as you like, sir," said the purser, smiting on the bell, 'if there's time.'

"Overhead the hoarse blast of the whistle, that mournfullest of all sounds at sea, beat out against Southampton Water. B Deck, between open doors, was cold and gusty.

"Now Tony Marvell had not the slightest recollection of having spoken to the purser before. That was what struck him between the eyes like a blow, and what, for the moment, almost drove him to run away from the *Queen Anne* before they should lift the gang-plank. It was the nightmare again. One of the worst features of his nervous breakdown had been the conviction, coming in flashes at night, that he was not real any longer; that his body and his inner self had moved apart, the first walking or talking in everyday life like an articulate dummy, while the brain remained in another place. It was as though he were dead, and seeing his body move. Dead.

"To steady his wits, he tried to concentrate on familiar human things. Judith, for instance; he recalled Judith's hazel eyes, the soft line of her cheek as she turned her head, the paper cuffs she wore at the office. Judith, his fiancée, his secretary, who would take care of things while he was away; whom he loved, and who was so maddeningly close even now. But he must not think of Judith. Instead, he pictured his brother Stephen, and Johnny Cleaver, and any other friends who occurred to him. He even thought of Old Jim Marvell, who was dead. And—so strong is the power of imaginative visualisation—at that moment, in the breezy lounge-room facing the purser's office, he thought he saw Old Jim looking at him round the corner of a potted palm.

"All this, you understand, went through Tony's mind in the brief second while he heard the ship's whistle hoot out over his head.

"He made some excuse to the purser, and went below. He was grateful for the chatter of noise, for the people passing up and down below decks. None of them paid any attention to him, but at least they were there. But, when he opened the door of his cabin, he stopped and stood very still in the doorway.

"The propellers had begun to churn. A throb, a heavy vibration, shook upwards through the ship; it made the tooth-glass tinkle in the rack, and sent a series of creaks through the bulkheads. The *Queen Anne* was moving. Tony Marvell took hold of the door as though

that movement had been a lurch, and he stared at the bed across the cabin. On the white bedspread, where it had not been before, lay an automatic pistol."

The gas-fire had heated its asbestos pillars to glowing red. Again there was a brief silence in the little study of the house in St. John's Wood. Hargreaves—Sir Charles Hargreaves, Assistant Commissioner of Police for the Criminal Investigation Department—leaned down and lowered the flame of the heater. Even the tone of his voice seemed to change when the gas ceased its loud hissing.

"Wait!" he said, lifting his hand. "I don't want you to get the wrong impression. Don't think that the fear, the slow approach of what was going to happen, pursued Tony all through his trip round the world. It didn't. That's the most curious part of the whole affair.

"Tony has told me that it was a brief, bad bout, lasting perhaps fifteen minutes in all, just before and just after the *Queen Anne* sailed. It was not alone the uncanny feeling that things had ceased to be real. It was a sensation of active malignancy—of hatred, of danger, of what you like—surrounding him and pressing on him. He could feel it like a weak current from a battery.

"But five minutes after the ship had headed out to open sea, every such notion fell away from him. It was as though he had emerged out of an evil fog. That hardly seems reasonable. Even supposing that there are evil emanations, or evil spirits, it is difficult to think that they are confined to one country; that their tentacles are broken by half a mile's distance; that they cannot cross water. Yet there it was. One moment he was standing there with the automatic pistol in his hand, the noise of the engines beating in his ears and a horrible impulse joggling his elbow to put the muzzle of the pistol into his mouth and—

"Then—snap! Something broke: that is the only way he can describe it. He stood upright. He felt like a man coming out of a fever, shaken and sweating, but back from behind the curtain into the real world again. He gulped deep breaths. He went to the porthole and opened it. From that time on, he says, he began to get well.

"How the automatic had got into his cabin he did not know. He knew he must have brought it himself, in one of those blind flashes. But he could not remember. He stared at it with new eyes, and new feeling of the beauty and sweetness of life. He felt as though he had been reprieved from execution.

"You might have thought that he would have flung the pistol overboard in sheer fear of touching it. But he didn't. To him it was the

part of a puzzle. He stared much at it: a Browning 38, of Belgian manufacture, fully loaded. After the first few days, when he did keep it locked away out of sight in his trunk, he pondered over it. It represented the one piece of evidence he could carry back home with him, the one tangible reality in a nightmare.

"At the New York Customs-shed it seemed to excite no surprise. He carried it overland with him—Cleveland, Chicago, Salt Lake City—to San Francisco, in a fog, and then down the kindled sea to Honolulu. At Yokohama they were going to take it away from him; only a huge bribe retrieved it. Afterwards he carried it on his person, and was never searched. As the broken bones of his nerves knitted, as in the wash of the propellers, there was peace, it became a kind of mascot. It went with him through the blistering heat of the Indian Ocean, into the murky Red Sea, to the Mediterranean. To Port Said, to Cairo in early winter. To Naples and Marseilles and Gibraltar. It was tucked away in his hip-pocket on the bitter cold night, a little more than eight months after his departure, when Tony Marvell—a healed man again—landed back at Southampton in the S.S. *Chippenham Castle*.

"It was snowing that night, you remember? The boat-train roared through thickening snow. It was crowded, and the heat would not work.

"Tony knew that there could be nobody at Southampton to meet him. His itinerary had been laid out in advance, and he had stuck to the bitter letter of his instructions about not writing even so much as a postcard. But he had altered the itinerary, so as to take a ship that would get him home in time for Christmas; he would burst in on them a week early. For eight months he had lived in a void. In an hour or two he would be home. He would see Judith again.

"In the dimly lighted compartment of the train, his fellow-passengers were not talkative. The long voyage had squeezed their conversation dry; they almost hated each other. Even the snow roused only a flicker of enthusiasm.

"'Real old-fashioned Christmas!' said one.

"'Hah!' said another appreciatively, scratching with his fingernails at the frosted window.

"'Damn cold, I call it,' snarled a third. 'Can't they ever make the heat work in these trains? I'm damn well going to make a complaint!'

"After that, with a sympathetic grunt or mutter, each retired behind his newspaper; a white, blank wall which rustled occasionally, and behind which they drank up news of home.

"In other words (Tony remembers that he thought then), he was in England again. He was home. For himself, he only pretended to read. He leaned back in his seat, listening vaguely to the clackety-roar of the wheels, and the long blast of the whistle that was torn behind as the train gathered speed.

"He knew exactly what he would do. It would be barely ten o'clock when they reached Waterloo. He would jump into a cab, and hurry home—to this house—for a wash and brush-up. Then he would pelt up to Judith's flat at Hampstead as hard as he could go. Yet this thought, which should have made him glow, left him curiously chilly round the heart. He fought the chill. He laughed at himself. Determinedly he opened the newspaper, distracting himself, turning from page to page, running his eye down each column. Then he stopped. Something familiar caught his eye, some familiar name. It was an obscure item on a middle page.

"He was reading in this paper the news of his own death. Just that.

"'Mr. Anthony Dean Marvell, of Upper Avenue Road, St. John's Wood, and owner of Marvell Hotels, Ltd., was found shot dead last night in his bedroom at home. A bullet had penetrated up through the roof of the mouth into the brain, and a small-calibre automatic was in his hand. The body was found by Mrs. Reach, Mr. Marvell's housekeeper, who . . .'

"A suicide!"

"And once again, as suddenly as it had left him aboard ship, the grasp fell on him, shutting him off from the real world into the unreal. The compartment, as I told you, was very dimly lighted. So it was perhaps natural that he could only dimly see a blank wall of upheld newspapers facing him; as though there were no fellow-passengers there, as though they had deserted him in a body, leaving only the screen of papers that joggled a little with the rush of the train.

"Yes, he was alone.

"He got up blindly, dragging open the door of the compartment to get out into the corridor. The confined space seemed to be choking him. Holding his own newspaper up high, so as to catch the light from the compartment, he read the item again.

"There could be no possibility of a mistake. The account was too detailed. It told all about him, his past and present . . .

“ . . . His brother, Mr. Stephen Marvell, the eminent Harley Street surgeon, was hurriedly summoned. . . . His fiancée, Miss Judith Gates . . . It is understood that in September Mr. Marvell suffered a nervous breakdown, from which even a long rest had not effected a cure. . . .’

“Tony looked at the date of the newspaper, afraid of what he might see. But it was the date of that day: the twenty-third of December. From this account, it appeared that he had shot himself forty-eight hours before.

“And the gun was in his hip-pocket now.

“Tony folded up the newspaper. The train moved under his feet with a dancing sway, jerking above the click of the wheels; and another thin blast of the whistle went by. It reminded him of the whistle aboard the *Queen Anne*. He glanced along the dusky corridor. It was empty except for someone, whom he supposed to be another passenger, leaning elbows on the rail past the windows and staring out at the flying snow.

“He remembers nothing else until the train reached Waterloo. But something—an impression, a subconscious memory—registered in his mind about that passenger he had seen in the corridor. First it had to do with the shape of the person’s shoulders. Then Tony realized that this was because the person was wearing a greatcoat with an old-fashioned brown fur collar. He was jumping blindly out of the train at Waterloo when he remembered that Old Jim Marvell always used to wear such a collar.

“After that he seemed to see it everywhere.

“When he hurried up to the guard’s van to claim his trunk and suitcases, the luggage-ticket in his hand, he was in such a crowd that he could not move his arms. But he thought he felt brown fur press the back of his shoulders.

“A porter got him a taxi. It was a relief to see a London cab again, in a coughing London terminus, and hear the bump of the trunk as it went up under the strap, and friendly voices again. He gave the address to the driver, tipped the porter, and jumped inside. Even so, the porter seemed to be holding open the door of the taxi longer than was necessary.

“‘Close it, man!’ Tony found himself shouting. ‘Close it, quick!’

“‘Yessir,’ said the porter, jumping back. The door slammed. Afterwards, the porter stood and stared after the taxi. Tony, glanc-

ing out through the little back window, saw him still standing there.

"It was dark in the cab, and as close as though a photographer's black hood had been drawn over him. Tony could see little. But he carefully felt with his hands all over the seat, all over the open space; and he found nothing."

At this point in the story, Hargreaves broke off for a moment or two. He had been speaking with difficulty; not as though he expected to be doubted, but as though the right words were hard to find. His gloved fingers opened and closed on his knee.

For the first time his companion—Miss Judith Gates—interrupted him. Judith spoke from the shadow on the other side of the gas-fire.

"Wait!" she said. "Please!"

"Yes?" said Hargreaves.

"This person who was following Tony." She spoke also with difficulty. "You aren't telling me that it was—well, was—?"

"Was what?"

"Dead," said Judith.

"I don't know who it was," answered Hargreaves, looking at her steadily. "Except that it seemed to be somebody with a fur collar on his coat. I'm telling you Tony's story, which I believe."

Judith's hand shaded her eyes. "All the same," she insisted, and her pleasant voice went high, "even supposing it was! I mean, even supposing it was the person you think. *He* of all people, living or dead, wouldn't have tried to put any evil influence round Tony. Old Jim loved Tony. He left Tony every penny he owned, and not a farthing to Stephen. He always told Tony he'd look after him."

"And so he did," said Hargreaves.

"But—"

"You see," Hargreaves told her slowly. "You still don't understand the source of the evil influence. Tony didn't, himself. All he knew was that he was bowling along in a dark taxi, through slippery, snowy streets; and whatever might be following him, good or bad, he couldn't endure it.

"Even so, everything might have ended well if the taxi-driver had been careful. But he wasn't. That was the first snowfall of the year, and the driver miscalculated. When they were only two hundred yards from Upper Avenue Road, he tried to take a turn too fast. Tony felt the helpless swing of the skid; he saw the glass partition tilt, and a black tree-trunk rush up, huge at them until it exploded against the outer windscreen. They landed upright against the tree, with a buckled wheel.

"‘I ’ad to swerve,’ the driver was crying. ‘I ’ad to! An old gent with a fur collar walked smack out in front of—’

"And so, you see, Tony had to walk home alone.

"He knew something was following him before he had taken half a dozen steps. Two hundred yards don't sound like a great distance. First right, first left, and you're home. But here it seemed to stretch out interminably, as such things do in dreams. He did not want to leave the taxi-driver. The driver thought this was because Tony doubted his honesty about bringing the luggage on when the wheel was repaired. But it was not that.

"For the first part of the way, Tony walked rapidly. The other thing walked at an equal pace behind him. By the light of a street-lamp Tony could see the wet fur collar on the coat, but nothing else. Afterwards he increased his pace to what was almost a run; and, though no difference could be seen in the gait of what was behind him, it was still there. Unlike you, Tony didn't wonder whether it might be good or evil. These nice differences don't occur to you when you're dealing with something that may be dead. All he knew was that he mustn't let it *identify* itself with him or he was done for.

"Then it began to gain on him, and he ran.

"The pavement was black, the snow dirty grey. He saw the familiar turning, where front gardens were built up above the low, stone walls; he saw the street sign fastened to one of those corners, white lettering on black; and, in sudden blind panic, he plunged for the steps that led up to his home.

"The house was dark. He got the cold keys out of his pocket, but the key-ring slipped round in his fingers, like soap in bath-water, and fell on the tiled floor of the vestibule. He groped after it in the dark—just as the thing turned in at the gate. In fact, Tony heard the gate creak. He found the keys, found the lock by a miracle, and opened the door.

"But he was too late, because the other thing was already coming up the front steps. Tony says that at close range, against a street-lamp, the fur collar looked more wet and moth-eaten; that is all he can describe. He was in a dark hall with the door open. Even familiar things had fled his wits and he could not remember the position of the light-switch.

"The other person walked in.

"In his hip-pocket, Tony remembered, he still had the weapon he had carried round the world. He fumbled under his overcoat to get the gun out of his pocket; but even that weak gesture was no

good to him, for he dropped the gun on the carpet. Since the visitor was now within six feet of him, he did not stop. He bolted up the stairs.

"At the top of the stairs he risked a short glance down. The other thing had stopped. In faint bluish patches of light which came through the open front door, Tony could see that it was stooping down to pick up the automatic pistol from the carpet.

"Tony thinks—now—that he began to switch on lights in the upper hall. Also, he shouted something. He was standing before the door of his bedroom. He threw open this door, blundered in, and began to turn on more lamps. He had got two lamps lighted before he turned to look at the bed, which was occupied.

"The man on the bed did not, however, sit up at the coming of noise or lights. A sheet covered him from head to feet; and even under the outline of the sheet you could trace the line of the wasted, sunken features. Tony Marvell then did what was perhaps the most courageous act of his life. He had to know. He walked across and turned down the upper edge of the sheet, and looked down at his own face; a dead face, turned sightlessly up from the bed.

"Shock? Yes. But more terror? No. For this dead man was real, he was flesh and blood—as Tony was flesh and blood. He looked exactly like Tony. But it was now no question of a real world and an unreal world; it was no question of going mad. This man was real; and that meant fraud and imposture.

"A voice from across the room said: '*So you're alive!*' And Tony turned round, to find his brother Stephen looking at him from the doorway.

"Stephen wore a red dressing-gown, hastily pulled round him, and his hair was tousled. His face was one of collapse.

"*'I didn't mean to do it!'* Stephen was crying out at him. Even though Tony did not understand, he felt that the words were a confession of guilt; they were babbling words, words which made you pity the man who said them.

"*'I never really meant to have you killed aboard that ship,'* said Stephen. *'It was all a joke. You know I wouldn't have hurt you; you know that, don't you? Listen—'*

"Now Stephen (as I said) was standing in the doorway, clutching his dressing-gown round him. What made him look round towards the hall behind, quickly, Tony did not know. Perhaps he heard a sound behind him. Perhaps he saw something out of the corner of his eye. But Stephen did look round, and he began to scream.

"Tony saw no more, for the light in the hall went out. The fear was back on him again, and he could not move. For he saw a hand. It was only, so to speak, the flicker of a hand. This hand darted in from the darkness out in the hall; it caught hold of the knob on the bedroom door, and closed the door. It turned a key on the outside, locking Tony into the room. It kept Stephen outside in the dark hall—and Stephen was still screaming.

"A good thing, too, that Tony had been locked in the room. That saved trouble with the police afterwards.

"The rest of the testimony comes from Mrs. Reach, the house-keeper. Her room was next door to Stephen's bedroom, at the end of the upstairs hall. She was awakened by screams, by what seemed to be thrashing sounds, and the noise of hard breathing. These sounds passed her door towards Stephen's room.

"Just as she was getting out of her bed and putting on a dressing-gown, she heard Stephen's door close. Just as she went out into the hall, she heard, for the second time in forty-eight hours, the noise of a pistol-shot.

"Now, Mrs. Reach will testify in a coroner's court that nobody left, or could have left Stephen's room after the shot. She was looking at the door, though it was several minutes before she could screw up enough courage to open the door. When she did open it, all sounds had ceased. He had been shot through the right temple at close range; presumably by himself, since the weapon was discovered in a tangle of stained bed-clothing. There was nobody else in the room, and all the windows were locked on the inside. The only other thing Mrs. Reach noticed was an unpleasant, an intensely unpleasant smell of mildewed cloth and wet fur."

Again Hargreaves paused. It seemed that he had come to the end of the story. An outsider might have thought, too, that he had emphasised these horrors too much, for the girl across from him kept her hands pressed against her eyes. But Hargreaves knew his business.

"Well?" he said gently. "You see the explanation, don't you?"

Judith took her hands away from her eyes. "Explanation?"

"The natural explanation," repeated Hargreaves, spacing his words. "Tony Marvell is not going mad. He never had any brainstorms or 'blind flashes.' He only thought he had. The whole thing was a cruel and murderous fake, engineered by Stephen, and it went wrong. But if it had succeeded, Stephen Marvell would have committed a very nearly perfect murder."

The relief he saw flash across Judith's face, the sudden dazed catching at hope, went to Hargreaves' heart. But he did not show this.

"Let's go back eight months," he went on, "and take it from the beginning. Now, Tony is a very wealthy young man. The distinguished Stephen, on the other hand, was swamped with debts and always on the thin edge of bankruptcy. If Tony were to die, Stephen, the next of kin, would inherit the whole estate. So Stephen decided that Tony had to die.

"But Stephen, a medical man, knew the risks of murder. No matter how cleverly you plan it, there is always *some* suspicion; and Stephen was bound to be suspected. He was unwilling to risk those prying detectives, those awkward questions, those damning post-mortem reports—until, more than eight months ago, he suddenly saw how he could destroy Tony without the smallest suspicion attaching to himself.

"In St. Jude's Hospital, where he did some charity work, Stephen had found a broken-down ex-schoolmaster named Rupert Hayes. Every man in this world, they say, has his exact double. Hayes was Tony's double to the slightest feature. He was, in fact, so uncannily like Tony that the very sight of him made Stephen flinch. Now, Hayes was dying of tuberculosis. He had, at most, not more than a year to live. He would be eager to listen to any scheme which would allow him to spend the rest of his life in luxury, and die of natural causes in a soft bed. To him Stephen explained the trick.

"Tony should be ordered off—apparently—on a trip round the world. On the night he was to sail, Tony should be allowed to go aboard.

"Hayes should be waiting aboard that same ship, with a gun in his pocket. After Stephen or any other friends had left the ship conveniently early, Hayes should entice Tony up to the dark boat-deck. Then he was to shoot Tony through the head, and drop the body overboard.

"Haven't you ever realized that a giant ocean-liner, just before it leaves port, is the ideal place to commit a murder? Not a soul will remember you afterwards. The passengers notice nothing; they are too excited. The crew notice nothing; they are kept too busy. The confusion of the crowd is intense. And what happens to your victim after he goes overboard? He will be sucked under and presently caught by the terrible propellers, to make him unrecognizable. When a body is found—if it is found at all—it will be presumed to be some

dock-roysterer. Certainly it will never be connected with the ocean-liner, because there will be nobody missing from the liner's passenger list.

"Missing from the passenger-list? Of course not! Hayes, you see, was to go to the purser and order Tony's luggage to be sent ashore. He was to say he was cancelling the trip, and not going after all. After killing Tony he was then to walk ashore as—"

The girl uttered an exclamation.

Hargreaves nodded. "You see it now. He was to walk ashore *as Tony*. He was to say to his friends that he couldn't face the journey after all; and everybody would be happy. Why not? The real Tony was within an ace of doing just that.

"Then, Hayes, well coached, would simply settle down to play the part of Tony for the rest of his natural life. Mark that: his natural life; a year at most. He would be too ill to attend to the business, of course. He wouldn't even see you, his fiancée, too often. If ever he made any bad slips, that, of course, would be his bad nerves. He would be allowed to 'develop' lung trouble. At the end of a year, amid sorrowing friends . . .

"Stephen had planned brilliantly. 'Murder'? What do you mean, murder? Let the doctors examine as much as they like! Let the police ask what questions they like! Whatever steps are taken, Stephen Marvell is absolutely safe. For the poor devil in bed really has died a natural death.

"Only—well, it went wrong. Hayes wasn't cut out to be a murderer. I hadn't the favour of his acquaintance, but he must have been a decent sort. He promised to do this. But, when it came to the actual fact, he couldn't force himself to kill Tony: literally, physically couldn't. He threw away his pistol and ran. On the other hand, once off the ship, he couldn't confess to Stephen that Tony was still alive. He couldn't give up that year of sweet luxury, with all Tony's money at his disposal to soothe his aching lungs. So he pretended to Stephen that he had done the job, and Stephen danced for joy. But Hayes, as the months went on, did not dance. He knew Tony wasn't dead. He knew there would be a reckoning soon. And he couldn't let it end like that. A week before he thought Tony was coming home, after writing a letter to the police to explain everything, Hayes shot himself rather than face exposure."

There was a silence. "That, I think," Hargreaves said quietly, "explains everything about Tony."

Judith Gates bit her lips. Her pretty face was working; and she

could not control the twitching of her capable hands. For a moment she seemed to be praying.

"Thank God!" she murmured. "I was afraid—"

"Yes," said Hargreaves; "I know."

"But it still doesn't explain everything. It—"

Hargreaves stopped her.

"I said," he pointed out, "that it explains everything about Tony. That's all you need worry about. Tony is free. You are free. As for Stephen Marvell's death, it was suicide. That is the official record."

"But that's absurd!" cried Judith. "I didn't like Stephen; I always knew he hated Tony; but he wasn't one to kill himself, even if he were exposed. Don't you see, you haven't explained the one real horror? I must know. I mean, I must know if you think what I think about it. Who was the man with the brown fur collar? Who followed Tony home that night? Who stuck close by him, to keep the evil influences off him? Who was his guardian? Who shot Stephen in revenge?"

Sir Charles Hargreaves looked down at the sputtering gas-fire. His face, inscrutable, was wrinkled in sharp lines from mouth to nostril. His brain held many secrets. He was ready to lock away this one, once he knew that they understood each other.

"You tell me," he said.

TERRIFIED

C. B. Gilford

Paul Santin had had a good day. Small town doctors and drug stores were doing a thriving business, and, therefore, so was Paul Santin, pharmaceutical salesman. But it had been a long day, and now it was past eleven. Santin was driving fast on the country back road, trying to make it home before midnight.

He was tired, sleepy, fighting to stay awake for another half hour. But he was not dozing. He was in complete control of his car. He knew what he was doing.

He'd passed few other cars. Right now the road seemed deserted. He'd chosen this route just for that reason. Light traffic. And that's the way it was—an almost empty road—when he saw the other car.

He saw it first as a pair of headlights rounding the curve a quarter mile ahead. The lights were fantastically bright, and the driver failed to dim them. Santin cursed him, whoever he was. He dimmed his own lights, but received no answering courtesy. He cursed again, vindictively switched his own lights back to highway brightness. But he sensed no real danger in it.

He was vaguely aware that the other car was rocketing toward him at high speed. Too much speed for the kind of road they were

on. Mechanically, he slacked off on the accelerator, concentrated on staying on his own side of the road, and on not looking directly at those oncoming lights.

But it was much too late when he realized the other car was hogging the center of the road. And he had to make his decision too quickly. Whether to bore right in, perhaps leaning on his horn, hoping the other driver would pull aside. Or to hit the shoulder and take his chances with gravel and dirt.

He took the second choice, but not soon enough. He saw the other car wasn't going to concede an inch; so he swerved to the right. The blow was delivered against his left rear fender and wheel. The rear of his car skidded ditchward ahead of the front. Then the whole car seemed to defy gravity. It rolled sideways, leaped into the air, throwing Santin clear of itself at the top of the leap.

He didn't see or hear the final crash of the machine. All his consciousness was in the impact of his body against the hillside that met him like a solid wall; then he slid downward in the midst of a miniature avalanche of small stones and dirt. Afterwards he lay still, and so was all the world around him.

In that first moment, he felt no pain. The shock had numbed him. But he knew he was alive. He knew he was somehow conscious. He was also distantly, vaguely aware that his body was broken and beginning to bleed.

The blinding lights were gone. He was lying on his back in a patch of weeds. Above him were the stars and a bright full moon. They seemed closer to him than they had ever seemed before. Perhaps it was that optical illusion that first gave him the idea he was going to die.

At that moment, he felt no anger about it. He could remember his anger before the crash, but it was a distant, unreal thing to him. Again the thought of dying flitted across his mind. The dying feel nothing toward other creatures. They are completely concerned with themselves.

Then he heard the voices. A renewal of contact with the world. There'd been people in that other car. He wondered about them, calmly, without fury, without sympathy. But he gave all his attention to the listening.

"He isn't here." A masculine voice a bit young.

The other car had been hit too. It had been stopped. Or perhaps the driver had stopped the car without being forced to. Anyway, the

people from that car, whoever they were, had walked back to his car and were looking for him.

To help him? His first instinct was to call out, guide them to where he lay. They'd been selfish in hogging the road, but now they were charitable, wanting to aid. But then another instinct rose to fight against the first. Would they really be friendly? Suddenly he felt terrified of them. Without knowing why. Surely everybody wants to help accident victims. Don't they?

"He must have been thrown out." A girl's voice answering. Frightened.

"I guess so. What'll we do?" The same masculine voice. So there must be only two of them.

"Look for him," the girl said.

A hesitation. "Why?"

Another hesitation. "Don't you want to know what happened to him . . . or her?"

"I don't know." The masculine voice trembled. "I don't know . . ."

"I think we ought to look around and find him."

"Okay . . . It's dark though."

"You've got a flashlight, haven't you?"

"Sure. I'll get it."

Footsteps up on the road. The boy returning to his own car for the flashlight. And then silence again.

Santin waited, trembling in sweat of new fear. He hadn't liked the sound of those voices. That boy and girl weren't people who would care. If he was dying, they weren't people who would be of much help.

If he was dying? He was certain of it. The pain was beginning now. He could identify it in several places. His face, his chest, both his legs. And somewhere deep inside him, where nobody could reach but a doctor. That was the area of pain that made him certain of death.

So it didn't matter, did it? Whether or not they found him with their flashlight?

"Okay, I've got it." The boy's voice. "Where do we look?"

"In the ditch, I guess."

Scuffling footsteps, disturbing gravel, crunching through grass and brush. Then a winking light, sweeping back and forth. Both the light and the footsteps getting nearer. Inevitably, they would find him. He

could speed their search by calling to them. But he didn't. He waited.

"Hey!"

The light was in his face. Paralyzed, he couldn't seem to turn away from it. The footsteps hurried. And then they were there. Two forms standing over him, outlined against the sky. And the light shining in his eyes. He blinked, but they didn't seem to understand that the light bothered him.

"He's alive." The girl. "His eyes are open."

"Yeah, I see . . ."

"But he's hurt." The figure who was the girl knelt down beside him, mercifully shielding him from the flashlight. Because of the brightness of the moon, he could see her face.

She was young, terribly young, sixteen maybe. She was pretty too, her hair dark, her skin pale, perhaps abnormally so, her made-up mouth lurid in contrast. But there was no emotion in her face. She was in shock possibly. But as her eyes roved over his injuries, no sympathy lighted in her eyes.

"You're pretty badly hurt, aren't you?" The question was right at him.

"Yes . . ." He discovered he could speak without great difficulty.

"Where? Do you know?"

"All over, I guess. Inside especially."

The girl was thoughtful over his reply. Her next question seemed cold, calculated. "Do you think you could pull through if we got help?"

He thought too, gave himself time to answer. But even so, he made a mistake. "I think I'm going to die," he said, and knew he had made a mistake as soon as he'd said it.

The girl's face changed somehow, imperceptibly. Santin couldn't fathom the change. He only knew it had happened. She pulled away from him, rose to her feet, rejoining the boy.

"He's going to die," she said. As if she knew it as certainly as Santin himself.

"There's no use trying to find a doctor then, is there?" The boy sounded relieved, as if his responsibility for this whole thing had ended now.

"I guess not."

"What'll we do then?"

"Nothing, I guess. Just wait here. A car's bound to come along sometime."

"We can ride back to town then, huh?" The boy seemed to depend completely on the girl for leadership.

"Sure. We can send a doctor or somebody back. But this guy will probably be dead by then. And we'll have to report to the police."

"The police?"

"We'll have to. You killed a man."

There was silence then. Santin lay at their feet, looking up at the two silhouetted figures. They were talking about him as already dead. But somehow it didn't anger him yet. Maybe because he considered himself dead too.

"Arlene . . . what'll they do to me?"

"Who, the police?"

"Yes . . . You said I killed a man."

"Well, you did, didn't you?"

The boy hesitated. "But it was an accident," he managed finally. "You know it was an accident, don't you, Arlene? I mean, it just happened . . ."

"Sure."

They were talking softly, but Santin could hear every word they said. And he felt compelled somehow to speak. "Every accident is somebody's fault," he told them.

They were startled. He could see them look at each other, then down at him again. "What do you mean by that, mister?" the boy asked after a moment.

"This accident was your fault. That's what I mean." He still wasn't angry. That wasn't why he argued. But he felt the blame should be established.

"How was it my fault?"

"First of all, you didn't dim your lights . . ."

"Well, neither did you."

"I did at first."

"But you switched back to highway lights again."

"Only after you refused to dim."

The boy was silent again for a moment. Then he said, "But when we hit, you had your lights on bright."

Santin had to admit it. "I got mad," he said. "But that's not the most important thing. You were driving over on my side of the road."

The boy's face went around to the girl. "Arlene, was I on his side of the road?"

It seemed she giggled. Or something like it. "How do I know? We were—"

She didn't finish the sentence, but Santin guessed the rest of it. They'd been necking, or petting, or whatever young people called it these days. That was why the boy hadn't dimmed his lights. And that was why he'd had poor control of his car. And now he, Santin, had to pay the price of their good time.

It angered him, finally. With a curious sort of anger. Detached somehow, separate from himself. Because now in the long run it didn't really matter to him. Since he was going to die.

But also Santin felt a certain satisfaction. He could speak vindictively, and with assurance. "You see, you were on the wrong side of the road. So it was your fault."

The boy heard him, but he kept looking at the girl. "What will they do to me?" he asked her. "The police, I mean. What will they do to me?"

"How do I know?" she snapped at him. She'd been so calm. Now maybe the initial shock was wearing off. Now maybe she was becoming frightened, nervous.

"Even if I was on the wrong side of the road," the boy said, "it was still an accident. I didn't try to run into this guy's car. I didn't try to kill him."

"That's right . . ."

"You read about these things in the paper. Nothing much happens to the driver. Maybe he gets fined. But my dad can pay that. And even if I had to go to jail, it wouldn't be for long, would it, Arlene? What do you think it would be? Thirty days?"

"Or maybe sixty. That wouldn't be so bad."

Santin listened to them. And slowly the anger welled higher in him. Or maybe even ninety days, he could have added. Some insurance company would pay. But the killer himself wouldn't pay nearly enough. Ninety days for murder.

"There's just one thing," the boy said suddenly.

"What?"

"It'll be called an accident. And maybe it'll be called my fault. A little bit anyway. That is, if this guy here doesn't spout off to anybody."

"About what?"

"About who dimmed lights and who didn't. And who was on whose side of the road. But of course he can't spout off if he's dead."

"That's right." There was suddenly something strange in the girl's voice, an awareness.

"So he's got to be dead. Do you see what I mean, Arlene?"

"He said he was going to die . . ."

"Yeah, but he doesn't know. And neither do we. But he's got to die. We've got to make sure he dies." The boy's voice went up suddenly, toward the pitch of hysteria.

Santin saw the girl clutch the boy's arm and look up into his face. The whole posture of her body denoted fear.

"There's another thing too." The boy spoke swiftly, almost babbling. "My dad has told me about insurance. They have to pay more for a guy who's just crippled than for a guy who's dead. They pay big money to cripples. I don't know whether our insurance is that big. If this guy doesn't die, and is just hurt real bad, it might cost us a lot more than the insurance we got. And, man, what my dad would do to me then."

The girl was terrified now. "But he's going to die," she whispered hoarsely.

"How do we know that, Arlene? How do we know?"

Santin felt no pain now. Only fury. They hadn't offered to help him. They wanted him dead. They were selfish, unbelievably selfish. And they were cruel enough to discuss all this right in front of him.

Suddenly, the boy was kneeling, and the flashlight was probing Santin's face again. Santin blinked in the glare, but despite it, he got his first look at the boy. Young. Young like the girl. But not calm like she'd been. Panic was in his eyes. And he was hurt too. An ugly scalp wound marred the left side of his head, and blood was matted in his hair.

"How do you feel, mister?" the boy asked.

Santin disdained to answer. He wouldn't give them the same satisfaction again. He wouldn't tell them of the hot flood of pain that washed over him in ever-growing waves. He wouldn't tell them he'd already heard death whispering in his ear, cajoling him to let go of life.

But he saw the desperation in the boy's face. The boy searched farther with the flashlight, playing it up and down Santin's body. Then he stood up.

"He doesn't look like he's hurt bad enough to die," he told the girl.

No, it doesn't look like that, Santin thought. The damage is inside. But it's just as fatal. Don't tell them though. Let them sweat. And you might stay alive till somebody comes.

A sudden eruption of pain blotted out his thoughts, leaving him barely conscious.

The girl screamed, and it was as though she was screaming for him. The boy had apparently struck him in some way. "What are you doing?" she demanded.

The boy's answer was almost a scream too. "He's got to die. I've got to make him die."

There was a strain of decency in the girl somewhere. Or a woman's compassion. "But you can't kill him," she told the boy fiercely.

"What difference does it make?" he argued back, with hysteria in his voice again. "I've already killed him, haven't I? He's just got to die quick, that's all. Don't you understand, Arlene?"

Obviously she didn't. She clung to him, holding him back.

"Nobody will ever know the difference," he told her. There was logic in his argument. "He's hurt already. They'll think it's from the accident."

They were silent for a little while. By twisting his head as far as he could, Santin could see them. They were two dark shadows against the lighter background of the sky, so close together that they merged. Santin could sense the desperation in their embrace. The girl with her feminine instinct for mercy. The boy nothing more than a brute, mad with the desire for self-preservation. Yet somehow the girl could love him. And because she loved him, she was in this together with him.

"All right, Vince," he heard her say finally.

And still all Santin could do was to lie there. Probably he was going to be beaten and kicked to death. Murdered deliberately, logically, to protect a weak, vicious kid. Somehow he hadn't been so afraid of that other death. But he was afraid of this one. This death had a quality of horror about it.

"No!" he yelled at them with all his strength. "No!"

His cry broke up their embrace. The flashlight in the boy's hand probed his face again. Santin had been proud before, but he wasn't now. He didn't turn away from the light. He let them see his terror.

"Do you think you can do it, Vince?" the girl asked. Her voice was steady. Now that she'd been convinced, she'd be the stronger of the two.

"I don't know," he said. "But I've got to."

Santin saw him coming and closed his eyes.

"Wait a minute," he heard the girl say, as from the far end of a long tunnel. He existed in a red haze of agony now, and her voice seemed far away.

"What's the matter?"

"You're getting blood on yourself, aren't you?"

"I don't know."

"Look and see."

"Yes, I am. But what difference does it make?"

"Vince, Vince, are you crazy? They'll see the blood. And maybe somebody will get suspicious. They can analyze blood, and tell who it belonged to."

A spark of hope, and Santin dared to open his eyes again. The boy was poised above him for another onslaught, but now he hesitated.

"I know what to do," he said finally.

He left suddenly, exited from Santin's view. But Santin could hear him thrashing around in the weeds. And then finally his shout.

"Arlene, come over and help me lift this."

More thrashing among the weeds. The girl joining the boy.

And the boy's excited voice. "The guy was thrown out of the car, wasn't he? Okay then, he just hit his head on this, that's all. We'll rearrange the body a little. Come on now, let's lift it together."

A slow returning of the footsteps. Wildly, Santin searched for them. Saw them. They were coming toward him together, their backs bent, straining. Between them they carried a wide flat object that seemed to be very heavy.

He didn't scream this time. He couldn't. Even his vocal cords were paralyzed. But he could watch them. They walked slowly, with great effort. They stopped, one on each side of him, and the huge, heavy, flat object they held blotted out the sky above his face.

Then, at the very last moment of his life, he became aware of something. A soothing calm flooded over him. I was going to die anyway, he thought. This is quicker, of course, maybe even merciful. But it's also murder.

He prayed. A strange prayer. He prayed for a smart cop.

Sergeant Vanneck of the State Highway Patrol was a smart cop. In the gray light of dawn, he studied tire marks on the road. They were hard to see on the dark asphalt, and he couldn't be entirely sure.

He was a little surer how he felt about the pair who stood by his car and watched him as he went about his work. The boy called Vince and the girl called Arlene. They were like most other youngsters who got involved in fatal accidents, and they were also different. So, as the dawn grew brighter, he continued his search.

He found more than he'd expected to find. The body had been removed and the area was pretty well trampled. But he found the evidence nevertheless. It was clear, unquestionable.

He climbed back out of the ditch and walked over to the girl and the boy. There must have been something terrifying in his face, because it made the boy ask nervously, "What's the matter, Sergeant?"

"There are two sides to a rock," Sergeant Vanneck said. "The top side stays clean, washed by the rain. The bottom side is dirty from contact with the ground. Now you tell me, sonny, how Mr. Santin was thrown from his car so that he hit his head on the bottom side of that rock?"

THE DUEL

Joan Vatssek

When Janine stopped talking, sometimes as now she seemed to stop breathing also, as if to listen. The silence came in through the walls of the old Virginia house and pressed itself between them.

"Are you sure this place isn't too lonely for you?" Laurence asked again.

"I'm all right, really I am," Janine said with a fleeting smile. "Stop worrying. Everything's fine. Besides," she added reasonably, "we had to come here. There wasn't anyplace else to go, was there, now that we've spent all our money on me? I mean was there, darling?"

"No," Laurence agreed after a brief pause. "But I'd forgotten how isolated it was. If you think—"

"It's fine. It's a wonderful old house. Perhaps I'll even try my painting again."

She turned to gaze through the window, her slender arms resting on the sill. It was a high window, and round, like a porthole. From it there was nothing to be seen but woods, stretching away unbroken up the hills to the west.

After a while, her mouth constricted, she turned brightly toward him again.

"You'll have lots of ideas here," she said. "And I'll try to let you alone when you're writing. Really."

She came gracefully toward the kitchen table where he was sitting, resting. While he went on with the unpacking, she managed supper. It came out of cans, but she served the food on fine china set on white damask cloth. She had unpacked and washed the china first of all, while Laurence got sheets and blankets out and made their bed and set the kitchen in working order.

They were surrounded by unpacked boxes in the dining room, but the good dishes were all aglow with pastel color and gold, and Janine glanced at them from time to time, satisfied.

She brought with her always this touch of luxury. It was a part of her being, a part of the aura that made her a unique and lovely woman.

Her gaze drifted around the room, uncarpeted, and bare, and hesitantly to the rooms beyond, in which their apartment furniture would leave echoing spaces.

She avoided looking at the windows now that the blue dusk was sifting down into the solitary valley.

The house was all that remained of an old Virginia estate. It had been left to Laurence by his father, who had gone bankrupt in gentlemanly fashion a generation earlier, raising thoroughbred horses. The acres that surrounded the house had been long since sold. The house and the grounds around it were unsalable; it was too remote. So now, after being away from it since his boyhood, he had returned.

Half hidden in the long grass behind the house one could still find the remains of stables and slave quarters—tumbled foundation stones and unexpected pits.

A stream ran through the far part of the field, which could be crossed on a homemade plank bridge, and on the other side of the stream was an old burying ground with stones half sunk in the earth and hidden by weeds and grass. Beyond the forgotten headstones a tangle of woods had taken over.

In the evening silence they could hear the gurgling of the stream more loudly than when they had been busy with unpacking.

For an instant Laurence caught from Janine, from the tilt of her head and her look of vague dread, the ominous undertones of the gurgling water over stones. He sensed too the eeriness for her of the mist rising from the stream, which he had been accustomed to from childhood as part of a summer evening.

"We'll leave as soon as we have a little money," he promised flatly into the silence and the holding of her breath.

"Good," she whispered.

Later in the big bed she lay shivering beside him.

"Cold?" he asked. "Come closer."

"I'm fine," she denied. "Just sleepy. Goodnight, Laurence."

"Goodnight, my darling."

She watched the moonlight stalk with grim shadows across the uncurtained room and fall across the counterpane. With a fierce intake of breath she rolled away from it, toward her husband, with superstitious dread remembering that moonlight must not shine upon one's bed.

"I can't sleep," she whispered desperately. "Cover the window, Laurence—cover the window. Keep the moon out. Please keep the moon out!"

In an instant he was wide awake and half across the room. He hung his robe over the curtain rods and said in an ordinary voice, "Better, Janine?"

"Better," she said, relaxing. "Much, much better. Thank you, darling."

"Can you sleep now? Want your eau de cologne? Anything?"

"No, dearest," she said with a low laugh, now that she was safe again in the darkness. "Just come back and let me put my arms around you, and we'll both drift off."

By the end of the week their belongings were all put away, the furniture arranged, the curtains hung. Their nearest neighbor was a farmer a mile away. Laurence hired one of his sons to cut the lawn, and his daughter, Trisa, a girl of seventeen, to come in for daily straightening and housecleaning. He and Janine drove to town twice a week to get groceries, and their mail and milk was delivered.

Everything had settled down to an orderly routine, and Laurence began to work again regularly. Janine kept to her promise. She no longer sought excuses to interrupt him; she brought his lunch on a tray and left it at his door.

Late one afternoon he went downstairs. It had been raining steadily all day long; he had scarcely seen Janine. He found her in the living room sitting cross-legged on the old Oriental rug before the fireplace.

It gave him a momentary start to see her there. How often he'd sat like that himself as a boy, while his mother read to him of Robin

Hood and King Arthur's knights, and a fire crackled on the hearth. But there was no fire now, only a few cold ashes.

Janine did not hear him but remained absorbed in something on the floor in front of her. In the strange half-light she looked more than ever like a Dürer drawing. She was not beautiful in the ordinary sense of the word, she was simply arresting and unforgettable.

Puzzled, he became aware of what preoccupied her. On the floor she had placed an old inlaid chessboard that had been in the house since he could remember. She had turned it over and on the polished back had placed a crystal wine glass, upside down.

Two fingertips of her right hand rested lightly on the base of the glass. As he watched, the glass seemed to glide across the board of its own volition in slow, swooping arcs, carrying her hand with it.

"What are you doing, Janine?" he asked.

She started, screamed, struck the glass a sidelong blow and sent it rolling off the board to the floor.

"No, no!" she cried.

He came into the room carefully, as if someone were asleep.

"I startled you," he said. "Forgive me. I just couldn't imagine what you were doing."

"Oh," she said, collecting herself, her breath coming unevenly. She picked up the glass and put it back. He saw now that she had carefully traced the letters of the alphabet on the back of the chessboard in ink.

"Haven't you ever received messages this way?" she asked with pretended carelessness. "Mother and I used to do it by the hour, when I was a girl, before she died."

"Messages from whom?" Laurence asked, careful to keep his tone casual.

"Oh, from beyond," Janine told him, looking surprised that he needed an explanation. "Mother and I used to talk to Father this way, and he brought all sorts of odd friends. Mother said it was just like him—when he was alive he was always bringing home the strangest people."

"But Janine—" Laurence began.

"I suppose," Janine added, watching him, "you and the doctor would say it was just Mother's way of escaping reality."

Fleeting he thought of Janine's mother, gallant and pathetic. Gently brought up, left with nothing when her husband drowned sailing on the Charles River, she had opened a boarding house for students. Somehow she had sent Janine to the best schools, instilling

in her daughter her own dream of the day when Janine, with her beauty and intelligence, would make a splendid success of some undefined kind—as a singer perhaps, or an actress, or a painter.

She had died, worn out but serenely satisfied with her handiwork, shortly before Janine and Laurence married.

Janine was watching him now with a hint of challenge in her smile.

"Try it," she said. "This is a wonderful old house. It was built in 1690—think of all the people who have lived and died here since then. And some of them are still around. I don't know why some stay and some don't, but it's always that way. Try it and see if any of them will talk to you."

"All right," he said, and forced a smile. He dropped to the rug beside her and took her hand. It slipped away from him, so he picked up the board and put it in front of him.

"Just place two fingers on the glass," she explained. "Relax and wait and when the glass moves, let it take your hand with it."

He did so, prepared when nothing happened to smile and suggest having an early dinner and seeing a movie. But as he waited with his fingers lightly touching the crystal, it was as if the unnatural stillness he had been aware of as he watched Janine were gathering again.

The glass began to move. He was not aware of any conscious muscular effort, but the glass slid in a smooth arc across the board to the letter N. It paused, then swept on to the letter O. From there it went back even more swiftly to N. To O once more. To N. To O. Then the glass with a violent jerk dragged his hand straight across the board and off the edge.

