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Introduction

Unless you began this book at the back and have been reading your way forward, you have doubtless perceived that it is entitled Stories My Mother Never Told Me. Permit me to observe that this is an absolutely accurate description of the contents. I am prepared to testify in any court of the land that none of these stories was ever recounted to me in any form by my mother.

The reason for this is quite simple. None of them had been written at the time when my mother was telling stories to me.

Still, I do not think that my mother would have told me any of the tales I have gathered here, even if they had been available to her. And I do not recommend that you pass them indiscriminately along to your own younger offspring. They are stories for the developed taste, one which has left behind it the delights of the blunt instrument, the scream in the night, the poison in the decanter of port.

I believe it has become public knowledge that I am addicted to tales which brush the emotions of the reader with a touch of terror, pluck at his sensitivities with a haunting horror, or set his pulse pounding with suspense. I have gone so far as to issue volumes of stories in which I have grouped narratives that seemed to me to distill these emotions in their finest essence.

But in this book I shall not presume to suggest what reactions these stories should call forth from you, the reader. Nor, despite great temptation, will I call your attention to any specific tales. These stories should be approached without forewarning or preconception. Only in that way may their fullest impact be received by sensitive nervous systems.

8 ALFRED HITCHCOCK

The one thing that I can promise is that you are in for a full gamut of emotional reactions—barring, of course, the tender sentiments, with which I will have no truck. I have even included a tale or two primarily for entertainment. But do not look upon this as a sign of weakness. Even in these tales there are underlying *frissons* to give a curious relish to the reading. And there are other stories which I consider well-nigh diabolical. Furthermore—

But someone has said that the best introduction is the shortest introduction.

Onward, then!

ALFRED J. HITCHCOCK

THE CHILD WHO BELIEVED

Grace Amundson

He was a magician of the upper brackets, though reasonable in price. He had told them that, but they seemed to have the notion that because he came rather cheap they must tutor him a bit. He had explained that his fee was always more moderate out of season. He had further assured them that he was invariably booked solid from September to late spring. Had this been the holiday season, for example, they would simply have to make do with someone third rate.

He didn't mind a benefit or two in the heat of summer. In fact, he rather enjoyed lending his personality now and again to a genial gathering of parvenu entrepreneurs in garden finery. But when he arrived, one of them met him at the gate and, if he did say so, herded him rather rudely into the dining tent, as though he were some old hack to be pushed into the arena at the last moment. Almost, to be brutally incisive, as though he were one of those tawdry characters who would show up in any condition for a performance.

His escort, a buoyant, curried fellow in tan sharkskin, offered him a cigarette from a crocodile case. "My name's Camden. We thought the children better not see you until we're ready for you."

Armitage laid his battered black case on a bench and stripped off his shrunken and yellowed gloves. "I think you'll find children accept the wondrous quite sensibly," he said, running a deprecating glance over the inside of the tent and settling finally on Camden.

"I suppose you understand what this is all about," said Camden. He spoke with an almost offensive maturity, but

there was an eager, angelic waxiness about his nostrils. It gave the edge to Armitage's haggard boredom.

Armitage tossed his gloves on the top of his case. His cutaway smelled slightly of naphthalene. A mossy ripple had captured his lapel in some forgotten storage. "I never concern myself with the motives of these affairs," he said wearily.

"It's the annual summer carnival for the building fund of Ascension Academy," Camden persisted. "We fathers manage the whole thing. Side show, the works. Ellerman's handling the barker's job this year. He's got a girl in Ascension. He should be along any moment now to cue you. They'll bring you supper here first."

The air was streaked with the odor of hot grease and chicken. Armitage sniffed fastidiously. His frail stature altered according to his passing moods of hauteur. "I don't customarily eat before a performance. But if this is a late show, I shall feel faint unless I have nourishment. I'll have a bite. Something light, mind you."

"Are you sure you don't want to brush up a bit first?"

Armitage stared uncomprehendingly at Camden, the greenish balls of his eyes like skinless white grapes. "I beg your pardon?"

Camden sensed the trespass. He fumbled with his cuff links. Outside, the lanterns bobbed on, broiling the dusk in hot festoons. "I'll see if I can locate Ellerman," Camden said. At the tent flap he paused. "You might want to know about the audience. All children. It may be tough going. Last year they—— Oh, hell, you don't want to be bored with that. Only they're not so easily amused as they were in my day. Damned if I know why—too much of a good thing, I suppose."

Armitage rendered a faint and patronizing smile. "Really, I wouldn't worry if I were you."

Camden darted out. Armitage sat down, flicked open his case and lightly rearranged a few items. He pressed his finger tips to his eyes, sighed and wriggled the veined arch of his nose in lieu of scratching it. He flexed his fingers, sighed again and affixed a cigarette to a holder delicately traced with gold; the great Pignon had given that to him when he had mastered the trick of breaking out of a concrete sarcophagus.

crete sarcophagus.

Outside, Ellerman roamed the languid assemblage, haranguing them with a vivacity more suitable for auctioning off a marble quarry. Armitage smiled. No inspired hedonism, no reckless hearts out there. He drummed rhythmically on the table. He had been able to break his way out of six padlocks in his day, but he had never been able to produce a quick dram out of a hat when he needed it most. Not the vintage stuff anyway. He'd known a mediocre Norwegian conjurer who'd been able to squeeze a green aqua vitae out of a dry sponge on occasion. But strictly bathtub stuff. Ellerman's voice pressed closer. "Right this way, folks! Here you are, folks! Hit the man in the eye!" It was a bit pathetic, Armitage decided. Everything was a bit pathetic, for that matter. The tragedy was not that people died, but that they lived so meagerly—on so much. Not a lavish spirit among them. No wonder the profession had sunk so low. so low.

so low.

Suddenly a treble tantrum broke outside the tent. It struck his quivering nerves like a snapped wire. He sank his thumbs in the pits of his eyes and cursed softly.

"Stop it right now! Stop it!" screamed the child's voice.

"Get dressed right, so they won't laugh! You're not supposed to look like this! Stop it right now!"

Immediately the tent flap was torn open and a rigid, leggy child thrust inside, propelled by a firm man in a paper derby, a false nose, tight coat and short trousers.

"Now what's come over you so suddenly, young lady?" he demanded, and swung the false nose on its elastic to the middle of his forehead, leaving a pale fungus patch in a ludicrous crust of pigment.

ludicrous crust of pigment.

The child stared at this new outrage with bitter fury.

"We've had just enough of this," the man said sternly.

"This morning you were all excited because I was going to do this job."

"They're laughing! The kids are all laughing at you!"
"All right, so they're laughing. That's what they're supposed to do. I'm funny, see?" He adopted a stance and a witless grin.

Like an enraged goat, the child hurled herself at him headfirst, fists hammering his chest. A button soared off his coat. "No, they can't laugh at you! You're my father! You stop it . . . right now!"

He pried her off, limb by limb. She was a vital, tenacious lichen. "Now look here. You'll stay right here until the magician's show. If there's any more of this nonsense, you'll be sent home without seeing the magician. Understand?"

He glanced at his watch, clapped the incredible nose in position again and turned to go. Suddenly he caught sight of Armitage. "Oh, there you are," he said. "Camden saw to you, did he? I'll send him in to tell you when it's time to tee off. Quite a crowd out there. Excuse me." He dashed forth and resumed his braying.

The child, a peaked blonde with lank, stranded hair, swiveled and stared at Armitage out of the lavender pastures of her eyes. She had a neck like a young ostrich. The puckered indention of her upper lip gave her an expression of brooding, inner resource. With her teeth she tore a fragment of cuticle from her finger, spat it thoughtfully to one side and moved in a conical pattern of white linen and blue ribbon to the bench beside Armitage, trailing her hand over the magic kit as she passed. She flopped on the bench a few places away from Armitage and stared at him, to discover whether the deliberate vibration had jarred him to wrath. Armitage stared blandly back and cast forth two magnificent rings of smoke which wreathed her like cloudy quoits. With superb poise she shrugged them to fit. There being nothing to communicate for the moment, she oc-

cupied herself with a recent injury to her calloused knee.

A slope-shouldered woman with an unmanageable halo of hair brought in a plate with half a broiled chicken and some French fries on it. She laid the plate before Armitage on the trestle table, then glanced down at the child with a measured proportion of hypothetical fondness.

"Well," she said, "and what are you doing?"

"I'm picking off my scab."

With a sharp sucked-in breath, the woman appealed to Armitage. He continued to dissect his chicken with zoo-

logical precision. He ignored her looks. "My dear woman, may I have a wedge of lemon with this chicken?"
"We don't serve it with lemon."

"I am not inquiring into your culinary ignorance, madam. But either I have a wedge of lemon to cut this boiled oil or there will be no performance this evening."

The woman cast an exasperated look over his head and

turned back to the kitchen.

"I want some chicken, too," announced the child.

"I'm only supposed to serve the performers," snapped the woman, salvaging a lingerie strap beneath her apron.

"The young lady is my assistant," said Armitage loftily.

The woman snorted and trudged off across the sawdust.

There was silence between the two on the bench.

Finally the child said, "People are afraid of my father too."

Armitage ate in a kind of abstraction. "Respect is the thing," he said. "It's about the only commodity you can't buy with money these days."

"My father's very poor," she assured him nervously.

There was another recuperative silence. "Would you care to divulge your name?" Armitage inquired eventually.

"Constance. Constance Ellerman."

"Constance, eh? That's the kind of people we need more of."

The waitress dragged toward them with the lemon and another half chicken. Constance looked at the pliant half corpse of fowl laid out on the plate and recoiled from the contours of such recent life. "I don't want it," she said

contours of such recent life. "I don't want it," she said hastily, feverish abhorrence in her eyes.

The woman bent over and shook her shoulder playfully, but there was a venomous energy behind the gesture. "Why don't you want it? It's perfectly good chicken."

Armitage interposed himself hastily, "What sort of cannibals do you think we are, madam—to eat our recognizable brethren?" Deftly, he sliced the nude chicken to less recognizable lineaments and incarcerated the meat between two slices of bread. "There you are, my dear. A bit of witch meat. Every third bite a charm."

The woman deposited their coffee and quivering lemon pie and slumped off, glancing back scornfully midway across the tent.

Armitage put down his knife and fork, laid his hands on the table and stared speculatively at them for a moment. The dim light in the tent flickered. Constance took two bites from her sandwich and tilted her head to study Armitage. A sleek tiger cat wandered in and curled round her legs. She gave it a lap of her lemon pie. On her third bite of sandwich she extracted a pellet from her mouth and deposited it carefully on the table.

She nudged Armitage. "What's that?"

He broke sharply from his reverie. "What? Oh, that! Aha, that's your third bite." He stuck his finger in a glass of water and leveled a drop on the pellet. It sprang into a tiny paper palm.

palm.

"That's easy," said Constance, "if you're a magician."

"There you go," he sighed. "Always underrating us. We traffic with the supernatural, make fools of the sorcerers, defy the alchemists, and what thanks do we get? Skepticism! I tell you, Constance, we're the sad harp of lost mankind, we magicians. Poor, maligned vessels of what we know not what. Between two worlds, the conscious and the unconscious, we perform deeds half divine. No one can explain them. And even we are afraid of them. In us are vested all the vestigial senses, telepathic and empathic. And what meager tools! The remnant hunch, the inspired guess, the fugitive hint. Pity the poor magician, Constance."

Constance, charmed by the mellifluous chain of his ex-

pression, stirred the cup of her ear with her finger. "Show me," she demanded. "Show me what you're talking about." "And traffic with my very soul? I should say not. You can only perform especial tricks a certain number of times, you know."

"How many times?"

Armitage speculated, lips pursed, a cast to his eye. "Oh, I should say I'm good for about two more performances of my magic speciality. It's a very personal piece of magic, of course."

"Show me."

"If I gave you an honorary performance, I'd have only one performance left, wouldn't I? No, I can't risk that, Constance."

"Why not?"

"Well, it takes a great deal out of a person, for one thing. And suppose I really needed that trick someday in a tight spot, with a hardhearted audience. Why, then I'd have wasted a whole performance on you."

Outside, the gathering drifted to the far end of the school

lawn, Ellerman's voice whooping them on. Constance's head whirled to the sound, her pale hair tasseling out. Filial shame colored her cheeks. She turned on Armitage.

"I bet it's a silly trick anyway," she flashed. "I bet I'd laugh at you."

Against the echo of Ellerman's buffoonery, Armitage winced, blinked and pressed his thumb and forefinger to the bridge of his nose. A host of gnats shadowed the feeble bulb hanging from the center of the tent. When Armitage looked up again, a sprightly expression was lashed to his face.

"Constance," he said with zest, "you have indeed humil-

"I don't care very much," she said airily, and parted the tiger cat's fur between yellow and black.

"But I do. How would I feel ten years from now when

Constance Ellerman is a very important person, if I were uncharitable now?"

"I won't be silly when I grow up, anyway."

Armitage drew back on the bench, his fingers barely touching the trestle table. "Behold, Constance," he said huskily. "I, Armitage, magician prince, successor to the great Pignon, can reproduce history in condensed and animate miniature. Watch closely. I shall recreate for you the pageantry of Genghis Khan in Turkestan, all of eight centuries ago."

Armitage drew in his breath. His shallow chest did not expand very much, but his cheeks dipped in alarmingly. His eyes bulged a trifle, and the saffron hue of his skin drained to a waxy white. The atmosphere about them contracted until Armitage, Constance and the tent were a spherical density wheeling free in imperishable space, remote from

the temporal fluff of the carnival. Constance yawned hard as her eardrums tightened. And then Armitage began to blow—only gentle, phosphorescent bubbles at first, gradually enlarging until finally, with infinite precision, he was producing luminous pastel globes of considerable size. And within each one a small figure or a group of figures, true in every dimension, obliviously pursued their violent affairs. First there was Genghis Khan—only a malevolent Chinese to Constance—riding the Great Wall with his warriors. There were palanquins with princesses; swarming, minute battles; exotic, alien faces. Constance made no attempt to grasp the globules as they passed overhead, but watched them with cold appraisal until they burst and disappeared. She was evaluating a piece of technical bravura in which Armitage was proving himself a magician above suspicion. There were no suitable expletives, only the grudging exclamations reserved for the calculated surprises of adults.

Gradually, as he reduced his effort, the strain left Armitage's face. His breathing lengthened, the pastel globules became smaller and deeper in color; the spectacular life encased by them diminished until the figures were hardly larger than sugar crystals, but still rigorously faithful to life. And eventually there was nothing on the air but a sparkling froth. The pulsing mortality of the carnival flooded into the tent again. Armitage sat like an unstrung instru-

ment, a fine perspiration on his long nose.

"That was good," conceded Constance, and edged closer to observe his debilitated expression. "Are you all right?"

Armitage shook himself free of his misty hearing. "Perfectly, perfectly, Constance. If one overdoes a thing like this, however, one is quite apt to—well ——"

"Die?"

"That's a rather cruel word, isn't it, Constance?"
"I wish I could do a trick like that. Could I learn it, do you think?"

Armitage pulled down his cuffs and sprucely fitted a fresh cigarette into his holder. "Virtuosity is not controlled or acquired, Constance. It is bequeathed and handed on. I could only make you an outright gift of my precocity."

"How?"

"Well, it would have to happen in a dire moment---perhaps as I was about to leave this terrestrial pain!"

"You mean die?" said Constance, then hastily clapped

both hands over her errant mouth.

Armitage smiled. "If you insist. For example, if you were holding my hand at that tragic moment, the magnetic flow of genius, an imperishable thing, would undoubtedly escape to you."

Constance gave a windy sigh. At the same moment, Camden poked his head inside the tent. "Armitage, if you're ready for this pack of doubting young brutes, I'll show you the way."

Armitage rose, tamped out his cigarette and picked up his black case.

Constance scrambled to her feet. "Mr. Armitage," she whispered horrendously. "I almost forgot. You can't do that trick again tonight, can you? You've only got one performance left. You'd better not forget."

"That's all right, Constance. I'll manage."

"You might need it," she said, her brow knit with concern. "I'm sorry I used it up, Mr. Armitage. Maybe it won't count."

Armitage looked down, a dapper glitter in his eye. "Thank you, Constance. I shall treasure your concern." He marched off with inscrutable nonchalance, one shoulder weighted low by the case.

Constance tore across the tent after him, but Camden put out a firm arm. "Your father says you're to join the children in the audience, Constance."

She struggled against the blockade. "Let me go!" Distressed, she called after Armitage, "I'm sorry I used it up, Mr. Armitage! But it won't count, I'm sure!" With maddened impatience, she bit Camden's hand.
"Constance, you little — —" Pinning her hands behind

"Constance, you little — —" Pinning her hands behind her, he pushed her through the audience entrance and released her like a winged thing. Reluctantly, she mounted a chair at the rear and stood thoughtfully on one leg, awaiting the performance. Her cousin, from the suburb across the river, blew a feathered paper snake against her leg. With

the subconscious cunning of irritation, she lowered her

raised foot and ripped it.

At that moment the hired spotlight came on and the bur-At that moment the hired spotlight came on and the burgundy-velvet curtains were drawn, revealing Mr. Armitage behind his portable table. He did not look up immediately, but continued his fleeting, oblivious gestures over equipment, as though his audience were a secondary consideration. Constance clapped. Her fellow men were sullen. Armitage displayed no apprehension, rather a touch of contempt. Rapidly, in suave pantomime, he produced four blooming geraniums from his left pocket and lined up the pots on the table.

"That's nothing," scoffed the boy in front of Constance.
"It is, too," said Constance with a kick.

Armitage took a substantial wooden block and whirled it rapidly between two fingers. The contours blurred, and he tossed a large rubber ball into the audience. With a somewhat fixed smile, he paused at the pinnacle of his toss for applause. A bit shaken at the lack of it, he turned quickly and dropped seven lighted cigars in succession from his sleeve.

"Faker," said Constance's cousin languidly.
The hour wore on humidly. All delicacies of legerdemain were laid at the skeptical altar of youth. Flushed, perspiring and rigidly proud, Armitage dug into obscure corners of his repertoire, but everything was too subtly perfect and nothing sufficiently spectacular. He flung minor miracles at their leaden feet, flawless illusions at their surfeited eyes. Apparently only the broad stroke could rouse them. Con-

stance, meanwhile, pounded her chair in a one-man claque.
With reckless desperation, Armitage brought forth a handful of ancient coins and flung them upward. They disappeared in mid-air, only to be discovered at his direction in the pockets of lads at various points in the audience.

"Aw, he's a phony!" scoffed a lad in the front row.

"He is not!" yelled Constance. . . . "Show them, Mr.

Armitage! Make them some history! That'll show them!"

Armitage appeared to hesitate, then resolved himself in hopeless pity for his benighted audience. He held himself

to his fullest height. Constance went into a frenzy of clapping.

"I shall recreate for you a spectacle which you do not deserve," he said. "In accurate and animated miniature, I shall produce out of the archives of time the Battle of Bunker Hill."

A sheepish silence fell. Armitage reared back slightly. The very atmosphere fled before his drawn breath and sickly pallor. He began to blow—short, carbonated breaths which were gradually lengthened and sustained. And with them, the preliminary fizz of his effort grew to transluscent bubbles of substantial diameter, floating just beyond reach and popping into oblivion at the far end of the tent. Obscurely at first, activity wakened in them. Small figures clarified, regiments marched, uniforms flashed. The lads roused from their lethargy and fought for vantage points of view.

Constance was more concerned with the effect than the phenomenon. It was only as the largest bubble, containing the ascent of the British up the hill, passed over, that she glanced triumphantly toward Armitage and saw him totter and grasp the backdrop weakly. Climbing ruthlessly over her contemporaries, she reached the grassy aisle and ran toward the stage.

"Don't do any more, Mr. Armitage! Stop it!" she shrilled. In the wings, Camden, with his first intuitive reaction in years, quickly tumbled the curtain, but not before Constance had wriggled across the footlights on her stomach and flung herself beneath the curtain, on the weather side of death.

When she reached the side of Armitage, he was crumpled with his head on his knees. She slipped her hand into his. He felt the warmth and tightened his convulsive grip. She peered with fearless candor into his contorted face. He managed a shred of a smile laced with agony.

"Good . . . Constance," he gasped. "You made it. It's

"Good . . . Constance," he gasped. "You made it. It's all . . . yours now. Oh, ancient masters"—his voice was no more than a dry leaf in a fitful wind—"I commend to your grace, Constance . . . first woman in the royal line . . . of custodians."

Ellerman and Camden arrived simultaneously, one with a bottle of lemon pop, the other with a bulky first-aid kit. Armitage waved them off disdainfully and toppled over. It was fully twenty minutes before Ellerman, still fumbling with the rudiments of resuscitation, discovered his daughter, trapped to the elbow beneath the weight of Armitage's body, her hand in his clasp.

He attempted to divert her with small talk as he extricated her. "There now, young lady, we'll send you home with Martin. And we'll certainly tease Mr. Armitage about this

when he gets better, won't we?"

She wiped her stained face on the sleeve of her free arm and heard him with dull tolerance. "Anyway, I got it all before he died."

Ellerman cast a bleak glance at Camden and laid the

back of his hand quickly to her forehead.

Camden drove Ellerman home afterward. Camden's wife was waiting at the Ellermans'. They had planned a late foursome and a recuperative drink the day before. The women were waiting it out in the game room over the garage.

"Hail the erstwhile ringmaster," said Ellerman's wife as he entered. "How did it go?"

"Never again," said Ellerman.

"You forget," said his wife, torturing an old abrasion, "we must keep our child in a school of standards at any price."

"That moth-eaten magician died on us," said Ellerman, wiping the make-up from his face with a monogrammed

paper towel.

Ellerman's wife glanced at Camden's wife with sudden

comprehension.

Behind the knotty-pine bar, Camden plunked stick pineapple into old-fashioned glasses. "Ugly business. No address on him. Not a cent in his pockets. A dinner roll in his case. Out of nowhere, into whatever."

"What on earth did you do with him?" inquired his wife.

"Sent him to the morgue. Or should we have brought him with us?"

"One old body more or less," sighed his wife.

"Martin bring Constance home all right?" Ellerman asked.

"What was left of her."

"She was pretty worked up, I guess. Bed was the place for that young lady."

"Well, she didn't make it," said his wife flatly.

Ellerman looked up, the hollows of his eyes still laden with grease paint; it gave him a wild look. "Where the devil is she?"

"She's in the garden. Yes, my darling, the gates are locked. She ran out there when Martin brought her home, and she won't come in. I tried to catch her, but even though you have never acknowledged it, I do have a point of exhaustion, you know."

"It was a pretty gruesome experience for her," Ellerman reflected. "Is she crying?"

"Crying? My dear, she's in a rage against all society. She's gnashing her teeth. She wants none of us. We're silly. People laugh at us. We don't have to support her any longer. She'll earn her own livelihood, if you please, with a most remarkable piece of magic she's inherited from this Mr. Armitage. Did you know our daughter can revive history inside colored bubbles, my darling? Do you think we ought to take her up on it?"

Ellerman appealed to Camden, "I tell you, there's no percentage in it. You spend a good half of your life slogging away in some hotbox to give your kids the things you never had. You make a damned fool of yourself to prove you can be a pal. And what happens? Some mangy fraud comes along with a bag of tricks, pulls a bit of hocus-pocus for cakes and coffee, and they turn against you."

Camden foraged in his pocket for his lighter and brought

forth, in a pause of puzzlement, a slip of paper which he studied as he lounged across the bar. "See what you make of this, Ellerman. Damned if I can figure it out," he mused. Ellerman came round. "Looks like one of those genea-

logical trees."

"But no mothers. Just fathers," observed Camden. "And not all the same nationality, at that."

"International gametes," quipped Ellerman, "Sounds like

a bunch of gyp artists, frankly. Where'd you get it?"
"Out of Armitage's magic kit. I thought it might give us some clue on his relatives."

"He probably gets a better break this way," said Ellerman. "What's that up there in the corner?"

Camden bent to the almost imperceptible script. "'Descent of inheritance,' it says. Descent of inheritance to what, for the love of Pete? Listen to them. Hippolytus, Gerbert, Androletti, Baptista Porta, Kircher, Comus, Philipstal, Maskelyne, de Kolta, Pignon, Armitage . . . and after Armitage a question mark."

"I recognize the question mark."

Camden lolled back on one arm. "That was still a honey of a trick, and you know it." He turned to his wife. "This

of a trick, and you know it." He turned to his wife. "This guy, Dolores, actually reproduced the Battle of Bunker Hill inside bubbles. Every detail as clear as life. The figures moved just like a motion picture, only they had dimension.

. . . How do you explain it, Ellerman?"

"The optical illusion owes a great debt to the magic lantern," Ellerman replied without conviction. He picked up his drink and examined it critically, as though expecting to see some minute form of marine life in it.

"Before you knock off," said his wife, "it might be a wise idea to bring young Constance Phantasmagoria in out of the foggy dew."

Ellerman snapped his fingers recollectively and put down his drink. Briskly, he descended the stairs leading to the garden.

"Constance!" he called sharply. "It's time to cut out this nonsense and get to bed now! Constance! Where are you?" He walked rapidly through the arbor and past the benches along the gravel path. "Constance, answer me."

"You don't have to bother about me any more," came

the wan reply.

"That may be," said her father, tracking down her voice, "but the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Daughters might post an objection. Are you cold?"

"No," came the annoyed monosyllable.

"Oh, there you are," said Ellerman, stooping. "How in

the dickens did you get there and what are you doing anywav?"

Betrayed by her white dress, Constance sat crouched against the fence, encaged by the thorny trunks of climbing roses. "I'm practicing."

"Practicing what?"

"The bubble trick. Mr. Armitage gave it to me."

"Well, suppose you come inside and we'll talk about that." "I don't have to come inside. I'm going to live out here

now."

Ellerman evaluated his chances of dragging her out unscratched, to say nothing of his own hide. He could not even see how she had got there. But there she sat, a sorry little oracle pitted against her world. It was shock, Ellerman decided. The child had held the hand of death. It was a traumatic experience even for an adult. He must remember that.

"Constance," he said gently, "Mr. Armitage died this evening. It was a shock to all of us."

"It wasn't to Mr. Armitage," she insisted.

"Well, perhaps not. But things are different for Mr. Armitage now. He's living a different kind of life—a more pleasant life, an easier life. That's what death is, you know."

"You're silly."

"Yes, I've often considered that possibility. But the important thing for us to remember is that though Mr. Armitage is dead, we are no different. We go on in the same way. We get up in the morning, we eat our cereal, we go to bed at night— —"

She drew back tensely against the wall and let out a jagged, objecting wail. "I am too different! Mr. Armitage left me his trick! I can do Mr. Armitage's trick! I can draw history, like he said!"

Ellerman stood up. His knee joints snapped. "You don't know any history to speak of yet," he said coldly. "You have got to learn there is a point at which we stop playing and become serious. I am going into the house now. When I reach the steps I shall give you one more chance. If you don't come then, the door will be locked until you apologize for this conduct. Your mother and I love you dearly, but

you are a very ordinary little girl with no special privileges or outstanding talents. Harsh as it may sound, you must learn to live with what you are."

Ellerman walked toward the house. From the game room came the recording of that damned Alsatian polka which Camden played to death every visit. It struck him occasionally that the record was as silly as Camden. He was engulfed by a familiar wave of distrust for the unreality of his utterly normal life.

With all his heart he wanted to stay out here in the garden and comfort his daughter. He had always tried to do a decent job of this business of being a parent. But what if his parents hadn't borne down hard on the wild illusions of his youth? Where would he be now? There were times when he was more terrified of having a too remarkable child than a stupid one. Somewhere between two poles there was a nice, healthy average, if you controlled all the environmental forces. Better they grew up to believe less than something too lurid. Besides, what in the name of common sense would one do with a prodigy anyway?

At the steps, he turned adamantly and faced the dark end of the garden. He couldn't expect to erase Armitage in an evening, but barring something out of the ordinary, there was nothing indelible about these charlatans. "Are you coming, Constance?"

From her thorny ambush, she raged like a savage, cornered pygmy, "Wait! I'll show you—I'll show you!"

Ellerman waited, then suddenly took a backward step

Ellerman waited, then suddenly took a backward step and flung his arm protectively across his eyes. For sailing toward him from the end of the garden and floating cheerfully overhead was a barrage of insouciant pastel globules, rather raggedly blown as yet, but containing in precise miniature the nice, healthy sequence of his personal history.

JUST A DREAMER

Robert Arthur

"Last night I had the most remarkable dream," Nichols, who manufactures saxophones, was saying as Morks and I entered the club reading room. "I was in a rocket ship that had just landed on the moon, and a herd of beasts as big as elephants, but with wings, were flapping around, trying to break in and get at me. I knew it was just a dream, of course, but it was so real it frightened me into waking up."

"I knew a man," Morks—his full and unlikely name is Murchison Morks—said in a thoughtful voice as we came up to the little group, "whose dreams were much more remarkable than that. And they were so real they frightened

his wife."

"Into waking up?" Nichols asked, puzzled. Morks shook his head.

"No. Into running away and leaving him, gasping with terror. She was a very strong-minded and unscrupulous woman; very hard to frighten, too."

Nichols got red in the face.

"As I was saying," he went on, tight-lipped, "after I got back to sleep, I dreamed that I had found Captain Kidd's treasure. The money was so real I could hear it chink when I dropped it, and—"

"When my friend dreamed of money," Murchison Morks put in, in that curiously soft voice which carried so re-

markably, "it was so real you could spend it."

Nichols, crimson with anger, tried to ignore him.

"I wish you could have seen the beautiful girl who came up then," he said. She—"

But Morks is a hard man to ignore.

"When my friend dreamed of a beautiful girl," he murmured, a faraway expression on his long, sad face, "you could see her."

Nichols turned from crimson to purple. But Morks had won. All eyes were turned on him. Morks, apparently unconscious of it, sank into the softest leather chair in the club and stared thoughtfully out of the window until I stopped a passing barboy, picked out the biggest drink on his tray, and put it into Morks' hand. Then Morks looked down, examined the drink, raised it to his lips, and after swallowing a third of it looked about him.

"Perhaps I ought to explain, though," he said courteously. "So no one will think that I am exaggerating. About my friend's dream, I mean."

And he began:

This friend of mine was named Weem—Wilfred Weem. He was a small man, with a friendly manner and a pleasant voice, and I once heard a woman say he had nice eyes. But he was very quiet, and I guessed he was hen-pecked. In this I proved to be right.

Weem was an accountant, and made a good income, which his wife, whose name was Henrietta, spent on herself as fast as he made it. His was not a very exciting occupation, and perhaps it was for that reason Weem took so much pleasure in his dreams. For they were, he explained to me later, very clear-cut and pleasant dreams about traveling through foreign lands, meeting interesting people, and such: things which in his waking life his wife certainly never permitted him to do, or even to think about.

It seems to have been shortly after moving to the Jersey

It seems to have been shortly after moving to the Jersey suburbs that Wilfred Weem's dreams began to grow extraordinarily vivid. He himself suggested that his house being located within a hundred yards of the transmitter for the world's most powerful radio station might have had something to do with that. You know—the air full of curious energy currents, and so forth.

It's a fact that the antique iron dog on the lawn in front of the house could be heard singing torch songs, or giving the latest European news, almost any clear cold night.

Radio experts explained it easily, but it was eerie to hear and I have no doubt the other phenomenon I'm about to tell you of had some connection with the radio station.

I was sitting in the park one fine, sunny day, watching the swans, when Wilfred Weem came walking along in a somber manner. Seeing me, he sat down.

We conversed politely, then suddenly he burst out: "Morks, have you ever had a dream so real that—damn it, so real that somebody else could see it, too?"

I considered the matter, but was forced to say no. Weem

mopped his brow.

"Well, I have," he said. "The night before last. And I've got to talk to somebody about it. Besides my wife, I mean, and that phony doc. Alexander Q. Brilt, he calls himself, mental specialist; but he's a quack. He's a smoothfaced guy with big popping eyes and black-ribbon pincenez, and he's a phoney-doney."

Weem snorted, "But I'll tell you what happened," he

said.

Two nights before he had gone to bed as usual in his tiny cubbyhole of a room, off the bedroom of his wife, who let him have a room to himself because he was allergic to her face powder, and got asthma when occupying the same bed.

He had been rather tired, so after glancing through a magazine had retired a bit earlier than usual. Henrietta had

stayed up to curl her hair.

He had been asleep perhaps half an hour, and was dreaming of a prize Persian kitten he'd seen a photograph of in the magazine a short while earlier, when all of a sudden he realized that he was not only dreaming about the kitten, but stroking her as well.

He lay still for some seconds, as this realization came to him. The dream of a fluffy gray Persian kitten curled up on his bed, purring, continued. But as he dreamed, he could actually feel the soft fur beneath his fingers.

Then he knew he was in that curious condition we all achieve sometimes, of being both asleep and awake—asleep and dreaming with half our mind, I might say, awake with the rest.

He heard his watch ticking. He heard an automobile go

past the house. And he heard the kitten purring.

He did not open his eyes, lest that wake him completely, but nevertheless a part of his mind was fully conscious. In his dream he could see the curled-up kitten perfectly. With his hand he could feel her. Stroke her back, smoothing the fur, and feel the small, rough tongue lick his finger.

It came to him then, in a vague sort of way, that something very strange was happening. He knew they owned no kitten: Henrietta hated all animals, except a moulty canary she fussed over as if it were a baby.

Then the kitten mewed, quite plainly, as if hungry. Immediately Wilfred began to dream that a bowl of cream was on the floor beside the bed; and as if looking for it, the kitten under his hand got up, jumped down to the floor—he heard the thump as it landed—and then Wilfred Weem heard a lapping sound.

Puzzled, he let one hand slip down beside the bed, and there was the kitten, busily lapping up a bowl of cream.

He was so surprised that he sat up and opened his eyes.

Naturally he stopped dreaming. He looked over the side of the bed for the kitten, but it wasn't there. No trace of it or the bowl of cream remained.

He was puzzled, and a little upset. But presently he told himself that it all had been a dream, unusual in its vividness as so many dreams had been since moving into this house

as so many dreams had been since moving into this house where, likely as not, the faucets would broadcast hill-billy music when you took a bath. So he went back to sleep.

Presently he was dreaming again. This time, for no good reason—you know how dreams are—he seemed to find himself the owner of a very handsome, leather-cased, luminous-dialed clock that had been advertised on the same page of the magazine that had held the picture of the kitten. He could see it clearly, even the grain of the pigskin and the position of the luminous hands. They stood at eleven forty-four.

Then Weem became aware that he was again in that half waking, half sleeping condition—and he heard a clock ticking beside him.

Cautiously he stretched out a hand. On the table beside

his bed was a clock which had not been there when he retired. It was a leather-encased square, with metal corner pieces.

Realizing now that something highly unusual was indeed occurring, Weem risked opening his eyes slightly. He managed to do it without disturbing that segment of his mind which was still dreaming, and he saw the clock. Standing there on the table, as it did in the dream, glowing dimly in the darkness, the hands at eleven forty-four.

Weem opened his eyes wide then, and the dream faded at once. And at exactly the same instant, the clock faded away too. By the time he was wide awake, it was quite gone.

"You see?" Weem asked me anxiously. "You understand? I was not only dreaming that kitten and that clock—but

while I dreamed them, they actually existed!"

I nodded. I understood. It was an upsetting thought. It's all very well to dream about a kitten and have one come to life on your bed. But suppose you had a nightmare instead? Nightmares are very different matters. The thought of dreaming into existence certain nightmares of my own gave me rather a nasty turn. I mentioned this, and Weem nodded.

"That's worried me, too, Morks," he admitted. "Now I don't think there's much danger, though. I believe that I can dream only real things: things that actually exist, or have existed. But of course, there in the darkness, I was in a cold sweat at the thought of having a nightmare. I tried to stay awake. I pinched myself, and pulled my hair. But I seemed to be exhausted. I couldn't keep from dozing off. And then —then the worst possible thing happened."
"You did have a nightmare?" I asked.

"No." He shook his head. "I dreamed about a girl. A very pretty girl, with nice blue eyes and honey-colored hair. She was the image of a girl whose picture was in the magazine. It was a page showing what was in style at Palm Beach, and she was wearing a bathing suit. A two-piece Lastex suit, quite brief. She was young, and very pretty, and in my dream she was smiling at me, as she had been in her picture."

[&]quot;And-"

"Yes," Weem said. "Just like the kitten and the clock. She was really there. I reached out and she took my hand. Her fingers were warm, exactly as any living person's would be, and I could even hear her breathing, very softly. I could smell a faint odor of perfume. And she started to speak. I heard her plainly. She said, 'My name is—'"
Wilfred Weem paused. "And then," he groaned, "Hen-

rietta burst into the room!"

He ran his fingers slowly around inside his collar.

"She'd been curling her hair," he said. "And she'd heard me tossing about, as I was trying to stay awake. So she peeked in the keyhole, to see what was the matter. And she saw the girl."

He shuddered a little at the recollection.

"Of course," he told me, "when she burst through the doorway, I came fully awake and the girl was gone. Henrietta was in a fury. It was only when she saw the screen was in place, and nobody was hidden in the room, that she'd let me get a word in. Even then it was almost morning before she'd half believe the truth about it being only an extraordinary dream.

"But I showed her the picture in the magazine, so she could see for herself it was the same girl. That at least made her realize I might be telling the truth. So first thing in the morning she dragged me around to see this Doctor Brilt, this phony psychoanalyst some of her friends had raved to her about."

Dr. Alexander Q. Brilt had tried to get him to demonstrate, there in his office, his peculiar dream-power. Weem was tired enough to sleep, indeed, but his dreaming produced no tangible results. Therefore, seeing the grim look of renewed suspicion gathering on Henrietta's features, he had insisted that the doctor come to the house in Jersey that evening.

"That was last night," Weem told me. "I had to convince him, you see, in order to convince Henrietta. I did think perhaps the power would be gone, that it had just been temporary; but it wasn't. It was easier than before. I just looked at a picture of a mink coat in the magazine, then lay down and went to sleep—half asleep, anyway; enough to set part of my mind to dreaming about the coat. I dreamed that it lay across the chair in the living room, and at once I heard a squeal from Henrietta.

"'A mink coat!' she exclaimed, 'Good Heavens! I wonder how it would look on me?'

"I opened my eyes a little, and through the open door saw her trying the coat on. But then the phone rang—it was a wrong number—and I woke up entirely. The coat faded away, right off Henrietta's shoulders, and she became indignant.

"I might have stayed asleep long enough for her to see how she looked in it, she told me. Heaven knew, she'd never have any other chance to see herself in a mink coat, real or dreamed. And so on. But Brilt quieted her. He asked me if I could do it again.

"I was feeling awfully tired, so instead of punching him in the nose—I just didn't like anything about him—I proved that I could. I dreamed an overstuffed chair, a bowl of tropical fish, and a set of book ends, all of which were pictured in the magazine. I tried to dream something I hadn't seen a picture of, but nothing happened when I did.

"And after all that, Brilt just nodded as if he'd seen a hundred men do the same thing, and said it was a very interesting case. Interesting case, indeed!"

Weem snorted again.

"After that he asked Henrietta to come in and see him at his office today," he glowered. "She's there now. They're cooking up something, and I'd like to know what. I don't trust people who wear glasses on black ribbons and use big words."

Weem looked at his watch then, and jumped up, appearing agitated.

"I'll have to hurry or I'll be late meeting her," he stammered. "I'm glad I could talk to you, Morks. It's eased my mind some. But I've got to hurry now, or Henrietta will be angr—"

His voice faded out as he hurried down the path toward Fifty-ninth Street.

I did not see him again for several weeks. But one afternoon when I was sunning myself in the park again, he came hurrying up as if he had been looking for me. His first words proved he had.

"Morks," he said desperately, "I'm glad to see you again.
I must—I want to ask your advice."

We sat down. He was thin and haggard, with dark circles of fatigue under his eyes. His hand shook as he held a match for my cigarette. He didn't smoke; his wife wouldn't let him

Then he told me of the developments since our previous conversation

He had been surprised when Dr. Alexander Q. Brilt had appeared at his home that evening after he had last seen me. But Henrietta seemed to be expecting him. Dr. Brilt explained suavely that he wished to make some additional notes on Wilfred Weem's case. He hoped Weem wouldn't mind. Weem did mind, and a lot, but Henrietta overruled him. Of course Wilfred didn't mind, she said. Wilfred was only too glad to oblige.

Reluctantly, Wilfred lay down on the couch, and the doctor took from his pocket a green object, which he held out for Weem to gaze at. It was a ten-dollar bill.

"Please," he said, in a liquid tone, "gaze at this carefully. Impress it upon your mind. For curiosity's sake, I wish to see if you can reproduce it as you did the other obiects."

Weem stared at the ten-dollar bill. He noted every detail of it, including the far-seeing, eagle stare of Alexander Hamilton's portrait. Then, fatigued from two nights without real rest, he drifted off to slumber. And began dreaming. "But not about ten-dollar bills," Weem told me, with the

ghost of a chuckle. "I already had a pretty good idea I could dream things I'd seen pictures of, and not real things themselves. The dreams are projections of the pictures, I guess you'd say, not reproductions of the reality. Anyway, I dreamed of Alexander Hamilton."

A faint smile quirked the corners of his lips. "It was quite a shock to Henrietta and Dr. Brilt to find Alexander Hamilton in the room with them, giving them that proud, imperious stare. He looked at them, and didn't like them. He sneered. Sneered very plainly. They were so startled they couldn't speak. Alexander Hamilton took a pinch of snuff and sneezed loudly into a handkerchief. "Of course, it wasn't the Alexander Hamilton. It was my

dream projection of his portrait. Real, of course, as long as I dreamed him, but not the original.

"Just as, Morks, if you gave me a snapshot of yourself, and I looked at it before falling asleep, then dreamed of it, the Morks that would come into being wouldn't be you."

He was very anxious for me to understand this part of the curious phenomenon, and I assured him I did. So he went on.

"Then Henrietta recovered enough from her fright to screech, and that woke me up. So Alexander Hamilton vanished. But Brilt and Henrietta were thoroughly upset, and had had enough for one evening. Brilt hurried off, and I took a sleeping tablet and went to bed. I never dream when I take sleeping tablets.

"The next morning I told Henrietta that we would have to move. That away from that house I would be all right. But she said no. That it was nonsense. That we had signed a lease and would have to stay. She was very emphatic about it. So I knew we wouldn't move."

Wilfred Weem was silent for a moment, brooding. Then he took up the story. "I thought we were through with that quack, Brilt, though," he muttered darkly. "But that very next night he came around again, and Henrietta welcomed him like an old friend. This time he'd brought a picture of a ten-dollar bill, a glossy photograph.
"So naturally, when I dreamed—Henrietta made me try

it—I dreamed a ten-dollar bill. Lying on the living room table. Half awake, I saw Henrietta and Brilt feel it, stare at it; then Brilt looked at it through a microscope.

"They seemed excited, and they whispered together. Brilt took the ten-dollar bill and went out. I guessed he was going to try to spend it, to see if it was a perfect reproduction. So I waited a couple of minutes, then made myself wake up.

"Of course, when I did the bill vanished out of his pocket; and he came back ten minutes later hopping mad. Henrietta was mad, too. They said I'd spoiled an important part of an important scientific experiment. I said I couldn't help it. So Brilt put on his hat and left. Only, before he went, he whispered something to Henrietta. And the next evening he was back again."

Wilfred Weem took out his handkerchief and mopped his brow. His eyes were dark wells of weariness and per-

plexity.

"Morks," he said unhappily, "what happened after Brilt arrived that time, I don't know."

"You don't know?" I repeated.

"I can't remember a thing. Until I woke the next morning, feeling like the very devil. I had an impression I had dreamed something all night long, but I couldn't remember what. Henrietta insisted I'd just gotten sleepy and gone to bed, and that I hadn't dreamed a thing, I'd have believed her, but-"

Weem's eyes held mine with desperate intensity.
"But," he finished, "the same thing has happened every night for ten nights now!"

I pondered this. It was a highly significant fact.

"And I want to know what has been going on those nights I can't remember!" Weem said. "I am determined to know. Something most peculiar, Morks, because almost every morning when I wake up, Henrietta has some new luxury.

"The first time it was a mink coat. Then an ermine jacket. Next a string of pearls. Then a set of silverware. After that a flacon of highly expensive perfume. And yesterday morning it was an emerald bracelet."

I asked how his wife explained them.
"She says I dreamed them," Weem muttered glumly.
"She says I dreamed them, and they—stayed. Didn't vanish. Because Dr. Brilt, the smooth-face phony-doney, has been helping me concentrate in my sleep by whispering suggestions to me. She the same as says he's been hypnotizing me into dreaming them so hard they didn't go back when I woke up. But I don't believe her." He gnawed his lip.

"Or maybe it's true after all!" he exclaimed wildly. "I don't know what to think. Morks, I'm going crazy. I wake up in the morning feeling a hundred years old. I sleep all day at my office and all night at home, and every day I feel worse. I've got to stop dreaming things. I've got to get away from that house, to some place where I can get a decent night's sleep. And Henrietta won't let me."

He was in a highly overwrought state. So I quickly told him that I might be able to help. However, I pointed out that first we must know what occurred during those nights of which he had no memory. He saw my point, and we agreed that that evening I would come secretly to his home and hide myself in the shrubbery.

Dr. Brilt usually arrived at nine. After he had entered, I would slip up to the window which Weem would leave slightly open, and watch and listen. The next day we would meet at my apartment, and I could tell him what had happened and make further plans.