"No, no, no," Janine read out. "I guess he doesn't want to talk to you, darling."

With an effort remaining calm, Laurence took out a cigarette and lit it.

"Who doesn't want to talk to me, Janine?"

"Roderick Jamieson," she said. "Major Roderick Jamieson. He once lived here. I was just talking to him when you came in. He was killed during the Revolution, he told me, at the Battle of Yorktown. He's buried in the little burying ground out back. I'm going to look for his tombstone tomorrow."

Laurence caught his breath. He had left the grass long in the little cemetery, and hadn't told Janine it was there.

But she must have found it and scraped the moss off the marble

stone that did have the name Roderick Jamieson on it, though no one in the family had ever known just who Roderick Jamieson was.

"I see," Laurence said, feeling a weight lowering on his shoulders." "Of course you know, Janine"—he spoke as carefully as if to a child—"the glass is moved by your own unconscious muscular actions. And any message it might spell out comes from inside your own mind."

"Perhaps," Janine said. "But that doesn't make the message any the less real, darling. Because who puts it there? Answer me that!" Abruptly her manner changed. "Don't worry, darling. I've nothing to do and Major Jamieson is fun, that's all. He's so boastful of his exploits. According to him he's fought so many duels and made love to so many women!"

She gave a ripple of excited laughter.

"No one could believe *all* his stories. It drives him into a rage when I tell him he's making them up. Sometimes he flings the glass across the room."

To his surprise she leaned into his arms, against his chest. They could both feel his heart pounding.

"I love you," he said tensely, summoning her back.

"I know." She turned to him and lifted her face to be kissed. Her lips were warm and yielding. There seemed to be no transition necessary for her. She could live in the real and the unreal world at one and the same time. He took her in his arms and held her convulsively, feeling her closeness for the first time in months.

"You've no idea," she murmured, "how furious this makes him."

He lay awake that night after Janine had fallen asleep and was breathing regularly, her breath soft and warm upon his cheek.

He racked his brains for something to interest her, to draw her away from this game with the board and the glass and the imaginary rival. And with anguish he recalled the happiness of their first four years together, when he and Janine had lived in a tiny apartment overlooking Washington Square, and he had written two books, both quite successful.

Janine had been so undaunted and gay about her own career, going the rounds of the Broadway theatrical producers' offices, carrying her scrapbook of notices praising her performances in summer stock productions . . . then the year slavishly studying art . . . the short-lived practical period in an advertising agency writing copy . . . the brief enthusiasm for avant-garde poetry, and the thin sheaf of verses, never published.

Then her repudiation of New York, her longing for the country and isolation. They had moved to New Hampshire for her sake, so that she could really paint. As for Laurence, he could write anywhere.

In the lovely old colonial house overlooking the ocean Janine had produced half a dozen creditable landscapes. After endless hesitation she had entered them in a local art show. When none of them received even an honorable mention, she had in unfeigned tedium put away her paints and canvases.

Then, during the long New England winter, had come the first of those spells of apathy which had led them to one specialist after another, in Boston, New York, Washington . . .

And now, their money gone, they were here.

Laurence tried to get Janine to call on people; she refused. They drove thirty miles to see the movies twice a week, until she balked and begged him to go alone.

She assured him she was happy. As if to prove it, she at last unpacked her paints and canvases and began some desultory sketching. He expected her to abandon them at any moment, but she did not. Instead, she became abruptly absorbed in her painting. She began work on a canvas which she would not let him see, which she made him promise not to look at until it was finished.

Happy to see her occupied, though he knew she still used the board and glass daily, he went back to work. He determined to treat her preoccupation with the messages lightly, until she should have enough of it. He even asked about Roderick Jamieson from time to time, his manner jesting.

But Janine took no notice of the jesting, and answered as naturally as if Roderick Jamieson were real.

One Sunday when Janine was washing the fine china after dinner—a task she never left to Trisa—Laurence said casually that he was going for a stroll, and made directly for the little bridge and the burying ground on the other side. He found the stone, right at the edge of the cemetery where he remembered it. The long grass beside it had been trampled. Janine must have been there. But the moss on the headstone now made the name quite illegible. How could she have known? To satisfy himself, he scraped off enough moss to verify the letters JAMIE . . .

Monday he drove the fifteen miles to town alone for groceries. "Trisa, stay here until I get back," he told the sloe-eyed, sleepy farm girl in the kitchen. "If your mistress wants to send you home,

find some excuse to stay. I'll pay you double when I get back."

In town he stopped at the local Historical Society, a musty room where a pleasant, elderly woman kept the records of the town and its environs, going back to pre-Revolutionary days.

After looking around in a happy fluster, for hardly anyone ever came, the librarian found a brief biography cut from some older record book and pasted into an album with other yellowed prints.

"Major Roderick Jamieson," she said. "I knew I remembered the name. He came from around here. A famous duelist, it says here, killed in action at Yorktown. Decorated by Lafayette."

So Roderick Jamieson had been real enough. But how had Janine known he was buried behind the house when the moss on the headstone was untouched? And certainly she had never visited the Historical Society—she had never been to town alone.

There was only one other possibility. Among the ancient books and papers in the attic, Laurence decided, she must have found some records that mentioned Roderick Jamieson. He had never come across any such reference himself, but then, it was years since he had been up there and he had never rummaged very deeply into the moldering old newspapers and letters that had gathered dust there for perhaps two hundred years.

But he put off checking in the attic, not admitting to himself that he was afraid he would find no record of Jamieson there.

"Roderick is growing fantastically jealous of you, darling," Janine said one afternoon, as she swung idly in the hammock. Laurence had brought out some lemonade flavored with mint he had found in a patch run wild.

"Mmmm," he said. "Had a letter from my agent today. He likes the new book but he wants me to work on it some more."

"What a bore."

"It means we have to stay put for the moment."

"Oh, that. I wouldn't want to leave."

"You wouldn't?" he asked uneasily.

"No. It's delightful simply to have time. I've never known anything like this place for time. I could just drift along forever."

"Lotus eater," he smiled, relieved.

She turned to him a look full of mysterious sorrow. "Yes," she said. "I'm not fighting it any more. I'm an idle and useless woman."

"Janine, you're nothing of the sort."

"But I am." She started the hammock swinging by lacing her fingers into the ropework. Her fingers were strong, bone-strong. The

nails were long and polished. She was always immaculately groomed. She spent hours in front of the little dressing table in the dressing room he had fitted up for her.

"You should have told me years ago," she said half-accusingly. "Roderick claims a woman doesn't need to be useful. At least not a woman like me. He says her only duty is to be ornamental."

"He does, eh?" Laurence was not the least bit amused. "What else does he say?" He sought to understand the new role she was playing.

"Oh, he talks interminably about himself, as I told you. He tells me about his duels and his love affairs. I accuse him of having the love affairs simply because he had such a zest for polishing off the husbands. He doesn't deny it."

"Did he use sword or pistol?" Laurence asked, watching her face closely without seeming to do so.

She hesitated. "He's a little bit vague about that—he doesn't specify what weapons he used. Once he went into a tantrum and wouldn't speak to me for days, when I suggested he wasn't always a gentleman about these 'duels.' When he came out of his miff, he informed me that he had been fabulous with his pistols, and that he had killed six men single-handed, before he was killed in action at Yorktown. He was only twenty-seven, and he seems, sometimes, ever so much younger than that—much younger than you've ever been, darling."

"Six men? All husbands?" he asked dryly. This was a familiar theme with Janine—only a new twist. She didn't really like husbands, or being a wife: essentially she wanted a state of romantic tension, indefinitely sustained.

"Three or four were husbands," she said carelessly. "But when I ask him what became of the ladies afterwards—all presumably free to marry him—he distracts me by complimenting me on my eyebrows, or something equally silly."

"Why? You have very nice eyebrows," Laurence said. "I suppose he's in love with you?"

"Oh, madly. He spends a lot of time brooding over how he can manage a duel with you. It's a great frustration to him not to be able to fling a glove in your face."

"He might fling the glass," Laurence suggested.

"That's not bad, darling," she said, as though she had not expected so much wit from him. "I'll suggest it. Would you like to see what he looks like?"

"See what he looks like?" He was momentarily startled.

She took him by the hand and led him into the living room. On an easel by the window was the canvas she had never let him see. Now, as she removed the covering and turned the picture toward him with the smile of a mischievous child, he understood.

It was the head and shoulders of a young man. His blond hair was long, and it curled down over his ears and to his collar. His face was thin and aristocratic, his lips twisted in a slight smile that might have been pleasing except for his eyes.

His eyes were an intense blue that was almost black. They seemed to catch and hold Laurence's gaze as if he were giving some command. There were depths to the painted eyes, depths of darkness, and when Laurence looked into the eyes, he saw that Janine hadn't painted Roderick Jamieson smiling.

It was undoubtedly the best thing she had ever done.

"It's superb," Laurence exclaimed. Then, trying to appear unconcerned, "So this is Major Roderick Jamieson."

"He says it's a perfect likeness"—laughter bubbled on Janine's lips—"except that it doesn't make him handsome enough. I told him his insufferable vanity begins to bore me."

"You must try another oil," Laurence said, choosing his words. "This is really very fine."

"Perhaps I will." Abruptly she covered the picture. Her voice was flat and uninterested. "It was fun."

That evening after Janine was asleep, Laurence wrote at last to the doctor in Washington who had treated her:

Janine's neurosis in this lonely place has taken a new turn. She spends her time dreaming. She has imaginary conversations through a homemade ouija board. She seems to be going gently

His pen tore through the sheet of paper, penetrating to the green blotter beneath. He burned the letter over the kitchen stove.

"Roderick says I should leave you," Janine said at breakfast, yawning and smiling at him. "He claims you don't understand me. He says you don't believe a word of what I tell you about him, and that you think I am going mad. Do you?"

Laurence concentrated on stirring his coffee, not trusting the expression of his eyes. His hands trembled. Had Janine watched him struggling with the letter, seen him burn it, guessed its contents?

"He does, eh? What else does he say?"

"Oh, never mind him, he's always making up things," she shrugged. She got up and kissed him. The rest of the day she put

herself out to be sparkling, gay, witty—and she refused to be drawn back to Roderick Jamieson.

That night Laurence woke and found she had stolen downstairs. He got out of bed and crept down the stairs to the living room, where he paused in the doorway, drawn back and hidden by darkness.

Janine had lit a fire with a bit of paper and some kindling wood. This was the only light in the room. She was laughing and talking to herself, and the glass lay idle by the board.

He could make out no word of what she was saying, for she was speaking in a voice so low it sounded almost like someone else talking. The faint murmur could even have been the wind. But he could see her lips moving and her eyes shining with an animation she had not displayed for a long, long time. Unlike her pretense of gaiety all day, this was genuine.

She was dressed in a diaphanous nightgown and matching loose robe. It had big sleeves tight at the wrist, and it was closed at the throat with a blue ribbon. Once she caught at her throat with a look of confusion, as if someone there beside her had reached up to unfasten it.

Then she said something teasingly, shaking her head from one side to the other in negation.

Laurence had a premonition that she was about to rise and turn, so he went stealthily to bed, his heart throbbing and his head aching intolerably.

Janine came drifting back a few moments later, all her languor returned. As she lay beside him he could feel her exhaustion.

Whatever it had been, it hadn't been play-acting. It had taken a lot out of her.

In her sleep, later, she spoke. "Run! Run! Run!" she whispered. Then she gave a little moan and her head fell sideways on the pillow.

Laurence wrote the doctor the next morning, telling him the whole story, and not trusting the letter to Trisa, mailed it himself.

The doctor wrote to bring Janine at once for further treatment. He reminded Laurence sternly that he had been unwilling to let Janine go: he had not considered her cured. Laurence had asked desperately for advice; the doctor gave none. He said simply to come to Washington at once.

Laurence spent an hour staring at his bank book. He did not need to open it to read the figures.

He looked out the window at Janine. Around the house was a

smooth carpet of lawn, but she preferred always to walk in the long grass, rustlingly, on the other side of the stream. Sometimes she vanished for hours in the woods. Did she meet Roderick Jamieson there?

He started, his fists clenched. Was her nonsense infecting him too? Yet it was true that she acted as though she had a lover.

He had never seen her so lovely. An inner wholeness seemed to possess her whole being. She was no longer torn apart as before by self-questionings, self-accusations, and abortive ambitions that were soon dispelled and left her limp and defeated.

She walked proudly now, almost with arrogance, and there were none of the nervous gestures and starts and stops that had marked her earlier illness.

He got out the doctor's letter to answer it, put it away again hopelessly, and began working, shutting out from his mind the seductive Virginia summer, the blue hot sky, the scent of honeysuckle, and his wife in its tangles, walking.

He worked all afternoon and sat down exhausted to the supper that Janine served by candlelight on fragile china, dreamily.

With a start Laurence noticed that she was drinking from the crystal glass she used for the ouija board, and that her hand was clasped around its stem almost constantly. She hardly ate, but drank lingeringly, her lips moving tenderly against the edge of the glass.

The wine, on top of a day of concentrated effort, made Laurence sleepy. He watched Janine through half-closed eyes.

She served brandied peaches in rose-crystal bowls, her every gesture fastidious and serene, as though she served a lover: but he knew that he was not the one she was thinking of.

As they went to bed, rain began to fall with a metallic patter on the copper roof gutters, and a soft whispering on the windowpanes. Thunder grumbled in the sky and lightning flashed, coming closer.

Janine fell asleep quickly and peacefully, but he was too weary. Sleep would not come. He turned and tossed, he lit cigarettes and put them out. He lay and stared into darkness illuminated at intervals by the reflected glare of lightning, and heard the storm draw nearer.

The shutter began to bang as the wind rose. Irritated, he got up to fasten it. As he reshut the window and turned back he saw Janine standing, facing him.

He did not move or speak, frozen by her expression. She seemed to be looking directly at him with malevolent hatred.

After an electric moment she turned and went downstairs in the

dark. He looked about for a flashlight, found none, and afraid to wait, gropingly followed her.

She did not turn even when he stepped upon the two creaking stairs, one after the other, hard. Then he was sure she was walking in her sleep.

The front door was open. He followed her out, shivering in the slashing rain. Ahead of him, Janine seemed to feel nothing. Her hair and her diaphanous gown blew back in the wind as the fitful lighting revealed her.

Laurence thought of the pits and foundation stones left of the old slave quarters and stables, toward which she was going. However great the shock, he must wake her.

"Janine!" he cried, his voice blending with the keening wind. "Janine!"

She heard her name, stopped in mid-flight, and must have made out the motion of his hurrying form, just as he could see only the erratically elusive white gown.

"Wait!" he called imperatively.

"You're slow, Roderick!" she called back. Then she gave a ripple of excited laughter and triumph. "Catch me!" she cried, coquetry in her voice. Starting away from him, she began to run. "Run, run, run!" she called. He remembered the compulsive words of her dream.

He ran. But she fled before him lightly, skirting the dangerous pits with amazing surefooted speed. She cut across the fields and Laurence followed, already sure of her destination. She raced across the little bridge, perhaps remembering vaguely some tale that spirits could not cross a stream.

Safe on the other side, she laughed exultantly. There was now nothing between her and the tangled woods, in which she might hide from him all night. He was soaked to the bone, and so must she be. She would catch pneumonia.

"Janine!" he called desperately. "Wait for me!"

"Too slow, too slow!" she called back. But she paused an instant. Lightning flared across the sky. In the brilliant white light he saw Janine looking toward him, her lips parted, her eyes wide with what seemed like dawning recognition, her hair and her thin gown plastered to her by the rain.

Laurence took the planks in three flying strides. He must get to her before she started off again. He must—he stretched his arm toward her, and then it seemed as if a vicious hand had treacherously seized

his ankle. He felt himself flying through the air as if lifted bodily, and as he plunged forward he could see the marble slab sunken and tilted in the long grass. By the flare of lightning he could even see the letters from which he had scraped away the moss:

J A M I E . . .

Then his forehead came down full force on the edge of the marble.

When Trisa, the hired girl, came the next morning, she found Janine crouched on the living room floor in her still damp nightgown, crooning to Laurence, whose body she had somehow dragged into the house and whose bloody head was cradled in her lap. In the cold fireplace was a half-burnt chessboard, and the pieces of a broken glass were on the hearth.

Janine looked up slowly as Trisa entered.

"He didn't love me," she said, in a voice so hoarse Trisa could hardly understand her. "He never cared at all for me. He never cared for any woman. He just wanted to kill. To kill!"

It was the last coherent sentence she ever spoke.

FOUR O'CLOCK

Price Day

The hands of the alarm clock on the table in front of Mr. Crangle stood at 3:47, on a summer afternoon.

"You're wrong about that, you know," he said, not taking his eyes from the face of the clock. "You're quite wrong, Pet, as I have explained to you often enough before. The moral angle presents no difficulties at all."

The parrot, in the cage hanging above him, cocked her head and looked down with a hard, cold, reptilian eye, an ancient eye, an eye older by age upon age than the human race.

She said, "Nut."

Mr. Crangle, his eye still on the clock, took a peanut from a cracked bowl at his elbow and held it above his head, to the bars of the cage. Pet clutched it in a leathery claw. The spring-steel muscles opened the horny beak. She clinched the peanut and crushed it, the sound mingling in the furnished room with the big-city sounds coming through the open window—cars honking, feet on the sidewalk, children calling to each other, a plane overhead like a contented, industrious bee.

"It is quite true," Mr. Crangle said at 3:49, "that only someone

above all personal emotions, only someone who can look at the whole thing as if from the outside, can be trusted morally to make such a decision." As the big hand reached 3:50, he felt a sense of power surge deeply through him. "Think, Pet. In ten minutes. In ten little minutes, when I say the word, all the evil people all over the world will become half their present size, so they can be known. All the uncaught murderers and the tyrants and the proud and sinful, all the bullies and the wrongdoers and the blackmailers and nicotine fiends and transgressors." His eyes blazed with omnipotence. "All of them, every one."

Pet said, "Nut."

Mr. Crangle gave her one.

"I know you don't agree fully with the half-size solution," he said, "but I do believe it to be the best one, all things considered."

He had studied over the alternatives day and night since that morning three weeks ago when, as he sat on a bench in the park, looking at the pictures in the clouds across the lake, it came to him that he had the power to do this thing, that upon him at that moment had been bestowed the gift of putting a mark on all the bad people on earth, so that they should be known.

The realization surprised him not at all. Once before, such a thing had happened. He had once held the power to stop wars. That was when the radio was telling about the big air raids on the cities. In that case the particular thing he could do was to take the stiffness out of airplane propellers, so that some morning when the crews, bundled like children against cold, went out to get in their planes, they would find the props hanging limp, like empty banana skins.

That time, he had delayed too long, waiting for just the right time and just the right plan, and they had outwitted him, unfairly. They had invented the jet, to which his power did not apply.

Then, too, there had been the thing about wheels. The thing about wheels came to him in a coffee place as he was looking at a newspaper photograph of a bad traffic accident, three killed. The power, that was, to change all the wheels in the world from round to square, or even to triangular if he wished, so they would stub in the asphalt and stop. But he wasn't allowed to keep that power. Before he could work out a plan and a time, he had felt it taken from him.

The power over bad people had stayed. It had even grown stronger, if power like that could grow stronger. And this time he had hurried, though of course there were certain problems to be thought through.

First, who was to decide what people were evil? That wasn't too hard, really, in spite of Pet's doubts. An evil person was a person who would seem evil to a man who held within himself the knowledge of good and evil, if that man could know all the person's innermost secrets. An evil person was a person who would seem evil to an all-knowing Mr. Crangle.

Then, how to do it, the method? Mark them on the forehead, or turn them all one color, say purple? But then they would simply be able to recognize each other the more readily, and to band together in their wickedness.

When at last he hit upon the idea of a change in size, what came to him first was the thought of doubling the height and bulk of all the bad people. That would make them inefficient. They couldn't handle delicate scientific instruments or typewriters or adding machines or telephone dials. In time they would expire from bigness, like the dinosaurs in the article in the Sunday paper. But they might first run wild, with their great weight and strength, and hurt other people. Mr. Crangle wouldn't have liked that. He hated violence.

Half-size people, it was true, might be able to manipulate some of the machines. They could also be dangerous. But it would take them a long time to develop tools and weapons to their scale, and think how ridiculous they would be, meanwhile, with their clothes twice too big and their hats falling down over their ears.

At 3:54, Mr. Crangle smiled at the thought of how ridiculous they would be.

"Nut," Pet said.

He reached up and gave her one, his eyes still on the clock.

"I think," he said, "that the most interesting place to be would be at a murder trial where nobody knew whether the accused was guilty or not. And then at 4 o'clock, if he was guilty—"

Mr. Crangle's breath was coming faster. The clock hands stood at 3:56.

"Or watching the drunkards in a saloon," he said.

"Nut," Pet said, and he gave her one.

"Oh," he said, "there are so many places, so many places to be. But I'd rather be with you when it happens, Pet. Right here alone with you."

He sat tense in his chair. He could actually see the big hand of the clock move, in the tiniest little jerkings, leaving a hairline of white between itself and the black 3:57 dot, and moving to the 3:58 dot,

narrowing the space, until it touched that dot, and then stood directly on it, and then moved past toward the 3:59 dot.

"At first," Mr. Crangle said, "the newspapers won't believe it. Even though some of it will happen right in the newspaper offices, they won't believe it. At first they won't. And then when they begin to understand that it has happened to a lot of people everybody knows are evil, then they'll see the design."

The clock said 3:59.

"A great story," Mr. Crangle said. "A great newspaper story. And nobody will know who did it, Pet, nobody but you and me."

The point of the big hand crept halfway past the 3:59 dot. Mr. Crangle's heart beat hard. His eyes were wide, his lips parted. He whispered, "Nobody will know."

The tip of the big hand touched the dot at the top of the clock face. The alarm went off. Mr. Crangle felt a great surge of strength, like water bursting a dam, and a great shock, as of a bolt of lightning. He closed his eyes.

"Now!" he said softly, and slumped exhausted.

By going to the window and looking down at the crowd in the street, he could have seen whether it had worked or not. He did not go to the window. He did not need to. He knew.

The alarm bell ran down.

Pet cocked her head and looked at him with an eye like polished stone.

"Nut," she said.

His hand, as he stretched it up, failed by a full foot and a half to reach the cage.

TOO MANY COINCIDENCES

Paul Eiden

The funeral service was in an ancient, dark little Catholic church on Washington Street in the Village. Starbuck watched Kathy carefully throughout the unfamiliar requiem, following her up and down from the kneeler in the back pew, although he was certain she knew little more about the service than he did. Starbuck's religion was mathematics.

He sensed the Mass was nearing its end when the priests and servers in their black vestments were down at the far end of the aisle opposite them, bearing a heavy book and a crucifix-tipped staff. It was then Starbuck took his first good look at the short, blond man on his left.

He had become aware of him when the man first slid into the pew, his hat in his hand, bowing hesitantly, a tentatively introductory smile on his lips. Starbuck knew at once that he had seen him somewhere before. Perhaps, he hazarded, at one of the wakes for Kathy's old room-mates. He darted looks at him throughout the Mass, now and then catching a half-smile on his thick, mobile lips, wishing he could tap Kathy on the arm and nod at her for her quick, remembering smile and the artful reintroduction.

Starbuck hated unresolved problems of any sort. Now, sensing imminent escape from the church, he tried to concentrate on the man. A faint odor clung to him. It reminded Starbuck of hospitals. A doctor perhaps? A friend of this dead nurse, or one of the others?

It was hopeless. Starbuck was used to doing his thinking in a nearly soundless, air-conditioned office. The priest just beyond Kathy was chanting in Latin and an altar boy swung a censer filled with burning incense that overcame and banished the smell that seemed to cling to the blond man's clothes. Starbuck was left wondering if he had imagined it, as the priests and servers went up the nave and into the chancel.

The pallbearers—six, solemn, hulking Irish youths—brought the casket down to the foot of the aisle then. He could feel Kathy begin to sob beside him, as it was borne out into the sudden sunlight of the opened doors and the undertaker began calling out the carloads for the procession to the cemetery. Starbuck took his young wife's arm and led her out through a side door. The blond man followed them out.

Kathy had not seen the dead girl in more than a year. Even last night at the wake, the coffin had been sealed. *I don't blame them*, Starbuck had thought. *Four days in the water*. He had felt nothing at all at the wake or the funeral. He never did. Now, vaguely embarrassed, he wondered how Kathy could be so emotional.

He saw with irritation that the blond man had not left them. Starbuck watched, as, still smiling faintly, the man touched his wife's forearm.

Kathy withdrew the tiny handkerchief with which she had been dabbing under her veil. Her eyes still wet, she smiled promptly at him. "Why, Mr. Carlson!"

Carlson ducked his head. "Very sad, very sad," he said.

Not a doctor, Starbuck's mind registered. "You've met my husband," Kathy was saying. "John Carlson, Alfred. Mr. Carlson was Pat Phelan's fiancé."

Starbuck shook his hand. Pat Phelan, one of the two that had been killed by the hit-and-run driver. "I wondered," Carlson was asking, in a voice with a faint linguistic accent, "are you going out to the cemetery . . . ?"

"Yes," Starbuck told him. "But we have our own car."

"That's what I wanted to ask," Carlson said, speaking to Kathy. "Could you drive me out?"

"Why, of course," Kathy said with her quick friendliness, taking his arm.

The last of the rented limousines was pulling away from the church. Starbuck led them down Sixth Avenue to where he had parked the car, repressing a frown of annoyance. After the burial, he had a long drive back across Brooklyn to the Battery Tunnel. He couldn't be in the office much before one as it was, and he was sure Kathy would quickly volunteer a side trip to drop this stranger off anywhere he asked.

He had wanted Kathy, for her outgoing friendliness and fresh red-haired beauty, the first moment he saw her in the hospital; after eight years of marriage, her emotionalism and sentimentality were a constant reproof and minor annoyance to Starbuck's own closely-reasoned sense of order and convenience. She could have been satisfied with the church service this morning, he thought; but she had insisted on the trip out to the graveside, and, even after he got her back downtown, she would have another hour's cab ride back up to Riverdale.

She was chatting volubly with Carlson in the back seat as Starbuck swung the Lincoln into the line of the cortege. The blond man leaned forward to offer them cigarettes from his pack. In the rear vision mirror, Starbuck saw his faint smile become pronounced as Kathy accepted one from him. He decided he didn't like Carlson much.

Kathy chattered effortlessly with Carlson as Starbuck followed the limousines out over the Williamsburg Bridge and down Meeker to New Calvary. No, Carlson hadn't married since they saw him last. Yes, he was still working for the pharmaceutical firm as a detail man, contacting physicians. *Unsuccessful*, Starbuck catalogued him, and all but forgot him. Kathy touched the blond man's hand sympathetically. "You have to forget Pat, you know. You'll meet someone else, just as nice. Wait and see."

No one had ever had to reassure him he would marry someone as desirable as Kathy, Starbuck reflected. He had known it all through his long bachelorhood, just as he had known he would make himself a wealthy man. The matter of a wife could wait until he had the money. Long ago, he had read Voltaire's words: "A woman is never more sincere than when she is telling a millionaire: 'I love you.'" That had been the only reassurance Starbuck needed.

It was a cynical bit of wisdom which served Starbuck as a minor article of faith. The major article was that hard work and a cold faith

in the logic of arithmetic would give him everything else that he wanted out of life. He had been right. Kathy was his wife. And for six years, he had been president of the fourth largest insurance company in America.

Mathematics was Starbuck's religion and logic its dogma; a sturdy staff, it supported him through all the storms and doubts of his career. It was to numbers and probabilities that Starbuck turned for strength. Take the question of Kathy's faithfulness to him. Or take the matter of her dead room-mates, for instance . . .

That poor bloated corpse in the hearse up ahead (Eileen. Eileen Something, wasn't it?) was the fourth one of Kathy's old nursing school room-mates to die in a little over two years. All young girls, under thirty. Five, if you counted back to the first one, years ago. The one whose death Kathy always referred to as "that horrible accident."

Starbuck remembered the consternation last summer when Kathy had mentioned the rate at which her old room-mates were dying off. They had a group of their friends out to their place on the Cape for a week-end—mostly Starbuck's fellow executives from the company, with their wives and young Quinlan from the legal department.

Smiling inwardly, Starbuck remembered his amusement. Really, it was amazing, but most people couldn't grasp the simplest equations in mathematical probabilities. Quinlan had become as excited as the women.

"My God!" he demanded accusingly, "aren't you worried at all? Four of her room-mates have died! Suppose something happens to her!"

Starbuck grinned at him tolerantly. "Isn't that silly, coming from an insurance man, Ed? Even one in the law office? Suppose all four had died of cancer. Would that increase Kathy's chances of dying of cancer?"

"But they've all died violently!" Quinlan exploded. "This first girl burned to death. Then the other was strangled to death in bed. And now two more run over by a hit-and-run driver!"

"Well?" Starbuck asked. "It's just a string of coincidences. Unlikely, of course, but the unlikely thing often happens in life." He looked around the group, an apostle expounding his gospel. "Their deaths don't alter Kathy's chances of living to a ripe old age. That would be like saying the chances of a roulette wheel stopping on red are increased because it has stopped on red four times in a row. Ac-

tually red's chances of turning up on the next spin are exactly the same as they ever were."

Starbuck smiled, warming at this chance to lecture. "In that example you are running into the principle of statistical independence—"

Behind their guests, Kathy smiled fondly and shook her head at him, the perfect hostess. Starbuck played to the older men for his laugh. "You draw dangerous—fatal—conclusions when you reason from too small a sample."

He got his laugh from the men, and even the wives seemed to relax, but young Quinlan was still in a flap. "*You're not worried?* Suppose— Suppose . . . ?"

"Suppose there's a curse on them?" Starbuck suggested urbanely, enjoying himself. Really, Quinlan must read mystery novels. "Like the one on the men who opened King Tut's tomb?"

Quinlan had subsided then, but not without a fretful look at Kathy. Starbuck grinned reminiscently, turning the car onto Laurel Hill in the procession. It had been ridiculous, just another example of the way undisciplined thinkers jumped to conclusions from insufficient facts. Starbuck never let his judgment or his emotions run away from him like that. He kept them firmly in check.

Take this marital fidelity thing, for instance. After all, he was fifty-three and Kathy was only twenty-nine. What was more natural than that she should one day choose a lover? It was right there in Kinsey—although he had some reservations about Kinsey's data-gathering and his disdain of the probability sample. Starbuck ran the IBM machine of his mind for the card bearing the statistic he wanted. Cumulative Incidence: Extra-Marital Coital Experience, By Decade Of Birth. Twelve per cent of the married women born between 1920 and 1929 had betrayed their husbands by the age of twenty-five.

Of course, the book had been compiled in 1953 and the findings did not extend beyond the age of twenty-five, but it seemed reasonable to extrapolate a percentage twice as large by age twenty-nine. The chances that Kathy would remain faithful to even a younger husband were, at best, no better than three out of four. There was a fact, and Starbuck liked to think that he had never grown emotional about a fact in his life.

He watched Kathy as the casket was lowered into the grave. Her face went white and she bit her lips, but no tears came. She was generally beyond the crying stage when they reached the cemetery.

All you could ask of a wife was that she be discreet about it when

the time came. Starbuck rather suspected that Kathy had begun to cheat on him already. In his secret heart, he was proud of her for giving him not even the shadow of proof.

He had the Lincoln back on the highway, already thinking ahead to the work at the office, before Starbuck remembered Carlson. "Mr. uhh—uhh— Where can we drop you?"

The thick, flexible lips formed a deferential smile and Carlson ducked his head and said in his polite, faintly accented voice: "Anywhere at all. I am taking the rest of the day off."

The fool couldn't even make up his mind where he was going. "Well, I'm taking the car back down to Wall Street," Starbuck said curtly, conscious of Kathy's still white, troubled face. "I'm leaving it there, and then Mrs. Starbuck will be going back uptown by cab. Any place that's convenient for you."

Carlson raised his eyebrows. "Oh? You don't drive?" he asked Kathy. She shook her head absently. "Then, perhaps—a suggestion—I could drive you home in this fine car? It would save your husband trouble, too."

Kathy smiled broadly, instantly cheerful again. "Oh, wonderful! That's wonderful!"

Even Starbuck felt something like gratitude. He never brought the car to the office when it was avoidable. He hated the drive up or down in rush hour traffic. "Nice of you," he murmured.

He kissed Kathy and turned the keys over to Carlson at the corner of Wall and Broadway.

A thick sheaf of real estate reports on the company's properties across the nation waited on his desk. Starbuck turned from them in an oddly dilatory mood. He stood at the window for a long time, treasuring its panoramic view of the harbor, watching a rusty tramp plow toward the Narrows.

This had been his office since fifty-two; he had worked toward it for twenty-five years before that. Nearly two-thirds of Starbuck's life had been spent in this building. In the beginning there had been the long subway rides uptown to Columbia for that all-important first degree, then years more of nights afterwards at NYU, City College, mastering law, investment banking, real estate.

There was no ulcer. And he was eight years into the coronary bracket, Starbuck reminded himself smugly, without a first attack. Seven more years and he was past even that hurdle. In twelve he would be retired, moved up to chair the board. Kathy would be forty-

one then, a dutiful, artfully unfaithful wife. He had everything he wanted.

Starbuck took an irritable turn around the office on the thick Persian rug, unable to attack the work on his desk. Something about today nagged at his mind, some danger signal. Angrily, hating it for the distraction, he assaulted it, free-associating.

The girl just buried, her swollen body crammed into her coffin? Supposedly, she had slipped off the ferry returning her from the night shift at the Staten Island Hospital. Starbuck snorted. If the company holding her policy paid off on that without the suicide clause first becoming effective they were criminal fools.

Nobody fell off the Staten Island ferry, unless they were pushed, and the girl had been alone. If he were the emotional, excitable type like Ed Quinlan, Starbuck knew, he could blame his disquiet on these successive deaths of Kathy's old friends. But there was nothing there, but a simple chain of coincidences.

Six girls, strangers, randomly assigned an apartment by a hospital personnel director. One commits suicide. Two others, the closest friends in the group, are smashed down by a hit-and-run driver, who is never apprehended. One slain in bed by a strangler, also never found. But the husband had been held a long time, hadn't he? Starbuck's mind challenged the coincidences. The police knew their business. The husband must have been guilty, even if they never found enough evidence to go into court.

And the first girl—that was nothing but a tragic, unforeseeable accident. Some of the girls sharing the apartment—it was never made quite clear just which ones—had doused her with ether.

Starbuck remembered the joke from his high-school science days. A drop of ether on the bare flesh, or even on the clothes, gave the body a freezing chill, far more intense than the one you experienced when a masseur spills rubbing alcohol on your back.

The girls had failed to notice though, that their victim held a lit cigarette. The ether had caught instantly. The girl burned to death in the kitchen. A tragic, horrible accident.

Starbuck caught himself in midstride. *Ether?* That faint smell that had hung about Carlson when he first came into the church this morning, that had been overcome by the burning incense. It had reminded him somehow of hospitals. It could have been . . . It was ether! Starbuck felt the heavy stroke of his heart.

Now, wait a minute. This was the kind of lurid imagining that Ed

Quinlan would supply. For this hypothesis to fit, Carlson would have to be some mad avenger out of a paper-back thriller, bent on executing Kathy in an ether immolation the same way the first girl had died.

There must be some other explanation. Too many implausibilities had to be explained. Carlson would have to be the murderer of four other girls. He would have to have known the first girl, loved her. Starbuck clawed his cheeks in an agony of recall. What did he remember of *her*?

Kathy had said she was shy, stand-offish, the butt of the group's teasing. There had been no family. But a fiance, yes! Someone the other girls had never met, just a portrait on her dresser.

Starbuck sank into his chair, his disciplined, card-index memory racing. The fiance? He had been a refugee. The last surviving member of a gypsy family that had disappeared into Hitler's concentration camp ovens. That could unhinge a mind. And, then, to have his girl die in the same way. It could start him on a mad search for vengeance against her killers—the whole group, whether guilty or innocent. Was it possible?

Starbuck remembered Carlson's accent, and panicked. He reached for the phone on his desk. But a gypsy. Carlson was blond. *A blond gypsy?* Starbuck sighed and settled back in the chair, shamefaced. Well, possible, of course, but just barely possible.

And what about the girl who was murdered? The husband had done that. Of course, the police couldn't prove it, and they released him, but that was no proof of innocence.

There was an implausibility for you: *A blond gypsy, who had to be driven insane by an accidental murder to give him a motive, strangles a girl who was probably murdered by her husband.*

But how do you explain the ether smell on him? Starbuck looked longingly at the phone. He could reach Kathy at home now. He wanted to call her.

To warn her? Of what? That a mad man with a bottle of ether in his pocket was about to murder her?

He knew Kathy. She would have chatted gaily with Carlson, all the way up the West Side Drive, glad of his company, as she was always glad of anyone's company. She wouldn't let him escape. He would have to come upstairs for coffee, tea, a drink. *And if he did have that ether . . .*

Suddenly, chillingly, Starbuck remembered the enigmatic smile on Carlson's face when Kathy accepted the cigarette from him. He had been so weirdly, unexplainably happy that she smoked!

"Are you all right, Mr. Starbuck?"

Mrs. Enlow, his secretary, was standing in the door, a soft, motherly frown on her face.

Starbuck's mind raced like a rat in a maze. This was insane. He had to convince himself that this wild speculation could not be true, that Kathy was safe at home, mixing a cocktail for Carlson.

"Would you like your coffee now?" Mrs. Enlow prodded him.

"Uh, yes." He had to talk to someone. Mrs. Enlow? No. "Would you ask young Quinlan, in Law, if he's not— Would you just tell him I'd like a word with him right away?"

There had to be some flaw in this mad hypothesis, Starbuck told himself. It broke every law of mathematical probability.

Carlson. Carlson. But, of course! Carlson had been the fiance of one of those two girl friends who were run down by the hit-and-run driver. That was where Kathy knew him from. Surely, if he had been the first girl's fiance, the fact would never have been hidden. They all would have certainly known him.

Starbuck smiled and leaned back in his chair. For a moment there, he had been on the point of calling the police, sending them rushing with sirens to his apartment. Wouldn't that have been a gorgeous mess!

This wild theory was certainly collapsing under a dead-weight of implausibilities. A *blond gypsy, who had to be driven insane, who strangled a girl murdered by another man, and then ran down his own fiancée!*

That exploded the Mad Avenger hypothesis, of course, but it didn't explain why Carlson should be so pleased to see Kathy take a cigarette, or why he should smell of ether.

Raggedly, Starbuck's mind went back to the problem. This fool theory had to crumble before a scientific, dialectical approach. None of the room-mates had ever *seen* the first girl's boy friend, Kathy said. Just a picture in her room. They could have forgotten his face. His appearance could have changed in a few years. He could have arranged to meet the other girl, make love to her, run her and the other down in a car.

But what about the last girl? The one buried today. She was a suicide. How could that fit in? But was she a suicide? There were no witnesses. *She could have fallen.*

But nobody falls off the Staten Island ferry.

She could have been pushed. Starbuck's hand snatched up the phone.

At his barked command, Mrs. Enlow, in the outer office, got his home number. He counted twelve rings before he dropped it back on the hand-set. Thursday, the maid's day off. There was no one there to answer until Kathy arrived. Unless she already was there, dead. Sweating, Starbuck glanced at his watch. She'd had time to get up to Riverdale. Barely.

"Good afternoon, sir." Quinlan stood in the door, blond and handsome and youthful in beautifully cut flannels.

"Of course," Starbuck said, and almost giggled. "Oh, of course." Carlson had said he was a contact man for a drug outfit, calling on doctors. That accounted for the smell of ether about him. And the pleasure when Kathy accepted his cigarette? Well, just put it down to nervous relief. After all, Carlson was a man without much social poise, an unsuccessful foreigner riding in the car of a man like Starbuck.

"I beg your pardon?" Quinlan said.

Starbuck regretted the impulse that had caused him to send for this young fool. He felt shaken. He was aware of sweat on his palms and upper lip, a nervous trembling in his thighs and biceps. Were his nerves going? Was he losing his grip on a mind he had trained to function like a precision machine? Never, since he was a child, had Starbuck spent such a half-hour of fearful fantasizing as this one just past.

At least he hadn't done anything foolish about summoning the police. It was a blessing he hadn't been able to reach Kathy on the phone. He had betrayed his lapse to no one. He set himself to chatting politely with Quinlan while they drank the coffee, already thinking of the work on his desk. Actually, Quinlan wasn't a bad young fellow. Pretty good lawyer.

Starbuck reached avidly for the stack of real estate reports when Quinlan left, and Mrs. Enlow had cleared off the cups. He should phone Kathy now. Husbandly check-up to see that she was home safe.

He listened to twenty unanswered rings before he disconnected.

"Mrs. Enlow," Starbuck said into the phone when her voice came back, "there's a Mrs. Kyle in my building. They have the other apartment on the floor. Would you ring her up for me, please? Mrs. Charles Kyle, I believe it is. And hurry, please."

Unreasonably, the fear was creeping back, but he was proud of the steadiness of his voice.

It took a long time for the woman's phone to be answered. Then

Starbuck found himself talking to a soft, Negro maid's voice, tense and hard to understand because of a volume of unidentifiable background noise. It took a long time for Starbuck to make her understand who he was, and to whom he wanted to talk.

When Mrs. Kyle finally came to the phone, her voice was almost comically tearful. "Oh, Mr. Starbuck! That I should have to be the one to tell you!"

"What? Tell me what, for God's sake!"

"Can't you hear the sirens? There's a terrible fire in your apartment, Mr. Starbuck!"

Starbuck set the phone down. The expression on his face was that of a saint whose God had denied him.

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. Beside 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 finger tip, 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 stereopti-

con pictures? Well, that's what these were like, only better, far better. In one picture you could see dew glistening on 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, kneel-

ing, 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 Colony," 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 building 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 somewhere. The printing said, "Good, when validated, for ONE TRIP TO VERNA. Non-transferable. 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. Includ-

ing 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 old buildings. 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 the 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 violent 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 afterward. 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 semiprecious 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 sur-

prise 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 caïque 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 caïque'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 pointing 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 touched his arm. His fingers felt icy. "I—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 monolithic 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 relations 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 house-boy, about what time I brushed my teeth." Her lips twisted. "Maria 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 abroad, away from all the news-

paper and fan magazine phonies, chiselers, 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 comedian. 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, raw-boned 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. Everyplace 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 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 utili-

tarian. 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 treeness 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 there 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 to 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 whenever 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 disused 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 battered 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 scroll-work! 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, porte-cochère, 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 judgeship, 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 in-

doors 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 puppies, 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 pre-occupation of his own, halted a rod away, and, without lifting his gaze from the ground, said: "Has Mother liked it here in Kennel-bridge, 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 be-

tween 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, unstirring 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 re-awakening 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 handker-

chief many times in the following days. On the third, the afternoon after the funeral, stopping 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 mantling. 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 glutton 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 authen-

ticated 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 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 yet 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. Something 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 fag-end 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 day 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 summer-house, 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 mo-

bility, 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 blacknesses 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 be-

cause 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 reopening 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 of the door at a walk, but then ran.

They found a lantern, a spade and a garden mattock under the Seckel-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 apartment 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 hitch-hike, 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 dead."

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 into 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.

"Hmmm, 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.

THE BLANK WALL

Elisabeth Sanxay Holding

ONE

Lucia Holley wrote every night to her husband, who was somewhere in the Pacific. They were very dull letters, as she knew; they gave Commander Holley a picture of a life placid and sunny as a little mountain lake.

"Dear Tom," she wrote. "It is pouring rain tonight."

She crossed it out, and sat for a moment looking at the window where the rain slid down the glass in a silvery torrent. There's no use telling him that, she thought. It might sound rather dreary. "The crocuses are just up," she wrote, and stopped again. The crocuses are up again for the third spring without you to see them. And your daughter, your idolized little Bee, has grown up without you. Tom, I need you. Tom, I'm frightened.

It was one of her small deceptions to pretend that she had lost her taste for smoking. Cigarettes were very hard to get. It was difficult to keep her father supplied. She would sit by while he smoked, and refuse to join him. No, thanks, Father, I really don't seem to care for them any more.

Yet, hidden in her own room, she always kept a few cigarettes, for special moments. She got one out now and lit it, leaning back in

her chair, a tall woman, slight, almost thin, very young-looking for her thirty-eight years, with a dark, serious face, and beautiful dark eyes. A pretty woman, if you thought about it, but she herself had almost forgotten that, had lost any coquetry she had ever had.

The house was very quiet this rainy night. Her son David had gone to bed early; old Mr. Harper, her father, was reading in the sitting room. Sibyl, the maid, had stopped creaking about in the room overhead.

Bee was shut in her own room, rebellious, furious; perhaps she was crying. I'm not handling this properly, Lucia Holley thought. If only I were one of those wise, humorous, tolerant mothers in plays and books. But I haven't been wise about this and I'm not tolerant about the man. I hate him.

If Tom were here, she thought, he'd get rid of that beast. If David were older . . . Or if Father were younger . . . But there's nobody. I've got to handle it alone. And I'm doing it badly.

She remembered, with a heart like lead, the visit to New York, to the dingy little midtown hotel where Ted Darby lived. She remembered how she had felt, and how she had looked standing at the desk, asking the pale and supercilious clerk to tell Mr. Darby there was a lady here to see him. Countrified, in her old tweed coat, gray cotton gloves, and round felt hat, she was already at a disadvantage. She did not even look like the wise, humorous, woman-of-the-world mother she so wished to be.

"Mr. Darby'll be right down," said the clerk.

She had sat down on a bench covered with green plush, and waited and waited, in the gloomy little lobby. Presently, as the doorman in uniform sat down beside her, she realized that the bench was for him and his colleagues. He was quite an elderly man, and she thought it might hurt his feelings if she got up and went away too quickly, so that she was still sitting there beside him when Ted Darby came out of the other elevator.

He had come straight toward her, holding out his hand.

"You must be Bee's mother," he had said.

She had taken his hand and that was a mistake. Only, she had never yet refused an outstretched hand; she had acted before thinking.

"Suppose we go into the cocktail lounge?" he had suggested. "It's quiet in there, this time of day."

It was a very small room, dimly lit, smelling of beer and varnish. They had sat at a table in a corner, and after one quick and appre-

hensive look at him, she had been silent. He was so much worse than she had expected, blond, thin, with an amused smile. Puny, she had thought, and dressed with a sort of theatrical nonchalance, in a powder-blue coat, darker blue flannels, and suède moccasins.

She had refused a drink, and he had ordered a rye for himself, and this had given him another advantage over her. He had been easy and relaxed and she had been in misery.

"I don't want my daughter to see you again, Mr. Darby," she had said, at last.

"My dear lady, isn't that for Bee to decide?" he had asked.

"No," Lucia had said. "She's only a child. Only seventeen."

"She'll be eighteen next month, I believe."

"That doesn't matter, Mr. Darby. If you don't stop seeing Beatrice, I'll have to put this in my lawyer's hands."

"But put what, dear lady?"

"I understand that you're married," she had said.

"But, my dear lady," he said laughing, "what will your lawyer do about that? After all, it's not a crime."

"It's altogether wrong for you to see Beatrice."

"Well, really . . ." he protested. "The poor kid tells me her life is miserably dull. She likes to get around, meet interesting people, and I'm very happy to take her around. She knows I'm getting a divorce, but she doesn't think that's any reason for refusing to see me."

Her visit had been not only utterly useless, but harmful. Ted had told Bee about it and she had been bitterly angry.

"Ted's so good-natured that he only laughed," she had told her mother. "But it doesn't make me laugh. It's the most humiliating, horrible thing that ever happened to me."

"Bee," Lucia had said, "unless you promise not to see him again, you'll have to stop going to art school."

"I *won't* stop going, and I *won't* promise."

"Bee," Lucia said, "Bee, darling, why won't you trust me? I'm only thinking of what's best for you."

"Why don't *you* trust *me*?" Bee had cried. "Ted's the most interesting person I've ever met. He knows all sorts of people, artists, and actors, all sorts of people. I'm *not* having a nasty love affair with him."

"I know you're not," Lucia had said. "But, Bee, you must believe me. Bee—he's not the right sort of man for you to know."

"Well, I *don't* believe you," Bee had said. "You think you know,

but you're just terribly old-fashioned. You couldn't possibly understand anyone like Ted."

Then Lucia Holley had used her last weapon, with heavy reluctance.

"Bee, if you don't promise me not to see him, I shan't give you any carfare, any allowance at all."

"You *couldn't* do that!" Bee had cried.

"There's nothing I wouldn't do, to stop this thing," Lucia replied.

She meant that. A week ago, her cousin Vera Ridgewood had telephoned her.

"Lucia, angel, I wonder if you know that your precious child is playing around with a *quite* sinister-looking character. I've seen them *twice* in Marino's bar together and today I saw them going into a place on Madison Avenue."

It doesn't mean anything, Lucia had thought, and she had spoken to Bee about it with very little anxiety.

"Bee, dear, is there someone in the art school you go to bars with?"

"That's Ted Darby," Bee had answered. "He doesn't go to art school. He's in the theatrical business."

"I'd rather you didn't go in bars with anyone, Bee."

"I never take anything but ginger ale."

"But I don't like you going to bars, dear. You could go to a drug-store with this boy."

"He isn't a boy," Bee had said. "He's thirty-five."

Lucia had been anxious now.

"Ask him out here, Bee," she had said.

"I wouldn't ask him under false pretenses," Bee had said. "He wouldn't come like that, either. We talked about it, and I told him that if you knew he was married, you'd never let him set foot in the house."

I didn't say the right things to her, Lucia thought, watching the rain against the window. I've made so many mistakes with Bee, even when she was a little girl. I've objected to her friends. I've been upset when she changed her mind about things. I've done so much better with David. If Tom was here, he'd know just what to say to Bee. Here, now, Duckling . . . ! She did use to look like a little yellow duckling, all ruffled . . .

She got up, and went over to the window, restless and heavy-hearted. The rain was streaming down the glass, glittering, with an oily look, the trees swayed a little. At the end of the path stood the

queer long shape of the boathouse and beyond that lay the invisible water.

It's too lonely here, she thought. It was a mistake to come here. There aren't enough young people. David doesn't much care, but if Bee had met some nice boys, perhaps this wouldn't have happened. Perhaps.

There was someone in the boathouse. She saw a little flame spring out and slant sidewise and die. She saw another one that was steady for an instant. Someone was striking matches in there. A tramp? she thought. A drunken man, who'll set fire to the place? I'd better tell . . .

No, I'm not going to tell Father, or David, and let them take risks. I'm not going myself, either. If he does set fire to the place, the rain will put it out long before it could reach here. As long as nobody can get in here . . .

She wanted to make sure the doors were all locked, the safety catches on the windows. She went out of her room, moving swiftly, her feet in slippers, and along the hall to the stairs. And in the hall below, she saw Bee, cautiously sliding the chain off the door. She ran down to her.

"Bee," she said, very low. "Where are you going?"

"Out," Bee answered.

She was wearing a transparent, light blue raincoat, her pale blonde hair, parted on the side, hung loose to her shoulders, her blue eyes were narrowed, her mouth had a scornful twist. She looked beautiful and terrible, to Lucia.

"It's raining, Bee. I don't want you to go out."

"I'm sorry, but I'm going," said Bee.

It was plain enough now.

"No," Lucia said. "You can't."

Bee began to turn the doorknob, but Lucia caught her wrist.

"Bee, you want to meet that man."

"All right, I am going to meet Ted," Bee said. "You won't let me go in to New York any more, but I called him up and told him to come here. At least I'm going to explain to him."

"What's this! What's this!" cried old Mr. Harper from the doorway of the sitting room.

Nobody answered him. He stood there, lean and soldierly, with his neat white mustache and his clear blue eyes, an open book in one hand.

"What's this?" he asked again.

"Mother refuses to let me go out of this house," said Bee.

"Your mother's right, Beatrice. Too late, and it's pouring rain."

"Grandpa," Bee said. "I've got a special reason for going out and Mother knows it."

Lucia could see now what the child's tactics were to be. She was counting upon her grandfather's immense indulgence for her, hoping to use it against her mother.

"You take your mother's advice, Beatrice," he said. "Best thing."

"It's *not*! She doesn't understand anything about this. She hasn't any faith in me. She thinks I'm a sort of juvenile delinquent."

"Come now!" said Mr. Harper.

"She does! Ted's come all the way out here to see me."

"A man?" asked Mr. Harper. "Where is he?"

"In the boathouse. I want to see him for a few moments."

"Your mother's perfectly right, Beatrice. If you want to see this fellow, have him come to the house."

"He couldn't. Not after the way Mother's treated him."

"Beatrice, if your mother doesn't approve of this fellow, she has some good reason, you can be sure of that."

"No!" cried Bee. "I asked him to come, and I'm going to see him, just for a few moments."

"Afraid not, m'dear."

Oh, Bee, darling! Don't look like that! Lucia cried in her heart. As if we were enemies . . . Under the light in the ceiling the child's pale hair glistened, the blue raincoat glittered, she looked so beautiful, so delicate, and so desperate.

"Do you mean," Bee said slowly, "that you and Mother would stop me by force from doing what I think is right?"

"It's not going to come to that, m'dear," he said. "You're going to be a sensible girl and not worry your mother. You know she's thinking only of—"

"Oh, *stop* it!" Bee cried, stamping her foot. "I *won't* . . . I won't . . ."

She began to cry, she tossed her head as if the tears stung her; she turned around and went running up the stairs. Her door slammed.

I hope she won't wake up David, Lucia thought. I shouldn't like him to know anything at all about this.

"Now . . ." her father said. He laid his hand on her shoulder, and a great sense of comfort came to her. "Have you a nice book to read, Lucia?"

"I'm writing to Tom, Father."

"Run along and finish your letter, m'dear," he said. "I'll be down here to see that everything's all right."

She understood what his words implied. He would stay in the sitting room, in a spot where he could watch the stairs, all night if he thought it was necessary. She trusted him as she trusted her own heart. She trusted even his thoughts. He would not misjudge that poor, reckless, furious child.

She kissed him on the cheek. "Good night, Father," she said, and went up the stairs to her own room.

DEAR TOM:

David is sending you some snaps he took of this house, so that you'll have a better idea. It's really very nice. The victory garden isn't doing so very well, though. The soil is too sandy. But the tomatoes are coming along . . .

Her writing was neat and small. It took so very many words to fill a V-mail page. I'm so *slow*, she thought. I'm stupid. I've done so badly with Bee.

The wind had died down and the rain fell straight now, pattering on the roof. A door closed. That's the front door! she thought. Ted's got in!

She hurried out into the hall and from the head of the stairs she saw her father taking off his overcoat. She ran down.

"I went to the boathouse, m'dear," he said. "I had a few words with this fellow. Very unsavory character, I'd call him. Inclined to be troublesome. When I told him to leave the premises, he refused. But I dealt with him. To tell you the truth, I pushed him off into the water."

He was pleased with himself.

"Water's no more than four feet deep there," he said. "Wouldn't drown a child. Won't do the fellow any harm. Do him good. Cool him off."

He patted her shoulder.

"Yes . . ." he said. "I sent him off with a flea in his ear."

TWO

To wake up extra early in the morning was always a delight to Lucia Holley. It gave her an exquisite sense of freedom and privacy. She could do whatever she pleased, while all the others were sleeping.

This morning she waked at five o'clock. For a moment she lay

thinking with a heavy heart about Bee; but life and energy were strong in her, and she could not lie still. She got up and put on a black wool bathing suit and a white rubber helmet. She took her rope sandals in her hand and went down the stairs barefoot. David made such a fuss about her swimming alone.

"Anyone that's water-wise," he said, severely, "wouldn't do that."

"I *am* water-wise," Lucia said. "I've been swimming since I was a baby."

"Nobody ought to go swimming all alone," he said. "And anyway, the water's too cold the beginning of May. I wish you wouldn't *do* it."

She felt sorry to do anything that might worry David. But he never wakes up before half-past seven or eight, she thought, and by that time I'll be all dried and dressed. He'll never know, and this is such a wonderful time of day.

She unchained the front door and went out, and sitting on the steps, she put on her sandals. It was a gray morning, but fresh and somehow promising, not like the beginning of a rainy day. I'll row out a little way, she thought. And she thought that when she would be swimming in the gray water, under the soft sky, she would think of some new and better way to talk to Bee.

Something else to offer her, she thought. If I don't let the poor child go in to her art school, what *is* she going to do? I'll have to branch out. I'll have to meet some of the people here, on Bee's account. But I'm so poor at that. It's so hard without Tom.

She had married at eighteen, and she had never gone anywhere without Tom, never had thought of such a thing. And before her marriage, she lived with her mother and father, a tranquil, happy home life with very little going out. She was by nature friendly and uncritical, but she had very little to say for herself. She had no talent for social life and no desire for it.

And that's wrong, she thought. With a daughter Bee's age, it's my *duty* to do things. Maybe I could get Father to go around with me and call on people . . . Maybe Father and I could join the Yacht Club here.

The boathouse was a queer-looking structure, a long wooden tunnel over a cement basin where the boats were moored, and attached to it, on the landward end, a little two-storied cottage with a porch. Ideal for a chauffeur or a couple, the real-estate agent had said, only Lucia had no chauffeur or couple, only Sibyl, who did not care to live out here.

The wooden wall of the tunnel led to an opening with a ramp. She

went down this, into the dimness where the rowboat, the canoe, and the motorboat were moored to iron staples. They had all swung out to the end of their ropes, following the ebb tide, and she began to pull in the rowboat. It came as if reluctant, and as she stepped into it, she saw the body.

It was a man, face down in the motorboat, in a strange and dreadful position, his legs sprawled across the thwart, his head and shoulders raised by something. She could not see his face, but something about him, the shape of his head perhaps, made her almost sure it was Ted Darby. And she was almost sure he was dead.

Almost sure was not good enough. She stepped into the motorboat, and it was Ted Darby, and he was dead. He had fallen on a spare anchor, half upended on the seat, and it had pierced his throat.

Father did that, she thought.

She stood in the gently rocking boat, feet apart for balance, tall and long-legged in her white robe. Of course it means the police, she thought. Then Father will have to know that he did this. They'll find out why Ted came here, and Bee will be dragged into it. And I shan't be able to keep it from Tom. Not possibly. It'll be in the tabloids.

It will be so horrible, she thought. For poor little Bee. For Tom. For David. But worst of all for Father. He'll have to go to court. He'll be blamed. He'll be so shocked, so humiliated.

If I were able to get rid of Ted, she thought, I would do it. If I could think of any way to save us all . . .

I could do it, she thought, if I could get him off the anchor.

Standing there, swaying a little as the boat rocked, she knew that she could get him off. She had the resourcefulness of the mother, the domestic woman, accustomed to emergencies. Again and again she had had to deal with accidents, sudden illnesses, breakdowns. For years she had been the person who was responsible in an emergency. She had enough physical strength for this job. What she lacked was the spirit for it. *I couldn't touch him*, she thought.

That's nonsense, she told herself. I thought I couldn't possibly kill old Tiger with gas. But I did. When that laundress had a fit and we were all alone, in the house, I did something about it. When David fell down the cellar stairs and just lay there with blood all over his eyes . . . No, I can do this.

It was very difficult, for the body had begun to stiffen. It was very dreadful. When she got Ted down in the bottom of the boat, her breathing was like sobbing. She got a tarpaulin out of a locker, and spread it over him; then she cast off and started the engine.

The noise was stupendous, terrifying in this enclosed space, in the early-morning quiet. She had trouble, too. The engine started and stopped and started again. Bang, *bang*, puttputtputt. *Bang*. They'll hear it at the house and somebody will come, she thought. Even when she was under way, the noise was atrociously loud.

She steered through the narrow inlet through the reeds and out into the open water of the Sound, in a world gray, soft, and quiet. There was no other craft in sight. She had already made up her mind to take Ted to Simm's Island. She had decided upon the best spot. On the side of the small island that faced the mainland there was a row of bleached little summer bungalows, all empty, as far as she knew. But I shan't go near them, she thought.

She and David and Bee had come here for a picnic lunch a week ago. They had been looking then for a nice place. She was looking now for a half-remembered place, so far from nice that no one would be likely to go there. It would be dreadful if a child were to find him, she thought.

Here was the place, a narrow strip of sand, and behind it a stretch of marsh where the tall reeds stirred in the breeze. She stopped the engine, and dropped the anchor. She drew a long breath and set to work.

Ted was very slight, but even at that, it was hard enough to lift him out of the boat. Then she took him under the shoulders and dragged him to the marsh, well in among the tall reeds. He looked grotesque and horrible with his arms and legs sprawled out; she tried to straighten him and could not, and she began to cry. There he lay, staring at the sky.

I can't leave him like this, she thought. There was a big blue bandanna in the pocket of her terry robe. She took it out and dried her eyes with it, and spread it over his face. But the breeze lifted it at once. There were no stones here to anchor it down. She knelt beside him frowning, still crying. Then with her strong sharp teeth she tore two corners of the bandanna into strips, and tied it, catercornered over his face, to two reeds.

It's better than nothing, she thought, and went back to the boat. The engine started easily this time. When she was out in the open water she stopped it again and cleaned the bottom of the boat with an oily rag. There was very little blood. I hope it was quick, she thought. I hope he wasn't there a long time—alone . . .

She tied the robe tight around her waist and turned in the lapels across her chest, for the breeze seemed chilly now. She started the

engine, headed for home. It's done, she told herself. I'm going to put it out of my mind. But suddenly she thought of the bandanna. Well, nobody could identify it, she thought. It's just one I bought in the ten-cent store ages ago. There must be thousands and thousands exactly like it. Fingerprints? I don't think they get fingerprints from cloth of any kind. Anyhow I could say I'd left the bandanna on the island the day we had the picnic.

Anyhow, I can't help it now. It's done. And I'm not going to brood about it. I'm not going to think about it at all.

As she approached the boathouse, she felt a faint shock of dismay to see David standing there, thin and slouching, in blue trunks and a khaki windbreaker. But she recovered herself at once. It's just as well to have to start right in, she thought.

"Hello, David," she said, cheerfully.

"Hello," he said, unsmiling.

As the boat glided into the tunnel, he moved along to the ramp, and was waiting to help her out.

"I couldn't believe my ears," he said, "when I heard the engine start. I thought someone was stealing the boat and I got down here as quick as I could, and I saw you scooting away."

"I like the early morning," she said.

"That's all right," said David. "But why didn't you take the row-boat, like you always do?"

"Well, I thought I'd like the motorboat for a change."

"Well, I ask you not to do it again," said David. "It's dangerous. You don't know one darn thing about that engine. If it stalled or even the least little thing went wrong, you'd be absolutely helpless."

"I didn't go far," said Lucia.

"Well, I ask you not to do it," said David. "It's darned eccentric, anyhow."

"There's nothing so terrible about being eccentric once in a while," said Lucia.

"Personally," said David, "I shouldn't like any of the fellows I know out here to see you scooting around in a motorboat at half-past five in the morning."

David's like Father, Lucia thought. But he looks like Tom with those furry ginger eyelashes and those nice green eyes. He's only fifteen. Only a child. But in three more years . . . if the war goes on for three more years . . .

Again and again and again that thought would come to her, piercing her heart. She put her arms around his thin shoulders.

"I'm quite sure none of your friends saw me, dear," she said. "But I won't do it again, if it worries you."

"Well, that's good," he said.

"Let's go along to the house and get some breakfast."

"Sibyl won't be down yet."

"I can manage," said Lucia.

She took her arm away from his shoulders and they walked in side by side.

"What's the matter with Bee?" he asked.

"What do you mean, David?"

"You certainly must have noticed it," he said. "Of course most of it's an act. She's always putting on an act. But something's been bothering her lately, all right."

"Doesn't she ever talk to you about things, David? You used to talk everything over together."

"I don't encourage that," said David.

"It does people good to talk over their troubles to—"

"Well, it doesn't do me good to listen to them," he said with unexpected vehemence. "I don't like anything that's sappy and emotional and all, and I don't want to get mixed up in things like that. Not now, or any other time."

He held open the screen door and she went past him into Sibyl's beautiful kitchen. The sun was breaking through the clouds; a shaft lay upon the green and white linoleum floor. It was a lovely thing to be getting breakfast for David.

THREE

"We could wait till tomorrow," said Sibyl. "Only this is the day for the chicken man."

"Then I'll get you a taxi," said Lucia.

"Better if you go, ma'am," said Sibyl, standing by the kitchen table, tall, portly, her dark face impassive.

"You're a much better marketer than I am," said Lucia.

"My business to be so," said Sibyl, quietly. "But the chicken man don't like colored people. Don't hesitate to say so."

"Has he ever said anything to you, Sibyl?"

"Yes, ma'am," said Sibyl.

"We won't deal with him any more," said Lucia.

"He's the only one got any chickens," said Sibyl.

"Then we'll do without chickens for the rest of the summer."

Sibyl smiled a smile, gentle, infinitely affectionate.

"No, ma'am," she said. "If you go, maybe you can get us two nice roasting chickens and I'll cook them Saturday and we'll have a chicken salad Sunday. I'll give you the list, ma'am."

They had been together, day in and day out, for eight years, in complete harmony. Sibyl knew that Lucia was not the wise, thrifty housewife the family believed her to be. Sibyl remembered the things Lucia forgot, found the things that Lucia lost, covered up Lucia's absent-mindedness, advised her, warned her. She had lent Lucia money, to conceal a shockingly careless overdraft, and had herself gone to the police about the chauffeur Lucia could not bring herself to accuse.

She knew Lucia better than anyone else did. But Lucia knew curiously little about Sibyl. She did not know Sibyl's age, or where she had been born, what family she had, or what friends. She had no idea where Sibyl went on her afternoons off, or what she did. Simply, she loved and trusted Sibyl without reservation.

"Well, maybe I can speak to the chicken man," she said.

"No, ma'am," said Sibyl. "Can't change this world."

From where she stood, Lucia could see her father at his breakfast in the dining room, the soft collar of his blue shirt revealing his lean old neck. He was wearing the black and white checked jacket he had bought in London years ago, and cherished so fondly, getting it re-lined and patched up again and again. Rather have a really decent jacket like this even if it was a bit shabby than a cheap flimsy new one, he often said.

He could very well have got himself a new one, not cheap and flimsy, but his daughter never pointed this out to him. He thinks it's more English to be shabby, she thought, and why shouldn't he if he wants?

I'm so glad I was able to get Ted away, she thought. Now no matter what happens, I don't see how Father could even find out what he did last night, or be connected with it in any way. Nobody will ever know.

She went in and kissed the top of his neat white head.

"Father," she said, "I think it would be better not to let Bee know that you saw that man last night."

"I didn't see him," said Mr. Harper.

"But, Father . . . !"

"Too dark," said he, pleased with the joke. "Don't worry, my

dear. I shan't tell Beatrice. And I don't think we'll be troubled again by the young gentleman."

Bee was coming down the stairs. She came straight into the kitchen.

"Good morning, Mother," she said. "Good morning, Sibyl. Is my orange juice in the icebox?"

"Yes, Miss Bee."

Bee brought out the bowl that held the full pint of orange and lemon juice combined which was an essential part of her new Vitabelle diet and carried it into the dining room.

"Good morning, Grandpa," she said.

This, obviously, was to be her attitude, polite, cool, aloof; no smiles for her oppressors.

"Going in to your school today?" Harper asked, surprised by her appearance in blue overalls and white shirt.

"I'm not allowed to go any more," Bee answered, very clearly.

"Oh . . . I see!" he said. "Number of pretty scenes around here that you could paint, I should think."

She gave the smile Lucia, watching from the kitchen, hated to see. The child was so lovely, with her soft fair hair, her delicate skin, her fine little features, but she rouged her mouth into a sort of square, and when she smiled this way, with her lips scarcely parted, and her eyes narrowed, she looked almost ugly.

She couldn't really have cared so very much for a man like Ted, Lucia thought. Of course she'll be terribly upset when she hears that he's dead, but she'll get over it. She's so *very* young. Poor Bee . . . I must do something about branching out, finding more friends for her. And there's no reason now why she shouldn't go back to the art school, only that I can't tell her. Can I just say I changed my mind? Or had I better wait until Ted gets into the papers?

She telephoned for a taxi and changed into a costume suitable for the village, a blue and white checked gingham dress, a blue belt, blue sandals, a wide black straw hat. Sibyl had the list ready for her and when the cab came, off she went, with the big green denim market bag.

I'll tell Bee this afternoon that I've changed my mind, she thought. Then she can go in to her school tomorrow. It may be quite a while before Ted gets into the papers, and there's no reason why she should stay home, poor child. Is she going to mind very much, when she finds out? It's so hard to understand how she could possibly have cared, even the least little bit, for a man like that. So cheap and sneering . . .

It was a morning of frustration. The chicken man would sell her only one chicken, and a smallish one at that. There was no margarine, no sugar. She could not get the brand of soap flakes Sibyl particularly wanted. The only potatoes she found were old and soft and sprouting. The only cigarettes were an unheard-of variety.

She could not get the tooth paste her father wanted. She could not get the magazines David had asked for. Bee's shoes, promised for last week by the shoemaker, still stood untouched, on a shelf. She went from one shop to another, the bag growing heavier and heavier. She was hot, flushed and tired, but still with her air of earnest politeness. She stood patiently in line at counters, she engaged in conversation with other housewives, she was zealous with her ration stamps.

When she had got what she could, she had a big paper bag in addition to the market bag. They'd hate me too much in the bus with all this, she thought, and crossed the main street of the village, pulled down by the bag, to the railway station, where three taxis stood.

"Got to wait for the train, lady," the first driver said.

He could put three or even four passengers in together; he was not interested in this single fare.

"If I drive you out to Plattsville," said the second, "I got to come all the way back empty. It don't pay me."

"Well, suppose I pay a little extra . . . ?" Lucia said, hot and tired.

"Well . . ." said the driver, "we're not supposed to do that. I'd have to charge you two dollars and a half."

That was outrageous. For a moment she contemplated trying the third, but he would realize that he was the last resort and he might take advantage of it. He might be worse.

"All right," she said, and got into the cab.

Just at that moment the train came in and her driver waited. A little crowd of people descended; the two other cabs pulled up to drive away, and a man came, leisurely and deliberately, toward Lucia's taxi. He was a stout man, in a gray suit with the jacket open. He walked with a sort of roll, bearing his portly stomach proudly.

"Know where some people named Holley live, son?" he asked the driver.

"Nope," said the driver. "You might ask the ticket office."

"You run along and do the asking, son," said the stout man.

Lucia sat back in a corner, looking at him in unreasoning dismay. His eyes . . . she said to herself. They were very pale eyes, light-

lashed, with a curious blankness, as if he were blind. He's a detective, she thought, and he's come about Ted.

"I got a fare," said the driver, "the other cabs'll be coming back."

"You go find out where the Holleys live, son," said the stout man, in the same even, indifferent voice, and it increased Lucia's dismay to see that the far from obliging young driver was prepared to do as he was told. Everyone would do what that man said.

"I'm going out there," she said.

The stout man gave her a glance, a thorough one from head to foot.

"You told me the Maxwell place," cried the driver, shocked and aggrieved.

"I know," Lucia said. "But we've rented it."

The stout man opened the door of the cab and got in. He sat down beside Lucia with his knees apart, taking up a good deal of room.

"Get going, son," he said.

He's one of those horrible detectives that you see in the movies, Lucia thought. He's . . . the word sprang up in her mind. He's merciless, she thought. He'd be merciless to Father.

"Your name Holley?" he asked.

"Yes."

"You got a sister or daughter name of Beatrice?"

"Yes," she answered again.

"She's the one I want to see," he said.

"Well . . . what about?"

"I'll take it up with her," he said.

"I'd rather you didn't," said Lucia. "I'm her mother. I can tell you anything she could tell you."

"She's the one I came out to see," he said. "Beatrice Holley."

"You might as well tell me what you want to see her about. She'll tell me herself, later on."

"Think so?"

"Yes, I know it. I wish you wouldn't talk to her. If you'd please talk to me instead . . . ?"

"It's Beatrice Holley I want," he said.

Something like panic assailed Lucia. He'll tell Bee that Ted's been found, she thought. It must be that. What else could bring him here? He'll ask her questions and questions, and she'll tell him things that'll get in the papers. I can't let her see this man, alone.

"My daughter's a minor," she said. "I'm sorry but I can't let you see her."

He turned his head and gave her another glance, his light lashes flickering up and down. Then he turned away again.

"That won't work," he said.

It was intolerable that Bee should have to endure this.

"I'm going to send for my lawyer," said Lucia.

He did not trouble to answer that; he sat with his double chin resting on his chest, looking straight before him, thinking his own thoughts. Lucia was of absolutely no interest to him.

They were in sight of the house now. David was strolling across the lawn of coarse grass; when he saw the cab he stopped and waited.

"What's the fare?" said the stout man.

"Dollar," said the driver, and the stout man gave him a dollar, no tip. He opened the door of the cab and got out without a glance at Lucia. He was speaking to David before she got her dollar out of her purse.

"Two-fifty was the rate," said the driver.

She gave him another fifty cents and got out, with her two big bags. The stout man was standing in front of the house.

"If you talk to my daughter, I'm going to be there, too," she said.

He didn't answer her. She stood there with the bags, utterly at a loss, but determined to protect Bee as best she could. The screen door opened and Bee came out. She looked with a frown of surprise at the two standing on the lawn, and ran down the steps.

"You wanted to see me?" she asked.

"You Beatrice Holley?"

"Bee—" Lucia began. "Don't."

"It's just something about the school, Mother," said Bee.

"It isn't!" said Lucia.

"It isn't," said the man. "I told the boy that. Makes it easier. No. I came to ask about my good friend Ted Darby."

"Well . . . Who are you?" Bee asked.

"The name's Nagle."

"Well . . . What do you want to ask?"

"Bee . . . !" said Lucia. "Don't!"

He's not a detective, she thought. He's—I don't know—a crook, a gangster, something horrible.

"Ted came out to see you last night," said Nagle.

"What if he did?" said Bee.

"He never came home again," said Nagle.

The statement was shocking to Lucia and frightening. But Bee was not alarmed.

"You mean he didn't go back to his hotel?" she said. "Then he probably went to visit someone. He has plenty of friends."

"Did he tell you he was going to visit somebody?"

"My daughter didn't see him last night," said Lucia.

"You saw him?"

"No. Nobody saw him."

"You're saying he didn't come here?"

"I don't know whether he came or not. I'm just saying that none of us saw him."

He turned to Bee.

"You called him up," he said. "You asked him to come out here last night. Well?"

"Well?" Bee replied. "I can't see what right you have to come here and ask me questions."

She was not in the least afraid of Nagle. She met his pale eyes steadily.

"Why didn't you see him?" asked Nagle.

"That's my own business," she said. "Come in, Mother, let's—"

"Wait!" said Nagle. "It's not that easy. I want everything you've got about my good friend Ted Darby. Names of any friends he's told you—"

"I'm not going to tell you anything at all," said Bee. "You can wait till he gets back and ask him."

"If you know where he is," said Nagle, "you'd better tell me."

"I'll take the bags in, ma'am," said Sibyl's voice behind Lucia.

She took the bags and walked away, erect and stately.

"I shan't tell you anything at all," said Bee.

"That's just too bad," said Nagle. "That's too bad for Ted."

"What do you mean?" Bee demanded. "Are you threatening him?"

"I ask questions," said Nagle. "I don't answer."

"That goes for me too," said Bee.

She's—tough, Lucia thought astonished. That slender girl in slacks, her light hair down to her shoulders, that child, who had lived all her life at home, protected and cherished, was talking now like a tough girl in a movie, looking like one, too, with her eyes narrowed and her fine mouth scornful.

"Okay! Okay!" said Nagle, and turned away.

Lucia stood looking after him, with dread and dismay in her heart. He'll come back, she thought. This is only the beginning. . . .

FOUR

"Dear Tom," Lucia wrote, "it was so very nice to get an air-mail from you this afternoon, especially a letter telling about the details of your life and your friends and your men. Things like that seem to bring you so much closer, Tom."

Only they didn't, really. I haven't much imagination, she thought, regretfully. I can't imagine Tom being a naval officer. I think of him as he was before he left, over two years ago, and probably he's not like that any more. No, he'll have changed, and I'll be just the same.

She went on with her dull, earnest, loving letter. Thank goodness Tom doesn't expect me to be wonderful, she thought. He knows what I'm like. When Tom had first met her she had been seventeen and still in school, a very earnest student but never excelling in anything, never a leader in anything. She liked everyone and was interested in no one. You're the hardest girl in the world to make love to, Tom had told her once. You're just so blamed friendly.

When she was eighteen they were married. When she was nineteen Bee had been born, and that was that. She had always been faintly disappointed in herself, disappointed in school because she had not been remarkable, disappointed when she married because she had not become the perfect housekeeper, most of all disappointed in herself as a mother. Whenever she visited her children's school she felt singularly inept among the other mothers. Simply not *real*, she thought.

I don't cope with things. That Nagle . . . Bee wasn't at all afraid of him. But I was. I am now. Suppose he tells the police that Ted was coming here . . . ? Well, I'll say he didn't come. But if they start asking Father questions . . . I'm pretty sure he's never heard Ted's name. But he'd say, yes, there was a man, and I sent him away with a flea in his ear.

If Father knew he'd killed Ted, he'd tell the police at once. He's like that. I know just how he'd talk. My dear, I am always prepared to accept the consequences of my acts. The full consequences. And then, of course, Bee would be dragged into it. And Tom would have to know. Why can't I look after my own daughter?

Lying in bed in the dark, a desperate, almost panic compulsion *to do something* rose in her. But she mastered it at once. Don't be frantic, she told herself. Just one day at a time. Just take things as they come.

She got up and lit a cigarette; when it was finished, she stubbed it out carefully and closed her eyes. I'm going to wake up at five o'clock, she told herself.

So she did, but to a morning of wild wind and rain. I'd love a little swim in this weather, she thought, but I'd worry David too much. No . . . I'll take a little walk out of sight of the house.

The idea was strong in her mind that she must stand guard over the house, that she must protect the inmates. She dressed in an old blue flannel skirt, a black sweater and tennis shoes. She tied a white scarf over her hair and went stealthily down the stairs and out of the house.

And out in the rain and the rough wind, she forgot her fears and distress. She went down the drive to the highway and walked up and down, as if patrolling, her skirt flattened against her long legs, her dark face wet and glowing.

"You look like a gypsy," her father said, benevolently, when she came back to the house.

The morning routine went on. The newspaper came and there was nothing about Ted. Old Mr. Harper went out for his constitutional. David went off in the motorboat to visit some friends he had made; Bee was shut in her own room. And Lucia did the things appointed to be done on Thursday. She stripped all the beds, she made out the laundry list. She tidied and dusted the sitting room and the bathroom she shared with Bee. In a blue cotton pinafore, she had an air of serious efficiency; nobody would know that all this was arranged entirely by Sibyl.

Before lunch, she knocked on Bee's door.

"Come in!" said Bee.

She was sitting at a table by the window, drawing, in a candy-striped play suit, her silky hair pushed back from her forehead.

"Bee," said Lucia. "I've been thinking things over . . . I can't bear for you to stay away from your art school, Bee. Go back tomorrow, dear, and I'll simply trust to your . . ."

"If you think you'll stop me from seeing Ted by saying you 'trust' me," said Bee, "you're mistaken."

"Bee, you don't need to be so hostile. Not to me."

"Mother," said Bee, and was silent for a time. "I know you're terribly fond of me. I know you think you're doing what's best for me. But I don't agree with you about *anything*."

"Bee, you do!"

"No. I'm not a fool about Ted. I realize he isn't our kind of person.

Daddy wouldn't like him any more than you do. But I want to know all kinds of people. I want to live out in the world. I'd just as soon be *dead*, as have a life like you."

"Bee!" said Lucia, startled, even shocked. "I've got all the things that are most worth having in the world."

"I think your life is *awful*," said Bee. "I'd rather—"

"Lunch!" called David from the hall, and Bee rose promptly.

"I'm sorry, Mother," Bee went on with a sort of stern regret. "But I'm not like you. I'm not going to have a life like yours. If you can call it a life. Getting married at eighteen, right from school. Never really seeing anything or doing anything. No adventure, no color. I suppose you like feeling safe. Well, *I* don't want to be safe."

"Come on, Mother!" called David.

He was always a little irritated by the private conversations that Lucia had with his sister. He himself never sought private conversations. He was willing to talk to anyone about anything. When the clergyman had come to call, he had shown a disposition to discuss religion with him which Lucia had had trouble in suppressing.

At the lunch table, he discussed the Pacific campaign with his grandfather while Bee sat silent, with a look of faintly amused boredom. I think he's very intelligent, Lucia said to herself. I like the way men talk.

As they were about to leave the table, Sibyl appeared in the doorway.

"The refrigerator is gone again, ma'am," she said, evenly.

"I don't know what you people *do* to that icebox," said Mr. Harper, frowning.

It was an unbreakable convention that whenever the refrigerator went out of order, nobody but Mr. Harper could turn off the gas properly. He now did this, and it was all he could do. He was not at all handy about the house. Neither was David, who was further disqualified by being candidly indifferent.

"Why worry?" he said. "People didn't use to have mechanical iceboxes, and they got on all right."

"Then they had cakes of ice," said Lucia.

"No," said David, reasonably. "Grandpa's told me, plenty of times, that when he was a boy in England, they *never* had any ice. If they specially needed it, if anyone was sick or anything, they had to send to the fishmonger's."

"Well, that's a different climate," said Lucia.

"The temperature's only sixty-six now," said David. "You couldn't call that so very hot."

He strolled away. Mr. Harper had already gone.

"I'll telephone the company," said Lucia.

"Yes, ma'am," said Sibyl, with the same doubt and heaviness.

This recurring trouble with the icebox was a catastrophe they both dreaded. Lucia went to the telephone and she got that girl.

"Holley?" said the girl. "All right. I'll put it down."

"When do you think the man will come?"

"I haven't any idea," said the girl. "He takes all the calls in order. You'll just have to wait for your turn."

"Naturally," said Lucia, coldly. "I simply wanted to know if you could give me any idea . . ."

"He'll come when it's your turn," said the girl. "This company doesn't play any favorites."

"Damn you," said Lucia, but not aloud, and returned to the kitchen. "They won't say when he's coming," she told Sibyl. "I suppose we'd better have the fish tonight . . . ?"

"Better had," said Sibyl. "They won't like fish two nights running, but if the man doesn't come this afternoon . . ."

They both knew he would not come this afternoon.

"Well, as long as he comes before the week end . . ." said Lucia, and was silent for a moment, thinking about it. "I think I'll take a little nap," she said, apologetically. "But call me if anything turns up."

"Yes, ma'am," said Sibyl, with indulgence. She approved of Lucia's taking naps.

But Lucia was longer than usual in falling asleep today. If the Nagle man comes back, she thought, I don't want Bee to see him alone. I don't want Father to see him at all. Ever. Maybe I ought to stay awake, in case something happens . . .

In the end, drowsiness overwhelmed her. She lay stretched out, long and lean in a shrunken gray flannel dressing gown, her hands clasped over her head.

"Mrs. Holley, ma'am . . . !" Sibyl's voice said, insistently.

"Yes?" said Lucia, sitting up.

Sibyl stood beside her, grave and impassive.

"There's a man here wants to see you," she said.

"What man, Sibyl?"

"Wouldn't give his name," said Sibyl. "Just said he wanted to see you about something personal."

Their eyes met in a long look.

"Sibyl . . . What's he like?"

They were still looking straight at each other, and into Sibyl's amber-flecked dark eyes came a troubled shadow. She was a reticent woman. It was hard for her to find words for her thoughts.

"He don't look like a man you'd know," she said.

It's Nagle, Lucia thought. I knew he'd come back.

"He's on the veranda," Sibyl went on. "I can send him away."

"I'd better see him," said Lucia and got up, standing tall and straight on her narrow bare feet.

"You don't have to, ma'am," said Sibyl. "Told him I didn't know if you were in."

"No. I'd better see him," Lucia repeated. "Tell him I'll be down in a moment, please."

"Let him in?" Sibyl asked, and again their eyes met.

"Yes. Yes, please," said Lucia.

She had to let him into her house, for she dared not keep him out. She stood motionless until she heard the front door close, and then she began to dress quickly and carelessly, in the checked gingham dress that was limp now. He's in, she said to herself. He's in the house.

She went down the stairs and into the sitting room. But the man who stood there was not Nagle.

"Mrs. Holley?" he asked.

He was a big man, broad shouldered and narrow flanked, very well dressed, in a dark suit, a sober and expensive necktie. He was a handsome man, or could be, or had been. But there was something curiously blurred about him, like a fine drawing partly erased. His strong-boned face looked tired. His dark blue eyes looked somehow dim.

"My name is Donnelly," he said and his voice was muffled.

"Yes?" said Lucia evenly.

Maybe it's nothing, she told herself. Maybe it's just about the insurance. Or selling War Bonds. Or, something just ordinary.

But she could not believe it. He came from some other world, the world of Ted Darby and Nagle, strange and unknown to her as the banks of Lethe.

"I'd like a few words with you," he said, and jerked his dark head toward the open door behind her.

"Well . . . what about?" she asked, with an attempt at defiance.

He moved light on his feet, he reached past her and closed the door.

"You'll be wanting these letters," he said.

"What letters?"

They were standing close to each other, facing each other; she looked up at him, still attempting that defiance, and he looked at her absently.

"The letters your daughter wrote to Ted Darby," he said. "The price is five thousand dollars. Cash."

FIVE

She was aware that she was not really thinking at all. Not yet.

"Well . . . Sit down, please," she said.

He waited until she was seated, and then he drew up a chair, facing her, and sat down, carefully hitching up his trousers. He was remarkably neat, his dark hair neat on his narrow skull, his big hands well kept, his shoes gleaming. He was so strangely, so dreadfully indifferent, simply waiting. A blackmailer, she thought. This is blackmail.

"My daughter . . ." she said. "There's nothing in her letters . . ."

"Would you like to see one?" he asked.

He took a handsome pigskin wallet out of an inside pocket, drew out a sheaf of folded papers, and looked through them. He selected one and handed it to her.

TED:

I just wasn't alive until I met you. But you came like a fresh wind blowing through a stuffy room. I don't know, Ted, if I can make up my mind to do what you asked yesterday. But just the fact that you *did* ask, and that you thought I had the courage to take such a chance makes me feel proud.

Ted, I'm thinking about it. I'm not sentimental; you know that. But just the same it is hard to break entirely with the past, and go against everyone and everything you were taught.

See you Friday, Ted, and maybe by that time I'll have made up my mind.

BEATRICE

The clear beautiful printing Bee used made the words so stark . . .

"That doesn't mean anything," said Lucia. "She's only a child. That doesn't mean—anything."

"It looks like something," he said, and held out his hand for the letter.

"No!" she said, putting it behind her. "I shan't give it to you. I—the police will make you give me those letters."

He didn't bother to answer that. He sat leaning forward a little, holding the handsome wallet open on his knee. Simply waiting.

"I'm going to put this in my lawyer's hands," Lucia said. And she had a vision of Albert Hendry, Tom's lawyer, ineffably distinguished, listening to the story of Bee's disastrous folly.

"Why do you not pay the money and forget all about it?" asked Donnelly. "There's nothing else you can do at all."

"No!" said Lucia. "I wouldn't pay blackmail. Never!"

"There's someone else will," he said.

"Who?"

"Your father, maybe."

"No!" she cried. "No! You can't . . . No!"

She checked herself. She tried to breathe evenly. She tried to think.

"How did *you* get hold of these letters?" she asked.

"Darby wanted to borrow a bit," said Donnelly, "and he left me the letters till he'd pay me back."

"Do you mean that *he*—?"

"Oh, he had it in mind to make the girl pay for them," said Donnelly.

His tone was not at all threatening. There was no hint of violence in him. But his matter-of-fact acceptance of this incredible treachery, this criminal demand, seemed to her infinitely more alarming than violence and infinitely more difficult to meet. The word "blackmail" disturbed him not at all.

"Darby's run out on me now," he said, as if explaining a business affair. "He went off without a word. And I cannot afford to lose what I lent him."

He doesn't know what happened to Ted, she thought. When he finds out, will that change things? Make this better? Or worse? If I could only, *only* think this out.

The rain rattled against the window, the room seemed close, filled with a gray light. Here she sat with this man, this criminal, so well dressed, so unclamorous . . .

"I'll have to have time to think this over," she said coldly.

"I'm going to Montreal," he said, again with that reasonable air of explaining matters to her. "I'll need the money before I go."

"I haven't got five thousand dollars," she said.

"You'll think of a way to lay hands on it," he said.

"No . . . No. When you get that, you'll ask for more."

"I would not," he said, simply.

"No! There's nothing in those letters. Nothing at all wrong."

"They would look wrong," he said.

"Don't you realize," she began, when the door opened and old Mr. Harper entered.

"Oh," he said, "sorry, m'dear. I didn't know . . . Getting near teatime, I thought . . ."

Donnelly had risen; he stood there, like any polite stranger, waiting to be introduced.

"Father . . ." she said, "this is Mr. Donnelly."

"How d'you do, sir?" said Mr. Harper.

But he was not satisfied with this. He wanted, naturally, to know who Mr. Donnelly was and why he was here.

"From Tom's office," she said, in her desperation.

"Ha! From Tom's office," said Mr. Harper, and held out his hand. "Glad to see you, sir. Sit down! Sit down!"

No! No! No! Lucia cried to herself.

"Mr. Donnelly's just leaving, Father," she said.

"You can wait for a cup of tea, eh, Donnelly? Or a highball?"

"Thank you, sir," said Donnelly, and sat down again.

"How is everything in the office?" asked Mr. Harper.

"I couldn't tell you," Donnelly answered, "for I left there three years ago. Government work."

"I see!" said Mr. Harper. "Lucia, m'dear, d'you think you could ask Sibyl to bring along the tea? Or if you'd prefer a whisky and soda, Donnelly?"

"Tea, if you please," said Donnelly.

There were no bells in the house to summon Sibyl. Lucia rose and went out to the kitchen. As she pushed open the swing door, she saw Sibyl standing at a table under the window, cutting raw carrots into little flowers, her dark face in profile was proud and melancholy. She turned at the sound of Lucia's step.

"Sibyl . . ." Lucia said, and could get no further. She was crushed and overwhelmed by this catastrophe.

"What's wrong, ma'am?" asked Sibyl with compassion in her eyes.

"He's staying . . ." Lucia answered.

"That man?"

"Yes. Father's asked him to tea."

Sibyl, too, was silent for a moment.

"We must just do the best we can," said Sibyl. "Don't fret, ma'am."

"But he's—"

"Yes, ma'am," said Sibyl. "I know."

She turned and put the carrots into a bowl of cold water.