That night, shortly before nine, I hid myself in the deep shadow of some lilac bushes, just outside the living room window of Weem's modest Jersey home. A hundred yards away the great towers supporting the radio aerials loomed against the night sky, bejeweled with little red lights.

The antique dog on the front lawn was, in an uncanny

The antique dog on the front lawn was, in an uncanny manner, singing Jeanie with the Light Brown Hair, and the rain spout was echoing it at a higher pitch. I was wondering what radio salesmen did for a living in that neighborhood when a coupé stopped at the curb, and a tall man with a curiously pale, smooth face came up the walk, knocked, and was admitted. Then through the window I watched what followed.

It was much as I had suspected it would be. Dr. Alexander Q. Brilt, as he shook Weem's reluctant hand, stared fixedly into his eyes. Weem's face became blank. Brilt was a good hypnotist.

"You are going to sleep soundly tonight, Weem," he murmured, his tone unctuous. "But first, I have a picture for you to look at. Here it is. It's a picture of money—of a

fresh package of ten-dollar bills. A hundred bills in all. Fix it in your mind. Now you're going to bed, aren't you? You're going to sleep. You're going to sleep soundly until morning, and every second of that time you're going to dream about this picture of ten-dollar bills. Aren't you?"

"Yes, doctor," Weem muttered, without inflection. "I'm going to dream about ten-dollar bills."

He moved slowly off and disappeared into his bedroom. Ten minutes passed. Dr. Brilt and Henrietta Weem, a large woman with a pronounced jaw and snub nose, sat tensely waiting, saying nothing.

Then from nowhere a small package appeared on the living room table. Dr. Brilt pounced upon it, broke the manila wrapper, and extracted a handful of crisp green slips that were undoubtedly ten-dollar bills.

He riffled them through his fingers, and the look on his

and Mrs. Weem's face was avid.

"Too bad they aren't as real as they look," he remarked. "Eh, Henrietta? But they're the next best thing. I trust you have ordered nothing for tonight, as tonight is my night, and I placed an order in town for delivery here, as usual."

Henrietta Weem sighed,

"There was a sable jacket that I wanted, advertised in today's paper," she said fretfully. "But I didn't forget it was your night."

"Good! We can't have too many unexplained losses oc-curring all at once, you know. So far, though, everything has gone just as I predicted. I told you those rascally delivery men would take care of themselves. Every one so far has claimed he was held up, when he came to turn in the money and couldn't find it."

The door bell interrupted him. I had been so engrossed I had not seen the delivery truck stop, nor the uniformed messenger come up to the door. But the messenger stepped into the room when Henrietta Weem opened the door. He held a small, securely wrapped parcel.

"Watch from Tiffany's, special order, to be delivered C.O.D. tonight to Mrs. Henrietta Weem, this address," he said briskly. "You Mrs. Weem?"

"I am," Henrietta Weem said decisively. "How much is it?"

"Nine hunnered fifty-eight dollars, sixty cents, including sales tax."

"Platinum," Dr. Brilt murmured dreamily. "Swiss movement, thirty-nine jewels. A repeater, with special dials for the day of the month and the phases of the moon."

Mrs. Weem, evidently well rehearsed in her act, counted out the money from the pile of ten-dollar bills on the table, received change and a signed receipt, and the messenger

received change and a signed receipt, and the messenger left, seeming to sense nothing unusual.

"Well, that's that," Brilt stated then, when the truck had gone. "Your husband will continue dreaming the money into existence until tomorrow morning, and by that time its strange disappearance will in no way be associated with us. I must be going now. It occurs to me, Henrietta, that we had best make no more purchases for a while, lest too many trips to the well break the pitcher."

Mrs. Weem looked sullen. "I want that sable jacket," she said determinedly. "After that we can stop."

Brilt shrugged. "Very well, Henrietta. After tomorrow, then, we'll allow a slight interlude. For the present, good night."

night."

He dropped the package containing the watch into his pocket and left. Henrietta Weem tossed the four remaining ten-dollar bills into the wastebasket and turned out the light. I slipped away to my parked car. As I left, the iron dog was heatedly assailing the Administration for spending so much money.

The next afternoon in my apartment, Wilfred Weem was horrified at what I told him. He flushed, then paled. "But that's stealing!" he cried. "They're buying expensive things with the bills I dream, that vanish when I wake up, and—" I agreed that it was certainly dishonest, and Weem sank

back into his chair.

"Morks," he groaned, "I knew Henrietta was selfish and greedy, and of course she's always spent all my money on things for herself, but I never guessed she'd do a thing like this. It—it's monstrous."

He shook his head. His face was haggard, his eyes hollow. "What can we do? It wouldn't do any good to try to reason with Henrietta, and I—"

He didn't go on, but I understood. And I told him that, having given the matter some thought, I believed I knew of a way to reform his wife and Brilt. It would take a day or so to accomplish; but I felt I could promise him results.

a way to reform his wife and Brit. It would take a day or so to accomplish; but I felt I could promise him results. I suggested that he go home that night, and by the simple expedient of going to bed and being asleep from the effect of a sleeping powder, he could foil the two temporarily. Asleep, of course he could not be hypnotized. Then, I said, if he would drop in again the next day, I would give him further details.

Taking heart, Wilfred Weem left, and I went to the phone and called up a promising young artist whom I knew. I gave him full instructions, said I wanted the work finished by noon the next day, and received his promise on this point.

When, the following afternoon, I told Wilfred Weem what I had in mind, his face brightened. A smile touched his lips—the first in some time. He promised to follow instructions exactly, and said he would expect me that night about eight thirty.

At eight thirty exactly—I always like to be exact—I rang his bell. He admitted me, and I stepped into his little living room. Henrietta Weem gave me a look of glowering suspicion.

Weem introduced me as an art dealer who had promised to stop by with a picture which had taken his fancy, and I gave him the flat package I had been carrying.

"A picture?" Henrietta Weem snorted. "What kind of picture, Wilfred?"

"Oh, just a picture for my room," Weem said vaguely. "Hmmm." Holding the picture under his arm, still wrapped, he turned the key of his door back and forth, as if testing the lock. "Needs oil, I think."

"Wilfred, what are you doing?" His wife's tone was ominous.

"Er-just making sure my door will lock tightly," Wil-

fred told her. "I thought that tonight I might want to lock it, and-"

Henrietta Weem snatched the picture from him.
"Lock your door?" she screeched. "Wilfred, I'm going to find out just what you're up to."

She ripped the paper off the picture. Then, as she stared at the painting beneath, she turned pale and gave a startled squeak. "Wilfred! You wouldn't!"

"I'm just going to hang it above the foot of my bed, where I can see it the last thing before I go to sleep." Weem took the picture from his large wife's nerveless hands. "Lifelike work, don't you think?"

"Wilfred!" There was fright in Henrietta Weem's gasp.
"You—you— If you went to sleep looking at that, you'd—"
Weem did not answer. He held the picture out at arm's

length, admiringly, and Henrietta Weem stared at him.
"You would!" She choked. "You—you murderer!"
"I think," Wilfred Weem said pleasantly, "that I'm going to be very fond of this work, Mr. Morks. I've always dreamed"—he lingered over the word—"of owning a genuine masterpiece."

It was at this point that Mrs. Weem's nerve broke. She screeched hysterically, and rushed for the coat closet. Not even thinking to seize up one of the ill-gotten fur wraps hanging there, she snatched at the first coat she found. Jamming on a hat, she jerked open the front door.

"I'm going to Dr. Brilt," she gasped, breathing heavily.
"He'll make you—"

"He'll make you—"

"Bring him back with you," Wilfred Weem advised her cheerfully. "Be sure and tell him about the picture, though. Or better still, perhaps you should stay with him. I think you've forfeited any claims on me, Henrietta; and I assure you, I do not intend to part with this work of art.

"If Brilt doesn't want to take you in and give you shelter, and marry you after you divorce me, threaten you'll tell the police what the two of you've been up to. I think he'll listen to reason then. Now"—he yawned luxuriously—"I think I'll go to bed. To sleep—" he winked at me—"perchance to draam" dream "

Henrietta gave a strangled scream, and sobbing half in rage, half in fear, slammed the door and ran down the walk. Weem smiled at me.

He held the picture up to the light, and I was forced to admit it was a masterpiece. I had told the young artist to go to the zoo and paint the leanest and hungriest tiger they had, the bigger the better. He had followed instructions. And the beast that glared out at us from the canvas, over the title Starving Tiger, had the most famished look I have ever seen on any creature.

Weem turned the thing face down on the table.

"Ho hum," he yawned. "I really am going to bed. And I'm going to take a tablet. No dreams tonight! And tomorrow"—his words were emphatic—"tomorrow I'm going to move away from this house."

"Drop in and see me tomorrow, then," I said. "I know a lawyer who may be able to break your lease for you. I'll give you his name and address."

Weem thanked me fervently, promised he would, and I left. But—(Murchison Morks, at this point, paused to gaze around at the little group that was listening)— when Weem stopped by my apartment early the next evening, he refused to take the name of the lawyer I wanted to give him. He shook his head, firmly.

"Er—thanks, Morks," he said. "But I don't think I'll get in touch with him just yet. Henrietta didn't return; I was quite sure she wouldn't. And I slept like a top last night. Felt fine today for the first time in weeks. It's remarkable what a pleasant little place that house is, after all. I actually enjoyed hearing an installment of a heart-rending radio serial from my electric razor.

"In fact, I—ah—well, to tell you the truth, the house is

for sale and I rather think I'll buy it."

I must have stared at him strangely, for he colored a bit. "Yes, I know. I did want to get away. But I've changed my mind on that point since—er, since Henrietta left me. Now that I can do as I please, I don't find the house at all distressing. But I won't bother you any more. I'm still a bit tired, so I think I'll just go on home and get into bed with a good book."

He had a book under his arm, in fact: a large, flat volume.

"That book?" I asked him.

"Um—yes," Weem admitted. "I saw it in a bookstore today, and it occurred to me that I ought to own a copy."

"Oh," I said. "I see. Well, in that case, Weem, good

luck."

"Thanks," he replied, quite seriously, and hurried out. I haven't seen him since. I'm sorry, too. I really did want to ask him about. . . .

But Morks let his narration die away into silence without finishing the final sentence. He leaned back and put his finger tips together, as if meditating on something. Nichols, finding nothing to say, stamped off, face purple. It was one of the younger members of the club who broke the silence with a question.

"What," he asked, "was the book?"

Morks looked at him.

"Why," he said, "it was a volume of color reproductions of the works of various great painters. Fine pictures, you know. The title of it was, The Hundred Most Beautiful Women in History."

THE WALL-TO-WALL GRAVE

Andrew Benedict

"There are worse crimes than murder," said the small man in the gray suit. "And there are worse punishments than the electric chair."

I don't know why people tell me stories but they do—in bars, on trains, in restaurants. This little man seemed withdrawn rather than outgoing, hardly the kind who starts conversations with strangers. His gray moustache hid a weak mouth and his eyes were slightly myopic behind thick glasses. He was standing at the bar and I hadn't said

a word, to anybody. All I'd done was order another beer, when the panel discussion on the television had turned to capital punishment, and somebody had said that capital punishment was upworthy of our civilization.

capital punishment, and somebody had said that capital punishment was unworthy of our civilization.

"Civilization?" the little man questioned, as the bartender drew my beer. "What is it, anyway? It's a carefully cultivated myth. We are just savages living in upholstered caves. Give any man sufficient provocation and the barbarian will

emerge."

He took a sip of his Scotch-on-the-rocks.

Take Morton (he said) as an example. You understand—that's not his real name. If anybody could be considered civilized, it was Morton. He liked music and art, he gave generously to charity, he was law-abiding, and had never knowingly injured anyone in his life. He was Anglo-Saxon and not very emotional, but he loved justice—or thought he did—and he certainly loved his daughter Lucy. Then one day Lucy drowned herself.

At first Morton was stricken with grief. Then he learned that a man was responsible for Lucy's suicide. And his grief turned into a hatred he'd never thought he could feel.

The man Morton hated was named Davis. He was an athlete, a football player, a track man and swimmer. Six feet tall, he was as full of vitality as a great cat. It was hardly surprising that Lucy fell in love with him. She met him at college, when she was a freshman and he was a senior. But he killed her and she killed herself.

Morton's first grief turned to a hatred that would give him no peace. He tried to tell himself that he must be civilized, that what Davis had done was no worse than other men had done. When he discovered that Lucy was by no means the first girl Davis had treated so—indeed, one of her classmates had died too, though in her case it was the result of blood poisoning—he decided he would take the law into his own hands and punish Davis.

If Morton had been of a Latin temperament, he might have shot Davis himself. But Morton was Anglo-Saxon, and his hatred, slow to grow, became a cold flame which could not be so easily satisfied.

Morton therefore spent some time in planning how he

would punish Davis, and in searching out the spot that would be exactly right for it. He traveled to a number of different cities before he found what he was looking for—a suitable penthouse apartment formerly occupied by an artist.

artist.

It was at the top of a large building, and he rented it under an assumed name. He posed as an importer with frequent business abroad, and came and went at odd intervals, sometimes being absent for months. During these periods, of course, he was simply back at home carrying on his real business. He took care to lock up the apartment, telling the superintendent and the rental agent that there were many rare and valuable objects in it, and under no circumstances was it to be entered, no matter how long he was away.

During the first year, whenever Morton was away he left little seals on all the doors so he could tell if his instructions were disobeyed and the apartment entered in his absence. It never was. In an expensive apartment building, a promptly paying tenant can get any degree of privacy and respect for his wishes that he desires, barring some drastic emergency such as fire or an explosion. So Morton now felt safe in taking the next step.

He had some false letterheads printed and wrote on one of them to Davis offering him a very good job at a high salary in a non-existent firm. He gave Davis a post office box for his reply.

Davis wrote back saying he was interested in the offer, and now Morton phoned him. He suggested Davis drive down—it was a distance of a hundred miles or more—and meet him the following evening at a well-known restaurant just outside the city where he had rented the penthouse apartment. He pledged Davis to secrecy about the meeting as well as about the job offer, asking him to bring the original letter with him—he gave Davis a story about some of the other officers of the company being opposed to him so that he had to exercise discretion until everything was set. There's an amazing amount of this hush-hush, cloak-and-dagger sort of thing actually going on in big business.

Of course if Davis had balked, Morton would have had to think of something else. But what man is going to balk at the prospect of a well-paid job? Davis arrived at the restaurant on schedule, big and blonde and radiating animal energy and high spirits. Sitting inconspicuously at his table, Morton could see the women's heads turn to watch Davis as he sauntered through the restaurant.

his table, Morton could see the women's heads turn to watch Davis as he sauntered through the restaurant.

Morton knew him of course—he'd seen Lucy's pathetic little hoard of pictures of the man. But Davis had no idea what Lucy's father looked like. Morton introduced himself, they had a drink together, and fifteen minutes later were driving into the city in Davis' car. They parked a couple of blocks from the building that held the penthouse and strolled over. It was quite late, and the lobby was deserted. Even luxury apartment buildings these days use automatic elevators.

Morton led the younger man in through a side entrance and they went directly up to the penthouse without encountering anyone. Once there Morton, who had been rather tense until now, relaxed. He cracked a few jokes and mixed drinks. Davis, who was really a magnificent animal, absorbed three of them before the drugs in the Scotch took effect. Just at the last when Davis began to be aware that something was wrong, things got a bit ticklish. But unconsciousness overcame him before his suspicions became acute. It's amazing how harmless a well-dressed, pleasant-spoken man can appear, especially when he is promising you a good job.

When Davis sprawled back in a big chair, in a drugged sleep, his head lolling, Morton took time out to study him. There was an appealing charm about the young man in his unconsciousness, and for a moment Morton felt his resolve weakening. Then he remembered the file of data a firm of private detectives had compiled about Davis, and he took out of his wallet a snapshot of Lucy on her sixteenth birthday and looked at it. His resolve became firm again.

Davis was big and heavy, but Morton was able to drag him up the narrow stairs that led to a studio room above the penthouse. This was an unusual room. In the first place, it was circular. It had once been a water tank on top of the

building. When a larger tank had been built, this one was converted into a room.

It was also soundproofed. Morton had intended to have this done, but the previous artist tenant had already taken care of it.

There were no windows—only a skylight. The skylight was of opaque glass and was open only an inch or two. An air-conditioner set into the wall brought in cool air and a ventilating hood in the ceiling carried stale air out.

Here Morton removed Davis' shoes and his belt and emptied his pockets. He did a few other things, including the burning of the original letter to Davis, which the young man had obligingly brought with him. Then he went back down the narrow stairs, locking behind him the heavy door which was the only entrance into the studio.

There now remained Davis' car. If found, it would certainly draw attention to Davis' absence and point to his having been in that particular city. Morton had no facilities for hiding a car, but he was not worried. He had the keys, so he drove it to a notorious gambling establishment and parked it in the lot behind the place. He suspected that if he left the keys in the car it would disappear in a day or two, and he was right. You see, he had imagination and he simply worked with the tools at hand. In a big city there are an amazing number of tools that can be turned to usefulness by a determined man, such as car thieves. But to get back to Davis—

Eventually, Davis woke up. His clothes were crumpled, his head hurt dismally, and his left ankle ached. Groggy, he sat up and looked around. He was in a circular room about twenty feet across, pleasantly decorated. An air-conditioner hummed. A television set facing the couch on which Davis had awakened was turned on—a cooking program was under way. The door was shut and he was alone in the room.

Davis tried to stand. Then for the first time he realized why his ankle hurt. There was a tight metal cuff around it, and a thin chain connected this to a ringbolt set into the wall at the foot of the couch.

When he realized that he was chained to the wall, Davis

sat for several minutes trying to think. He was terribly thirsty, and as his head cleared a little he saw a plastic pitcher of water standing on a table about six feet away. He hobbled toward it and was just able to reach it by extending himself and stretching. He drank the water, a quart, in several long gulps and tossed the pitcher back on the table. He saw that a number of loaves of bread were stacked on the table too, but he wasn't hungry. With his thirst quenched, he sat back on the couch and tried to understand his situation

He remembered the previous night clearly, and surmised that he was still in Morton's apartment. It was clear enough that Morton must have drugged him, and then chained him in this manner to the wall. What Morton's reason was he had no notion, and so he decided it must be some kind of ridiculous practical joke.

If it was a practical joke, probably the chain wasn't really meant to hold him. He tried jerking it a few times. It seemed as solid as an anchor chain. He studied the way the cuff was locked around his ankle. The lock that held it was small, but seemed very solid and quite unpickable.

Davis stood up and followed the chain to the wall. The other end was fastened to a ringbolt set into the wall, and when Davis jerked it by hand he got a metallic sound which suggested to him that the bolt was fastened, through the plaster, to metal.

Since the chain could not be pulled loose, and was much too tight to slip out of, he studied the links themselves. They were not massive, but they were welded shut and seemed to be made of some special steel, which they were—a specially alloyed Swedish steel that would resist even a good file.

Davis, his fingers clumsy because of the hangover effect of the drugs, searched his pockets for a cigarette. He had no cigarettes, matches, coins, billfold, pen or pencil or pocket knife. He had thought that with a knife he might be able to cut one of the links, but now he realized that even if he had had his knife it probably would not even have nicked the chain.

Davis raised his voice, "Morton!" he called, "Morton!"

He waited. On the television, an attractive girl in a white nylon dress said, "And then add three eggs, well beaten." The air-conditioner hummed. There was no answer to his shouts, repeated several times.

Davis was not imaginative, but now for the first time he began to feel panicky. Was Morton crazy, to do this to him? Morton certainly hadn't seemed crazy. He tried to think back. He recalled how the first letter had come to him, and how Morton had asked him not to discuss the offer. He remembered the phone call, the meeting at the restaurant, Morton's request that he tell no one of the visit, and bring the original letter with him.

Davis had followed instructions. Outside of some vague hints to a couple of his current girls, he had told no one. No one knew where he had gone. Back home his bachelor apartment was simply locked, with no trace of his whereabouts in it. Now he realized that he knew nothing about Morton, didn't even know if that was his real name, had no real proof the business Morton claimed to be part owner of actually existed. It began to add up in his mind to the fact that Morton had carefully lured him there in such a way that no one had any clue as to where he had gone, or why. He jumped to his feet and jerked on the chain a dozen

He jumped to his feet and jerked on the chain a dozen times. The only result was to give his ankle a great deal of pain. He began to shout. He raised his voice to a bull bellow and yelled for help until he was hoarse, until he staggered back onto the upholstered couch in exhaustion.

There was no reply.

Dazedly, he reminded himself that he was in a building where there must be hundreds of others. On the floor below, or at most two floors down—which is to say, within thirty feet of him—there must be human beings who would come to his rescue. But he could not make them hear him.

Except for himself, the only life that manifested itself was in the shadow world of the television, on which now a smiling man with fine white teeth was saying, Ladies, if you want your husband to sit down to your meals with a sigh of happy contentment . . .

Otherwise, Davis might have been on the moon.

His mind refused to accept the situation more fully yet.

Exhausted by his yelling, he even slept for a while—he didn't know how long, but when he awoke, the people on the television screen were playing a happy game of charades, with prizes of electric ranges and automatic washers to the squealing women who won.

He was thirsty again, and rose to reach for the water on the table. But there was none. He saw the plastic pitcher he had tossed down, and then saw that above the table was a rubber tube, leading to a large tank against the wall some feet away. By some device the tube was arranged so that one or two drops a minute came through it. The drops had fallen on the table, as he had not replaced the plastic pitcher under them. under them.

under them.

Now he could not reach the pitcher. He had tossed it too far. As soon as he realized that, his thirst became raging. He panicked, and lunged for it, stretching his body and arms to the utmost. He managed only to brush the pitcher with his fingertips and knock it further away.

When he realized the futility of what he was doing, he fought for calm. He had to reach the pitcher somehow. He tried leaning forward, letting the chain around his ankle hold him from falling, and stretching his arms. This enabled him to touch the smooth plastic side of the pitcher, but nothing more. Breathing hard, watching the drops of water go to waste on the polished surface of the table, he licked dry lips and tried to keep from screaming and lunging.

At last he realized that he could capture the pitcher again. Slipping off his jacket, he held it by a sleeve and tossed it so that the jacket fell over the pitcher. Then, using the jacket as a net, he pulled the pitcher within reach and set it carefully under the dripping water. In time it would fill. He could only wait.

fill. He could only wait.

When he tossed the jacket, a slip of paper he had not noticed, or at least had overlooked when he searched his pockets, fell out of the breast pocket. He picked it off the floor and saw that it was a typewritten note.

It said simply:

Sorry I had to run off, old man, but please be my guest until I return. I've given you the best room, and left food

and water that should last for quite awhile. I may be gone several days—possibly even more. Make yourself comfortable until I get back.

Morton

It took several minutes for the meaning of the note to sink in. Morton might be gone several days. This crazy joke would continue at least that long. For a minimum of several days, Davis would have to stay chained up like an animal, waiting for Morton to return and release him.

The realization sent him into a frenzy of shouting again. This time he tired more quickly. He decided that possibly no one was near enough in the apartments below to hear him because it was daytime, and the occupants were at work. He would try again at night when someone was bound to be home. Then he would certainly be heard.

The thought calmed him somewhat. Finally he began to take full, deliberate stock of his situation.

The chain was unbreakable. He had already decided that, though he would keep trying. The drip of water was agonizingly slow, but steady. On the table, within reach, were stacked loaves of bread wrapped in waxed paper. He counted them. Thirty loaves.

Unbidden the thought came to him. Bread and water. A loaf a day... God in heaven, did Morton plan to keep him chained up for thirty days? For a month! Living on bread and water? No, that couldn't be; it was only part of the joke—to frighten him. Soon Morton would come in and unchain him and they would have a drink and a good laugh together. This was part of some fantastic test Morton had devised, some test of his ability to stay calm, to accept an uncomfortable situation....

uncomfortable situation. . . .

This reasoning sustained him for a time—perhaps an hour, though the only way he could tell time was to watch the changing programs on the television. Now another game was being played. In this one women contestants were faced by a row of boxes, and invited to select one. One woman found a head of cabbage in her box, and squealed in dismay. Another found a check for a thousand dollars and a certificate entitling her to select a fur coat at a department store, and squealed in delight. One woman found a check

for five thousand dollars and fainted from excitement.

Davis turned his eyes to the plastic pitcher. A tiny amount of water had gathered in it. Perhaps enough for one swallow. He could not resist. He stretched for the pitcher, gulped the water, and replaced the pitcher with great care.

Later he would try one of the loaves of bread. But his mouth was dry and cottony now and he was not hungry.

So for a time he just sat. The air-conditioner hummed, the television cooed and cackled and exhorted, and the water dripped one drop at a time slavely ever so slavely.

television cooed and cackled and exhorted, and the water dripped, one drop at a time, slowly, ever so slowly.

By evening Davis had recovered from the effects of the drugs. His head throbbed, but was reasonably clear. His thirst was great, but only a little over half a pint of water had accumulated in the pitcher. He opened one of the loaves of bread and tried to eat, but after forcing down two slices, gave up and drank what water there was. Then he had to wait again for more.

He knew the time—seven o'clock, for a seven o'clock news program had come over the television. He paid no attention to the news, but waited until it ended and a bland, smiling man was talking about the merits of a new cigarette with a double filter. Then, judging that now, if ever, people would be at home in the apartments below him, somewhere in the building, he began to shout.

"Help!" he cried. "Help! I need help!"

He waited a minute, then repeated. He shouted at one minute intervals for a full fifteen minutes. Then, panting and hoarse, he lay back on the couch to wait.

hoarse, he lay back on the couch to wait.

No one came. There was no sound, except the inane patter of the television, on which a violent Western program had commenced. Through the skylight, open perhaps two inches, he could hear the subdued murmur of a great city. And that was all.

But he was an:

But he was more rested now and he did not give up hope, though he was sure that the room he was in must be soundproofed. There had to be some living human being within thirty feet of him—fifty at the very most. Surely he could make some sound carry that distance, even through two floors and ceilings, in spite of the soundproofing.

He looked for something to make a noise with. His

shoes were gone, or he would have pounded on the wall with them. He tried pounding with his fists, but could make only a soft thudding sound.

Now he turned his attention to the couch. Perhaps he could tear it apart and use pieces of it to hammer on the walls and floor. But the couch was a simple wooden platform, bolted together, the legs screwed tightly to the floor, the whole covered with a foam rubber cushion. With all his strength he could not budge the frame. And there was nothing else within reach. . . .

Abruptly, with a leap of the heart, he realized that the wooden table which held the water pitcher was within his reach. Swiftly he took the pitcher, drank the few drops in it, and set it on the floor. Then he tried to draw the table to him.

Disappointment so bitter that it was sour in his mouth overwhelmed him and he dropped back on the couch numbly. The table, too, was bolted down. It was an hour before he remembered the water pitcher, and then he had lost an hour's worth of the water.

He had nothing to make a noise with. Nothing to use as a tool. The skylight was many feet above his head, and just barely open, even if he had anything to throw through it. He checked it off, mentally.

Slowly it became apparent to him that Morton had thought of every action he might try.

Then he really began to feel frightened. Until now he had felt chiefly bewilderment and anger. Now fear replaced these emotions.

What was Morton up to?

When would Morton come back?

In an effort to quiet his fears he stared at the television set. Program gave way to program, all of them peopled by clean, smiling people who looked well groomed even when they wore Western clothes and shot at each other. When a program ended he could not remember what it had been about

At last even the television ceased to live. The screen became a flickering white blank. The room was lit only by the glow from the picture tube. Then at last Davis slept. While he slept, a concealed peephole in the door slid silently back and Morton looked at him and then silently withdrew.

He slept late the next morning and woke hungry and thirsty. His leg hurt. For a moment he lay half asleep, half awake, wondering where he was. Then recollection returned and he sat up.

Nothing had changed. A pint of water had accumulated in the plastic pitcher. The television set was presenting an interview between a chatty woman with prominent teeth and a tweedy man who had written a novel.

Davis reached for the water, then stopped. Instead he ate some bread. Five or six slices. Then he drank, letting himself swallow only half the pint.

He judged that the dripping of the water was timed so that about a quart a day accumulated.

He studied the tank from which the rubber tube ran. It held perhaps seven or eight gallons. Did it hold—thirty quarts? Thirty quarts of water—thirty loaves of bread. Thirty days!

Dear God, did that mean Morton would not return for thirty days? Or did it mean—

Davis started to scream, and shouted and yelled for half an hour before he collapsed, exhausted.

But no one came. He tried shouting for help again that evening. Still no one came.

No one came the next day.

Nor the day after. Nor the day after that did anyone come to the air-conditioned dungeon at the top of the luxury apartment building in a great modern city, where Davis was chained to the wall by his ankle. . . .

The small man in the gray suit glanced at his watch and stood up.

"I have to catch a plane," he said. "Hope I haven't bored vou."

"Wait!" I said. "What happened?" He shook his head slowly.

"I really can't say. I suppose after thirty days the water stopped. And of course the bread must have been gone. Then—" He shrugged.

"But-" I began, and stopped.

"No one has entered that room for two years," the gray man said. "The bills are all paid promptly by a lawyer and the superintendent and the rental agent get annual Christmas remembrances from the same source. They understand that Morton is in Europe and may be gone several years more. They don't mind, as long as the rent is paid. Of course, some day the apartment will be entered. It may be years, however, unless Morton decides to stop paying the rent."

He glanced at me from the corners of his eyes.

"It would be interesting to know what the men who finally enter that studio room make of what they find," he said, and turned toward the door. "I don't imagine they will find any clues to Morton's true identity, nor to Davis' either."

Then he smiled and went out. I stared after him stupidly for a moment, then ran out to the street after him. But he was gone, lost in the crowd of passers-by.

I stood for a moment looking up. For blocks in all directions buildings loomed around me, many of them with penthouses. And this was only one of at least eight large cities within a two-hour plane ride.

I went back into the bar and asked the bartender if he knew the man I had been talking to. But the small man was a stranger who had never been in there before.

WITCH'S MONEY

John Collier

Foiral had taken a load of cork up to the high road, where he met the motor truck from Perpignan. He was on his way back to the village, walking harmlessly beside his mule, and thinking of nothing at all, when he was passed by a striding madman, half naked, and of a type

never seen before in this district of the Pyrénées-Orientales.

He was not of the idiot sort, with the big head, like two or three of them down in the village. Nor was he a lean, raving creature, like Barilles' old father after the house burned down. Nor had he a little, tiny, shrunken-up, chattering head, like the younger Lloubes. He was a new sort altogether.

Foiral decided he was a kind of bursting madman, all blare and racket, as bad as the sun. His red flesh burst out of his little bits of coloured clothes; red arms, red knees, red neck, and a great round red face bursting with smiles, words, laughter.

Foiral overtook him at the top of the ridge. He was staring down into the valley like a man thunderstruck.

"My God!" he said to Foiral. "Just look at it!" Foiral

looked at it. There was nothing wrong.

"Here have I," said the mad Jack, "been walking up and down these goddam Pyrénées for weeks—meadows, birch trees, pine trees, waterfalls—green as a dish of haricots verts! And here's what I've been looking for all the time. Why did no one tell me?"

There's a damned question to answer! However, madmen answer themselves. Foiral thumped his mule and started off down the track, but the mad fellow fell in step beside him.

"What is it, for God's sake?" said he. "A bit of Spain strayed over the frontier, or what? Might be a crater in the moon. No water, I suppose? God, look at that ring of red hills! Look at that pink and yellow land! Are those villages down there? Or the bones of some creatures that have died?

"I like it," he said. "I like the way the fig trees burst out of the rock. I like the way the seeds are bursting out of the figs. Ever heard of surrealism? This is surrealism come to life. What are those? Cork forests? They look like petrified ogres. Excellent ogres, who bleed when these impudent mortals flay you, with my little brush, on my little piece of canvas, I shall restore to you an important part of your life!"

Foiral, by no means devout, took the sensible precaution of crossing himself. The fellow went on and on, all the way

down, two or three kilometres, Foiral answering with a "yes," a "no," and a grunt. "This is my country!" cried the lunatic. "It's made for me. Glad I didn't go to Morocco! Is this your village? Wonderful! Look at those houses—three, four stories. Why do they look as if they'd been piled up by cave-dwellers, cave-dwellers who couldn't find a cliff? Or are they caves from which the cliff has crumbled away, leaving them uneasy in the sunlight, huddling together? Why don't you have any windows? I like that yellow belfry. Sort of Spanish. I like the way the bell hangs in that iron cage. Black as your hat. Dead. Maybe that's why it's so quiet here. Dead noise, gibbeted against the blue! Ha! Ha! You're not amused, eh? You don't care for surrealism? So much the worse, my friend, because you're the stuff that sort of dream is made of. I like the black clothes all you people wear. Spanish touch again, I suppose? It makes you look like holes in the light."

"Goodbye," said Foiral.

"Wait a minute," said the stranger. "Where can I put up in this village? Is there an inn?"

"No," said Foiral, turning into his yard.

"Hell!" said the stranger. "I suppose someone has a room I can sleep in?"

"No," said Foiral.

That set the fellow back a bit. "Well," said he at last, "I'll have a look around, anyway."

So he went up the street. Foiral saw him talking to Madame Arago, and she was shaking her head. Then he saw him trying it on at the baker's, and the baker shook his head as well. However, he bought a loaf there, and some cheese and wine from Barilles. He sat down on the bench outside and ate it; then he went pottering off up the slope.

Foiral thought he'd keep an eye on him, so he followed to the top of the village, where he could see all over the hillside. The fellow was just mooning about; he picked up nothing, he did nothing. Then he began to drift over to the little farm-house, where the well is, a few hundred yards above the rest of the houses.

This happened to be Foiral's property, through his wife: a good place, if they'd had a son to live in it. Seeing the

stranger edging that way, Foiral followed, not too fast, you understand, and not too slow either. Sure enough, when he got there, there was the fellow peering through the chinks in the shutters, even trying the door. He might have been up to anything.

He looked round as Foiral came up. "Nobody lives here?" he said.

"No," said Foiral.

"Who does it belong to?" said the stranger.

Foiral hardly knew what to say. In the end he had to admit it was his.

"Will you rent it to me?" said the stranger.

"What's that?" said Foiral.

"I want the house for six months," said the stranger.

"What for?" said Foiral.

"Damn it!" said the stranger. "To live in."

"Why?" said Foiral.

The stranger holds up his hand. He picks hold of the thumb. He says, very slowly, "I am an artist, a painter."

"Yes," says Foiral.

Then the stranger lays hold of his forefinger. "I can work here. I like it. I like the view. I like those two ilex trees."

"Very good," says Foiral.

Then the stranger takes hold of his middle finger. "I want to stay here six months."

"Yes," says Foiral.

Then the stranger takes hold of his third finger. "In this house. Which, I may say, on this yellow ground, looks interestingly like a die on a desert. Or does it look like a skull?"

"Ah!" says Foiral.

Then the stranger takes hold of his little finger, and he says, "How much—do you want—to let me—live and work—in this house—for six months?"

"Why?" says Foiral.

At this the stranger began to stamp up and down. They had quite an argument. Foiral clinched the matter by saying that people didn't rent houses in that part of the world; everyone had his own.

"It is necessary," said the stranger, grinding his teeth, "for me to paint pictures here."
"So much the worse," said Foiral.

The stranger uttered a number of cries in some foreign gibberish, possibly that of hell itself. "I see your soul," said he, "as a small and exceedingly sterile black marble, on a waste of burning white alkali."

Foiral, holding his two middle fingers under his thumb, extended the first and fourth in the direction of the stranger, careless of whether he gave offence.

"What will you take for the shack?" said the stranger.

"Maybe I'll buy it."

It was quite a relief to Foiral to find that after all he was just a plain, simple, ordinary lunatic. Without a proper pair of pants to his backside, he was offering to buy this excellent sound house, for which Foiral would have asked twenty thousand francs, had there been anyone of whom to ask it.

"Come on," said the stranger. "How much?"
Foiral, thinking he had wasted enough time, and not objecting to an agreeable sensation, said, "Forty thousand."
Said the stranger, "I'll give you thirty-five."
Foiral laughed heartily.

"That's a good laugh," said the stranger. "I should like to paint a laugh like that. I should express it by a *mélange* of the roots of recently extracted teeth. Well, what about it? Thirty-five? I can pay you a deposit right now." And, pulling out a wallet, this Crœsus among madmen rustled one, two, three, four, five thousand-franc notes under Foiral's nose.

"It'll leave me dead broke," he said. "Still, I expect I can sell it again?"

"If God wills," said Foiral.

"Anyway, I could come here now and then," said the other. "My God! I can paint a showful of pictures here in six months. New York'll go crazy. Then I'll come back here and paint another show."

Foiral, ravished with joy, ceased attempting to understand. He began to praise his house furiously: he dragged

the man inside, showed him the oven, banged the walls, made him look up the chimney, into the shed, down the well——"All right," said the stranger. "That's grand. Everything's grand. Whitewash the walls. Find me some woman to come and clean and cook. I'll go back to

some woman to come and clean and cook. I'll go back to Perpignan and turn up in a week with my things. Listen, I want that table chucked in, two or three of the chairs, and the bedstead. I'll get the rest. Here's your deposit."

"No, no," said Foiral. "Everything must be done properly, before witnesses. Then, when the lawyer comes, he can make out the papers. Come back with me. I'll call Arago, he's a very honest man. Guis, very honest. Vigné, honest as the good earth. And a bottle of old wine. I have it It shall cost nothing." it. It shall cost nothing."

"Fine!" said the blessed madman, sent by God.

Back they went. In came Arago, Guis, Vigné, all as honest as the day. The deposit was paid, the wine was opened, the stranger called for more, others crowded in those who were not allowed in stood outside to listen to the laughter. You'd have thought there was a wedding going on, or some wickedness in the house. In fact, Foiral's old woman went and stood in the doorway every now and then. just to let people see her.

There was no doubt about it, there was something very magnificent about this madman. Next day, after he had gone, they talked him over thoroughly. "To listen," said little Guis, "is to be drunk without spending a penny. You think you understand; you seem to fly through the air; you have to burst out laughing."

"I somehow had the delectable impression that I was rich," said Arago. "Not, I mean, with something in the chimney, but as if I—well, as if I were to spend it. And more."

"I like him," said little Guis. "He is my friend."
"Now you speak like a fool," said Foiral. "He is mad. And it is I who deal with him."

"I thought maybe he was not so mad when he said the house was like an old skull looking out of the ground," said Guis, looking sideways, as well he might.

"Nor a liar, perhaps?" said Foiral. "Let me tell you, he

said also it was like a die on a desert. Can it be both?"

"He said in one breath," said Arago, "that he came from Paris. In the next, that he was an American."

"Oh, yes. Unquestionably a great liar," said Quès. "Perhaps one of the biggest rogues in the whole world, going up and down. But, fortunately, mad as well."

"So he buys a house," said Lafago. "If he had his wits about him, a liar of that size, he'd take it—like that. As it is, he buys it. Thirty-five thousand francs!"

"Madness turns a great man inside out, like a sack," said

Arago. "And if he is rich as well-"

"—money flies in all directions," said Guis.

Nothing could be more satisfactory. They waited impatiently for the stranger's return. Foiral whitewashed the house, cleaned the chimneys, put everything to rights. You may be sure he had a good search for anything that his wife's old man might have left hidden there years ago, and which this fellow might have heard of. They say they're up to anything in Paris.

The stranger came back, and they were all day with the mules getting his stuff from where the motor truck had left it. By the evening they were in the house, witnesses, helpers, and all—there was just the little matter of paying up the money.

Foiral indicated this with the greatest delicacy in the world. The stranger, all smiles and readiness, went into the room where his bags were piled up, and soon emerged with a sort of book in his hand, full of little billets, like those they try to sell for the lottery in Perpignan. He tore off the top one. "Here you are," he said to Foiral, holding it out. "Thirty thousand francs."

"No," said Foiral.

"What the hell now?" asked the stranger.

"I've seen that sort of thing," said Foiral. "And not for thirty thousand francs, my friend, but for three million. And afterwards—they tell you it hasn't won. I should prefer the money."

"This is the money," said the stranger. "It's as good as money anyway. Present this, and you'll get thirty thousand-franc notes, just like those I gave you."

Foiral was rather at a loss. It's quite usual in these parts to settle a sale at the end of a month. Certainly he wanted to run no risk of crabbing the deal. So he pocketed the piece of paper, gave the fellow good-day, and went off with the rest of them to the village.

The stranger settled in. Soon he got to know everybody. Foiral, a little uneasy, cross-examined him whenever they talked. It appeared, after all, that he did come from Paris, having lived there, and he was an American, having been born there. "Then you have no relations in this part of the world?" said Foiral.

"No relations at all."

Well! Well! Foiral hoped the money was all right. Yet there was more in it than that. No relations! It was quite a thought. Foiral put it away at the back of his mind: he meant to extract the juice from it some night when he couldn't sleep.

At the end of the month, he took out his piece of paper, and marched up to the house again. There was the fellow, three parts naked, sitting under one of the ilex trees, painting away on a bit of canvas. And what do you think he had chosen to paint? Roustand's mangy olives, that haven't borne a crop in living memory!

"What is it?" said the mad fellow. "I'm busy."

"This," said Foiral, holding out the bit of paper. "I need the money."

"Then why, in the name of the devil," said the other, "don't you go and get the money, instead of coming here bothering me?"

Foiral had never seen him in this sort of mood before. But a lot of these laughers stop laughing when it comes to hard cash. "Look here," said Foiral. "This is a very serious matter."

"Look here," said the stranger. "That's what's called a cheque. I give it to you. You take it to a bank. The bank gives you the money."

"Which bank?" said Foiral.

"Your bank. Any bank. The bank in Perpignan," said the stranger. "You go there. They'll do it for you."

Foiral, still hankering after the cash, pointed out that

he was a very poor man, and it took a whole day to get to Perpignan, a considerable thing to such an extremely poor man as he was.

"Listen," said the stranger. "You know goddamn well you've made a good thing out of this sale. Let me get on with my work. Take the cheque to Perpignan. It's worth the trouble. I've paid you plenty."

Foiral knew then that Guis had been talking about the price of the house. "All right, my little Guis, I'll think that over some long evening when the rains begin." However, there was nothing for it, he had to put on his best black, take the mule to Estagel, and there get the bus, and the bus took him to Perpignan.

In Perpignan they are like so many monkeys. They push you, look you up and down, snigger in your face. If a man has business—with a bank, let us say—and he stands on the pavement opposite to have a good look at it, he gets elbowed into the roadway half a dozen times in five minutes, and he's lucky if he escapes with his life.

Nevertheless, Foiral got into the bank at last. As a spectacle it was tremendous. Brass rails, polished wood, a clock big enough for a church, little cotton-backs sitting

among heaps of money like mice in a cheese.

He stood at the back for about half an hour, waiting, and no one took any notice of him at all. In the end one of the little cotton-backs beckoned him up to the brass railing. Foiral delved in his pocket, and produced the cheque. The cotton-back looked at it as if it were a mere nothing. "Holy Virgin!" thought Foiral.

"I want the money for it," said he. "Are you a client of the bank?"
"No."

"Do you wish to be?"

"Shall I get the money?"

"But naturally. Sign this. Sign this. Sign on the back of the cheque. Take this. Sign this. Thank you. Good-day."

"But the thirty thousand francs?" cried Foiral.

"For that, my dear sir, we must wait till the cheque is cleared. Come back in about a week."

Foiral, half dazed, went home. It was a bad week. By

day he felt reasonably sure of the cash, but at night, as soon as he closed his eyes, he could see himself going into that bank, and all the cotton-backs swearing they'd never seen him before. Still, he got through it, and as soon as the time was up, presented himself at the bank again.

"Do you want a cheque-book?"

"No. Just the money. The money."

"All of it? You want to close the account? Well! Well! Sign here. Sign here."

Foiral signed.

"There you are. Twenty-nine thousand eight hundred and ninety.

"But, sir, it was thirty thousand."

"But, my dear sir, the charges."

Foiral found it was no good arguing. He went off with his money. That was good. But the other hundred and ten! That sticks in a man's throat.

As soon as he got home, Foiral interviewed the stranger. "I am a poor man," said he.

"So am I," said the stranger. "A damned sight too poor to pay you extra because you can't get a cheque cashed in a civilized way."

This was a peculiarly villainous lie. Foiral had, with his own eyes, seen a whole block of these extraordinary thirty-thousand-franc billets in the little book from which the stranger had torn this one. But once more there was nothing to be done about it; a plain honest man is always being baffled and defeated. Foiral went home, and put his crippled twenty-nine-thousand-odd into the little box behind the stone chimney. How different, if it had been a round thirty thousand! What barbarous injustice!

Here was something to think about in the evenings. Foiral thought about it a lot. In the end he decided it was impossible to act alone, and called in Arago, Quès, Lefago, Vigné, Barilles. Not Guis. It was Guis who had told the fellow he had paid too much for the house, and put his back up. Let Guis stay out of it.

To the rest he explained everything very forcefully. "Not a relation in the whole countryside. And in that book, my dear friends—you have seen it yourselves—ten, twelve,

fifteen, maybe twenty of these extraordinary little billets."

"And if somebody comes after him? Somebody from America?"

"He has gone off, walking, mad, just as he came here. Anything can happen to a madman, walking about, scattering money."

"It's true. Anything can happen."