"You go back now, ma'am. I'll bring in the tea. Don't fret, ma'am. Sometimes there's good luck in this life. No harm to hope for it."

That was language Lucia could understand. Her father and her husband never spoke like that. In the blackest days of the war, old Mr. Harper had never had the slightest doubt of England's victory; he considered doubt to be a form of treason. And Tom, when he went away, had had the same resolute optimism.

"I'll come through all right," he had said, looking at her pale, averted face. "It's half the battle, Lucia," he had said, "to feel hopeful. Sure that you're lucky."

She did not believe that. She believed that a shell or a bullet could strike a brave and hopeful man as readily as a miserable one. She did not believe that the guilty were always punished; or the innocent always spared. She believed, like Sibyl, that life was incalculable, and that the only shield against injustice was courage.

She had courage.

"All right, Sibyl," she said and turned away.

Old Mr. Harper was having a good time. He was talking about the First World War to Donnelly who, it seemed, had been in it. In France and Belgium he had seen some of the English regiments whose names were glorious and almost sacred to the old man. Donnelly was far from eloquent, but his few words entirely satisfied Mr. Harper.

"I imagine it very changed now, Donnelly."

"I was in and out of Liverpool for nearly a year, sir."

"Oh, Liverpool . . ." said Mr. Harper, politely dismissing that city. "Never been there myself. But London . . . Ever been in London, Donnelly?"

"I have, sir. It is a fine city."

"I imagine it's very changed now, Donnelly."

"It has a right to be," said Donnelly, gravely.

Lucia sat on the sofa with the tea table drawn up before her. She poured tea; when her father remembered to include her in the conversation, she responded quickly, with a bright smile. If I could only go out and take a walk, she thought, I'd be able to think. I've got to

think. I've got to find a way out of this. I've got to stop being so stupid and dazed.

And then, to complete the nightmare, Bee came downstairs.

"Oh . . . !" she said from the doorway, as if surprised to see a stranger here.

But Lucia noticed that she was much more carefully got up than was natural for an ordinary afternoon at home. She was wearing a lemon-colored organdy blouse and a black skirt; she had blue mascara on her lashes and fresh make-up on her mouth.

Go away! Lucia cried in her heart. Don't you come in here . . .

Mr. Harper waited, but his daughter was drinking tea, her eyes lowered.

"This is Mr. Donnelly, Beatrice," he said. "From your father's office. My granddaughter, Donnelly."

Donnelly rose.

"Oh . . . How do you do?" said Bee, and he gave a slight bow. She sat down on the sofa beside her mother, and lit a cigarette.

"No tea, thank you, Mother. Is there any grape juice?"

"It's too many points," said Lucia.

"Then could I have some iced tea, Mother?"

"I'm sorry, but there's no ice. The refrigerator's out of order."

"What a life!" said Bee laughing.

She wanted to get the attention of this stranger. It would have irritated David, but to Lucia it was heartbreaking. She saw Donnelly glance at her lovely child, an unreadable glance, and then turn to listen to old Mr. Harper, and a fierce, desperate rebellion rose in her.

I let him get in, she thought. There he is, with Bee's letters in his pocket. Trying to blackmail me. I'll get those letters somehow. I'll do something.

Donnelly rose.

"I'll have to be going," he said, "but I'll be in the neighborhood for a while."

"Oh, stopping out here?"

"It is business," said Donnelly. "Mrs. Holley, could I stop by in my car tomorrow around eleven, maybe, and drive you to see the old house we were speaking about?"

His effrontery was beyond belief. Here, under her own roof, in the presence of her father and her daughter, he dared propose this rendezvous. But she had let him get in, and her home was no longer safe.

All right! she thought. All right! She raised her dark eyes and looked straight at him, a hot color in her cheeks, a defiance in her heart.

"Thanks. That would be very nice," she said.

I'll settle with you, all right, she thought. I'll think of something. Just wait and see.

SIX

All right! All right! she thought. Let him take the letters to Father, and see what happens. Just let him try to blackmail Father.

It will be hard for Bee. But Father'll know that there's really nothing to those letters. No matter how they sound. She went to sleep with that in her mind, defiant and resolute.

But when she waked in the early morning, all that was gone. I simply can't trust Father, she thought. He's so upright. He'd probably want to go to the police. We must see this through, my dear. And then the police would connect Bee with Ted, and when they found Ted . . .

No. I'll put Donnelly off. I'll pretend I'm getting the money for him. That'll give me a little more time.

And what was she going to do with this time? Think of something. Do something.

It was a soft, mild morning of pale sunshine. With a regretful thought for David, she put on her bathing suit and went quietly out of the house, and down to the boathouse. She took the rowboat this time; she went out through the tunnel at the narrow inlet through the reeds into the open water. Oh, this is the best thing! she thought and, laying the oars in the bottom of the boat, she made a shallow dive into the water.

"Hey!" she cried aloud, because it was so cold. But, in a moment, as she swam, the water no longer felt cold, only exquisitely refreshing. There were gulls flying overhead, and she turned on her back and floated, to watch them, one swooped so low that she could see its fierce face.

She lay floating in the sparkling water, looking with half-closed eyes at the gulls and the little clouds in the soft blue sky. She turned over and swam around the boat twice, happy in the smooth rhythm of her muscles. Just for practice she swam under the boat, in cold shadow for a moment, and came up with the sun again.

A motorboat had started somewhere. David, coming after me?

she thought and climbed hastily into the rowboat. But the motorboat was now behind her. It was coming from the island. As she took up the oars she saw it. There was a policeman in uniform behind the wheel and in the stern sat another policeman, and a young man in a gray suit, a big young man with big, outstanding ears and a big bony nose. Motionless, she sat watching them, and the young man turned his head, looking at her; as they passed, she met his eyes, dark, gentle and a little sad.

Then they were gone. The rowboat rocked violently in the swell. They'd found Ted, she thought. *Now* what's going to happen?

She began to row homeward. All right. All right. I'll take things as they come. One at a time. I'm not going to worry. I'm not going to borrow trouble. I'll manage, all right. She took off her rubber cap and let her dark hair blow loose in the wind. She rowed slowly, and let the sun dry her woolen suit.

And if the police come asking questions about Ted, I'll say he never came near us. Father doesn't know who it was he spoke to. I'd better tell him something this morning.

She got back to her room, unheard by David. She dressed and sat down by the open window. Now, if anybody comes, I'm ready, she thought. I don't care what I say. I don't care how many lies I tell.

She heard Sibyl go creaking down the stairs and a few moments later she followed.

"Certainly hope that laundry man comes today," said Sibyl. "I don't know how Mr. Harper's going to hold out, with only one clean shirt to last him a whole week."

It was like gears meshing. This was the day beginning. This was life.

"I'd better go into New York and try again to get him some more shirts," she said. "And David, too. But they're so scarce and so expensive."

"We could manage," said Sibyl, "if the laundry man'll do what he said he'd do. But it's nearly two weeks since he came. Doesn't bring back what he's got. Doesn't pick up what we got ready for him."

"If he doesn't come today, I suppose I'd better telephone . . . ?" said Lucia.

"Better had, ma'am," said Sibyl.

She drank a cup of coffee in the kitchen, waiting, very restless, for old Mr. Harper to come down. She was waiting for him in the hall.

"Father," she said, "you know that man who came to the boat-

house night before last . . . ? I thought I'd better tell you something about him."

"No need to, m'dear. Not unless he comes again, and I don't think that's likely. No, I don't think he'll be back in a hurry. I sent him—"

"Yes, I know you did, Father. His name is Stanley Schmidt."

"Schmidt, eh! German name."

"He is a German. He's a very queer, shady sort of man, Father, and I shouldn't like it ever to get known that Bee had had anything to do with him."

"What d'you mean, Lucia? How is he—shady?"

"I think he's a Nazi agent," said Lucia, readily.

"What! What! Then he ought to be reported."

"I did. I sent an anonymous letter to the F.B.I.," said Lucia. "Only you can see that we can't possibly let Bee get involved in this."

"No. No, of course not. Have you told her your opinion of the fellow, Lucia?"

"I thought it was better not to," said Lucia in a special tone, quiet, very significant.

It was a tone she had used on Tom, too. It implied that she and she alone could understand the mystery of a young girl's heart. It had always made Tom uneasy and it had the same effect now upon old Mr. Harper.

"Well . . . I dare say you know best," he said.

David came down now, followed a few minutes later by his sister. They all sat at the table together; a steady breeze blew in at the open windows; the sun made the glass and silver twinkle. Lucia glanced at her father's silvery hair, Bee's soft fair mane, David's sandy hair, rough on his stubborn skull. Let them alone! she cried in her heart. Let them *alone!*

"Here comes the postman!" said David, pushing back his chair. "Let's see if there's anything from Dad."

He went out, letting the swing door bang behind him, and came back with the mail.

"Four," he announced. "Two for you, Mother, and one for Bee, and one for me. V-mails. Newspaper for Grandpa and a letter for Sibyl, and some bills and stuff."

He and Bee opened their letters at once, but Lucia kept hers to read when she was alone. Old Mr. Harper opened his New York paper.

"Fair and warmer," he read. "High time, too. Most unseasonable weather we've been having. Let's see now . . . Things look very

promising in Europe. Here's Monty . . . A good man . . . What's this? Ha! Body of Slain Art Dealer found on Simm's Island."

"Go on!" said David, looking up.

"The Horton County police report the discovery yesterday in an isolated swamp on Simm's Island of the body of Ted Darby, 34, whose name—"

"Give it to me!" cried Bee.

"What?" said Mr. Harper.

"Give it to me!" she cried again.

"I want to read it," he began, but she snatched it out of his hand, and ran out of the room and up the stairs.

"What's the matter with her?" asked Mr. Harper.

"Probably someone she's heard of," said David. "She knows a lot of those arty people."

"She needn't have snatched the paper out of my hands," said Mr. Harper.

"She'll have a fine time now," said David. "She'll call up all the girls she knows. My *dear!* Have you *heard* about What's-his-name?"

"Nevertheless," said Mr. Harper, "she could have waited a few moments."

"Oh, you know how girls are with a nice juicy bit of gossip," said David, man to man.

Does he know anything? Lucia thought. Or is he just being loyal to Bee?

She did not permit herself to show any impatience or haste, but as soon as breakfast was finished, she went upstairs and knocked on Bee's door.

"It's me, Bee. Let me in, dear."

The key turned in the lock and Bee opened the door.

"Well, you win," she said, with that square, scornful smile.

Lucia went in, closing the door after her.

"I don't want to 'win,'" she said. "It's just—"

"You have won, though," said Bee. "I'm finished."

"Bee, you're *not!* Anyone can make a mistake."

"Not quite such a big mistake. I suppose what they've got in the paper is true . . . !"

"I haven't seen it yet."

"He was arrested, just before the war. He had some sort of little art gallery, where he sold obscene pictures. The police locked up the gallery but somehow he got into it before the trial, and daubed all over the pictures. Amusing, isn't it? What's more, he's already

been divorced once, and his first wife accused him of swindling her out of all her money. I suppose you knew all this."

"No, I didn't, Bee. I didn't know anything about him."

"Then how did you know he was so—awful?"

"But when I saw him, Bee, I knew."

"How?"

"Well, I did . . ." said Lucia.

"But *how*? I saw a lot of Ted, and I'd never have thought he was—like that. I mean, he was so gay, and he seemed to be so careless. Not like anyone who'd plot things . . . Mother, I'd like to know how *you*—caught on to him when *I* didn't?"

"But, Bee, I'm so much older—"

"But you've never been anywhere. You've never seen anything of life."

"That's rather silly, Bee. I'm married and I have two children."

"That's nothing," said Bee. "You told me how you met Daddy when you were still in school. I don't suppose you ever even *thought* of another man. You got engaged at seventeen."

"You're only seventeen yourself," said Lucia.

"It's a different era. Girls are different. They're not brought up in that sheltered way." She paused. "I want to get away," she said.

"What d'you mean, Bee?"

"I couldn't *stand* staying here!" Bee cried. "I don't want to see anybody I know. I'm never going back to that art school."

"Bee, you didn't tell anyone about Ted, did you?"

"Oh, not by name. But everyone knew I had a beau . . . I used to mention places we'd been—things like that. God! If anyone ever finds out that I fell for someone like Ted, I'll—I don't know. I'd rather be *dead*."

"Don't say that, Bee."

"That happens to be exactly how I feel. God!"

"Bee, don't swear, dear."

"Oh, what does it matter? When I think that I let him kiss me—*lots* of times . . . I tell you I'd rather be *dead*, than have people know that."

Her blue eyes looked dark, in her face that was white as paper. She was stung to desperation by this pain, this shame.

"I want to get *away*!" she said.

"Bee," said Lucia. "Bee, darling, the only way to stand things is to face them, take the consequences . . ."

"You're talking like *Grandpa*!"

I feel like him, thought Lucia.

"I suppose you've told Grandpa about Ted?"

"I haven't told anyone. I never intend to. You ought to know that, Bee."

"Well, I don't! I don't know *what* your ideas might be. You might think it was your 'duty' to tell Grandpa and Daddy. To teach me a lesson, or something."

"If you can think that . . ." said Lucia.

"I know you always do what you think is *best* for me," said Bee.

"But you don't understand me."

Lucia said nothing.

"Will you help me to get away?" Bee demanded.

"Yes," said Lucia. "Let me see the paper, will you, Bee?"

"You'll help me to get away—at once?"

"Yes. We'll talk it over later. I'd like to see the paper, Bee."

She took it into her own room, and sat down on the edge of the unmade bed. The details of Ted Darby's past did not interest her. She was looking for something else.

The body was discovered yesterday afternoon by Henry Peters, 42, electrician, of Rockview, Conn. While walking along the shore, Mr. Peters was led, by the insistent barking of his dog, to enter the marsh . . .

Lieutenant Levy, of the Horton County police, stated the death had been caused by a wound in the throat with some pointed instrument, from twenty-four to thirty-six hours previous to the discovery. The police are following several clues.

What clues? Lucia thought. If they trace it back to me, back to Father, then nothing could save Bee. And those letters . . . ? Those letters! If I could somehow raise five thousand dollars . . . But there'd be nothing to stop him from asking for more, later on. He could hold back some of the letters. I wouldn't know.

She left the paper on the bed and went over to the window. Maybe that was Lieutenant Levy I saw this morning in the launch, she thought. He looked rather nice. Suppose I go to him and tell him the whole thing? After all, none of us has done anything criminal. It was probably illegal to take Ted away like that, but I wasn't covering up a crime, just an accident. It would be dreadfully hard on Father, but he can take it.

Only not Bee. She had a vision of Bee, standing up in a court, looking so tough and scornful. But, at heart, so desperate and

wretched. Miss Holley, you had asked this man to meet you in the boathouse? You had visited this man in his hotel?

No! Lucia said to herself. I don't want Bee to face things, and take the consequence of things. I'm going to get her away somewhere. Angela, in Montreal? Unless you have to have papers to go to Canada in wartime . . . Well, then, there's Gracie's camp in Maine. I could telephone Gracie, right now.

Only she couldn't. Her father might hear her telephoning, or David might. No privacy was possible for her. It never had been, she thought, wondering. All my life, people have known everything I did, everywhere I went. I don't mean that anyone's ever been snooping or suspicious, it's just that somehow I've always lived in such a sort of public way, right out in the open.

I'll go into the village and telephone from the drugstore, she thought. I'll—

Sibyl was coming up the stairs, creaking, sighing a little. Reluctant to speak to anyone, Lucia hurried to the bathroom, to hide in there, but the door was locked.

"Just a moment!" said Bee, in a loud, choked voice.

Lucia hurried out into the hall.

"I think I'll do a little weeding," she said to Sibyl.

"Yes, ma'am," said Sibyl.

Gardening had no appeal for Lucia. She did it because it was a duty to have a victory garden. She put on a big burnt-straw hat and her heavy gloves. She took up the basket with shears and trowel, and went out of the back door to the patch the local gardener had dug and planted for her.

She was not at all sure which sprouting things were weeds. It's queer, she thought. Father and Bee and David all take it for granted I know what I'm doing. Only Sibyl knows better. There was another implement in the basket, a stubby little rakelike tool with curved prongs. She did not know the name of it, or its purpose, but it was her favorite. You couldn't do much harm with this, she thought, kneeling in the hot sun and scratching gently at the earth.

Mr. Donnelly can stop at the drugstore, she thought. I'll pop in and telephone to Gracie and arrange for Bee to go there at once. I'll tell Father and David that Gracie suddenly needed another counselor. Sibyl can do up a couple of wash dresses for Bee, and she can take my little gray coat for the train. We can send the other things after her. I've got enough cash.

"Mother . . ." said David.

She looked up at him and saw him frowning.

"There's a man who calls himself Donnelly," he said. "Says he's come to take you out for a drive."

"Well, yes," said Lucia, rising.

"You mean you're going out for a drive *alone* with him?"

"Why not?" said Lucia. "He was here to tea yesterday."

"So I heard," said David. "Well, suit yourself. But I think it's a mistake."

There was no time to argue with David now. Lucia ran upstairs to wash and change her dress. A hat, she thought; it looks better, and she put on the new hat Bee had persuaded her to buy in New York, a sort of sailor with an edging of white eyelet embroidery on the brim. She put on white gloves, too, glancing in the mirror. It seemed to her that she looked altogether correct and dignified.

"What time for lunch, ma'am?" Sibyl asked as she reached the lower hall.

"Oh . . . one o'clock as usual, Sibyl," Lucia answered. "I shan't be gone long."

I'm just going to take a little drive with a blackmailer, she thought. It's—hard to believe.

Donnelly was standing in the driveway, with one foot on the running board of a superb roadster. He was wearing a dark gray flannel jacket and slacks of a lighter gray. He looked handsome, aloof, and distinguished.

"Good morning!" Lucia said.

"Good morning," he answered, not smiling, and helped her into the car.

He drove off, down to the highway, with nonchalant skill.

"Would you mind stopping at the drugstore?" she asked. "We can't use our car until we get the next coupons; and things pile up so."

"Certainly. If you'll call the turns . . . ?"

"Next turn right," she said, "and then straight ahead."

Isn't he even nervous? she thought. Doing a thing like this—a crime that could send him to prison for years? Isn't he the least bit ashamed? When they reached the village, she caught a glimpse of them in the plate-glass window of the furniture store, and it was astonishing. The big, well-dressed, well-groomed man, and beside him a lady with gloves and a stylish hat. Nobody would *believe* it, she thought.

"There's the drugstore, on the corner," she said. "I'll only be a minute."

She was mistaken. It took a long time to get the camp in Maine, and it took still longer to get Gracie Matthews, the proprietor.

"I *think* Miss Matthews is out on the lake," said the polished, anxious voice that answered the telephone. "I'll send after her."

It was hot in the booth and there was a very unpleasant smell. Lucia's hands grew damp, sweat came out on her forehead and her upper lip. Oh hurry up! Hurry up! she cried in her heart. I don't want to irritate him by making him wait so long.

Gracie, when at last she came, was very trying.

"Certainly, Lucia. I'd love to have the child. But not today. We couldn't meet the train. The station wagon's laid up. Say Monday."

"I'd like—she'd like to come today, Gracie."

"But what's the hurry, Lucia?"

"It just came into her head . . ."

"Well, tell her it'll be just as nice on Monday."

"Can't you arrange for tomorrow, Gracie?"

"Well, I could!" said Gracie. "But why? I'll have to arrange with the Camp Weelikeus people to pick her up at the station, and I don't like to do that if I can help it. We'll have our own station wagon on Monday, and I don't see *why* she can't wait till Monday. It's Friday already."

"You know how it is when you're young."

"I do not!" said Gracie, with her usual vigor. "When I was young, I didn't *expect* people to cater to my whims."

"Bee hasn't been too well. I don't think this climate—"

"If there's anything wrong with the child, don't send her here, Lucia. I've got thirty-eight girls and no trained nurse. I'm short two counselors."

"Bee would love to be a counselor, Gracie."

"She wouldn't do at all!" said Gracie. "She doesn't know anything about handling people. Too self-centered."

"She's not," said Lucia, mechanically. "Well, if you won't let her come tomorrow—"

"All right!" said Gracie. "Let her come. But it's only for *your* sake, Lucia. Personally, I wouldn't give in to an adolescent whim."

They spoke a little, about trains, about equipment.

"Two blankets," said Gracie. "A pillow. And—are you writing this down, Lucia?"

"Yes," said Lucia, lying without a qualm.

It was a long list.

"And if she has any hobbies, stamp album, scrapbook, knitting, water colors; anything like that, tell her to bring them along."

"I will, Gracie. I do appreciate this."

"I think you're very foolish," said Gracie, "to give in to your family the way you do. You can take my word for it, Lucia, that they'd think twice as much of you if you'd stand up to them."

"Maybe you're right," said Lucia. "But thanks ever so much, Gracie. I'll write."

She hung up the telephone and opened the door of the booth. I've been ages . . . she thought. And I didn't want to irritate him. He did not seem irritated. He got out politely and helped her into the car. He set off again through the village and along a tree-shaded road unfamiliar to her.

"Have you the money ready?" he asked.

"I couldn't," she said. "I couldn't get into town to the bank without everyone asking questions. I just want a little more time."

He drove on in silence for a way.

"Things are changed," he said, "with Darby dead."

"Yes," she said. "Yes, I suppose so."

"That makes it worse for the girl," he said.

"Not much," said Lucia, evenly. "It couldn't be."

"It will be worse," he said, "with all that will come out at the trial."

"What trial?"

"They will try the man who killed Darby," said Donnelly. "It was a good job he did, but they will try him."

"If they catch him."

"There's no great mystery in it, at all," said Donnelly. "There's a dozen people know the man."

Oh, no! Lucia thought. They can't. They *mustn't* arrest the wrong man.

"They could be mistaken," she said.

"You mean there are others would be glad to see him out of the way?" he asked, and for the first time she saw him smile, a bleak and fleeting smile.

"Or it could have been an accident," she said.

He turned the car up a side road and slowed down.

"There's a roadhouse along here," he said. "It is a good one. Respectable. Would you have lunch with me there?"

"Oh, thank you," she said, startled. "But I've got to be home to lunch. I really ought to be getting home now."

"Any way you like it," he said, and backed the car down to the road. "Will you have the money tomorrow?" he asked.

"Monday," she said. "I can't do anything until Monday."

"I wouldn't be bothering you so," he said. "Only there's someone else in it."

"Someone else . . . ?"

"My partner," he said. "If it was me alone, I would drop the thing altogether. I would let you alone."

It's the oldest trick in the world, Lucia told herself, pretending to have a partner to blame things on.

"If I don't get the money," Donnelly went on, "he'll be out again after it."

"Again?" she asked. "You mean it's Nagle—Mr. Nagle?"

"You're quick," he said, glancing at her sidelong, and the blueness of his eyes surprised her.

"He's a horrible man," she said.

"Do you think so, now?" he asked. "He's been a good friend to me. It was him gave me my start when I first came over here."

"Did you come from the other side?"

"From Ireland," he said. "I had a great idea of this country, from all I'd heard. I ran away from home when I was fifteen, and I shipped as a cabin boy, the way I'd get here. But it took me near three years. I got here, right enough, on the first voyage, but the mate would not let me go ashore. He'd seen it in my eyes, maybe, that I was intending to jump ship. So there I was, standing on the deck, looking at the Statue of Liberty."

He fell silent, with the shadow of a smile on his face.

"Well, how did you get here?" Lucia asked.

"It would be tejus for you to hear," he said, modestly.

"I'd like to hear," she said.

That was true. She wanted to know what manner of man this was, so that she might deal with him better.

"Back we went, to Liverpool," he said. "I was down on the docks one day, looking for a ship would take me back here, when a stranger comes up, very civil. We talk for a while and then he says, 'Come and have a drink.' I was sixteen then, but I looked older. I never had had a drink and to tell you the truth, I was afraid of it, from all I'd heard. But I went along with him, to see what would come of it. The next I knew I was in a ship bound for Singapore. To China we went, to Japan. When we got back to Liverpool, my head was full

of the wonders I'd seen, and I wanted more. I got another ship sailing east, Egypt, India . . ."

He was silent again for a time.

"It is a queer thing," he said. "When I'd the money to go traveling in style, I went back to those places. But they were not the same. Well . . . Maybe it was youth that was missing."

"But how did you get to New York?"

"There's no story to that," he said. "I saved my pay and bought a ticket."

And how did you get to be a blackmailer? she thought. He must have been an adventurous and romantic boy, and how had he come to this?

"What did you do when you got here?" she asked.

"It's a thing you wouldn't believe," he said. "I knew I'd a cousin in Brooklyn. That's all I knew; no address, nothing at all but his name. I thought I could look him up, and off I went to Brooklyn, thinking it would be a small town. You wouldn't believe it . . . I walked up and down the streets, asking here and there: Did you ever hear of a Mr. Mulligan from County Clare? After a while I asked a policeman. There's a club near by, he says, for the men of County Clare. Go there, he says, and maybe you'll learn something. Well, my cousin was well known there. Someone took me out to the saloon he had, and my troubles were over, the first day I set foot in the country."

"Did you go to work for your cousin?" Lucia asked.

"No . . ." he said. "That wasn't quite the way of it. Y'see, he made book on the side—"

"What's that?"

"He took bets on the horse races," Donnelly explained. "He took me out to Belmont Park with him and I met a lot of his friends, and they'd put me on to one thing or another. Then I got in with the ward boss. I got in with everyone."

"But didn't you have a job? A regular job?"

"I did not," he said, with a certain pride. "I've never had a job in my life, since the three voyages I made."

"But didn't you ever want a regular job with a salary?"

"I did not," he said. "That's not in my nature."

And what is your nature? she thought. She could not understand him at all. She could not even imagine what his life had been, or what sort of world he lived in. He doesn't seem like a really *bad* man, she thought. Could I possibly talk him out of this?

But her own house was in sight now. There was no more time.

"I'll ask my partner will he wait till Monday," said Donnelly, "but I don't know . . . Are you sure you'll have it Monday?"

"Yes," said Lucia.

By Monday Bee would be gone. And I'll think of something . . . she told herself. Some way out of this.

When they turned into the drive, there was a high van drawn up before the house. Eagle Laundry. The driver was standing beside it, and Sibyl stood on the steps above him.

"Says he's only coming once a month," she said.

"A *month!*" cried Lucia. "But we can't possibly manage—"

"Best we can do," said the driver, a lean, dark young man in a visored cap. "Haven't got the gas, haven't got the tires, haven't got the men to make a pickup any oftener."

"I'll do it *myself*," said Sibyl, with a sort of passion, "before I wait a *month*."

"Okay!" said the driver and got back into his van.

He backed and turned and drove off. Donnelly got out and helped Lucia to descend.

"I'll get in touch with you," he said, standing hat in hand.

She was surprised to see him turn to Sibyl with a smile and a gesture like a salute.

SEVEN

What's the *idea*?" Bee demanded. "It's not *like* you, Mother, to go running around with that man."

"I'm not running around," said Lucia. "He wanted to show me an old house. Historic. We'd better make a list, Bee, of what you'll need. Aunt Gracie said blankets and a pillow."

"I can't carry all that," said Bee. "And there aren't any porters any more. Anyhow, Gracie's sure to have some spares, she's so damned efficient."

"Bee, don't swear. You know how Daddy hates it. And Aunt Gracie."

"She's not an aunt, thank God."

"She loves you and David to call her 'Aunt.'"

"We haven't, for years. Personally, I'm not crazy about her at all. I wouldn't go near her gruesome camp, if I didn't have to get away from here."

Lucia was sitting on the bed in Bee's room, and Bee stood before

her, barefoot, in an ivory satin slip, so lovely, and so remote. How much did she care for Ted Darby? Lucia thought. How much does all this mean to her? I don't know. She's very nervous. She didn't eat anything for lunch. But is she sad about it?

I *ought* to know. I ought to be able to talk to my own child.

"David took me over to the Yacht Club this morning," Bee began.

"But how could he? We don't belong to it."

"He knows people there. He's rather good at making friends. There was rather a nice crowd there, not all kids, either. I'd have had a nice time there, only I kept thinking all the time. Suppose any of them ever heard about Ted and me. It makes me *hate* him."

"Bee! He's dead."

"I hate him!" said Bee. "I'll never forgive him for the harm he's done me."

"Bee, what harm, darling?"

"He's made it so I can never trust a man again."

"He hasn't, Bee. Just think of your father and Grandpa and David."

"You don't realize," said Bee, "how rare they are. You don't realize how lucky you've been. Your life may have been stodgy, but at least you've never been deceived and humiliated. What's that Donnelly man like?"

"Oh, he's very pleasant," said Lucia. "Now let's get out your list, Bee."

"He's good-looking," said Bee. "But *I* think he's a wolf."

"Well, it doesn't matter," said Lucia. "You'll take your flannel dressing gown, of course."

"The thing is, *you* wouldn't *know* if he was a wolf."

"Certainly I should. I'm not an idiot."

"Mother, did you *ever* have anyone proposition you?"

"I shouldn't tell you if I had," said Lucia.

"That's where you make a mistake," said Bee. "Pretending to be superhuman."

"I don't pretend to be superhuman."

"But you do. You wouldn't let anyone see you shed a single tear when Daddy left."

"Why should I let people see me if I'm not happy?"

"It would be a lot better if you did. If you weren't so darned inhibited, I could *talk* to you."

Oh, Bee! Can't you talk to me? Lucia cried in her heart. I want that so. I do understand things.

David was springing up the stairs.

"Mother," he said, from the hall. "Someone wants to see you."

His voice was ominous.

"Oh, who, David?"

"He says Mr. Donnelly sent him. I'll stick around," said David. "Keep an eye on the spoons. He's on the porch."

"Try on that brown skirt of mine, Bee," said Lucia. "I'll be right back."

"Mother, what goes on?" Bee demanded. "Who *is* this Donnelly man anyhow?"

"I told you," said Lucia. "I'll be back in a moment."

From a window in the sitting room, Lucia could see the man on the porch, and her heart sank. He was the worst yet, far the worst, the most obviously shady and suspect. He was young, a boy, in a dark red sweater clinging tight to his skinny torso; he had a rough mop of black hair, and small black eyes set too close to a broad nose.

I suppose there's a gang, she thought. A whole gang of black-mailers. They'll keep on and on . . . Well, the first thing is to get Bee away. Then I'll see. Then I'll think.

Cold with dismay, she opened the door and went out. "You want to see me?" she asked.

"Yeah," said the boy. "Regal Snowdrop."

"What?" said Lucia.

"Regal Snowdrop," he replied, impatiently. "Mr. Donnelly tole me to come. To pick up your laundry."

"Oh . . . laundry?" she repeated.

"Yeah. Laundry."

She was silent, trying to understand. This must be a sort of code, she thought. He must have come to get money, or a check, or something. And suppose he won't go away without it?

"Mr. Donnelly said tomorrow," she said cautiously.

"Well, he tole us today. Said we got to make dis a special job. Pick it up today, bring it back Tuesday."

"You *mean* laundry?"

"Well, jeez, lady, didn't I *say*? Laundry. What gets washed and ironed. Laundry."

"Mr. Donnelly sent you?"

"He said youse was having problems."

"But how can you take it?"

"I got a car here," he said, jerking his head, and she saw, parked

down the drive, a very shabby little blue coupé. "Listen!" he said. "I haven't got all night, lady."

"No," she said. "I'll get it for you."

She went into the house, a little dazed, into the kitchen to Sibyl.

"There's a boy here for the laundry," she said. "They're going to send it back Tuesday."

"It's a new laundry, ma'am?" asked Sibyl.

It seemed to Lucia that Sibyl was looking at her in an odd way.

"Yes," she answered, in a matter-of-fact way. "It's the Regal Snowdrop. If you'll give it to the boy, please, Sibyl."

David was waiting in the hall.

"What gives?" he asked briefly.

"Why, nothing," said Lucia. "It's simply a boy for the laundry."

"Why hasn't he got a van?"

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

"What's the Donnelly man got to do with our laundry?"

"He knew of this laundry, and he wanted to be obliging."

"He can oblige me by keeping away from here," said David.

"Don't be silly," said Lucia, mechanically, and went up the stairs to Bee.

"Who was it?" Bee asked.

"Oh, it was a boy for the laundry."

"How did Mr. Donnelly get into it?"

"He knew about the laundry, and sent the boy."

"Well, why?"

"Why *not*? I'm tired of all these questions!" cried Lucia.

"Mother!" said Bee, shocked. "I never saw you like this before."

"Like what?" Lucia asked coldly. "Turn around, Bee, and let me see how that skirt is in the back."

This won't do, she told herself. It's not like me to get so irritable. Only I'm—I don't know. I feel tired, I guess. But I've got to keep hold of myself or they'll all notice.

They were all dangerous to her, her father, her daughter and her son. And Sibyl? I don't know, she thought. But I've got to be let alone, to handle this thing. I've got to think it out carefully. I'll get Bee away. And I wish I could get Father away.

It seemed to her that if only she could hide them somewhere, in safety, she could cope with the growing menace of her problems. If they were away, I could think, she told herself, and knew in her heart that she had not been thinking, that she had no plans at all. Nothing

but this quite useless, stupid impulse to put things off, to gain one more day from Donnelly and Nagle. I couldn't possibly get hold of five thousand dollars, she thought.

But if I have to?

No, it wouldn't do any good. Blackmailers never stop. They wouldn't give me back all the letters. I couldn't know. She was in her own room, sewing a sash on Bee's house coat, a sweet little house coat, of dusty pink rayon, faintly fragrant of perfume. It made her want to cry; she did begin to cry a little.

But that had to be stopped. Someone would come and see her. Someone always came. There was always a knock at the door. Everyone had a right to come to her; that was what she was for, that was her function, her reason for being. There was never an hour that belonged to her.

The knock came and it was Sibyl.

"Mr. Harper's got a man from the police downstairs, ma'am," she said. "He's asked him to stay to tea."

"From the police?" Lucia cried.

"Yes, ma'am," said Sibyl. "But I don't think there's anything to worry about. He came right to the back door and he spoke to me first. Says he's going to all the people in this neighborhood, got to see if anybody knew Mr. Darby."

Was that compassion in Sibyl's voice, and in her amber-flecked eyes? Did she know anything? Or everything? Don't ask her. Don't try to find out.

"Is—where's Miss Bee?" she asked.

"She went out walking with a young man, ma'am."

"What young man?"

"Only the neighbor's, ma'am. Seems to be a *nice* young man," said Sibyl.

It was compassion in her voice, and understanding.

"A *nice* young man," she repeated.

"I'll go down," said Lucia.

"Yes, ma'am. Mr. Harper's pleased to have company for tea. He doesn't worry about the police, ma'am. Got nothing on his conscience."

So you know? Lucia thought. But she could not be sure, and she did not want to be. She washed, and brushed her hair, and put on a fresh dress, and hastened down to the sitting room.

"Oh, Lucia . . ." said her father. "This is Lieutenant Levy, from the Horton County police. Lieutenant, my daughter, Mrs. Holley."

The lieutenant had risen, a tall young man with big feet and big, rather outstanding ears. He was not in uniform; in a neat gray suit he was not formidable, his smile was friendly, his dark eyes were thoughtful and mild. But she was very greatly afraid of him.

"The lieutenant is making some routine inquiries," said Mr. Harper. "He's investigating a homicide."

That *you* committed, Lucia thought.

EIGHT

The postman came, while they were at tea, and there was a V-mail from Tom. Lucia kept it, unopened, in her hand. There was comfort in it, and in the thought of Tom, who was so definite about things, so uncomplicated. Here, I'll look after this, Lucia, he would say. And if he saw that she had dreadfully mismanaged things, he would not be angry, or reproachful, or impatient. I think you made a bit of a mistake right here, Lucia . . .

She was very thankful that Levy asked her no questions at all. He didn't even want to talk about Ted. But Mr. Harper did.

"I read about the case in the newspapers," he said. "Didn't mention it, because I didn't want to alarm you or Bee. Too near home, what? But it looks very like one of these gangster murders to me."

"Let's not talk about it," said Lucia suddenly, and more loudly than she meant.

"Certainly, m'dear. Certainly," said her father, instantly contrite.

It was as Sibyl had said, he was pleased to have company for tea. He's lonely, Lucia thought. He misses his office and his club. And he misses Tom so very much. They used to talk. He's lonely and he's getting old . . .

He was getting old in such a clean, fine way, his silver hair cropped close, his nails so neatly clipped, his necktie pressed that morning, a brown and a yellow check . . . I could cry, she thought, and was shocked at herself.

Levy asked her if she had read a certain book very popular just then.

"Well, no," she answered. "Have you?"

He had, and he talked a little about it. He's not—right, she thought. He's not like a policeman. Suppose he really isn't one? Suppose he's someone that Nagle sent?

Her home was invaded, it was no longer a safe refuge for her people. If I could only put Father on his guard somehow, she thought.

so that he wouldn't say anything. . . . But maybe he had already 'said something,' had, in his innocence, completely betrayed himself?

She looked and looked at Levy, trying to read his face. In vain. He looked mild, a little sad, nothing more. If he was a policeman, why did he stay and stay and stay, like this? To trap someone.

He stayed and stayed, and Bee came home. She brought a boy with her, and he seemed to Lucia a sinister boy, dark and unsmiling; his shoulders were too broad, he looked powerful and aggressive.

"Mother," Bee said, "this is Owen Lloyd."

Owen took her outstretched hand in a grip that made her wince. He then shook hands in turn with Mr. Harper and Lieutenant Levy.

"You're looking into that case over on the island, sir?" he asked Levy. "This Darby?"

Lucia was stricken with terror to see how white Bee grew. If Levy looked at her *now* . . . she thought.

"Oh, we have our routine," Levy answered. "We're visiting everyone in the neighborhood, to see if we can pick up any information."

"My mother'll give you plenty, sir," said Owen. "She's been wanting to go to the police with her story. She says that early Wednesday morning she looked out of her window, and she saw a man and a woman, standing up in a motorboat between here and the island. Struggling, she says they were. She turned away to get her glasses and when she found them, and looked again, the man had disappeared, and the woman was heading for the island."

"Why didn't your mother come to us, Mr. Lloyd?"

"My father and I put her off it," said Lloyd. "We thought maybe she was mistaken, and she'd get herself all upset for nothing. She's pretty high-strung, you know."

"I see!" said Levy.

He finished his second cup of tea and rose.

"Thanks very much, Mrs. Holley," he said. "It's been very enjoyable."

"Stop in again, sir," said old Mr. Harper. "I'd be very interested to hear anything about this case you feel at liberty to tell."

"I will, Mr. Harper!" said Levy, earnestly.

Now it was the boy Owen who stayed and stayed, and Lucia stayed, too, until her father left to take his before-dinner stroll. Then she went up to her own room, longing for the solace of Tom's letter.

But it was one of his queer letters, filled with an almost wild hilar-

ity. She had had two or three others like this and they had disturbed her profoundly. Tom never drinks too much, she thought. It's not that. Is it battle that makes him so excited?

She tried to think of her good-humored, nonchalant Tom in battle. She recalled the battles she had seen in newsreels. Flames, smoke, hideous noises, whining, droning, screaming, shattering crashes. I can't . . . she thought. It's no use. He's too far away . . .

She sat on a chest by the window, in a curious apathy, until David came knocking at the door.

"Sibyl says you got a letter from Dad," he said. "What does he say?"

"Why, nothing very special, dear," she said. "Of course he's not able to tell anything much."

"Owen was in the Pacific zone," David said.

He glanced at Lucia, frowning a little.

"Well, if it isn't over pretty soon," he said, "it'll be my turn."

He had never spoken of that before, he said it now as if it were a question, as if he were asking her, what is this? What shall I think about life and war and death?

He looked so young, so slight. No! she said in her heart. *No!*

And who was she saying that to? She had no power to protect her own people, her own children. The walls of her home were falling down; there was no refuge.

"Have you got a clean shirt for dinner, dear?" she asked. "Give that one to me when you take it off. The collar . . ." She touched the collar at the back of his thin young neck. "It's a little frayed . . ."

"Oh, all right," he said with a sigh and went away disappointed.

NINE

Lucia sat up in bed to read over the letter she had written the night before.

DEAR TOM:

Bee is going to Gracie's camp for a week or two. I think it will do her good. It really is pretty dull here.

Dull . . . she repeated to herself, but she let it stand.

You ask how the car is standing up. We scarcely ever use it on account of tires and gas, so it will be in nice shape when you get back. I told Sibyl you sent her your best regards and she

said to tell you she prays for you every night. She *means* it, too, Tom. I don't know what I'd do without Sibyl.

She leaned back against the pillows, thinking of Sibyl and what she might know. It was a sparkling morning, but she had no thought of going out. She had to stay here, right here, inside the house, so that nothing could happen. I will stop things, too, she told herself. I don't know now just what I'll do, but as they come up . . .

Nagle and Donnelly and Levy . . . Five thousand dollars . . . My jewelry! she thought suddenly. She had her diamond engagement ring, an emerald ring her father had given her on her twenty-first birthday, a string of pearls her mother had left her, her grandmother's diamond bracelet, all in the safe-deposit box in the New York bank. I could borrow on them, she thought. Or if it comes to the worst, I could even sell them.

To pay blackmail? Yes, she thought. It may be terribly stupid, but that's what I'm going to do. It'll keep those men quiet for a while, anyhow. It'll gain time.

And time must be her ally. She clung to that belief. She lived by it, now. Every day made the end of the war nearer, every day that no telegram came about Tom was a day gained. She lived as if holding her breath. Just get through this day.

She got a book and read it in bed, with stubborn determination. It was a mystery story she had got out of the lending library for her father, and she was not fond of mystery stories. Nobody in them ever seems to feel *sorry* about murders, she had said. They're presented as a problem, m'dear, her father said. What's more, they generally show the murdered person as someone you can't waste any pity on. *I'm sorry* for them, she said, I hate it when they're found with daggers sticking in them and their eyes all staring from poison and things like that.

Yet how little pity did she feel for Ted Darby! I really did that, she thought amazed. I concealed a body. Anyhow I took it away. And when I came back—after that—nobody could see anything wrong with me—anything queer. Maybe I haven't got so much feeling, after all. Maybe I'm rather too tough.

I'd better be, too, she thought, as she rose and began to dress.

Breakfast that morning had an unusual quality. She was surprised to find all her family so cheerful and talkative. Surprised but not pleased; it worried her. They were too innocent. They seemed this morning like victims, pitifully unaware of what darkly menaced them.

She saw the menace more vividly now than ever before. Her father standing in the dock. My dear, I don't like to be hurried, she'd heard him say all her life. But, once accused, he could be hurried. Question after question would be shot at him. She pictured him growing a little confused, indignant. She could imagine his overwhelming shame when he heard of Bee's folly. He and David. Tom would be different, she thought. He'd just be so sorry for Bee.

"Owen's mother wants to call on you," said David.

"Owen? Owen?" said Mr. Harper. "Oh, yes! Nice lad."

"He's twenty-three," said David. "And he was in the Army two years."

"His mother's a frightful nitwit," said Bee. "But she's rather nice. They're quite a nice family."

"Rolling in money," said David, complacently. "Absolutely rolling. I found them."

"Oh, you're a marvel!" said Bee, with scornful good humor.

"I know the art of making friends," said David. "Mother, the Lloyds asked me to lunch today. That all right with you?"

"Perfectly, dear," said Lucia. "Have you got a clean shirt?"

She went into the kitchen to consult with Sibyl.

"If that icebox man doesn't come today," said Sibyl. "I don't know how we're going to keep a thing over Sunday."

They stood in gloomy silence for a moment.

"I'd better get to market early," said Sibyl. "Better leave everything and get the nine o'clock bus."

"I'll do the marketing, Sibyl."

"No, ma'am," said Sibyl. "Better for me to do it Saturday. I'll go early and get back in time to iron those little things for Miss Bee." She thought for a time. "Best give me twenty dollars, ma'am."

"I'll send for a taxi," Lucia said. "And you'd better keep it, Sibyl. I'll pay it by the hour."

Bee wanted to go to the village, too; she and Sibyl set off in the cab. David had gone already; old Mr. Harper was taking his walk. Lucia put on an apron and was starting to wash the breakfast dishes when the telephone rang. She dried her hands and went to answer.

"Mrs. Holley, please," said a man's muffled voice.

"This is me," said Lucia.

"Donnelly speaking. I'd like to see you this morning for a few moments, Mrs. Holley. What time could I come?"

"Oh . . . !" she cried. "I'm afraid . . . You'd really better not come *here*."

"Well, I must see you somewhere, then."

"I don't know . . . I don't see . . ."

"Down at the railroad station, maybe. I am there now."

"I couldn't. I couldn't get away."

"I am sorry to bother you," he said.

"Can't you tell me what it is on the telephone?"

"It is not a good thing to be talking too much on the telephone," he said.

"I don't see *how* I can meet you *anywhere*."

"It is important," he said. "Else I shouldn't be bothering you. Is there someplace maybe near by where you can see me for a moment?"

"Wait," she said. "Let me think . . . There's the boathouse here. If you go by the shore road and then along a little path, you can get into it without anyone seeing you."

"What time will I be there?"

"Oh . . . It's very hard for me to say . . . I mean, I'll have to wait for a chance to slip out."

"I'll go there now," he said, "and I'll wait."

"Wait upstairs, please," she said. "I'll try to come right away, but I *might* be delayed."

"Don't worry," he said. "I'll wait."

She hung up the telephone and stood beside it, irresolute, flustered. There are such a lot of things . . . she thought. People are *idiots* to talk about getting married and being your own mistress, so much more free than women with jobs.

If Bee comes back and finds the dishes in the sink . . . Even unsuspecting Father would think that was queer . . . What reason can I give anyone for running out of the house?

"Oh, I don't know!" she cried aloud in angry desperation. "It's nobody's business."

She decided to finish washing the dishes, and leave them draining. Then I'll tell them, if they ask me, that I felt like being alone. I'll say I wanted to *think*. Why shouldn't I? Other people do.

She ran upstairs to powder her face and her anger increased, to see herself flushed and disheveled. Anger at them, her father, her children, and Sibyl. It's none of their business if I feel like leaving the house for a few moments. And the beds not made . . . I've got to make Father's bed. He's so neat. He'd hate to come back and find it not done.

Bee ought to make her own bed. Oh, Bee, my darling . . . !

Nagle and Mr. Donnelly, and maybe other people, horrible people, reading your poor silly letters. Trying to make money out of them . . .

This afternoon Bee would be going away, perhaps for weeks. Perhaps this trouble couldn't be kept away from her. I've got to make her bed, Lucia thought. Or she'd think I didn't love her.

She could not stop. She made David's bed too. She picked up, she tidied up the bathroom. David had left a ring in the tub. She took up the scouring powder and the rag. No! she told herself. I've got to see Mr. Donnelly and hear whatever it is. This is silly.

But she had to clean the tub. She ran down the stairs, and she nearly cried, because she wanted so terribly to empty the ash trays and straighten up the sitting room. She ran across the lawn and into the cottage part of the boathouse, hot, angry, miserable.

She went through the sitting room on the ground floor and up the stairs, and Donnelly stood on the landing waiting for her.

"I'm sorry I kept you waiting," she said briefly. "But I was very busy this morning."

"You hurried too much," he said. "You're out of breath and all. I did not mind waiting."

"Well . . . Let's go in here," she said, and led the way into one of the two bedrooms, a big room, dimly lit through the grimy windows, with two sagging couches against the wall, everything covered thick with dust.

Lucia sat down in a rocking chair with a torn and discolored anti-macassar on the back, and Donnelly stood before her.

"Why is it the ladies don't carry fans any more?" he asked.

"Well, I don't think I ever did," Lucia answered.

"No. You're too young. I remember a long time ago, I was in New Orleans and there was a girl there, French, she was, and dark like yourself, and she'd a little fan, purple, maybe. I don't know the names of those pretty, light colors."

He was trying to give her time to grow calmer, and she responded courteously.

"There's mauve," she said, "and lavender and violet."

"They are pretty names."

There was a silence. She rocked and the floor boards squeaked. Donnelly stood before her, arms at his sides, his head averted, immaculate and elegant in his dark suit and handsome olive-green tie.

"I am sorry this ever began at all," he said. "If I was in it alone, I'd hand you the letters and you'd hear no more about it."

"Well . . ." she said with a sigh.

"I told Nagle you said give you till Monday. He did not like that. It was all I could do to keep him from coming here himself."

"That wouldn't do him any good. It would only make things worse."

"That's what he wants. He wants to keep after you till you'll be desperate and get the money one way or another."

"But not *you*, of course!" she cried.

"Not me," he said.

A great anger was rising in her against Donnelly. He's a crook, she thought, and probably a very smart one. He's trying to trap me in some way. He's trying to deceive me. He's—I don't know what he's trying to do but it's something horrible.

"So Mr. Nagle's to blame for *all* of this?" she said, with a faint smile.

"Well, no . . ." Donnelly said. "No. I couldn't say that. When he first brought it up, I didn't make any objections."

"But now you've changed. You've got very high-minded about it."

"Now I wish to God I could stop it all," he said. "Only I cannot. Nagle is a man hard to handle. There'll be money coming to us from this deal we made. But things are bad now for the two of us, and he is nervous. He likes to have a bit of ready cash by him, in case anything'll be going wrong."

"But not *you*. *You* don't want this money, this blackmail!"

"I do not," he said. "Only I cannot hold Nagle off longer than Monday. Are you sure you can get the money that day?"

"Yes," she said carelessly, recklessly.

Bee would get away this afternoon, and there would be all Sunday to think things over, to make a plan.

"Will I come out here to get it?" he asked. "Or would you rather meet me in New York?"

"I'll meet you in New York," she said.

"When would it suit you?"

"I'll meet you outside Stern's on Forty-second Street," she said, "at noon."

She rose.

"There's one little thing more . . ." he said. "You'll only need bring forty-five hundred with you."

"Oh! How *nice* of Mr. Nagle!" she cried. "How kind and nice of him to let me off five hundred dollars!"

"I gave him five hundred," said Donnelly. "I told him it was you

sent it. I did that, the way he wouldn't be out here bothering you."

She looked straight into his face that was as it always was, handsome, strong boned, but blurred and veiled by something.

"I don't believe you," she said. "I don't believe any of this."

He said nothing and she went past him, out of the room and down the stairs. Liar! she cried to herself. Liar! I hate him!

She had never felt anything like this turmoil of the spirit, this anger. He's the one who brought the letters here. He's the one I'm to pay the blackmail to. And he says he did that. For me. Liar. Black-mailer. Contemptible crook. I hate him so . . .

She went back to the house, thinking of nothing but her anger. I will go to the police, she thought. I'll manage some way to keep Father out of it. The police will see to it that nobody ever knows anything about Bee's letters. They'll just arrest those men. That man!

She opened the front door and Bee came out of the sitting room. And at the sight of her child, all the other things rose in Lucia like a rushing tide. Getting Bee's clothes ready, packing, the lunch, the familiar feeling of things undone, things demanding attention.

"Oh, you're back, dear?" she said. "Did you get the things you wanted?"

"No," Bee answered. "But it doesn't matter. I'm not going to the camp, Mother. I sent Aunt Gracie a telegram."

"Bee! But why?"

Bee stood facing her, slight and lovely and curiously stern, all in white.

"I'm too much worried and upset about you," she said. "I'm shocked."

"What are you talking about?" cried Lucia.

"That man," Bee said. "The way you're acting with that man."

TEN

Lucia had felt irritated by her children now and then, and sometimes—not often—impatient. But this was anger.

"Don't talk like that," she said, curtly.

"How do you think I feel—we feel—David and I?"

"David would never be so silly and offensive."

"He feels just the way I do. When we found out that you'd sneaked out of the house to meet that man—"

"Don't say 'sneaked'!"

"You did! The moment we were gone—"

"I have things to talk over with Mr. Donnelly, and I'll see him when and where I think best."

"*What* things to talk over?"

"I certainly don't have to account to you," said Lucia. "And I'm not going to listen to any more of this. You'll have to go to the camp, as we arranged—"

"I'm not going. Not unless you promise me you won't see that man again. Ever."

"How can you dare to talk like that?" cried Lucia. "As if you had absolutely no confidence in your own mother."

"I met David in the village," said Bee, in a cold, even voice, "and that Halford kid gave us a lift home. You weren't in the house, and David thought maybe you'd taken out one of the boats. So we went to see. We thought we heard voices in the boathouse, and we opened the door—"

"You stood there listening!"

"We didn't. We came right out. We were absolutely shocked."

"Then you're both very silly—and offensive. I don't want to hear another word about this."

"David and I consider that we have an obligation to Daddy—"

"Shut up!" said Lucia, and went past Bee, into the house and up the stairs to her room.

I shouldn't have said that, she told herself. It was vulgar and horrible. Only, I don't care. My own children turning against me like that. I can't believe David would have ideas like that. I'm going to speak to him now, this instant.

But she did not move.

I can't speak to David about such a thing, she thought. About meeting a man. It's impossible. But David couldn't possibly think I was 'shocking.' Suppose I did step out to the boathouse to see Mr. Donnelly for a few moments, because I had things to talk over with him . . .

Then she remembered what it was that she had to talk over with Mr. Donnelly. Oh, no! she cried to herself. Let the children be shocked. Let them be exasperating, and offensive, anything at all. Anything was better than that they should know the truth. David would never get over it, she thought, if he knew that his sister had written letters like that to Ted Darby. And Bee would never, never get over it, if she knew that that Darby man didn't really care for her at all. That he was just planning to make money out of her.

I said I'd get the money by Monday, she thought. Mr. Donnelly

said that if I didn't, he couldn't keep Nagle from coming out here. I can't let that happen.

Then I'll have to get the money. Four thousand, five hundred dollars. I've got eight hundred, about, in my account now, and there'll be the allotment check and Mr. Fuller's check next month. But I have to pay the rent and the food and the storage on our furniture, and all the other things. My jewelry? I don't know how much it's worth. Thousands, maybe. But maybe not.

Those people who make loans . . . That's the thing! She remembered seeing advertisements in newspapers; she remembered hearing something on the radio. Privacy, they said. Your personal signature alone.

I know how stupid and wrong it is to pay money to blackmailers. But that's what I'm going to do. I want *time*. Time to get Bee away. Time for—other things. I don't know just what. Only, if I keep that Nagle man away, even for a while, there's a chance of something happening. He might have to run away. Mr. Donnelly said so.

A sort of fever possessed her. Her anger against Bee was forgotten; she was desperately impatient for Monday to come, so that she could get the money, and pay Nagle, and have peace. For a time.

There was a knock at the door.

"Who is it?" she called, with an unusual sharpness.

"Me," answered David's voice.

"Well, do you want anything special, David?" she asked. "I've got a headache."

"It's important," he said, and she opened the door.

"Now, if you're going to begin to nag, David—" she said.

"I'm not," he said. "I think you're making a big mistake, taking up with that fellow, but I told Bee I was darn sure there was no real harm in it. Just folly."

His extreme calmness was as exasperating and as humiliating as Bee's shocked indignation.

"I'm not going to be talked to like this by a boy of fifteen," she said. "I know what I'm doing—"

"All right! All right!" he said, soothingly. "I came to tell you that Mrs. Lloyd's downstairs."

"Who is Mrs. Lloyd?"

"She's Owen's mother. She's got another son, around my age, and a daughter. They're nice people. They've got two cars and a chauffeur. They've got a swell cabin cruiser."

"What does she want?"

"Why, I suppose she just wants to see you," said David.

"I can't see her now. This time of the morning—and I'm not dressed."

"You look all right," said David. "Anyhow, she won't care."

"No, I can't!" said Lucia. "I'll—tell her I'll come to call on her."

"Mother, she's *right here!*" said David. "I can't tell her you won't come downstairs."

David was shocked now, and, in a way, he was not to be blamed. I'm being—very queer, Lucia thought.

She stopped being queer, at once.

"I'll be very glad to see your Mrs. Lloyd, dear," she said. "I'll be down in a minute."

Mrs. Lloyd was a thin woman, with rouge daubed carelessly on her hollow cheeks, and light hair in a thick, careless bun at the nape of her neck. She wore a white blouse too big for her, with cuffs that half covered her hands, and a bunchy gray skirt, and emerald-green wedgies. But she had a sweet voice, a sweet, triangular smile. Like a cat, Lucia thought. A mother cat, letting the kittens walk all over her.

"It's a *fearsome* time to come bothering you," she said. "But Owen and Phyllis and Nick got at me. I've been wanting to call—but really I never get around to anything." She paused. "I really don't know what I do all day," she said, with a sort of wonder.

"The days just go," said Lucia.

"Yes, *don't* they?" said Mrs. Lloyd. "Do you think you could possibly lunch with me at the Yacht Club some day soon? It's rather sweet there. You sit on the lawn—if it isn't *raining*, of course—and they bring little trays with fishes on them. *Painted* on them, I mean. A really very wonderful girl paints them. She supports her mother and her great-aunt in a tiny little cottage, and she paints simply anything. You send things to her, or she comes to the house. I didn't seem to have anything to send her, so I put her in our sun porch, and she painted simply adorable little fishes all over, on tables, you know, and on the walls. She does flowers, too, if you ask for them. And she did a simply huge horse's head for Mrs. Wynn, almost *too* huge, I thought, right over the mantelpiece. Do you paint, Mrs. Holley?"

"Why, no, I don't," Lucia answered, soothed and pleased by this most amiable guest.

"I don't, either, but I'd love to. Or play the piano, or something like that. When the children were little, they went to the Dame Nature School, and they played in a little orchestra. All the children did. It would be rather lovely if everyone kept *on* playing in orches-

tras, all their lives, don't you think? But do you think you could possibly come to lunch at the Yacht Club?"

"I'd love to," said Lucia.

"Tomorrow, perhaps? We could have their Sunday brunch. And David says your father is here with you. We should so love to have him—and there's a bar in the clubhouse. He'd like that, don't you think?"

"I'm sure he would," said Lucia.

"Then may we call by, tomorrow? The station wagon will hold us all. Twelve, do you think? I've tried to train myself to sleep late on Sunday mornings, but I can't do it. I seem to be so *hungry*. And then, it's rather charming, somehow, to go prowling around in the house, with everyone else asleep. Do you think I might ask that policeman to lunch with us? If you like him, that is."

"Well, what policeman?" asked Lucia.

"That Lieutenant Levy. I think he's so kind. And it would be nice to have another man. I'm so glad that really sinister case is settled, aren't you? That man on Simm's Island, I mean."

"Settled . . . ?" said Lucia.

"They've caught the murderer, and I'm *very* glad, because my Phyllis is only nineteen, and I do hate the thought of a murderer in the neighborhood."

"Do you know what man they've arrested?"

"I really know quite a lot about it," said Mrs. Lloyd. "We had Lieutenant Levy in for cocktails yesterday and he told us. It's a horrible man, named Murray. Underworld, you know. He was an enemy of that poor Darby man, and they came out here together on the same train. Imagine, in that teeming rain! I was rather surprised, because *I* thought he'd been killed by a woman."

"Oh! Did you?"

"Yes. Nick went over to the island, with another boy. Boys that age seem strangely gruesome, don't you think? Nick found this list there, in the reeds."

"A list?"

"A market list. Quite pathetic, somehow. I mean, grated cheese, two points, and things like that. You simply felt sure it was a *nice* woman, not black market, of course, with those points all written down. I thought it was probably someone goaded to frenzy."

"That's very interesting," said Lucia. "I'd love to see the list, if you'd let me."

"But I gave it to Lieutenant Levy. It did seem to be a clue, don't you think?"

"Oh, I do!" said Lucia.

It must have been one of my lists, she thought. An old one. I must have pulled it out of my pocket with the bandanna. And Lieutenant Levy's got it. He'll know ways to trace it back to me; he'll know I was there.

But they arrested a man—after they'd got the list. So they can't think the list is very important.

"This Murray they've arrested . . ." she asked. "Is he a criminal?"

"Oh, heavens, yes!" said Mrs. Lloyd. "He'd just come out of another prison. He's a dope-peddler, and what untold harm they do, don't they?"

"Yes, they *do*!" said Lucia, earnestly.

"I was rather surprised," Mrs. Lloyd went on, "because I'd felt quite sure those two women had had something to do with it."

"What two women?"

"Oh, didn't I tell you? Well, you know, the morning the poor man was killed, I got up frightfully early, about half-past five, and I went out on my little balcony. And I saw a little motorboat, a little launch like yours, you know, and two women were standing up in it, having a struggle."

But you didn't! Lucia thought. If there'd been another motorboat out, I'd have seen it. Certainly I'd have heard it. And there wasn't any. I could swear to that.

Mrs. Lloyd rose.

"I so look forward to our brunch tomorrow," she said. "You and your father and your two children. And shall I ask the policeman?"

"Oh, I think he's very nice," said Lucia.

David was not home to lunch, and Lucia sat at the table with her father and Bee, in a dream. It seemed to her that the world could offer nothing more desirable than Mrs. Lloyd's Sunday brunch. She had a remarkably clear vision of it in her mind; all of them sitting on a shady lawn, holding trays upon which fishes were painted, red and gold; Bee in her blue dress, she thought, and the sky pure blue, the calm sea a deeper blue. Father will enjoy it, she thought. And Bee . . . It's exactly the sort of thing Bee needs. There'll be Owen, and the daughter who's nineteen, and maybe other people will come. Maybe this is the beginning of a really happy summer for her.

"What did you think of Mrs. Lloyd?" Bee asked, with cold formality.

"I like her very much," said Lucia. "Very much. I don't know when I've met anyone I liked more."

"I don't think she's all that wonderful," said Bee, a little surprised, and still cold. "Of course, she's goodhearted and all that, but I think she's pretty silly. And irresponsible."

"'Irresponsible?'" old Mr. Harper repeated. "That's a strong word, m'dear."

"Well, I mean muddled," said Bee. "For instance, one time when I met her in the village, she asked me if I'd seen *Life with Father*. I said no, and she said she'd seen it just the week before, and she told me things out of it. But what she told me about wasn't *Life with Father* at all. It was a boring little play I'd seen with Sammy before we came out here."

"Well," said Mr. Harper, "considering the sort of plays they produce nowadays, I can't say that I blame the good lady."

"Honestly, Grandpa!" said Bee.

She always took him up on things like that; she began now to defend the theater of her own day, and old Mr. Harper was quite as ready to praise, and to describe, plays he had seen in London, in his boyhood. Lucia waited impatiently for the first pause.

"Mrs. Lloyd's asked us all to brunch with them tomorrow at the Yacht Club," she said. "She specially wants you, Father."

"Me?" he said, with a short laugh. He was pleased.

"I think it would be very nice," said Lucia.

"Well, they do know how to have a good time, the whole family," said Bee. "They're all popular, too. There's always a lot going on in their house, people coming and going and the telephone ringing."

"Ha . . . shouldn't care for that, myself," said Mr. Harper.

"I love it," said Bee. "This house is like a graveyard."

That's meant for me, thought Lucia. All right; I know I'm not popular.

"They're calling for us at twelve," she said.

Now it was done. She was letting Murray stay in prison.

Only over the week end, she told herself. I want Bee to get a little established with the Lloyds. I want them to see what she's really like. Then, later on, if they hear anything—about Ted Darby, or anything else, they'll see . . . Just this brunch, and then I'll tell Lieutenant Levy.

That Murray has been in prison before. A few days won't seem so terrible, to him. He's a criminal, anyhow. Being a dope-peddler is as bad as being a murderer. It's murdering people's souls.

I mustn't talk that way to myself. Like a cheap movie. I don't know anything about Murray, except what Mrs. Lloyd said, and maybe she is a little—irresponsible. All I really know is, that he's in jail for something he didn't do. I could get him out. And I'm letting him stay there.

That's a sin, she said to herself.

A car was coming up the drive, someone was mounting the steps. It's the police, she thought. They've traced that market list.

"I'll go, Sibyl!" she called, and pushed back her chair.

A small delivery van stood outside the house and the driver, a burly man in a singlet, stood leaning against the porch rail.

"Holley?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Package," he said, and went back to the truck, returning with a big bundle clumsily wrapped in brown paper.

"Well, but from where?" Lucia asked.

"Wouldn't know," he said. "I was tole to deliver it to Mrs. Holley."

He held it out to her and she took it, and was surprised by its heaviness. The driver turned away, got into his truck, and drove off.

"What is it, Mother?" asked Bee, standing beside her.

"It's probably something Sibyl ordered," said Lucia. "I'll take it into the kitchen. Go on with your lunch."

But Bee followed her into the kitchen; she began to pick at the string on the package when Lucia set it down on the table.

"Why are you so inquisitive?" cried Lucia. "*Do* go back to your lunch, Bee!"

Sibyl stood by the window, silent.

"Good lord!" cried Bee. "It's a ham! A simply huge ham!"

"Came from my nephew," said Sibyl. "Told me he'd send one, soon as he could."

"Without any red points?" Bee demanded.

"I've got plenty of red points, Miss Bee," said Sibyl, mildly.

Bee followed her mother into the hall.

"I hope Sibyl isn't mixed up in any black market business," she said. "I *despise* that."

"You ought to know Sibyl better than that," said Lucia.

"Well, just the same, I call it very queer," said Bee. "A simply

huge ham arriving, and nobody asking for red points, or money, or anything."

Lucia sat down at the table again. I don't know where that ham came from, she thought. And I'm not going to think about it. Ever.

ELEVEN

DEAR TOM: We've met some very nice people here, named Lloyd. It was David who found them, of course; he's like you about making friends. Mrs. Lloyd's asked us all to brunch with them tomorrow at the Yacht Club, and it ought to be fun. Mrs. Lloyd says they serve lunch on little trays with fishes painted on them by a girl . . .

This is nonsense, she thought. How can I write drivel like this to Tom? Tom—in a war? But I don't know what to write to him. If he knew what I'd done . . . What I'm doing *now*. Letting an innocent man stay in prison.

It's a sin. What I did about Ted Darby was illegal. I dare say it was foolhardy. But this is a sin. It's bearing false witness against your neighbor, not to speak when you know the truth. Suppose Mrs. Lloyd is mistaken, and Murray isn't a criminal and a dope-peddler? Suppose he's a perfectly innocent man?

She had to get the letter finished, some sort of letter. But she was troubled by visions, very foreign to her. She imagined Tom standing on the deck of a ship that was rushing through the water; she could see his blunt-featured face raised to a sky sparkling with southern stars. She knew, in some way, that he was not thinking of her, but beyond that she could not go; she could not imagine the thoughts of a man with battle and death before him and behind him. She felt desolately remote from him, as never before.

That's because of what I've done, she thought. It's made a separation.

She took up her pen and finished the letter, fluently, quickly, and pointlessly. It was late, and she took a bath and got into bed, and turned out the light. And then she had visions of Murray. He was shaking the bars of his cell and shouting. Before God, I am innocent! I am an innocent man! His head was shaved and he was wearing a shapeless gray uniform. I am an innocent man! he cried. But nobody believed him.

Suppose he kills himself? she thought, and sat up in bed, aghast. The prisoner hanged himself in his cell last night. The prisoner cut his wrists. The prisoner went violently insane.

I'll have to tell Lieutenant Levy now, she thought. But I'll have to tell Father first. And then we'll get Lieutenant Levy on the telephone, and they'll let Murray out tonight.

She went along the hall to her father's room; she stood outside it, barefoot, in her pajamas, her black hair loose on her shoulders. Then she heard him cough a little, an elderly cough. A lonely cough. Did he lie awake in the nights, and think of his wife, who had lain beside him for twenty years? Did he think of the days when his life had been vigorous and stirring, and not lonely?

I won't do it! she said to herself. Not at this hour of the night. I won't do it.

And when she got back into bed again, she made up her mind that she would not do it until after that brunch. All right! she told herself. I'll take a chance. A chance that Murray won't get desperate. I'm gambling with a human life. That sounds like something out of a movie, but it's the truth.

On Sunday afternoon I'll tell Lieutenant Levy. No, I won't. On Monday morning I'll go to see that finance company, and if they won't lend me enough, I'll pawn my jewelry. I've got to get those letters back before the police get into this. It's going to be bad enough as it is, with all that shock and misery for Father. But I won't have Bee disgraced. I'm sorry about Murray. I'm so sorry . . .

Her visions of Murray so troubled her that she could not sleep; she got up and took two aspirins. You can see how people start taking drugs, she thought. Not from grief. I could bear it when Tom went away, when Mother died. It's this feeling of guilt, this horrible, shameful worry.

She waked later than usual; she dressed and went downstairs, and Sibyl was in the kitchen.

"Got the ham boiling," said Sibyl. "Then round about ten o'clock, I'll put it in the oven. Got some cloves left over, in a little jar. Got a little brown sugar. If you could spare a little sherry, ma'am?"

"Yes, of course," said Lucia.

She stood leaning against the doorway, heavy-eyed, oppressed. I suppose I ought to know . . . she thought. It's cowardly not to ask.

"Sibyl," she said. "Did your nephew really send that ham?"

"No, ma'am," Sibyl answered, without emphasis.

It seemed to Lucia necessary to go on with this.

"Well, have you any idea where it did come from, Sibyl?" she asked.

"No sense to look a gift horse in the mouth, ma'am," said Sibyl.

"Well, no . . ." said Lucia, and went into the dining room.

They took three newspapers on Sunday; one was especially for Mr. Harper; one had been requested by David, for certain comics he followed; the third was a sort of communal one. Lucia went through this one in haste, and found what she sought.

The Horton County police have arrested Joseph 'Miami' Murray in connection with the slaying of Theodore Darby on Simm's Island. . . . Five years ago Darby figured in the news as a dealer in pornographic art. . . . 'Miami' Murray has twice been convicted on drug-peddling charges. . . .

It's like one of David's comic strips, she thought. They're so *very* criminal. Why should people like Father and Bee have to suffer, just to clear a man like that Murray?

She had learned that answer by the time she was ten years old. Because it was right to tell the truth, and wrong to hide it. Because it was wrong to let anyone be blamed, unjustly, for anything. It was as simple as that. *Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour.*

That drug-peddler isn't my 'neighbor'! she cried to herself. And I'm not bearing any kind of witness against him.

She could not eat anything. She drank the two cups of coffee from the little pot Sibyl had brought in, and then she went into the kitchen.

"Sibyl," she said, "I think I'd like another cup of coffee."

"Never knew you to take three, ma'am."

I never did, Lucia thought. I never wanted to. Only, today I want to be—nice. I want to be gay and pleasant. I want the Lloyds to think we're a nice family.

A nice family? she thought. When Father killed Ted Darby, and Bee wrote him those letters, and I took Ted to the island, and now I'm paying blackmail. Why, if anybody knew about us, we'd be—outcasts.

Nobody's going to know, she thought. I'm not going to think about that Murray any more today. I've made my decision, and I'll stick to it. And not think.

She was curiously undecided about what to wear for the brunch. It was a problem which, as a rule, concerned her very little, only now she felt sure of nothing. She did not even feel like Mrs. Holley.

I want to look nice, she thought. But not too formal. And thinking about this, she was inspired to remember a picture in a magazine, and that was how she wished to look. She put on a black blouse with a high neckline and a white skirt; she looked in the mirror and was pleased with the debonair and somehow soldierly effect.

Mr. Harper was waiting for her in the sitting room.

"I suppose," he said, "that as long as these people have invited me, I'd better go. But I'm a bit past the age for enjoying *al fresco* meals." He laughed a little. "I prefer my tea—without ants," he said.

Lucia laughed, too. Oh, you darling! she thought, with a pang. You're dying to go. And you look so nice and handsome and pleased.

"Are the children ready, do you think?" she asked.

"Oh, yes. Yes. On the veranda, reading the news," he said. "Quite a little family excursion, eh? All four of us."

He's proud of us, Lucia thought, and it touched her almost unbearably. Everything about this day had pain in it, and, with the pain, a feeling of reckless triumph. She had got this day for them; she had bought it for them, at a price she could not begin to compute. There could never be another day like it; it had, for her, the heartbreaking clarity of a lovely scene never to be revisited.

The Lloyds were bathed in this clear light. Mrs. Lloyd, her hair blowing wildly about her thin, rouged cheeks, sat among her children, with her sweet mother-cat smile, and they were gentle to her. There were Owen, and a vivid, pretty daughter, and a nimble boy of fourteen, all of them good-looking, polite, and at ease. More at ease, politer, gentler than David and Bee. Well, I dare say she's brought them up better, Lucia thought. But I do think David and Bee are more remarkable, somehow.

The brunch had style. A table was set ready for them on the terraced lawn overlooking the bright water; the chauffeur brought cocktails in a thermos jug.

"The bar doesn't open till one," Mrs. Lloyd explained. "And anyway, the ones you make at home are generally a little nicer, don't you think?"

"In this case, I agree with you," said Mr. Harper. "Smooth as velvet."

"I'm so *glad*!" said Mrs. Lloyd. "Lieutenant Levy doesn't seem to be here, does he? But he said he never could be sure."

"'A policeman's lot is not a happy one,' " Mr. Harper quoted, and he and Mrs. Lloyd both laughed at that.

Lucia could have listened to them and watched them all for hours.

It's the loveliest day . . . she told herself. David was talking, with amiable condescension, to the younger Lloyd boy; Bee and the daughter Phyllis were talking together. It interrupted her dreamlike pleasure when Owen sat down beside her and began to talk, with an obvious effort.

He talked about himself. He was, he said, going back to Harvard, to take his senior year, and then there would be a job waiting for him in New York.

"It's a pretty good job," he said. "It's only three thousand to start, but the possibilities are practically unlimited."

"Oh, that's nice!" said Lucia.

He went on and on, in a curiously boring way for someone so young. He told her about his fraternity, about his Army record, he told her about sailing trophies he had won. I must say he's rather egotistic, Lucia thought. And then, suddenly, it occurred to her that he was telling her these things for a reason. He was trying to explain his qualifications as a suitor of Bee's. Oh, no! Lucia thought, in a panic. Bee's only seventeen, and he's much too young, too. No! He mustn't—

"There's the Lieutenant!" said Phyllis Lloyd.

The brunch had been cleared away by this time, and they all strolled down to the beach, a mild and amiable herd. They scattered there, the young people went away; Mrs. Lloyd gave all her attention to Mr. Harper, and Levy sat on the sand beside Lucia. She did not want him there. His presence made her remember everything that she wanted to forget. She wanted this day to be an interlude, all sunny and clear, and Levy made her remember Murray, in prison.

He talked to her in his quiet and gentle way; he talked about sea gulls and snipe and sandpipers.

"What a lot you know about birds!" said Lucia, politely.

"Well, since I've come here, I've got interested," he said. "I'm making a study of the shore birds, taking photographs of them, and so on."

That's an attractive thing to do, Lucia thought. Too nice for a policeman.

"Do you *like* police work?" she asked.

"Not always," he answered. "I started out to be a lawyer, you know. I was admitted to the bar. But police work appeals to me more."

"I should think it would be horrible," said Lucia. "Hunting people down, trying to get them punished."

"The function of the police is protection, Mrs. Holley," he said. "It's not punitive. I have nothing to do with punishing anyone. I enforce the law, that's all."

"I don't think so much of 'the law,'" said Lucia. "I think it's often very stupid and unjust."

"It's all we have, Mrs. Holley," he said. "It's the only thing that can preserve anything at all of our civilization. Whether it's religious law, or civil law, as long as it's something we've all agreed upon, and something we all understand—in advance—"

"I don't understand the law," said Lucia.

"You made it, Mrs. Holley," he said. "If we have any laws of which you don't approve, you have the right to work for their repeal."

"Yes, I know," she said, secretly rebellious.

"Women, above all, should value government by law," he said. "It's the one protection you and your family have against aggressive and predatory people."

"Oh, yes, I'm sure you're quite right," said Lucia.

She did not like him when he talked about his precious law, and she stopped listening to him. She leaned back, with both palms flat on the sand, and she allowed herself to relax. Far down the beach she could see her children, with the young Lloyds and some others they had met; she could hear her father's voice, talking contentedly with Mrs. Lloyd. Nice friends for them to have, she thought. I'm very glad this happened, right now. It was an immeasurable comfort to her that it should be like this, a golden, tranquil day, friendly, and a little de luxe. No matter what happens to me, she thought, I'm pretty sure the Lloyds would stand by Bee and David and Father.

She believed that something was going to happen to her. She had no formed idea of what it would be; only it was as if, in a few hours, she was going to walk out of this sunny world into darkness. She was not frightened, simply resigned, and tired.

It's rather soothing to hear Lieutenant Levy droning on like this, she said to herself. I think he likes me. I'm sure he'd never suspect me of breaking any of his precious laws. He's—when you come to think of it, he talks like a grown-up David. Maybe David will be a lawyer. Or a policeman.

Then she realized that Levy had been silent for some time, and, like most shy people, she was afraid of silence. She glanced at him, and he was pouring sand through the open fingers of one hand, a fine, narrow hand; his head was bent, his face in profile was grave, even melancholy.

"I'd like to see a flamingo sometime," she said, anxiously. "They must be beautiful."

"They are," he said, looking up. "I've seen them, in Florida."

"Oh, you've been in Florida?"

"I went down there, after a man," he said. "However, I like our own birds better. Sandpipers . . . D'you often go over to Simm's Island, Mrs. Holley?"

"Why, no," she answered. "Only—once."

She hoped that this hesitation was not noticeable.

"We went there for a picnic," she went on, "but we didn't like it very much."

"Lots of sandpipers there," he said. "Did you find a fairly good place for your picnic, Mrs. Holley?"

"It was just a strip of beach."

"Most of the island is marshy," said Levy.

"Yes, it is," said Lucia.

"Still," he said, "there are a lot of inlets. It wouldn't be hard to get a boat well into the marshes."

She was afraid to look at him. A trap? she thought.

"But who'd want to?" she asked.

"To study the birds," he explained.

"Oh, yes!" said Lucia. "Yes, of course."

I don't think he means anything, she thought. I think he's too nice to want to trap me. Especially at a sort of little party like this. He's come here to relax and enjoy himself. Not as a policeman.

But he was a policeman.

He offered her a cigarette, and lit it for her and one for himself.

"My housekeeper's getting tough with me," he said, sadly. "She wants *me* to go to market for her."

"That's not right," said Lucia.

"She thinks I get preferential treatment," he said. "She tells me that whenever I take the list to the store, I get things she couldn't get."

"Well, it could be like that," said Lucia. "Someone in the police . . ."

"She says—let's hope it's not true, but she says they don't take enough points from me. Very unethical, that would be."

"I suppose it would be."

"For instance," he said, "how many points should I give for half a pound of Royal Grenadier cheese?"

"Twelve red points," said Lucia.

"Is it a good brand?"

"Oh, yes! We like it best of all."

He turned his head quickly.

"I see!" he said.

But he did not raise his eyes, to look at her. It was as if what he had heard was enough.

He did mean something. She had said something to make him prick up his ears.

TWELVE

"I've got to go into New York this morning," Lucia said, at the breakfast table.

There was a silence; her family sat as if stunned.

"But, Mother! You never said a word . . . !" Bee protested.

"Well, why should I, dear?" said Lucia. "I've just got to run in, to look after some business."

"Business?" said her father. "I expect to be going in to town myself, later in the week. Maybe I could attend to things for you, m'dear."

"No, thank you, Father. It's just some little details."

There was another silence, and she resented it. Other people go to New York, she thought, and nobody's so amazed. I bet Mrs. Lloyd goes to New York whenever she feels like it. She made for herself a picture of Mrs. Lloyd at *her* breakfast table. Children, she said, I'm going in to New York this morning. Oh, are you, Mother? said her children.

"What train will you get back, Mother?" asked David.

"I don't know exactly, David. Early in the afternoon."

"If you'll make up your mind now," David said, "I'll meet you with the car."

"There's no sense wasting gas, when we're so short, David. I'll take a taxi."

"Very well," he said, stiffly.

"Mother," said Bee, "I think I'll go in with you."

"Well, not today, dear."

"I want to look at coats, little short coats. You can go ahead and attend to this 'business,' whatever it is, and I'll meet you for lunch."

"I'm having lunch," Lucia said, "with Mrs. Polk."

"For Pete's sake!" cried David. "What d'you want to see that old harpy for?"

Lucia regretted having chosen Mrs. Polk, a simpering white-haired lady of great culture, who had managed the lending library they had patronized in New York.

"You said she'd gone to Washington," said Bee.

Oh, let me alone! Lucia cried in her heart. Ask me no questions and I'll tell you no lies.

"Well, you wouldn't mind my being along, if it's only Mrs. Polk," said Bee.

"She said she wanted to talk to me about something rather special," said Lucia. "We'll go together someday very soon, Bee."

"But what could Mrs. Polk possibly want to talk to *you* about?" asked Bee. "You hardly know her."

"I wish you wouldn't keep *on* at me so!" cried Lucia. "I have absolutely no freedom at all! I can't do the simplest thing without all this nagging—"

She stopped short, well aware that she had shocked all of them, her father and her children. My disposition is getting horrible, she thought. Well, I'm sorry, but I can't help it.

"Will you telephone for a taxi, please, David?" she asked, with cold dignity.

All the way to the station, her anger occupied her mind. Good heavens! Can't I even go in to town, without all this silly fuss? I'm not a child, or an idiot. I'm not a slave, either. I can go to New York whenever I think best, and I don't intend to be cross-examined by my own children. They ought to have confidence in me, and so should Father. Complete confidence.

But when she got on the train, she realized, with a faint shock, that what she ought to be doing, and must do, was to plan the day before her. First I'll go to the bank, she thought, and get my jewelry out of the safe-deposit. Then I'll go to that finance company. If I can't get enough from them, I'll have to pawn my things, to make up the difference. Anyhow, then I'll meet Mr. Donnelly and give him the money. Then I'll call up Lieutenant Levy. No. I'll have to warn Father first. Oh, how can I? How can I tell him he killed Ted Darby? They'll question him, and maybe they won't believe what he says.

They'll ask, why did you go to the boathouse to see deceased? I'll have to tell him not to mention Bee. I'll say I saw a light there, and I thought it was a prowler. That's a funny word, but everybody uses it. The lawn mower was taken by a prowler. There are prowlers in the neighborhood. I wonder if the police use it, write it down? John

Doe, charged with prowling. I wonder if there are any women prowlers.

Stick to the point, you fool. Remember what this means. I could get Father to promise not to mention Bee, but I'd never, never be able to get him to tell a lie. He'd just be silent. Mr. Harper, why did you go to the boathouse? All by yourself, in the pouring rain? I refuse to answer that question, sir. Then we'll lock you up until you do answer.

Suppose they lock me up, too? For taking away the body. The children would be left alone. I know Sibyl would look after them, but think of the disgrace . . .

Oh, it can't be true! Things like this don't happen to people like us. I can't tell Lieutenant Levy. But I cannot let that Murray man stay in jail, not even one more night. Taking Ted away was breaking some sort of law, I suppose. But letting that Murray man stay in jail, when I know he's innocent, is really evil. It's a sin.

This was like a fever. Her thoughts came too fast; they merged one into another, in panic confusion. This won't do, she told herself. One thing at a time. First I've got to get the money, so that I can buy back poor little Bee's letters. That's the first thing. First things first. I can't afford to be so flustered.

When the train entered the tunnel, she looked at herself in the window, and she was dismayed. She had taken great pains with her dressing; a black suit, the little black hat with a veil, a white blouse, white gloves. Sophisticated, she had thought, and rather businesslike. But the image she saw in the black window looked idiotic; a white face, the collar of the blouse like a clown's ruffle, the little hat perching too high. Fool! she called herself. If I wasn't a fool, I wouldn't be in this position.

She took a taxi to the bank, and it was her misfortune that she kept on feeling like a fool, a clown. She felt that the man she spoke to was amazed at her and her request. Another man went with her, down to the strange, sinister vaults; a guard with a revolver in a holster opened the door for her and waited outside while she went in alone, to get out the jewelry. It was in a manila envelope, and on it was written, in Tom's handwriting, "Lucia's jewelry."

Oh, Tom! Oh, Tom! Everything so carefully arranged for me—so that there wouldn't be any trouble—if you didn't come back . . . A loud sob came, and a sudden rush of tears; she fought them furiously; she dried her eyes and came out.

The distinguished elderly man who had escorted her gave her a form to sign. "*Thank you!*" she said, and hurried away.

She took another taxi to the offices of the Individual Loan Service Association, and now she had no illusion left of seeming sophisticated and businesslike.

"You want to pay off on a loan?" a drowsy, dark-eyed boy asked her.

"I want to get a loan," she said. "Make a loan. I mean, get one."

"Aw right!" he said, and went away, leaving her in a stately high-ceilinged hall set with Renaissance furniture. A young woman came out, and led her to a table, a young woman with round, rouged cheeks and modishly waved white hair.

"What amount did you wish to borrow?" she asked.

"Oh . . . Five thousand dollars," Lucia answered.

"That's quite a lot of money," said the white-haired young woman.

"Where are you employed, Mrs. . . . ?"

"Holley," said Lucia. "I'm not employed anywhere. Not just now."

"What is the purpose of this loan, Mrs. Holley?"

"Well, I need the money," said Lucia.

"Doctors' bills? Paying off a mortgage?"

"Well, your ad says, no red tape."

"We have to protect ourselves, Mrs. Holley. Especially in the case of such a large amount. Have you a weekly or monthly income, Mrs. Holley?"

"Yes."

"What is the source of this income, Mrs. Holley?"

"It's from my husband."

"Will you give me the name and occupation of your husband, please?"

"I'd rather not," said Lucia. "You said you'd lend money on a note. All right. I'll sign a note."

"How much is your income, Mrs. Holley?"

"Well, it's around five hundred a month."

"How much do you think you could repay every month?"

"Well . . . Fifty dollars?"

"Do you realize how long it would take you to repay five thousand dollars at that rate, Mrs. Holley?"

"Yes!" said Lucia, loudly.

"I'm afraid we couldn't consider it, Mrs. Holley. Unless you have collateral. D'you own any property? A car?"

"I've got a car."

"In your own name?"

Tom did that. The car's in your name, Lucia, so that if you ever want to sell it, or trade it in, you won't have any trouble. So that if he didn't come back . . .

"What's the make of your car, Mrs. Holley? How old is it?"

She had to go on with this, but she had no hope left.

"Well, why don't you do this?" said the white-haired young woman. "Drive the car in someday, and we'll get someone to look it over. Ask for me. Miss Poser."

"Your ad said, no delay."

"But we have to protect ourselves, Mrs. Holley," said Miss Poser. Against *me*? Lucia thought. As if I was a crook?

"Well, how much do you think they'd let me have on the car?" she asked.

Miss Poser said it depended upon the condition of the car, and upon other things.

"But what's the most I could get?" Lucia asked.

If everything was satisfactory, it might, Miss Poser said, come to five hundred dollars.

"Five *hundred!*" said Lucia.

Miss Poser rose.

"You drive the car around sometime," she said, pleasantly enough.

It was a dismissal. For the first time in her life, Lucia was a person to be got rid of, a queer, troublesome, suspect person. Coming around here, trying to get five thousand dollars. Did you ever!

"Would you like to see some jewelry?" Lucia asked.

"Why, no. No, thanks," said Miss Poser.

She was obviously startled and uneasy.

"We don't make loans on personal effects," she said.

"I see!" said Lucia. "Well, thanks!"

She went over to Madison Avenue and walked uptown, looking in vain for a pawnshop. It's getting late, she thought. Mr. Donnelly won't wait. He'll go away. She signaled a taxi and got into it.

"D'you know where there's a pawnshop?" she asked the driver. "A—reliable one?"

"Sure," said the driver.

She was glad that he showed no surprise, not even any interest. It probably doesn't seem queer to him, she thought. He probably knows about society women and duchesses and people like that pawning their jewels. Only Father'd be terribly upset. He has all those little

jokes about hock shops, and cockneys hocking their Sunday clothes every Monday and getting them out on Saturday, and things like that. He'd hate me to be doing this.

I don't like it much, myself. But I don't care, if only they won't be rude to me. I didn't know I was so sensitive. It's rather disgusting, to be so sensitive. I thought I was pretty tough. But I'm not. Not when I get out in the world. Then I'm a nincompoop. If one of those reporters stopped me in the street and asked me what I thought about Russia, or something like that, he'd put me down as Mrs. Lucia Holley, Housewife.

Why is it 'housewife'? What would I call myself if we lived in a hotel? Nobody ever puts down just 'wife,' or even just 'mother.' If you haven't got a job, and you don't keep house, then you aren't anything, apparently. I wish I was something else. I mean, besides keeping house, I wish I was a designer, for instance. The children would think a lot more of me, if I was a designer. Maybe Tom would, too.

No! Tom likes me the way I am. Only, if I could be even a little different when he comes back? I don't mean bustling off to an office every morning. He wouldn't like that. But if I could go to an office or a store now and then, meet outside people. Have interesting little things to tell at dinner. Not be—just me, year after year . . .

"Here you are!" said the driver, stopping before a place on Sixth Avenue.

"Will you wait, please?" Lucia asked.

"Okay," said the driver.

She was frightened. It was such a queer little place, with a metal grille over the window in which was displayed a crazy jumble of things, a mandolin, clocks, candlesticks, a fur neckpiece, an old-fashioned pearl stickpin in a box lined with purple plush. Do they put everything in the window? she thought. I'd hate my things to be there. Mother's pearls, and the ring Tom gave me. I hate this! I hate all this! It's worse than taking Ted over to the island.

It was dim inside the shop, and so queer. A dark, moonfaced young man in shirt sleeves came behind the counter; she thought he looked scornful, and she put on a manner of cold aloofness.

"I'd like to borrow some money on some jewelry," she said.

He said nothing. She opened her purse and took out the long envelope; she handed him the little boxes and he emptied them onto the counter.

"How much do you want?" he asked.

"Well, as much as possible," said Lucia.

The rings, the bracelet, the clasps, the necklace lying on the counter looked, she thought, like junk, worthless and dull. He gathered them up and took them to a little table by a window; he weighed them, looked at them through a glass in his eye, and she stood at the counter, waiting, in cold despair. It's my last chance, she thought. Whatever he gives me is all I'll have for Nagle, and it can't possibly be enough. Maybe he'll say ten dollars. Maybe he'll cheat me. I don't know. I don't care.

He brought the things back to the counter.

"They're very nice," he said. "The settings are nice."

She was startled by his words, and his tone, mild and kind.

"Pretty old, these two," he said. "I guess you think a lot of them."

Tears came into her eyes. All she could do was to ignore them, and keep on looking at him.

"Maybe you'd rather have a smaller loan," he said, "so it'll be easier to get them back?"

She shook her head.

"No, thank you," she said, unsteadily. "As much as possible, please."

"I can let you have six hundred and twenty-five on these," he said.

"Okay!" she said, suddenly and clearly.

"Or maybe we could bring it up to six-fifty," he said, looking down at the things.

"Thank you," said Lucia. "Can I get the money today?"

"Right now," he said.

"Will you—are you going to put them into the window?" she asked, still ignoring the tears on her cheeks.