"But it should happen before the lawyer comes."

"That's true. So far even the curé hasn't seen him."

"There must be justice, my good friends, society cannot exist without it. A man, an honest man, is not to be robbed of a hundred and ten francs."

"No, that is intolerable."

The next night, these very honest men left their houses, those houses whose tall uprights of white plaster and black shadow appear, in moonlight even more than in sunlight, like a heap of bleached ribs lying in the desert. Without much conversation they made their way up the hill and knocked upon the stranger's door.

After a brief interval they returned, still without much conversation, and slipped one by one into their extremely

dark doorways, and that was all.

For a whole week there was no perceptible change in the village. If anything, its darks and silences, those holes in the fierce light, were deeper. In every black interior sat a man who had two of these excellent billets, each of which commanded thirty thousand francs. Such a possession brightened the eyes, and enhances the savour of solitude, enabling a man, as the artist would have said, to partake of the nature of Fabre's tarantula, motionless at the angle of her tunnel. But they found it no longer easy to remember the artist. His jabbering, his laughter, even his final yelp, left no echo at all. It was all gone, like the rattle and flash of yesterday's thunderstorm.

So apart from the tasks of the morning and the evening, performing which they were camouflaged by habit, they sat in their houses alone. Their wives scarcely dared to speak to them, and they were too rich to speak to each other. Guis found it out, for it was no secret except to the world outside, and Guis was furious. But his wife berated

him from morning till night, and left him no energy for reproaching his neighbours.

At the end of the week, Barilles sprang into existence in the doorway of his house. His thumbs were stuck in his belt, his face was flushed from lead colour to plum colour, his bearing expressed an irritable resolution.

He crossed to Arago's, knocked, leaned against a doorpost. Arago, emerging, leaned against the other. They talked for some little time of nothing at all. Then Barilles, throwing away the stump of his cigarette, made an oblique and sympathetic reference to a certain small enclosure belonging to Arago, on which there was a shed, a few vines, a considerable grove of olives. "It is the very devil," said Barilles, "how the worm gets into the olive in these days. Such a grove as that, at one time, might have been worth something."

"It is worse than the devil," said Arago. "Believe me or not, my dear friend, in some years I get no more than three thousand francs from that grove."

Barilles burst into what passes for laughter in this part of the world. "Forgive me!" he said. "I thought you said three thousand. Three hundred—yes. I suppose in a good year you might make that very easily."

This conversation continued through phases of civility,

This conversation continued through phases of civility, sarcasm, rage, fury and desperation until it ended with a cordial handshake, and a sale of the enclosure to Barilles for twenty-five thousand francs. The witnesses were called in; Barilles handed over one of his billets, and received five thousand in cash from the box Arago kept in his chimney. Everyone was delighted by the sale: it was felt that things were beginning to move in the village.

They were. Before the company separated, pourparlers were already started for the sale of Vigné's mules to Quès for eight thousand, the transfer of Lloubes' cork concession to Foiral for fifteen thousand, the marriage of Roustand's daughter to Vigné's brother with a dowry of twenty thousand, and the sale of a miscellaneous collection of brass objects belonging to Madame Arago for sixty-five francs, after some very keen bargaining.

Only Guis was left out in the cold, but on the way home,

Lloubes, with his skin full of wine, ventured to step inside the outcast's doorway, and looked his wife Filomena up and down, from top to toe, three times. A mild interest, imperfectly concealed, softened the bitter and sullen expression upon the face of Guis.

This was a mere beginning. Soon properties began to change hands at a bewildering rate and at increasing prices. It was a positive boom. Change was constantly being dug out from under flagstones, from the strawy interiors of mattresses, from hollows in beams, and from holes in walls. With the release of these frozen credits the village blossomed like an orchid sprung from a dry stick. Wine flowed with every bargain. Old enemies shook hands. Elderly spinsters embraced young suitors. Wealthy widowers married young brides. Several of the weaker sort wore their best black every day. One of these was Lloubes, who spent his evenings in the house of Guis. Guis in the evenings would wander round the village, no longer sullen, and was seen cheapening a set of harness at Lafago's, a first-rate gun at Roustand's. There was talk of something very special by way of a fiesta after the grape harvest, but this was only whispered, lest the curé should hear of it on one of his visits.

Foiral, keeping up his reputation as leader, made a staggering proposal. It was nothing less than to improve the mule track all the way from the metalled road on the rim of the hills, so that motor trucks could visit the village. It was objected that the wage bill would be enormous. "Yes," said Foiral, "but we shall draw the wages ourselves. We shall get half as much again for our produce."

The proposal was adopted. The mere boys of the village now shared the prosperity. Barilles now called his little shop "Grand Café Glacier de l'Univers et des Pyrénées." The widow Loyau offered room, board, and clothing to certain unattached young women, and gave select parties in the evenings.

Barilles went to Perpignan and returned with a sprayer that would double the yield of his new olive grove. Lloubes went and returned with a positive bale of ladies' underclothing, designed, you would say, by the very devil him-

self. Two or three keen card players went and returned with new packs of cards, so lustrous that your hand seemed to be all aces and kings. Vigné went, and returned with a long face.

The bargaining, increasing all the time, called for more and more ready money. Foiral made a new proposal. "We will all go to Perpignan, the whole damned lot of us, march to the bank, thump down our *billets*, and show the little cotton-backs whom the money belongs to. Boys, we'll leave them without a franc."

"They will have the hundred and ten," said Quès.

"To hell with the hundred and ten!" said Foiral. "And, boys, after that—well—ha! ha!—all men sin once. They say the smell alone of one of those creatures is worth fifty francs. Intoxicating! Stair carpets, red hair, every sort of wickedness! Tomorrow!"

"Tomorrow!" they all cried, and on the morrow they went off, in their stiffest clothes, their faces shining. Every man was smoking like a chimney, and every man had washed his feet.

The journey was tremendous. They stopped the bus at every café on the road, and saw nothing they didn't ask the price of. In Perpignan they kept together in a close phalanx; if the townspeople stared, our friends stared back twice as hard. As they crossed over to the bank, "Where is Guis?" said Foiral, affecting to look for him among their number. "Has he nothing due to him?" That set them all laughing. Try as they might, they couldn't hold their faces straight. They were all choking with laughter when the swing doors closed behind them.

THE SECRET OF THE BOTTLE

Gerald Kersh

The fact that the lustrous red color of the glaze on the Oxoxoco Bottle is due to the presence in the clay of certain uranium salts is of no importance. A similar coloration may be found in Bohemian and Venetian glass, for example. No, the archaeologists at the British Museum are baffled by the shape of the thing. They cannot agree about the nature or the purpose.

the nature or the purpose.

Doctor Raisin, for example, says that it was not designed as a bottle at all, but rather as a musical instrument: a curious combination of the ocarina and the syrinx, because it has three delicately curved slender necks, and opposite the longest one there is something like a finger hole. But in the opinion of Sir Cecil Sampson, a leading authority on ancient musical instruments, the Oxoxoco Bottle was never constructed to throw back sounds. Professor Miller, however, inclines to the belief that the Oxoxoco Bottle is a kind of tobacco pipe: the two shorter necks curve upward to fit the nostrils while the longer neck extends to the mouth. Professor Miller indicates that smoldering herbs were dropped in at the finger hole and that the user of the bottle must have inhaled the smoke through all his respiratory passages.

I have reason to believe that Professor Miller has guessed closest to the truth, although, if the document in my possession is genuine, it was not tobacco that they burned in the squid-shaped body of the bottle.

session is genuine, it was not tobacco that they burned in the squid-shaped body of the bottle.

It was intact, except for a few chips, when I bought it from a mestizo peddler in Cuernavaca in 1948. "Genuine," he said; and this seemed to be the only English word he knew: "Genuine, genuine." He pointed toward the mountains and conveyed to me by writhings and convulsions, pointing to earth and sky, that he had picked the bottle up after an earthquake. At last I gave him five pesos for it, and forgot about it until I found it several years later while I was idling over a mess of dusty souvenirs—sombreros, huaraches, a stuffed baby alligator and other trifles, such as tourists pick up in their wanderings, pay heavily for, and then give away to friends who consign them to some unfrequented part of the house. The straw hats and other plaited objects had deteriorated. The stitches in the ventral part of the little alligator had given way, and the same had happened to the little Caribbean sting ray. But

the vessel later to be known as the Oxoxoco Bottle seemed to glow.

I picked it up carelessly, saying to a friend who was spending that evening with me. "Now what this is, I don't know—" when it slipped from between my dusty fingers and broke against the base of a brass lamp.

My friend said, "Some sort of primitive cigar holder, I imagine. See? There's still a cigar inside it. Or is it a stick

of cinnamon?"

"What would they be doing with cinnamon in Mexico?" I asked, picking up this pale brown cylinder. It had a slightly oily texture and retained a certain aromatic odor. "What would you make of a thing like that?"

He took it from me and rustled it at his ear between thumb and forefinger much in the manner of a would-be connoisseur "listening to" the condition of a cigar. An outer leaf curled back. The interior was pale yellow. He cried, "Bless my heart, man, it's paper—thin paper—and written on, too, unless my eyes deceive me."

So we took the pieces of the bottle and that panatellashaped scroll to the British Museum. Professor Mayhew, of Ceramics, took charge of the broken bottle. Doctor Wills, of Ancient Manuscripts, went to work on the scroll with all the frenzied patience characteristic of such men, who will hunch their backs and go blind working twenty years on a fragment of a Dead Sea scroll.

Oddly enough, he had this paper cigar unrolled and separated into leaves within six weeks, when he communicated with me, saying, "This is not an ancient manuscript. It is scarcely fifty years old. It was written in pencil, upon faint-ruled paper torn out of some reporter's notebook not later than 1914. This is not my pigeon. So I gave it to Brownlow, of Modern Manuscripts. Excuse me." And he disappeared through a book-lined door in the library.

Doctor Brownlow had the papers on his table, covered with a heavy sheet of plate glass. He said to me in a dry voice, "If this is a hoax, Mr. Kersh, I could recommend more profitable ways of expending the museum's time and your own. If it is not a hoax, then it is one of the literary discoveries of the century. The Americans would be espe-

cially interested in it. They could afford to buy it, being millionaires. We could not. But it is curious—most curious."

"What is it?" I asked.

He took his time, in the maddening manner of such men, and said, "Considering the advanced age of the putative author of this narrative, there are certain discrepancies in the handwriting. The purported author of this must have been an old man in about 1914, at which I place the date of its writing. Furthermore, he suffered with asthma and rheumatism. Yet I don't know. If you will allow me to make certain inquiries, and keep this holograph a few days more

I demanded, "What man? What rheumatism? What do vou mean?"

He said, "Beg pardon, I thought you knew. This"—and he tapped the plate glass—"pretends to be the last written work of the American author Ambrose Bierce. I have taken the liberty of having it photographed for your benefit. If we may keep this until next Monday or so for further investigation?"

"Do that," I said, and took from him a packet of photographs, considerably enlarged from the narrow notebook sheets.

"He was a great writer!" I said, "One of America's greatest!"

The Modern Manuscripts man shrugged. "Well, well. He was in London from 1872 until 1876. A newspaperman—a newspaperman. They used to call him 'Bitter' Bierce. When he went back to America he worked—if my memory does not deceive me-mainly in San Francisco; wrote for such publications as The Examiner, the American, Cosmopolitan and such-like. Famous for his bitter tongue and his ghostly stories. He had merit. Academic circles in the United States will give you anything you like for this—if it is genuine. If— Now I beg you to excuse me." Before we parted, he added, with a little smile, "I hope it is genuine, for your sake and ours, because that would certainly clear up what is getting to be a warm dispute among our fellows in the Broken Crockery Department."

And here is the manuscript found in the Oxoxoco Bottle:

Mount Popocatepetl looms over little Oxoxoco, which, at first glance, is a charming and picturesque village, in the Mexican sense of the term. In this respect it closely resembles its human counterparts. Oxoxoco is picturesque and interesting, indeed; at a suitable distance, and beyond the range of one's nostrils. Having become acquainted with it, the disillusioned traveler looks to the snowy peak of the volcano for a glimpse of cool beauty in this lazy, bandithaunted, burnt-up land. But if he is a man of sensibility, he almost hopes that the vapors on the peak may give place to some stupendous eructation of burning gas, and a consequent eruption of molten lava which, hissing down into the valley, may cauterize this ulcer of a place from the surface of the tormented earth, covering all traces of it with a neat poultice of pumice stone and a barber's dusting of the finest white ashes.

They used to call me a good hater. This used to be so. I despised my contemporaries, I detested my wife—a feeling she reciprocated—and had an impatient contempt for my sons, and for their grandfather, my father. London appalled me, New York disgusted me and California nauseated me. I almost believe that I came to Mexico for something fresh to hate. Oxco, Taxco, Cuernavaca—they were all equally distasteful to me, and I knew that I should feel similarly about the—from a distance enchanting—village of Oxoxoco. But I was sick and tired, hunted and alone, and I needed repose, because every bone in my body, at every movement, raised its sepulchral protest. But there was to be no rest for me in Oxoxoco.

Once the traveler sets foot in this village, he is affronted by filth and lethargy. The men squat, chin on knee, smoking or sleeping. There is a curious lifelessness about the place as it clings, a conglomeration of hovels, to the upland slope. There is only one half-solid building in Oxoxoco, which is the church. My views on religion are tolerably well known, but I made my way to this edifice to be away from the heat, the flies and the vultures which are the street cleaners of Oxoxoco. In this respect it is not unlike certain other cities I have visited, only in Oxoxoco the vultures have wings and no politics. The church was comparatively cool.

Resting, I looked at the painted murals. They simply christen the old bloody Aztec gods and goddesses—give them the names of saints—and go on worshiping in the old savage style.

A priest came out to greet me. He radiated benevolence when he saw that I was wearing a complete suit of clothes, a watch chain and boots, however down at heel. In reply to his polite inquiry as to what he could do for me, I said, "Why, padre, you can direct me out of this charming village of yours, if you will." Knowing that nothing is to be village of yours, if you will." Knowing that nothing is to be got without ready cash, I gave him half a dollar, saying, "For the poor of your parish, if there are any poor in so delightful a place. If not, burn a few candles for those who have recently died of want. Meanwhile, if you will be so good as to direct me to some place where I can find something to eat and drink, I shall be infinitely obliged."

"Diego's widow is clean and obliging," said he, looking at my coin. Then, "You are an American."

"There you mill indeed to make the most indeed to the control of the

"Then you will, indeed, be well advised to move away from here as soon as you have refreshed yourself, because there is a rumor that Zapata is coming—or it may be Villa. What do I know?"

"Presumably, the secrets of the Infinite, padre, judging by your cassock. Certainly," I said, "the secrets of Oxoxoco. Now, may I eat and drink and go on my way?"

"I will take you to Diego's widow," said he, with a sigh. "Up there," said he, pointing to the mountain slope, "you will certainly be safe from Villa, Zapata and any other man in these parts. No one will go where I am pointing, señor—not the bravest of the brave. They are a superstitious people, my people."

"Not being superstitious yourself, padre, no doubt you have traveled that path yourself?"

Crossing himself, he said, "Heaven forbid!" and hastily

added, "But you cannot go on foot, señor?"

"I'd rather not, padre. But how else should I go?"

His eyes grew bright as he replied, "As luck will have it, Diego's widow has a burro to sell, and he knows the way anywhere. Come with me and I will take you to Diego's

widow. She is a virtuous woman and lives two paces from here."

The sun seemed to flare like oil, and at every step we were beset by clouds of flies, which appeared not to bother the good priest, who seemed inordinately concerned with my welfare. His "two paces" were more like a thousand, and all the way he catechized me, only partly inspired. I believe, by personal curiosity.

"Señor, why do you want to go up there? True, you will be safe from bad men. But there are other dangers, of which man is the least."

"If you mean snakes or what not-- " I began.

"Oh, no," said he; "up there is too high for the reptiles and the cats. I see, in any case, that you carry a pistol and a rifle. Oh, you will see enough snakes and cats when you pass through the Oxoxoco jungle on your way. That, too, is dangerous; it is unfit for human habitation."
"Padre," said I, "I have lived in London."

Without getting the gist or the point of this, he persisted. "It is my duty to warn you, señor: it is very bad jungle." "Padre, I come from San Francisco."

"But, señor! It is not so much the wild beasts as the insects that creep into the eyes, señor, into the ears. They suck blood, they breed fever, they drive men mad---"

"Padre, padre, I have been connected with contributors

to the popular press!"

"Beyond the second bend in the river there are still surviving, unbaptized, certain Indians. They murder strangers slowly, over a slow fire, inch by inch."

"Enough, padre; I have been married and have had a

family."

His pace lagged as we approached the house of Diego's widow, and he asked me, "Do you understand the nature of a burro, a donkey?"

"Padre, I attended the Kentucky Military Institute."

"I do not grasp your meaning, but they are perverse animals, bless them. Tell them to advance, and they halt. Urge them forward, they go sideways."

"Padre, I was drummer boy with the Ninth Indiana In-

fantry."

"Ah, well, you will have your way. Here is Diego's widow's house. She is a good woman." And so he led me into a most malodorous darkness, redolent of pigs with an undertone of goat.

The widow of Diego, as the padre had said, was unquestionably a good woman and a virtuous one. With her looks, how could she have been other than virtuous? She had only three teeth and was prematurely aged, like all the women hereabout. As for her cleanliness, no doubt she was as clean as it is possible to be in Oxoxoco. A little pig ran between us as we entered. The padre dismissed it with a blessing and a hard kick, and said, "Here is a gentleman, my daughter, who requires refreshment and wants a burro. He is, of course, willing to pay."

"There is no need of that," said the widow of Diego, holding out a cupped hand. When I put a few small pieces of money into her palm, she made them disappear like a prestidigitator, all the while protesting, "I could not possibly accept," et cetera, and led me to a pallet of rawhide strips,

where I sat nursing my aching head.

Soon she brought me a dish of enchiladas and a little bottle of some spirits these people distill, at a certain season, from the cactus. I ate, although I knew that the hot red pepper could not agree with my asthma; and drank a little, although I was aware that this stuff might be the worst thing in the world for my rheumatism. The flies were so numerous and the air so dense and hot that I felt as one might feel who has been baked in an immense currant bun, without the spice.

She gave me a gourd of goat's milk and as I drank it, asked me, "The señor wants a burro? I have a burro."

"So the reverend father told me," said I, "and I hear no good of him."

"I have never seen such a burro," said she. "He is big and beautiful—you will see for yourself—almost as big as a mule, and all white. You can have him for next to nothing. Five silver dollars."

"Come now," said I. "What's wrong with this animal that has all the virtues in the world and goes for next to nothing? I have lived a very long time in all parts of the world,

señora, and one thing I have learned—never trust a bargain. Speak up. What's the matter with the beast? Is he vicious?"
"No, señor, he is not vicious, but the good people in

"No, señor, he is not vicious, but the good people in Oxoxoco are afraid of him and nobody will buy him. They called him a ghost burro, because his hair is white, his eyes and nose red."

"In other words, an albino donkey," I remarked.

At the unfamiliar word she crossed herself and continued, "And what need have I for a burro, señor? A few goats, a pig or two, a little corn—what more do I want? Come, caballero, you may have him for four dollars, with a halter and a blanket thrown in."

"Well, let me see this famous burro, widow. I have ridden many a ghost in my time and have been ridden by them in my turn."

So she led me to a shady place nearby where stood a large white donkey, or burro as they call them, haltered, still and seemingly contemplative.

"Where did you get him?" I asked.

The question seemed to embarrass her, but she replied. "He strayed from up there"—pointing to the mountain—"and since no one has claimed him in three years, I have the right to call him mine."

"Well," said I, "I am going up there. No doubt someone will recognize him and claim him, and I'll be short one donkey. But give me the blanket and the halter, and I will give you three dollars for the lot."

Diego's widow agreed readily. I could see what was passing in her mind: the burro was economically valueless, and if Villa broke through, which seemed likely, his commissariat would take the donkey away to carry ammunition or, perhaps, to eat. She could not hide a donkey, but she could hide three dollars. Hence, she produced an old Indian blanket and a rawhide halter. Also, she filled my canteen with water and offered me a stirrup cup of mescal, and pressed into my pockets some cakes wrapped in leaves. "Go with God, stranger," she said. "When you pass the bend in the river and find yourself in the jungle, look to your rifle. But where the path forks, where the trees get thin, turn left, not right." Then she threw over my head a little silver

chain, attached to which was a small silver crucifix. I felt somewhat like the man in young Bram Stoker's *Dracula*—which might have been an excellent novel if he could have kept up to the quality of the first three or four chapters—but I thanked her and offered her another dollar, which she refused. Perhaps, after all, she really was a good woman, as the priest had said.

The inhabitants of Oxoxoco came out of their divers lethargies to cross themselves as I passed, mounted on the white burro. But soon I was in the jungle, following a barely per-

ceptible path up the mountain.

I detest the indiscriminately growing, perpetually breeding, constantly rotting, useless and diseased life of the jungle. It reminds me too much of life in the poorer quarters of such great cities as London and New York. Jungles—whether vegetable or of brick and mortar—are to hide in, not to live in. Where there is too much life there is too much death and decay. The Oxoxoco jungle was full of useless forms of life. The trees grew to an immense height, racing neck and neck to the sunlight; meeting overhead and grappling with one another, branch to branch, locked in a stranglehold, careless of the murderous vines that were twining themselves about their trunks and sucking their life sap while they struggled.

that were twining themselves about their trunks and sucking their life sap while they struggled.

There was no light, but there was no shade; only a kind of evil steam. In places I thought I would have to cut my way with my machete, but the donkey seemed to know his way through what, to me, seemed hopelessly impenetrable places. He paused, sometimes, to drink out of some little pool or puddle that had dripped from the foliage above. But he went on very bravely. I never spent three dollars on a better bargain, and wished now that I had not haggled with Diego's widow, who, I was by now convinced, was not merely a virtuous woman but a generous one. Or a fool. And I had reason to bless her forethought in filling my canteen with water and my pocket with cakes because three laborious days passed before the air became sweeter and the vegetation more sparse.

But long before we got out of the jungle I heard myself talking to myself, saying, "So you old fool, you have got

what you deserve. Live alone, die alone." There being no unlicked journalists to puncture with my tongue, I turned it against myself; and I believe that at last I met my match in piercing acrimony, because I was tongue-tied against my own onslaughts.

Then, having drunk the last drop of my water—which immediately sprang out again through the pores of my skin—I gave myself up for lost and started to become delirious. I thought that I was back in the log cabin in which I was born in Meigs County, Ohio, with my poor crazy father and my eight brothers and sisters, and I had made up my mind to run away.

Then, miraculously, there were no more trees, and the air was clean and cold. The white burro broke into a gallop, then a trot, then a walk, and so came to a halt. I raised my drooping head and saw, standing in our path, a tall, lean man, dressed all in white, holding up a hand in an imperious gesture.

He said, in a sonorous voice, "So, you bad burro, you have come home? Well, I will forgive your going astray since you have brought us a guest." Then, to me, in pure Castillian, "Allow me to help you to dismount, señor. I fear you are exhausted, and your face is badly scratched by the thorns."

I managed to croak, in English, "For heaven's sake, water!"

Mine was the semi-imbecile astonishment of the help-lessly played-out man when I heard him reply in perfect English, "Of course, sir. I am extremely thoughtless." I suppose he made some gesture, because two men lifted me very gently and put me in a shady place, while the gentleman in white held to my lips a vessel—not a gourd, but a metal vessel—of pure ice-cold water, admonishing me to drink it slowly.

It revived me wonderfully, and I said, "Sir, you have saved my life, and I am grateful to you—not for that, but for the most delicious drink I have ever tasted." Then my eyes fell upon the cup from which I had drunk. The outside was frosted, like a julep cup, but the inside was not. Then I noticed the color and the weight of it. It was solid gold.

A servant refilled it from a golden ewer and I drained it again. The gentleman in the white suit said, "Yes, it is very good water. It comes unadulterated from the snows, which are unpolluted. But your voice is familiar to me."

I was traveling incognito, but in courtesy I had to give my host some name to call me by, so I said, "My name is Mark Harte"—borrowing from two of my literary contemporaries the Christian name of one and the surname of the other. Then I fainted, but before I quite lost consciousness I heard the gentleman in the white suit utter some words in a strange language and felt myself, as it were, floating away. I know that somebody put to my lips a cup of some bitter-tasting effervescent liquid. Then, curiously happy, I fell into oblivion as lightly as a snowflake falls upon black velvet.

It was one of those sleeps that might last an hour or ten thousand years. When I awoke I was lying on a bed of the most exquisite softness, in a cool and spacious chamber simply but luxuriously furnished in a style with which I was unacquainted. There was a kind of dressing table near the window, upon which stood a row of crystal bottles with gold stoppers containing what I presumed to be perfumes and lotions. A series of garments had been laid out for me, and I put them on.

Above the dressing table hung a large beveled mirror in a golden frame, wonderfully wrought in designs which seemed at once strange and familiar. My face, in the mirror, was miserably familiar. But my month-old beard was gone. Only my mustache remained; and my hair had been trimmed and dressed exactly as it was before I left San Francisco and came to Mexico to die. There were bookshelves, also, well filled with a variety of volumes. With a shock of surprise, almost of dismay, I recognized some works of my own. Upon a low table near the bed stood a golden ewer and cup, and a little golden bell. This last named I picked up and rang.

The door opened and two servants came in, carrying between them a table covered with a damask cloth and laid with a variety of dishes, every dish of gold with a gold cover. One of them placed a chair. Another unfolded a

snowy napkin, which he laid across my knees as I sat. Then he proceeded to lift the covers, while the other brought in a wine cooler of some rich dark wood curiously inlaid in gold with designs similar to those in the frame of the mirror. Everything but the wineglasses was of massive gold, and these were of crystal, that beautiful Mexican rock crystal. I picked up a champagne glass and observed that it had been carved out of one piece, as had the hock glass, claret glass, port-wine glass and liqueur glass, et cetera. Many months of patient, untiring and wonderfully skillful craftsmanship must have gone into the making of every piece. Gold never meant much to me, except when I needed it; and such a profusion of it tended even more to debase that metal in my currency. But those wineglasses, carved and ground out of the living crystal, they fascinated me.

While I was admiring them, I touched a goblet with a tentative fingernail and was enjoying its melodious vibrations when the sommelier, the wine waiter, went out on tiptoe and returned, wheeling a three-tiered wagon, upon every shelf of which was ranged a number of rare wines of the choicest vintages. It seems that I had touched a sherry glass; in any case, he filled the glass I had touched from an old squat bottle.

old squat bottle.

"Hold hard, my friend," I said in Spanish. But he only bowed low and made a graceful gesture toward the glass. I believe that that sherry was in the hogshead before Napoleon came to handgrips with the Duke of Wellington at Badajoz. Sherry is the worst thing in the world for rheumatism, and I meant to take no more than one sip. But that one sip filled me so full of sunlight that I felt myself responding to it as if to Spanish music, and my appetite came roaring back.

I ate as I had never eaten before. With each course came

an appropriate wine. At last I was served with coffee and brandy. The table was removed. In its place they brought in a low round table, inlaid like the wine cooler, and upon a great gold tray crystal glasses, a decanter and all that goes with a Sèvres coffeepot.

Now my host came in, and I had an opportunity to ob-

serve him more closely. "I trust that you have refreshed yourself, Mr. Harte," said he.

I replied. "My dear sir, it is you who have refreshed me. Never have I, in my wildest dreams, imagined such Heliogabalian hospitality. I do not know how to thank you."

He replied, "You thank me by your presence. You reward me, Mr. Mark Harte. Let us take coffee and cognac together. I hope you slept well. I thought that it might please you, when you awoke, to find yourself looking a little more like the gentleman whose conversation I—inadvertently, but with vast pleasure—happened to overhear in the Imperial Café in London, in the spring of 1873; and later at the Ambassador, not many years ago. But do taste this brandy. It was distilled, I think, about the time when Napoleon was a cadet:

'Napoleon with his stockings half down Is in love with Giannaconnetta.'

You heard the jingle? Yes, Mr. Harte, the wine merchants speak of Napoleon Brandy, but I possess the last few dozen authentic bottles in the world."

"You have been so kind to me," said I, "that I feel bound to tell you. My name is not Mark Harte."

"Oh, but I knew that two days ago—yes, you slept fortyeight hours—and I was quite aware that you were neither Mark Twain nor Bret Harte, nor any imaginable combination of the two. You are Mr. Ambrose Bierce and, to be frank with you, I would rather have you under my roof than the other two put together."

Always of an irritable turn, though somewhat mellowed by deep rest, good food and fine wine, I repeated what I must have said elsewhere a thousand times before: that Bret Harte was a cheap, slangy upstart who had wheedled his way; and that Sam Clemens—Mark Twain—was better, but not much, or he would never have written such a puerile work as *Huckleberry Finn*.

I drew a deep breath, whereupon one of my asthmatic attacks took hold of me. An asthmatic should know better

than to draw a deep breath too suddenly, even when he is about to launch a diatribe against his rivals. A certain mockery pervades such occasions. You need at least two good lungfuls of air to blow up the epigram, which is, of course, the most brilliant thing that ever came to the tip of your tongue. Then your respiratory tract closes as surely as if a Turk had a bowstring about your throat, and the air you have inhaled refuses to come out. Suddenly you develop the chest of a blacksmith and the complexion of a general. It is at once the most ridiculous and the most wretched of maladies, torturing as it does sufferer and bystander alike. My host rang the little golden bell and in a moment a woman came in.

He said to her three or four words in that unknown tongue which I had heard before, and she darted away to return with a most curious bottle with three necks, a small gallipot and a vessel of boiling water. The contents of the gallipot she poured into a hole in the body of the bottle and added what I presume to be boiling water. Then, inserting two of the necks of the bottle into my nostrils and the longest neck between my lips, she applied her own lips to the hole in the body of the bottle and steadily blew. I was first aware of something disagreeably pungent. Then the pungency became pleasurable. She withdrew the bottle and I found myself breathing with a most charming sense of peace.

But my witticisms had been completely driven out of my mind.

"It is only asthma," my host said, in his powerful but gentle voice. "We can cure you of that, Mr. Bierce."

"Thank you, sir, thank you," I said. I was about to add

"Thank you, sir, thank you," I said. I was about to add that, with such a formula, he might make his fortune in the north, but I remembered that profusion of pure gold and said, instead, "It was that, that drove me here—that and rheumatism. I thought that the hot, high, dry air——"

My host said, in his gentle voice, "Indeed, yes, Mr. Ambrose Bierce. You are right, as usual—and, as usual, somewhat wrong. Remember your story entitled "The Damned Thing," in which you indicate that there are sounds inaudible to the human ear and colors invisible to the human

eye? If my memory does not deceive me, you concluded with the words, 'God help me, the Damned Thing is of such a color!' Correct me if I am wrong. Listen, Mr. such a color! Correct me if I am wrong. Listen, Mr. Bierce. Up here we can hear the high and the low, the squeak of the bat and the rumblings under the earth; and we know—believe me, we know." His eyes were like coals, but his face was bland as he said, "What do you know, Mr. Ambrose Bierce? Let us change the subject. Tell me of your experiences in the Oxoxoco jungle. Were you troubled?"

"Excepting hunger and thirst," I said, "not a bit. Once or twice I thought I amy come and harms force and a series and the same and t

or twice I thought I saw some red-brown faces peering at me, but then they disappeared almost as if they were afraid

of me."

My host laughed, and said, "Do forgive me, Mr. Bierce. Those savages were not afraid of you; they were afraid of Tonto."

"I thought it might be my guns that frightened them, sir. But who is Tonto?"

"Tonto is a Spanish word meaning silly, irresponsible, stupid. It is the name of the burro upon which you rode here—and for bringing you, I will forgive all that perverse donkey's sins. Allow me to assure you, however, that if you had been riding any ordinary ass, both you and it, by now, would have been butchered, eaten and forgotten. Thank Tonto. When those jungle beasts see one of my white burros—and they know them, the dogs—they hide their heads." Then he mused, "Tonto was always a curiously rebellious animal. That is why we call him Tonto. Cross-grained. A donkey is not called a donkey without reason, sir." He laughed. "It would be no use beating him, even if I were so disposed. One must earn the affection of a donkey or a mule; otherwise they will stand and be beaten to death rather than take an order. Not that I have ever beaten beast or man. We are humane here, sir, and loathe violence. Mr. Bierce, sir, let it be quite plain that you do here as you will."
"I like that donkey, or burro," said I. "Somehow I find

him sympathetic."
"Then he is yours," said my host.

After some interchange of courtesies, I said, "Here is something I do not understand, sir: you live here in the

wilds, near a jungle inhabited by savages. Yet you live in a magnificent stone house, attended by servants who would be worth their weight in gold even in Mexico City. I speak of gold—you eat off gold platters, drink out of gold cups or glasses of pure rock crystal. You are an accomplished man; you speak several languages with remarkable purity. This I do not understand."

This I do not understand."

"Mr. Bierce, I am the head of a very ancient family, indeed—possibly the most ancient family extant upon the face of the earth. No, wait! I see springing to your lips an inquiry unworthy of you, which would not do justice to me. Did I come over with Conquistadores? Were my predecessors with Cortes? The answer is, no. Then you will ask whether my forebears, the ancient Aztecs, came up here to escape from the Spaniards and their horses. Sir, you may believe me when I tell you that the Aztecs were mere upstarts by my family reckoning. The very house in which I have the honor of sheltering you is almost as old as the pyramids in Yucatán. Do not speak to me, sir, of the Aztecs—without entering into detail, they were a foolish people, though numerous. My people were kings, sir, before the Aztecs crept out of the jungle. The little they knew of architecture, carving, and so forth, they derived from us. You have seen the Yucatán pyramids? Have you ever seen anything so crude? The Aztec carvings? Put your fingers in the corners of your mouth, pull, and roll your eyes. They are out of drawing, too, if you observe the limbs.

"Now, this house is made of volcanic rock—fused by the

drawing, too, if you observe the limbs.

"Now, this house is made of volcanic rock—fused by the fires that die not—cut in cubes, mathematically precise, each side of the cube as long as my stride, which is about thirty-two inches. No baking, no plastering. It is not a house—humble though it may seem to you—it is an ancient jewel. The pyramids of Egypt themselves would, on analysis, look foolish beside this little house. Now you will ask me about gold, et cetera. Mr. Bierce, we have almost inexhaustible funds of gold, and take it for granted. In effect, we of the Old People scarcely regard it except as a medium of exchange, and for certain other purposes. Personally, for utility, I prefer silver. Silver, I find, is lighter and more agreeable. And while I drink out of crystal—my

men grind it to its proper proportions with wet sand, as the Chinese shape jade—I prefer a mixture of silver, gold and copper for my dishes. This is firmer than tedious gold. I would like to make an admixture with tin, which might be a very good thing. But I bore you."

"I assure you, not in the least, sir," I said. "I was only about to remark that you seem to have traveled greatly. You say that you have seen me in London, in San Francisco, and so forth."

"Why not, Mr. Bierce? Necessarily so, sir. You may have observed that we live, here, in something of a civilized way. You took—and I hope you enjoyed it—champagne, for example, with your meal. Where does it come from? Necessarily, France. How do I get it? Very simple. I exchange gold, of which I have an immense supply. There you have it."

"But, my dear sir, you are a man of the world. It seems to me," said I, "that you speak every language fluently, even including languages I have never heard spoken."

"Oh, I move here and there as necessity dictates. But

this is my home. Not only do I speak languages, Mr. Bierce, I speak accents and dialects." Then he made a chewing motion with his jaws, let the right-hand side of his mouth droop loosely, and spoke in the accents of a Calaveras prospector, and pretended to spit as he said, "Mr. Ambrose Bierce, sir! Me and my folks sure would admire to have you for supper!"

I replied, in the same intonation, "Yes, sir, you bet!"
We shook hands in the California style. His handshake was exploratory; he seemed to be feeling my hand, joint by joint. Said he, "But we were speaking of rheumatism. We can first alleviate, then cure that. Nothing simpler, if you overcome your modesty."

"My modesty apart," said I, "what is your process?"

My host said, "There are two processes. The preliminary process is a form of massage. You have been massaged, no doubt, by shampooers in Turkish baths and Hummums in various cities. But only by ten fingers. Now, my masseuses have seventy fingers. That is to say, there are seven of them. Each takes a joint, a muscle or a place where certain nerves

cross. The seven women—I am sorry, but only women can do it—work at the same time, in perfect co-ordination. They were trained from childhood, bred to the business. They will prepare you for the second treatment, which is sonic."

"Sonic? That, sir should pertain to sound."

"Just so, Mr. Bierce. My masseuses will prepare you for the sound treatment that will take away the crystals that come between certain joints and fibers, and make you uncomfortable. With all your perspicacity you do not understand? Here, I'll demonstrate."

This extraordinary man now picked up a crystal water glass and threw it down. It bounced—while I winced—and rocked itself still, undamaged. He picked it up and set it on the low table, saying, "To all intents and purposes. Mr. Bierce, apart from a sudden shock this crystal is indestructible. But observe me closely."

While I watched, he rang the glass with a fingernail. It gave out a gloriously melodious note, somewhere in the scale of D major. He listened intently; then, filling his lungs, which were the enormous lungs of the man who lives in the rarefied air of the uplands, he sang into the glass precisely the same note as it had sounded. Only that one note, and he sang it with tremendous volume and power. The glass quivered, appeared to dance; then suddenly burst asunder, fell to pieces.

He said, "One must take into consideration the natural cohesion of particles. The particles, or atoms, of all matter, living or dead, are obedient to certain natural laws of cohving or dead, are obedient to certain natural laws of co-hesion. They respond to their own vibrations, Mr. Bierce. By means of sound, and sound alone, I could, for example, have made that glass very light or very heavy. And when you are relaxed, almost inert, I will find the right vibration and, by the proper application of sound, I will break the tiny nodules and disperse the antagonistic acids that cause you so much pain—with your permission, let it be understood—not without your permission."

"If you can rid me, sir, of these aches and pains as you have rid me of this asthmatic attack, you have my permis-

sion to do anything."

He rang the little golden bell. A manservant came in immediately, to whom he gave an order in that tantalizingly familiar yet utterly foreign tongue of the household. Then he said to me, in his impeccable English, "I must ask you, if you will be so kind, to remove your robe. I may say, by the bye, that the clothes in which you came have been cleaned and mended, so that they are as good as new; your boots likewise. They are in the cupboard by the door, together with your rifle, your revolver and your machete. Understand me; it is my desire that you be perfectly content. You have only to express a wish and it will be granted. You may think this odd, Mr. Bierce?"

"Delightfully so," I said.

"Yes, by common standards it is. But I am of the Old People, and we live by the spirit of the great. I have sent out messages, north, south, east and west, to my scattered family. They will assemble here in a month, and then——"

But then eight women came into the room. An anthropologist would have been hard put to it to define their race. Presumably their heads had been bound at birth, because their skulls were curiously conical. Their faces were of the neutral color of weak coffee, and quite expressionless. While I lay on the bed, seven of them took positions around me. The eighth carried a golden bowl of some kind of aromatic oil, which she offered to the others, who steeped their hands in it.

Then began the massage as my host had explained it—inch by inch, line by line, nerve by nerve and muscle by muscle—seventy skilled fingers working in perfect co-ordination. There used to be a masseur with a red beard in the Turkish bath at Covent Garden whom I regarded as a master of his profession. He could take away indigestion, muscular pains or a headache simply by the application of his supple and intelligent hands. His name was Jim. Any one of these seven women was worth ten Jims. I had been tolerably comfortable before they went to work. But they brought to me a sense of tranquillity of which I should never have thought myself capable.

I fell asleep while they were still working. How long they worked I do not know, but the sun was setting when I

awoke, and I was hungry and thirsty again. I rang my little bell, and the two men who had previously attended me came in again—this time with a larger table, which they set for two. Now my host dined with me, anticipating my every want.

"With this meal," he explained, "you may eat only white meats—merely poultry of various sorts, unborn veal, fish, et cetera. Hence, only white wine. Because, after an hour for digestion and a good cigar, you must come with me and we will complete the treatment. There will be no more rheumatism, no more arthritis, no more gout. Believe me, Mr. Bierce, we live by the spirit here, and once purged of pain and hate, relieved of the necessity to earn a living, yours is the greatest spirit of the age, and I want you to become one of us. We will make you perfect."

It was in my heart to say that I did not want to be perfect; that perfection is for saints and gods, and I had no ambition in that direction; for they used to call me "Bitter" Bierce, not without reason. Certain souls thrive on bitter fruit; only fools love sugar, only madmen hope for perfection. But I was too comfortable to argue the point, and my host had been somewhat more than kind to me. I may have been born a farmer's boy, but I have some of the instincts of a gentleman.

"A cigar, if you will, but no brandy until later. Then, anything you like. Later nothing will hurt you, Mr. Bierce. I have had a steer killed, and the filet hung; likewise a five-year-old sheep, well fed, well penned, well killed. We shall eat the saddle."

So, eventually, having dressed me in a suit similar to his own, he led me through a labyrinth of corridors, down and down from door to door, into the bowels of the mountain, and there we came into a great cave. One might put St. Paul's dome in London, entire, into the dome of St. Peter's in Rome, but St. Peter's itself might have been lost in the vastness of that cave. It was occupied by something, the sight of which impelled me to ask, "Is this an organ, sir?"

"An organ of a kind," said my host, "but of such a kind that I venture to say that its like will never be seen again. I

suppose you know that the Indians in Yucatán, et cetera, have what they call 'water pipes.' These are a series of pottery jars of varying sizes, to the tops of which are attached a certain kind of whistle. By means of a primitive sort of spigot, they regulate a flow of water into the largest jar, first of all. The water, rising, compresses the air, which, being forced out through the whistle, makes a certain sound what time the water, having reached a certain level, pours into the next jar, and so on, until the air is full of mysterious music. It must be," he mused, "a race memory. Crude, yes; primitive, unquestionably. But derived from the Old People, who used sound in its proper application before Atlantis sank into the sea. Now these things which seem to you to be the pipes of some colossal organ are water pipes. They are gray only with the incrustations of age, but they are mostly of pure gold. The largest one, which is about the size of five hogsheads, is of massive gold. The next is of silver. The following five are of gold and bronze. There are ninety-three in all. You yourselfe, Mr. Bierce, have written of colors the human eye cannot see an account here. human ear cannot hear. You cannot hear the great pipe berunnan can cannot near. You cannot near the great pipe because it is too deep; and you cannot hear the ninety-third pipe, which is thinner than a pencil, because its note is higher than the squeak of a bat. Now you must take off your clothes and lie down on this pallet. Shut your eyes, open your mouth and wait while I control the flow."

I asked, "What happens now?"

"There are sounds which it is not vouchsafed to man to hear, Mr. Bierce. You won't hear them; you will scarcely feel them. Breathe deeply, and let us have done with discus-

sion. Listen and tell me what you hear."

"I hear," I said, "a pouring of water. A tinkling of water conjoined to something strangely compounded of melody and thunder."

"Aha! The great pipe fills. Now wait."

My host held to my lips that bitter, effervescent drink which I so clearly remembered and then, as it were through a veil, I sensed an agreeable numbness while, from basso to alto, the pipes made their music. I felt them rather than heard them. The first sensation was in the back of my head, in my cerebellum; then it was in my wrists and my elbows, my hips and knees and ankles. Soon this fabulous vibration, controlled as it was by my host, as it seemed, took hold of the front of my throat. If I had the will of ten men I could not have resisted this spell. It is not that I swooned—I very gently became unconscious.

It is common knowledge that I am a man of a certain strength of will. I held onto my senses as long as I could; was aware of strange vibrations in all my joints; and finally floated out of the world in a black sleep. The last thing I remember in this gigantic cave was the intolerably thin whistle of the smallest pipe, queerly compounded with the dull thunder of the great pipe. It was as if I were melting.

"We only want your spirit," said my host.

I could not speak, but I remember saying within myself, "I hope you may get it."

Soon the music died. All I could hear was a sound of water running away. Somebody wrapped me in a soft blanket and I was carried away again, back through those labyrinthine passages, to my bedroom, where I fell into a profound slumber.

I did not awaken until about noon next day. One of my silent attendants led me to a bath of warm water delicately perfumed with something like sandalwood. Again they had shaved me while I slept. He had laid out a fresh white suit, a fine silk shirt and a black cravat. Studs, cuff buttons and scarf pin were of matched pearls. He was setting the table again, so that I had my choice of a dozen dishes. My host came in when I was dressed.

"Now, Mr. Bierce," said he, "confess that our treatment is efficacious."

"I never felt so well in all my life," I said.
"I dare say not. And you will feel better yet. We shall not need to repeat yesterday's treatment. Only, after you have taken luncheon and rested a little, I might advise the use of the bottle again. Two or three repetitions, and there will be an end to your asthma. Your rheumatism, sir, you may regard as cured forever, but if you will allow me, I shall have the Seven Sisters repeat the massage every night before you retire, to make you plump and supple. Repose, repose—refresh, refresh! Pray be seated with a good appetite. Will you take a glass of sherry with me? Aha—here, I see, is this saddle of mutton. You must try it. It is of Welsh breed. Do you prefer capers or red currant jelly? You must eat, Mr. Bierce, and relax and be happy. Soon my family—what is left of it—will be here, and then we shall have a real feast, and you shall be one with us. Allow me to serve you."