"Oh, no!" he said. "That's only the things for sale." He glanced up. "Y'see, if you don't redeem the things, or you fail to pay the interest for a certain length of time, why, we're allowed to sell them."

"I see!" she said. "It seems—sort of pathetic, doesn't it? People's funny things."

"Sometimes," he said, "it's very pathetic. But mostly, well, you're doing a service. If anyone needs money in a hurry, well, here's where they can get it. There's been cases I know of where a man would have committed suicide if he couldn't get forty-fifty dollars quick. Then somebody'll come in here that would get put out in the street if he can't pay his rent. Well, the landlord won't take his fine watch. The landlord, naturally, he don't know the value of things. Then, say the next week, this man gets a good job. Soon as he gets his pay, he's back here, redeems his watch, and all is well."

Lucia was very much touched. I like him! she thought. He's trying to make me see that it isn't horrible and comic to be a pawnbroker. He wants it to seem sort of romantic.

She wished to help him in this; she wanted to show an interest in his business.

"Do you ever get wedding rings?" she asked.

"Well, not so many," he said. "People have a lot of sentiment about them and a wedding ring hasn't got much actual value, as a rule. Although you'd be surprised how many women throw away their wedding rings."

"But why?"

"Well, they're getting a divorce, or they're mad at their husbands, or one thing or another, and they throw away their rings."

"I saw a baby's silver mug in the window."

"The father's a drunk," he said. "That's a bad case. Well, I'll get your money for you now."

He brought it to her, all in bills.

"Good luck!" he said.

The taxi driver sat in the cab, smoking a cigarette.

"Do you know where I could get any cigarettes?" Lucia asked.

"Lady," he said, "if I knew that, I'd be rich. I can let you have one."

"Thank you!" she said. "Now I'd like to go to Stern's, please, on Forty-second Street."

He gave her a cigarette; he struck a match and held it for her, and she leaned back, relaxed, savoring the cigarette with something like bliss. It's all over, she thought. I haven't got the money, and I can't get it, ever.

I wonder if this is a little the way people feel sometimes when they're going to die, she thought. When the doctor says there's no hope, and there's nothing you can do but just let go. It would be a rather good way to die, not fighting and struggling, just letting go.

She had a picture of herself at home, lying comfortably in bed, with everything over. Nothing to be done, about anything.

But the children! she thought. And Father . . . They'd have to send a cable to Tom . . . Oh, no! You never can stop fighting and struggling.

The cab turned into Forty-second Street, and looking at her watch, she saw that she was over half an hour late. Maybe Mr. Donnelly's gone, she thought. You couldn't blame him.

But he was there, standing outside the entrance, tall, outstandingly

neat, in a dark blue, double-breasted suit and a gray felt hat; not smoking, not fidgeting, not glancing around; just waiting. He certainly doesn't look like a crook, she thought. He's quite distinguished-looking. Quite handsome.

As she was getting out of the cab he came forward, hat in hand.

"We could keep the cab," he said. "There's a place in the Fifties I think you would like."

She settled back in the cab and as he got in beside her, he gave the driver an address.

"I haven't got the money," she said, at once. "I never can get it."

He was silent, and she turned to look at him; she found him looking at her, with his curiously clouded blue eyes.

"Be easy," he said. "Take it easy."

THIRTEEN

There was no reason to feel reassured by this, but she did feel so.

"This place where we are going," he said. "There's a small room in it we can have to ourselves. Unless you'd rather eat out with the other people?"

"Maybe we could talk better by ourselves," she said.

"That's what I'd thought of," he said.

It was strange, she thought, that she had no hesitation about lunching alone with him in whatever place he had chosen. She remembered things she had read in old-fashioned novels about private dining rooms, always the scene of some amorous adventure, a seduction, drugged wine, a conniving waiter. But Mr. Donnelly isn't like that, she thought.

The cab stopped before a little restaurant of rather smart appearance, with a dark blue canopy over the entrance on which was lettered *Café Colorado*; a doorman in uniform came forward to open the door of the taxi. Donnelly took a bill out of his wallet and passed it to the driver.

"All right," he said.

"What?" said the driver. "Well, thanks. Thanks a lot."

They went down a few steps, to a carpeted restaurant with lighted lamps on small tables, and at one end a bar with a mirror lined by blue fluorescent lights. The place was well filled with people; nothing at all queer about it, she thought. An elderly waiter came hurrying up to Donnelly.

"*Bon jour, madame, monsieur!*"

"Tell the boss I am here, will you?" said Donnelly.

"Mais oui, monsieur!" said the waiter, and hurried away.

Very promptly a man came across the room to them, stout and swarthy, with a black mustache and sorrowful eyes.

"Ah . . . !" he said. "Ze room, Marty?"

"Parfaitement," said Donnelly.

"Zis way, madame!"

They followed him through the restaurant, and he opened a door beside the bar, leading to a dark little passage. At the end of this he opened another door.

"Voilà!" he said, with an air of pride.

"C'est assez bien," said Donnelly, and went on talking in French, of which Lucia had only a schoolgirl knowledge. She gathered, though, that he was talking about the lunch, and that the other man was called Gogo.

The room itself made her want to laugh, it was so exactly like something from one of those old-fashioned books; a small room without windows, a round table right in the center, set for two, with a bowl of red roses in the middle; there was even a couch, covered with blue and gold brocade.

"Alors . . ." said Gogo, and bowed and smiled and went out, closing the door after him.

"I did not introduce him," said Donnelly. "I did not think you'd be wanting to know him."

"Well, why not? Is he—?" She paused for a word. "Is he—questionable?"

"He is a good friend of mine," Donnelly said. "Only, he's not the class you're used to."

'Class'? she thought. What 'class' would you call Donnelly? According to his own words, he came of peasant stock; he had had no education; he was a blackmailer and God knew what else. But he had a courtesy that was natural and effortless; his speech had a correctness, a rhythm like that of a carefully trained foreigner. I don't know what he is, she thought.

He drew back a chair for her.

"I ordered a Martini for you," he said. "Will that be what you like?"

"Oh, yes, thanks!"

"Will you have a cigarette?" he said. "While you're waiting?"

He lit one for her, and one for himself; he moved an ash tray nearer to her, and sat down across the table from her.

"You speak French very fluently, don't you?" she said.

"It is fluent enough," he said, "but I don't know at all if it is very good. I picked it up in Quebec."

"Did you live in Quebec?"

"I was in a monastery near there for more than a year."

"In a monastery?"

"It was in my mind, those days, that I'd study to be a priest."

"Oh! Did you change your mind?"

"I had no vocation," he said, and after a pause, "the world was too much with me."

It seemed to Lucia then that this big, stalwart man, of unimaginable experiences, was a creature infinitely more sensitive and more fragile than herself. She had thought that often about David, about her father, about Tom; she had felt herself to be tougher, more flexible, better able to endure what must come.

"Didn't you ever marry?" she asked.

"I wanted to marry," he said, "but I never found a girl would suit me."

A slight resentment rose in her, against this male arrogance.

"You never found anyone good enough?" she asked.

"I did not," he answered, with simplicity.

The waiter came in then, with one cocktail on a tray.

"Aren't you having one?" she asked.

"I never take a drink till five o'clock."

"Why not?" she asked, a little sharply.

"There was a time when I drank too much," he said. "For three years I went roaring around, till I had the d.t.'s. It is a terrible thing. You'd never forget it. To Bellevue, they took me, and I saw the others that were in it. Old men, some of them, with their lives all drunk away and wasted." He paused. "Now I am moderate," he said.

"You've had quite a lot of experience . . ." she said, lightly.

"I have that," he said.

She sipped the cocktail, feeling an odd new strength in herself, a sense of power she had not known before. I can manage *him*, all right, she thought.

"You look very charming," he said. "It is a nice little hat you're wearing, and the white gloves, and all."

Then it all came back to her.

"I don't feel charming," she said, bitterly. "I've—failed. I can't get that money."

"You were trying?"

"I went to a loan company I saw advertised," she said. "They said they lent money on your note, without any red tape. Well, they wouldn't." She was silent for a moment, remembering Miss Poser. She opened her purse and took out the manila envelope, into which she had put the money. "Here's six hundred and fifty dollars," she said. "That's all I can get. *All*."

"Did you draw that out of your bank?"

"No. I haven't anything in the bank except what I have to use. No. I pawned some jewelry I had."

"Give me the ticket," he said.

"But—why?"

"Give me the ticket," he said, with a ring in his voice.

"But why? I don't want to."

"Give it me!" he said, rising.

"No! I won't!"

He stood over her, his hand outstretched, and she was startled, and almost frightened, by the power of the man, the concentrated force in him. His face was not blurred now; the angle of his jaw was sharp; his eyes were clear and cold.

"Give it me! Get it out of your purse."

She took the ticket out of her purse, reluctant and angry.

"Well, why?" she demanded.

"I will get your things back for you," he said. "Every damn one of them."

"They're not important. I don't care about them."

He began walking up and down the room.

"I will get them back for you," he said.

"I don't care about them!" she cried. "I only want to stop that Nagle."

"I will do that, too," he said.

"Oh! But can you?"

"I didn't know how it was—" he began, when the waiter came in, with shrimp cocktails set in ice.

"Bring the lady another Martini," said Donnelly, and she made no protest.

He sat down at the table.

"I didn't know it would be so bad for you," he said. "Carlie—Nagle, that is, told me he'd looked into it. He said you'd plenty of money; your father, too."

"I haven't any money," she said. "Only what I have to use."

"It's a wonder they wouldn't give you some."

"They do! My father and my husband have always given me anything I wanted."

"It is not enough," he said.

"You mean I ought to have a little special fund—to pay blackmail out of?"

She could see that that hit him, hard, and she was glad.

"I don't care about those bits of jewelry," she said. "I only care about saving my daughter from a miserable scandal."

"I'm not worrying about your daughter. She would get over a scandal."

The waiter came back with the second Martini and set it before her.

"I'll have a talk with Nagle," he said. "I will try to make him wait till the money comes in from the deal we've got on. I'd pay him for you now, only the two of us are hard up, putting all we could lay hands on into this new thing. The trouble is, Nagle is always nervous if he hasn't a good sum in the bank. Drink your cocktail."

"I don't want it."

"Then eat your lunch."

"I can't."

"Look!" he said. "If I cannot keep Nagle quiet, then let him go ahead. He will take the letters to your father."

"No! He can't! He mustn't!"

"Your father is a fine old gentleman, by what I saw. He will not be too hard on the girl."

"No! No!" she said. "My father *mustn't* know."

"You take it too hard. Let Nagle go ahead. It will soon be over—"

"No!" she cried, again. "You don't understand. Father can't know anything at all about Ted Darby."

She pushed back her chair, but she did not rise; she sat there rigid, thinking fast. If I tell Lieutenant Levy, Father'll have to know. Have to know about Bee and Ted; have to know that he killed Ted. And I can't let that Murray stay in jail. I've got to tell Lieutenant Levy, unless . . .

Unless somehow Murray could be got out of prison—without my telling the police.

"What is it?" Donnelly asked. "What is it worrying you?"

She glanced quickly at him, and the look in his face was clear to her. She did not care to put it into words for herself; simply she knew

that she could trust him with anything at all. She knew that she could make use of all the strength and the force in him.

"Father would go straight to the police, if Mr. Nagle saw him," she said. "And if the police find out about my daughter and Ted Darby—"

"They would not care about that," he said. "When it is people like yourselves, they'd try to keep the girl's name out of it. Her letters have nothing to do with Darby's killing."

"But suppose they have?"

"They have not."

Her heart was beating in a quick, erratic way that made her breath come too fast.

"Suppose it wasn't Murray who killed Ted?" she said.

"I know damn well it was not Murray," he said. "Murray was framed."

"But he's in jail for it. He'll be tried for it."

"He will go to the chair for it," said Donnelly. "I would not lose a night's sleep over that. He and Darby, the two of them, were dirty, double-crossing—" He checked himself. "They are rats," he said.

"Murray can't be punished—executed—for something he didn't do."

"Don't worry about him. He is not worth it."

"Could you get Murray off, if you wanted?"

"I would not want to."

"But *could* you, if you tried? Please answer!"

"I might," he said. "Why do you want to know?"

The waiter came in, and hesitated, seeing the untouched shrimps.

"Wait a while," said Donnelly. "Is there a bell in it? There? Then take it easy till I'll ring for you."

The man went out, closing the door behind him.

"You could get Murray freed?" she asked.

"Maybe. Only I would not lift a finger to do it."

She had the most vivid image in her mind of yesterday's brunch, the blue water, the green trees, the sunny tranquillity; Mrs. Lloyd's smile, the way Owen had watched Bee. Bee, and David, and her father, and Tom so very far away, all of them so innocent, all of them threatened by these dark, horrible shadows from another world. Ted Darby, Nagle, Murray, criminals, all of them, cruel, dangerous as wild beasts.

"What is it worrying you?" Donnelly asked.

"Well . . . Suppose I told you *I* killed Ted Darby?" she said.

FOURTEEN

He gave her a quick sidelong look.

"No," he said. "You could not kill anyone."

"It was an accident. He was—I got angry at him, about the letters. I pushed him, and he fell. It was in the boathouse, and he fell into the launch, on the anchor. It killed him."

He gave her another of those sidelong looks, wary and alert.

"Swallow your drink," he said. "It will do you good."

She shook her head.

"I didn't know he was dead, until the morning," she said. "Then I found him there. Then I took him over to the island. It was . . . It was—" She paused a moment. "I had—to get him off the anchor. It was . . . And then I had—to get him out of the boat."

Her voice was unsteady, her mouth trembled. Remembering it was worse than the doing of it.

"You'll have to believe me," she said.

She looked up at him; their eyes met for a long moment.

"I do believe you," he said. "There's no saint in heaven would do more than you'd do for your family."

"I was—never going to tell anyone," she said. "But now—I can't let Murray pay for it."

"You can that," he said. "Murray's no good at all."

"That doesn't matter. I can't let him suffer for something that's my fault."

"You can."

"No," she said. "I won't. It's a sin."

"A sin?" he repeated, as if startled. "It's hard, now, to know what's a sin and what isn't."

"It's never hard," she said. "You always know in your own heart what's right."

"Ah . . ." he said. "It's not that easy. You have to look at all sides of it. Now, there's your family. They're good people. They do good in the world. What's the sense in sacrificing them for a rat like Murray? You have to think out what's going to do the most good."

"No," she said. "You have to do what's right, no matter what comes of it."

"There are many don't agree with that," he said. "There are many believe you have to study out what's going to do the most good in the end."

"That's—" she began, and stopped herself. That's Jesuitical, she had been going to say, but maybe that was his belief. "I can't see things that way," she said. "I can't let Murray stay in jail. No matter what happens to us. I'd rather be in jail myself."

"You'll not go to jail," he said. "Look, now. Will you not try to eat a little? I've ordered a steak, but if there's something else—"

"That man's in prison this moment—while I sit here."

"Look, now. It doesn't mean to him what it would mean to you. He's been in it before."

"Oh, can't you understand how I feel?" she cried. "I can't sit here—eating . . . I don't know what to do. I don't know where to turn."

"Turn to me," he said.

She looked at him. He pushed back his chair and rose, and began to walk up and down the room again. He was a big man, and heavy, but his heel-and-toe walk was very light; his gleaming shoes seemed more flexible than anyone else's.

"It's my punishment," he said. "I've been a fool with my money, and worse. And now, when I need it, I haven't it. I'd give the eyes out of my head if I could pay off Nagle now. Or if I'd the money to pay Isaacs or Jimmy Downey to get Murray off." At the end of the room he turned and came back toward her. "Only don't be eating your heart out," he said. "I will do it."

"How?"

"I will work on Nagle," he said. "He knows we'll be getting this money before long, and I will pay him out of the share that's coming to me."

"Why should you?" she demanded, angrily. "Why should *you* pay blackmail to that horrible man, if he's your partner, or whatever you call him?"

"Well, you see," he said, "it was Nagle got the letters from Darby. Nagle thought up the whole thing. He has a right—"

"You can't talk like that! As if it was an ordinary business thing. It's—don't you realize it's a *crime*?"

He was coming toward her, so big, light-footed, his eyes blank. He was menacing. Then he wheeled round and went away from her.

"Yes . . ." he said. "Yes, you're right. God help me, I hardly know any more what's right from what's wrong."

"Everyone knows."

"Yes," he said. "But I cannot go back on Nagle now."

"Even when you realize that he's a criminal?"

"I am a criminal myself," he said.

"You're not," said Lucia. "Not really."

"I've broken the law," he said. "I've done wrong enough. Only, God be praised, I never killed anyone." He was down at the end of the room now, with his back to her. "Only in the war," he said, "the first war, I mean. And the killing in the war is not accounted a sin." He was silent for a time. "But I wasn't easy about it," he said. "I was young then, and when I'd see some of the Boches—that's what we called them, in those days—when I'd see them lying dead in a field or maybe a forest, I'd think, was it me did that? And now, when you see the young lads going off again . . . You'd think the devil rules the world."

He came back to her.

"There's yourself," he said. "So good—and look at the trouble that's come to you. But I'll get you free of it. I'll work on Nagle, and I will see Isaacs or Downey, about getting Murray out."

"But how can they? Unless they find someone else?"

"Isaacs can get anyone off," said Donnelly.

"But what will you tell him? Will you have to say that you know someone else did it?"

"I will tell him nothing at all. He'll go to see Murray, and they will fix it up together." He paused a moment. "Will you trust me?" he asked.

"Yes . . ." she said.

"There is nothing I would not do for you," he said. "Nothing in the world."

She lowered her eyes, not to see the look in his face.

"Could we have the steak?" she asked. "I've got to be getting home."

He rang the bell at once.

"Did you ever get a ham?" he asked.

"Oh, yes!" she said, and added, "Thank you."

"There's a roast of beef on the way," he said. "And three pounds of bacon."

"Mr. Donnelly—"

"Yes?"

"I'd rather you didn't send anything more. It's—hard to explain them. And—"

"Yes?"

"Well, they're black market, aren't they?"

"I suppose you'd call them that," he said. "But there's no need for it to be on your conscience at all. They are a present to you."

"Thank you very much, but please don't send the beef. Please don't send anything."

"I'm afraid they're on the way, if they're not there already."

The waiter brought in the steak, French fried potatoes, peas, a salad; he moved saltcellars, emptied the ash tray, and went away.

"That Sibyl is a fine woman," said Donnelly.

"But you don't know her!"

"I had a bit of a talk with her yesterday, when you were not home," he said. "She is a fine woman."

"Yes. She is."

"I asked her to let me know if ever I was needed," he said. "I gave her my telephone number."

How could you be 'needed'? Lucia thought. But she did not say it.

"Eat, will you not?" he asked, anxiously. "You're pale. Eat a bit of the red meat. And take it easy. I will get Murray out of jail for you, and I will keep Nagle off your neck. He'll give you the letters back. Trust me, will you not?"

"I do trust you," she said.

He gave a sigh, as if a weight were lifted. But he did not eat, nor could she. This room without windows was quiet, too quiet; she felt unbearably restless. She did something unusual to her; she opened her purse and took out a little mirror and looked at herself.

She did not look flustered and frightened now. It was true that she was pale, her hair a little disordered, but there was something in her face she had not seen in it before, a sorrowful and quiet beauty. That's how I look to him, she thought.

FIFTEEN

They did not want the dessert; he waved it away. No check was brought to him; he left some bills on the table, and they went out of the room, through the restaurant, and into the street. He stopped a taxi and took her to the train.

"You'll be hearing from me," he said. "And you'll take it easy, will you not? I'll look after everything."

She stood silent, her lashes lowered. She knew that he was looking at her; she knew that she was dark, slender and lovely; she knew

he was waiting for her to look up, and presently she raised her eyes.

"Thank you," she said.

"Could I come to the house?" he asked. "Just once more? Stop by, maybe, and bring a bottle of Scotch for your father?"

"I'm sorry," she said. "I'm very sorry, but—not possibly."

"Can I see you once more?" he said. "When I've settled all this, would you have lunch with me, the way it was today?"

She did not answer.

"Just the once, when it's all settled?" he asked. "I know how it is with you. You have your family and your—social position to think of. But if you'd give me just one more sight of you . . . ?"

There were people moving and hurrying all around them; a prodigious voice was announcing trains. But they were somehow isolated. He did not urge her any more; he simply waited, in a dreadful humility. The gate of her platform was opening, but still she stood there, with her lashes lowered.

Suddenly she held out her white-gloved hand, and looked at him.

"Yes," she said. "I'll be very pleased to have lunch with you someday."

She did not smile; they never smiled at each other. He held her hand for a moment, very lightly.

"Be easy," he said.

She went along the dim platform, in a silent, smooth-moving crowd; she got into a car. It was a smoker, and she decided to stay in it and have a cigarette. She sat down beside a man and opened her purse; she took out her pack, but it was empty; she felt in the corners; she turned it upside down.

"Have one of mine!" said the man beside her.

"Oh, but really . . . ! When they're so hard to get . . ."

"Not hard for *me*," he said. "Take one! Take one!"

He lit it for her; a burly man with a red face and bright little blue eyes.

"This shortage'll be over in a week or so," he said. "But in the meantime it doesn't bother *me* any. I've got connections in just about every line of business *you* ever heard of. Why, only the other day, this fellow I know was squawking about an alarm clock. Couldn't find one anywhere. I'll get you one this afternoon, I told him. Hey, no black market stuff for me, he says. I don't use the black market, brother, I tell him. I use *this*."

He tapped his temple with his third finger and raised his thin brows; he smiled, with his lips closed. And he was trying to impress

her. His little bright eyes flickered over her, not boldly, but with admiration.

"Here!" he said. "Let's change seats. You young ladies always like to sit by the window."

When he stood up, he put his hand into his pocket, and brought out two packs of cigarettes, Mr. Harper's favorite brand.

"Just slip these in your purse," he said.

"Oh, I couldn't!"

"Plenty more where they came from," he said. "You take them. You'll be doing me a favor."

He settled down cozily beside her.

"No, sir," he said, "I never married. I see you're wearing the badge of servitude." He laughed. "That's the way it goes," he said. "Every time I meet an attractive young lady, she's got a husband. Didn't bother to wait for me."

Now he got around to asking questions, and she had no objection to telling him that she had a husband overseas, that she had two children. Just like somebody in a magazine story, she thought.

"It's hard," he said, gravely, "it's very hard. Attractive young lady."

He's a wolf, she thought. But not a bad one. Sort of pathetic. She could see what he was getting around to now.

"I could meet you somewhere . . ." he said. "We could have a little dinner, go somewhere to dance. Do you good."

"I can't leave the children," she said. "I never go out in the evenings."

"Mistake," he said. "Great mistake. You could get one of these high-school kids to sit with the children."

He obviously pictured two small children, and let him, Lucia thought. She was surprised at herself for the bland enjoyment she found in his company. But she would not tell him her name.

"No," she said, looking into his eyes. "Really I can't."

"I'll give you my card," he said, "and if ever you change your mind—"

Mr. Richard Hoopendyke. Representing the Shilley Mfg. Co.

"Change your mind!" he said, rising when she did.

"Well, maybe . . ." said Lucia.

When she got out at the familiar station, it was strange to see the sunny afternoon quiet. It seemed to her that she had been gone so long, so very long; she felt timid about going home, as if she had in some way changed. She got into a taxi with two other people, a man

and a woman, and they rode in grim silence. They don't like me, Lucia told herself. They think I'm queer. An Undesirable Acquaintance. Well, maybe I am.

She felt queer. She was the first one to get out, and she told the driver to stop at the corner; she walked down the road, feeling strangely solitary. Such a long day, she thought, and so much has happened.

But, after all, what really had happened? She had tried to get a loan, and failed; she had pawned her jewelry. And then I had lunch . . . she thought. There's nothing so wonderful in all that. Only, I never can tell anyone about it. Certainly not Father and the children, and not even Tom. Tom would know there wasn't anything wrong, but he wouldn't like it. Lunch in a private room. With a crook. Tom wouldn't like that man in the smoker, and neither would Father or the children. They don't think I'm like that.

The house seemed unwelcoming in the late afternoon sun. It's nice when someone comes out to meet you, she thought. When the children were little, they always rushed out. That was nice. But then I always had some little present for them.

And she was empty-handed now; she felt it. She was bringing back nothing. The front door was unlocked, as usual; she opened it and went in, and Mr. Harper spoke, from the sitting room.

"Lucia?"

"It's me, Father."

He was sitting in an armchair, with a book in his hand, an empty teacup on the table beside him.

"Oh . . . Sibyl gave you your tea?" she said.

"Never forgets," he said.

She came up behind him, and kissed his silver head.

"Ha . . ." he said, pleased. "Have a good day, m'dear?"

"Yes, thank you, Father."

"Shopping, I suppose," he said. "Your mother used to come home, say she was exhausted, shopping all day. I'd ask her what she'd bought, and half the time she'd say she hadn't bought anything at all."

He laughed, his eyes fixed upon nothing; as if in his mind he could see that absurd and beloved figure. Lucia handed him one of the packs of cigarettes Mr. Hoopendyke had given her.

"That's very nice," he said. "Very welcome, m'dear. By the way, that Lloyd boy was here. Wanted my permission to put my name up at the Yacht Club. I told him my sailing days were a thing of the

past. I shouldn't make much use of the club. But I didn't like to rebuff the boy. Nice lad. And the dues are no great matter. I told him to go ahead, if he liked."

He wants to belong to the club, Lucia thought. He's lonely. I don't keep him from being lonely. I haven't any time. I don't know what I do with myself, but I never have any time.

"You'll be on a committee inside a week," she said. "You always are."

"Nonsense!" he said. "At my age—"

"Nonsense yourself!" she said. "People always have such confidence in you, Daddy."

"'Daddy' . . ." he repeated. She had not used that name for a long time, and it seemed to echo for both of them. Tears came into her eyes and she winked them away.

"I've got to see Sibyl," she said.

Sibyl was standing at the cabinet, in a dazzle of sun, breaking eggs, letting the whites slip into one fluted blue bowl, and the golden yolks into a green one. It was a delicate operation, and beautiful. She dealt with the egg in hand, and then looked up, with her tender, slow smile.

"Oh, you're back, ma'am?"

"Yes, I'm back. We're having the cold ham tonight, aren't we, Sibyl?"

"Thought I'd better cook the beef tonight, ma'am."

"The beef . . . ?"

"It came just in time," said Sibyl. "And I'll make the Yorkshire pudding Mr. Harper likes."

No questions about that beef. No questions, ever, about anything. But what does she *think*? Lucia asked herself. Above everything in the world, she wanted to know what Sibyl thought.

"It was a present," she said.

"Yes, ma'am," said Sibyl.

"You must have been surprised, when the beef came," Lucia said.

"No, ma'am."

"Well, why not?"

"Mr. Donnelly told me he was sending it, ma'am. Asked me, what would Mrs. Holley like. Said he'd get anything you wanted, any time."

The words, in Sibyl's soft voice, had an impact that made Lucia catch her breath. Nobody should say that. Nobody should know that.

"I've told him not to send anything more," she said. "I've told him not to come here again."

"Yes, ma'am," said Sibyl.

Now drop it! Lucia told herself. Let well enough alone.

But she could not.

"He's not the sort of person to have here," she said.

"He's unfortunate," said Sibyl.

"What do you mean, Sibyl?"

"Got in bad company," said Sibyl.

"He's a free agent. He could choose his company, like anyone else."

"We don't always know what we're doing, ma'am," said Sibyl.

"Till it's too late."

"It's never too late to—change," said Lucia.

"That's what my husband says, all the time. But I don't think people change much."

"I didn't know you'd been married, Sibyl."

"Yes, ma'am. He's in jail, in Georgia."

"Oh, Sibyl!"

"Been there eighteen years," Sibyl said, "and got seven more to go. Unless he gets a parole. And he won't."

"And you're—waiting for him?" Lucia asked.

"Obliged to," Sibyl answered, somberly. "Bill never did me any wrong. Not that he knew of. When they took him away, I told him I'd wait for him, and I have."

"Eighteen years!" Lucia said. "That must have been terribly hard for you, Sibyl."

"Yes, ma'am," said Sibyl. "And I don't know if it was sensible, either."

"You mean you've changed your mind about him, Sibyl?"

"It just didn't do him much good," Sibyl said. "He's got a hopeful nature. Thinks he can come out of jail, when he's fifty-four years old, and start a fine new life for us. Gets more and more philosophical."

"Well . . ." Lucia said, anxiously. "That's probably a good thing, Sibyl."

"Maybe so, ma'am," said Sibyl, with courteous deference. "The philosophy Bill's got, it's that everything that happens is for the best. He doesn't study about injustice. He's not bitter, shut up there all the best years of his life for what wasn't wrong at all."

"What was it, Sibyl?"

"Bill was a sailor," said Sibyl. "I reckon that's why I married him. I was just so crazy to travel. Don't know how it got in my head, but

even when I was a little girl, I used to think about it. Maybe it was out of books. The white people my mother worked for used to lend me books. I used to think, if I could ever get up to the frozen North, big, white fields of snow, those lights in the sky . . . And Paris. Bill told me it's all true about Paris. Colored people can go anywhere, see all the sights. Bill said we'd get to take trips."

"Didn't you ever?"

"No, ma'am. First thing we got married, I started to have a baby. And he gave up going to sea. He got a job in the mill; said he wanted to be near me, case there was any trouble. I lost the baby, and there he was. We had some money saved, and he said we'd take a trip. Went to a steamship office to buy us a ticket. Man said they didn't want any niggers on their ships. Bill said it was the law that he could buy a ticket if he had the money. The man hit him, and Bill hit him back. Assault with intent to kill, they called it. But the man didn't die, and Bill didn't ever think to kill him. He just hit back. He had a knife on him, but he always did, ever since the days when he was at sea."

"Maybe when he gets out, you can take a trip."

"No, ma'am," said Sibyl. "Bill'll be fifty-four, and I don't know if he can get him a decent job. He's got kind of queer, shut up in that jail. I reckon I'll have to support him. Well, I can do it, if I keep my health."

"Well . . ." Lucia said. "You must have been a wonderful help and comfort to your husband, all this while."

"I don't know . . ." said Sibyl. "He's got that philosophical nature . . . if I'd said I wouldn't be waiting for him, he'd have found some other kind of comfort. And I'd have found some way to see the world."

Lucia was silent, deeply impressed by this glimpse into Sibyl's nature. All these years, while she had gone about her work so quietly and competently, there had been in her this passionate longing to see the world. I never had that, Lucia thought. I never specially thought about traveling. I never wanted anything like that. *What did I want?*

She had wanted a husband and children, and she had got them. Ever since she could remember, everything she had wanted had been given to her. If she had wanted a doll, a bicycle, a new dress, her parents had given it to her. The husband she wanted had appeared while she was still in school; the son and the daughter she wanted had come to her without too much pain and effort.

Was she, then, a creature uniquely favored? Or was she a creature, not favored, but scorned and dismissed by life, denied what other people had? There was David, filled with his uneasy hopes, Bee and her stormy follies, Tom going through the experience he could never share with her. Even Sibyl. Even Donnelly . . .

I'm like a doll, she thought. I'm not real. As she sat at dinner with her family, this sense of unreality became almost frightening. They told about things that had happened to them today, and it was all real, and crystal-clear, to be understood by anyone. But her day was like a dream; if she should try to describe it, who would believe or understand about the vaults, the loan office, the pawnshop, the private dining room, even Mr. Hoopendyke in the smoker?

She sat down to write to Tom, with the same sense of numbed unreality. Who was this, trying to write a letter?

DEAR TOM:

I don't know where you are. I don't know who I am. Tom, I'm in such trouble . . .

Take it easy, Donnelly had said. I'll get Murray out, he had said. I'll keep Nagle quiet. But she could not take it easy. She was caught in a current that was carrying her farther and farther from the shore.

Her restless dreams that night were all of the sea. She dreamed that she was swimming, in a race with Mrs. Lloyd, and everyone she loved best was standing on the shore, watching. Mrs. Lloyd, in a little hat of purple violets, went through the water with incredible speed and ease, and Lucia went laboring after her, disappointing her own people so by her clumsy floundering.

She waked from that, and got up in haste, to look at the letter she had written to Tom, to make sure that she had not really written anything about 'trouble,' or even anything he might read between the lines. I don't think so . . . she said to herself. It seems to me just like my other letters. Just babbling.

She went back to bed, and she dreamed that she was in a row-boat, with an enormous rock on the thwarts. She pulled on the oars with all her strength, but she could not move the boat with that great weight in it. And she had to move; she had to hurry. At first it was because something was coming after her, out of the dark boathouse, something dangerous and dreadful. But, as she strained at the oars, she became aware that the danger was the rock itself. If she did not hurry, did not get to the place of safety, the rock was going to change into something else.

It was beginning already. Two things like ears were shaping on its top; it shifted a little, and she thought it sighed. Then it rolled toward her, and she waked, in a sweat of terror. There was a great wind blowing, and rain was driving in at the open window; there was a noise, as if the night itself were roaring.

She sprang up and closed her window and barefoot, in her pajamas, went out into the hall, to Bee's room. It was dark in there, and filled with the rushing wind, and her daughter lay there, unconscious, helpless. She closed that window, and went to David's room. He too was asleep, and the rain was driving straight on his back. She pulled off the damp sheet and covered him with a blanket, and he did not stir.

Tears were running down her face, it so pierced her heart to think of her children lying unprotected in the rain. She went along the hall to her father's room, and there was a light showing under the door; she knocked and he said "Come in! Come in!" in his steady old voice.

He was standing by the window in his flannel dressing gown, smoking a cigarette.

"Oh, pilot, 'tis a fearful night,' what, what?" he said.

"Yes, it *is*!" said Lucia.

"What's this? What's this? Are you crying, m'dear?"

"It's just the rain. I was closing the children's windows."

"Sit down and have a cigarette," he said. "I've got that pack you brought me, m'dear. Here! Sit down here. Very comfortable chair."

SIXTEEN

"I wish you'd ask Mrs. Lloyd to tea," Bee said at breakfast, with a hint of reproach.

"Well, I will," said Lucia. "I'll call her up after breakfast."

"There's the postman!" cried David, jumping up.

He went to the door, and came back leisurely, looking through the sheaf of letters he carried.

"Oh, hurry up!" said Bee. "Is there anything for me?"

"Take it easy!" said David.

"Mother, tell him to hurry up!" said Bee.

"*Take it easy! Take it easy!*" said David. "Four for you, Mother; two V-mails from Dad. One for you, Grandpa. Letter for me from Dad. And here's the vitally important mail for Miss Beatrice Holley. Letter from your alumnae association, letter from Boothbay—that

must be Edna. Oh, gosh! Here's a letter from Jerry, Bee. Open it and let's see if he's still in China."

"When I'm good and ready," said Bee.

They all sat at the table, opening their letters. The V-mails from Tom looked queer, Lucia thought; his sharp, clear writing was unfamiliar in this diminished form. These were not the actual letters he had written; this was not the paper his hand had touched; these dwarf letters had been handled and read by heaven knew how many people.

Have written to David sending some snaps. I'd be very glad to get pictures of the house. Glad to think of you all there, out of the city. Don't worry about your letters being 'dull,' old girl. They're just what I want. They give me the feeling of our life going on, the same old way. I lived in heaven, but I didn't know it. End of paper. Love to you, kids, Granddad. Most to you.

In the second letter he wrote:

Like to hear all the little details. Other men tell me their wives complain of shortages, meat, butter, and so on. How are you getting on? You never say anything much, old girl.

Tom . . . she kept saying to herself. Tom . . . And she thought that if he were to walk into the room this moment, she would have nothing else to say to him. Only his name; only Tom.

"Will you call up Mrs. Lloyd now, Mother?" Bee asked. "If you don't, you'll forget all about it."

"I don't forget everything," said Lucia.

"Oh, Mother!" Bee protested, laughing.

"I don't find your mother forgetful," said Mr. Harper. "On the contrary. Remembers everything, it seems to me. You must realize, young lady, that a woman with a family and a house to look after has a great deal on her mind. Like an executive in an office."

"Yes, I know, Grandpa. I was only teasing her."

"Well . . ." said Mr. Harper, somewhat mollified. "You'll understand, one of these days, Beatrice, when you have a home of your own."

"Excuse me?" said David. "I promised to meet a kid."

"Wait a minute!" Bee said, and ran after him; Lucia could see them talking in the hall.

Their friendship pleased her beyond measure, but it was always a little surprising. She remembered a day, long ago, when they had

been little more than babies, perhaps three and five. She had been writing a letter in the sitting room, and they had been in their nursery, with the door open. And, while she sought something to put into the letter, she had heard them talking. Those two baby creatures, that she had brought into the world, were living a life of their own, independent of her. They could talk to each other.

She had listened to them with rapture; it was a thing so thrilling that even now she remembered their talk. They had been making a baby plan. "You get your horse, David," Bee had said, "and I'll get Lilacker." That was her favorite, sacred doll, kept in a drawer; before this, she had always played alone with Lilacker; only now was the little brother admitted. Why, even if I died, they'd go on! Lucia had thought, delighted.

Why do you talk so damn much about "if you died"? Tom had asked her once. I can't say I enjoy it. Well . . . she had said. I don't exactly know. Maybe having children makes you feel like that. It doesn't make me feel like that, Tom had said. I've got insurance for you all; I've made the best arrangements I can. But I don't keep thinking about dying, all the time.

It's probably morbid, Lucia thought. It's probably some sort of enormous conceit. But it doesn't go away. When they were little, I used to feel that nobody else could understand how Bee felt about Lilacker. I used to think that nobody else would understand why David wouldn't say his prayers right. He just couldn't say "I pray the Lord my soul to take." He always said "keep." He didn't want anyone to "take" his soul. It frightened him. I'm still like that. I still think I'm the only one . . .

She telephoned to Mrs. Lloyd.

"I'd love to come!" said Mrs. Lloyd. "This afternoon? But I'm afraid Phyllis can't come; she has a dancing lesson. Would half-past four be too early? Because if I'm not home at *least* an hour before dinner, everything gets so queer. *Why* is it that just when dinner is served everyone locks himself up in a bathroom? They read; I know that. Or if they don't do that, they start making simply endless telephone calls. It must be psychological—but why *should* everyone be so psychological about not wanting dinner the moment it's put on the table?"

Mrs. Lloyd soothed Lucia; she liked her.

"Mrs. Lloyd is coming to tea," she told Sibyl. "Could you make some of those tiny biscuits, Sibyl?"

"Make popovers, ma'am," said Sibyl. "They don't take any shortening. Or we could have nice little ham sandwiches."

"Well, no," said Lucia.

She could not offer any of that ham to Mrs. Lloyd; it would be improper, even treacherous.

"Now, about the marketing?" she said. "I'll go this morning."

"Not much to get today," said Sibyl, with an air of satisfaction. "Got plenty of meat in the house. And now we can use more red points for butter."

She read off the list she had written.

"And if you'd stop in the gas company office, ma'am," she said, "maybe you could make them send a man about the icebox."

"I'll try," said Lucia.

She was surprised when Bee volunteered to go with her.

"I've got some things to get in the drugstore," Bee said. "Let's take the car."

"No," said Lucia. "I'd rather save the gas for sometime when we really need it."

They were both ready and waiting when the taxi came; Lucia in an old red and white checked gingham dress, stiffly starched, Bee in gray slacks and a white shirt, and that look she sometimes had of severely perfect grooming, her blonde hair pinned up under a blue bandanna, her arched, delicate brows a little darkened. She looked older this way; only when she turned away her head Lucia noted the sweet contour of her cheek, her childish neck.

"You're going to be disappointed, Mother," she said, "but I don't want to study art any more."

"I shan't be disappointed, dear."

"I'll tell you what I want to do, Mother. I want to go to Miss Kearney's, for her two-year secretarial course."

"Everyone says it's a very good school."

"It's the best," said Bee. "If you graduate from Kearney you're practically certain to get a job, no matter how bad conditions are."

"Well, I think that's a good idea, darling."

"Daddy won't think so," said Bee. "He'll kick like a steer."

"I'm sure he won't," said Lucia.

"Mother, honestly . . . ! You know how Father talks about career women. He's always saying that they miss out on all the best things in life."

"Well, you probably wouldn't want to be a career woman, dear."

"Yes, I do," said Bee. "I intend to keep on working after I get married."

"But if you have children—"

"I'd get a good nurse for them, and they'd be a damn sight better off than if I was home with them all the time."

"Don't swear, dear," said Lucia. "I don't see why they'd be better off. I don't see why a mother couldn't be as good as a nurse."

"Because the sort of mother who simply stays home and has no outside life can't help being narrow-minded," said Bee.

"Well, most nurses aren't so wonderfully broad-minded, that I can see," said Lucia.

"What's more, I think every woman ought to be able to support her children," said Bee. "Nobody knows what kind of world it's going to be, after this war. If you're going to take a chance and bring children into the world, you ought to be able to look after them, no matter what happens."

"Oh, yes . . ." said Lucia.

Anything rather than be like me, she thought. I'm simply a horrible example.

They rode in silence for a time.

"This new shampoo I'm going to get says it's specially good for dry hair," said Bee. "My hair's getting frightfully dry."

"You wash it too often," said Lucia.

This was a very familiar topic.

"I read an article about some women somewhere who wash their hair every single day," said Bee. "And they're famous for their beautiful hair."

"I never wash mine more than once a week," said Lucia, "and sometimes I let it go longer than that. And you'll have to admit that it's in pretty good condition."

"That's different," said Bee.

As if I were too old to *have* any hair, Lucia thought.

"I don't see why it's different," she said, coldly. "As a matter of fact, I've got rather remarkable hair. Hairdressers always speak of it. It's very thick, and it's very healthy."

Bee glanced at her.

"I know it is, Mother," she said, gently. "David and I always say so."

She kept on looking and looking at her mother.

"Don't stare so, Bee!" cried Lucia.

"Sorry, Mother," said Bee, and turned away her gaze.

They got out of the taxi at the market.

"I'll whip over to the drugstore, and come back for you," Bee said.

"Will you be long, Mother?"

"Oh, hours, probably," said Lucia.

It was not, in theory, a self-service market, but it was understaffed, and the customers had been trained to go about and find their own things, to weigh the fruit and vegetables. Then you tried to get a place at the counter, to spread out the unwieldy hoard, and if you were not alert, people pushed in ahead of you and cut you off from your supplies; they planked down their things, and sometimes knocked yours off the counter. I hate this! Lucia thought. I wish I was immensely rich and arrogant, so that people *had* to be polite to me, no matter how they felt.

"No paper towels," said the clerk. "Try on Tuesday. No sugar today. Only cheese we got is pimento, and you're lucky to get that."

The telephone rang and he went away to answer it; Lucia was still waiting his return when Bee came for her.

The girl in the gas company's office was distraught and superior.

"Oh, hasn't the man been yet?" she said. "I'll check on it, to see if he came."

"He *didn't* come," said Lucia.

"Maybe you were out," said the girl.

"We're never all out."

"Well, maybe he's been busy with emergency calls," said the girl.

"Ours is an emergency," said Lucia.

"No," said the girl, flatly. "We don't call yours an emergency. I'll check on it."

"Will you let me know when to expect the man?"

"We don't do that," said the girl. "He takes the calls in turn."

The taxi driver was an unfamiliar one, and odious.

"They ought to leave us make a charge for them big grocery bags," he said. "If trucks get paid for bundles, why not us? But no. People fill up the cab with them heavy bundles that are hard on the springs and all, and when they get out, it's a ten-cent tip."

"Give him ten cents!" Bee whispered.

"No! I might have to take him again," Lucia whispered back.

He stopped the cab before the house and Lucia leaned forward to pay the fare and give him a quarter tip. He said nothing.

"I can't get the door open!" said Bee.

"Pull the handle *down*!" said he. "Pull it hard."

"I suppose it would kill you to open the door," said Bee.

"No," he said, "and it wouldn't kill you, neither."

"Hush!" whispered Lucia.

Bee got the door open and they descended, and carried the big bags into the kitchen.

"Master David said could we have lunch a little early?" said Sibyl. "He wants to go out."

"Why, yes," said Lucia. "Half-past twelve, Bee?"

"All right," said Bee, moving away.

Lucia was about to follow her, but Sibyl came to her side.

"Mr. Nagle's here, ma'am," she said, very low.

Lucia looked at her.

"Ma'am . . . !" said Sibyl. "Sit down! There! Drink some cold water, ma'am."

"Where is he, Sibyl?"

"Put him upstairs in the boathouse, ma'am. Nobody else saw him. Told him he might have to wait quite a while, till you got a chance to see him."

Lucia sipped the water, fighting against a dreadful weakness that weighed upon her. I can't, she told herself. I can't talk to him. I can't see him. I can't—I really can't do anything. If I don't go, he'll go away.

He would not go away. She was certain of that. If she did not go to him, he would come here, to the house. I'll have to see him, she thought. I'll have to.

A furious anger sprang up in her. What's Mr. Donnelly doing? she cried to herself. What does he *mean* by saying not to worry, that *he'll* look after things?

What the *hell's* the matter with him? she thought.

SEVENTEEN

This anger helped her.

"I'll go and see him now," she said, rising.

The swing door opened and David came into the kitchen.

"Say, look, Mother!" he said. "Just glance over this, will you?"

"What is it, dear?"

"Take a look!" he said, holding out a sheaf of papers.

"But what is it, David?" she asked. "Won't after lunch do?"

"All right," he said. "Don't bother. I've got to post it right after lunch."

He was hurt.

"Oh, then I want to see it now!" said Lucia. "Give it to me, David!"

He hesitated, but only for a moment; he held out the papers again, neatly typed pages stapled together.