After we had drunk each other's health, he left me. The mutton was excellent. I also ate something which, if it was not real Stilton cheese matured with port wine, was remarkably like it. I opened the cupboard by the door and there, indeed, were my old clothes, rejuvenated. Only they had thrown away my old straw sombrero and replaced it with a magnificent Panama lined with green silk. There was my rifle, cleaned and oiled, and my revolver too; both fully loaded. My machete stood in its scabbard, but they had burnished the leather with a bone, as soldiers in England burnish their bayonet scabbards, so that it shone like glass. For my convenience, my host had placed next to it a walking stick of some rare jungle vine with a handle of pure gold in the form of a lizard with emeralds for eyes. So I put on my hat and picked up the stick and prepared to go for a walk.

An attendant conducted me into the open. The air was keen and refreshing. Far below lay the dense and fetid jungle, but up here everything was sweet and fresh. I saw that the house, although it was only one story high, covered an immense area. Some distance away there stood a smaller, somewhat humbler house, which, as I guessed, was for the servants. Beyond, there were erected other buildings, all of that ancient, diamond-hard volcanic stone. From one of these buildings came the braying of an ass. I strolled over. There were horses and mules, all white; and, segregated, a number of white burros, all beautifully clean and well fed. I called, "Hello there, Tonto!"

fed. I called, "Hello there, Tonto!"

Sure enough, my old friend that I had bought for three dollars, blanket and halter and all, came running toward me to be stroked. I spoke to him with affection. "Well, Tonto, old friend," said I, "I believe I owe you a debt of gratitude,

little burro, because you certainly did me a good turn when you brought me here. Yes, Tonto, you and I must have something in common. A restlessness, eh? Eh, Tonto? A misanthropy? Which, I wonder, is the donkeyest donkey of us two? You must be an ass, you know, to run away from a cozy crib like this to go to Oxoxoco—however virtuous Diego's widow may be. So long, my friend; so long, Tonto." Then I went slowly back to the house, twirling my stick

But I was aware of a vague disquiet, which I could not define. My host was waiting for me. He too, was wearing a Panama hat, but the handle of his walking stick was of a translucent, glowing red.

He saw my curious glance and said, "It is cut out of a solid ruby. In Paris, say, a ruby like this would be worth a fortune. Here, its value is merely symbolical. Here, let us exchange walking sticks. Carry it in good health, I beg." He took away my gold-headed stick and pressed into my hand the ruby-headed one. I have seen rubies one-twentieth of the size that were valued at ten thousand dollars. Then, with many compliments, he, followed by the two attendants, conducted me to my room, saying, "You must rest. Yesterday's treatment shakes the very fabric of one's being. You have lived in England. Have you acquired the English habit of taking afternoon tea? In any case, it shall be sent up, with buttered toast and cinnamon buns. I want to see you plump and hearty, Mr. Bierce, solid and vital, bursting with life. You must not overexert yourself."

"I was not, sir. I was only making my courtesies to the burro that brought me here."

"Ah, little Tonto? He is an unpredictable burro, that one; temperamental, spasmodically seized with an itch to travel. Please rest, and if there is anything at all that you desire, you have only to ring the bell. But before you lie down"—he beckoned and an attendant brought a cup of that bitter, effervescent stuff—"drink this. It relaxes the nerves, it is good for the blood and improves the appetite. In a manner of speaking, it loosens and clarifies the spirit."

I drank it and lay down. But even as the soporific effect of that draught took hold, disquietude came back, I was on

the verge of sleep when I sat up and snapped my fingers, having hit upon the cause of it. Simply, I was too contented—a condition to which I was unaccustomed, and which naving nit upon the cause of it. Simply, I was too contented—a condition to which I was unaccustomed, and which aroused in me the direst suspicions. Maddeningly incomplete yet indescribably sinister thoughts passed through my mind. In spite of the comforts with which I was surrounded and the charming courtesy and respect with which I was treated, I felt that something, somewhere, was wrong—wrong in a mad, unearthly way.

However, I slept very peacefully and awoke only when the seven masseuses and their cupbearer came in. Again, when I was massaged and dressed, the attendants brought the table and my host came in, smiling.

"I will wager," said he, "that you feel as you look—thirty years younger. I am delighted to see you looking so well, and I hope that you will do justice to the filet. My little herd is of interesting stock, part Hereford, part Scottish. I keep it only for my table, of course."

"I have the appetite of an ostrich," said I, "and his digestion too. I am sure that I am getting fat."

"By the time the rest of my family are gathered here you will be in perfect condition, Mr. Bierce. Then we will have a true banquet"—he stopped himself abruptly and added—"of the spirit—of the spirit." He looked at me with curious intensity and begged me to try an avocado pear with a particularly rich and savory stuffing.

In spite of my nameless misgivings, I ate like a fifteen-

In spite of my nameless misgivings, I ate like a fifteen-year-old boy. My host dined with me, but tonight he seemed to be beset with a kind of neurasthenic lassitude. He said, "I am in low spirits this evening. Yes, I am in need of spiritual refreshment. Ah, well, it will not be long now." And he poured me a glass of that superlative cognac, saying,

And he poured me a glass of that superlative cognac, saying, "I will take one glass with you, and then I must sleep. You must rest too. In a little while they will bring you your draught, and so good night and pleasant dreams to you."

But I did not drink my draught that night. I say, I was weary of idleness and contentment, and wanted to think. I drowsed a little, however, and should eventually have slept, but then a frightful thought occurred to me, which jerked me like a hooked fish, cold and wet with panic, into bright

consciousness. I remembered what my host had said when he had imitated the accents of the California squatter: "Me and my folks sure would admire to have you for supper," and the peculiar expression of veiled mockery that flashed across his face when he said it. Then, I remembered all his talk about the banquet, the impending "feast of the spirit," and I recalled again certain cannibalistic practices of some ancient races, who believe that partaking of a portion of the flesh of a dead friend or enemy, they absorb some of his spiritual and intellectual attributes. And now I began to understand the deadly terror in which the people up here were regarded. Also I perceived for the first time the nature of the pleasant-smelling oil with which I had been so carefully shampooed; I detected in its odor thyme, sage, basil, marjoram, hyssop and mint—herbs, in fact, which belong not to the art of healing but to the art of cookery. This was enough——

So, to clear my thoughts and to pass the time, I wrote the above in my notebook. I propose, in case I am caught and searched, to roll these thin pages into a tight little scroll and put it where no one will ever think of looking for it—into one of the necks of the inhaler bottle which stands on my dressing table. Then I will put on my own clothes, take up my old arms, go to the stable and call the burro, Tonto. He found his way to Oxoxoco once; he may do so again. One thing is certain: no savage will touch me while I am mounted on his back. And once in the jungle, given a three hours' start, I shall have nothing but thirst to fear. I am reluctant to leave the stick with the ruby head, but, although I was born an Ohio farmer's boy, nevertheless I trust I have the instincts of a gentleman. In any case, with my other equipment, I shall find it inconvenient to carry. The moon is setting. Rifle, revolver, machete, canteen; and then, to horse.

> (Signed) Ambrose Bierce. May (?) 1914.

And that is the manuscript that was found in the Oxoxoco Bottle. The authorities have been reluctant to publicize it,

for fear of a hoax. The farce of the Piltdown skull still rankles in many academic minds. But, in my opinion, it is genuine. The holograph is undoubtedly in Ambrose Bierce's writing. The fact that it is no longer the writing of an old man may be attributed to the circumstances that he was relieved of his rheumatism up there, when the man in the white suit was making him "perfect" for the ghoulish "spiritual supper."

But exactly how one of the greatest American writers of his time died we still do not know. It may be—I hope not—that they pursued him and led him and Tonto back. It may be that he died in the jungle. It may be that he reached Oxoxoco and there—as is generally believed—was shot by Pancho Villa. One thing is certain, and that is that the gentleman in the white suit, his house, his riches and his tribe were wiped out when there was an earthquake some years later, and now are covered by an unknown depth of hard volcanic rock, so that no solution is to be looked for there.

Still I am convinced that this is the only authentic account of the last days of "Bitter" Ambrose Bierce.

A SHORT TRIP HOME

F. Scott Fitzgerald

I

I was near her, for I had lingered behind in order to get the short walk with her from the living room to the front door. That was a lot, for she had flowered suddenly and I, being a man and only a year older, hadn't flowered at all, had scarcely dared to come near her in the ten days we'd been home. Nor was I going to say anything in that walk of ten feet, or touch her; but I had a vague hope she'd do something, give a gay little performance of some sort,

personal only in so far as we were alone together.

She had magic suddenly in her pink palms, in the twinkle of the short hairs on her neck, in the sure, clear confidence that at about eighteen begins to deepen and sing in attractive American girls. She was nearly complete, yet the dew was still on her.

Already she was sliding into another world—the world of Joe Jelke and Jim Cathcart waiting for us now in the car. In another year she would pass beyond me forever.

As I waited, feeling the others outside in the snowy night, feeling the excitement of Christmas week and the excitement of Ellen here, a maid came in from the dining room, spoke to Ellen quietly and handed her a note. Ellen read it and her eyes lit up, as when the current grows strong on rural circuits, and glowed off into space. Then she gave me an odd look—in which I probably didn't show—and without a word, followed the maid into the dining room and beyond. I sat turning over the pages of a magazine for a quarter of an hour.

Joe Jelke came in, red-faced from the cold, his white silk muffler gleaming at the neck of his fur coat. He was a senior at New Haven; I was a sophomore. He was prominent, a member of Scroll and Keys, and, in my eyes, very distinguished and handsome.

"Isn't Ellen coming?"

"I don't know," I answered discreetly. "She was all ready."

"Ellen!" he called, "Ellen!"

He had left the front door open behind him and a great cloud of frosty air rolled in from outside. He went halfway up the stairs—he was a familiar in the house—and called again, till Mrs. Baker came to the banister and said that Ellen was below. Then the maid, a little excited, appeared in the dining room door.

"Mr. Jelke," she called in a low voice.

Joe's face fell as he turned toward her, sensing bad news. "Miss Ellen says for you to go on to the party. She'll

come later."

"What's the matter?"

"She can't come now. She'll come later."

He hesitated, confused. It was the last big dance of vacation, and he was mad about Ellen. He had tried to give her a ring for Christmas, and failing that, got her to accept a gold mesh bag that must have cost two hundred dollars. He wasn't the only one—there were three or four in the same wild condition, and all in the ten days she'd been home—but his chance came first, for he was rich and gracious and "white-headed"—at that moment the desirable boy of St. Paul. To me it seemed impossible that she could prefer another, but the rumor was she'd described Joe as "much too perfect." I suppose he lacked mystery for her, and when a man is up against that with a young girl who isn't thinking of marriage—

"She's in the kitchen," Joe said angrily.

"No, she's not." The maid was defiant and a little scared. "She is."

"She went out the back way, Mr. Jelke."

"I'm going to see."

I followed him. The Swedish servants washing dishes looked up sideways at our approach and an interested crashing of pans marked our passage through. The storm door, unbolted, was flapping in the wind and as we walked out into the snowy yard we saw the tail light of a car turn the corner at the end of the back alley.

"I'm going after her," Joe said slowly. "I don't understand this at all."

I was too awed by the calamity to argue. We hurried to his car and drove in a fruitless, despairing zigzag all over the residence section, peering into every machine on the streets. It was half an hour before the futility of the affair began to dawn upon him—St. Paul is a city of almost three hundred thousand people—and Jim Cathcart reminded him that we had another girl to stop for. Like a wounded animal he sank into a melancholy mass of fur in the corner, from which position he jerked upright every few minutes and waved himself backward and forward a little in protest or despair.

Jim's girl was ready and impatient, but after what had happened her impatience didn't seem important. She looked lovely though. That's one thing about Christmas vacation—

the excitement of growth and change and adventure in foreign parts transforming the people you've known all your life. Joe Jelke was polite to her in a daze—he indulged in one burst of short, loud, harsh laughter by way of conversation-and we drove to the hotel.

The chauffeur approached it on the wrong side—the side on which the line of cars was not putting forth guests—and

on which the line of cars was not putting forth guests—and because of that we came suddenly upon Ellen Baker just getting out of a small coupé. Even before we came to a stop, Joe Jelke had jumped excitedly from the car.

Ellen turned toward us, a faintly distracted look—perhaps of surprise, but certainly not of alarm—in her face; in fact, she didn't seem very aware of us. Joe approached her with a stern, dignified, injured and, I thought, just exactly correct reproof in his expression. I followed.

Seated in the coupé—he had not dismounted to help

Ellen out—was a hard thin-faced man of about thirty-five with an air of being scarred, and a slight sinister smile. His eyes were a sort of taunt to the whole human family—they were the eyes of an animal sleepy and quiescent in the presence of another species. They were helpless yet brutal, unhopeful yet confident. It was as if they felt themselves powerless to originate activity, but infinitely capable of profiting by a single gesture of weakness in another.

Vaguely I placed him as one of the sort of men whom I

had been conscious of from my earliest youth as "hanging around"-leaning with one elbow on the counters of tobacco stores, watching, through heaven knows what small chink of the mind, the people who hurried in and out. Intimate to garages, where he had vague business conducted in undertones, to barber shops, and to the lobbies of theaters—in such places, anyhow, I placed the type, if type it was, that he reminded me of. Sometimes his face bobbed up in one of Tad's more savage cartoons, and I had always from earliest boyhood thrown a nervous glance toward the dim borderland where he stood, and seen him watching me and despising me. Once, in a dream, he had taken a few steps toward me, jerking his head back and muttering: "Say, kid" in what was intended to be a reassuring voice, and I had broken for the door in terror. This was that sort of man

Joe and Ellen faced each other silently; she seemed, as I have said, to be in a daze. It was cold, but she didn't notice that her coat had blown open; Joe reached out and pulled it together, and automatically she clutched it with her hand.

Suddenly the man in the coupé, who had been watching them silently, laughed. It was a bare laugh, done with the breath—just a noisy jerk of the head—but it was an insult if I had ever heard one; definite and not to be passed over. I wasn't surprised when Joe, who was quick-tempered, turned to him angrily and said:

"What's your trouble?"

The man waited a moment, his eyes shifting and yet staring, and always seeing. Then he laughed again in the same way. Ellen stirred uneasily.

"Who is this-this-" Joe's voice trembled with annoyance.

"Look out now," said the man slowly.

Joe turned to me.

"Eddie, take Ellen and Catherine in, will you?" he said quickly. . . . "Ellen, go with Eddie."
"Look out now," the man repeated.

Ellen made a little sound with her tongue and teeth, but she didn't resist when I took her arm and moved her toward the side door of the hotel. It struck me as odd that she should be so helpless, even to the point of acquiescing by her silence in this imminent trouble.

"Let it go, Joe!" I called back over my shoulder, "Come inside!"

Ellen, pulling against my arm, hurried us on. As we were caught up into the swinging doors I had the impression that the man was getting out of his coupé.

Ten minutes later, as I waited for the girls outside the women's dressing room, Joe Jelke and Jim Cathcart stepped out of the elevator. Joe was very white, his eyes were heavy and glazed, there was a trickle of dark blood on his forehead and on his white muffler. Jim had both their hats in his hand.

"He hit Joe with brass knuckles," Jim said in a low voice. "Joe was out cold for a minute or so. I wish you'd send a bellboy for some witch hazel and court plaster."

It was late and the hall was deserted; brassy fragments of the dance below reached us as if heavy curtains were being blown aside and dropping back into place. When Ellen came out I took her directly downstairs. We avoided the receiving line and went into a dim room set with scraggly hotel palms where couples sometimes sat out during the dance; there I told her what had happened.

"It was Joe's own fault," she said, surprisingly. "I told

him not to interfere."

This wasn't true. She had said nothing, only uttered one curious little click of impatience.

"You ran out the back door and disappeared for almost an hour," I protested. "Then you turned up with a hard-looking customer who laughed in Joe's face."

"A hard-looking customer," she repeated, as if tasting the

sound of the words.

"Well, wasn't he? Where on earth did you get hold of him, Ellen?"

"On the train," she answered. Immediately she seemed to regret this admission. "You'd better stay out of things that aren't your business, Eddie. You see what happened to Ice."

Literally I gasped. To watch her, seated beside me, immaculately glowing, her body giving off wave after wave of freshness and delicacy—and to hear her talk like that.

"But that man's a thug!" I cried. "No girl could be safe with him. He used brass knuckles on Joe—brass knuckles!" "Is that pretty bad?"

She asked this as she might have asked such a question a few years ago. She looked at me at last and really wanted an answer; for a moment it was as if she were trying to recapture an attitude that had almost departed; then she hardened again. I say "hardened," for I began to notice that when she was concerned with this man her eyelids fell a little, shutting other things—everything else—out of view.

That was a moment I might have said something, I sup-

pose, but in spite of everything I couldn't light into her. I

was too much under the spell of her beauty and its success. I even began to find excuses for her—perhaps that man wasn't what he appeared to be; or perhaps—more romantically—she was involved with him against her will to shield someone else. At this point people began to drift into the room and come up to speak to us. We couldn't talk any more, so we went in and bowed to the chaperons. Then I gave her up to the bright restless sea of the dance, where she moved in an eddy of her own among the pleasant islands of colored favors set out on tables and the court winds from the brosse meaning across the hell. After ant islands of colored favors set out on tables and the south winds from the brasses moaning across the hall. After a while I saw Joe Jelke sitting in a corner with a strip of court plaster on his forehead watching Ellen as if she herself had struck him down, but I didn't go up to him. I felt queer myself—like I feel when I wake up after sleeping through an afternoon, strange and portentous, as if something had gone on in the interval that changed the values of everything and that I didn't see.

of everything and that I didn't see.

The night slipped on through successive phases of paper caps and cardboard horns, amateur tableaux and flashlights for the morning papers. Then was the grand march and supper, and about two o'clock some of the committee, dressed up as revenue agents, pinched the party, and a facetious newspaper was distributed, burlesquing the events of the evening. And all the time out of the corner of my eye I watched the shining orchid on Ellen's shoulder as it moved like Stuart's plume about the room. I watched it with a definite foreboding until the last sleepy groups had crowded into the elevators, and then, bundled to the eyes in great shapeless fur coats, drifted out into the clear dry Minnesota night. nesota night.

There is a sloping mid-section of our city which lies between the residence quarter on the hill and the business district on the level of the river. It is a vague part of town, broken by its climb into triangles and odd shapes—there are names like Seven Corners—and I don't believe a dozen people could draw an accurate map of it, though everyone traversed it by trolley, auto, or shoe leather twice a way.

And though it was a busy section, it would be hard for me to name the business that comprised its activity. There were always long lines of trolley cars waiting to start somewhere; there was a big movie theater and many small ones with posters of Hoot Gibson and Wonder Dogs and Wonder Horses outside; there were small stores with Old King Brady and the Liberty Boys of '76 in the windows, and marbles, cigarettes, and candy inside; and—one definite place at least—a fancy customer whom we all visited at least once a year. Sometimes during boyhood I became aware that one side of a certain obscure street there was blackly questionable, and all through the district were pawnshops, cheap jewelers, small sporting clubs and gymnasiums, and somewhat too blatantly run-down saloons.

aware that one side of a certain obscure street there was blackly questionable, and all through the district were pawnshops, cheap jewelers, small sporting clubs and gymnasiums, and somewhat too blatantly run-down saloons.

The morning after the Cotillion Club party, I woke up late and lazy, with the happy feeling that for a day or two more there was no chapel, no classes—nothing to do but wait for another party tonight. It was crisp and bright—one of those days when you forget how cold it is until your cheek freezes—and the events of the evening before seemed dim and far away. After luncheon I started downtown on foot through a light, pleasant snow of small flakes that would probably fall all afternoon, and I was about half through that halfway section of town—so far as I know, there's no name for it—when suddenly whatever idle thought was in my head blew away like a hat and I began there's no name for it—when suddenly whatever idle thought was in my head blew away like a hat and I began thinking hard of Ellen Baker. I began worrying about her as I'd never worried about anything except myself before. I began to loiter, with an instinct to go up on the hill again and find her and talk to her; then I remembered that she was at a tea, and I went on again, but still thinking of her, and harder than before. Right then the affair opened up again.

It was snowing, I said, and it was four o'clock on a December afternoon, when there is a promise of darkness in the air and the street lamps are just going on. I passed a combination pool parlor and restaurant, with a stove loaded with hot dogs in the window, and a few loungers hanging around the door. The lights were on inside—not bright lights but just a few pale yellow ones high up on the

ceiling—and the glow they threw out into the frosty dusk wasn't so bright that you weren't tempted to stare inside. As I went past, thinking hard of Ellen all this time, I took in the quartet of loafers out of the corner of my eye. I hadn't gone half a dozen steps down the street when one of them called to me, not by name but in a way clearly intended for my ear. I thought it was a tribute to my raccoon coat and paid no attention, but a moment later whoever it was called me again in a peremptory voice. I was annoyed and turned around. There, standing in the group not ten feet away and looking at me with the same half sneer on his face with which he'd looked at Joe Jelke, was the hard, thin-faced fellow of the night before.

He had on a black fancy-cut coat, buttoned up to his neck as if he were cold. His hands were deep in his pockets, and he wore a derby and high button shoes. I was startled, and for a moment I hesitated, but I was most of all angry, and knowing that I was quicker with my hands than Joe Jelke, I took a tentative step back toward him. The other men weren't looking at me—I don't think they saw me at all—but I knew that this one recognized me; there was nothing casual about his look, no mistake.

"Here I am. What are you going to do about it?" his eves seemed to say.

I took another step toward him and he laughed sound-lessly, but with active contempt, and drew back into the group. I followed. I was going to speak to him—I wasn't sure what I was going to say—but when I came up he had either changed his mind and backed off, or else he wanted me to follow him inside, for he had slipped off and the three men watched my intent approach without curiosity. They were the same kind—sporty, but, unlike him, smooth rather than truculent; I didn't find any personal malice in their collective glance.

"Did he go inside?" I asked.

They looked at one another in that cagey way; a wink passed between them, and after a perceptible pause, one said:

"Who go inside?"

"I don't know his name."

There was another wink. Annoyed and determined, I walked past them and into the poolroom. There were a few people at a lunch counter along one side and a few more playing billiards, but he was not among them.

Again I hesitated. If his idea was to lead me into any blind part of the establishment—there were some half-open doors farther back—I wanted more support. I went up to

the man at the desk.

"What became of the fellow who just walked in here?" Was he on his guard immediately, or was that my imagination?

"What fellow?"

"Thin face—derby hat."
"How long ago?"

"Oh-a minute."

He shook his head again, "Don't know him," he said.

I waited. The three men from outside had come in and were lined up beside me at the counter. I felt that all of them were looking at me in a peculiar way. Feeling helpless and increasingly uneasy, I turned suddenly and went out. A little way down the street I turned around and took a good look at the place, so I'd know it and could find it again. On the next corner I broke impulsively into a run, found a taxicab in front of the hotel, and drove back up the hill.

Ellen wasn't home. Mrs. Baker came downstairs and Ellen wasn't home. Mrs. Baker came downstairs and talked to me. She seemed entirely cheerful and proud of Ellen's beauty and ignorant of anything being amiss or of anything unusual having taken place the night before. She was glad that vacation was almost over—it was a strain and Ellen wasn't very strong. Then she said something that relieved my mind enormously. She was glad that I had come in, for of course Ellen would want to see me, and the time was so short. She was going back at half past eight tonight. "Tonight!" I exclaimed. "I thought it was the day after

tomorrow."

"She's going to visit the Brokaws in Chicago," Mrs. Baker said. "They want her for some party. We just decided today. She's leaving with the Ingersoll girls tonight."

I was so glad I could barely restrain myself from shaking

her hand. Ellen was safe. It had been nothing all along but a moment of the most casual adventure. I felt like an idiot, but I realized how much I cared about Ellen and how little I could endure anything terrible happening to her.
"She'll be in soon?"

"Any minute now. She just phoned from the University Club."

I said I'd be over later—I lived almost next door and I wanted to be alone. Outside I remembered I didn't have a key, so I started up the Bakers' driveway to take the old cut we used in childhood through the intervening yard. It was still snowing, but the flakes were bigger now against the darkness, and trying to locate the buried walk, I noticed that the Bakers' back door was ajar.

I scarcely know why I turned and walked into that kitchen. There was a time when I would have known the Bakers' servants by name. That wasn't true now, but they knew me, and I was aware of a sudden suspension as I came in—not only a suspension of talk but of some mood or expectation that had filled them. They began to go to work too quickly; they made unnecessary movements and clamor—those three. The parlor-maid looked at me in a frightened way and I suddenly guessed she was waiting to deliver another message. I beckoned her into the pantry.

"I know all about this," I said. "It's a very serious busi-

ness. Shall I go to Mrs. Baker now, or will you shut and lock that back door?"

"Don't tell Mrs. Baker, Mr. Stinson!"

"Then I don't want Miss Ellen disturbed. If she is-and if she is, I'll know of it-" I delivered some outrageous threat about going to all the employment agencies and seeing she never got another job in the city. She was thoroughly intimidated when I went out; it wasn't a minute before the back door was locked and bolted behind me.

Simultaneously I heard a big car drive up in front, chains crunching on the soft snow; it was bringing Ellen home, and I went in to say good-by.

Joe Jelke and two other boys were along, and none of the three could manage to take their eyes off her, even to say hello. She had one of those exquisite rose skins frequent in

our part of the country, and beautiful until the little veins begin to break at about forty; and the cold had lit it to a lovely flame, like the thrilling flush of children after their cold baths in the evening. She and Joe had reached some sort of reconciliation, or at least he was too far gone in love to remember last night; but I saw that though she laughed a lot she wasn't really paying any attention to him or any of them. She wanted them to go, so that there'd be a message from the kitchen, but I knew the message wasn't coming—that she was safe. There was talk of the Pump and Slipper dance at New Haven and of the Princeton Prom, and then, in various moods, we four men left and separated quickly outside. I walked home with a certain depression of spirit and lay for an hour in a hot bath thinking that vacation was all over for me now that she was gone; feeling, even more deeply than I had yesterday, that she was out of my life.

And something eluded me, some one more thing to do, something that I had lost amid the events of the afternoon, promising myself to go back and pick it up, only to find it had escaped me. I associated it vaguely with Mrs. Baker, and now I seemed to recall that it had poked up its head somewhere in the stream of conversation with her. In my relief about Ellen I had forgotten to ask her a question regarding something she had said.

The Brokaws—that was it—where Ellen was to visit. I knew Bill Brokaw well; he was in my class at Yale. Then I remembered and sat bolt upright in the tub—the Brokaws weren't in Chicago this Christmas; they were at Palm Reach!

Dripping, I sprang out of the tub, threw an insufficient union suit around my shoulders and sprang for the phone in my room. I got the connection quickly, but Miss Ellen had already started for the train.

Luckily our car was in, and while I squirmed, still damp, into my clothes, the chauffeur brought it around to the door. The night was cold and dry, and we made good time to the station through the hard, crusty snow. I felt queer and insecure starting out this way, but somehow more confident as the station loomed up bright and new against the dark, cold

air. For fifty years my family had owned the land on which it was built and that made my temerity seem all right somehow. There was always a possibility that I was rushing in where angels feared to tread, but that sense of having a solid foothold in the past made me willing to make a fool of myself. This business was all wrong—terribly wrong. Any idea I had entertained that it was harmless dropped away now; between Ellen and some vague overwhelming catastrophe there stood me, or else the police and a scandal. I'm no moralist—there was another element here, terribly dark and frightening, and I didn't want Ellen to go through it alone.

There are three competing trains from St. Paul to Chicago that all leave within a few minutes of half past eight. Hers was the Burlington, and as I ran across the station I saw the grating being pulled over and the light above it go out. I knew, though, that she had a drawing room with the Ingersoll girls, because her mother had mentioned buying the ticket, so she was, literally speaking, tucked in until tomorrow.

The C. M. & St. P. gate was down at the other end, and I raced for it and made it. I had forgotten one thing, though, and that was enough to keep me awake and worried half the night. This train got into Chicago ten minutes after the other. Ellen had that much time to disappear into one of the largest cities in the world.

I gave the porter a wire to my family to send from Milwaukee, and at eight o'clock next morning I pushed violently by a whole line of passengers, clamoring over their bags parked in the vestibule, and shot out of the door with a sort of scramble over the porter's back. For a moment the confusion of a great station, the voluminous sounds and echoes and cross currents of bells and smoke struck me helpless. Then I dashed for the exit and toward the only chance I knew of finding her.

I had guessed right. She was standing at the telegraph counter, sending off heaven knows what black lie to her mother, and her expression when she saw me had a sort of terror mixed up with surprise. There was cunning in it too. She was thinking quickly—she would have liked to

walk away from me as if I wasn't there and go about her own business, but she couldn't. I was too matter-of-fact a thing in her life. So we stood silently watching each other and each thinking hard.

"The Brokaws are in Florida," I said after a minute.

"It was nice of you to take such a long trip to tell me that."

"Since you've found it out, don't you think you'd better go on to school?"

"Please let me alone, Eddie," she said.

"I'll go as far as New York with you. I've decided to go back early myself."

"You'd better let me alone." Her lovely eyes narrowed and her face took on a look of dumb animal-like resistance. She made a visible effort, the cunning flickered back into it, then both were gone, and in their stead was a cheerful reassuring smile that all but convinced me.

"Eddie, you silly child, don't you think I'm old enough to take care of myself?" I didn't answer. "I'm going to meet a man, you understand. I just want to see him today. I've got my ticket East on the five o'clock train. If you don't believe it, here it is in my bag."

"I believe you."

"The man isn't anybody that you know and—frankly, I think you're being awfully fresh and impossible."

"I know who the man is."

Again she lost control of her face. That terrible expression came back into it and she spoke with almost a snarl:

"You'd better let me alone."

I took the blank out of her hand and wrote out an explanatory telegram to her mother. Then I turned to Ellen and said a little roughly:

"We'll take the five o'clock train East together. Mean-

while you're going to spend the day with me."

The mere sound of my own voice saying this so emphatically encouraged me, and I think it impressed her too; at any rate, she submitted—at least temporarily—and came along without protest while I bought my ticket.

When I start to piece together the fragments of that day,

a sort of confusion begins, as if my memory didn't want to yield up any of it, or my consciousness let any of it pass through. There was a bright, fierce morning during which we rode about in a taxicab and went to a department store where Ellen said she wanted to buy something and then tried to slip away from me by a back way. I had the feeling, for an hour, that someone was following us along Lake Shore Drive in a taxicab, and I would try to catch them by turning quickly or looking suddenly into the chauffeur's mirror; but I could see that Ellen's face was contorted with mirthless, unnatural laughter.

All morning there was a raw, bleak wind off the lake, but when we went to the Blackstone for lunch, a light snow came down past the windows and we talked almost naturally about our friends and about casual things. Suddenly her tone changed; she grew serious and looked me in the eve, straight and sincere.

"Eddie, you're the oldest friend I have," she said, "and you oughtn't to find it too hard to trust me. If I promise you faithfully on my word of honor to catch that five o'clock train, will you let me alone a few hours this afternoon?"

"Why?"

"Well"—she hesitated and hung her head a little—"I guess everybody has a right to say—good-by."

"You want to say good-by to that . . ."

"Yes, yes," she said hastily; "just a few hours, Eddie, and

I promise faithfully that I'll be on that train."

"Well, I suppose no great harm could be done in two

hours. If you really want to say good-by..."

I looked up suddenly and surprised a look of such tense and palpable cunning in her face that I winced before it. Her lip was curled up and her eyes were slits again; there wasn't the faintest touch of fairness and sincerity in her whole face.

We argued. The argument was vague on her part and somewhat hard and reticent on mine. I wasn't going to be cajoled again into any weakness or be infected with any—and there was a contagion of evil in the air. She kept trying to imply, without any convincing evidence to bring forward, that everything was all right. Yet she was too full of the thing itself—whatever it was—to build up a real story, and she wanted to catch at any credulous and acquiescent train of thought that might start in my head, and work that for all it was worth. After every reassuring suggestion she threw out, she stared at me eagerly, as if she hoped I'd launch into a comfortable moral lecture with the customary sweet at the end—which in this case would be her liberty.

launch into a comfortable moral lecture with the customary sweet at the end—which in this case would be her liberty. But I was wearing her away a little. Two or three times it needed just a touch of pressure to bring her to the point of tears—which, of course, was what I wanted—but I couldn't seem to manage it. Almost I had her—almost possessed her interior attention—then she would slip away.

I bullied her remorselessly into a taxi about four o'clock and started for the station. The wind was raw again, with a sting of snow in it, and the people in the streets, waiting for busses and street cars too small to take them all in, looked cold and disturbed and unhappy. I tried to think how lucky we were to be comfortably off and taken care of, but all the warm, respectable world I had been part of yesterday had dropped away from me. There was something we carried with us now that was the enemy and the opposite of all that; it was in the cab beside us, the streets we passed through. With a touch of panic, I wondered if I wasn't slipping almost imperceptibly into Ellen's attitude of mind. The column of passengers waiting to go aboard the train were as remote from me as people from another world, but it was I that was drifting away and leaving them behind.

My lower was in the same car with her compartment. It was an old-fashioned car, its lights somewhat dim, its carpets and upholstery full of the dust of another generation. There were half a dozen other travelers, but they made no special impression on me, except that they shared the unreality that I was beginning to feel everywhere around me. We went into Ellen's compartment, shut the door, and sat down.

Suddenly I put my arms around her and drew her over to

sat down.

Suddenly I put my arms around her and drew her over to me, just as tenderly as I knew how—as if she were a little girl—as she was. She resisted a little, but after a moment she submitted and lay tense and rigid in my arms. "Ellen," I said helplessly, "you asked me to trust you.

You have much more reason to trust me. Wouldn't it help to get rid of all this, if you told me a little?"

"I can't," she said, very low—"I mean, there's nothing

to tell "

"You met this man on the train coming home and you fell in love with him, isn't that true?"

"I don't know."

"Tell me, Ellen. You fell in love with him?"

"I don't know. Please let me alone."

"Call it anything you want," I went on; "he has some sort of hold over you. He's trying to use you; he's trying to get something from you. He's not in love with you."

"What does that matter?" she said in a weak voice.

"It does matter. Instead of trying to fight this—this thing—you're trying to fight me. And I love you, Ellen. Do you hear? I'm telling you all of a sudden, but it isn't new with me. I love you."

She looked at me with a sneer on her gentle face; it was an expression I had seen on men who were tight and didn't want to be taken home. But it was human. I was reaching her, faintly and from far away, but more than before.

"Ellen, I want you to answer me one question, Is he going to be on this train?"

She hesitated; then, an instant too late, she shook her head.

"Be careful, Ellen. Now I'm going to ask you one thing more, and I wish you'd try very hard to answer. Coming West, when did this man get on the train?"

"I don't know," she said with an effort—"in Pittsburgh, I think. He spoke to me just after we left Pittsburgh, back in the observation car."

Just at that moment I became aware, with the unquestionable knowledge reserved for facts, that he was just outside the door. She knew it, too; the blood left her face and that expression of low animal perspicacity came creeping

back. I lowered my face into my hands and tried to think.

We must have sat there, with scarcely a word, for well over an hour. I was conscious that the lights of Chicago, then of Englewood and of endless suburbs, were moving by, and then there were no more lights and we were out on the

dark flatness of Illinois. The train seemed to draw in upon itself; it took on an air of being alone. The porter knocked at the door and asked if he could make up the berth, but I said no and he went away.

After a while I convinced myself that the struggle inevitably coming wasn't beyond what remained of my sanity, my faith in the essential all-rightness of things and people. That this person's purpose was what we call "criminal," I took for granted, but there was no need of ascribing to him an intelligence that belonged to a higher plane of human, or inhuman, endeavor. It was still as a man that I considered him and tried to get at his essence, his self-interest—what took the place in him of a comprehensible heart—but I suppose I more than half knew what I would find when I opened the door.

When I stood up Ellen didn't seem to see me at all. She was hunched into the corner staring straight ahead with a sort of film over her eyes, as if she were in a state of suspended animation of body and mind. I lifted her and put two pillows under her head and threw my fur coat over her knees. Then I knelt beside her and kissed her two hands, opened the door, and went out into the hall.

I closed the door behind me and stood with my back against it for a minute. The car was dark save for the corridor lights at each end. There was no sound except the groaning of the couplers, the even click-a-tick of the rails and someone's loud sleeping breath farther down the car. I became aware after a moment that he was standing by the water cooler just outside the men's smoking room, his derby hat on his head, his coat collar turned up around his neck as if he were cold, and his hands in his coat pockets. When I saw him, he turned and went into the smoking room, and I followed. He was sitting in the far corner of the long leather bench; I took the single armchair beside the door.

As I went in I nodded to him and he acknowledged my presence with one of those terrible soundless laughs of his. But this time it was prolonged; it seemed to go on forever, and rather to cut it short than to deal in hollow amenities,

I asked: "Where are you from?" in what I tried to make a casual tone of voice.

He stopped laughing and looked at me narrowly, wondering what my game was. When he decided to answer, his voice was muffled as though he were speaking through a silk scarf, and it seemed to come from a long way off.

"I'm from St. Paul, Jack."

"Been making a trip home?"

He nodded.

"Just a short trip?" I pursued.

Again he nodded impatiently. Then he took a long breath and spoke in a hard, menacing voice:

"You better get off at Fort Wayne, Jack."

He was dead. He was dead as hell—he had been dead all along, but what force had flowed through him, like blood in along, out what force had nowed through him, like blood in his veins, out in St. Paul, was leaving him. Now a new outline—the outline of him dead—was coming through the palpable figure that had knocked down Joe Jelke.

He spoke again, with a sort of jerking effort.

"You get off at Fort Wayne, Jack, or I'm going to bump you off." He moved his hand in his coat pocket and showed

me the outline of a revolver.

I shook my head. "You can't touch me," I answered. "You see, I know." His terrible eyes shifted over me quickly, trying to determine whether or not I did know. Then he gave a snarl and made as though he were going to iump to his feet.

jump to his feet.

"You climb off here or else I'm going to get you, Jack!" he cried hoarsely. The train was slowing up for Fort Wayne and his voice rang loud in the comparative quiet, but he didn't move from his chair—he was too weak, I think—and we sat staring at each other while workmen passed up and down outside the window banging the brakes and wheels, and the engine gave out loud mournful pants up ahead. No one got into our car. After a while the porter closed the vestibule door and passed back along the corridor, and we slid out of the murky yellow station light and into the long darkness. darkness.

What I remember next must have extended over a space

of five or six hours, though it comes back to me as something without any existence in time—something that might have taken five minutes or a year. There began a slow, calculated assault on me, wordless and terrible. I felt what I can only call a strangeness I had felt all afternoon, but deeper and more intensified. It was like nothing so much as the sensation of drifting away, and I gripped the arms of the chair convulsively, as if to hang on to a piece in the living world. Sometimes I felt myself going out with a rush. There would be almost a warm relief about it, a sense of not caring; then, with a violent wrench of the will, I'd pull myself back into the room.

Suddenly I realized that from a while back I had stopped hating him, stopped feeling violently alien to him, and with the realization, I went cold and sweat broke out all over my head. He was getting around my abhorrence, as he had got around Ellen coming West on the train; and it was just that strength he drew from preying on people that had brought him up to the point of concrete violence in St. Paul, and

that, fading and flickering out, still kept him fighting now.

He must have seen that faltering in my heart, for he spoke at once, in a low, even, almost gentle voice: "You better go now."

"Oh, I'm not going," I forced myself to say. "Suit yourself, Jack."

"Suit yourself, Jack."

He was my friend, he implied. He knew how it was with me and he wanted to help. He pitied me. I'd better go away before it was too late. The rhythm of his attack was soothing as a song: I'd better go away—and let him get at Ellen. With a little cry I sat bolt upright.

"What do you want of this girl?" I said, my voice shaking. "To make a sort of walking hell of her."

His glance held a quality of dumb surprise, as if I was punishing an animal for a fault of which he was not conscious. For an instant I faltered; then I went on blindly:

"You've lost her; she's put her trust in me."

His countenance went suddenly black with evil, and he cried: "You're a liar!" in a voice that was like cold hands.

"She trusts me," I said. "You can't touch her. She's safe!"

safe!"

He controlled himself. His face grew pale and bland, and I felt that curious weakness and indifference begin again inside me. What was the use of all this? What was the use?

"You haven't got much time left," I forced myself to say, and then, in a flash of intuition, I jumped at the truth: "You're sinking. You've only got a few hours. Your body is lying dead back in Pittsburgh. That's as far as you can go."

His face contorted, lost all semblance of humanity, living or dead. Simultaneously the room was full of cold air and with a noise that was something between a paroxysm of coughing and a burst of horrible laughter, he was on his

feet, reeking of shame and blasphemy.

"Come and look!" he cried. "I'll show you . . ."

He took a step toward me, then another and it was

He took a step toward me, then another and it was exactly as if a door stood open behind him, a door yawning out to an inconceivable abyss of darkness and corruption. There was a scream of mortal agony, from him or from somewhere behind, and abruptly the strength went out of him in a long husky sigh and he wilted to the floor. . . . How long I sat there, dazed with terror and exhaustion, I don't know. The next thing I remember is the sleepy porter shining shoes across the room from me, and outside the window the steel fires of Pittsburgh breaking the flat perspective of the night. There was something extended on the bench also—something too faint for a man, too heavy for a shadow. Even as I perceived it, it faded off and away.

Some minutes later I opened the door of Ellen's compartment. She was asleep where I had left her. Her lovely cheeks were white and wan, but she lay naturally—her hands relaxed and her breathing regular and clear. What had possessed her had gone out of her, leaving her exhausted but her own dear self again.

I made her a little more comfortable, tucked a blanket

I made her a little more comfortable, tucked a blanket around her, extinguished the light, and went out.

Ш

When I came home for Easter vacation, almost my first act was to go down to the billiard parlor near Seven Corners. The man at the cash register quite naturally didn't

remember my hurried visit of three months before.

"I'm trying to locate a certain party who, I think, came here a lot some time ago."

I described the man rather accurately, and when I had finished, the cashier called to a little jockeylike fellow who was sitting near with an air of having something very important to do that he couldn't quite remember.

"Hey, Shorty, talk to this guy, will you? I think he's looking for Joe Varland."

The little man gave me a tribal look of suspicion. I went and sat near him.

"Joe Varland's dead, fella," he said grudgingly. "He died last winter."

I described him again—his overcoat, his laugh, the habitual expression of his eyes.

"That's Joe Varland you're looking for all right, but he's dead."

"I want to find out something about him."

"What you want to find out?"

"What did he do, for instance?"

"How should I know? He used to come in here once in a while and shoot pool."

"Look here! I'm not a policeman. I just want some kind of information about his habits. He's dead now and it can't hurt him. And it won't go beyond me."

"Well"—he hesitated, looking me over—"he was a great one for traveling. Somebody told me he died on a train"—I started—"wait a minute now—who was it told me that? Anyhow, he was in New York sick and he tried to come home. They took him off the train with pneumonia at Pittsburgh and he died there."

I nodded. Broken pieces of the puzzle began to assemble in my head.

"Why was he a lot on trains?"

"How should I know, fella?"

"If you can use ten dollars, I'd like to know anything you may have heard on the subject."

"Well," said Shorty reluctantly, "all I know is they used to say he worked the trains."

"Worked the trains?"

He had some racket of his own he'd never loosen up about. He used to work the girls traveling alone on the trains. Nobody ever knew much about it—he was a pretty smooth guy—but sometimes he'd turn up here with a lot of dough and he let 'em know it was the janes he got it off of."

I thanked him and gave him the ten dollars and went out, very thoughtful, without mentioning that though a part of Joe Varland had been taken off the train at Pittsburgh, another part of him had made a last trip home. Ellen wasn't West for Easter, and even if she had been I wouldn't have gone to her with the information, either—at least I've seen her almost every day this summer and we've managed to talk about everything else. Sometimes, though, she gets silent about nothing and wants to be very close to me, and I know what's in her mind.

Of course she's very popular and coming out this fall and I have two more years at New Haven; still, things don't look as impossible as they did a few months ago. She belongs to me in a way—even if I lose her she belongs to me. She'll always know I love her and that she might need me, and sometimes those are powerful considerations. I'm going to take her out to a dance at the club tonight, and perhaps sometime during the evening she'll get silent, and a little frightened and want me close to her. Who knows? Anyhow, I'll be there—I'll always be there.

AN INVITATION TO THE HUNT

George Hitchcock

His first impulse upon receiving it had been to throw it in the fire. They did not travel in the same social set and he felt it presumptuous of them, on the basis of a few words exchanged in the shopping center and an occasional chance meeting on the links, to include him in their plans. Of course, he had often seen them—moving behind the high iron grillwork fence that surrounded their estates, the women in pastel tea-gowns serving martinis beneath the striped lawn umbrellas and the men suave and bronzed in dinner jackets or sailing togs—but it had always been as an outsider, almost as a Peeping Tom.

"The most charitable interpretation," he told Emily, "would be to assume that it is a case of mistaken identity."

"But how could it be?" his wife answered holding the envelope in her slender reddened fingers. "There is only one Fred Perkins in Marine Gardens and the house number is perfectly accurate."

"But there's no earthly reason for it. Why me of all

people?"

people?"

"I should think," said Emily helping him on with his coat and fitting the two sandwiches neatly wrapped in aluminum foil into his pocket, "that you would be delighted. It's a real step upward for you. You've often enough complained of our lack of social contacts since we moved out of the city."

"It's fantastic," Perkins said, "and of course I'm not going," and he ran out of his one-story shingled California ranch cottage to join the car pool which waited for him at

the curb.

All the way to the city, like a dog with a troublesome bone, he worried and teased at the same seemingly in-soluble problem: how had he attracted their notice? What was there in his appearance or manner which had set him apart from all the rest? There had been, of course, that day the younger ones had come in off the bay on their racing cutter, when by pure chance (as it now seemed) he had been the one man on the pier within reach of the forward mooring line. He recalled the moment with satisforward mooring line. He recalled the moment with satisfaction—the tanned, blonde girl leaning out from the bowsprit with a coil of manila in her capable hand. "Catch!" she had cried and at the same instant spun the looping rope toward him through the air. He had caught it deftly and snubbed it about the bitt, easing the cutter's forward motion. "Thanks!" she had called across the narrowing strip of blue water, but there had been no sign of recognition in her eyes, nor had she when a moment later the yacht was securely tied to the wharf invited him aboard or even acknowledged his continuing presence on the pier. No, that could hardly have been the moment he sought.

Once at the Agency and there bedded down in a day of invoices, he tried to put the problem behind him, but it would not rest. At last, victim of a fretful pervasive anxiety which ultimately made concentration impossible, he left his desk and made his way to the hall telephone (years ago a written reproof from Henderson had left him forever scrupulous about using the Agency phone for private business) where he deposited a dime and rang his golf partner, Bianchi.

They met for lunch at a quiet restaurant on Maiden Lane. Bianchi was a young man recently out of law school and still impressed by the improbable glitter of society. This will give him a thrill, Perkins thought, he's a second generation Italian and it isn't likely that he's ever laid eyes on one of these.

"The problem is," he said aloud, "that I'm not sure why they invited me. I hardly know them. At the same time I don't want to do anything that might be construed as well-as-"

"Defiance?" Bianchi supplied.
"Perhaps. Or call it unnecessary rudeness. We can't ignore their influence."

"Well, first let's have a look at it," Bianchi said finishing his vermouth. "Do you have it with you?"

"Of course."

"Well, let's see it."

Poor Bianchi! It was obvious that he was dying for an invitation himself and just as obvious from his slurred, uncultivated English and his skin acne that he would never receive one. Perkins took the envelope from his notecase and extracted the stiff silver-edged card which he lay face up on the table.

"It's engraved," he pointed out.

"They always are," Bianchi said putting on his shell-rimmed reading glasses, "but that doesn't prove a thing. They aren't the real article without the watermark." He

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held the envelope up against the table lamp hoping, Perkins imagined, that the whole thing would prove fraudulent. "It's there," he admitted, "by God, it's there." And

Perkins detected a note of grudging respect in his voice as he pointed out the two lions rampant and the neatly quartered shield. "It's the real McCoy and no mistake."

"But what do I do now?" Perkins asked with a hint of

irritation

"First let's see the details." Bianchi studied the engraved Old English script:

> The pleasure of your company at the hunt is requested on August sixteenth of this year RSVPAppropriate attire ob.

"The 'ob,'" he explained, "is for 'obligatory'."
"I know that."

"Well?"

"The problem is," Perkins said in an unnecessarily loud voice, "that I have no intention of going."

He was aware that Bianchi was staring at him incredu-

lously but this merely strengthened his own stubbornness.
"It's an imposition. I don't know them and it happens I

have other plans for the sixteenth."

"All right, all right," Bianchi said soothingly, "no need to

shout. I can hear you perfectly well."

With a flush of embarrassment Perkins looked about the restaurant and caught the reproving gaze of the waiters. Obviously he had become emotionally involved in his predicament to the extent of losing control; he hastily reinserted the invitation in its envelope and returned it to his notecase. Bianchi had arisen and was folding his napkin.

"Do as you like," he said, "but I know a dozen men around town who would give their right arm for that

invitation."

"But I don't hunt!"

"You can always learn," Bianchi said coldly and signal-ling for the waiter, paid his check and left. Meanwhile, word of the invitation had apparently gotten

around the Agency, for Perkins noticed that he was treated with new interest and concern. Miss Nethersole, the senior librarian, accosted him by the water-cooler in deep thrushlike tones.

"I'm so thrilled for you, Mr. Perkins! There is no one else in the whole office who deserves it more."

"That's very sweet of you," he answered attempting to hide his embarrassment by bending over the faucet, "but the truth is I'm not going."

"Not going?" The rich pearshaped tones (the product of innumerable diction lessons) broke into a cascade of rippling laughter. "How can you say that with a straight face? Have you seen the rotogravure section?"

"No," Perkins said shortly.

"It's all there. The guests, the caterers, even a map of the course. I should give anything to be invited!" No doubt you would, Perkins thought, looking at her

square masculine breastless figure, it's just the sort of sport which would entertain you, but aloud he merely said, "I have other commitments," and went back to his desk.

After lunch he found the rotogravure section stuck under the blotter on his desk. Aware that every eye in the office was secretly on him he did not dare unfold it but stuck it in his coat pocket and only later after he had arisen casually and strolled down the long row of desks to the men's room, did he in the privacy of a locked cubicle and with trembling hands spread it out on his knees. Miss Nethersole had been right: the guest list was truly staggering. It filled three columns in six point type; titles gleamed like diamonds the newsprint; there were generals, statesmen, manufacturers and university presidents; editors of great magazines, movie queens and polar explorers; radio-casters, regents, prize-winning novelists—but Perkins could not begin to digest the list. His eyes ferreted among the jumbled syllables and at last with a little catch of delight he came upon the one he had unconsciously sought: "Mr. Fred Perkins." That was all, no identification, no Ll.D. nor Pres. Untd. Etc. Corp. He read his one name over four times and then neatly folded the paper and put it back in his pocket.

"Well," he said with a thinlipped smile, "I'm not going and that's that "

But apparently Emily, too, had seen the paper.

"The phone has been ringing all day," she informed him as soon as he entered the house and deposited his briefcase on the canebottomed chair by the TV set. "Of course everyone is furiously envious but they don't dare admit it so I've been receiving nothing but congratulations."

She helped him off with his coat.

"Come into the dining-room," she said mysteriously, "I've a little surprise for you." The telephone rang. "No, wait, you mustn't go in without me. It will only be a minute."

He stood uneasily shifting from one foot to the other until she returned.

"It was the Corrigans," she announced, "Beth wants us to come to a little dinner party on the seventeenth. Naturally," she added, "the date isn't accidental. They expect to pump you for all the details before anyone else in the subdivision hears about it. Now come on—" and like a happy child on Christmas morning she took his hand and led him into the dining-room.

Perkins followed her with mumbled protestations.

"Isn't it gorgeous?"

There, spread out on the mahogany table (not yet fully paid for) were a pair of tan whipcord breeches, a tattersall vest and a bright pink coat with brass buttons. In the center of the table where the floral piece usually stood was a gleaming pair of boots.

"And here's the stock," she said waving a bright bit of yellow silk under his eyes. "You can wear one of my stickpins, the one with the onyx in the jade setting I think would be best. And I've ordered a riding crop with a silver handle, it's to be delivered tomorrow."

"You're taking a great deal for granted," Perkins said. He picked up the boots and felt the soft pliable waxed leather. "They must be very expensive. Where did you get the money for them?"

Emily laughed. "They're on time, silly, we have twelve months to pay."

"I'll look ridiculous in that coat."

"No, you won't. You're a very handsome man and I've always said you would cut a fine figure anywhere."
"Well," said Perkins hesitantly, "I suppose we can send

them back if I decide not to go."

After dinner Bianchi drove by in his old Studebaker and obviously a bit fuzzy from too many cocktails. Emily opened the door for him.

"Fred is in the bedroom trying on his new hunting out-

fit," she said, "he'll be out in a moment."

"Who is it?" Perkins shouted and when she answered he hastily took off the pink coat (which was a bit tight under the arms anyway) and slipped on his smoking-jacket. He remembered the scene in the restaurant and felt ashamed to let Bianchi see that his resolution was wavering.

"Look, Fred," Bianchi said when they were seated in the livingroom over their Old Fashioneds, "I hope you've finally changed your mind—about—" He glanced at Emily to see how much she knew of the invitation.

"Go ahead. I've told her everything," Perkins said.
"Well, you can certainly decline if you feel strongly about it," said Bianchi in his best legal manner, "but I don't advise it. If they once get the idea you're snubbing them they can make things pretty unpleasant for you—and in more ways than one."

"But this is ridiculous!" Emily interrupted. "He is not going to decline. Are you, darling?"

"Well," Perkins said.

She caught the indecision in his voice and went on vehemently, "This is the first social recognition you've ever had, Fred, you can't think of declining. Think what it will mean for the children! In a few years they'll be ready for college. And you know what that means. And do you seriously plan to remain in this house for the rest of your life?"

"There's nothing wrong with this house," Perkins said defensively, reflecting that the house was not yet paid for but already Emily was finding fault with it.

"Suppose the invitation was a mistake," Emily continued.
"I'm not saying that it was, but suppose it just for a minute. Is that any the less reason why you shouldn't accept?"

"But I don't like hunting," Perkins interjected weakly. "And I'll look ridiculous on a horse."

"And I'll look ridiculous on a horse."

"No more ridiculous than ninety per cent of the other guests. Do you suppose Senator Gorman will exactly look like a centaur? And what about your boss, Mr. Henderson? He's certainly no polo player."

"Is he going?" Perkins asked in surprise.

"He certainly is. If you had paid the slightest attention to the guest list you would have noticed it."

"All right, all right," Perkins said, "then I'll go."

"I think that's the wisest course," said Bianchi with a slightly blurry attempt at the judicial manner.

He wrote his acceptance that evening, in pen and ink on a plain stiff card with untinted edges.

"It's all right for them to use silvered edges," Emily pointed out, "but they're apt to think it shows too much swank if you do." She phoned a messenger service—explaining, "it's not the sort of thing you deliver by mail"—and the next morning a uniformed messenger dropped his acceptance off at the gatekeeper's lodge.

The ensuing week passed swiftly. Emily fitted the pink coat and the tan breeches, marked them with chalk and sent them out for alterations. The yellow stock, she de-

coat and the tan breeches, marked them with chalk and sent them out for alterations. The yellow stock, she decided, would not do after all—"a bit too flashy," she observed—so it was replaced by one in conservative cream. The alteration necessitated a change in stickpin and cufflinks to simple ones of hammered silver which she selected in the village. The expense was ruinous but she over-rode his objections. "So much depends upon your making a good impression and after all if it goes well you will be invited again and can always use the same clothes. And the cufflinks will be nice with a dinner jacket," she added as an afterthought an afterthought.

At the Agency he found that he basked in a new glow of respect. On Monday Mr. Presby, the office manager, suggested that he might be more comfortable at a desk nearer the window.

"Of course, with air-conditioning it doesn't make as much difference as it did in the old days, but still there's a bit of a view and it helps break the monotony."

Perkins thanked him for his thoughtfulness.

"Not at all," Presby answered, "it's a small way of showing it, but we appreciate your services here, Mr. Perkins"

And on Friday afternoon Henderson himself, the Agency chief and reputedly high in the councils of Intercontinental Guaranty & Trust, stopped by his desk on his way home. Since in a dozen years he had received scarcely a nod from Henderson, Perkins was understandably elated.

"I understand we'll be seeing each other tomorrow," Henderson said resting one buttock momentarily on the

corner of Perkins' desk.

"Looks like it," Perkins said noncommittally.

"I damn well hope they serve whiskey," Henderson said. "I suppose hot punch is strictly in the old hunting tradition but it gives me gas."

"I think I'll take a flask of my own," said Perkins as if

it were his longstanding habit at hunts.

"Good idea," Henderson said getting up. And as he left the office he called back over his shoulder, "Save a nip for me, Fred!"

After dinner that evening Emily put the children to bed and the two of them then strolled to the edge of Marine Gardens and gazed across the open fields toward the big houses behind their iron grills. Even from that distance they could see signs of bustle and activity. The driveway under the elms seemed full of long black limousines and on the spreading lawns they could make out the caterer's assistants setting up green tables for the morrow's breakfast. As they watched, an exercise boy on a chestnut mare trotted by outside the fence leading a string of some forty sleek brown and black horses toward the distant stables.

"The weather will be gorgeous," Emily said as they turned back. "There's just a hint of autumn in the air al-

ready."

Perkins did not answer her. He was lost in his own reflections. He had not wanted to go, part of him still did not want to go. He realized that he was trembling with nervous apprehension; but of course that might have been expected—the venture into new surrounding, the fear of failure, of

committing some social gaffe, of not living up to what they must certainly expect of him—these were causes enough for his trembling hands and the uneven palpitations of his heart.

"Let's go to bed early," Emily said, "you'll need a good night's sleep."

Perkins nodded and they went into their house. But despite the obvious necessity, Perkins slept very little that night. He tossed about envisaging every conceivable social humiliation until his wife at last complained, "you kick and turn so that I can't get a bit of sleep," and took her pillow and a blanket and went into the children's room.

He had set the alarm for six—an early start was called for-but it was long before that when he was awakened.

"Perkins? Fred Perkins?"

He sat bolt upright in bed.

"Yes?"

It was light but the sun had not yet risen. There were two men standing in his bedroom. The taller of them, he who had just shaken his shoulder, was dressed in a black leather coat and wore a cap divided into pie-shaped slices of yellow and red.

"Come on, get up!" the man said.
"Hurry along with it," added the second man, shorter and older but dressed also in leather.

"What is it?" Perkins asked. He was fully awake now and the adrenalin charged his heart so that it pumped with a terrible urgency.

"Get out of bed," said the larger man and seizing the covers with one hand jerked them back. As he did so Perkins saw the two lions rampant and the quartered shield stamped in gilt on the breast of his leather coat. Trembling, and naked except for his shorts, he rose from his bed into the cool, crisp morning.

"What is it?" he repeated senselessly.

"The hunt, the hunt, it's for the hunt," said the older

man.

"Then let me get my clothes," Perkins stammered and moved toward the dresser where in the dim light he could see the splendid pink coat and whipcord breeches spread

out awaiting his limbs. But as he turned he was struck a sharp blow by the short taped club which he had not observed in the large man's hand.

"You won't be needing them," his attacker laughed, and out of the corner of his eye Perkins saw the older man pick up the pink coat and holding it by the tails rip it up the center.

"Look here!" he began but before he could finish the heavy man in black leather twisted his arm sharply behind his back and pushed him out of the french doors into the cold clear sunless air. Behind him he caught a glimpse of Emily in night-clothes appearing suddenly in the door, heard her terrified scream and the tinkle of glass from one of the panes which broke as the short man slammed the door shut. He broke loose and ran in a frenzy across the lawn but the two game-keepers were soon up with him. They seized him under the armpits and propelled him across the street to the point where Marine Gardens ended and the open country began. There they threw him onto the stubbled ground and the short one drew out a whip.

"Now, run! you son of a bitch, run!" screamed the large

Perkins felt the sharp agony of the whip across his bare back. He stumbled to his feet and began to lope across the open fields. The grass cut his bare feet, sweat poured down his naked chest and his mouth was filled with incoherent syllables of protest and outrage, but he ran, he ran, For already across the rich summery fields he heard the hounds baying and the clear alto note of the huntsman's horn.

THE SUMMER PEOPLE

Shirley Jackson

The Allisons' country cottage, seven miles from the nearest town, was set prettily on a hill; from three sides it looked down on soft trees and grass that seldom, even at midsummer, lay still and dry. On the fourth side was the lake, which touched against the wooden pier the Allisons had to keep repairing, and which looked equally well from the Allisons' front porch, their side porch or any spot on the wooden staircase leading from the porch down to the water. Although the Allisons loved their summer cottage, looked forward to arriving in the early summer and hated to leave in the fall, they had not troubled themselves to put in any improvements, regarding the cottage itself and the lake as improvement enough for the life left to them. The cottage had no heat, no running water except the precarious supply from the backyard pump and no electricity. For seventeen summers, Janet Allison had cooked on a kerosene stove, heating all their water; Robert Allison had For seventeen summers, Janet Allison had cooked on a kerosene stove, heating all their water; Robert Allison had brought buckets full of water daily from the pump and read his paper by kerosene light in the evenings and they had both, sanitary city people, become stolid and matter-of-fact about their backhouse. In the first two years they had gone through all the standard vaudeville and magazine jokes about backhouses and by now, when they no longer had frequent guests to impress, they had subsided to a comfortable security which made the backhouse, as well as the pump and the kerosene, an indefinable asset to their summer life.

In themselves, the Allisons were ordinary people. Mrs. Allison was fifty-eight years old and Mr. Allison sixty; they had seen their children outgrow the summer cottage and go on to families of their own and seashore resorts; their friends were either dead or settled in comfortable year-round houses, their nieces and nephews vague. In the winter they told one another they could stand their New York apartment while waiting for the summer; in the summer they told one another that the winter was well worth while, waiting to get to the country.

Since they were old enough not to be ashamed of regular habits, the Allisons invariably left their summer cottage the Tuesday after Labor Day, and were as invariably sorry when the months of September and early October turned out to be pleasant and almost insufferably barren in the

city; each year they recognized that there was nothing to bring them back to New York, but it was not until this year that they overcame their traditional inertia enough to decide to stay at the cottage after Labor Day.

"There isn't really anything to take us back to the city," Mrs. Allison told her husband seriously, as though it were a new idea, and he told her, as though neither of them had ever considered it, "We might as well enjoy the country as long as possible."

Consequently, with much pleasure and a slight feeling of adventure, Mrs. Allison went into their village the day after Labor Day and told those natives with whom she had dealings, with a pretty air of breaking away from tradition, that she and her husband had decided to stay at least a month longer at their cottage.

"It isn't as though we had anything to take us back to the city," she said to Mr. Babcock, her grocer. "We might as well enjoy the country while we can."

"Nobody ever stayed at the lake past Labor Day before," Mr. Babcock said. He was putting Mrs. Allison's groceries into a large cardboard carton, and he stopped for a minute to look reflectively into a bag of cookies. "Nobody," he added.

"But the city!" Mrs. Allison always spoke of the city to Mr. Babcock as though it were Mr. Babcock's dream to go there. "It's so hot—you've really no idea. We're always sorry when we leave."

"Hate to leave," Mr. Babcock said. One of the most irritating native tricks Mrs. Allison had noticed was that of taking a trivial statement and rephrasing it downwards, into an even more trite statement. "I'd hate to leave myself," Mr. Babcock said, after deliberation, and both he and Mrs. Allison smiled. "But I never heard of anyone ever staying out at the lake after Labor Day before."

"Well, we're going to give it a try," Mrs. Allison said, and Mr. Babcock replied gravely, "Never know till you try."

Physically, Mrs. Allison decided, as she always did when leaving the grocery after one of her inconclusive conversations with Mr. Babcock, physically, Mr. Babcock could

model for a statue of Daniel Webster, but mentally . . . it was horrible to think into what old New England Yankee stock had degenerated. She said as much to Mr. Allison when she got into the car, and he said, "It's generations of inbreeding. That and the bad land."

Since this was their big trip into town, which they made only once every two weeks to buy things they could not have delivered, they spent all day at it, stopping to have a sandwich in the newspaper and soda shop, and leaving packages heaped in the back of the car. Although Mrs. Allison was able to order groceries delivered regularly, she was never able to form any accurate idea of Mr. Babcock's current stock by telephone, and her lists of odds and ends that might be procured was always supplemented, almost beyond their need, by the new and fresh local vegetables Mr. Babcock was selling temporarily, or the packaged candy which had just come in. This trip Mrs. Allison was tempted, too, by the set of glass baking dishes that had found themselves completely by chance in the hardware and clothing and general store, and which had seemingly been waiting there for no one but Mrs. Allison, since the country people, with their instinctive distrust of anything that did not look as permanent as trees and rocks and sky, had only recently begun to experiment in aluminum baking dishes instead of ironware, and had, apparently within the memory of local inhabitants, discarded stoneware in favor of iron.

Mrs. Allison had the glass baking dishes carefully of iron.

of iron.

Mrs. Allison had the glass baking dishes carefully wrapped, to endure the uncomfortable ride home over the rocky road that led up to the Allisons' cottage, and while Mr. Charley Walpole, who, with his younger brother Albert, ran the hardware-clothing-general store (the store itself was called Johnson's, because it stood on the site of the old Johnson cabin, burned fifty years before Charley Walpole was born), laboriously unfolded newspapers to wrap around the dishes, Mrs. Allison said, informally, "Course, I could have waited and gotten those dishes in New York, but we're not going back so soon this year."

"Heard you was staying on," Mr. Charley Walpole said. His old fingers fumbled maddeningly with the thin sheets of

newspaper, carefully trying to isolate only one sheet at a time, and he did not look up at Mrs. Allison as he went on, "Don't know about staying on up there to the lake. Not after Labor Day."

"Well, you know," Mrs. Allison said, quite as though he deserved an explanation, "it just seemed to us that we've been hurrying back to New York every year, and there just wasn't any need for it. You know what the city's like in the fall." And she smiled confidingly up at Mr. Charley Walpole. Rhythmically he wound string around the package. He's

Rhythmically he wound string around the package. He's giving me a piece long enough to save, Mrs. Allison thought, and she looked away quickly to avoid giving any sign of impatience. "I feel sort of like we belong here, more," she said. "Staying on after everyone else has left." To prove this, she smiled brightly across the store at a woman with a familiar face, who might have been the woman who sold berries to the Allisons one year, or the woman who occasionally helped in the grocery and was probably Mr. Babcock's aunt.

"Well," Mr. Charley Walpole said. He shoved the package a little across the counter, to show that it was finished and that for a sale well made, a package well wrapped, he was willing to accept pay. "Well," he said again. "Never been summer people before, at the lake after Labor Day."

Mrs. Allison gave him a five-dollar bill, and he made change methodically, giving great weight even to the pennies. "Never after Labor Day," he said, and nodded at Mrs. Allison, and went soberly along the store to deal with two women who were looking at cotton house dresses.

As Mrs. Allison passed on her way out she heard one of the women say acutely, "Why is one of them dresses one dollar and thirty-nine cents and this one here is only ninetyeight?"

"They're great people," Mrs. Allison told her husband as they went together down the sidewalk after meeting at the door of the hardware store. "They're so solid, and so reasonable, and so honest."

"Makes you feel good, knowing there are still towns like this," Mr. Allison said. "You know, in New York," Mrs. Allison said, "I might have paid a few cents less for these dishes, but there wouldn't have been anything, sort of personal in the transaction."

"Staying on to the lake?" Mrs. Martin, in the newspaper and sandwich shop, asked the Allisons. "Heard you was staving on."

"Thought we'd take advantage of the lovely weather this vear," Mr. Allison said.

Mrs. Martin was a comparative newcomer to the town; she had married into the newspaper and sandwich shop from a neighboring farm, and had stayed on after her husband's death. She served bottled soft drinks, and fried egg and onion sandwiches on thick bread, which she made on her own stove at the back of the store. Occasionally when Mrs. Martin served a sandwich it would carry with it the rich fragrance of the stew or the pork chops cooking alongside for Mrs. Martin's dinner.

"I don't guess anyone's ever stayed out there so long before," Mrs. Martin said. "Not after Labor Day, anywav."

"I guess Labor Day is when they usually leave," Mr. Hall, the Allisons' nearest neighbor, told them later, in front of Mr. Babcock's store, where the Allisons were getting into their car to go home. "Surprised you're staying on."

"It seemed a shame to go so soon," Mrs. Allison said.
Mr. Hall lived three miles away; he supplied the Allisons with butter and eggs, and occasionally, from the top of their hill, the Allisons could see the lights in his house in the early evening before the Halls went to bed.

"They usually leave Labor Day," Mr. Hall said.

"They usually leave Labor Day," Mr. Hall said.

The ride home was long and rough; it was beginning to get dark, and Mr. Allison had to drive very carefully over the dirt road by the lake. Mrs. Allison lay back against the seat, pleasantly relaxed after a day of what seemed whirlwind shopping compared with their day-to-day existence; the new glass baking dishes lurked agreeably in her mind and the half bushel of red eating apples, and the package of colored thumbtacks with which she was going to put up

new shelf edging in the kitchen. "Good to get home," she said softly as they came in sight of their cottage, silhouetted above them against the sky.

"Glad we decided to stay on," Mr. Allison agreed.

"Glad we decided to stay on," Mr. Allison agreed.

Mrs. Allison spent the next morning lovingly washing her baking dishes, although in his innocence Charley Walpole had neglected to notice the chip in the edge of one; she decided, wastefully, to use some of the red eating apples in a pie for dinner, and, while the pie was in the oven and Mr. Allison was down getting the mail, she sat out on the little lawn the Allisons had made at the top of the hill, and watched the changing lights on the lake, alternating gray and blue as clouds moved quickly across the siin.

Mr. Allison came back a little out of sorts; it always irritated him to walk the mile to the mail box on the state road and come back with nothing, even though he assumed that the walk was good for his health. This morning there was nothing but a circular from a New York department store, and their New York paper, which arrived erratically by mail from one to four days later than it should, so that by mail from one to four days later than it should, so that some days the Allisons might have three papers and frequently none. Mrs. Allison, although she shared with her husband the annoyance of not having mail when they so anticipated it, pored affectionately over the department store circular, and made a mental note to drop in at the store when she finally went back to New York, and check on the sale of wool blankets; it was hard to find good ones in pretty colors nowadays. She debated saving the circular to remind herself, but after thinking about getting up and getting into the cottage to put it away safely somewhere, she dropped it into the grass beside her chair and lay back, her eyes half closed. her eves half closed.

"Looks like we might have some rain," Mr. Allison said,

squinting at the sky.

"Good for the crops," Mrs. Allison said laconically, and they both laughed,

The kerosene man came the next morning while Mr. Allison was down getting the mail; they were getting low on kerosene and Mrs. Allison greeted the man warmly; he

sold kerosene and ice, and, during the summer, hauled garbage away for the summer people. A garbage man was only necessary for improvident city folk; country people had no garbage.

"I'm glad to see you," Mrs. Allison told him, "We were getting pretty low."

The kerosene man, whose name Mrs. Allison had never learned, used a hose attachment to fill the twenty-gallon tank which supplied light and heat and cooking facilities for the Allisons; but today, instead of swinging down from his truck and unhooking the hose from where it coiled affectionately around the cab of the truck, the man stared uncomfortably at Mrs. Allison, his truck motor still going. "Thought you folks'd be leaving," he said. "We're staying on another month," Mrs. Allison said brightly. "The weather was so nice, and it seemed like—"

"That's what they told me," the man said. "Can't give

you no oil, though."

"What do you mean?" Mrs. Allison raised her eyebrows.
"We're just going to keep on with our regular—"
"After Labor Day," the man said. "I don't get so much oil myself after Labor Day."

Mrs. Allison reminded herself, as she had frequently to do when in disagreement with her neighbors, that city manners were no good with country people; you could not expect to overrule a country employee as you could a city worker, and Mrs. Allison smiled engagingly as she said, "But can't you get extra oil, at least while we stay?"

"You see," the man said. He tapped his finger exasperatingly against the car wheel as he spoke. "You see," he said slowly, "I order this oil. I order it down from maybe fifty, fifty-five miles away. I order back in June, how much I'll need for the summer. Then I order again . . . oh. about November. Round about now it's starting to get pretty short." As though the subject were closed, he stopped tapping his finger and tightened his hands on the wheel in preparation for departure.

"But can't you give us some?" Mrs. Allison said. "Isn't

there anyone else?"

"Don't know as you could get oil anywheres else right

now," the man said consideringly. "I can't give you none." Before Mrs. Allison could speak, the truck began to move; then it stopped for a minute and he looked at her through the back window of the cab. "Ice?" he called. "I could let you have some ice."

Mrs. Allison shook her head; they were not terribly low on ice, and she was angry. She ran a few steps to catch up with the truck, calling, "Will you try to get us some? Next week?"

"Don't see's I can," the man said. "After Labor Day, it's harder." The truck drove away, and Mrs. Allison, only comforted by the thought that she could probably get kerosene from Mr. Babcock, or, at worst, the Halls, watched it go with anger. "Next summer," she told herself. "Just let him try coming around next summer!"

There was no mail again, only the paper, which seemed to be coming doggedly on time, and Mr. Allison was openly cross when he returned. When Mrs. Allison told him about

the kerosene man he was not particularly impressed.

"Probably keeping it all for a high price during the winter," he commented. "What's happened to Anne and Jerry, do you think?"

Anne and Jerry were their son and daughter, both married, one living in Chicago, one in the far west; their dutiful weekly letters were late; so late, in fact, that Mr. Allison's annoyance at the lack of mail was able to settle on a legitimate grievance. "Ought to realize how we wait for their letters," he said. "Thoughtless, selfish children. Ought to know better."

"Well, dear," Mrs. Allison said placatingly. Anger at Anne and Jerry would not relieve her emotions toward the kerosene man. After a few minutes she said, "Wishing won't bring the mail, dear. I'm going to go call Mr. Bab-cock and tell him to send up some kerosene with my order."

"At least a postcard," Mr. Allison said as she left.

As with most of the cottage's inconveniences, the Allisons no longer noticed the phone particularly, but yielded to its eccentricities without conscious complaint. It was a wall phone, of a type still seen in only few communities; in

order to get the operator, Mrs. Allison had first to turn the side-crank and ring once. Usually it took two or three tries to force the operator to answer, and Mrs. Allison, making any kind of telephone call, approached the phone with resignation and a sort of desperate patience. She had to crank the phone three times this morning before the operator answered, and then it was still longer before Mr. Babcock picked up the receiver at his phone in the corner of the grocery behind the meat table. He said "Store?" with the rising inflection that seemed to indicate suspicion of anyone who tried to communicate with him by means of this unreliable instrument.

"This is Mrs. Allison, Mr. Babcock. I thought I'd give you my order a day early because I wanted to be sure and get some—"

"What say, Mrs. Allison?"

Mrs. Allison raised her voice a little; she saw Mr. Allison, out on the lawn, turn in his chair and regard her sympathetically. "I said, Mr. Babcock, I thought I'd call in my order early so you could send me—"

"Mrs. Allison?" Mr. Babcock said. "You'll come and

pick it up?"

"Pick it up?" In her surprise Mrs. Allison let her voice drop back to its normal tone and Mr. Babcock said loudly, "What's that, Mrs. Allison?"

"I thought I'd have you send it out as usual," Mrs. Allison said.

"Well, Mrs. Allison," Mr. Babcock said, and there was a pause while Mrs. Allison waited, staring past the phone over her husband's head out into the sky. "Mrs. Allison," Mr. Babcock went on finally, "I'll tell you, my boy's been working for me went back to school yesterday and now I got no one to deliver. I only got a boy delivering summers. you see."

"I thought you always delivered," Mrs. Allison said.
"Not after Labor Day, Mrs. Allison," Mr. Babcock said firmly. "You never been here after Labor Day before, so's you wouldn't know, of course."

"Well," Mrs. Allison said helplessly, Far inside her mind

she was saying, over and over, can't use city manners on country folk, no use getting mad.

"Are you sure?" she asked finally. "Couldn't you just

send out an order today, Mr. Babcock?"

"Matter of fact," Mr. Babcock said, "I guess I couldn't, Mrs. Allison. It wouldn't hardly pay, delivering, with no one else out at the lake."

"What about Mr. Hall?" Mrs. Allison asked suddenly, "the people who live about three miles away from us out here? Mr. Hall could bring it out when he comes."

"Hall?" Mr. Babcock said. "John Hall? They've gone to

visit her folks upstate, Mrs. Allison."
"But they bring all our butter and eggs," Mrs. Allison said, appalled,

said, appalled.

"Left yesterday," Mr. Babcock said. "Probably didn't think you folks would stay on up there."

"But I told Mr. Hall . . ." Mrs. Allison started to say, and then stopped. "I'll send Mr. Allison in after some groceries tomorrow," she said.

"You got all you need till then," Mr. Babcock said, satisfied; it was not a question, but a confirmation.

After she hung up, Mrs. Allison went slowly out to sit again in her chair next to her husband. "He won't deliver," she said. "You'll have to go in tomorrow. We've got just

again in her chair next to her husband. "He won't deliver," she said. "You'll have to go in tomorrow. We've got just enough kerosene to last till you get back."

"He should have told us sooner," Mr. Allison said.

It was not possible to remain troubled long in the face of the day; the country had never seemed more inviting, and the lake moved quietly below them, among the trees, with the almost incredible softness of a summer picture. Mrs. Allison sighed deeply, in the pleasure of possessing for themselves that sight of the lake, with the distant green hills beyond, the gentleness of the small wind through the trees.

The weather continued fair; the next morning Mr. Allison, duly armed with a list of groceries, with "kerosene" in large letters at the top, went down the path to the garage, and Mrs. Allison began another pie in her new

baking dishes. She had mixed the crust and was starting to pare the apples when Mr. Allison came rapidly up the path and flung open the screen door into the kitchen.

"Damn car won't start," he announced, with the end-ofthe-tether voice of a man who depends on a car as he

depends on his right arm.

"What's wrong with it?" Mrs. Allison demanded, stopping with the paring knife in one hand and an apple in the other. "It was all right on Tuesday."

"Well," Mr. Allison said between his teeth, "it's not all

right on Friday."

"Can you fix it?" Mrs. Allison asked.

"No," Mr. Allison said, "I can not. Got to call someone, I guess."

"Who?" Mrs. Allison asked.

"Man runs the filling station, I guess." Mr. Allison moved purposefully toward the phone. "He fixed it last summer one time."

A little apprehensive, Mrs. Allison went on paring apples absentmindedly, while she listened to Mr. Allison with the phone, ringing, waiting, finally giving the number to the operator, then waiting again and giving the number again, giving the number a third time, and then slamming down the receiver.

"No one there," he announced as he came into the kitchen.

"He's probably gone out for a minute," Mrs. Allison said nervously; she was not quite sure what made her so nervous, unless it was the probability of her husband's losing his temper completely. "He's there alone, I imagine, so if he goes there's no one to answer the phone."

"That must be it," Mr. Allison said with heavy irony. He slumped into one of the kitchen chairs and watched Mrs. Allison paring apples. After a minute, Mrs. Allison said soothingly, "Why don't you go down and get the mail and then call him again?"

Mr. Allison debated and then said, "Guess I might as well." He rose heavily and when he got to the kitchen door he turned and said, "But if there's no mail—" and

leaving an awful silence behind him, he went off down the path.

Mrs. Allison hurried with her pie. Twice she went to the window to glance at the sky to see if there were clouds coming up. The room seemed unexpectedly dark, and she herself felt in the state of tension that preceded a thunderstorm, but both times when she looked the sky was clear and serene, smiling indifferently down on the Allisons' summer cottage as well as on the rest of the world. When Mrs. Allison, her pie ready for the oven, went a third time to look outside, she saw her husband coming up the path; he seemed more cheerful, and when he saw her, he waved eagerly and held a letter in the air.

"From Jerry," he called as soon as he was close enough for her to hear him, "at last—a letter!" Mrs. Allison noticed with concern that he was no longer able to get up the gentle slope of the path without breathing heavily; but then he was in the doorway, holding out the letter. "I saved it till I got here," he said.

Mrs. Allison looked with an eagerness that surprised her Mrs. Allison hurried with her pie. Twice she went to the

Mrs. Allison looked with an eagerness that surprised her on the familiar handwriting of her son; she could not imagine why the letter excited her so, except that it was the first they had received in so long; it would be a pleasant, dutiful letter, full of the doings of Alice and the children, reporting progress with his job, commenting on the recent weather in Chicago, closing with love from all; both Mr. and Mrs. Allison could, if they wished, recite a pattern letter from either of their children.

Mr. Allison slit the letter open with great deliberation, and then he spread it out on the kitchen table and they leaned down and read it together.

"Dear Mother and Dad," it began, in Jerry's familiar, rather childish, handwriting, "Am glad this goes to the lake as usual, we always thought you came back too soon and ought to stay up there as long as you could. Alice says that now that you're not as young as you used to be and have no demands on your time, fewer friends, etc., in the city, you ought to get what fun you can while you can. Since you two are both happy up there, it's a good idea for you to stav."

Uneasily Mrs. Allison glanced sideways at her husband; he was reading intently, and she reached out and picked up the empty envelope, not knowing exactly what she wanted from it. It was addressed quite as usual, in Jerry's hand-writing, and was postmarked "Chicago." Of course it's postmarked Chicago, she thought quickly, why would they want to postmark it anywhere else? When she looked back down at the letter, her husband had turned the page, and she read on with him: "—and of course if they get measles, etc., now, they will be better off later. Alice is well, of course, me too. Been playing a lot of bridge lately with some people you don't know, named Carruthers. Nice young couple, about our age. Well, will close now as I guess it bores you to hear about things so far away. Tell Dad old Dickson, in our Chicago office, died. He used to ask about Dad a lot. Have a good time up at the lake, and don't bother about hurrying back. Love from all of us. Jerry."

"Funny," Mr. Allison commented.
"It doesn't sound like Jerry," Mrs. Allison said in a small voice. "He never wrote anything like . . ." She stopped.
"Like what?" Mr. Allison demanded. "Never wrote any-

thing like what?"

Mrs. Allison turned the letter over, frowning. It was impossible to find any sentence, any word, even, that did not sound like Jerry's regular letters. Perhaps it was only that the letter was so late, or the unusual number of dirty fingerprints on the envelope.

"I don't know," she said impatiently.

"Going to try that phone call again," Mr. Allison said. Mrs. Allison read the letter twice more, trying to find a phrase that sounded wrong. Then Mr. Allison came back and said, very quietly, "Phone's dead."

"What?" Mrs. Allison said, dropping the letter.

"Phone's dead," Mr. Allison said.

The rest of the day went quickly; after a lunch of crackers and milk, the Allisons went to sit outside on the lawn, but their afternoon was cut short by the gradually increasing storm clouds that came up over the lake to the cottage, so that it was as dark as evening by four o'clock. The storm delayed, however, as though in loving anticipation of the moment it would break over the summer cottage, and there was an occasional flash of lightning, but no rain. In the evening Mr. and Mrs. Allison, sitting close together inside their cottage, turned on the battery radio they had brought with them from New York. There were no lamps lighted in the cottage, and the only light came from the lightning outside and the small square glow from the dial of the radio.

The slight framework of the cottage was not strong enough to withstand the city noises, the music and the voices, from the radio, and the Allisons could hear them far off echoing across the lake, the saxophones in the New York off echoing across the lake, the saxophones in the New York dance band wailing over the water, the flat voice of the girl vocalist going inexorably out into the clean country air. Even the announcer, speaking glowingly of the virtues of razor blades, was no more than an inhuman voice sounding out from the Allisons' cottage and echoing back, as though the lake and the hills and the trees were returning it unwanted.

During one pause between commercials, Mrs. Allison turned and smiled weakly at her husband. "I wonder if we're supposed to . . . do anything," she said. "No," Mr. Allison said consideringly. "I don't think so.

Just wait."

Mrs. Allison caught her breath quickly, and Mr. Allison said, under the trivial melody of the dance band beginning again, "The car had been tampered with, you know. Even I could see that."

Mrs. Allison hesitated a minute and then said very softly, "I suppose the phone wires were cut."
"I imagine so," Mr. Allison said.

After a while, the dance music stopped and they listened attentively to a news broadcast, the announcer's rich voice telling them breathlessly of a marriage in Hollywood, the latest baseball scores, the estimated rise in food prices during the coming week. He spoke to them, in the summer cottage, quite as though they still deserved to hear news of a world that no longer reached them except through the

fallible batteries on the radio, which were already beginning to fade, almost as though they still belonged, however tenuously, to the rest of the world.

Mrs. Allison glanced out the window at the smooth surface of the lake, the black masses of the trees, and the waiting storm, and said conversationally, "I feel better about that letter of Jerry's."

"I knew when I saw the light down at the Hall place last night," Mr. Allison said.

The wind, coming up suddenly over the lake, swept around the summer cottage and slapped hard at the windows. Mr. and Mrs. Allison involuntarily moved closer together, and with the first sudden crash of thunder, Mr. Allison reached out and took his wife's hand. And then, while the lightning flashed outside, and the radio faded and sputtered, the two old people huddled together in their summer cottage and waited.

ADJUSTMENTS

George Mandel

Once the wheels had righted themselves after her turn into the lane, Caroline cut the engine so that the car glided silently to its stop before the house. She sat perfectly motionless, then, except for one hand that rubbed with slow, meditative pressure at her forehead. There was no way to learn if it was safe yet to leave the car, and the dreariness of the lane made this uncertainty the more disheartening for her. To one side stretched the concave wall of bramble and trees, bereft of foliage and white with hoarfrost; to the other lay the fields, gray as a winter sea and spotted by houses isolated from one another in two tiers, like the black, weatherbitten stumps of some decaying dock; and low over everything the sky hung pale and

unfriendly. She longed to be in the house and turned to look that way, detecting at her first glance a shattered window pane, which, together with the absence of sound from upstairs and down, encouraged her to go inside.

Caroline reached back for her package, a sizable thing but light, then shifted over in front of the rear view mirror, where she ran a comb through her hair with slow, abstracted strokes. Cautiously, she got out and, depressing the handle, eased the door quietly shut. A few paces up the flagged walk she veered to go around the evergreens, and searched the lawn in the general area of the windows until she found her husband's small brass paperweight. She picked it up and kicked to the side some glass fragments that had trailed the statue to the grass. Then, hesitantly, she mounted the stairs and, holding the package firmly against her to silence its paper wrapping, put an ear to the door.

The stillness was constant enough, inside, but any solace in that was doubtful, for often before such periods of quiescence had proved to be no more than brooding moments of pause. Still, the morning was so raw, the cold so painfully sharp in her nostrils, that she chanced her way into the vestibule, closing the door in the slow, rigid way she had opened it, guarding against the slightest sound. She pressed flat against the wall, breathessly, and there in the shadows she began to tremble.

shadows she began to tremble.

shadows she began to tremble.

Her package let out a brash and spiteful rustling that grew louder when she reached by reflex for the doorknob. Then, dimly audible, there came a ringing of metal upon glass, and with it, dimly at first, then flooding her, a warm rush of consolation. She stepped forward and looked across the living room to the dinette, where Peter sat stirring his coffee, his cowlick hanging boyishly near his eyes, his profile angular and hard in the pallid morning light.

Caroline became immediately spirited and, hanging her coat away, she called, "Good morning, Pete," while an image loitered in her mind of the litter that lay strewn across the carpet between Peter and herself. She had seen, as well, that except for his jacket he was fully dressed, which indicated that the coffee before him was at least his second cup. She carried the package past him to the

second cup. She carried the package past him to the

kitchen, then passed him again to set a small table right side up. "Good breakfast, Pete?" she asked, poking some cigarette butts from the carpet into the ashtray that she found under the couch.

"Just hit the spot," he said in a strident whisper, smiling blearily over a shoulder. "Here." He began to rise. "Let me do that for you." But she had already replaced the ashtray on the desk; there was nothing for him to do. "Maybe you should cut it a bit shorter. I like it, but when you bend over it covers your whole little face."

She brushed her hair back with one hand and tapped him on the head with the other—a light touch, but one with which she experienced the substance of him as she might have with a caress. "If I cut it any shorter it'll be ordinary. You want me to be ordinary?"

You want me to be ordinary?"

"Heaven forbid." There was an attendant gaze—long and significant, or so it seemed—that impelled her to turn away and take several aimless steps, so preoccupied with the suggestive tone of those words that she was not aware of bending to the floor for the copper table lamp until he spoke again, asking where she had been all morning.

"In town," she said, carrying the lamp to its place across the room, inspecting its ruined plug. "Getting some things

at the store."

at the store."

Blinking his eyes, Peter seemed about to say something, but instead he leaned in toward his coffee and took a long sip. Then he smiled and said, "You werent in the attic, honey. I looked, and you weren't there."

"Well, the lock's been broken. Maybe I'll go back up there again when it's fixed." These words, as she went to the pantry for the carpet sweeper, were made in the swift disconcertment that came with his remark, yet also with a vague and spontaneous motive: returning, she was gratified by his response. by his response.

His laughter was rich for that time of day, and through it he said, "Well, it really doesn't matter. I'd find you no matter where you were. God, Carrie, you don't suppose I'm partial to the attic, do you?"

Caroline laughed too, meanwhile running the sweeper over a cloud of ash on the carpet. With such shaggy

badinage, she reflected, they had to emerge from the morning each day as from a pool, level by level, slowly to the surface; in a desultory way at first, Peter extending phrases he always termed *marcescent* (cliché being itself too trite)—like "just hit the spot" and "heaven forbid"—with a clumsy lack of the fun he could manage later on, in his equanimity. "That must be your third coffee," she said, "the way you're laughing, Pete."

"Second. Second half a cup. Or no, that would make it

my third half a cup, wouldn't it?"

"I don't know—I can't do long division. You loaf around much longer and you'll be late. Today's your early class."

"The Friday one," he said fondly.

She stood still, then, watching him rub his swollen eyes

as he grinned. This morning's class was the one for which he had organized his material, thus his favorite. Going to him, she was thinking that if they could sit down together some time and organize once and for all the index cards for his other four classes, there was every probability that he would, within another year, arrive at an assistant professorship—providing, of course, that this terrible thing in him did not burst before then. If it did. . . .