Ubu stood at the mouth of the cave and turned his shaggy head from side to side. Over his shoulders was thrown a rough garment of wolf-skin and in his hand he held a stone club weighing around fifteen pounds. The cave was on a mountainside and below him stretched the jungle, where roamed the saber-toothed tiger and other wild beasts who were the enemies of him and his.

"Is it a story, David?" she asked, glancing up.

"Sort of a good start, isn't it?" he asked. "I mean, you get interested in Ubu, don't you?"

"Oh, yes, you *do*!"

"I'll tell you what it's for," he said. "You know that Vigorex Gum program on the radio? Well, they're having a contest. Anyone under sixteen can send in a story, up to a thousand words, about any of the great inventions that changed the life of mankind. The first prize is a thousand-dollar War Bond. I bet you practically everybody will do stories about the printing press, telephone, things like that. Well, I've done the wheel. You'll see how I've worked it out."

"David, how interesting!" Lucia said. "Let's go into the sitting room while I finish it."

Nagle can just wait, she thought. Even if I was mean enough not to read David's story, I couldn't get out to the boathouse now. David would want to come with me—and what could I say?

Mr. Harper was in the sitting room, reading.

"When you've finished it, Mother," David said, "maybe Grandpa'd like to glance at it."

"Certainly! Certainly! What is it? A letter?"

"Well, it's a sort of story, in a way," David answered, laughing a little. "Don't worry, Grandpa. I'm not trying to be an author, or anything like that. I just thought I'd have a try for this prize."

Lucia sat down to read the story.

"Gosh, you're a slow reader!" said David.

"I know," said Lucia.

She was trying to make her distracted mind understand the words she read.

Ikko came out of the cave, bearing in her arms the infant just born, wrapped lovingly in the skin of a giant hare.

"Ikko! Look! Stone!" cried Ubu.

As Ubu stood watching the almost perfectly round Wonderstone rolling down the mountainside, into his brain was born the

great principle of the Wheel. He saw how round stones like this could be used to transport the bodies of slain beasts . . .

"Lunch is served, ma'am," said Sibyl.

"Just a moment," said Lucia, and finished the last page. "It's awfully good, David."

"The thing is, is it interesting?" he asked.

"It's awfully interesting!"

"The deadline's the day after tomorrow," said David. "I didn't mean to be so late with it, but I couldn't get it right. I've got to mail it right after lunch, but I'd like Grandpa to take a look."

"I'll read it at the table, if your mother doesn't object," said Mr. Harper.

Bee came into the dining room, with a towel pinned over her hair like a Red Cross nurse.

"I tried that shampoo—" she began.

"Hush, dear!" said Lucia. "David's written a story—"

"I've read it," said Bee. "I must say I think it's pretty darn good."

"Remarkably good," said Mr. Harper. "Yes . . . The thing is, my boy, have you got all your facts straight? I mean to say, these prehistoric animals—they all existed in the same era?"

"Yes, sir," said David. "I looked them up in the library. I did quite a lot of research for this thing."

I think I have a fever, Lucia said to herself. I feel so hot. I feel so—queer. I've got to see Nagle. Suppose he gets tired of waiting? Suppose he comes here?

As soon as he had finished lunch, David left the house, and Bee went out on the veranda, to dry her hair in the sun. I'll have to go by the back way, Lucia thought, and went into the kitchen. Through the window there she saw her father pacing leisurely up and down the lawn, hands clasped behind his back. I can't go that way, either, she thought. He'd ask me where I was going.

I must make up an excuse. I've got to get to the boathouse.

"Took some lunch out to Mr. Nagle, ma'am," said Sibyl. "Took him some of Mr. Harper's whisky."

"Oh, Sibyl, what a good idea! Was he—how was he?"

"He's quiet now, ma'am," said Sibyl.

As if he were a dangerous animal, quiet only for this moment.

"If you'll go up and lie down, ma'am," said Sibyl, "I'll tell you, soon as Mr. Harper stops his walking."

Lucia went up to her room, but she could not lie down, or even

sit down. She stood by the window where she could see the boat-house.

Donnelly . . . she thought. He told me not to worry. What the hell's the matter with him? Damn him. He let this happen. He's no good. He's nothing but a crook, a liar. I hate him. Damn him.

She glanced at her watch, and panic swept over her. Half-past one! It isn't good for Father to walk so long, at his age . . .

But that was his habit. On a stormy day, he would walk up and down a room for an hour or more. Oh, don't let him do that today! Or make Bee come in. I've got to get out.

She kept her eyes upon her watch now. That's a mistake, she told herself. I ought to read—or mend something. This way makes the time seem twice as long. Twenty to two . . . He *can't* walk this long.

It was a quarter to two when Sibyl knocked at the door.

"Mr. Harper's come in, ma'am," she said.

Lucia went past her and ran down the stairs, through the kitchen and out by the back door. Her father or Bee might be looking out of a window; they must not see her running. I don't want to run, anyhow, she thought. Nagle can just wait, damn him.

She walked across the grass to the boathouse and up on to the little porch; she opened the door and entered into the moldy dimness. There was no one in the room; there was not a sound to be heard. She closed the door and stood holding the knob.

"Mr. Nagle?" she called.

There was no answer. Is he—hiding? she thought. No. He's upstairs. Just sitting up there? If I go upstairs, suppose he's standing behind the door?

Suppose he tries to kill me? she thought.

That seemed to her quite possible. Nagle was mysterious to her as a creature from another planet; she did not think of him as a man, a human being; only as something wholly evil and dangerous. He's come for money, of course, she thought, and if he doesn't get any, maybe he'll try to kill me.

But suppose he wasn't there at all? Suppose he had got tired of waiting and had gone away?

Too good to be true, she told herself.

"Mr. Nagle?" she called again.

"Come up!" he called back.

The only thing to do was, to go quickly, without thinking. He was sitting in a wicker chair, in the upstairs sitting room, in shirt sleeves and lavender suspenders, his soft hat on the back of his head. The

lunch tray was on the floor, and on the table beside him was a bottle of whisky and a glass.

"You took your time, all right," he said.

"I couldn't help it," said Lucia.

"All right," he said. "I've done all the waiting I'm going to do. It's ten thousand now—and I mean now."

"I can't get it."

"You can get it, off your father. I checked on him."

"No. I couldn't."

"You get it—or else."

"Or else what?"

"I take one of your girl's letters to this guy I know on a newspaper."

"Go ahead," said Lucia. "No newspaper would ever publish a letter like that."

"Wait a minute, duchess," he said. "Wait a minute. Who's talking about printing any letters? All I want is, to get this guy after you. Just let me tip him off there's a good-looking blonde mixed up in the Darby case, and he'll do the rest."

"What good do you think that's going to do you?" Lucia asked.

"Plenty, duchess. Plenty."

He wants to do me harm, she thought. He wants that, much more than he wants the money. He hates me.

And that, somehow, took away all her fear of him. He wouldn't dream of killing me, she thought, scornfully, looking at him as he sat there with his hat on the back of his head, drinking her father's whisky. I'd like to hit him, she thought. I'd like to hurt him.

"Well?" he asked. "What about it, duchess?"

"Nothing," she said. "I can't give you ten thousand dollars. Or even one thousand."

"All right," he said. "Then you and that blonde girl of yours get the first train out of here, and stay out of here."

"What a crazy idea!" said Lucia.

"Get the hell out of this town and stay out of it. Or you'll wish you was never born."

He's just bluffing, Lucia thought, surprised, and still more scornful. Just trying to frighten me. He can't really do anything.

"You needn't wait," she said. "You won't get anything."

"I'll go when I'm ready," he said. "Just now, I'm not ready."

"Suppose I call the police?"

"Go ahead! Go right ahead and call the police, duchess. I'm a friend of Ted Darby's. I know he was mixed up with that blonde

girl of yours, and I'm here to see can I find out anything. So I give the cops one of her letters. And they'll make her talk."

Well, that could very well happen, if I called the police, Lucia thought. It's funny, when you think of it, but I really don't want the police getting into this, any more than he does.

"Well, duchess?" he cried.

"Stop calling me that!" she said, sharply.

"So you don't like it? That's just too bad, duchess. That's one mistake I never made, to get myself mixed up with one of you goddam society bitches."

"Society?" Lucia cried. "If you think I'm a 'society woman,' you're a fool."

"Oh, no," he said. "I'm no fool. I know your kind, all right. I seen friends of mine fall for them. You're just no goddam good, any of you. Any man that gets mixed up with one of you is finished. Look at Darby and—"

"Stop it!" Lucia said. "Get out of here!"

"When I'm ready, duchess. When I'm ready."

"You—" she began, and stopped, with a chill of terror at the sound of a step on the stairs.

Father? she thought. No, no! Oh, don't let it be Father!

It was Donnelly, tall and elegant, in a slate-gray suit, with a blue cornflower in his buttonhole.

"What's this?" he asked. "I could hear the two of you from outside."

"He's going to give the letters to a newspaperman—" said Lucia.

"Shut up!" said Nagle.

"Let her alone," said Donnelly. "What are you doing here at all, Carlie? It is a dirty, underhanded thing for you to do, when we had it all fixed up."

He spoke with severity, but not angrily.

"You got your money," he said. "Why wouldn't that be enough for you, Carlie? You'd no right to come here."

"Now you look here, Marty," said Nagle, rising. "If we got to have a showdown, we got to have a showdown. I come here, because some way I got to get this woman off your neck. You don't see it, but I do. She's going to ruin you."

"Let her alone," said Donnelly, still without anger. "It is a thing beyond your understanding, entirely."

"The hell it is!" said Nagle. "Look what she done to you already. A man like you, a man with a name—and yesterday you were passing the hat, getting a couple of hundred here, couple of hundred

there. D'you think I want the money you got that way? Listen. We went in this together; we were cutting fifty-fifty. And when she won't come across, what do you do? Pass the hat—to pay *me*. Like I was holding you up. I am not. I don't want your money."

"Well, you took it," said Donnelly, "and you told me you'd let her alone. You are a liar, Carlie."

"So I'm a liar. Okay. I'm not going to let her alone."

"You will have to," Donnelly said.

Lucia moved aside, so that she could lean against the wall. The two men stood facing each other; Nagle was shorter, he was overweight, he looked older, but there was a powerful energy about him, in the pugnacious set of his head, in the way he stood, with his rear thrust out. And Donnelly was blurred, vague; he showed no energy, only that severe patience.

But he'll settle things, she thought. One way or another. She leaned against the wall, completely passive. There was nothing for her to do, or to say; for the moment there was nothing she need think about. The two men were talking, but she did not listen to them. She was waiting; she was resting.

Until a note in Donnelly's voice startled her. She glanced at him, and his blurred look was gone; he was wary, his head a little bent, like a listening animal.

"What did yez say?" he asked.

"You heard me," said Nagle.

They're afraid of each other, Lucia thought, seeing in Nagle the same alertness, the same bodily stillness. As if the least little movement might make the other pounce.

"You told me Eddy and Moe were talking about it," said Donnelly. "Then it was you told them."

"It was not. Do you think you can go around in New York like you was invisible? You take her to Gogo's place. Champagne—"

"There was no champagne!"

"Okay, so there was no champagne. Okay. It was Pop that seen you there."

"Pop, was it?" said Donnelly. "And it was Pop told Eddy and Moe?"

"That's right," said Nagle. "It was natural that he'd tell them. She is the same woman they saw over in Darby's hotel, and Eddy and Moe were good friends of Darby's."

"Sure it was natural," said Donnelly. "Only that Pop is in Buffalo."

Nagle made a slight move, a shift of the feet.

"Maybe he wrote them a letter."

"He would not write anybody a letter. And he did not see me at Gogo's place. He went to Buffalo last Thursday. You are a liar, Carlie."

"Now, look here, Marty—"

"If Eddy and Moe were talking, it was you told them, Carlie."

Something was happening, something was changing in the two men who did not move.

"I did not tell them," said Nagle.

"You are a liar," Donnelly said again. "If they were talking, it was you set them on to it. I'll never forgive it you."

"All right. They were not talking. I only told you that to make you see what you were doing. You can't keep this thing hid; you can't do it. They'll find out, and it's going to get them worried. You play around with this society bitch, and she gets you talking. Okay. One day you talk too much, and she turns you up. And the rest of us, too. For God's sake, Marty, drop her! You never let a woman throw you before. For God's sake, show some sense!"

"It's in your mind to set the others on her," said Donnelly.

"Then let her get the hell out of here. We—"

Donnelly struck, without any warning; his arm shot out straight from the shoulder, his fist caught Nagle on the point of the jaw, and sent him stumbling backward, with little running steps. He crashed into a chair and fell on the floor, with a thud that shook the house. As quick as a cat, Donnelly was on his knees beside him.

"Is he hurt?" Lucia asked, in a flat voice.

"No," said Donnelly. "Go back to your house."

He was bending over Nagle, and she moved, to see what he was doing.

"Marty . . . !" she cried. She tried to scream, but her throat contracted. "Marty . . ." she said, in a whisper.

"Be quiet!" he said, his teeth clenched. "Go home!"

She caught his arm, but it was like steel, like stone. His fingers were tight around Nagle's throat, and Nagle's pale eyes were bulging, his tongue showed between his gasping lips, his face was darkening.

"Marty . . ." she said, pulling at his arm with both hands. "Stop . . . I beg you . . . I beg you . . ."

She herself was choking. With her eyes fixed upon Nagle's awful face, she put her hands to her neck. She was choking and she was blind now, looking into blackness.

Donnelly lifted her onto the sagging couch. He raised her head and held a glass to her lips.

"Drink a little," he said. "It will help you."

The whisky had a rank, sour smell. She took a few sips; then she pushed the glass away, so violently that it fell out of his hand onto the floor.

"His glass . . ." she said.

She lay back, for a little time; then she sat up. Donnelly stood beside her, smoking a cigarette.

"As soon as you're able," he said, "go back to your house. Try now; can you get up?"

"Nagle . . . ?" she said, with a great effort.

"I will look after him."

"You killed him," she said. "You killed him. You choked him."

"I had to do it," he said.

"You killed him. You choked him—"

"Let you get back to your house now," he said.

"You killed him. You choked him—"

"Don't be saying that, darlin'," he said.

"How *could* you? How *could* you?" she demanded, beginning to cry.

"I had to do it. It was in his mind to set the two of them on you."

"Better . . ." she said. "Much better . . ." She was sobbing. "Anything—would be better—than that. Than *that*."

"Look!" he said, sitting down on the couch beside her. "It is hard for you, but you'll have to have courage. You'll have to stop crying. Suppose, now, somebody was to call you, and you'd have to go downstairs?"

"O God!" she cried, in despair.

No matter what happened to her, no matter how she felt, her first thought must always be, how to face her world. Her little world, her children, her father.

"I'd like some more whisky, please," she said. "Could I drink out of the bottle?"

"You could," he said. "Only go easy."

She took a few swallows.

"Have you a cigarette?" she asked.

He gave her one and lit it for her.

"Thank you," she said.

"You're welcome," he said.

They spoke with formality, as they had in the past. She smoked for a time, sitting up straight, growing quieter, growing stronger.

"What will you do—with him?"

"Leave it to me," he said. "Go back now to your house, and if

they ask you any questions, tell them this. Tell them you'd invited me to take a cup of tea before I'd be off to Montreal. Then, while you were out this morning, Nagle comes, asking for me, and you sent him off to the boathouse to wait. Well, after a while you get to wondering is he still there, and you walk out, and you hear the two of us, having an argument. You wait awhile, and then you're off, leaving us at it."

"All right!" she said, frowning. "But what are you going to do with him?"

"Say it for me once, will you not?" he asked. "I mean, the way you'll tell it, if they ask you any questions."

"No. I'll remember."

"Say it once, will you not?"

"Oh . . . I'll say I asked you to tea, and Nagle came, asking for you, and I told him to wait in the boathouse, and I heard you having an argument. Now I want to know what you're going to do with him."

"I will take him in your boat and row off with him."

"That's ridiculous!" she said. "There are always lots of people out on the water, this time of day."

"I will manage," he said.

"Not that way. There's no place you could take him."

"I will leave him here, then, where he won't be seen, and I will come back for him later."

"Here? No. Can't you think of anything better than that?"

"I cannot," he said.

"Then I will. The—" She looked up at him, frightened to see him blurred and vague again. "Don't you realize the danger you're in?"

"I will manage."

"Your plans are—simply idiotic. If you're found with him, you won't have a chance. I'm sure any doctor would know how he'd been killed. You want me to tell people I left you having an 'argument' with him. I suppose you mean to swear you killed him in self-defense. Well, nobody would believe that. Not when you choked him."

"I will manage," he said.

He stood there, so big, so slow, so vague.

"You're a perfect fool!" she cried. "You've got to get him away. I'll bring my car to the door, and you—"

"I cannot drive," he said.

"Yes, you can. You drove me—"

"I cannot drive now," he said. "My arm has gone dead on me."

"What do you mean?"

"My arm," he explained. "I cannot use it at all."

She noticed then that his right arm hung limp at his side.

"You've got to use it," she said. "That's all just psychological."

"How's that?" he asked, anxiously.

"It's just imagination. You can use it."

"It is a judgment on me," he said.

"What!" she cried. "You *can't* be so ignorant and stupid. I'm going to bring the car here, and you've got to get him into it, and take him away. You've got to leave him somewhere, and then go home. Nobody ever needs know what happened to him. *Don't* be so spineless! Aren't you man enough to fight for your own life?"

"I cannot move my arm at all," he said. "It was done to me, so I could not get away. Go back to your house now—"

"You fool! You idiot! You coward!" she cried. "Snap out of it!"

He did not answer.

"Then I'll get you out of it," she said.

EIGHTEEN

"Now look here!" she said. "I'll bring the car to the door and we—"

"No," he said. "I will not let you get into this."

"If you won't help me," she said, "I'll do it all alone. I'll get him down the stairs and into the car alone."

"Go back to your house," said Donnelly. "Leave me to manage my own way."

"I won't. You've got a chance, and you'll have to take it. I'll get the car, and you look around for something to—wrap him in."

"For the love of God, will you let me alone?" he cried.

"No. I won't. I'll do it all by myself if you're not man enough to help me."

"I will help you," he said, with an effort. He sighed, very deeply, and raised his head. "Have you a trunk, maybe?" he asked.

"Not here. But wait! There's that chest."

He looked where she pointed, at a long window seat, the top padded and covered with faded, moldering chintz. He went over to it and raised the lid.

"It will do," he said. "Only there are things in it, tools, and the like."

"Get them out," she said. "Oh, *try* to use your right hand . . . ! Here!"

She leaned over the chest, and brought out a trowel, two empty flashlight cases, a tangled mass of wire and rope and threw them on the floor; she was so fast, and he was so slow.

"Now we'll get him in," she said.

"You cannot!" said Donnelly, with a sort of horror.

"Oh, yes, I can!" she said.

"You don't know—"

"I picked up Rex—he was David's dog—I picked up Rex after he'd been run over. I carried him to the house," she said, proudly and arrogantly. "I can do anything I have to do."

"Not this," he said.

She turned then to look at Nagle. He was only a mound on the floor, covered with a dark green chenille tablecloth.

"Come on!" she said. "We've got to hurry."

Donnelly turned the chest over on its side.

"Hold open the lid," he said.

Using only his left arm, he pulled Nagle to the chest; he got him into it, lying on his back, with his knees raised high, because the chest was too short. He pushed the box upright, and Nagle shifted, with a faint thud.

"Now, while I'm getting the car," Lucia said, "do something with the tray and the whisky bottle. And the tools. Make the place look all right."

"I will," he said.

She ran down the stairs and opened the door. And out in the brilliant sunshine, terror seized her. Someone will see me, she thought. What can I say? What can I say?

She must not run. She must not look behind her. *Think!* Think of something to say to them. You must think.

She opened the garage door and got into the car. *Think!* You can't get away with this. Someone is going to ask you where you're going. someone will come to the boathouse. To see you and Martin dragging that chest down the stairs. What are you going to say?

She drove the car to the boathouse, and left the engine running when she got out. I *knew* I ought to save the gas, she thought. I knew something would turn up . . .

She opened the door, and saw Donnelly halfway down the stairs. He had wrapped the chest in the chenille cover and tied one end of it like the mouth of a sack; he held this in his left hand, letting the chest slide bumping down the steps ahead of him.

"That was a good thing to think of!" she said, pleased. "Now we'll get it into the car."

They could not. It was far too heavy for her, and he was of little use without his right hand.

"Can't you try?" she cried.

"God knows I would like to," he said.

They stood on the grass before the boathouse, with the chest at their feet, and they could not lift it into the car.

"Wait here!" she said. "I'm going to get Sibyl."

Sibyl was sitting in her neat, clean kitchen, reading a magazine. The sun was shining in, the wartime alarm clock ticked loudly.

"Sibyl," Lucia said, "help me, please. I've got to get a box into the car, and it's too heavy."

"Yes, ma'am," said Sibyl.

They walked to the boathouse, side by side.

"Mr. Donnelly's hurt his arm," Lucia said. "But I think we can manage, Sibyl."

It was very difficult, but they did manage. The chest was in the back of the car.

"Thank you, Sibyl," said Lucia. "You'd better get in front with me, Mr. Donnelly."

"Mother!"

It had happened. Bee was here, standing beside the car, her newly washed hair like silver in the sun.

"Mr. Donnelly wants to borrow an old engine I found in the boathouse," said Lucia. "He thinks he can fix it."

It was no trouble to say that. It was not necessary to think. The words simply came, when you needed them.

"But, Mother, where are you *going*?"

"To the station," said Lucia.

"But, Mother, Mrs. Lloyd'll be here—"

"Oh, I'll be back," said Lucia, carelessly.

"But, Mother, we can get a cab for—Mr. Donnelly—"

"No, dear," said Lucia. She started the car; they went down the drive and onto the highway.

"Holy Mother of God!" said Donnelly. "There was never another like you in the world."

"Can you think of any place to take the chest?"

"I don't know these parts at all."

"I don't, either," she said. "I haven't done any driving around. I suppose I'd better just go ahead . . . ?"

"You had. I'll keep my eyes open, for a lane or a byroad."

It's done, she thought. I got him out of it. She drove along, steadily, tranquilly, with an untroubled mind. The sweet air blew in her

face; cars and trucks were rolling along the highway, each in its right lane, all so orderly. It's like riding in a procession.

It's done. I've got him out of it, the idiot. Sibyl will never say anything. Even if she knew . . . And maybe she does. I don't know. It doesn't matter. Anyhow, here he is.

Here he was, sitting beside her, riding along in the procession. The big parade . . . she said to herself. I got him out of it.

"You'd better really go to Montreal, right away," she said.

"I will," he said.

She glanced at him, and she did not trust him.

"You don't mean that," she said. "You haven't any intention of going to Montreal."

"I was just thinking . . ." he said, with humility.

A great pity for him rose in her. He was so helpless, so remote from her. He mustn't brood, she thought. I've got to get him talking.

There was only one thing in the world that *they* could talk about.

"Why did you come out here today?" she asked.

"Sibyl called me up. She told me Nagle was there."

"Why do you trust Sibyl so," she asked, "when you hardly know her?"

"It's a sort of idea I have," he said, with the same humility. "There's a kind of wisdom in her." He paused. "She is a realist," he said.

Strange word for him to use, she thought. Now he was silent again, and she did not like that.

"If you'd talk . . ." she said. "If we talked—about this . . ."

"I cannot talk at all," he said. "I'm sorry, but I cannot."

"We can't go on like this. We can't—just ignore it."

"I hope you'll forget it," he said. "Try, will you not?"

"Forget it," she said, scornfully. "Not till the last day I live."

"I had to do it," he said. "You see, Carlie was a strange man. He was a grand friend to the ones he liked, but there were not many of those. And if anyone did him a wrong, he'd never forget it. He was still talking about a teacher he'd had when he was a boy, over in Brooklyn. She's over eighty years of age now, but he was still trying to find a way to get back at her. He'd never have let up on you."

"But I never did him any harm!"

"He thought you did. He thought you wanted to break up the friendship there was between him and me."

There was a long moment's silence.

"There were other elements in it, too," he went on. "The first time he went out to see you, he came back very bitter. He was hurt."

"Hurt? That man?"

"He told me you looked down on him, you and your girl. He told me you were haughty to him. Like the dirt under your feet, he told me."

"I was afraid of him."

"Then you did not show it. Anyhow, he'd a great hatred for society women."

"*You* know better than to call me a 'society woman.'"

"It was the only word he had for it," said Donnelly, grave and gentle. "What they call 'the gentry,' in the old country. What he meant was, a woman with a standing in the world, a woman with a family, a good name. It was his conviction they'd always sell a man out, to keep what they had."

"He was a vindictive, ignorant man."

"Maybe," said Donnelly. "He always held it against his parents that they did not give him a good education, did not send him to college. They had him working for his father, that was a butcher, when he was fourteen, and it made him bitter. He was a smart man. It is a pity he did not get a good education."

"Did you—like him?"

"I did," he said.

"But—"

"I had to do it," he said. "Once he had an idea in his head, he'd never let go of it. And he gave himself away. He let me see what he had in his mind. If he'd set Eddy and Moe onto you, it would be the worst thing could ever happen to you."

"Why? What could they have done?"

"You would not understand, the way you've never met anyone like those two, and never will."

"Are they—gunmen?" she asked, timidly, afraid of hurting his feelings, but desperately curious.

"They are not," he said.

"But—what are they?"

"You would not understand."

"You could explain," she said.

"I will not," he said.

After a moment, he spoke again.

"There's a lane to the left," he said. "What do you think of it?"

She slowed down the car, and looked along the road that ran downhill from the highway, a pretty lane, with trees meeting overhead. There were no buildings to be seen, no traffic.

"We might try it," she said.

"We don't want to waste any time," he said.

"Why? Why do you say that?"

"You ought to be getting home," he said.

That's a strange thing to say, she thought, startled. A strange thing for him to be thinking, when there's this other thing . . .

Nagle is here, she thought, with a shock. In the car. In that chest.

She was driving along this quiet lane, with a dead man in the car, a murdered man. If the least thing went wrong, it would mean—God knew what. We can't do this! she thought. This is madness. We can't possibly get away with this.

She glanced at him. His head was turned away; he was looking into the woodland that bordered the lane. Think what could happen to him . . .

"Mr. Donnelly . . ." she said, a little loudly, "we've got to talk about this. We've got to have a plan, a story. It'll have to be self-defense."

"Oh, I'll think of a story," he said.

"We've got to have the same story, don't you see?"

"There's no need for you to be thinking about a story," he said. "No one's going to bother you about this."

"That's silly. Something could go wrong, any minute. You've got to think this out, carefully."

"I will."

"But now! Lieutenant Levy's been to see me already about—Ted Darby. He might very well come again, and ask questions. He—I think he's very clever."

"Lieutenant Levy? The police, is it?"

"The Horton County police. Suppose he goes into the boathouse? He might find something there—something we hadn't thought about?"

"Look!" Donnelly said. "There's a bit of a lake, around the bend of the road. You can see it from here."

The road was level now, along the floor of a little valley. She accelerated.

"Slow down!" he said, mildly. "There is a curve ahead."

And a car came around the curve, a roadster, with two soldiers in it.

"They saw us!" she said. "They could identify us!"

"Don't be nervous," said Donnelly. "You're trembling."

"Let's hurry!"

The engine backfired, and she gave a sort of scream.

"Don't! Don't!" he said, in distress.

It backfired again, and stopped, and started. Donnelly leaned forward.

"Your gauge is broken," he said.

"I know."

The car stopped. She pressed the starter, and nothing happened.

"I'll get out and crank it," she said.

"It will do you no good," he said. "You're out of gas."

"God damn it!" she cried.

"Don't! Don't!" he said. "It's not like you."

"What can we do? What in God's name can we do?"

"We are fine," he said. "We couldn't have found a better spot. Let you be easy now. Here! Have a cigarette!"

"There's a car coming!"

"Let it come. They'll see nothing at all but the two of us, having a little smoke."

"The chest!"

"People are taking around queer things in their cars, these days."

"Oh, *don't* you see? All these people can say they saw us here. After they've found—that."

"They'll will not find it. Smoke your cigarette now, and I'll tell you what we'll do."

I'm shaking, she thought. I wasn't, before. But this is the worst. Just to sit here, until someone gets us.

"We can't get away with this," she said.

"Wait, now!" he said. "Listen to what I'm saying, will you not? We can get away with this, if you'll do your part right. You'll have to pull yourself together."

"What can I do? What is there—?"

"Come!" he said. "We'll walk a little way, up the road."

"Leave—that?"

He got out of the car; he held out his hand, his left hand, to her; she took it, and got out beside him. Still holding her hand, he began to walk away.

"Listen now to what you've got to do," he said. "You've got to do it right. If you don't, we're sunk, the two of us. You've got to go home, as fast as you can."

"And leave you—like this?" she said. "I won't."

"Listen, will you not? Your girl said there was someone coming to visit you. Mrs.—" He paused a moment. "Mrs. Lloyd."

"How can you remember that?"

"I'm a good one for remembering. If you don't go home, your family'll be worrying. If you're away out of it too long, they'll have the police looking for you."

"Oh . . . !" she cried, angrily.

"You wouldn't want that," he said. "You'll have to get home as quick as ever you can. Here's how you'll do it. We passed a filling station on the highway, just a bit before we turned off here. It is not a long walk. Go there, and tell them to send for a taxi to take you to the railroad station. Don't say anything about your car being stuck. You could give a kind of idea that the man you were driving with began to make trouble."

"I can't."

"Ah, you can!" he said. "Look how you answered your girl, quick as a flash. Now, when you get home— Are you paying heed to me?"

"Yes."

"Forget the story about us having an argument and all that. It will not do now. Here's the story you'll tell. Are you listening, dear?"

"Yes."

"Sibyl told you Nagle had come and she had sent him into the boat-house to wait. Well, you'd seen Nagle before and you did not like him much. You thought he had something to do with the black market. So you didn't hurry out to see him. You let him wait, hoping maybe he'd go away. Have you got that clear?"

"Yes."

"Then there's myself. Was there ever an old engine in the boat-house?"

"Yes."

"As soon as you've a chance, get rid of it. Throw it down into the water. Well, you'd told me I could take the engine, to see could I fix it. So, after your lunch, when you thought Nagle would be gone, you went out to the boathouse, to have a look at the engine. And, sure enough, Nagle is gone. You did not see him at all. Then I come along, and you say you'll give me a lift to the station. Well, we're driving along, and you ask me where am I taking the engine, and I tell you to a sort of a boat yard where a friend of mine is going to work on it. You'll remember all this?"

"Yes," she said, resisting every word of the story in her mind.

"Well, I have hurt my arm, and in the kindness of your heart, you say you will drive me to the boat yard. The gauge in the car is broke, and you don't know the gas is low until the car stops on you. When that happens, you know you've got to get home, or they'll be worry-

ing. You leave the car with me, to go on to the boat yard, and you take the train."

"And what about you?"

"I'll wait a bit, till you're out of it. Then I'll go along to the filling station and telephone a friend of mine in New York. He'll drive out, and he'll bring gas for me. He'll help me with the chest, and we'll drive back to New York. Then I will get a late train to Montreal."

"No," she said.

"Now, what do you mean, at all?" he asked.

"I can't . . . How is your arm?"

"It is better."

"Can you move it now?"

"A little, I can."

"Let me see you," she said.

She was startled to hear him laugh.

"And what's so funny?" she demanded.

"The way you talk to me."

"I'm sorry," she said, coldly.

"I like it," he said. "Only, don't you be worrying about me. I've been looking after myself a good long while."

"I know," she said. "But . . ."

She remembered him in the boathouse, so helpless, so vague. It is a judgment on me, he had said.

"I'd like to see you move your arm," she said.

"Well, maybe I cannot, just now," he said. "It comes and goes. But whatever it is, it is passing off."

"Suppose the friend you're going to call up isn't home?"

"I've plenty of others."

"It'll be a long time, hours, before anyone can drive out here from New York."

"Well, I've a nice shady spot to wait in. I've cigarettes on me, and a bottle of whisky in my pocket."

"You mustn't *drink!*" she cried. "That'll make you do wrong, stupid things. You mustn't touch it!"

"I wouldn't take too much," he said. "But a drop of good whisky . . . I was thinking you'd take a little yourself, you're that pale."

A car was coming from the direction of the highway.

"O God! He'll go right past my car!" she cried.

"Let him," said Donnelly.

"But if he sees the car there, with no one in it, he might stop. He might get out, and look in the chest—"

"Now, why would he be doing that, dear? He won't stop at all.

You want to remember this. There's no one else in the world knows what's in that box, and if you do your part right, there's no reason why anybody would ever know."

She wanted to stop until the car had passed, but he took her hand and led her on, toward the highway. When the car had gone, he dropped her hand, and reached into a breast pocket.

"Here's something you might be glad of," he said, and held out three little capsules, bright yellow.

"What are they?"

"They're little sleeping pills," he said. "One will do you. Swallow one of them, and you'll have a good night's sleep."

"Do *you* take things like that?"

"I do," he said.

"It's a terribly bad habit."

"I don't like to be lying awake," he said.

She dropped the capsules into the pocket of her dress, and he brought out a wallet from another breast pocket. He flipped it open, and leaning it against his chest, he drew out some bills.

"You're not using your right arm!" she said.

"You've no money on you," he said. "You'd better take this."

She put the bills into her pocket without looking at them. They were getting nearer to the highway now.

"Send me a wire from Montreal," she said.

"I will," he said. "And take it easy. There's nobody else in the world knows about Nagle. He won't be missed for a day or two, the way he moves around so much. And it'll be longer than that before ever he's found. When he is found—and maybe that'll never happen—he won't be in the box. Nobody'll know where he came to his end."

Now she could see a big green truck going along the highway.

"The filling station's only a bit of a way, to the left," he said. "You'll go home now—and you'll remember the story, will you not?"

"I can't," she said, stopping short. "I just can't. I'm—tired, or something. I can't go on."

From a side pocket he brought out a bottle of whisky.

"You've got to go home," he said. "You know that, don't you, darlin'?"

"Yes . . ." she said.

"I didn't drink from the bottle," he said, anxiously. "Nobody's touched it at all since you had a swallow."

She took a sip, and it seemed weak, almost tasteless. She went on, one sip after another.

"I wouldn't take any more," he said. "It'd make you drowsy, maybe. It is good Scotch, the real McCoy. You know what to buy, don't you?"

"It's my father's," she said.

And, in speaking his name, amazement overwhelmed her. *I can't be drinking Father's whisky—here!* she thought. This can't be true. Not possibly. Not possibly.

"Now you'll go home, will you not?" he asked.

"Yes . . ."

"You've saved my life this day," he said. "I'd lost my wits entirely. I'd never have got him out of the place, if you hadn't saved me."

You killed him for me, she thought. So that I'd be safe.

"To your left," he said. "It's not far."

"Yes . . ." she said. "Good-by. You'll—be careful, won't you?"

"I will that," he said. "Good-by now, and God bless you."

NINETEEN

She could see the house now, through the taxi window. She was coming back just as she had left, hatless, in the red and white checked gingham dress; she had no purse with her, no powder, no mirror, no comb. She did not know how strange, how dreadful she might be looking.

It seemed to her completely beyond her strength to mount the few steps to the veranda. The cab drove off, and she did not move.

The door opened, and Bee came running down to her.

"Mother!" she cried, in an unsteady voice. "I've been almost crazy with worry. Mother, what were you *thinking* of? Mrs. Lloyd waited nearly an hour—"

"We ran out of gas," said Lucia.

"But why did you go at all? *Why* did you go off with that man?"

"I don't intend to answer any more questions," said Lucia.

"All right! Just think—how I feel! I gave Mrs. Lloyd tea—and I tried to talk to her." Bee was crying now. "I kept telling her—you'd be back any minute. I said—something must have happened to the car—and that's what I kept thinking. An *accident* . . ."

"I'm sorry you were worried," said Lucia, and moved forward. "But I'm tired now, Bee. I want to wash—"

"Mother, there's liquor on your breath! Mother, you've been *drinking!*"

She stood facing her mother, her eyes dilated, tears on her cheeks.

"Don't you dare to talk like that," said Lucia, evenly. "If I choose

to take a cocktail now and then, I intend to do so. And don't you dare to call it 'drinking.'"

I drank out of a bottle, in a country lane, she thought. I must be let alone.

"Let me pass, please," she said. "I want to rest a little, before dinner."

"Lieutenant Levy's here!" said Bee.

Let me alone! Let me alone! Lucia cried to herself. She waited a moment.

"I'm too tired now," she said. "Ask him to come back tomorrow."

"You've *got* to see him, Mother," said Bee. "He's a policeman. You can't put him off."

"Certainly I can," said Lucia. "It's nothing important."

"Mother," said Bee, "you've made things queer enough, as it is. When Lieutenant Levy asked me when you were coming home, I couldn't tell him. *I didn't know where you were!*"

"Well, why should you always know where I am?"

"Mother!"

That word was like a wave, like a tide beating against her. Mother! Where have you been? What were you doing? Open your door, when I knock. Answer, when I ask. Be there, always, every moment, when I want you. It's—inhuman . . . she thought.

"I'll see Lieutenant Levy," she said, briefly. "Tell him I'll be down in a moment."

Her father came into the hall as she entered the house.

"Well, m'dear!" he said. "We were quite anxious—"

"Hello, Father!" she said, in a loud, cheerful voice, and went past him, up the stairs to her own room. She turned the key in the lock, and stood before the mirror.

She had thought of herself as bedraggled, grimy, pale, strange. But it was not so. Her hair was a little rough; there were faint smudges on her cheekbones, but, on the whole, she looked neat enough; a rather countrified housewife in a gingham dress.

She washed, and brushed her hair; she changed into a brown rayon dress with a ruffled peplum, ruffles on the sleeves. Fancy little number, David had called it, with disapproval. She did not like it herself, but what did it matter? She put on lipstick, more than usual, and, for some unrecognized reason, a necklace of green beads.

It's more about Ted Darby, she thought. I've just got to go through with it. Only, the whole Ted Darby episode seemed so far in the past, so unimportant. If it weren't for Father, she thought, I'd

tell Lieutenant Levy the truth about it right now. There's nothing really horrible about it; nothing criminal.

Levy rose as she came into the room; he stood before her, tall, a little clumsy, with his big feet, his big nose, his big ears, yet with the mild, half-melancholy dignity that never left him.

"I'm sorry to bother you again, Mrs. Holley," he said. "But that's my job. I'm generally unwelcome."

"Oh, no!" Lucia said, warmly. "Not here! Smoke, if you like, Lieutenant."

"No, thank you," he said, and after she was seated, he sat down. "My housekeeper gives me a good idea of how hard things are for you ladies, these days," he said. "It must take the greater part of your day, just to get supplies."

"Well, you see, I have Sibyl," said Lucia. "She's wonderful."

"Does she do all the marketing?"

"Oh, I go sometimes," said Lucia. "But she's much better than I am."

"My housekeeper says you have to stick to one store, where they know you, if you want to get anything."

"Yes, you do," Lucia agreed.

I wish he'd get on with whatever he wants to ask, she thought. This is pretty boring.

But she appreciated his effort to establish a pleasant, easy atmosphere. It's the most sensible thing he could do, she thought, if he wants to get me talking, and off my guard. He had, she thought, a very good personality for disarming people, a slow, quiet voice, a gentle smile, a very courteous way of listening to every word you spoke. But she was on guard, and she would stay so; she would notice the first, the lightest change in his tone, in the drift of his talk.

He was talking on about his housekeeper; a Czech, she was, and a fine woman. She had been left a widow at twenty-five, in a strange country, with three children; she had brought them up, seen that they all got a good education. The two sons were in the Navy now; the daughter was married.

"But she keeps on working as hard as ever," he said. "The only thing that really upsets her is the shortage of soap. She was very apologetic about it, but she asked me to try, whenever I could, to get her a box of soap flakes. I haven't been able to find any of the three brands she wants, in spite of my exalted position." He smiled a little. "In one store they offered to sell me something called Silverglo. D'you think it would do?"

"Well . . ." said Lucia, "I don't think there's any real soap in it, but it seems to get things clean, and it's certainly easier to get."

"Silverglo . . ." he repeated, and reached in his pocket.

He's going to take notes about it, Lucia thought, amused.

"Is this yours, Mrs. Holley?" he asked, holding out a dirty little scrap of paper.

She did not want to take that paper into her hand. She looked at him, but she could read nothing in his face.

"Will you look at this, please, Mrs. Holley?" he asked.

She did not want to look at it. She was afraid. But that would be the worst mistake I could make, she thought. To say—I didn't want to look at it.

She took the paper, still with her eyes fixed on his face. Then, with heavy reluctance, she opened it. It was an old market list of hers. Mrs. Lloyd had told her about a market list found by Ted Darby's body. *This one?* she thought.

Or was this just a trap, something subtle and complicated, designed to make her talk? But he can't make me talk, she thought, and I won't lie, either. That's what he wants, for me to lie, and get all mixed up.

"Why, yes!" she said, as if surprised. "It's an old market list of mine. Where in the world did you find it, Lieutenant?"

"It was found under Darby's body," he said.

That's supposed to shock me, she thought.

"Good heavens! On the island?" she asked. "We went over there for a picnic, and I must have dropped it."

"I don't think so, Mrs. Holley. Your picnic was nearly two weeks ago, and this paper hasn't been out in any rain."

"It looks as if it had," she said. "It's frightfully dirty."

"Mrs. Holley, can you tell me on what day you wrote this list?"

"Not possibly," she said. "There are things that are on almost all my lists. Oranges, whole-wheat bread—"

"You'll notice that the list says 'Try Silverglo?' Does that suggest anything to you, Mrs. Holley?"

"No, it doesn't," she said. "I often put that down about things."

"I have information that the first advertisement for Silverglo appeared in the newspapers on the sixteenth. Does that refresh your memory, Mrs. Holley?"

"Why, no. I'm sorry, but it doesn't."

She saw what it meant. The list could not have been written before the sixteenth, and Ted Darby's body had been found on the eighteenth.

"Can you suggest any way in which this paper could have got on the island, Mrs. Holley?"

"Why, no, Lieutenant. When I've finished with a list, I don't bother with it. I throw it away, just anywhere. It could blow away."

Over a mile, across the water, straight to Ted Darby's body?

"Or someone—anyone could pick it up," she said.

"Yes," he agreed, politely, and waited. But she said nothing.

"Mrs. Holley," he said, "I understand that you took out your motorboat, early on the morning of the seventeenth."

"I don't remember dates, Lieutenant, but it's possible. I often get up very early. I like to."

"Did you, on this occasion, see anyone on the island?"

"I didn't look at the island," she said, airily. "I just went scooting past."

"Mrs. Lloyd has made a statement," he said. "She states that early on the morning of the seventeenth, sometime between five and six, she saw a motorboat in the bay, with two women in it. She has the impression that the two women were engaged in some sort of struggle. Did you see this boat with two women in it, Mrs. Holley?"

Lucia was silent for a moment, seized by astonishment. Maybe I'd better say I did see two women in a boat, she thought. It might help me.

But she could not do that. Her astonishment was turning into a curious anger. You can't let people get away with things like that, she thought. Mrs. Lloyd just says anything that comes into her head, and she can't *do* that.

"If there'd been another boat out," she said, "I couldn't have helped seeing it, or at least hearing it. Well, there wasn't any. Mrs. Lloyd may be nearsighted. I stood up once, to button my coat. Perhaps that's what she saw."

"She seems very definite about what she saw, Mrs. Holley."

"But she's mistaken," said Lucia. "I *know* there wasn't any such boat, with two women in it. Not between five and six in the morning. I *know* it."

Looking at Levy's face, she felt a curious fear. He was grave and patient, but he was not convinced. But can't he see what Mrs. Lloyd is like? she thought. She's sweet, but she's featherbrained. I dare say she thinks she saw two women struggling in a boat—but she didn't. I *know* she didn't.

It came into her mind that things like this must happen sometimes during a trial. Suppose you were being tried for your life, she thought,

and someone got up and made a statement like that? Suppose someone said—and really believed it—that they'd seen you in some place where you hadn't been? And maybe you couldn't prove you hadn't been there. Maybe all you could do was, to deny it.

She remembered David coming home from school one day, when he was a little boy.

"Miss Jesser said I scribbled in Petey's geography book," he had told her, pale, his eyes narrowed. "I didn't. But she won't believe me. I hate her! She's an old skunk!"

Lucia had gone to see Miss Jesser, but she had not been able to convince her.

"I don't want to make an issue of it, Mrs. Holley," she had said. "After all, it's not serious. At David's age, a child scarcely knows the difference between truth and falsehood."

Lucia had never been able to get any satisfaction for David. He had been falsely accused, and he had never been able to clear himself. Maybe he had forgotten about that—and maybe he had not. Maybe that happened to every child, at some time, leaving in every adult's mind the fear that she felt now, the fear of an utterly baseless accusation, coming like a bolt from the blue, and impossible to disprove.

"There wasn't any such boat," she said.

"Mrs. Holley," he said, "you understand that, no matter how reluctant I may be, it's my duty to enforce the law—"

"All laws?" she said. "Whether they're good or bad?"

"The laws in this country are made by the consent of the people. They can't be 'bad.' What the people decide for themselves is right, is, by that decision, right."

They were coming to something; she knew that. Everything they said was leading to a destined end. He was driving her—somewhere, and she had to resist.

"You don't care how unjust a law might be to an individual?" she asked, scornfully.

"The law isn't necessarily synonymous with justice, Mrs. Holley. After all, we don't know very much about justice. And we'd need wiser men than we're likely to get, to apply justice to everyone. What we have is a code, a written code, accessible to everyone."