She sat down across his lap and brushed away the cowlick so that she could kiss his eye. He wanted that assistant professorship, she was certain, but she suspected that his reasons were deeper than he realized, that much more than the salary he had a rankling need for the identification. She pressed closer against him to feel the warmth through his shirt; he bent and kissed her at the turn of the jaw. "Is that a fresh shirt?" she asked. "Because I want the cardboard."

Swiftly, he sneaked up to kiss her ear, making her jump with the shock it always passed through her. Then, laughing, he promised not to do it again and pressed his mouth to her throat, still speaking. She had to lean away in order to hear him. "What do you need cardboard for?" he said.

"For the window. Till the repair man comes. Aren't you cold?"

"Oh," Peter said, gazing bemusedly past her across the living room. "Did you find my brass statue?"
"Yeah, now what did I do with it? Hurry and go to

"Yeah, now what did I do with it? Hurry and go to school, Pete." She rose and took up some dishes. "You just tear a little strip off one end—they always fit perfectly in the window frames. It must be in my coat pocket, the statue."

Pete rubbed a hand around in his hair, grinning absently, then got up with mock abruptness and marched off to the bathroom. Caroline took dishes to the kitchen sink, but had to turn away and set them on the table in order to clear the sink of broken glass. One of the green saucers and a bowl. She scooped the pieces into a waste bag and, along with them, dumped the other dishes of Peter's breakfast, then dumped out the remainder of that glass set, which she replaced in the cabinet with the new service of unbreakable plastic she had just brought home in the big package. For days she had feared that Peter might cut himself, and now she carried the waste bag and empty dish carton down to the trash can with a relief that was almost vengeful. Returning, she lighted a burner under the coffee and began to consider her strategy for the following morning.

to consider her strategy for the following morning.

It was clear that Peter would molest the car, disable it in some way—since she had used it that morning for elusion—just as he had undone the attic door lock right after she had installed it for the same reason. At some hour during the night to come he would rise with half-awake purpose and a slumbering knowledge that she could not walk away from the house in this frozen Oregon weather. She drank coffee, planning intricately meanwhile, then set about cleaning the kitchen as little stratagems built up in her mind.

Peter provided her with a sheet of cardboard, which she

Peter provided her with a sheet of cardboard, which she fitted into the frame of the ruined window. Before he left she dallied with him in the vestibule. He was completely awake by then, his eyes wide, no longer lackluster but bright as ink, yet unsteady with the contrition that could never more than tacitly be acknowledged between them. It was an effort for her, each time she was faced thus with his remorse, to keep from reaching a hand to his cheek, or from covering his eyes to unburden them. Instead she would

laugh, and she would dally. Such dismissals were most easily carried off on days like this one, when he was stimulated with anticipation of the Friday morning class. His gait was fairly resilient as, through the glass of the door, she watched him depart from the lane for the short walk to work.

Considerable heat had escaped through the violated window. Caroline phoned the glazier in town, then went to the bedroom for a robe. She found her bed on its side, the bedclothes tangled, her mattress twisted over on one edge. A wire lay tight across the night table: tracing it to the disarray, she came upon the porcelain lamp, smashed, its shards lying frightfully about on her pillow.

By the time Peter returned for lunch, shaking off a spray of new snow, the house had been tidied, the windowpane repaired, and the plug replaced on the copper lamp. He brought home a fervor she had hoped for but had not dared expect. "The kids were nicely involved," he told her while the weather was still strong in his cheeks. "Remember that distinguishing exercise—Fact and Opinion? Some wonderful papers. Haven't read them yet, of course, but you can tell by the way they go at the discussion. It's no fact, but the opinion is a considered one."

The eggs were especially tasty for Caroline—her first real food of the day. She always assured herself that it was more than vacant sentimentality that kept her from eating without him, for, above remaining hungry enough to join him for lunch, she enjoyed the abstention itself as an exercise in broadening her contribution to their relationship. In this way she tried to countervail his stifled restlessness. She compared him with people uprooted by circumstances, although it was really a contrast, for Peter had been planted, as it were, by their marriage. For five years as a correspondent with a news service he had been several times around the world, and that constancy of motion had become so much a part of him that it was with ill-concealed reluctance that he had resigned from the job in order, literally, to settle down. She had never hesitated, in their deliberations during those swift San Francisco months of courtship, to state her doubts. But his argument that the

university appointment satisfied a true aspiration rather than the obvious necessity had been delivered with such con-viction that she had contentedly yielded, even though one tenuous edge of her heart had remained afraid.

After coffee and cigarettes they sang duets at the piano for a while, and then got up to dance. That lasted only until Peter smelled something in her hair that was difficult to describe, like winter or nature or some pleasant memory. He took her to the couch, where he pursued it lightly, with a diffidence so remarkably alien to any nightly embrace, yet not unexpected. Simply, a portion of the morning still lurked in his mind, and it hovered too in his smile, a certain remoteness, as he leaned back and talked some more about his class.

"Oh, incidentally," he interrupted himself, "we're invited over to the Tildens' tonight. Just some of the department and their wives. Casual gathering—something as noncommittal as that."

"When heads of departments," she offered, "have informal evenings, it's more committal than meets the eye. I'm taking a long bath."

As soon as Peter left for the afternoon class Caroline went to the tool cabinet in the cellar for a hole-punch, a hammer, some screws, a screw-driver, and an old slide-lock. The metal pantry door was refractory and her work laborious, but she amused herself imagining conversation that might have occurred had she been dauntless enough to call in a mechanic from town for the job.

"On the inside, lady?"

"Please. And make it strong."

"Lady, you want me to put this bolt on inside the pantry?"

"Isn't that all right?"

"It's all right. But maybe you want a different type of lock. With a key, so you can lock it up from out here in the kitchen."

"No, a bolt-lock. I think I'd like that."

"This type of lock, lady—let me explain—you wind up in the pantry when you lock it. And then if you want to come out it's not locked any more. See? What's the good?"

She built upon it, playing that way until she had succeeded in fixing an effective slide-bolt on the inside of the pantry door. Then she climbed the stairs to the attic for Peter's army sleeping bag. A wind was rampant in the room, cold enough to have frozen the whole house, had there been no confining door. One section of a casement window had been unhinged and cast out on the sloping roof. She considered climbing out after it, since it was too far out to be reached, but the veneer of snow had dangerously slicked the shingles. She propped the mattress of the army cot against the open space, then hurried out with the sleeping bag, rolling it tight as she descended. In the pantry she tucked it away under a shelf obscured by the shadow of the door.

Caroline disrobed, went to bed, and rested for the time one usually takes to nap, but in a profound and unperturbed sleep. In her year of marriage she had developed the ability to predetermine the duration of her sleep, setting in motion some mechanism of mind to restore her senses in an hour, ten minutes, or even less. Now, when she roused herself, it was early enough to relax a long while in the tub, and she was still in it when Peter returned.

He mixed cocktails and brought them to the bathroom, handing her one and sitting with his own on the bathtub ledge. "I nearly missed the whole thing," he said.

"Missed what?"

"Your bath. I have to watch you wash your feet now and then, or what's life for?" He finished his double martini, then cocked his head and regarded her with a bland smile. "Your feet happen to be a couple of the prettiest appurtenances of your anatomy. And, with all modesty, you'll admit that's saying quite a piece for them."

"Your feet ain't bad," she said.

"Oh, as feet go. But grace—your feet have grace, Carrie. That's more important in feet than many people suspect." His repose seemed complete now: the morning was gone out of him.

"You just love me for my feet."

"Then you know."

Drying herself, she told him about the casement out on

the roof. "Don't let me forget it, because the house'll be freezing when we get home."
"I'll get it," he said. "I know where it is."

"No, it's too far out. I don't want you going out on that slippery roof. Wait'll I get dressed."

She dressed in heavy wool slacks, a couple of sweaters,

and a mackinaw. Peter swore that the martini had affected nothing but his mouth, so she had him hold her ankles while she bellied out the attic window for the casement. Peter stayed upstairs repairing the window while she fixed dinner, then came down to mix more cocktails and, consuming some, to make more little speeches.

Peter's loquacity lasted through dinner, her dressing, and

the full drive around to the other side of town, ending abruptly as they drove into the woods where the Tilden home sat nestled and alone. The first thing Caroline noticed after the greetings were made was that, among the four assistants, two associates, and two full professors, Peter was the only instructor to have been invited. Everyone was gracious, overlooking as if by prearrangement the incongruousness of his presence—even the ladies, who in their fluster seemed likely to make into words anything that crossed their minds. Two of them, sisters who happened to be married to the pair of associates, of course gave themselves no opportunity to remark on Peter's conspicuous youthfulness, being so occupied the evening long with numbing declamations on their own affairs. One seemed in the market for a new house, and spoke in an unrestrained way of builders, blueprints, sites, taxes, and the like. The other, apparently a teacher in the local grammar school, went on incessantly as though her sister were silent, delineating the esotery of child education, deigning even to sing many of the little songs with which she inspired her pupils. It was, as a matter of fact, while she was singing directly into the captive gazes of Peter and Caroline that Dean Tilden rescued them, leading them off with an arm around the shoulder of each. Behind them the song of the teacher went on by its own momentum, fading with distance, but unbridled

"Little Ducky Duddle
Went wading in a puddle,
Went wading in a puddle so small.
He said, 'It doesn't matter
How much I splash and splatter,
I'm only a ducky after all.'"

The dean, tall, bald, and merry, walked them to a table and replenished their drinks, talking meanwhile in the low, composed way that made all things he said sound merely conversational. But Caroline alerted herself by something like reflex and with the feeling she had half expected it when he remarked that Mr. Brogge, one of the assistant professors, had notified the department that he intended not to renew his contract.

"Brogge's had quite a desirable offer," the dean said, adjusting his glasses mischievously, "from quite an undesirable magazine." Peter, who admired the dean, laughed in reverence rather than mirth, and failed to notice that they were being led toward the two full professors in a corner.

Caroline squeezed his arm sharply when he balked at sight of the looming professors, for she had anticipated it, aware that the gray old men were anathema to his sensibilities, obsolescent mentalities, as he had often described them—one a devoted but vacuous person, the other a maudlin specimen who continually ruined aspiring journalists with false praise. But if Peter was tense, then Caroline was doubly so, for she sensed that the dean, with academic protocol, would weigh the opinions of those two veterans when it came to replacing Brogge.

Brogge himself, a tall, ferretlike man, sauntered over with his wife just as the dean was going off. Dean Tilden had disrupted what seemed to have been a cashew-eating seminar between the professors, saying simply, after an affectionate chuckle, that all the world was fond of lovers—this morsel of restraint by way of introduction, and then he was gone. Dr. Newel, however, picked it up lavishly and with even greater affection, though he barely knew the couple.

"In all my years as an educator, I have never seen such fundamental, exquisite harmony." He gave Peter a fierce whack on the back, and Caroline had to avert her eyes.

"They don't seem to flaunt it, thank God," Dr. Lane put in with a miserable sort of smile, entwining his fingers and devotedly nodding his head where he sat.

"It's easy for me," Caroline murmured out of a discomposed need to speak. "Peter is so faultless."

"Hear, hear," said Dr. Newel unaccountably, beaming all

around.

The embarrassment fell multiplied on Peter, who could not quite bury it in his highball glass. He looked up with his uneasiest of smiles and surveyed the group blankly. "Now, that's not completely true, Caroline." His voice expired to a whisper. "I have . . . well, at least one glaring fault, haven't I?"

It created a silence, until Brogge, whose glances during that much of the evening had been captious ones resting usually on his dour little reticent wife, broke into his first smile and said, "That's more like it," sighing then with unconcealed pleasure. "Tell us about your *one* single fault, Peter, us faultridden old bounders." Brogge sat back, com-

placently sucking a tooth.

Heroically, like a champion unto the breech, Dr. Newel lurched forward. "If the lad has a fault, the confession of it reveals the oldest and noblest virtue—honesty!" He turned a victorious glint in his eye on Dr. Lane, who had fallen asleep.

"Oh, honesty's definitely a policy of Peter's," Caroline ventured. "His very best, you might say."

Brogge took delight in the remark, laughing out compulsively while his wife gave him a malignant look. The whole thing might have ended there, but for Dr. Newel's sudden and dire fascination: he asked precisely what was Peter's

great fault, fixing him in a bold, judicial gaze.

Caroline grew rigid, but then Peter muttered simply, "Well, I'm surly before breakfast." The shock of understatement doubled her over in laughter, and when she looked up she found that Mrs. Brogge had joined her, regarding Brogge through an intense, derisive cackle. Dr. Newel, extending an ingratiating snicker while his eyes shifted about, patted Caroline's back and glanced once over a shoulder before he spoke. "And how do you meet the problem, my dear?" Again he glanced behind him, toward a group of ladies standing nearby.

At the low end of her laugh Caroline said, "Why, I suppose it's just a matter of adjustment. Are you surly in the morning, Doctor?"

"I? Surly? No. No, I'm a lamb." He said it with arched eyebrows and a broad grin evidently designed to vindicate him of any connection with morning obduracy, but his irresolute eyes betrayed at least an intimacy with the gray face quivering with rage before breakfast on bleak winter mornings. Then he held his hands out to those of a portly woman who approached, and introduced her as his wife.

Dean Tilden masterfully influenced the party away from its scattered conversations and into a group-sing that carried the evening through. Peter was in fine voice, and just as his martini speeches had earlier sustained themselves all the way to the Tilden door, now his highball singing continued all the way home, with Caroline accompanying him half way, then spending the remainder of the drive with her head on his shoulder.

When they arrived the house was comfortably warm, with an audible silence and a stillness of air reminiscent of morning. Peter undressed rapidly and began to tune the taps for his shower bath, and Caroline protested. "You're so nice and drunk—you can fall right to sleep. Take your shower in the morning, Pete."

shower in the morning, Pete."

"If I don't shower, I won't have enough energy to sleep."

So she went through her toilet while he hummed behind the glass door and laughed out occasionally through his splashings. He was still chuckling when she joined him in his bed, and they lay there a long time reviewing the evening. Peter, growing oscitant as she held his head, spoke mostly of the tranquil manner of Tilden, and not at all about the impending promotion. When he was quiet and breathing rhythmically she indulged pleasant visions of Peter in his new role as professor, Peter reconciled to university life, Peter at peace. Then she too slept.

Caroline slept in periods no longer than fifteen minutes, waking herself frequently through the night to watch Peter. The hours lumbered slowly by: each time she returned to sleep it would be with a deeper lust for the warmth her head found in the crook of her arm. The darkness outside began to separate when she felt, as if in a dream, the movement

to separate when she felt, as if in a dream, the movement she had been expecting.

Peter left the bed, and then his feet were marching in the measured rhythm of half-sleep across the living room, then the dinette, and, with a receding creak, down the cellar stairs. The rest was easy to imagine: he was through the garage door, groping at the hood of the car, finding the ignition wire and—the rip, unheard, yet making its sound inside her with the cogency of last night's crack of the attic door lock, the smash of the guest bathroom lock of the night before, the splintering collapse of the storage bin shield—any number of rending noises that had destroyed a previous morning's refuge.

Now she could hear him once more—the cadence of his trip upstairs, across two rooms, and now he loomed before

trip upstairs, across two rooms, and now he loomed before her, large and dark, and he was climbing in beside her, nestling his head by her neck.

Caroline waited until he was asleep, then rose and quietly brought two blankets down from the closet. These she arranged under the quilt of her own bed, sculpturing them to resemble a sleeping figure. Then she kissed Peter lightly and went to the pantry, where she bolted the metal door and tucked herself into the sleeping bag, digging her head into the heat of her arms, falling instantly, richly asleep.

Lying on his side, Peter labored to focus his eyes. A weight drew at his back, in turn sucking sense from his mind. The room was gray and inimical.

When he sat up there was an undulating dizziness at his temples and a terrible void in his chest. His first thought was of Newel and his first consciousness was of the man's obsequious stupidity. He thought of Lane and, vaguely, decided the old professor was insane. The kindly and the useless. A smoldering distaste for everyone swept him and he felt a creeping chill all over his skin. He got up, his

head quaking slightly, and somewhere deep inside himself, as if from a great distance, his own voice called him back to bed, deep, deep under the covers and away. He looked at Caroline's tangled mound of bedclothes and left the room, his head quaking still.

The desk was piled with the papers of his Friday classes; he stood motionless, regarding them. *Students*, *youth*. The best of them would go on—to the degeneration of Newel's coddling or of Lane's subtle tyranny. Peter felt overcome with the whole sham of academic reputation that established and venerated frauds like the two old men. He decided to burn the papers, and then the house, with Caroline in it. She was the root of this deleterious trap, inevitably to become socially ebullient like the rest of the wives, unsightly and hopeless. He stumbled into the kitchen and looked around for matches. "Such fundamental harmony," he muttered. "Exquisite. Well, Peter is so faultless." It struck him suddenly that they were all conspiring to submerge him in a permanence of banality. Even the dean was, in his own affably disguised way, as preposterous as them all—"All the world is fond of lovers." God!

And yet, the face of Dean Tilden, merry but resolute in his mind, subdued him. He dropped the book of matches to the shelf and ran his palms up and down his pajama legs. "No shambles," he murmured. "Smoothly. Smoothly."

He selected from the wall the sturdiest knife and, cover-

ing his mouth to suppress the blunt joy, tip-toed to the bedroom, silently and slowly over to Caroline's bed. With a short, mirthless laugh he raised the knife and plunged it into the heaped blankets. There was no resistance and he was startled with a feverish sense of having been deceived. He groaned, then smashed his fist into the pillow. In a rage that swelled and oscillated in his head he ran about the house, groping savagely with the knife through all the closets. Then, winded, he sat down on the living room couch, rubbing his chest, where the whole excruciating sense of morning lay congested. He felt weak with hunger.

A sudden alarm shot through him and he dashed downstairs to the cellar, where the flat, stale cold forced a sob out of him. Dancing on his bare feet, he looked through the

garage door glass to see the car standing there unused, and he ran upstairs relieved, gasping, "I have you now, I have you now."

Peter climbed on to the attic, softly singing some lines from the Ducky Duddle song. In the long, still room he searched every corner, kicked over the army cot, and then left. Descending, he moaned through his teeth, "What does she want from me? What is she doing to me?"

A frenzy was burgeoning inside him. Yet something—

his remote self—told him to control it, that she must be nis remote seir—told him to control it, that she must be somewhere about. He sat at his desk, whittling away at a leg with the kitchen knife while he brought every last corner of the house methodically across his mind. He stood up when he thought of the pantry. "Caroline," he sang with sardonic tenderness, "I have found you, come out, sweet Caroline, I have you now," and he went toward the pantry in a hopping little dance, singing in falsetto:

> "It really doesn't matter How much I splash and splatter, I'm only a ducky after all."

But when he found the pantry door fast he let out a broken cry of despair. "Carrie," he wailed. "Carrie, come out!"

"First have your breakfast, dear," she called through. "Caroline, it's locked. You locked it on me! Caroline! I almost had you!"

"First breakfast, dear."

"Oh, Carrie! Everybody—everybody thinks you're an angel. If they only knew how mean! Carrie, please. For a minute, Carrie. Please!"

Caroline did not answer.

"Car-rie!" he screamed, and began to pound the door with that fist which was free of the knife. Then he bucked at the door with his shoulder. Panting, he had to quit, for the hunger was spreading acidulously out of his chest, suffusing his whole body with a chill infirmness. "Oh, Carrie," he said plaintively, "can't you please come out?"

"Darling," she said, taking her weight off the door, "right

after breakfast. Hurry up and eat, Peter. I miss you very much."

Caroline sat down on the sleeping bag and dozed lightly while the sounds of cooking began. She heard bacon frying and heard, eventually, the bulbous percolation of coffee. Later, when, after the clacking of his spoon against the plastic cup, all was quiet, she unbolted and opened the door.

Peter turned from his coffee with a penitent grin. "I

wrecked very little today," he said.

That pleased her. She carried the knife to its place on the kitchen wall. As she put a light under the coffee her thoughts were mingled between the chore of finding some unviolated sanctuary for the following morning and the encouraging notion that today Peter's compunctions would subside by noon,

THE CHILDREN OF NOAH

Richard Matheson

It was just past three A.M. when Mr. Ketchum drove past the sign that read Zachry: pop. 67. He groaned. Another in an endless string of Maine seaside towns. He closed his eyes hard a second, then opened them again and pressed down on the accelerator. The Ford surged forward under him. Maybe, with luck, he'd reach a decent motel soon. It certainly wasn't likely there'd be one in Zachry: pop. 67.

Mr. Ketchum shifted his heavy frame on the seat and stretched his legs. It had been a sour vacation. Motoring through New England's historic beauty, communing with nature and nostalgia was what he'd planned. Instead, he'd found only boredom, exhaustion and over-expense.

Mr. Ketchum was not pleased.

The town seemed fast asleep as he drove along its Main

Street. The only sound was that of the car's engine, the only sight that of his raised headbeams splaying out ahead lighting up another sign. Speed 15 Limit.

"Sure, sure," he muttered disgustedly, pressing down on the gas pedal. Three o'clock in the morning and the town fathers expected him to creep through their lousy hamlet. Mr. Ketchum watched the dark buildings rush past his window. Good-by Zachry, he thought. Farewell, pop. 67. Then the other car appeared in the rear-view mirror. About half a block behind, a sedan with a turning red specificant on its roof. He knew what kind of car it was His

spotlight on its roof. He knew what kind of car it was. His foot curled off the accelerator and he felt his heartbeat quicken. Was it possible they hadn't noticed how fast he was going?

The question was answered as the dark car pulled up to the Ford and a man in a big hat leaned out of the front window, "Pull over!" he barked.

Swallowing dryly, Mr. Ketchum eased his car over to the curb. He drew up the emergency brake, turned the ignition key and the car was still. The police car nosed in toward the curb and stopped! The right front door opened. The glare of Mr. Ketchum's headlights outlined the dark figure approaching. He felt around quickly with his left foot and stamped down on the knob, dimming the lights. He swallowed again, Damned nuisance this. Three A.M. in the middle of nowhere and a hick policeman picks him up for speeding. Mr. Ketchum gritted his teeth and waited.

The man in the dark uniform and wide-brimmed hat

leaned over into the window. "License."

Mr. Ketchum slid a shaking hand into his inside pocket and drew out his billfold. He felt around for his license. He handed it over, noticed how expressionless the face of the policeman was. He sat there quietly while the policeman held a flashlight beam on the license.

"From New Jersey."

"Yes, that . . . that's right," said Mr. Ketchum.

The policeman kept staring at the license. Mr. Ketchum stirred restlessly on the seat and pressed his lips together.
"It hasn't expired," he finally said.

He saw the dark head of the policeman lift. Then, he

gasped as the narrow circle of flashlight blinded him. He twisted his head away.

The light was gone. Mr. Ketchum blinked his watering eyes,

"Don't they read traffic signs in New Jersey?" the policeman asked.

"Why, I... You mean the sign that said p-population 67?"

"No, I don't mean that sign," said the policeman.

"Oh." Mr. Ketchum cleared his throat. "Well, that's the only sign I saw," he said.

"You're a bad driver then."

"Well, I'm-"

"The sign said the speed limit is fifteen miles an hour. You were doing fifty."

"Oh. I . . . I'm afraid I didn't see it."

"The speed limit is fifteen miles an hour whether you see it or not."

"Well . . . At—at this hour of the morning?"

"Did you see a timetable on the sign?" the policeman asked.

"No, of course not. I mean, I didn't see the sign at all."
"Didn't you?"

Mr. Ketchum felt hair prickling along the nape of his neck. "Now, now see here," he began faintly, then stopped and stared at the policeman. "May I have my license back?" he finally asked when the policeman didn't speak.

The policeman said nothing. He stood on the street, motionless.

"May I-?" Mr. Ketchum started.

"Follow our car," said the officer abruptly and strode away.

Mr. Ketchum stared at him, dumbfounded. Hey wait! he almost yelled. The officer hadn't even given him back his license. Mr. Ketchum felt a sudden coldness in his stomach.

"What is this?" he muttered as he watched the policeman getting back into his car. The police car pulled away from the curb, its roof light spinning again.

Mr. Ketchum followed.

"This is ridiculous," he said aloud. They had no right to

do this. Was this the Middle Ages? His thick lips pressed into a jaded mouth line as he followed the police car along Main Street.

Two blocks up, the police car turned. Mr. Ketchum saw his headlights splash across a glass store front. *Hand's Groceries* read the weather-worn letters.

There were no lamps on the street. It was like driving along an inky passage. Ahead, were only the three red eyes of the police car's rear lights and spotlight; behind only impenetrable blackness. The end of a perfect day, thought Mr. Ketchum; picked up for speeding in Zachry, Maine. He shook his head and groaned. Why hadn't he just spent his vacation in Newark; slept late, gone to shows, eaten, watched television?

The police car turned right at the next corner, then, a block up, turned left again and stopped. Mr. Ketchum pulled up behind it as its lights went out. There was no sense in this. This was only cheap melodrama. They could just as easily have fined him on Main Street. It was the rustic mind. Debasing someone from a big city gave them a sense of vengeful eminence.

a sense of vengeful eminence.

Mr. Ketchum waited. Well, he wasn't going to haggle. He'd pay his fine without a word and depart. He jerked up the hand brake. Suddenly he frowned, realizing that they could fine him anything they wanted. They could charge him \$500 if they chose! The heavy man had heard stories about small town police, about the absolute authority they wielded. He cleared his throat viscidly. Well, this is absurd, he thought. What foolish imagination.

The policeman opened the door.

"Get out," he said.

There was no light in the street or in any building Mr.

There was no light in the street or in any building. Mr. Ketchum swallowed. All he could really see was the black figure of the policeman.

figure of the policeman.

"Is this the—station?" he asked.

"Turn out your lights and come on," said the policeman.

Mr. Ketchum pushed in the chrome knob and got out.

The policeman slammed the door. It made a loud, echoing noise; as if they were inside an unlighted warehouse instead of on a street. Mr. Ketchum glanced upward. The illusion

was complete. There were neither stars nor moon. Sky and earth ran together blackly.

The policeman's hard fingers clamped on his arm. Mr. Ketchum lost balance a moment, then caught himself and fell into a quick stride beside the tall figure of the policeman.

"Dark here," he heard himself saying in a voice not entirely familiar.

The policeman said nothing. The other policeman fell into step on the other side of him. Mr. Ketchum told him-

sep on the other side of him. Mr. Ketchum told himself: These damned hicktown nazis were doing their best to intimidate him. Well, they wouldn't succeed.

Mr. Ketchum sucked in a breath of the damp, sea-smelling air and let it shudder out. A crumby town of 67 and they have two policemen patrolling the streets at three in the morning. Ridiculous.

He almost tripped over the step when they reached it. The policeman on his left side caught him under the elbow. "Thank you," Mr. Ketchum muttered automatically. The policeman didn't reply. Mr. Ketchum licked his lips. Cordial oaf, he thought and managed a fleeting smile to himself. There, that was better. No point in letting this get to him.

He blinked as the door was pulled open and, despite himself, felt a sigh of relief filtering through him. It was a police station all right. There was the podiumed desk, there a bulletin board, there a black, pot-bellied stove unlit, there a scarred bench against the wall, there a door, there the floor covered with a cracked and grimy linoleum that had once been green.

"Sit down and wait," said the first policeman.

Mr. Ketchum looked at his lean, angled face, his swarthy skin. There was no division in his eyes between iris and pupil. It was all one darkness. He wore a dark uniform that fitted him loosely.

Mr. Ketchum didn't get to see the other policeman because both of them went into the next room. He stood watching the closed door a moment. Should he leave, drive away? No, they'd have his address on the license. Then again, they might actually want him to attempt to leave. You never knew what sort of warped minds these smalltown police had. They might even—shoot him down if he tried to leave.

Mr. Ketchum sat heavily on the bench. No, he was letting imagination run amuck. This was merely a small town on the Maine seacoast and they were merely going to fine him for—

Well, why didn't they fine him then? What was all this play-acting? The heavy man pressed his lips together. Very well, let them play it the way they chose. This was better than driving anyway. He closed his eyes. I'll just rest them, he thought.

After a few moments he opened them again. It was damned quiet. He looked around the dimly lit room. The walls were dirty and bare except for a clock and one picture that hung behind the desk. It was a painting—more likely a reproduction—of a bearded man. The hat he wore was a seaman's hat. Probably one of Zachry's ancient mariners. No; probably not even that. Probably a Sears Roebuck print: Bearded Seaman.

Mr. Ketchum grunted to himself. Why a police station should have such a print was beyond him. Except, of course, that Zachry was on the Atlantic. Probably its main source of income was from fishing. Anyway, what did it matter? Mr. Ketchum lowered his gaze.

In the next room he could hear the muffled voices of the two policemen. He tried to hear what they were saying but he couldn't. He glared at the closed door. Come on, will you? he thought. He looked at the clock again. Three twenty-two. He checked it with his wrist watch. About right. The door opened and the two policemen came out.

One of them left. The remaining one—the one who had

One of them left. The remaining one—the one who had taken Mr. Ketchum's license—went over to the raised desk and switched on the gooseneck lamp over it, drew a big ledger out of the top drawer and started writing in it. At last, thought Mr. Ketchum.

A minute passed.

"I—" Mr. Ketchum cleared his throat. "I beg your—" His voice broke off as the cold gaze of the policeman raised from the ledger and fixed on him.

"Are you . . . That is, am I to be-fined now?"

The policeman looked back at the ledger. "Wait," he said.

"But it's past three in the mor—" Mr. Ketchum caught himself. He tried to look coldly belligerent. "Very well," he said, curtly, "Would you kindly tell me how long it will be?"

The policeman kept writing in the ledger. Mr. Ketchum sat there stiffly, looking at him. *Insufferable*, he thought. This was the last damned time he'd ever go within a hundred miles of this damned New England.

The policeman looked up, "Married?" he asked.

Mr. Ketchum stared at him.

"Are you married?"

"No, I—it's on the license," Mr. Ketchum blurted. He felt a tremor of pleasure at his retort and, at the same time, an impaling of strange dread at talking back to the man.

"Family in Jersey?" asked the policeman.

"Yes. I mean no. Just a sister in Wiscons-"

Mr. Ketchum didn't finish. He watched the policeman write it down. He wished he could rid himself of this queasy distress.

"Employed?" asked the policeman.

Mr. Ketchum swallowed. "Well," he said, "I—I have no one particular em—"

"Unemployed," said the policeman.

"Not at all; not at all," said Mr. Ketchum stiffly, "I'm a—a free-lance salesman. I purchase stocks and lots from . . ." His voice faded as the policeman looked at him. Mr. Ketchum swallowed three times before the lump stayed down. He realized that he was sitting on the very edge of the bench as if poised to spring to the defense of his life. He forced himself to settle back. He drew in a deep breath. Relax, he told himself. Deliberately, he closed his eyes. There. He'd catch a few winks. May as well make the best of this, he thought.

The room was still except for the tinny, resonant ticking of the clock. Mr. Ketchum felt his heart pulsing with slow, dragging beats. He shifted his heavy frame uncomfortably on the hard bench, Ridiculous, he thought,

Mr. Ketchum opened his eyes and frowned. That damned picture. You could almost imagine that bearded seaman was looking at you.

Almost . . .

"Tih!"

Mr. Ketchum's mouth snapped shut, his eyes jerked open, irises flaring. He started forward on the bench, then shrank back.

A swarthy-faced man was bent over him, hand on Mr. Ketchum's shoulder.

"Yes?" Mr. Ketchum asked, heart jolting.

The man smiled.

"Chief Shipley," he said, "Would you come into my office?"

"Oh," said Mr. Ketchum, "Yes. Yes."

He straightend up, grimacing at the stiffness in his back muscles. The man stepped back and Mr. Ketchum pushed up with a grunt, his eyes moving automatically to the wall clock. It was a few minutes past four.

"Look," he said, not yet awake enough to feel intimidated, "Why can't I pay my fine and leave?"

Shipley's smile was without warmth.

"We run things a little different here in Zachry," he said.

They entered a small, musty-smelling office.
"Sit down," said the chief, walking around the desk while
Mr. Ketchum settled into a straight-backed chair that creaked.

"I don't understand why I can't pay my fine and leave."
"In due course," said Shipley.
"But—" Mr. Ketchum didn't finish. Shipley's smile gave the impression of being no more than a diplomatically veiled warning. Gritting his teeth, the heavy man cleared his throat and waited while the chief looked down at a sheet of paper on his desk. He noticed how poorly Shipley's suit fitted. Yokels, the heavy man thought, don't even know how to dress.

"I see you're not married," Shipley said.

Mr. Ketchum said nothing. Give them a taste of their own no-talk medicine he decided.

"Have you friends in Maine?" Shipley asked.

"Why?"

"Just routine questions, Mr. Ketchum," said the chief. "Your only family is a sister in Wisconsin?"

Mr. Ketchum looked at him without speaking. What had all this to do with a traffic violation?

"Sir?" asked Shipley.

"I already told you; that is, I told the officer. I don't see—"

"Here on business?"

Mr. Ketchum's mouth opened soundlessly.

"Why are you asking me all these questions?" he asked. Stop shaking! he ordered himself furiously.

"Routine. Are you here on business?"

"I'm on my vacation. And I don't see this at all! I've been patient up to now but, blast it, I demand to be fined and released!"

"I'm afraid that's impossible," said the chief.

Mr. Ketchum's mouth fell open. It was like waking up from a nightmare and discovering that the dream was still going on. "I—I don't understand," he said.

"You'll have to appear before the judge."

"But that's ridiculous."

"Is it?"

"Yes, it is. I'm a citizen of the United States. I demand my rights."

Chief Shipley's smile faded.

"You limited those rights when you broke our law," he said. "Now you have to pay for it as we declare."

Mr. Ketchum stared blankly at the man. He realized that

Mr. Ketchum stared blankly at the man. He realized that he was completely in their hands. They could fine him anything they pleased or put him in jail indefinitely. All these questions he'd been asked; he didn't know why they'd asked them but he knew that his answers revealed him as almost rootless, with no one who cared if he lived or—

The room seemed to totter. Sweat broke out on his body. "You can't do this," he said; but it was not an argument.

"You'll have to spend the night in jail," said the chief. "In the morning you'll see the judge."

"But this is ridiculous!" Mr. Ketchum burst out, "Ridicu-

lous!"

He caught himself. "I'm entitled to one phone call," he said, quickly, "I can make a telephone call. It's my legal right."

"It would be," said Shipley, "if there was any telephone

service in Zachry."

When they took him to his cell, Mr. Ketchum saw a painting in the hall. It was of the same bearded seaman. Mr. Ketchum didn't notice if the eyes followed him or not.

Mr. Ketchum stirred. A look of confusion lined his sleep-numbed face. There was a clanking sound behind him; he reared up on his elbow.

A policeman came into the cell and set down a covered

tray.

"Breakfast," he said. He was older than the other policemen, even older than Shipley. His hair was iron-grey, his cleanly-shaven face seamed around the mouth and eyes. His uniform fitted him badly.

As the policeman started re-locking the door, Mr. Ket-

chum asked, "When do I see the judge?"

The policeman looked at him a moment. "Don't know," he said and turned away.

"Wait!" Mr. Ketchum called out.

The receding footsteps of the policeman sounded hollowly on the cement floor. Mr. Ketchum kept staring at the spot where the policeman had been. Veils of sleep peeled from his mind.

He sat up, rubbed deadened fingers over his eyes and held up his wrist. Seven minutes past nine. The heavy man grimaced. By God, they were going to hear about this! His nostrils twitched. He sniffed, started to reach for the tray; then pulled back his hand.

"No," he muttered. He wouldn't eat their damned food. He sat there stiffly, doubled at the waist, glaring at his

sock-covered feet.

His stomach grumbled uncooperatively.

"Well," he muttered after a minute. Swallowing, he reached over and lifted off the tray cover.

reached over and litted off the tray cover.

He couldn't check the oh of surprise that passed his lips.

The three eggs were fried in butter, bright yellow eyes focused straight on the ceiling, ringed about with long, crisp lengths of meaty, corrugated bacon. Next to them was a platter of four, book-thick slices of toast spread with creamy butter swirls, a paper cup of jelly leaning on them. There was a tall glass of frothy orange juice, a dish of strawberries bleeding in alabaster cream. Finally, a tall pot from which wavered the pungent and unmistakable fragrance of freshly-brewed coffee freshly-brewed coffee.

Mr. Ketchum picked up the glass of orange juice. He took a few drops in his mouth and rolled them experimentally over his tongue. The citric acid tingled deliciously on his warm tongue. He swallowed. If it was poisoned it was by a master's hand. Saliva tided in his mouth. He suddenly remembered that, just before he was picked up, he'd been meaning to stop at a cafe for food.

While he ate, warily but decidedly, Mr. Ketchum tried to figure out the motivation behind this magnificent breakfort

fast.

It was the rural mind again. They regretted their blunder. It seemed a flimsy notion, but there it was. The food was superb. One thing you had to say for these New Englanders; they could cook like a son-of-a-gun. Breakfast for Mr. Ketchum was usually a sweet roll heated, and coffee. Since he was a boy in his father's house he hadn't eaten a breakfast like this.

He was just putting down his third cup of well-creamed coffee when footsteps sounded in the hall. Mr. Ketchum smiled. Good timing, he thought. He stood.

Chief Shipley stopped outside the cell. "Had your break-

fast?"

Mr. Ketchum nodded. If the chief expected thanks he was in for a sad surprise. Mr. Ketchum picked up his coat. The chief didn't move.

"Well . . . ?" said Mr. Ketchum after a few minutes. He tried to put it coldly and authoritatively. It came out somewhat less.

Chief Shipley looked at him expressionlessly. Mr. Ketchum felt his breath faltering.

"May I inquire—?" he began.

"Judge isn't in yet," said Shipley.
"But . . ." Mr. Ketchum didn't know what to say.
"Just came in to tell you," said Shipley. He turned and was gone.

Mr. Ketchum was furious. He looked down at the remains of his breakfast as if they contained the answer to this situation. He drummed a fist against his thigh. Insufferable! What were they trying to do—intimidate him? Well, by God-

—they were succeeding.

Mr. Ketchum walked over to the bars. He looked up and down the empty hallway. There was a cold knot inside him. The food seemed to have turned to dry lead in his stomach. He banged the heel of his right hand once against the cold bar. By God! By God!

It was two o'clock in the afternoon when Chief Shipley and the old policeman came to the cell door. Wordlessly the policeman opened it. Mr. Ketchum stepped into the hall-way and waited again, putting on his coat while the door was relocked.

He walked in short, inflexible strides between the two men, not even glancing at the picture on the wall. "Where are we going?" he asked.

"Judge is sick," said Shipley. "We're taking you out to his house to pay your fine."

Mr. Ketchum sucked in his breath. He wouldn't argue with them; he just wouldn't. "All right," he said, "If that's the way you have to do it."

"Only way to do it," said the chief, looking ahead, his

face an expressionless mask.

Mr. Ketchum pressed down the corners of a slim smile.

This was better. It was almost over now. He'd pay his fine and clear out.

It was foggy outside. Sea mist rolled across the street like driven smoke. Mr. Ketchum pulled on his hat and shud-dered. The damp air seemed to filter through his flesh and

dew itself around his bones. Nasty day, he thought. He moved down the steps, eyes searching for his Ford.

The old policeman opened the back door of the police car and Shipley gestured toward the inside.

"What about my car?" Mr. Ketchum asked.

"We'll come back here after you see the judge," said Shipley.

"Oh. I . . ."

Mr. Ketchum hesitated. Then he bent over and squeezed into the car, dropping down on the back seat. He shivered as the cold of the leather pierced trouser wool. He edged over as the chief got in.

The policeman slammed the door shut. Again that hollow sound, like the slamming of a coffin lid in a crypt. Mr. Ketchum grimaced at the simile.

The policeman got into the car and Mr. Ketchum heard the motor cough into liquid life. He sat there breathing slowly and deeply while the policeman out-choked warmth into the engine. He looked out the window at his left.

The fog was just like smoke. They might have been parked in a burning garage. Except for that bone-gripping dampness. Mr. Ketchum cleared his throat. He heard the chief shift on the seat beside him.

"Cold," Mr. Ketchum said, automatically,

The chief said nothing.

Mr. Ketchum pressed back as the car pulled away from the curb, U-turned and started slowly down the fog-veiled street. He listened to the crisp sibilance of tires on wet paving, the rhythmic swish of the wipers as they cleared off circle segments on the misted windshield.

After a moment he looked at his watch. Almost three. Half a day shot in this blasted Zachry.

He looked out through the window again as the town ghosted past. He thought he saw brick buildings along the curb but he wasn't sure. He looked down at his white hands, then glanced over at Shipley. The chief was sitting stiffly upright on the seat, staring straight ahead. Mr. Ketchum swallowed. The air seemed stagnant in his lungs.

On Main Street the fog seemed thinner. Probably the sea

breezes, Mr. Ketchum thought. He looked up and down the

street. All the stores and offices looked closed. He glanced at the other side of the street. Same thing,

"Where is everybody?" he asked.

"What?"

"I said where is everybody?"

"Home," the chief said.

"But it's Wednesday," said Mr. Ketchum, "Aren't vourstores open?"

"Bad day," said Shipley. "Not worth it."

Mr. Ketchum glanced at the sallow-faced chief, then withdrew his look hastily. He felt cold premonition spidering in his stomach again. What in God's name is this? he asked himself. It had been bad enough in the cell. Here, tracking through this sea of mist, it was altogether worse.

"That's right," he heard his nerve-sparked voice saving. "There are only sixty-seven people, aren't there?"

The chief said nothing.

"How . . . h-how old is Zachry?"

In the silence he heard the chief's finger joints crackle dryly.

"Hundred fifty years," said Shipley.
"That old," said Mr. Ketchum. He swallowed with effort. His throat hurt a little. Come on, he told himself, Relax.

"How come it's named Zachry?" The words spilled out. uncontrolled.

"Noah Zachry founded it," said the chief.

"Oh. Oh. I see. I guess that picture in the station . . ."

"That's right," said Shipley.

Mr. Ketchum blinked. So that was Noah Zachry, founder of this town they were driving through-

-block after block after block. There was a cold, heavy sinking in Mr. Ketchum's stomach as the idea came to him.

In a town so big, why were there only 67 people?

He opened his mouth to ask it, then couldn't. The answer might be wrong.

"Why are there only-" The words came out anyway before he could stop them. His body jolted at the shock of hearing them.

"What?"

"Nothing, nothing. That is—" Mr. Ketchum drew in a shaking breath. No help for it. He had to know.
"How come there are only sixty-seven?"
"They go away," said Shipley.
Mr. Ketchum blinked. The answer came as such an anti-

climax. His brow furrowed. Well, what else? he asked himself defensively. Remote, antiquated, Zachry would have little attraction for its younger generations. Mass gravitation to more interesting places would be inevitable.

The heavy man settled back against the seat. Of course. Think how much *I* want to leave the dump, he thought, and

I don't even live here

His gaze slid forward through the windshield, caught by something. A banner hanging across the street. BARBECUE TONIGHT. Celebration, he thought. They probably went berserk every fortnight and had themselves a rip-roaring taffy pull or fishnet-mending orgy.

"Who was Zachry anyway?" he asked. The silence was

getting to him again.
"Sea captain," said the chief.

"Whaled in the South Seas," said Shipley.

Abruptly, Main Street ended. The police car veered left onto a dirt road. Out the window Mr. Ketchum watched onto a dirt road. Out the window Mr. Ketchum watched shadowy bushes glide by. There was only the sound of the engine laboring in second and of gravelly dirt spitting out from under the tires. Where does the judge live, on a mountain top? He shifted his weight and grunted.

The fog began thinning now. Mr. Ketchum could see grass and trees, all with a greyish cast to them. The car turned and faced the ocean. Mr. Ketchum looked down at the country of the

the opaque carpet of fog below. The car kept turning. It faced the crest of the hill again.

Mr. Ketchum coughed softly. "Is . . . uh, that the judge's house up there?" he asked.

"Yes," the chief answered.

"High," said Mr. Ketchum.

The car kept turning on the narrow, dirt road, now facing the ocean, now Zachry, now the bleak, hill-topping

house. It was a greyish-white house, three stories high, at each end of it the crag of an attic tower. It looked as old as Zachry itself, thought Mr. Ketchum. The car turned. He was facing the fog-crusted ocean again.

was facing the fog-crusted ocean again.

Mr. Ketchum looked down at his hands. Was it a deception of the light or were they really shaking? He tried to swallow but there was no moisture in his throat and he coughed instead, rattlingly. This is so *stupid*, he thought; there's no reason in the world for this. He saw his hands clench together. For some reason he thought of the banner across the Main Street.

The car was moving up the final rise toward the house now. Mr. Ketchum felt his breaths shortening. I don't want to go, he heard someone saying in his mind. He felt a sudden urge to shove out the door and run. Muscles tensed emphatically.

emphatically.

He closed his eyes. For God's sake, stop it! he yelled at himself. There was nothing wrong about this but his distorted interpretation of it. These were modern times. Things had explanations and people had reasons. Zachry's people had a reason too; a narrow distrust of city dwellers. This was their socially acceptable revenge. That made sense. After all—

The car stopped. The chief pushed open the door on his side and got out. The policeman reached back and opened the other door for Mr. Ketchum. The heavy man found one of his legs and foot to be numb. He had to clutch at the top of the door for support. He stamped the foot on the ground.

"Went to sleep," he said,

Neither of the men answered. Mr. Ketchum glanced at the house; he squinted. Had he seen a dark green drape slip back into place? He winced and made a startled noise as his arm was touched and the chief gestured toward the house. The three men started toward it.

"I, uh . . . don't have much cash on me, I'm afraid," he said, "I hope a traveler's check will be all right."

"Yes," said the chief.

They went up the porch steps, stopped in front of the door. The policeman turned a big, brass key-head and Mr.

Ketchum heard a bell ring tinnily inside. He stood looking through the door curtains. Inside, he could make out the skeletal form of a hat rack. He shifted weight and the boards creaked under him. The policeman rang the bell again.

"Maybe he's—too sick," Mr. Ketchum suggested faintly. Neither of the men looked at him. Mr. Ketchum felt his muscles tensing. He glanced back over his shoulder. Could they catch him if he ran for it?

He looked back disgustedly. You pay your fine and you leave, he explained patiently to himself. That's all; you pay vour fine and you leave.

Inside the house there was dark movement, Mr. Ketchum looked up, startled in spite of himself. A tall woman was approaching the door.

The door opened. The woman was thin, wearing an ankle-length black dress with a white oval pin at her throat. Her face was swarthy, seamed with thread-like lines. Mr. Ketchum slipped off his hat automatically.

"Come in." said the woman.

Mr. Ketchum stepped into the hall.

"You can leave your hat there," said the woman pointing toward the hat rack that looked like a tree ravaged by flame. Mr. Ketchum dropped his hat over one of the dark pegs. As he did, his eye was caught by a large painting near the foot of the staircase. He started to speak but the woman said, "This way."

They started down the hall. Mr. Ketchum stared at the painting as they passed it.

"Who's that woman," he asked, "standing next to Zachry?"

"His wife," said the chief.
"But she—"

Mr. Ketchum's voice broke off suddenly as he heard a whimper rising in his throat. Shocked, he drowned it out with a sudden clearing of the throat. He felt ashamed of himself. Still . . . Zachry's wife?

The woman opened a door. "Wait in here," she said.

The heavy man walked in. He turned to say something to the chief. Just in time to see the door shut.

"Say, uh . . ." He walked to the door and put his hand on the knob. It didn't turn.

He frowned. He ignored the pile-driver beats of his heart. "Hey, what's going on?" Cheerily bluff, his voice echoed off the walls. Mr. Ketchum turned and looked around. The room was empty. It was a square, empty room.

He turned back to the door, lips moving as he sought

the proper words.

"Okay," he said, abruptly, "It's very—" He twisted the knob sharply. "Okay it's a very funny joke." By God, he was mad. "I've taken all I'm—"

He whirled at the sound, teeth bared.

There was nothing. The room was still empty. He looked around dizzily. What was that sound? A dull sound, like water rushing.

"Hey," he said automatically. He turned to the door. "Hey!" he yelled, "cut it out! Who do you think you are anyway?"

He turned on weakening legs. The sound was louder. Mr. Ketchum ran a hand over his brow. It was covered with sweat. It was warm in there.

"Okay, okay," he said, "It's a fine joke but—"
Before he could go on, his voice had corkscrewed into an awful, wracking sob. Mr. Ketchum staggered a little. He stared at the room. He whirled and fell back against the door. His outflung hand touched the wall and jerked away.

It was hot.

It was hot.

"Huh?" he asked, incredulously.

This was impossible. This was a joke. This was their deranged idea of a little joke. It was a game they played. Scare The City Slicker was the name of the game.

"Okay!" he yelled. "Okay! It's funny, it's very funny! Now let me out of here or there's going to be trouble!"

He pounded at the door. Suddenly he kicked it. The room was getting hotter. It was almost as hot as an—

Mr. Ketchum was petrified. His mouth sagged open.

The questions they'd asked him. The loose way the clothes fit everyone he'd met. The rich food they'd given him to eat. The empty streets. The savage-like swarthy coloring of the men, of the woman. The way they'd all

looked at him. And the woman in the painting, Noah Zachry's wife—a native woman with her teeth filed to a point. The banner:

BARBECUE TONIGHT

Mr. Ketchum screamed. He kicked and pounded on the door. He threw his heavy body against it. He shrieked at the people outside.

"Let me out! Let me out! LET . . . ME . . . OUT!!"

The worst part about it was, he just couldn't believe it was really happening.

THE IDOL OF THE FLIES

Jane Rice

Pruitt watched a fly on the corner of the table. He held himself very still. The fly cleaned its wings with short, back-stroke motions of its legs. It looked, Pruitt thought, like Crippled Harry—cook's husband. He hated Crippled Harry. He hated him almost as much as he hated Aunt Mona. But he hated Miss Bittner most of all.

He lifted his head and bared his teeth at the nape of Miss Bittner's neck. He hated the way she stood there erasing the blackboard in great, sweeping circles. He hated the way her shoulder blades poked out. He hated the big horn comb thrust into her thin hair—thrust not quite far enough—so that some of the hair flapped. And he hated the way she arranged it around her sallow face and low on her neck, to conceal the little button that nestled in one large-lobed ear. The button and the narrow black cord that ran down the back of her dress under her starched collar.

He liked the button and the cord. He liked them because Miss Bittner hated them. She pretended she didn't care

about being deaf. But she did. And she pretended she liked him. But she didn't.

He made her nervous. It was easy. All he had to do was open his eyes wide and stare at her without batting. It was delightfully simple. Too simple. It wasn't fun any more. He was glad he had found out about the flies.

Miss Bittner placed the eraser precisely in the center of the blackboard runnel, dusted her hands and turned toward Pruitt. Pruitt opened his eves quite wide and gimleted her with an unblinking stare.

Miss Bittner cleared her throat nervously. "That will be

all, Pruitt. Tomorrow we will begin on derivatives."
"Yes, Miss Bittner," Pruitt said loudly, meticulously forming the words with his lips.

Miss Bittner flushed. She straightened the collar of her dress.

"Your aunt said you might take a swim."

"Yes, Miss Bittner."

"Good afternoon, Pruitt, Tea at five."

"Yes, Miss Bittner. Good afternoon, Miss Bittner." Pruitt lowered his gaze to a point three inches below Miss Bittner's knees. He allowed a faint expression of controlled surprise to wrinkle his forehead.

Involuntarily, Miss Bittner glanced down. Quick as a flash, Pruitt swept his hand across the table and scooped up the fly. When Miss Bittner again raised her head, Pruitt was regarding her blandly. He arose.
"There's some lemonade on top of the back porch ice-

box. Can I have some?"

"May I have some, Pruitt."

"May I have some?"

"Yes, Pruitt, you may."

Pruitt crossed the room to the door.

"Pruitt--"

Pruitt stopped, swiveled slowly on his heel and stared unwinkingly at his tutor, "Yes, Miss Bittner?"

"Let's remember not to slam the screen door, shall we? It disturbs your auntie, you know." Miss Bittner twitched her pale lips into what she mistakenly believed was the smile of a friendly conspirator.

Pruitt gazed at her steadily. "Yes, Miss Bittner." "That's fine," said Clara Bittner with false heartiness.

"Is that all, Miss Bittner?"

"Yes, Pruitt."

Pruitt, without relaxing his basilisklike contemplation of his unfortunate tutor, counted up to twelve, then he turned and quitted the room.

Clara Bittner looked at the empty doorway a long while and then she shuddered. Had she been pressed for an explanation of that shudder she couldn't have given a satisfactory answer. In all probability, she would have said, with a vague conciliatory gesture, "I don't know. I think, perhaps, it's a bit difficult for a child to warm up to a teacher." And, no doubt, she would have added brightly, "The psychology of the thing, you know."

Miss Bittner was a stanch defender of psychology. She

had taken a summer course in it—ten years ago—and had, as she was fond of repeating, received the highest grades in the class. It never occurred to Miss Bittner that this was due to her aptitude at memorizing whole paragraphs and being able to transpose these onto her test papers without ever having digested the kernels of thought contained therein.

Miss Bittner stooped and unlaced one oxford. She breathed a sigh of relief. She sat erect, pulled down her dress in back and then felt with her fingertips the rubbery, black cord dangling against her neck. Miss Bittner sighed again. A buzzing at one of the windows claimed her attention.

She went to a cupboard which yielded up a wire fly swatter. Grasping this militantly, she strode to the window, drew back, closed her eyes, and swatted. The fly, badly battered, dropped to the sill, lay on its wings, its legs curled.

She unhooked the screen and with the end of the swatter

delicately urged the corpse outside.
"Ugh," said Miss Bittner. And had Miss Bittner been pressed for an explanation of that *ugh* she, likewise, would have been at a loss for a satisfactory answer. It was strange how she felt about flies. They affected her much as rattle-snakes would have. It wasn't that they were germy, or that their eyes were a reddish orange and, so she had heard,

reflected everything in the manner of prisms; it wasn't that they had the odious custom of regurgitating a drop of their last meal before beginning on a new one; it wasn't the crooked hairy legs, nor the probing proboscis; it was—well, it was just the creatures themselves. Possibly, Miss Bittner might have said, simpering to show that she really didn't mean it, "I have flyophobia."

The truth was, she did. She was afraid of them. Deathly afraid. As some people are afraid of inclosed areas, as others are afraid of height, so Miss Bittner was afraid of flies. Childishly, senselessly, but horribly, afraid.

She returned the swatter to the cupboard and forthwith scrubbed her hands thoroughly at the sink. It was odd, she

thought, how many flies she had encountered lately. It almost seemed as if someone were purposely diverting a channel of flies her way. She smiled to herself at this foolish whimsy, wiped her hands and tidied her hair. Now, for some of that lemonade. She was pleased that Pruitt had mentioned it. If he hadn't, she might not have known it was there and she did so love lemonade

Pruitt stood at the head of the stairwell. He worked his jaws convulsively, then he pursed his mouth, leaned far over the polished banister and spat. The globule of spittle elongated into a pear-shaped tear and flattened with a wet smack on the floor below.

Pruitt went on down the stairs. He could feel the fly bumbling angrily in its hot, moist prison. He put his tightly curled hand to his lips and blew into the tunnel made by his thumb and forefinger. The fly clung for dear life to his creased palm.

At the foot of the stairs Pruitt paused long enough to squeeze each one of the tiny green balls on the ends of the fern that was potted in an intricate and artistic copper holder.

Then he went through a hallway into the kitchen.

"Give me a glass," he said to the ample-bosomed woman
who sat on a stool picking nut meats and putting them into a glass bowl.

The woman heaved berself to her feet.

"'Please' won't hurt you," the woman said.

"I don't have to say 'please' to you. You're the help."

The cook put her hands on her hips. "What you need is

a thrashing," she said grimly. "A good, sound thrashing."

By way of reply, Pruitt snatched the paper sack of cracked hulls and deliberately up-ended the bag into the howl of nut meats.

The woman made a futile grab. Her heavy face grew suffused with a wave of rich color. She opened her hand and brought it up in a swinging arc.

Pruitt planted his feet firmly on the linoleum and said low, "I'll scream. You know what that'll do to aunt."

The woman held her hand poised so for a second and

then let it fall to her aproned side. "You brat." she hissed: "you sneaking, pink-eyed brat!"

"Give me a glass."

The woman reached up on a shelf of the cabinet, took down a glass and wordlessly handed it to the boy.
"I don't want that one," Pruitt said, "I want that one."

He pointed to the glass' identical twin on the topmost shelf.

Silently, the woman padded across the floor and pushed a short kitchen ladder over to the cabinet. Silently, she climbed it. Silently, she handed down the designated glass.

Pruitt accepted it. "I'm going to tell Aunt Mona you took vour shoes off."

The woman climbed down the ladder, put it away and returned to the bowl.

"Harry is a dirty you-know-what," Pruitt said. The woman went on lifting out the nut hulls.

"He stinks."

The woman went on lifting out the nut hulls. "So do you," finished Pruitt. He waited.

The woman went on lifting out the nut hulls.

The boy took his glass and repaired to the back porch. It spoiled the fun when they didn't talk back. Cook was "on to" him. But she wouldn't complain. Aunt Mona let them stay through the winter rent free with nobody but themselves to see to and Harry was a cripple and couldn't make a living. She wouldn't dast complain.

Pruitt lifted the pitcher of lemonade from the lid of the

icebox and poured himself a glassful. He drank half of it and let the rest dribble along a crack, holding the glass close to the floor so it wouldn't make a trickling noise. When it dried it would be sweet and sticky. Lots of flies.

dried it would be sweet and sticky. Lots of flies.

He relaxed his hand ever so slightly and dexterously extricated his shopworn captive. It hummed furiously. Pruitt pulled off one of its wings and dropped the mutilated insect into the lemonade. It kicked ineffectually, was quiet, kicked again, and was quiet—drifting on the surface of the liquid, sagging to one side, its remaining wing outstretched like a useless sail.

The boy caught it and pushed it under. "I christen you Miss Bittner," he said. He released his hold and the fly popped to the top—a piece of lemon pulp on its back. It kicked again—feebly—and was quiet.

Pruitt replaced the lemonade and opened the screen door.

Pruitt replaced the lemonade and opened the screen door. He pulled it so that the spring twanged protestingly. He let go and leaped down the steps. The door came to with a mighty bang behind him. *That* was the finish of Aunt Mona's nap.

He crouched on his haunches and listened. A cloud shadow floated across the grass. A butterfly teetered uncertainly on a waxy leaf, and fluttered away following an erratic air trail of its own. A June bug drummed through the warm afternoon, its armored belly a shiny bottle-green streak in the sunlight. Pruitt crumbled the cone of an ant hill and watched the excited maneuvers of its inhabitants.

There was the slow drag of footsteps somewhere above—the opening of a shutter. Pruitt grinned. His ears went up and back with the broadness of it. Cook would puff up two flights of stairs "out of the goodness of her heart," Aunt Mona said—"out of dumbness," if you asked him. Whyn't she let "Miss Mona" fill her own bloody icebag? There'd be time to go in and mix the nut shells up again. But no, he might run into Miss Bittner beating a thirsty course to the lemonade. She might guess about the fly. Besides he'd dallied too long as it was. He had business to attend to. Serious business.

He got up, stretched, scrunched his heel on the ant hill and walked away in the direction of the bathhouse.

Twice he halted to shy stones at a plump robin and once he froze into a statue as there was a movement in the path before him. His quick eyes fastened on a toad squatted in the dust, its bulgy sides going in and out, in and out, in and out, like a miniature bellows. Stealthily, Pruitt broke off a twig. In and out, in and out, in and out. Pruitt eased forward. In and out, in and out, in and out. He could see its toes spread far apart, the dappling of spots on its cool, froggy skin. In and out, in and out, the leg muscles tensed as the toad prepared to make another hop. Pantherlike, Pruitt leaped, his hand descending. The toad emitted an agonized, squeaking scream.

Pruitt stood up and looked at the toad with amusement. The twig protruded from its sloping back. In and out, in and out went the toad's sides. In—and out, in—and out. It essayed an unstable hop, leaving a darkish stain in its wake. Again it hopped. The twig remained stanchly upright. The third hop was shorter. Barely its own length. Pruitt nosed it over into the grass with his shoe. In—and—out went the toad's sides, in—and—out, in—and—out, in—

Pruitt walked on.

The crippled man mending his fishing net on the wooden pier sensed his approaching footsteps. With as much haste as his wracked spine would permit, the man got to his feet. Pruitt heard the scrambling and quickened his pace.

"Hello," he said innocently.

The man bobbed his head. "'Do, Mr. Pruitt."

"Mending your nets?"

"Yes, Mr. Pruitt."

"I guess the dock is a good place to do it."
"Yes, Mr. Pruitt." The man licked his tongue across his lips and his eyes made rapid sortees to the right and left, as if seeking a means of escape.

Pruitt scraped his shoe across the wooden planking. "Excepting that it gets fish scales all over everything," he said softly, "and I don't *like* fish scales."

The man's Adam's apple jerked up and down as he swallowed thrice in rapid succession. He wiped his hands on his pants.

"I said I don't like fish scales."

"Yes, Mr. Pruitt, I didn't mean to-"

"So I guess maybe I better fix it so there won't be any fish scales any more."

"Mr. Pruitt, please, I didn't-" His voice petered out as the boy picked up a corner of the net.

"Not ever any more fish scales," said Pruitt.

"Don't pull it," the man begged, "it'll snag on the dock."

"I won't snag it," Pruitt said; "I wouldn't snag it for anything." He smiled at Harry. "Because if I just snagged it, you'd just mend it again and then there'd be more fish scales, and I don't like fish scales." Bunching the net in his fists, he dragged it to the edge of the dock. "So I'll just throw it in the water and then I guess there won't ever be any more fish scales."

Harry's jaw went slack with shocked disbelief, "Mr. Pruitt-" he began.

"Like this," said Pruitt. He held the net out at arm's length over the pier and relinquished his clasp.

With an inarticulate cry the man threw himself awkwardly on the planking in a vain attempt to retrieve his slowly vanishing property.

"Now there won't ever be any more fish scales," Pruitt said. "Not ever any more."

Harry hefted himself to his knees. His face was white. For one dull, weighted minute he looked at his tormentor. Then he struggled to his feet and limped away without a word.

Pruitt considered his deformed posture with the eye of a connoisseur. "Harry is a hunchback," he sang after him in a lilting childish treble, "Harry is a hunchback, Harry is a hunchhack."

The man limped on, one shoulder dipping sharply with each successive step, his coarse shirt stretched over his misshapen back. A bend in the path hid him from view.

Pruitt pushed open the door of the bathhouse and went inside. He closed the door behind him and bolted it. He waited until his eyes had become accustomed to the semigloom, whereupon he went over to a cot against the wall, lifted up its faded chintz spread, felt underneath and pulled out two boxes. He sat down and delved into their contents.

From the first he produced a section of a bread board, four pegs, and six half-burned birthday candles screwed into nibbled-looking pink candy rosettes. The bread board he placed on top the pegs, the candles he arranged in a semicircle. He surveyed the result with squint-eyed approval.

From the second box he removed a grotesque object composed of coal tar. It perched shakily on pipestem legs, two strips of Cellophane were pasted to its flanks and a black rubber band dangled downward from its head in which was embedded—one on each side—a red cinnamon

drop.

The casual observer would have seen in this sculpture a child's crude efforts to emulate the characteristics of the common housefly. The casual observer—if he had been inclined to go on with his observing—also would have seen that Pruitt was in a "mood." He might even have observed aloud, "That child looks positively feverish and he shouldn't be allowed to play with matches."

But at the moment there was no casual observer. Only Pruitt absorbed in lighting the birthday candles. The image of the fly he deposited square in the middle of the bread board

Cross-legged he sat, chin down, arms folded. He rocked himself back and forth. He began to chant. Singsong. Through his nose. Once in a while he rolled his eyes around in their sockets, but merely once in a while. He had found, if he did that too often, it made him dizzy.

"O Idol of the Flies," intoned Pruitt, "hahneemah-

"O Idol of the Flies," intoned Pruitt, "hahneemahneemo." He scratched his ankle ruminatively. "Hahneeweemahneemo," he improved, "make the lemonade dry in the crack on the back porch, and make Miss Bittner find the scrooched up fly after she's already drunk some, and make cook go down in the cellar for some marmalade and make her not turn on the light and make her fall over the string I've got tied between the posts, and make aunt get a piece of nutshell in her bread and cough like hell." Pruitt thought this over. "Hell," he said, "hell, hell, hel

He meditated in silence. "I guess that's all," he said finally, "except maybe you'd better fill up my fly catcher in case we have currant cookies for tea. Hahneeweemah-

neemo, O Idol of the Flies, you are free to GO!"

Pruitt fixed his gaze in the middle distance and riveted it there. Motionless, scarcely breathing, his lips parted, he huddled on the bare boards—a small sphinx in khaki shorts.

This was what Pruitt called "not-thinking-time." Pretty soon, entirely without volition on his part, queer, half-formed dream things would float through his mind. Like dark polliwogs. Propelling themselves along with their tails, hinting at secrets that nobody knew, not even grownups. Some day he would be able to catch one, quickly, before it wriggled off into the inner hidden chamber where They had a nest and, then, he would know. He would catch it in a net of thought, like Harry's net caught fishes, and no matter how it squirmed and threshed about he would pin it flat against his skull until he *knew*. Once, he had almost caught one. He had been on the very rim of knowing and Miss Bittner had come down to bring him some peanut butter sandwiches and it had escaped back into that deep, strange place in his mind where They lived. He had only had it for a split second but he remembered it had blind, weepy eyes and was smooth.

If Miss Bittner hadn't come— He had vomited on her stockings. Here came one of Them now-fast, it was coming fast, too fast to catch. It was gone, leaving behind it a heady exhilaration. Here came another, revolving, writhing like a sea snake, indistinct, shadowy. Let it go, the next one might be lured into the net. Here it came, two of them, rolling in the sleep hollows. Easily now, easily, easily, close in, easily, so there wouldn't be any warning ripples, closer, they weren't watching, murmuring to each other—there! He had them!

"Pru-itt. Oh, Pru-itt."

The things veered away, their tails whipping his intellect into a spinning mass of chaotic frenzy.

"Pru-itt. Where are you? Pru-itt."

The boy blinked.

"Pru-itt. Oh. Pru-itt."

His mouth distorted like that of an enraged animal. He stuck out his tongue and hissed at the locked door. The handle turned.

"Pruitt, are you in there?"

"Yes, Miss Bittner." The words were thick and meaty in his mouth. If he bit down, Pruitt thought, he could bite one in two and chew it up and it would squish out between his teeth like an eclair.

"Unlock the door."

"Yes, Miss Bittner."

Pruitt blew out the candles and swept his treasures under the cot. He reconsidered this action, shoved his hand under the chintz skirt, snaffled the coal tar fly and stuffed it in his shirt.

"Do you hear me, Pruitt? Unlock this door," The knob rattled.

"I'm coming fast as I can," he said. He rose, stalked over to the door, shot back the bolt and stood, squinting, in the brilliant daylight before Miss Bittner.

"What on earth are you doing in there?"

"I guess I must've fallen asleep."

Miss Bittner peered into the murky confines of the bathhouse. She sniffed inquisitively.

"Pruitt," she said, "have you been smoking?"
"No, Miss Bittner."

"We mustn't tell a falsehood, Pruitt. It is far better to tell the truth and accept the consequences."

"I haven't been smoking." Pruitt could feel his stomach moving inside him. He was going to be sick again. Like he was the last time. Miss Bittner was wavering in front of him. Her outside edges were all blurry. His stomach gave a violent lurch. Pruitt looked at Miss Bittner's stockings. They were messy. Awfully messy. Miss Bittner looked at them, too.

"Run along up to the house, Pruitt," she said kindly. "I'll be up presently."

"Yes. Miss Bittner."

"And we won't say anything about smoking to your auntie. I think you've been sufficiently punished."

"Yes, Miss Bittner."

"Run along, now."

Pruitt went languidly up the path, conscious of Miss Bittner's eyes boring into him. When he turned the bend, he stopped and crept slyly into the bushes. He made his way back toward the boathouse, pressing the branches away from him and easing them cautiously to prevent them from snapping.

Miss Bittner sat on the steps taking off her stockings. She rinsed her legs in the water and dried them with her handkerchief. Pruitt could see an oval corn plaster on her little toe. She put her bony feet into her patent-leather Health Eases, got up, brushed her dress and disappeared into the bathhouse.

Pruitt inched nearer.

Miss Bittner came to the doorway and examined something she held in her hands. She looked puzzled. From his vantage point, Pruitt glimpsed the pink of the candy rosettes, the stubby candle wicks.

"I hate you," Pruitt whispered venomously, "I hate you, I hate you." Tenderly, he withdrew the coal tar image from his shirt. He cuddled it against his cheek. "Break her ear thing," he muttered. "Break it all to pieces so's she'll have to act deaf. Break it, break it, hahneeweemahneemo, break it good." Warily he crawled backward until he regained the path.

He trudged onward, pausing only twice. Once, at a break in the hedge where he reached into the aperture and drew forth a cone-shaped contraption smeared with sirup. Five flies clung to this, their wings sticky, their legs gluey. These he disengaged, ignoring the lesser fry of gnats and midges that had met a similar fate, and returned the flycatcher to its lair. The second interruption along his line of march was a sort of interlude during which he cracked the two-inch spine of a garden lizard and hung it on a bramble where it performed incredibly tortuous convolutions with the lower half of its body.

Mona Eagleston came out of her bedroom and closed the door gently behind her. Everything about Mona was gentle from the top of her wren brown head threaded with gray to the slippers on her ridiculously tiny feet. She was rather like a fawn. An aging fawn with liquid eyes that, despite the encroaching years, had failed to lose their tiptoe look of expectancy.

One knew instinctively that Mona Eagleston was that rare phenomenon—a lady to the manor born. If, occasionally, when in close proximity with her nephew, a perplexed look overshadowed that delicate face, it was no more than a passing cloud. Children were inherently good. If they appeared otherwise, it was simply because their actions were misunderstood. They—he—Pruitt didn't mean to do things. He couldn't know that—well, that slamming the screen door, for instance, could send a sickening stab of pain through a head racked with migraine. He couldn't be expected to know, the poor orphan lamb. The poor, dear, orphan lamb.

orphan lamb.

If only she didn't have to pour at teatime. If only she could lie quiet and still with a cold compress on her head and the shutters pulled to. How selfish she was. Teatimes to a child were lovely, restful periods. Moments to be forever cherished in the pattern of memory. Like colorful loops of embroidery floss embellishing the whole. A skein of golden, shining teatimes with the sunset staining the windows and high-lighting the fat-sided Delft milk jug. The taste of jam, the brown crumbles left on the cookie plate, the teacups—eggshell frail—with handles like wedding rings. All of these were precious to a child. Deep down inside, without quite knowing why, they absorbed such things as sponges absorbed water—and, like sponges, they could wring these memories out when they were growing old. As she did, sometimes. What a wretched person she was to begrudge a teatime to Pruitt, dear, little Pruitt, her own dead brother's child.

She went on down the stairs, one white hand trailing the banister. The fern, she noticed, was dying. This was the third fern. She'd always had so much luck with ferns, until lately. Her goldfish, too. They had died. It was almost an omen. And Pruitt's turtles. She had bought them at the village. So cunning they were with enameled pictures on

their hard, tree-barky shells. They had died. She mustn't think about dying. The doctor had said it was bad for her. She crossed the great hall and entered the drawing room. "Dear Pruitt," she said to the boy swinging his legs from the edge of a brocaded chair. She kissed him. She had intended to kiss his sunwarm cheek but he had moved, suddenly, and the kiss had met an unresponsive ear. Children were jumpy little things.

"Did you have a nice day?"

"Yes, aunt."

"And you, Miss Bittner? Did you have a nice day? And how did the conjugations go this morning? Did our young man... why, my dear, whatever is the matter?"

"She broke her ear thing," Pruitt said. He turned toward

his tutor and enunciated in an exaggerated fashion. "Didn't vou. Miss Bittner?"

Miss Bittner reddened. She spoke in the unnaturally loud, toneless voice of the deaf, "I dropped my hearing-aid," she explained. "On the bathroom floor. I'm afraid, until I get it fixed, that you'll have to bear with me." She smiled a tight strained smile to show that it was really quite a joke on her.

"What a shame," said Mona Eagleston, "but I daresay it can be repaired in the village. Harry can take it in tomorrow."

Miss Bittner followed the movement of Mona Eagle-

ston's lips almost desperately.
"No," she said hesitantly, "Harry didn't do it. I did it. The bathroom tile, you know. It was frightfully clumsy of me."

"And she drank some lemonade that had a fly in it. Didn't you, Miss Bittner? I said you drank some lemonade that had a fly in it, didn't you?"

Miss Bittner nodded politely. Her eyes focused on Pruitt's mouth.

"Cry?" she ventured. "No, I didn't cry."

Mona Eagleston seated herself behind the teacaddy and prepared to pour. She must warn cook, hereafter, to put an oiled cover over the lemonade. One couldn't be too par-

ticular where children were concerned. They were susceptible to all sorts of diseases and flies were notorious carriers. If Pruitt were taken ill because of her lack of forethought, she would never forgive herself. Never.

"Could I have some marmalade?" Pruitt asked.

"We have currant cookies, dear, and nut bread. Do you think we need marmalade?"

"I do so love marmalade, aunt. Miss Bittner does too. Don't you, Miss Bittner?"

Miss Bittner smiled stoically on and accepted her cup with a pleasant noncommittal murmur that she devoutly hoped would serve as an appropriate answer to whatever Pruitt was asking.

"Very well, dear." Mona tinkled a bell.

"I'll pass the cookies, aunt."
"Thank you, Pruitt. You are very thoughtful."

The boy took the plate and carried it over to Miss Bittner and an expression of acute suffering swam across the Bittner countenance as the boy trod heavily on her foot.

"Have some cookies." Pruitt thrust the plate at her.

"That's quite all right," Miss Bittner said, thinking he had apologized and congratulating herself on the fact that she hadn't moaned aloud. If he had known she had a corn, he couldn't have selected the location with more exactitude. She looked at the cookies. After that lemonade episode, she had felt she couldn't eat again—but they were tempting. Gracious, how that corn ached.

"Here's a nice currenty one." Pruitt popped a cookie on her plate.

"Thank you, Pruitt."

Cook waddled into the room. "Did you ring, Miss Mona?"

"Yes, Bertha. Would you get Pruitt some marmalade, please?"

Bertha shot a poisonous glance at Pruitt. "There's none up, ma'am. Will the jam do?"

Pruitt managed a sorrowful sigh. "I do so love marmalade, aunt," and then happily, as if it were an afterthought, "Isn't there some in the basement cubby?"

Mona Eagleston made a helpless moue at cook. "Would

you mind terribly, Bertha? You know how children are."

"Yes, ma'am, I know how children are," cook said in a flat voice.

"Thank you, Bertha. The pineapple will do." "Yes, ma'am." Bertha plodded away.

"She was walking around in her bare feet again today," Pruitt said.

His aunt shook her head sadly. "I don't know what to do," she said to Miss Bittner. "I dislike being cross, but ever since she stepped on that nail"—Mona Eagleston smiled quickly at her nephew—"not that you meant to leave it there, darling, but... well... will you have a slice of nut bread, Miss Bittner?"

Pruitt licked back a grin. "Aunt said would you like a slice of nut bread, Miss Bittner," he repeated ringingly.

Miss Bittner paid no heed. She seemed to be in a frozen

trance sitting as she did rigidly upright staring at her plate with horror. She arose.

"I . . . I don't feel well," she said, "I think . . . I think I'd better go lie down."

Pruitt hopped off his chair and took her plate. Mona Eagleston made a distressed tching sound. "Is there anything I can do-" She half rose but Miss Bittner waved her hack.

"It's nothing," Miss Bittner said hoarsely. "I . . . I thing it's just something I . . . I ate. Don't let me disturb your t-t-teatime." She put her napkin over her mouth and hastily hobbled from the room.

"I should see that she--" began Mona Eagleston worriedly.

"Oh, don't let's ruin teatime," Pruitt interposed hurriedly. "Here, have some nut bread. It looks dreadfully good."

"Well--"

"Please, Aunt Mona. Not teatime."

"Very well, Pruitt." Mona chose a slice of bread. "Does teatime mean a great deal to you? It did to me when I was a little girl."

"Yes, aunt." He watched her break a morsel of bread, butter it and put it in her mouth.

"I used to live for teatime. It was such a cozy—" Mona Eagleston lifted a pale hand to her throat. She began to cough. Her eyes filled with tears. She looked wildly around for water. She tried to say "water" but couldn't get the word past the choking in her lungs. If Pruitt would only—but he was just a child. He couldn't be expected to know what to do for a coughing spell. Poor, dear Pruitt, he looked so...so—perturbed. Handing her the tea like that, his face all puckery. She gulped down a great draught of the scalding liquid. Her slight frame was seized with a paroxysm of coughing. Mercy! She must have mistakenly put salt in it, instead of sugar instead of sugar.

She wiped her brimming eyes. "Nutshell," she wheezed, gaining her feet. "Back . . . presently—" Coughing violently, she, too, quitted the room.

From somewhere beneath Pruitt's feet, deep in the

bowels of the house, came a faint, faraway thud.

Pruitt picked the flies off of Miss Bittner's cookie. Where there had been five, there was now four and a half. He put the remains in his pocket. They might come in handy.

Dimly he heard cook calling for help. It was a smothered, hysterical calling. If Aunt Mona didn't return, it could go on quite a while before it was heeded. Cook could yell here.

self blue around the gills by then.

"Hahneeweemahneemo," he crooned. "Oh, Idol of the Flies, you have served me true, yea, yea, double yea, fortyfive, thirty-two,"

Pruitt helped himself to a heaping spoonful of sugar.

The pinkish sky was filled with cawing rooks. They pivoted and wheeled, they planed their wings into black fans and settled in the great old beeches to shout gossip at one another.

Pruitt scuffed his shoe on the stone steps and wished he had an air rifle. He would ask for one on his birthday. He would ask for a lot of impossible things first and then—pitifully—say, "Well, then, could I just have a little old air rifle?" Aunt would fall for that. She was as dumb as his mother had been. Dumber. His mother had been "simple" dumb, which was pretty bad—going in, as she had, for treacly bedtime stories and lap sitting. Aunt was "sick" dumb, which was very dumb indeed. "Sick" dumb people always looked at the "bright side." They were the dumbest of all. They were push-overs, "sick" dumb people were. Easy, little old push-overs.

Pruitt shifted his position as there came to his ears the

scrape of footsteps in the hall.

That dragging sound would be cook. He wondered if she really had pulled the muscles loose in her back. Here came Harry with the car. They must be going to the doctor. Harry's hunch made him look like he had a pillow behind him.

"We mustn't let Pruitt know about the string," he heard his aunt say, "It would make him feel badly to learn that he had been the cause."

Cook made a low, unintelligible reply.

"Purposely!" his aunt exclaimed aghast. "Why, Bertha, I'm ashamed of you. He's only a child."

Pruitt drew his lips into a thin line. If she told about the nut hulls, he d fix her. He scrambled up the steps and held open the screen door.

But cook didn't tell about the nut hulls. She was too busy gritting her teeth against the tearing pull in her back.

"Can I help?" Pruitt let a troubled catch into his voice. His aunt patted his cheek. "We can manage, dear, thank

vou."

Miss Bittner smiled on him benevolently. "You can take care of me while they're gone," she said. "We'll have a picnic supper. Won't that be fun?"

"Yes, Miss Bittner. Oodles of fun."

He watched the two women assist their injured companion down the steps with Harry collaborating. He kissed his fingers to his aunt as the car drove away and linked his arm through Miss Bittner's. He gazed cherubically up at her.

"You are a filthy mess," he said caressingly, "and I hate your guts."

Miss Bittner beamed on him. It wasn't often that Pruitt was openly loving to her. "I'm sorry, Pruitt, but I can't hear very well now, you know. Perhaps you'd like me to read to you for a while."

Pruitt shook his head. "I'll just play," he said loudly and distinctly and then, softly, "you liverless, old hyena."

"Play?" said Miss Bittner.

Pruitt nodded.

"All right, darling. But don't go far. It'll be supper time soon."

"Yes, Miss Bittner." He ran lightly down the steps. "Good-by," he called, "you homely, dear, old hag, you." "Good-by," said Miss Bittner, nodding and smiling.

Pruitt placed the bread board on the pegs and arranged the candles in a semicircle. One of them refused to stay vertical. It had been stepped on.

Pruitt examined it angrily. You'd think she'd be particular with other people's property. The sniveling fool. He'd fix her. He ate the candy rosette with relish and, after it was completely devoured, chewed up the candle, spitting out the wick when it had reached a sufficiently malleable state. He delved into his shirt front and extracted the coal tar fly which had developed a decided list to starboard. He compressed it into shape, reanchored a wobbly pipestem leg, and established the figure in the center of the bread board.

He folded his arms and began to rock back and forth, the swealing candles spreading his shadow behind him like a thick, dark cloak.

"Hahneeweemahneemo. O Idol of the Flies, hear, hear, O hear, come close and hear. Miss Bittner scrooched one of your candles. So send me lots of flies, lots and lots of flies, millions, trillions, skillions of flies. Quadrillions and skintillions. Make them also no-color so's I can mix them up in soup and things without them showing much. Black ones show. Send me pale ones that don't buzz and have feelers. Hear me, hear me, hear me, O Idol of the Flies, come close and hear!"

Pruitt chewed his candle and contemplated. His face lighted, as he was struck with a brilliant thought. "And make a thinking-time-dream-thing hold still so's I can get it. So's I'll know. I guess that's all. Hahneeweemahneemo, O Idol of the Flies, you are free to GO!"

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As he had done earlier in the afternoon, Pruitt became quiescent. His eyes, catlike, were set and staring, staring, staring staring fixedly at nothing at all.

He didn't look excited. He looked like a small boy engaged in some innocuous small-boyish pursuit. But he was excited. Excitement coursed through his veins and rang in his ears. The pit of his stomach was cold with it and the palms of his hands were as moist as the inside of his mouth was dry.

This was the way he felt when he knew his father and mother were going to die. He had known it with a sort of clear, glittering lucidity—standing there in the white Bermuda sunlight, waving good-by to them. He had seen the plumy feather on his mother's hat, the sprigged organdy dress, his father's pointed mustache and his slender, artist's hands grasping the driving reins. He had seen the gleaming harness, the high-spirited shake of the horse's head, its stamping foot. His father wouldn't have a horse that wasn't high-spirited. Ginger had been its name. He had seen the bobbing fringe on the carriage top and the pin in the right rear wheel—the pin that he had diligently and with patient perseverance, worked loose with the screwdriver out of his toy tool chest. He had seen them roll away, down the drive, out through the wrought-iron gates. He had wondered if they would turn over when they rounded the bend and what sort of a crash they would make. They had turned over but he hadn't heard the crash. He had been in the house eating the icing off the cake.

But he *had* known they were going to die. The knowledge had been almost more than he could control, as even now it was hard to govern the knowledge, the *certainty*, that he was going to snare a dream-thing.

He knew it. He knew it. He knew it. With every wire-taut nerve in his body he knew it.

Here came one. Streaking through his mind, leaving a string of phosphorescent bubbles in its wake and the bubbles rose and burst and there were dark, bloody smears where they had been. Another—shooting itself along with its tail—its greasy sides ashine. Another—and another—and another—and then a seething whirlpool of them. There

had never been so many. Spiny, pulpy, slick and eellike, some with feelers like catfish, some with white, gaping mouths and foreshortened embryo arms. Their contortions clogged his thoughts with weeping. But there was one down in the black, not-able-to-get-to part of his mind that watched him. It knew what he wanted. And it was blind. But it was watching him through its blindness. It was But it was watching him through its blindness. It was coming. Wriggling closer, bringing the black, not-able-to-get-to part with it and where it passed the others sank away and his mind was wild with depraved weeping. Its nose holes went in and out, in and out, in and out, like something he had known long ago in some past, mysterious other life, and it whimpered as it came and whispered things to him. Disconnected things that swelled his heart and ran like juice along the cracks in his skull. In a moment it would be quite near, in a moment he would know.

"Pruitt. Pruitt." The words were drops of honey.

"Pruitt. Pruitt." Pollen words, nectareous, sprinkled with flower dust. The dream-thing waited. It did not—like the rest—dart away affrighted.

rest-dart away affrighted.

"Pruitt. Pruitt." The voice came from outside himself. From far away and down, from some incredible depth like the place in his mind where They had a nest—only it was distant—and deep. Quite deep. So hot and deep.

With an immense effort Pruitt blinked.

"Look at me." The voice was dulcet and alluring.

Again Pruitt blinked, and as his wits ebbed in like a sluggish tide bringing the watching dream-thing with it, he saw a man.

He stood tall and commanding and from chin to toe he was wrapped in a flowing cape and, in the flickering candle-light, the cape had the exact outlines of Pruitt's shadow, and in and about the cape swam the watching dream-thing, as if it were at home. Above the cloak the man's face was a grinning mask and through the mouth, the nostrils and the slits of eyes poured a reddish translucent light. A glow. Like that of a Halloween pumpkin head, only intensified a thousandfold.

"Pruitt. Look, Pruitt." The folds of the cloak lifted and fell as if an invisible arm had gestured. Pruitt followed the

gesture hypnotically. His neck twisted round, slowly, slowly, until his gaze encompassed a rain of insects. A living curtain of them. A shimmering and noiseless cascade of colorless flies, gauzy winged, long bodied.

"Flies, Pruitt, Millions of flies,"

Pruitt once more rotated his neck until he confronted the stranger. The blind dream-thing giggled at him and swam into a pleat of darkness.

"Who—are—you?" The words were thick and sweet on Pruitt's tongue like other words he half remembered speaking a thousand years ago on some dim plane in some hazy twilight world.

"My name is Asmodeus, Pruitt. Asmodeus. Isn't it a beautiful name?"

"Yes."

"Say it, Pruitt."

"Asmodeus."

"Again."

"Asmodeus."

"Again, Pruitt,"

"Asmodeus."

"What do you see in my cloak?"

"A dream-thought."

"And what is it doing?"

"It is gibbering at me."

"Why?"

"Because your cloak has the power of darkness and I may not enter until--"

"Until what, Pruitt?"

"Until I look into your eyes and see--"

"See what. Pruitt?"

"What is written therein."

"And what is written therein? Look into my eyes, Pruitt. Look long and well. What is written therein?"

"It is written what I wish to know. It is written-"

"What is written, Pruitt?"

"It is written of the limitless, the eternal, the foreverness, of the what is and was ordained to ever be, unceasingly, beyond the ends of Time for . . . for—"

"For whom, Pruitt?"

The boy wrenched his eyes away. "No," he said, and with rising crescendo, "no, no, no, no, no." He scooted backward across the floor, pushing with his hands, shoving with his heels, his face contorted with terror. "No," he babbled, "no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no."

"Yes, Pruitt. For whom?"

The boy reached the door and lurched to his feet, his jaw flaccid, his eyes starting in their sockets. He turned and fled up the path, heedless of the pelting flies that fastened themselves to his clothes and tangled in his hair, and touched his flesh like ghostly, clinging fingers, and scrunched beneath his feet as he ran on—his breath breaking from his lungs in sobbing gasps.

"Miss Bittner . . . help . . . Miss Bittner . . . Aunt . . . Harry . . . help-"

At the bend waiting for him stood the figure he had left behind in the bathhouse.

"For whom, Pruitt?"

"No, no, no,"

"For whom, Pruitt?"

"No, oh no, no!"

"For whom, Pruitt?"

"For the DAMNED," the boy shrieked and, wheeling, he ran back the way he had come, the flies sticking to his skin, mashing as he tried frantically to rid himself of them as on he sped.

The man behind him began to chant. High, shrill, and mocking, and the dream-thought took it up, and the earth, and the trees, and the sky that dripped flies, and the pilings of the pier clustered with their pulsating bodies, and the water, patched as far as eye could see with clotted islands of flies, flies. And from his own throat came laughter, crazed and wanton, unrestrained and terrible, peal upon peal of hellish laughter that would not stop. Even as his legs would not stop when they reached the end of the pier.

A red-breasted robin—a fly in its beak—watched the

widening ripples. A garden lizard scampered over a tuft of grass and joined company with a toad at the water's edge, as if to lend their joint moral support to the turtle who slid off the bank and with jerky motions of its striped

legs went down to investigate the thing that was entwined so securely in a fishing net there on the sandy bottom by the pier.

Miss Bittner idly flipped through a textbook on derivatives. The textbook was a relic of bygone days and the pages were studded with pressed wild flowers brittle with age. With a fingernail she loosened a tissue-thin four-leaf clover. It had left its yellow-green aura on the printed text. "Beelzebub," Miss Bittner read absently, "stems from the

"Beelzebub," Miss Bittner read absently, "stems from the Hebraic. Beel—meaning idol, zebub—meaning flies: Synonyms, lesser known, not in common usage, are: Appolyon, Abbadon, Asmodeus—" but Miss Bittner's attention flagged. She closed the book, yawned and wondered lazily where Pruitt was.

She went to the window and immediately drew back with revulsion. Green Bay flies. Heavens, they were all over everything. The horrid creatures. Funny how they blew in off the water. She recalled last year, when she had been with the Braithwaites in Michigan, they had come—and in such multitudes—that the townspeople had had to shovel them up off the streets. Actually shovel them. She had been ill for three whole days thereafter.

She hoped Pruitt wouldn't be dismayed by them. She must guard against showing her own helpless panic as she had done at teatime. Children placed such implicit faith in the invincibility of their elders.

Dear Pruitt, he had been so charming to her today.

Dear, little Pruitt.

HOSTAGE

Don Stanford

At Mr. Cochrane's request, I have corrected most of his grammatical lapses and done what I could to relieve the ten-

dency to be inarticulate which was so evident to those who watched him on television during the recent Congressional crime investigations. Aside from that, however, this is essentially the story as Mr. Cochrane told it to me and as he wishes it to reach the public.

(Signed) Don Stanford

I want to say first that I am strictly legitimate now and have been for a long time. That is what I told those senators on the television, and it is the truth, and anybody who says I committed perjury is a liar. Maybe I don't know a whole lot about my own investments, and maybe I don't have to know so long as they show a good profit. I do own that country club outside of New Orleans, and it shows a good profit, like a lot of my investments do. —I have good business advisers. I have never seen that country club, and if there is gambling going on there, I do not know anything about it, and I do not care to be told.