"D'you think that's so wonderful?" she demanded.

"Yes," he said. "You wouldn't admit that even God had the right to punish or reward, if He never let anyone know what the laws were."

His words frightened her, and silenced her.

"Mrs. Holley," he said, "I suggest that your daughter was with you in the boat, on the morning of the seventeenth."

"My daughter . . . ?"

"Darby was not killed in the place where his body was found, Mrs. Holley. We're certain of that. We also know that Darby was in your boathouse at some time. We've found his fingerprints on several objects."

"Anyone could get in there. Anyone. But you said—you said Murray . . ."

"We've let Murray go, Mrs. Holley. One of the smartest criminal lawyers in New York came out last night to take his case—and it wasn't a very good case, anyhow. He's out now."

"But my daughter . . . Why are you trying to drag her into this?"

"Your daughter is attempting to shield you, Mrs. Holley. That's obvious. I've questioned her, and she was extremely evasive."

"And what's she supposed to be shielding me from?" Lucia asked.

"Mrs. Holley, it's my duty to inform you that you are not obliged to answer my questions. It is furthermore my duty to inform you that anything you say may—"

"Don't *talk* like that!" she cried.

He rose, and stood before her, and he was so immensely, toweringly tall that she could not see his face.

"Mrs. Holley, I have evidence that Darby was in your boathouse. I have good reason to believe that he was killed there and his body later removed to the island. I have reason to believe that this afternoon Donnelly assisted you to remove from the boathouse some object or objects which you feared might tend to incriminate you."

"No," Lucia said. "No, I didn't."

"I haven't applied for a warrant, Mrs. Holley—"

"A warrant?" she cried. "For—me?"

"I'd certainly be justified, Mrs. Holley, in holding you, and your daughter for questioning. You're both withholding information."

"My daughter . . . ?"

"Your daughter is very evasive, Mrs. Holley. She told me that Donnelly had come here to see her. She gave me to understand that he was infatuated with her, and was attempting to win your good will, for that reason. Further questioning made it plain that she knows nothing at all about the man. She doesn't know his first name, for instance, or his address. She 'can't remember' where or when she met him. She then told me the same story about Darby. That if he had come here at any time—which she didn't admit—it was to see her." He paused. "How long have you known Donnelly, Mrs. Holley?"

"Oh, not long. He's—just an acquaintance."

"How did you make his acquaintance, Mrs. Holley?"

"Well, I *think* some life-insurance agent introduced him."

"Do you know what Donnelly's occupation is, Mrs. Holley?"

"No," she said. "No, I don't."

"He was arrested five times in connection with bootlegging and rumrunning, during prohibition. At present, the O.P.A. is interested in him. There's good reason to believe that he's active in the black market, particularly in meat."

"But he hasn't done anything really—criminal, has he? I mean, robbery, or—?"

"Mrs. Holley," said Levy, "your attitude is surprising. If you don't consider black market activity, in wartime, a criminal offense—"

"I *do*!" she said, quickly. "Of course I do!"

"Mrs. Holley," said Levy, "I shall have to ask you what you and Donnelly removed from the boathouse this afternoon."

She sat very still. She did not realize that she was holding her breath until it burst out in a faint gasp.

"An engine," she said. "An outboard motor."

"That's what your daughter told me," he said. "When I asked her where you were, she told me you'd driven Donnelly to the station, taking with you an outboard motor. I made an opportunity to visit the boathouse, and the engine is still there."

"There were two."

"Did the landlord give you an inventory of the contents of the boat-house, Mrs. Holley?"

"Yes. Yes, I think so. But I don't exactly remember where it is. I can *find* it, of course, later on . . ."

"Why did you put the engine in a chest, Mrs. Holley?"

"Well, I always like to put things in boxes . . ."

The end of the tether, she said to herself. You go as far as you can, and then the rope is stretched tight and you can't go on.

"Where did you take this chest, Mrs. Holley?"

"Well, we were going to take it to a boat yard, but we ran out of gas, and I came home by train."

"Where did you leave Donnelly?"

"In the country. In a lane."

"What part of the country?"

"I don't know exactly."

"What station did you take the train from?"

"It was—I think it was called West Whitehills."

"When is Donnelly going to return your car, Mrs. Holley?"

"Well, very soon, I guess."

"I'll have to question Donnelly, Mrs. Holley. Will you give me his address, please?"

"I haven't got it."

"How do you communicate with Donnelly, Mrs. Holley?"

"Well, I don't."

"Has any member of your family his address?"

"No. I'm sorry."

"Mrs. Holley, I suggest that you and Donnelly removed evidence pertaining to Darby's death."

"No! Really we didn't. I promise you we didn't."

You get to the end of the tether, but nothing happens. The rope doesn't break; it doesn't choke you to death.

"I can't accept your story about this engine, Mrs. Holley. You've given me no satisfactory explanation for the presence of your market list under Darby's body. Neither you nor your daughter has given me any plausible explanation for Darby's presence in your boathouse. I'll have to ask you to come with me to the District Attorney's office."

"Well, but—when?"

"Immediately."

"But it's almost dinnertime!"

"I'm sorry."

"But—when would I get back? I mean, what time shall I tell Sibyl to put dinner on?"

"I don't know, Mrs. Holley."

"An hour?"

"It would be better not to count on that, Mrs. Holley."

"You mean . . . ? You don't mean—they'd keep me?"

"That's a possibility, Mrs. Holley."

"You mean—arrest me?"

"I think it's a possibility that the District Attorney may consider it advisable to hold you for further questioning."

"Hold me? In prison?"

"It's a possibility, Mrs. Holley."

"I can't," she said, flatly. "I can't possibly just walk out of the house like this, and go to prison. You don't realize . . . I've got my children and my father . . . Perhaps you didn't know that my husband's overseas, in the Navy?"

"Yes. I knew that, Mrs. Holley."

"Then don't you see . . . ? Don't you see what it would do to them all? I *can't* . . . Don't you see? They can't—just sit down to dinner . . ."

She rose; she clasped her hands, to keep from seizing his sleeve.

"Please!" she said. "You understand human nature. You *know* I didn't kill Ted Darby. You don't want to bring such disgrace and misery—to all of us—"

"Mrs. Holley," he said, "you've been consorting with a known criminal—"

"Consorting?" she repeated, looking into his face.

"That's the usual expression," he said, returning her look steadily.

He thinks we're lovers, she told herself. Everyone will think so. The police will find out about that lunch. About everything.

But nobody knows anything about Nagle; maybe they never will. Maybe if I tell the truth about Ted Darby now, it will be the end. Only I've got to warn Father.

"Lieutenant Levy," she said. "Let me have until tomorrow morning. I beg of you."

"It's not possible, Mrs. Holley."

"I'm—so tired," she said. "I can't put things very clearly. If I can just have a good night's sleep, then tomorrow I'll—tell you."

"Tell me what, Mrs. Holley?"

"About Ted Darby," she said.

"You admit that you know the circumstances of his death?"

"Please," she said, "please just let me have until tomorrow morning."

"That's impossible, Mrs. Holley."

"It has to be that way," she said.

Because I won't let them spring it on Father, she thought. It'll be hard enough for him, no matter how careful I am about telling him. He doesn't even know that the man he met in the boathouse was the horrible Ted Darby he read about in the newspapers. He'll—

"Mrs. Holley," said Levy, "I don't think you understand your position. It's extremely serious. You've admitted that you have knowledge of Darby's murder—"

"It wasn't a murder."

"Of Darby's death. By admitting this knowledge, Mrs. Holley, you've rendered yourself liable to arrest."

"Look!" she said, with desperate earnestness. "Lieutenant, let's just talk, like—people. You *know* I'm not a murderess. I should have told you the whole thing before, but I had a reason—it seemed to me a good reason. I'll tell you everything tomorrow morning. As early as you like."

"Why not now?"

"I need a good night's sleep. I'm—really, I'm so tired . . ."

He moved away, his hands clasped behind his back.

"Mrs. Holley," he said, after a moment, "I'll postpone questioning you any further until tomorrow, if you'll get Donnelly here tonight."

TWENTY

She walked over to the window, and she was startled to see how it looked out there in the world; everything bathed in a clear lemon light; the coarse grass looked yellow, the leaves on the young trees were a translucent green, and trembling strangely in the strange light.

He's gone now, she told herself. He's on the train, going to Montreal.

But in her mind she could see him only in the lane, as she had left him, tall and neat, his right arm hanging useless by his side. And that's the bargain, she thought. I'm to sell him out. I'm to get him here, and hand him over to the police.

There were footsteps overhead; a door closed. Father, she thought. I suppose Bee's upstairs, too. And David? It's nearly time for dinner.

"Mrs. Holley?"

Levy's tone was courteous and patient; too patient. It's ridiculous for him to wait like this, she thought, with a sudden anger, when he could make me give him an answer.

"I don't know where Mr. Donnelly is," she said, evenly.

"Then I'm afraid we'll have to be getting along, Mrs. Holley."

"You can let me have my dinner, can't you?"

"I'm afraid not."

She turned to face him. The room was growing shadowy, and that made him look very pale, his hair very black.

"I didn't think *you'd* behave like this," she said.

He said nothing.

"Why don't you find Mr. Donnelly for yourself?" she demanded. "If you're so anxious to see him."

"I've tried. But the New York police have lost track of him, temporarily. They'll trace him, of course, but I'd like to see him now."

"You'll arrest him, won't you?"

"I want to question him, Mrs. Holley. If his answers are satisfactory, he'll have no further trouble."

He's been arrested five times, Lucia thought. And they never could convict him. He knows how to look after himself. And they won't ask him about Nagle. Why should they? Nobody can know yet that anything's happened to Nagle. The rest of it isn't dangerous for him. Lieutenant Levy will only ask him about Ted Darby, and he can

easily clear himself. He must have an alibi for that evening; certainly he wasn't here.

And about the chest? He'll certainly have got rid of that, long ago. And nobody can possibly know about Nagle yet. No. Martin will say what I said. That it was an engine. He'll be able to answer all Lieutenant Levy's questions—much better than I can. He's been arrested five times, and they couldn't hold him. *He* knows how to look after himself.

She heard the screen door in the kitchen bang, and David's voice, loud and hearty.

"Hello, Sibyl! What's with dinner?"

"Lieutenant Levy's talking to your mother just now," Sibyl answered, in her gentle voice.

"Aha!" said David, pleased. "He's a smart cooky. I bet he cracks this case. Any Coke in the icebox, Sibyl?"

"No, Master David. Can't get any."

"Well . . ." said David. "Maybe I'll mix up a chocolate malted."

"Spoil your appetite!"

"It never does," said David.

"I'll mix it for you," said Sibyl.

All the little sounds were strikingly clear to Lucia. That was the bowl being set down on the kitchen cabinet; here was the egg beater clattering, and catching, and starting again. David, she thought, would be sitting on the edge of the kitchen table, happy to be home.

I can't spoil this for David. For all of them. I *will not* go off now, just at dinnertime, to the District Attorney's office. And maybe not come back tonight—not for days. And let them hear—let everyone hear—that I consorted with a known criminal . . .

I'd do anything, to keep that from happening.

He would keep it from happening, if he came. He'd know how to answer Lieutenant Levy, and the District Attorney. He'd know how to help me out of this, if he came. He'd put that first.

"Mrs. Holley, I'll have to have your decision," said Levy.

The egg beater had stopped; she heard the oven door open and shut.

"Yes . . ." she said, and went out of the room, along the hall to the kitchen.

"Hello, David, dear!" she said. "Sibyl, will you come into the sitting room for a moment, please?"

"Sibyl's going to be grilled, is she?" asked David. "Well, watch your step, Sibyl!"

Sibyl smiled at him softly, and followed Lucia back to the sitting room.

"Sibyl," said Lucia, "do you happen to know Mr. Donnelly's telephone number?"

Sibyl looked at her; their eyes met. If she said no, that would be fate.

"Yes, ma'am," said Sibyl.

"You might call him now," said Levy. "Say that Mrs. Holley would like him to come out this evening, as early as possible. Don't mention me."

"No, sir," said Sibyl.

The telephone was on a little table in the hall, just outside the sitting-room door; they could both see her as she sat down on the chair and dialed. Her face looked composed and sorrowful, with her eyes lowered. She's dialing a wrong number, Lucia thought. She likes Martin, and she knows this is a trap for him.

"Hello?" said Sibyl. "May I speak to Mr. Donnelly, please? . . . You expect him in soon? Well, will you please tell him Sibyl says will he please come out to see her this evening, soon as he can? Thank you, sir."

"He's not home, ma'am," she said, rising. "But I left a message."

"With whom?" asked Levy.

"Don't know who it was, sir."

"You might give me the number, please," said Levy, and Sibyl repeated a number which he wrote down in a notebook.

It's a wrong number, Lucia thought. Sibyl wouldn't do this to Martin.

Anyhow, he's gone now. He's on the train now, going to Montreal. He's not coming here. He's gone.

"Thanks," said Levy, putting the little book back into his pocket. "Then I'll see you tomorrow, Mrs. Holley. Good night!"

"Good night!" Lucia answered.

As soon as the door had closed after him, Lucia hurried to the kitchen, almost breathless with impatience to hear what Sibyl would have to say.

"Sibyl . . . ?"

"Yes, ma'am?"

Their eyes met, and Sibyl's were unfathomable, dark, sorrowful and steady.

"Sibyl . . . Do you think he'll come?"

"Left the message, ma'am."

But did you, really? Lucia thought. Or did you just pretend to? You like him. Would you really get him out here—for a policeman?

She stood looking at Sibyl, and she could not ask her that question. Anyhow, he's gone. He's on the train to Montreal.

"Shall I ring now, ma'am?"

"I suppose so," said Lucia.

She thought that Sibyl enjoyed sounding the gongs in the hall, a series of four strung on a red silk cord; an old thing, that had belonged to Lucia's mother. David and Bee had loved the chimes in their childhood; it was a part of their family life; they had brought it along as a matter of course.

The setting sun made a gold dazzle on the glass of the front door, but the brilliance did not reach Sibyl; she stood in shadow, with the little padded wooden stick in her hand. She struck the lowest and deepest gong, and went on, up to the fourth, then down, then up once more; the notes hummed through the house. And it was like a charm; old Mr. Harper at once came out of his room, then David opened his door; before they had reached the hall, Bee was coming down the stairs.

I want Tom here! Lucia said to herself, in passionate rebellion. I want them all here, all safe. It was an impious wish, a rebellion against heaven, against life itself. She knew that. But she would try, she would fight, to turn away the tide from her doorstep.

She felt that she could do anything. She could sit at the table, she could even eat a little. That was because she had set a limit to her ordeal.

At nine o'clock, she told herself, I'll say I'm tired, and I'll go upstairs. And I'll take one of his pills and go to sleep.

Bee and David were 'queer'; she noticed that at once. They were unusually silent; they were disapproving of her. Let them. They would get over it. Her father talked, and she responded, soothed by his kindly vagueness. He had never disapproved of her. If he had noticed any of her strange goings-on lately, or if anyone were to tell him of still stranger goings-on, he would dismiss it all. She was his daughter; she was the irreproachable wife and mother, the wise and prudent housekeeper. The worst he would ever admit against her was that perhaps she had been somewhat lacking in judgment.

But her husband and her children did not consider her beyond criticism. She belonged to them; whatever she did affected them; their pride, their good name in the world lay in her hands. They would give her love, protection, even a sort of homage, but in return for that she must be what they wanted and needed her to be.

They all went into the sitting room after dinner. Bee sat down at the desk to write a letter; David took up a science magazine; old Mr. Harper proposed a game of cribbage. It was only a little after eight, but Lucia could not keep to her self-imposed limit of nine o'clock.

"Father," she said, "if you don't mind, I think I'll just write to Tom, and then go to bed."

"Very good idea!" he said. "Have you anything to read, m'dear? I have this book from the lending library, very amusing; light touch. This family in a cathedral town in England—"

"I'm sure I'd like it, Father, but I don't think I'll read anything to-night. I think I'll go right to sleep. Good night, Father. Good night, children."

David rose, and kissed her cheek; it was a stern kiss, but at least he accepted her.

"Good night, Mother," said Bee, not even raising her head from her writing.

You're unkind, Lucia thought. But that's because it's much, much harder for you than it is for David. He just thinks I'm being silly and trying, but you feel that there's something more, something dreadful, and you're frightened. I'm sorry . . .

It was necessary to write Tom's letter quickly, while she could. Her room was tranquil in the lamplight; a soft salt wind blew in at the open windows.

Dear Tom.

It was as if something stirred behind a curtain.

Dear Tom. The weather. Dear Tom. Oh, Tom, *come alive!* Be real. Let me remember how you were, let me see you. Let me feel something about you. Anything. You mustn't, you can't be this far away, so that you're not real.

But there was no feeling in her, for anyone. She was in a hurry to get to sleep, that was all. Folded in the back of the writing tablet she found an old letter to Tom that had not seemed good enough to send. She copied it, almost without change. There were little domestic details; there was a reminder of a day they had spent together at Jones Beach, long ago, when the children were little. It had been a special day, specially happy, but it evoked no feeling in her now. That young, happy Tom and Lucia were no more than bright little dolls.

She addressed the envelope and stood it up against Tom's picture, where every night an envelope stood. She had wrapped the yellow capsules in a paper handkerchief and put them into a bureau drawer. She took one out now, and swallowed it with a glass of water. I don't

even know what it is, she thought. I don't know what it will do to me.

Only it would do her no harm. She was not afraid of anything from his hands. She undressed, and bathed, hurrying, for fear sleep would suddenly overcome her. I might fall down, she thought; I might fall asleep just anywhere, and in the morning, they'd find me on the floor. How long will it last, I wonder? So that they'll have trouble waking me up in the morning?

It worried her to think of that, of being drugged and 'queer' in the morning. Especially when I've got to tell Father about Ted, she thought. But nothing really mattered except getting through this night, sleeping through it, utterly unconscious. There's nothing to stay awake for, she thought. It's out of my hands now. I let Sibyl give that message. But he won't come. He's on his way to Montreal now.

She got into bed and lay there, propped up on two pillows, the lamp still lighted. She took up a book, but that was no good. What's the matter with that pill? she thought, impatiently. Why doesn't it start? I'll give it twenty minutes more, and then, if nothing's happened, I'll take another.

She closed her eyes, and a face was forming before her; she watched it anxiously. It was a familiar face, bony, wearing pince-nez, and a simpering smile. Now, who's that? she thought. I ought to know. Why, yes; it's Miss Priest, our English teacher. But didn't I hear from someone that she'd died? Well, has she come to give me a message?

"Miss Priest?" she asked, apologetically.

No answer. Lucia sighed, and put the pillows down flat; she stretched out her legs, relaxing. Miss Priest, she thought, trying to remember something. About school, was it? I don't care whether I actually sleep or not, she thought, as long as I can relax like this. And not worry.

Sibyl's voice was hissing in her ear.

"I'm asleep!" Lucia said, angrily. "Let me alone!"

Hiss, hiss, hiss. Missess Holley.

"Let me alone, Sibyl."

"Mrs. Holley, he's here, ma'am. Got to hurry."

Holley. Here. Hurry. Hiss, hiss, hiss.

Sibyl laid a cold, wet washcloth across her forehead, drew it across her eyes.

"Again!" Lucia said.

She opened her eyes and sat up.

"Got to hurry, ma'am. He's here."

"I can't hurry, Sibyl. I took a pill. I was asleep."

"I'll help you, ma'am."

This was a dreadful way to feel, so leaden, so confused. And so indifferent. She sat in a chair while Sibyl put on her shoes and stockings and pinned up her hair.

"What time is it, Sibyl?" she asked.

"Nearly two o'clock, ma'am."

Lucia began to cry a little.

"I didn't get to sleep until after nine," she said. "I haven't had—enough sleep."

"You can go back to sleep later, ma'am."

The dimly lit hall frightened her; she held back, in dread that one of those closed doors would open. But Sibyl took her hand and led her to the stairs; she went down carefully, on wooden feet, still holding Sibyl's hand. They went through the dark kitchen and out onto the back porch, and it was black as pitch there.

"It's raining!" she whispered.

"Just a little bit, ma'am," Sibyl whispered back. "Got to be very quiet now, ma'am."

There was a man moving along the drive; Lucia saw the dull gleam of his raincoat as he passed within a few feet of them.

"Now!" Sibyl whispered.

They went, half running, across the grass, to the boathouse. Sibyl opened the door and they entered, and it was pitch-dark in there, and there was a cold, musty smell.

"This way, ma'am," Sibyl said.

She opened the door that led to a little pantry without a window, and the light from the unshaded bulb that hung from the ceiling was dazzling. He was there.

"It was kind of you to come," he said, with formality.

This was not a dream, and she was not leaden and drowsy now. He was most immaculately neat, in his dark suit and dark tie, his arm in a black sling; he was not blurred now, but sharp and clear. He was completely a stranger to her, and she was cold with fear at the sight of him.

This brilliant little room without a window was a trap that she had got him into. And now she was shut up in it with him. This was the meeting that she had dreaded more than anything in the world.

"I wouldn't have bothered you," he said, "only my arm is broke on me."

"Broken?" she cried.

"Broken," he repeated, apologetically. "If it wasn't for that, I'd

have mailed you the things, with a bit of a note, to explain. Only the way it is, I cannot write."

"Have you had your arm set?"

"That'll come later. Look, will you, what's on the shelf?"

"You can't go on like this! It must hurt you—horribly."

"I don't think of it," he said. "Don't worry. It'll be cared for, later. Look, now, what's on the shelf."

But she kept her eyes upon his face, that had so strangely gay a look.

"Look, now!" he said. "Here's your girl's letters, every last one of them."

He picked up from the drainboard a little bundle of envelopes in an elastic band.

"You'll have no more worry about them," he said. "And here . . . Won't you look? Here's your jewels." He smiled a little. "They're not so grand as I'd been thinking."

"Martin . . ." she said.

The dam was giving way, the great wave was mounting, to engulf her.

"Martin," she said, "your arm is broken. Martin, you must get away, quick."

"There's no great hurry."

"There is! There is! There's a policeman—"

"He is just patrolling. I saw him before, and I kept out of his way while I knocked on the kitchen window and Sibyl came out."

"Martin . . . I'll take you in the rowboat—farther down the shore. Hurry! You must hurry! The policeman might come here."

"He wouldn't be bothering with me."

"But that's what he's here for! I'll take you in the rowboat. I'll get you away, somehow."

"The cop's not looking for me."

"But, Martin! Lieutenant Levy knows about the message—"

"What message?"

He doesn't know, she thought. And if he finds out . . .

"What message was it?" he repeated. "I want the truth of it."

He was looking at her, in a narrow, thoughtful way, as if he were making up his mind. She could not speak; she could not turn her eyes away from him.

"You sent me a message?" he said. "What was it?"

He waited a moment.

"So that's the way of it?" he said. "You turned me in."

"Martin . . ." she said.

He gave a long sigh.

"Ah, well . . ." he said. "That's what poor Nagle meant, y'know."

TWENTY-ONE

She could not understand the words; only the tone, that had in it no trace of bitterness or reproach.

"You could not help it," he said. "Levy got after you, did he?"

"It was only about Ted Darby," she said. "He doesn't know about anything else. He only thinks we took something away—evidence—about Ted. Nothing else. Nothing—that could really hurt you. I wouldn't—you know I wouldn't . . . Never about—the other. Never!"

"My poor girl," he said, "you couldn't help yourself at all. That's what Nagle meant, y'know. A woman like yourself will always have to be thinking of her family and her good name first."

"No. Not about—the other. I'd never give you away. Never!"

"Sure, I believe you," he said.

"You don't. I can see that you don't. You think—"

"Look, now! Would I forget the way you helped me get him out, in that chest? Would I forget the courage you had, and the spirit, answering your girl as quick as a flash? You've been good to me."

"No," she said. "I haven't."

"Well, I'm satisfied," he said, with a flicker of that strange gaiety. "Sit down now, will you not? There's a few things—"

"No! You've got to get away now—this instant—in the rowboat."

"You will have to listen, my poor girl," he said, "for my mind is made up."

"You must go!" she said.

"There's no chair in it," he said, glancing around the pantry. "Well, I'll be quick. There's no one ever need know Nagle was in the chest, and the chest itself is burned to ashes. You've only to say you don't know what I had in the chest at all, or where I took it."

"Where is Nagle?"

"It's better you don't know that. Anyhow, he is far from here, and there's nobody knows he was ever in the boathouse but the two of us, and Sibyl. Your car's in the garage by the station. I sent a young boy with it. There's nothing to tie you with Nagle."

"And what about *you*? What are *you* going to do?"

"I can't get away with it," he said, "if the cops are looking for me here."

"You can! I'll take you in the rowboat."

"No," he said, "I can't get away with it. And well I knew it, from the start."

"Martin, even if they did catch you tonight, they'd only ask you questions about Darby. They don't know about Nagle."

He took out a pack of cigarettes and shook one into his hand.

"Will you give me a light, please?" he asked. "It is hard—"

"Aren't you going?"

"A few drags . . ." he said, apologetically. "It is a comfort."

She struck a match and held it out for him.

"Martin," she said, "you're not being—sensible. You *can* get away. If I take you in the rowboat—"

"I'll not go in the boat with you," he said.

"Then go by the road. We'll watch, Sibyl and I, until the policeman's on the other side of the house, and then you can get away."

"Sure!" he said, absently, drawing on the cigarette.

"Martin!" she cried. "You've got something in your mind! Something silly."

"A life for a life," he said. "That's the way of it."

"It doesn't have to be—unless you just give up. Martin, aren't you man enough to fight for your life?"

"There are things you can't fight," he said. "Carlie and I, we were friends for near twenty years. It never came into his head I'd do that to him. Surprised, he looked, like—"

"Stop! Don't talk like that! You—" She stopped for a moment, appalled by the look on his face, the blankness. "Don't be a fool! Pull yourself together. You've got to fight for your life."

"And what kind of life would it be at all, with never a moment's peace, day or night? I'd never lay my head on my pillow that I wouldn't see Carlie—"

"Shut up!" she said, furiously. "You did it for me."

"That was the same as doing it for myself," he said. "There is no merit in that."

"Snap out of it! You can get away—if you'll stop being such a dope."

He was looking down at her with a smile.

"Stop that smiling!" she said. "There's nothing to smile about. For God's sake, will you pull yourself together and *think*?"

"I will," he said, readily.

"And you'll go to Montreal?"

"I will try."

"Don't say that. Don't think that way. Say you will go to Montreal."

"I will," he said.

"I don't trust you! You've got something in your mind. You think that because I sent—because I had to send that message—you think it's fate, or something."

"It is not fate I believe in," he said.

She was silent, in a furious effort to find the right words, to reach him, to rouse him.

"Martin," she said, "you've managed so well up to now. You've burned the chest; you've—managed everything. You won't go to pieces now, when the worst of it's all over?"

"Oh, I won't," he said. "Don't you be worrying, dear."

"Martin, you don't—you can't believe—what Nagle said . . . ?"

"I do not," he said.

She was leaning against the drainboard, supporting herself with one outstretched hand. He laid his hand over it.

"Good-by now," he said.

"Martin . . ."

But he had opened the door and gone into the dark room beyond. She moved after him, groping, lost in the blackness. The front door closed softly.

"Sibyl?" she called, sharply.

"Yes, ma'am?"

"We ought to—"

Ought to do what? She made her way across the room and opened the door. It was lighter out there, and she saw Donnelly moving quickly across the grass, going toward the highway. Then a flashlight swung in a half circle, and she shrank back against the house.

Now there would be a shout. Now there would be a shot.

The flashlight swung again, and she had a glimpse of stunted bushes that seemed to slide along the beam of light. The water lapped softly against the boathouse; the rain made a whispering sound.

"Now, ma'am?" said Sibyl, close to her ear.

It was a dreadful thing, to cross that dark, open space. The flashlight would catch them, and they would be paralyzed by it; they would stand frozen.

It was a dreadful thing to go up the stairs. A door would open, a voice would call to her.

"I'll help you get to bed, ma'am."

"No, thank you, Sibyl. No, thank you."

Her own lamplit room was not safe. Someone could knock; someone could open the door. She undressed in frantic haste, and threw all her damp clothes into the closet; she put on her pajamas and lay down on the bed.

She lay very still, waiting for the shot to ring out, for the sound of footsteps running up the stairs.

TWENTY-TWO

She waked in a gray twilight, and looked at her watch. It was half-past four. That's too early, she said to herself, and frowned, worried by the words. What was it about 'too early'? Something important. Too early . . .

Come as early as you like tomorrow morning, she had told Levy, and this was tomorrow morning. I'll have to talk to Father first, she thought, but not just yet. I can sleep a little longer.

She had a dream, about Sibyl. Sibyl was living in a little shack, by the edge of a swamp, and the sheriff and his men were coming to get her husband. But that was all right, because she knew it was only a dream. The swamp was a dream swamp, a jungle of tall, dark trees festooned with strange white moss that rustled like paper. The sheriff and his men had brought bloodhounds with them, and they went into the jungle-swamp, splashing through water. She could not see them now, but the hounds began to bay, and it froze her blood.

She heard a high, squealing whistle. That's a bazooka gun! she thought. Oh, Tom, be careful! Now she knew that it was Tom in the gloomy swamp, hunted by dogs, and his leg was broken. She tried to run to him, and she could not stir; she tried to call to him, and her voice was strangled. Some gasping little sound came, and waked her.

There was the same gray twilight in the room, and the house was very quiet. But it was after seven, by her watch. I'll have to talk to Father, she thought, and got up. A sick dizziness came rushing up, spinning round and round, from her feet into her head; she fell back on the bed, and the bed rose from the floor and spun, in a great swoop.

When that stopped, she was afraid to move, for fear it would start again. She still felt sick, and too tired, too weak to lift her head. I can't talk to Father, she thought. I can't get up. They'll have to let me alone for a little while, until this goes away.

There was a knock at the door, and Sibyl came in with a tray. She

set the tray down, and came over to the bed; she helped Lucia to lie back against the pillows; she drew the sheet neatly up over her chest.

"Thought you'd like some breakfast, ma'am."

"Sibyl . . . Have you heard anything?"

"No, ma'am."

"Did you look in the newspapers?"

"Yes, ma'am. There's nothing."

"Sibyl, I'd like to rest for a while."

Sibyl poured her a cup of coffee.

"If you'll just tell the others that I'm tired, and that I'd like to rest until lunchtime . . . If you'll just see that no one disturbs me, Sibyl . . ."

"I'll tell them, ma'am," said Sibyl, with no spark of hope.

"Can't you see to that for me?" Lucia demanded, ready to cry.

"I'll tell them, ma'am. That's all I can do," said Sibyl.

There was nothing sympathetic in her tone; her face was completely inexpressive. Tears were running down Lucia's cheeks as she drank her coffee. Sibyl's absolutely heartless, she told herself. She could see that I got a little peace and quiet, if she wanted.

The coffee made her feel better. No, she thought, Sibyl's not heartless. She's a realist, that's all. She knows you have to do things. I'll lie here until Lieutenant Levy comes. Then he can wait downstairs until I've talked to Father. He can just wait. Do him good.

She drank two cups of coffee, and lit a cigarette. But it was curiously bitter, and she put it out. I really don't feel at all well, she thought. I think I'm on the verge of a breakdown. What, exactly, was a breakdown? Aunt Agnes had a nervous breakdown. Lots of people do. Maybe this was it, this bodily weakness and weariness, this refusal of the mind to think or to feel. This is how sick animals feel, she thought. When Tom's collie was sick, he always wagged his tail when Tom spoke to him. I used to think he hated to do it. Toward the end, he didn't even open his eyes; just gave one little thump with his tail. Because he felt he had to, on Tom's account. I always thought he didn't like Tom to pat his head and say, "Good old scout, aren't you? Aren't you, Max? Good old scout, aren't you?" Enough to drive you crazy, when you're dying.

She lay with her eyes closed, and thought about dogs, and then about cats. People don't make such exorbitant demands upon cats, she thought. Nobody expects them to grin and pant and wag their

tails and be overjoyed every time anyone speaks to them. No . . . People feel rather flattered if they can make a cat purr.

Birds . . . she thought. Why should everyone think that a skylark was so full of rapture? I think birds are frightfully fussy and worried. People say 'nervous as a cat.' I think 'nervous as a bird' would be much better. When you think of birds, hopping around, and chirping, and looking for food all the time . . . They push each other, too. I've seen them. They're rude, birds are.

There was a knock at the door, and she began to cry.

"Come in!" she called, drying her eyes roughly on the sheet.

It was David. He stood in the doorway, slight, too slight, in slacks and a blue shirt, and he was not smiling.

"I hear you're not feeling so fine," he said. "What's the trouble?"

"I'm tired, that's all," said Lucia.

"Well, I hadn't noticed you'd been doing such a heck of a lot lately," he said.

"Everyone gets tired, sometimes," said Lucia, nettled by this tone.

"And, after all, I'm not fifteen, David."

"You look funny," he said. "I think we'd better get a doctor."

"No!" said Lucia. "I'm not going to have a doctor. All I need is a little rest."

"Well, I think you look funny," said David.

She fought against her anger; she reasoned with herself. It's always like this, she thought. Even Tom is sort of furious if I get sick. What have you been *doing* with yourself, to get a cold like this?

"I'll be all right, David, after a little rest," she said.

"Well . . ." said David, "I don't want to bother you, but there's one thing I'd like to ask you. What's happened to our car?"

"It's in the garage by the station."

"Well, I hope it is," said David.

"I *know* it is," said Lucia.

"Well, I hope so," said David.

Lucia closed her eyes, so that she need not see his irritating face.

"Mother?" he said, and when she did not answer: "*Mother?*" he said, in a different tone, in a panic.

"Oh, what *is* it, David?"

"Well, when you closed your eyes . . . I thought maybe you felt faint, or something."

She remembered him, when he was a little boy, shaking her by the shoulder, waking her out of a sound sleep, crying "Mother!" in that same tone. "What *is* it, David?" she had asked.

She remembered how he had looked, thin and wiry in his striped pajamas, his black hair ruffled. "I thought you were dead," he had said.

"I'm sorry I worried you, dear," she said. "Don't worry any more. I'll just rest for a while, and then I'll be perfectly all right."

She smiled at him, and his face relaxed.

"Okay!" he said. "Want anything from the village, Mother? Any medicine, or anything?"

"No, thank you, dear. But ask Sibyl what she wants."

It's going to be dreadful for David, she thought, when the story comes out. He wanted his mother to be not only conventional, and beyond measure respectable, but practically invisible. He had been disturbed even by her going out in the motorboat earlier than was the custom for mothers. How would it be when he learned what she was doing with the boat? And if he learned about Donnelly?

He had gone out of the room now, reassured about her health, but he left her miserably agitated, all the vague calmness gone. Now Bee will come, she thought. Bee was frightened yesterday. I know how she felt. When I was seventeen, if my mother had gone driving off with a strange man, leaving a guest she'd invited to tea, coming back so much later, and smelling of whisky . . . I'd have thought it was the end of the world. And I didn't explain anything to her.

Explain? *Explain?* But did I really do that? Did I help to put Nagle into that chest?

Oh, the chest is the worst! Far the worst. I drove the car, and I never even thought about the chest. He was there, in the chest, and I wasn't even sorry for him. Suppose he wasn't really dead? O God!

Sweat came out on her forehead. How do I know he was dead—when we put him—?

There was a knock at the door.

"May I come in, m'dear?"

"Oh, come in, Father!"

"Resting, eh?"

"Yes, I am, Father."

"Very good idea. Keeping house, in times like these—great strain. You need a rest, now and then."

"Well . . ."

"There's one thing, m'dear," he said, standing beside the bed. "I don't want to disturb your rest, but I dare say you can solve the mystery with one word."

"What mystery, Father?"

"Thing is," he said, lowering his voice, "I had a bottle of Scotch,

in the sideboard. Hadn't even opened it. Well, dashed if it hasn't disappeared!"

"You've got another bottle, haven't you, Father?"

"Oh, yes. Yes. Plenty. But that's not the point, m'dear. I put that bottle in the sideboard myself, day before yesterday. And it's gone. I don't like to ask Sibyl about it. Colored people are sensitive—and you can't blame them. Shouldn't like her to imagine I was accusing her."

"She wouldn't think that, Father. She knows how we feel about her."

But Sibyl did take his whisky! she thought, remembering. And I drank out of the bottle. And Nagle . . .

"It occurred to me . . ." he said. "D'you think Bee might have offered drinks to some of her friends?"

"She'd never *touch* your whisky without asking you, Father. And she doesn't drink whisky. Only a little glass of sherry, once in a great while. Bee isn't like that, Father."

"No, no. Naturally. Don't worry. Rest. Enjoy yourself. Don't worry about anything."

He laid his hand on her forehead.

"Headache?" he asked. "Any aches or pains, m'dear? The great thing is, if there's anything starting, to nip it in the bud."

She looked up at him, into his steady blue eyes that had never looked at her except with affection and trust, and tears rose in her own.

"I'm—just tired . . ." she said, very unsteadily.

"Come, come!" he said, in alarm. "That's not like you, m'dear. Nerves . . ."

She forced a smile; she could feel how stiff and forced a smile it was, but it satisfied him.

"That's better!" he said. "I'm going to write to Tom today. Going to tell him how you keep the flag flying, eh?"

When he had gone, she cried . . . She wanted to cry wildly and violently, but only a few slow tears ran down her face. Why doesn't Bee come? she thought. I want Bee to come.

She was asleep when Sibyl brought her lunch tray.

"Is Miss Bee home?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am. Went down to the village with Master David, and they came back in the car."

"Sibyl . . . Haven't you heard anything?"

"They brought back an evening paper, ma'am. It's in that."

"What is it? Did they get him?"

"I'll bring you the paper, ma'am, soon as they start their lunch."

"Tell me."

"I'll bring you the paper, ma'am."

She waited, waited, waited, not even looking at the tray.

"Can't you eat anything, ma'am?"

"No. Let me see, Sibyl."

SLAYER CONFESSES UNSUSPECTED CRIME

QUESTIONED IN DARBY CASE, SUSPECT ADMITS FEUD MURDER

Early this morning, the Horton County police got not only a full account of the accidental slaying of Ted Darby on the 17th, but also the surprise confession of a murder wholly unsuspected by them.

At 3 A.M. a police car picked up Martin Donnelly, 42, who gave his residence as the Hotel De Vrees, New York City, and took him to headquarters for questioning in regard to the Darby case.

DARBY DEATH ACCIDENTAL

In a statement to press representatives, Lieutenant Levy, of the Horton County police said that Donnelly's account of Darby's death tallied with medical reports and other factors. The two men had, according to Donnelly's account, engaged in a quarrel, on the private pier of one of the Glendale Beach palatial estates, which Donnelly was unable to identify. In the course of the quarrel, Donnelly stated that he had pushed Darby off the pier, and had then gone back to his car, in which he had slept until morning.

Alarmed then by Darby's continued absence, Donnelly stated that he returned to the pier, where he found Darby's body impaled on an anchor in a motorboat. He ran the boat over to Simm's Island, four miles or so offshore, and concealed the body in a marsh.

CONFESSION A SURPRISE

"We were wholly unprepared," Lieutenant Levy told press representatives, "for the confession which followed. Donnelly stated, voluntarily, that on the previous day he had strangled and killed Anton Karl Nagle, 57, believed by New York police to have been an associate of Donnelly's in black market activities.

Following Donnelly's directions, police found Nagle's body in a lake . . .

"Sibyl!" cried Lucia.

But Sibyl had gone, and she was alone.

Martin, you fool! You wicked, wicked fool! You can't get out of this. And you don't want to. You wanted to be arrested. You wanted to confess. You want to die—in the electric chair.

Well, I won't let you. I'll tell Lieutenant Levy the truth about Ted Darby.

That won't do any good. Ted Darby doesn't matter now. It's Nagle. He did that for me. Martin, you fool! You fool, to choose that dreadful death. You didn't trust me. You thought I'd give you away. Again.

I've got to talk to him. I've got to see him. And I never can. Never, never again. But it can't—

"Lieutenant Levy is here, ma'am," said Sibyl. "Shall I bring him up?"

"No, no! He can't come up here. No. Ask him to wait. I'll be down in a moment. No . . . Ask my father to come here, please."

"Mr. Harper's stepped out, ma'am."

This is too much. This is too much, Lucia thought. She got up, and tried to dress in haste, but her hands trembled so, her heart beat so fast. What dress? she thought, opening the closet door.

She took down the brown dress, and hung it up again. She took down a clean pink cotton dress, and that was not right. O God, I've got to hurry! What dress? She picked out two others, and laid them on a chair, and they were not right. O God, what shall I do? I've got to find the right dress . . .

There was a gray flannel skirt in the closet, with the hem half unripped. That was the right thing. With shaking hands she opened her preposterous sewing basket, a jumble of thread, darning silk, shoulder pads, bits of ribbon. She threaded a big darning needle with gray silk, and stitched up the hem, so badly that it was in puckers. She put on the skirt, and a white blouse, and forgetting to glance in the mirror, she went out of the room and down the stairs. She thought she heard Mrs. Lloyd's voice, but that was impossible.

She stopped in the hall outside the sitting room, and it was Mrs. Lloyd in there, sitting on the edge of a chair. She was stylish today, in a high black hat from which a cyclamen veil floated, and she was just drawing off a cyclamen glove. But Lieutenant Levy was not there.

He's in the dining room, Lucia thought, and was moving away when Bee called to her.

"Mother!"

"I'm sorry . . ." Lucia said. "I'm sorry, but I've got to see Lieutenant Levy."

"He's gone, Mother. Mother, Mrs. Lloyd is here."

"I know. But—"

Bee crossed the room and took her mother's hand.

"Come and sit down, Mother."

It was inhuman of Bee to ask her to sit down and talk to Mrs. Lloyd. She hung back, like a rebellious child, but Bee drew her forward.

"I'm afraid I drove Lieutenant Levy away," said Mrs. Lloyd.

"Oh, no!" said Bee. "He said it wasn't anything important. He just stopped by, to tell Mother that the Darby case was closed."

"I've been to a meeting of the hospital committee," Mrs. Lloyd said, "and everyone was talking about this case. The Donnelly man was absolutely desperate. He fought off the police like a tiger, for hours, and they had to shoot him in the leg before he'd give in. Mrs. Ewing heard the shots."

"I'm afraid Mrs. Ewing's mistaken," said Bee. "Mr. Donnelly didn't even try to get away."

"But these gunmen always seem to defy the police, don't they?"

"Mr. Donnelly isn't a gunman," said Bee. "You see, we know him."

"You *know* him?" said Mrs. Lloyd, fascinated.

"Yes. And we liked him, Grandpa, and David and me, and Mother . . ."

"Then weren't you appalled, when you found out what he'd done?"

"No," Bee said, rising. She sat down on the arm of the sofa beside Lucia, and laid her hand on her mother's shoulder. "We're just terribly sorry."

Her hand lay heavy on her mother's shoulder.

"He had lots of nice qualities," she said. "Only, the war makes people do—queer, horrible things." Her voice was a little unsteady now. "Especially middle-aged people."

"Oh, do you think so?" Mrs. Lloyd asked, a little surprised.

"Yes!" Bee said, vehemently. "It's psychological. Middle-aged people feel—sort of left out. As if everything was finished for them. They get a sort of craving for adventure . . ."

It was not Donnelly she was defending; it was her mother. She had

tried to understand Lucia's bewildering and frightening behavior; she was trying now to present it as the foolish, but pitiable, last fling of a middle-aged woman. Lucia glanced up at her, and their eyes met.

"Mother," Bee said. "I'm sorry you felt so tired, but I thought I wouldn't bother you."

She had forgotten Mrs. Lloyd, so important in her scheme of life. All she wanted now was that Lucia should know she understood, that she loved her.

"I'll look after the housekeeping for a while," she said. "And you can take things easy, Mother."

Be easy . . .

"Excuse me, ladies!" said Mr. Harper. "But the young fellow from the gas company wants to see the contract, Lucia."

"What contract, Father?"

"He says the owner of the house has a contract for maintenance. He must have left it with you, m'dear."

"I don't remember seeing it, Father."

"Well . . ." he said, indulgent and resigned, "if you can't find the contract, m'dear, we'll have to pay, and pay through the nose, for these repairs to the icebox." He smiled at Mrs. Lloyd. "I'm afraid you ladies don't take contracts very seriously," he said.

"I'm frightful about losing things," said Mrs. Lloyd.

This is my life, Lucia thought. The things I dreaded aren't going to happen, the shame, the disgrace. I don't know whether Lieutenant Levy believes Martin's story about Ted Darby, but anyhow he's going to accept it. Nothing's going to happen to me.

This is my life, going on just the same. I haven't hurt the children, or Tom, or Father. I haven't shocked people like Mrs. Lloyd. The man is here to fix the icebox, at last. This is how I'll go on.

And all that had happened to her would be, must be, pushed down, out of sight; the details of daily living would come like falling leaves to cover it. I don't really know what's happened to me, she thought, in wonder. I haven't taken time to think about it.

Maybe I never will. Or maybe, when I'm old, and have plenty of time and quiet . . .

Sibyl came in, with tea and cinnamon toast. The butter on the toast was margarine, colored yellow; the cinnamon was artificial. Lucia had read the label on the little tin with an unreasonable interest; she remembered some of it now. Imitation cinnamon. Cinnamic aldehyde. Eugenol. Oil of cassia, quite a lot of other things, too.

But nobody knows the difference, she thought. Only Sibyl and me.