I have been clean for a good many years. I make strictly legitimate investments, and I am a legitimate citizen. I pay my income taxes, and I contribute to charities. I have some very fine friends in very high places, and they will all say the same thing. For a long time, the mayor of New York was a real pal of mine, and you don't have to believe it if you don't want to, but I could have been a United States ambassador if I had wanted to. I could have done just as well under this Administration, too, in a couple of years, if this thing I am going to tell you about hadn't happened. But that is all over now. I do not think it is fair at all that such a thing should be allowed to happen to a strictly legitimate United States citizen.

I will skip the background material, because everybody heard it all on the television last year. So you know that I was born in Sicily in 1901 and that my name was Pasquale Cocciani then but it is now legally Pat Cochrane, and I am a legal naturalized citizen of the United States and strictly legitimate. I have done a little time, but only for little things like any high-spirited kid will get involved in, like stealing a car. And I have already told all about how I owned a brewery in Jersey during Prohibition, but I always paid my

income taxes, so that was really legitimate business, too. Though not quite as legitimate as I am now, of course. It is very unfair to speak of me as the head of organized crime in the United States when nobody can prove anything like that, and I only wish there was somebody I could sue to defend my good name.

Well, I want to get right to the point now and tell about what happened to me, because it was very unfair and I think everybody should know about it.

I like to eat my lunch in the Men's Bar of the Waldorf-Astoria, because it is a very high-type place and you meet only very high-type people there. Some of these men I met right there in the Men's Bar, when they asked me for a contribution to some charity or other. Of course, I never turn down a charity appeal—I bet I have eaten more thousand-dollars-a-plate dinners than anybody in New York—and, of course, a man who has sat next to me at such a banquet usually will acknowledge our acquaintance from then on. These are all very good contacts for a legitimate citizen such as I am, and although I never do any business with these men I see in the Waldorf Men's Bar, I value their social friendship highly.

But, of course, it was brought out on the television that I eat lunch at the Waldorf almost every day. I forgot that. I wish it hadn't been; if it hadn't come up on the television, those kids would not have known where to find me, maybe, and none of this would have happened.

It was a Saturday, and I was having a drink at the bar before my lunch when these kids came in. They had practically all their hair cut off short with clippers, and they had on Brooks Brothers' charcoal-gray suits and pink shirts and black knit ties and dirty saddle shoes, and you could tell from one look at them that they were the sons of very rich men and went to some Ivy League college. They came in the bar, and they looked around, and then they came right over to me.

"Mr. Cochrane?" one of them said, and he seemed to be kind of nervous. "Excuse us, sir, but my—my father thought I might find you here. Excuse me, I'm Peter Minot, and this is Bart Ewell. My father's Harrington Minot, Mr. Cochrane. He thought you might remember meeting him at a dinner two or three months ago."

"Sure," I said. "Glad to meet you, boys. Will you have a drink?"

I could have dropped dead, you understand. I remembered meeting Harrington Minot, all right, but I would have bet he wouldn't remember meeting me, or admit it if he had. He is a very high-society-type man and filthy rich besides. No matter how legitimate a man is, he does not get to meet Harrington Minot very often, and Harrington Minot never looks him up again if he does. So I was very glad to be seen in the Men's Bar of the Waldorf-Astoria buying a drink for Harrington Minot's son and his hightype Ivy League college friend.

"Well, no, thank you, Mr. Cochrane," young Peter Minot said politely, and he still seemed kind of nervous and worried. "As a matter of fact, Father wondered if you could come up to the house right away. He said if you hadn't already started your lunch, if you could possibly get free— It's rather terribly important, Mr. Cochrane. Father said he would consider it a great favor."

Well, you know. It's doing favors that gets you places in this world, doing favors for the right people, that is. And Harrington Minot was a righter people than any I had ever had a chance to do a favor for before. So I left my drink on the bar unfinished, and I threw five bucks at the bartender, and I said very businesslike, like I understood and was all ready to please, "Sure, boys. Let's go."

Right outside the Waldorf was my Cadillac, my chauffeur in it like always. He never leaves the car when I am out of it, in case I might need to go somewhere quickly. It is not, like Winchell said, because I am afraid somebody might rig a bomb in the car. That is a lie, because who would want to bomb a strictly legitimate citizen like I am? And it is not true that Al Fiore, my chauffeur, is also a bodyguard, because why would I need a bodyguard when I am only a businessman?

The Minot kid was opening the door of one of those

low-slung open foreign sports cars, and I just waved Al Fiore away with the Cadillac. I had never been for a drive in one of those foreign cars, and I kind of liked the idea of riding home later on in Mr. Harrington Minot's car with his chauffeur driving. It would make a nice impression. Of course, there was absolutely no doubt about the kids' being genuine, even if the doorman hadn't let go of my Cadillac door to race the Minot kid, Peter, for the door of his sports car. The Waldorf doorman knows who is who, believe me.

The Harrington Minot town house is up on Fifth Avenue. As a businessman, I know a little about real estate maintenance costs in New York, and I can tell you that it costs Harrington Minot over \$150,000 a year just to keep the house up. And this is just his town house.

There were two unmarked cars full of detectives parked in the same block near the Minot house. I don't think the

in the same block near the Minot house. I don't think the boys spotted them, but I did, and it made me sit up and take notice. It looked like Harrington Minot might need a favor, at that. I mean, anybody can have police trouble once in a lifetime. And a high-type man like Harrington Minot might not know how to handle police trouble.

That was all I thought, absolutely all. I was clean, you know. And I was thinking, well, I still have a few connections down at City Hall. And if Harrington Minot needed to the few of the state of a fewer at all I would be said to do to the fewer at all I would be said to do to the fewer at all I would be said to do to the fewer at all I would be said to do to the fewer at all I would be said to do to the fewer at all I would be said to do to the fewer at all I would be said to do to the fewer at all I would be said to do to the fewer at all I would be said to do to the fewer at all I would be said to do to the fewer at all I would be said to do to the fewer at all I would be said to the said

any kind of a favor at all. I would be glad to do it for him

There wasn't time to wonder what trouble Harrington Minot might be in, because Peter Minot muttered something that sounded like, "Those damned cops!" and shot right on by the house. We sped around the corner and into an alley and stopped, and the other kid, Bart Ewell, said politely, "Mr. Minot wanted to talk to you privately, Mr. Cochrane, so I guess we better slip in the side door and go straight to his study. If you don't mind, sir?"

It kind of gets me, that "sir" stuff. I would want a kid of mine to have those Ivy League airs. But I wouldn't want a kid of mine to be like these two Ivy League kids in some

ways.

Well, the Minot kid opened a side door of the town

house with a key and went in first. The Ewell kid sort of stood aside politely to let me go in ahead of him. And as I stepped through the door, the Ewell kid sapped me.

I guess he used a regular blackjack, because the skin

I guess he used a regular blackjack, because the skin wasn't broken. The Minot kid must've turned and caught me as I fell, too, so nobody in the Minot house would hear anything.

The next thing I remember is the hospital smell. I felt very woozy, because I had a pain somewhere else besides my head, but for a couple minutes I just couldn't think where. It wasn't a very bad pain, just a stabbing sort of pain that didn't seem real serious but bothered me, and the hospital smell was making me sick. I opened my eyes, not having had a chance to think about what was going on, but even if I had, I wouldn't have believed it.

I was in Harrington Minot's house, all right. I could tell that quick enough. I was in a very deep leather chair that reclined, kind of, and it was cocked back so I was looking up at the ceiling unless I moved my head, and as soon as I moved my head I got dizzy and had to lie back again. But I got a look at the room in that moment, and the white pan on the table that the hospital smell seemed to come from, and the kids.

There were four kids now. The other two looked just like Peter Minot and Bart Ewell. They were Ivy League types with crew haircuts and so on, but one of them was littler than the others and had big black-rimmed glasses and an owly expression, and the other one had like a white hospital coat on and a tight white cap and rubber gloves, and there was a smear of blood on the front of the white hospital coat. All four of the kids looked very white in the face, like they were going to throw up any minute. And what with the smell and the funny woozy feeling in my head and the other little pain I still didn't know quite where it was, I felt like throwing up myself.

"He's awake," Bart Ewell said, and another voice that must have been the doctor-type kid in the white coat said, "Yes, he's coming out of it now. You can go ahead, Peter."

could look at him without moving my head. His face was very white and his lips quivered a little and his voice shook, but there was something about him that scared me, if you can imagine being scared of a kid. "Mr. Cochrane, my father did not send us for you. He does not know you are here. Nobody knows, except us. And you, of course.

"Mr. Cochrane, Bart and I came down from New Haven

"Mr. Cochrane, Bart and I came down from New Haven last night. We were going to a party. Bart was going to take my sister Lorrie. He'd had the date since last summer—"

The Ewell kid's voice broke in, and from the sound of it I was just as glad I couldn't see his face, somehow. I still didn't know what was going on, but I didn't like it.

"Lorrie is seventeen, Mr. Cochrane," the Ewell kid said very softly. "She's still in school. She won't even come out until next April. You have no idea what a nice sweet kid Lorrie is."

"Lorrie wasn't here when we got here," Peter Minot said, and his mouth twisted until he looked much older. "She hadn't come home from school. She never did, Mr. Cochrane. She was kidnaped."

I tried to sit up then, to protest, to tell them I am strictly legitimate and wouldn't know anything about crime at all. But when I raised my head I got dizzy again, and had to lie back down.

"The telephone call came about seven-thirty," Peter Minot said. "It was the usual thing, I suppose. Don't call the police and she won't get hurt. Get a hundred thousand dollars in small worn bills, and wait for further instructions—"

He seemed to choke a little, and then his voice steadied and he said, "Mr. Cochrane, my father is an honorable man, and a dignified one, and a—a stubborn one. He was shocked. He couldn't believe it at first. And then when he did believe it, he did just what my father would always do in the circumstances. He called the police. We've had police all over the place ever since last night, and of course they haven't a thing to go on. They're doing everything they can, but they can't do a thing. Maybe they'll find out who kid-

naped Lorrie in time, but that might be too late for Lorrie, in view of-of-"

His nice boy's face got contorted and red, and suddenly

it vanished, and Bart Ewell's face appeared in its place.
"This morning," Bart Ewell said softly, "a messenger came. He had a box and a note. The police took the messenger, of course, but he doesn't know anything. The note said Mr. Minot could have Lorrie back a piece at a time, if he wanted to go on disobeying instructions, or if he'd get rid of the police and do as he was told, he could still have the rest of her back in one piece. And the box contained one of Lorrie's fingers."

A sob came from Peter Minot, and a chill ran up my back and chased all the wooziness out of my head, and I sat up quick. Because without really believing it—I couldn't believe it!—I knew where that other nagging pain was coming from, and I had to look.

"It was the little finger from Lorrie's left hand, Mr. Cochrane," Bart Ewell was saying, and sure enough, there was a bandage on my left hand, a neat surgical bandage. And the stabbing pain was in my little finger, but there was only

the bandage where the finger ought to be.
"It's right here, Mr. Cochrane," Bart Ewell said, and he grabbed the white enamel pan and shoved it at me so hard the hospital-smelling stuff sloshed over and some of it spilled on my suit. And he reached into the pan and picked something out and dropped it into my lap, and it was my finger.

"If they send us another finger tonight," Bart Ewell said, and his voice was clear and hard now, "or an eye, or an ear... Mr. Cochrane, this is Harry Finnister. Harry is a medical student. We sent for him this morning, after we talked with Dean Leggett. This is Dean Leggett. He is a very good thinker, Dean is, and he thought of this."

"You are Lorrie Minot's hostage," the little owl-eyed guy, Dean Leggett, said, and blinked hard behind his big black-rimmed glasses. "Anything that happens to Lorrie is going to happen to you, Mr. Cochrane. Absolutely anything.

You see, Mr. Minot can't get rid of the police now. It's too late. He got them, and now he can't get rid of them. So if they can't get Lorrie back without her getting hurt any more, you'd better, Mr. Cochrane. Because you have just as much at stake as Lorrie has."

as much at stake as Lorrie has."

My head was quite clear now. There was something laughing insanely deep inside me, telling me this was ridiculous, it simply couldn't be happening, civilized people didn't act this way. And there was no reason for them to act this way toward me, anyway. I never pulled a snatch in my entire life, so help me, and I'm twenty years from anything even remotely like that rough stuff. But I looked around at those four kids, and there was the same thing in all four nice high-type Ivy League faces, and whatever it was, I give you my word it made me shiver.

I didn't say anything about them having cut off my finger. I was thinking about the fingers and eyes and ears I still had, and hoping I would get to keep them, and I was

still had, and hoping I would get to keep them, and I was serious, believe me. And I was thinking that whoever the punks were that had snatched this Lorrie Minot kid, they might be scared now that the cops were on it and they might knock her off. And I did not have any doubt at all that when the Leggett kid said anything that happened to

the little girl would happen to me, he meant anything.

"I give you my word, boys," I said, without much hope,
"I'd do anything in my power to help. But I don't know
anything about kidnapings. I am a legitimate businessman,
boys, I don't even have contacts anymore—"

"We believe you, Mr. Cochrane," the owl-eyed kid said "We believe you, Mr. Cochrane," the owl-eyed kid said quickly, and even then he was real polite. "We know you're not responsible, directly. But indirectly you are responsible, and so we're holding you accountable. You see, Mr. Cochrane, you're rich and comfortable and secure now, and the law can't touch you. It's wanting to get where you are that inspires young hoodlums to kidnap people, and so on."

"Never mind that," Ewell said, and shouldered the Leggett kid aside. "Just get busy, Mr. Cochrane. You're staying right in this room until she's back home, and then you can leave—in exactly the same condition she's in when she gets here. Understand?"

"There's a telephone right here," the Leggett kid said politely, and brought it over. "Call anyone you want."

I almost grabbed the phone, and then I saw the Leggett kid's owl eyes reading my mind, and the contemptuous little smile on his lips, and I knew for the first time just how bad off I was. You see, my first impulse was to call the police. Hell, I'm clean, and the Police Commissioner knows it, and anyway he owes me a favor. So I was going to call the Commissioner and tell him to come get me.

And then I thought, and I could see the Leggett kid reading my thought, How could I? And I knew the answer right then, just like that damned kid had known it all along: There was no way in the world Patsy Cochrane could make the Police Commissioner—or anyone else—believe he was being held prisoner in Harrington Minot's town house, with Harrington Minot's son and a bunch of other Ivy League college boys cutting off his fingers one by one. My own mother wouldn't have believed that story; I was having trouble believing it myself.

So I sat there with the telephone in my right hand, and I looked at my left hand with the three fingers all in a neat row and the neat bandage beginning to turn red where the other finger should have been. And I knew right then that everything had gone smash for me, through no fault of my own. Here I was, clean as a country parson, and I would be lucky to get out of this alive, let alone go on living clean, and meeting high-type people, and being a legitimate businessman.

I called my lawyer first, and before I even got him on the phone, I remembered he was not the lawyer I used to have. He is a former United States senator and a very good lawyer for a businessman, but he would not know anything about what I had to have done now.

So the boys got me a phone book, and after a long time I got the lawyer I used to have when I owned the brewery in Jersey. I was hoping he would still be in touch with some of the people I used to do business with in those days, because I no longer associate with low-type people.

"Lepke," I said to the lawyer, "this is the most important thing in the world to me right now. Expense is no

object. This kid has been snatched and I want her returned to her family, and I do not want her hurt in any way."
"Who snatched her?" Lepke asked.

"Who snatched ner?" Lepke asked.

"How do I know? I only know if the cops get to messing around, she is going to get hurt, and if she gets hurt I—well, I do not want her to get hurt. Numbers runners are all over the place. One of them must've heard something. Find out who runs the numbers now, and get on it."

"You run the numbers, Patsy," Lepke said, and you see

what I mean about being legitimate? Here I had that investment in the numbers business, and I did not even know it. I did not want Lepke to tell me, either, but he did not know that. "How much will you spend, Patsy?"

"Half a million. A million, if you have to. Just so it's quick. And efficient. Remember, she doesn't get hurt."

I could hear Lepke suck his teeth, and I remembered he didn't see many million-dollar deals since Repeal. But I got more millions than fingers, and now my fingers were more important to me.

important to me.

"What about the kidnapers, Patsy?" Lepke said, and I thought about that for a minute, and then I said, real dignified, "I do not believe such low-type people can successfully be rehabilitated into civilized society, do you, Lepke? I think steps should be taken to see that such criminals are not turned loose upon society again."

"Got you!" Lepke said. "Geeze, Patsy, I thought you'd gone soft when you went legit, but I should of known better. A million, huh? Okay. You'll get results."

That was it. I don't know how the kid was found or by whom, and I don't want to. I don't know what became of the kidnapers, either, though Lepke assures me that they will not prey upon legitimate people again. I paid Lepke one million bucks, and consider it cheap at that; and whom Lepke paid how much and for what is nothing I care to know about. The Minot kid walked in early Sunday afternoon chipper as a bug and proud as she could be of the bandage on her hand where they'd taken off her little finger. They hadn't hurt her any, she said, they'd had a doctor do the job. She was kind of awed at meeting me, right at first, said I was her favorite person after Johnnie Ray. She was a silly little girl but cute.

But, of course, the story will get around now, and under the circumstances I can regard my life as completely smashed. I do not especially regret the loss of my finger, and certainly I do not begrudge the money spent to save that nice little girl. But I can see that my chances of associating socially with high-type people are not going to be very good once this gets out, and that is not all.

Because these kids have started something awful, and I do not think it can be stopped now. If they are going to hold me personally accountable for all crime, whether or not I have anything to do with it—

Well, how would you like to have everybody in the city, or maybe everybody in the country, thinking that if some-body robbed his flat or cheated him in a crap game he body robbed his flat or cheated him in a crap game he could just come around and punch you in the nose for it? No, it looks like I don't have a chance to lead a nice quiet legitimate life or any kind of life at all unless I hide out somewhere, and so that is what I am going to do. I am liquidating all my investments and leaving the country.

But I think it is all very unfair.

SMART SUCKER

Richard Wormser

He went, a guy determined to make two more calls before the end of office hours, along the dark and dirty street. Torn newspapers and empty cigarette packages skittered along the gutter, and a lean black cat, not quite mangy, scuttled up a narrow alleyway.

When he raised his head to see if he was anywhere near

number 1262, the Merser Printing Company, the damp wind caught the brim of his new hat and he slapped a quick hand on the crown to hold it down. The wind was strong enough

to make the briefcase in his other hand a problem.

His name was Henry Croft, he sold office supplies, and he believed that hard work, a neat appearance and attention to his customers' individual needs would some day make him rich. He had a wife, one and seven-ninths children, lived in the suburbs—though not in as good a house as he someday hoped to own—and was generally considered a pretty good guy.

He did not belong in a place like this Slack Street except to pass through, selling a few typewriter ribbons and maybe a filing case or two. Which was why he was here.

Now, raindrops began to fall, big, idle ones that rolled in the dust of Slack Street without breaking. A frugal guy, he thought first of the new hat, the newly-pressed suit. He stepped into a doorway.

Then the rain changed, became the kind in which the drops are small and driven hard; the lasting kind of rain. He shifted the briefcase to his other hand and looked around.

Through unwashed windows neon ads for a couple of breweries shone at him from across the street. A bar, but one so lowly that it didn't have a name—just BAR & GRILL in letters that might have been born gilt on a onceblack background.

Waiting for the wind to slacken for a second, he made the dash across the street toward the neon.

As he made it into the bar, the wind took the heavy door away from him and slammed it shut. He gave the apologetic smile of an intruder.

Nobody smiled back at him.

There were six people in the bar, counting the bartender; four men, two women. Or rather, four boys and two girls; all of them had the unlined faces of the early twenties, despite their late-forty eyes.

Bubbles chased themselves endlessly around the brightly-lit rim of the juke box, out of rhythm with the rock-androll number that was playing.

Henry Croft laid his briefcase on a stool, wiped it with his handkerchief and then carefully placed his hat on the dried surface. He told the bartender: "Scotch on the rocks."

The bartender gave his dark hair an unnecessary slicking

with both palms, and said: "I don't read you, Mac."

"Scotch whiskey and ice. No water, no soda."

"Whyn't you say so?"

Henry Croft perched himself on the stool next to his hat and case. The young man on his right smelled slightly sweaty and more than slightly pomaded. The girl beyond him languidly pulled up her skirt and scratched a deadwhite thigh. The bartender slapped an old-fashioned glass in front of Henry Croft and waited for a dollar bill; he threw a quarter back in exchange.

The wind shifted and rain slashed viciously against the windows

The Scotch had never crossed salt water; its soil clung to his tongue, its peculiarly acrid aroma went up his nose and made him feel like he'd slept all night in a freshly-painted room.

The juke box stopped and one of the old-young men pushed away from the bar and languidly dropped another nickel in. The same record started; nobody seemed to be listening.

The bartender said: "Think he's a cop, Juney?"

Juney was the one who'd nickelled the machine. He said: "We'll find out." He ambled slowly toward Henry Croft, without looking at him. Even with Henry, Juney swept the briefcase and hat off onto the floor, and slouched down on the stool they had occupied. He said: "Beer."

When the bottle had been opened and the beer poured, he tasted it and said: "Naw, Carley. He's no cop." He smiled at Henry Croft between them. "Pick up your hat, man. What you so scared of?"

The one named Carley said: "That's a good hat, man. Too good to lay on the floor."

Henry Croft bent slowly and retrieved the hat and briefcase. The back of his neck ached all the time he was bent over, expecting the rabbit punch, the thin knife blade, the unknown. But nothing happened.

Juney said: "Drink your drink. You'll hurt Carley's feel-

ings."

Henry Croft picked up the glass. It was nearly to his mouth when the girl reached over and knocked it out of his

hand. The bad whiskey, the ice, the glass itself rolled down the front of his suit. The girl laughed. "Change seats with me, Juney. I like this square."

me, Juney. I like this square."

Carley began to laugh. It was a funny laugh, without humor, or friendship behind it. "Watch yourself, mister," he said. "When Gwen gets hot, she sizzles."

Juney slid out of his seat, and the girl slid over. She put her hand on Henry Croft's shoulder and slowly slid it down his arm until she could grab his wrist. Her hand was stronger than it looked; she had a pasty, sickly complexion. She was about twenty. "You got a name?"

"Henry."

"Buy me a drink, Henry. I'm Gwen."

He nodded at Carley. The bartender grinned, and poured a straight shot for Gwen, threw something on top of ice for Henry. The girl knocked her drink down in a single

Henry. The girl knocked her drink down in a single swallow, and moved her hand from Henry's wrist to his thigh. "What you want in here, Henry?"

He had to clear his throat twice before he could speak. "A drink. To get out of the rain," he said.

Gwen laughed her flat laugh again. "Oh boy. Some rain."

It didn't make any sense. Henry Croft grabbed his glass, and this time Gwen let him swallow the oily stuff. She caressed his thigh gently. "You like me, Henry?"

"Sure, Gwen, Sure."

Carley said: "That'll be a buck-fifty, mister."

Henry Croft took his wallet from his hip pocket. He laid two dollar bills on the bar, and started to put the wallet away. Gwen reached out and took the wallet from him and shoved it down the front of her dress, "You want to treat me right, don't you, Henry?"

He pulled away from her and then lunged at the point of her V-neck. Just as his fingers touched the cloth, Juney hit him on the jaw. He went back against the bar, and Carley brought a bottle down on his head, and he was quiet. Black and quiet.

When he came to he was in a car. It was still raining; almost the first thing he knew was the sweep and swish of the windshield wipers. He moaned and felt his head, con-

fusedly; he had no idea where he was or why he was here. or how he'd gotten there

Then the whole business of the bar came back to him. Carley, the bartender, was driving, and the girl Gwen was next to him, on the front seat. She had turned around. She said: "Juney, he's moving."

Juney's voice came from next to him, out of the shadows. "Let him move. If he gets too lively, I'll sock him again." Henry Croft lost all desire to move. He even held his

breath until he felt his eyes bugging. Then he let his wind out with a deep hissing, and Juney laughed. "He's being a good boy," Juney said. "He's even trying not to breathe."

"You can breathe, sucker," Gwen said. "Help yourself.

It won't be for long."

"Shut up," Carley said.

The car went along in the rain; Henry Croft didn't recognize any of the streets they twisted through. The district was residential, though, and he didn't know any of the suburbs except his own.

Then Carley said: "There they are," and started slowing down. "It's Paul," he said.

Henry Croft could see him, one of the young men from the bar, standing in the rain, waving his arms. Carley turned the car in behind another, following Paul's directions, and stopped with his front bumper against the rear one of the parked car.

Juney said: "Watch my sucker," and got out of the car. He went ahead and got in behind the wheel of the parked sedan, and then disappeared, as though crouching under the dashboard. Gwen twisted around in the front seat, and said: "I'm watching you, Henry."

Juney reappeared, and waved his hand. Carley let the car go forward in low gear, and Juney's car went ten or twenty feet along the wet pavement. Then Juney waved his hand again, and Carley cut the motor. Paul came out of the rain, and opened the back door. "Out, sucker. It won't be long now." He reached in and prodded Henry Croft, who climbed out, stiffly.

The rain felt good on his battered head.

Carley climbed out and took up a post on Henry Croft's

other side. He and Paul half pulled him to the front car. "Let's move out," Paul said. "Even without the starter, sometimes these car-loving citizens wake up when they hear their own motor."

This time Carley got in the back seat with Henry Croft. He lounged back in the corner, reaching under his coat. He took out a gun, balanced it loosely in his hand, grinning at Henry Croft. In the front seat Gwen suddenly laughed, and said: "Oh, cut it out, Paul."

Carley said: "Know what this is. Henry?"

Henry Croft nodded.

"Well, then, tell me." Carley waited a minute, and when Henry didn't speak, he suddenly lashed out with the pistol, rapping the sights into Henry Croft's belly. "Speak up, sucker."

Henry Croft gulped air with difficulty, and said: "A gun."

Carley nodded wisely, while Gwen told Paul: "That hurts, damnit." But she laughed.

Carley said: "Kids. Can't keep their hands off a dame . . . Yeah, Henry, this is a gun. You know what a gun does?" Again he waited.

Henry said: "It shoots people."

Carley gave his schoolmaster nod again. "Yeah. A gun. And it shoots people. Dead. So does Paul's gun, so does Juney's . . . You gotta gun, Gwen?"

Gwen said: "If I did, I'd murder this Paul," still laughing.

"Kids," Carley said again. "Always I got to work with kids. So Gwen doesn't have a gun. So there will be only three guns. You ever have eighteen holes in you?"

Henry shook his head. Then, remembering, he said: "No,

I never did."

Carley said: "Well, then, I suppose you don't know how that feels. Well, to tell you the truth, neither do I. But I can guess, and a smart sucker like you, you can guess, too. So maybe you'll do what we tell you to. Do you think you will?"

Henry Croft said: "Yes. Of course I will."

"A smart sucker," Carley said again, and then was silent

while the car went around some more corners and through a little park and out again, the water splashing sidewise from the wheels and the windshield wipers squeaking slightly. The wipers on the first car had not squeaked like this.

Then they stopped, and Juney turned the headlights off and said: "This is the place, folks. The sucker know what

and said: Inis is the place, folks. The sucker know what he's to do, Carley?"

"No," Carley said, "but he'll do it. He's a very nice sucker." He laughed. "Listen, Henry. It's easy. All you do is go up to that house, see there, and ring the bell. Talk nice to them, Henry. They got a heavy chain on the door. Get them to open it."

Paul said: "Supposing he tells them to call the cops?"
"Why, I guess he will," Carley said. "That's about the quickest way I know to get people to open doors. Who wouldn't trust a sucker who's calling copper?"

Paul said: "I don't like it. I like things simple."

Carley said: "Now he tells me. My strong silent pal.

Okay. You go up there. Give them a nice simple look at your face. It'll make them happy. Or maybe wear your mask. People always open doors for guys with masks on. Especially at night. Especially a guy who's got a payroll in the house."

Paul said: "Okay, okay."

Carley said: "So now you know, Henry. Get going."

Henry opened the door of the car. He did it slowly, thinking: Now my fingerprints are on a stolen car, and knowing, even while he thought it, that it was a silly thought. His shoes squished across the pavement, and he felt lonesome and chilled and sick. I'll get pneumonia out of this, he thought, and remembering what Carley had said

this, he thought, and remembering what Carley had said about the eighteen holes, that was pretty silly too.

Now he was at the steps, four of them, leading up to a little porch, sheltered over so a person wouldn't get wet waiting for the door to be opened. Lawn on either side of the walk and the steps, nice little house, dark, not a light showing. He took a deep breath and pressed the doorbell. The ringing in the depth of the house was shockingly loud.

He stood there, thinking he was going to be sick to his

stomach, was going to faint. Instead, he sneezed. He thought he heard an abrupt movement close to him in the night air when he made the involuntary noise; but he

couldn't be sure. Then he pressed the bell-button again.

A light came on in the hall, a voice said: "All right, all right," and a peephole opened in the door. All he could see was a bushy brow and the bleary eye of a freshly-disturbed sleep, but the voice was masculine and angry: "What do you want?"

do you want?"

"I've been—call the police," Henry Croft said.

The peephole closed then, and there was the noise of the door being unlocked. But it opened only a crack, and there was a heavy chain, brassily shining, that clinked. "Man, you're beat up," the voice inside the house said. It belonged, Henry could see now, to a burly man in ridiculously bright blue striped pajamas. "What happened to you?"

"Hold up," Henry said. "Taken for a ride. I—"

"All right," the burly man said. "Sit on the porch out there. I'll phone the cops."

The guns in the night were real. If this door closed in his face, he'd be shot. Eighteen holes. Again his mind veered away into ridiculousness, shrinking from the reality of death, and a silent bar from the song Sixteen Tons came back to him.

But he knew what he had to do. He flung himself forward, clawing at the edge of the open door, risking having the heavy wood crush his fingers against the frame. "Let me in. For God's sake, they might come back."

The big man hesitated. "I can't—aw, hell, all right.

You'll die out there, and you don't look like you could hurt me."

More noise, the noise of the chain being slid out of the slot that held it, then the door opened a little more, and a blue-striped arm shot out to jerk Henry into the house, shut the door quickly.

It didn't work. Bodies hit Henry Croft from behind, forcing him and the door and the burly man all to swing back into the hall in confusion; then feet were running outside, and more bodies jammed into the mess, and then the door was closed, and the little entry hall was filled with

guns and masked faces and terror.

A purple mask said: "You're Joe Wheeler."

The burly man said: "So what?"

Upstairs a female voice called: "Joe, Joe what is it?" and the purple mask made a gesture. Two of the masked men started up the stairs. Henry thought they were Paul and Juney, but he couldn't be sure. It didn't matter.

From behind a black silk mask, Carley's voice said: "You done well, Henry." The voice laughed nastily. "Somebody give Henry a gun, He done well."

The third man left in the hall had on a white silk mask, ornamented with sequins; something for a lady in evening dress to wear to a dance. He pushed a gun into Henry's hands, said: "Help cover Mr. Wheeler there, Henry."

Wheeler looked at Henry and said: "You had me fooled. You sure had me fooled." Henry Croft had never been spoken to with such enmity in his life.

He said: "But I—" and a gun barrel slashed his ribs

Purple Mask said again: "You're Joe Wheeler. You're running a little construction job out here. Today you drew your payroll from the bank in the city; you don't pay off till tomorrow. So the money's here in the house."

"Out at the shack," Joe Wheeler said. "I left it on the job."

"Yeah?" Purple Mask didn't sound convinced. "You believe that, Henry?"

Henry said: "I—" but Purple Mask had raised his voice. "Hurry it up there. You guys ain't here to play around." He bowed to Joe Wheeler. "Very playful guys."

Joe Wheeler said nothing. He seemed to have settled down to a policy of quietly hating Henry Croft.

Paul and Juney came down the stairs again. They had a woman between them, a woman about thirty, not bad looking despite her lack of makeup, pretty good figure, with nothing over it but a thin nightgown.

"They wouldn't let me get a robe, Joe," she said.

"Don't worry, lady, we got girls of our own," Carley said. "Where's the money, Joe Wheeler?"

"On the job," Wheeler said. "In the shack."

"Let her go, boys," Purple Mask said.
On the stairs, Paul and Juney paused, then they pushed, together and Mrs. Wheeler came down to the hall, fast. She landed on her knees, hands scrabbling on the floor to break her fall. One breast came out of the top of the nightgown, and Joe Wheeler groaned a little.

Paul and Juney followed her down, slowly. She started to rise, and Carley took his foot and pushed her down on the floor, lightly. "The money," he said.

Joe Wheeler said: "Guys, I—"

Carley leaned forward, putting his weight on the foot that pinned Mrs. Wheeler to the floor. His eyes glittered through the mask, watching Joe Wheeler. Mrs. Wheeler screamed once, as Carley's other foot came up off the floor.

"In the kitchen," Joe Wheeler said. "The flour bin."

Carley put both feet on the floor. "Show us, sucker."
Wheeler went away, Carley following him. Paul and Juney stood at the foot of the stairs, looking down at the half-naked woman, looking up at Henry Croft. Paul bent forward and looked at Mrs. Wheeler more closely. "Not bad," he said. "For a rainy night."

"Cut it out," Purple Mask said. "Cut it out." He had never taken his eyes off Henry Croft.

"She's too old, anyway," Juney said. "She's stiff in the joints, aren't you, lady?" He cleared his throat, spat on the

floor, near the woman.

"You can get up now," Purple Mask said. "If we need you anymore, it'll be easy to put you back down."

Carley came back alone. His hands and the cuffs of his

coat were white with flour. The rain in his sleeves was caking it. He carried a sack of something or other; he slapped it against the newel post, and flour whitened the air. Mrs. Wheeler was getting to her knees. Her hands shakingly adjusted the lace V around her breasts. "Where is he? Where's Joe?"

Carley said: "Who told you to get up?" and the money sack whirled in his hands. It landed across the back of the woman's neck and she fell back down to the floor, hard. Henry thought he heard the bones in her nose break, but he couldn't be sure, because Carley was looking at him now. "I slapped the old man down," he said.

"He's in the kitchen, but he ain't cooking. Let's roll."

Henry Croft stepped aside to let them—in God's name roll. Roll out of the house, out of the street, out of his life. But Carley made a gesture with his gun. "Out, Henry."

They had made a very good boy of him. He went out.
Out into the cold, the dreary, but not the lonesome rain. He had plenty of company.

Gwen was behind the wheel of the second car, now. Carley motioned Henry into the right-hand front seat, slid behind the wheel, crowding Gwen over against Henry. He dropped the flour-stained sack into Gwen's lap.

Other guys jumped into the back, they took off fast; Gwen had kept the motor running. Henry leaned back against the cushions, shivering.

Gwen's hand was back on his thigh. She was breathing hard. "That was kicks," she said. "That was joy, way up. Ohhhh." She let out her breath in a long sigh.

Carley said, as he had said before: "Kids. I gotta work

with kids. Bopsters . . . Henry!"

Henry said: "Yes?"

"We gonna have to bump you off, Henry?"

Gwen's fingers worked up and down Henry's thigh ecstatically. "Let's," she said. "Let's bump Henry off, Carley. We don't need him any more."

"Shut up," Carley said. "You had your kicks for the night, Gwen . . . Henry, while you were out, we went through your wallet. We know you, we know where you live. Pictures in the wallet, a wife, a kid."

"Squares," Gwen said.
Carley said: "Give him back the wallet, Gwen. You can keep the money."

She said: "I want the pictures. For my album." But Carley growled, and she reached into her bra, got the leather out, slipped out the money and gave Henry the wallet. Then she put her hand back on him.

"Leave him alone," Carley said. "Henry, we re letting you out. Near your house. You know Polacks, Henry, Polish people?"

"Some," Henry said.

"They got a custom. They prop stiffs up in their coffins, and take pictures of them. That's the kind of snapshots you'll be carrying if you talk, Henry."

He skidded the car around a corner, then another one. "You get me. Henry?"

Henry Croft said: "Yes."

Gwen said: "Ah, the river, Carley. In the river with him. We could tie the car jack to his feet." Her busy hand dug in

Carley said: "I'm gonna ditch you someday, Gwen. And Juney on accounta you. You got no business sense. We're cool now. Kill this mark, and we're hot."

"I like being hot," Gwen said simply. "It's living, when you're hot."

Carley slid the car to a stop, silently, expertly. "Out, Henry. You'll keep your mouth buttoned. A guy away from home all day, a salesman, with a wife. And a kid. You'll keep right on being good, Henry, like you was all evening."

Henry opened the door. He was sure it couldn't be over, that the nightmare wasn't ending, that there'd be a shot from the car, a blackjack out of the night. But all that happened was Gwen's taunting voice drifting back to him: "You didn't kiss me good night, Hen-ry—" and then they were gone.

Gone to some unknown rendezvous, where they'd ditch the cars, back to the bar on Slack Street . . . One street he'd never walk down any more, one neighborhood he'd avoid. The Merser account would have to go unserviced, some other company could have that business.

Thinking about the Merser account, thinking about business brought him back to reality a little. He looked around. He wasn't more than three blocks from his home.

Excitement died in him, and so did the last tail-ends of his energy. The three blocks were endless, and later he couldn't have said if he'd walked them in the rain, or if the downpour had stopped.

Then he was on his own porch, fumbling at the lock with his own key, a little surprised that the key had been in

his pocket all this time, but home. He got into the hall, and he closed the door after him. He would have to get a chain like Joe Wheeler's. Everybody ought to have a chain on his front door

And there was Peggy, his wife, coming down the stairs, in a long house coat, holding it up a little, her eyes anxious and black-circled in her pale face. "Henry. Oh, Henry, thank God you're home."

He mumbled something. Then she switched on the hall light, and screamed a little. He looked down at himself. His clothes were soaked with rain, his shirt filthy, and despite all the water, there was still some of the reek of liquor on him. He put up his hand slowly, and his fingers found the bump where they'd knocked him out in the bar on Slack Street.

A couple of buttons were missing from his coat, and his necktie was a soggy string.

He said, with a great effort: "Don't ask any questions, Peggy. Don't ever ask any questions about tonight. I've been through hell."

She was a good girl. The remembrance of how good she was made tears come to his eyes. She bent over and got an arm under his shoulders, helped him to his feet. "All right," she said. "No questions."

They started up the stairs. He was making a terrible attempt to struggle back to normalcy, to remember business and what he had to do tomorrow. His whole schedule of accounts had been in his briefcase, and that was gone. He was going to be bawled out by the sales manager, he might even lose his job . . . There had been forty dollars in the wallet, and Gwen had that. And his hat was gone, he'd have to buy a new one, probably his suit was ruined.

They were halfway up the stairs. Peggy stopped on the landing, said: "Rest here a minute . . ."

The phone rang. They looked at each other, he with guilt, she with an expression he couldn't read. It rang and rang, and finally Peggy shrugged and went down to answer it. Maybe she said something about the bell waking the baby, he couldn't be sure . . . She was pretty far along with her pregnancy, the second child was due in two

months, he shouldn't have let her help him that way . . . She didn't weigh much.

Her voice came through the concentric rings of fatigue in his head. "Yes, he's back... A few minutes ago... No, he didn't... That won't be necessary... Well, if you have to."

Then she was back. "The police," she said. "I called them when you didn't come home."

"Shouldn't have," he mumbled . . . But she was helping him up the stairs again, and then he was in their bedroom, and she was taking his clothes off, clucking a little as she saw the bruises on him.

He stood in the shower a long time, resting his head against the wall, letting warm water flow down his back. When he came out, there were clean pajamas on the bed. He put them on, reached for the covers, and Peggy was back.

"The police," she said. "Downstairs. I told them—well, they said they'd come up here if you'd rather."

"No," he said. "Downstairs. Less noise . . . the baby."

As soon as he came, in robe and slippers, into the living room, Joe Wheeler jumped up and said: "That's him. That's the son of a bitch."

An older man caught Joe Wheeler's arm, and said: "Now, take it easy. I'm Lieutenant Myers, this is Detective Sloan, he'll take notes. Mr. Croft, your wife's description, when she phoned in, was so much like the one Mr. Wheeler gave us of the fellow who—"

Henry Croft said: "Yes. I was there when they held up Mr. Wheeler."

Lieutenant Myers said: "You'll have to tell us."

Henry Croft told it. He told it all but two things: the names—just first names—he'd heard, and the location of the bar he'd found them in.

Joe Wheeler said: "It listens right. He didn't have a mask, the others did. I guess they were pushing him around, now I think of it... I want to go home. My wife's nose is broken, the doctor's there."

Henry Croft said: "I'm sorry."

Joe Wheeler said, gruffly: "You don't look like you had

it so easy yourself." Then he turned and slammed out.

Lieutenant Myers said: "You won't tell us the names, or where you met them?"

"They know where I live," Henry Croft said. "They found pictures of my wife and baby in my pocket. For God's sake, Lieutenant..."

The Lieutenant nodded, slowly. "All right. I can't make you talk. Maybe the D.A. could, but probably he won't want to. If I need you, I'll call on you."

Henry Croft didn't go to work the next day. The day after he did, though, and it wasn't good. Peters, the sales manager, was sore about the loss of the schedule, sore about the day off . . . He took Henry Croft off his territory and gave it to another man, put Henry on a route that would make three quarters as much, at the best.

He had to buy a hat, a briefcase, a suit. His hospital plan would pay for the coming baby, but not for somebody to stay with his kid while his wife was in the hospital. The house needed a paint job bad. And he was sure that insurance salesman would be back when the new baby came. With another child, Henry Croft earnestly believed, just as the salesman had said, a man owed it to his wife and kids to have a little more insurance.

A week after it all happened, he sat at his desk, making up his daily reports, but his mind was on money. Joe Wheeler was maybe covered by insurance, but he was the one who had been robbed. Henry Croft. Sucker was what they had called him, and they were right. That he agreed with their name for him caused a hot flush of anger.

He threw down his pencil and shoved the reports on the desk away from him. This defiance startled him, but also made him feel strangely good.

"They took forty dollars from me," he said forcefully in his thought, "and I'm going to make them give it back." But at once the courage wooshed out of Henry Croft,

But at once the courage wooshed out of Henry Croft, like air out of a busted balloon. What was that his mother always said? She said that it was better to be a live dog than a dead lion.

The phone rang, and he picked it up. His wife's voice said, "Henry. I hated to call you, but—"

"What is it?" An image of her body, misshapen with child, falling, flashed in his mind. "You're all right?"

"It's all right, dear, I'm all right,"

It was their son who had come down with some virus and the doctor had been in. She had to have him make a house call because of the high fever. Would he pick up the prescription?

Henry Croft said no, he might be a little late; have it de-livered and give the delivery kid a dime tip; he hung up.

She shouldn't be worried, he thought, not in her condition. Money. A house call costs more. The hot anger washed through him again and he unconsciously clenched his fist.

It was four-thirty and Henry Croft told the girl at the switchboard that he was going to make a call. He hadn't told a lie. She looked at him strangely as he went out.

The street didn't look any better, even though it wasn't rainy and windy as it had been that day, but mild with the first suggestion of summer.

Henry Croft walked across the street and into the bar. At first the gloomy interior appeared deserted. The juke box bulked dark and silent. For an instant he felt relief that there was no one there. Carley came out of the Men's Room, wiping his hands on his apron.

"Yeah?" Carley said as he headed for the bar. Then as he came down back of it, he recognized his customer.

Henry Croft put his hat on the bar. "Scotch," he said. "Where are the others? The girl and the others? I want my forty dollars."

"Have you gone off your nut!" He kept his eyes on Henry as he poured the Scotch.

Paul and Gwen and Juney sauntered in the front door.

Carley said: "You know what sucker here wants? He wants his forty bucks." Carley let out a guffaw.

"No kiddin'," Juney said.

Paul laughed.

Gwen took Henry Croft's arm in both her hands and

drew herself up close to him, put her lips to his throat.

"G'wan," Carley urged Gwen. "G'wan. Maybe he'd take that forty he's squawking about in trade."

Paul said: "This your hat?" and picked up Henry Croft's hat from the bar.

Henry Croft, with a violent twist of his shoulders, knocked Gwen to one side. "You put that hat down," he ordered Paul, cords in his neck distended, arms tensed, fists clenched. "Put it down, you sonofabitch, or I'll kill vou!"

A long silence, Paul spun the hat on his forefinger. "Put it down."

As Paul put the hat down on the bar with exaggerated care, he shrugged and said, "He says he wants me to put his hat down."

They all laughed. All of them except Henry Croft. He took the gun from his pocket that they had given him in Jim Wheeler's home and he said, "Now. My forty dollars."

Gwen said: "Isn't he the big, big man."

They all laughed again.

Henry Croft gestured with the gun. He told Gwen: "Right in the face," he said. "So help me, the bullet right in your face."

The place turned very silent. Henry felt himself quivering. Not with fear. Rage had carried him beyond fear.

Juney said, finally: "He's sore. He's real sore." He

laughed. It was a very flat laugh.

Gwen's face was white.

Carley rang up No Sale on the register. As he took bills out, he said, "He didn't go snitchin' to the cops. No cop's been here. Henry's okay." He was almost placating. "You deadheads chip in on this. Get it up, before he shoots my place all to hell."

Paul turned the hat over on the bar and each of them dropped their contribution into it, laughing, making cracks, but dropping it in.

Henry Croft counted the money before he left. He drank his Scotch, neat. Then he walked straight out, not backing out, but straight out.

Tomorrow by God he was going in to Peters' office and demand his old route back. Peters had no goddam right taking it away from him. He hoped his kid's fever had subsided

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