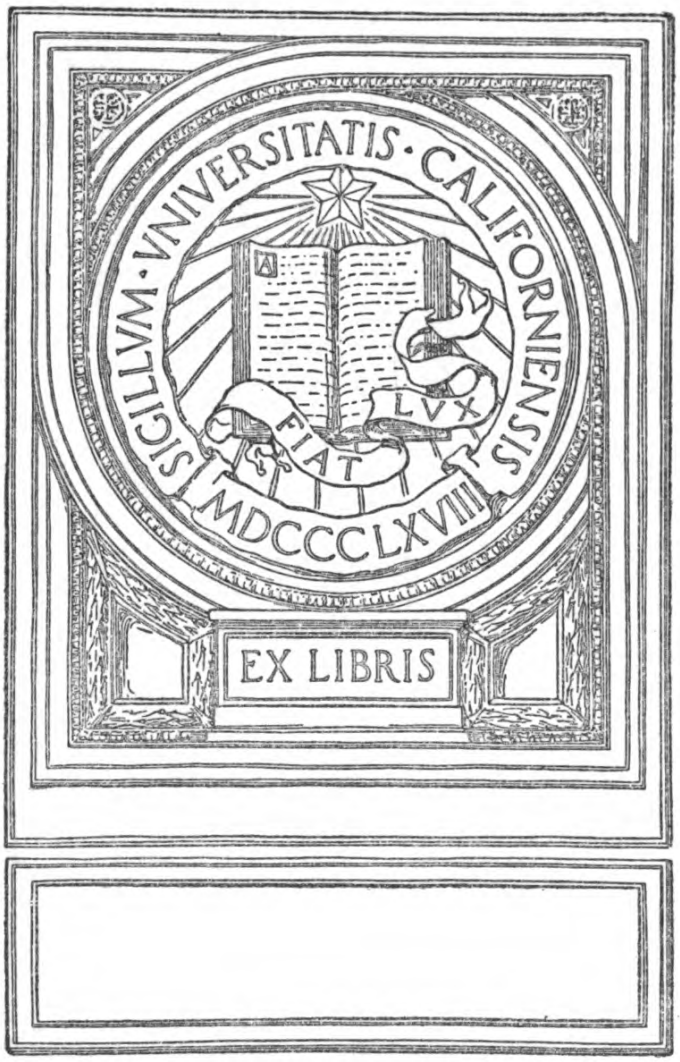
SENECA, U.S.A.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SENECA, U.S.A.

Books by JOHN ROEBURT

SENECA, U.S.A.

JIGGER MORAN

THERE ARE DEAD MEN IN MANHATTAN

DEATH IS A LONG TIME

SENECA, U.S.A.

by

JOHN ROEBURT

1947

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New York

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To Agda
who mothered this book

SENECA, U.S.A.

Chapter One

1.

The alarm clock sounded and soon the hands prodded him roughly, pinching. The sleeping man toiled upward, then sat on the edge of the bed looking dispersed.

Mary set a steaming sugared lemonade on the nightstand beside the clock. "It's past nine, Shep." Her voice was quarrelsome. She pointed to the glass of liquid. "And for once, drink it while it's hot."

The telephone rang in the narrow foyer and his eyes moved behind her resentfully as she crossed the room. His lids were drooping when Mary came back to the nightstand, lifted the clock, and stood over him. She held the clock straight inside his vision. It read 9:10.

"It was your precious employer." There was a con-

temptuous overtone— "When you finally come alive, there's a directive on the telephone pad."

Shep made grunting sounds of appeasement, and set his feet into his waiting slippers. Mary said, "I've got a news item for you—Lem Morrissey was beaten at the Bunte plant late yesterday."

Shep mumbled distractedly, "Lem's always carrying a chip."

"That's glib, Shep." She sought his eyes and held them implacably. "The beating means much more to Seneca than just Lem and his belligerence." Now there was a flaming ultimatum in her look. "Suppress it and I'll lose my last shred of respect for you."

His floating face took form slowly. For a while he stared at her moodily, his mind slowly erecting defenses. Then the eyes kindled, and he came to life.

The endless quarrel resumed.

2.

The old man with the darting eyes wore a Spanish-American War overseas cap at a rakish angle. His chair was tilted against the building so that the late-morning sun warmed the lower half of his face. Behind him, against the wall, a bronze plaque attached to the building read: SENECA. NEXT STOP TO HEAVEN. Below, in block arrangement, hidden from view by the old man's back, was a listing of the number of miles of paved sidewalks, the number of schools, parks, libraries, hospitals, and a detailing of the

names of the great and lesser of the town's fathers.

The building was a wide, oyster-white, Dutch-English colonial with coal-black shutters. Once a dwelling in frontier days (built close to the road as a defensive measure against Indian raids), the structure was now used solely for business. To the old man's far left, a wood-hewn sign read POST OFFICE. To his right, closer, a metal sign announced THE SENECA LEADER. AMERICA'S LEADING COUNTY DAILY.

The old man held a newspaper loosely, part of it falling into his lap. The newspaper was opened to the obituary page. The old man wore a pleased look reading it. He read a name aloud, giving it its solemn instant in reverent tones, tst-tsted lugubriously, then cackled, slapping his thigh in a mounting convulsion of merriment until his spare body shook to bursting, while he looked at passers-by as if he wanted to share a huge joke with them. This routine was repeated with each name of the departed dead. It was a formula for self-amusement that endured through every morning the old man was well enough to take his public station.

Then, having exhausted the obituary column (four deaths recorded for the week past) the old man was sated with his sport. The newspaper slipped from his fingers to his lap, and from his lap to the floor. Rusty Stone, Seneca's oldest bachelor (and oldest citizen), took to saluting the pedestrian public, individualizing each passer-by with a rasping too-loud greeting that rolled ambiguously and could be taken

for an imprecation by the suspicious, and accepting the lukewarm acknowledgements of passing housewives, shopkeepers, civil servants, small produce farmers, factory hands, with a benign nod and an under-the-breath "drat ye."

A late-model station wagon pulled to the curb. A man with a puffed front, who looked unmistakably like an officeholder, and a teen-aged girl in pigtails alighted, leaving the station wagon through separate doors. They moved self-consciously toward the post office.

Rusty called out, "Mornin', Mayor. Mornin', Susan."

The girl in pigtails smiled. The officeholder paused and said warily, "Morning, Rusty. Things going all right?"

Rusty said sunnily, "Fer m'self, better'n fine. Ain't never felt better." Now his brows drew portentously. "But t'tell the truth, Mayor—I ain't feelin' easy about the town. Ain't feelin' easy a bit."

The dignitary glowered. The tableau was irking—this daily tribute wrung from him by Rusty before he could clear the post office threshold. Being astute, as officeholders must be, and being acutely aware of Rusty's long-flowered talents for innuendo and anarchy, the mayor knew that behind the expressions of concern for Seneca was a scorching contempt for its administrators. Of those constitutents he secretly or openly detested, Rusty was close to the top of the list. There was no shunting of Rusty, no escape from his

waspishness. Rusty was eternally there to vex and harass; flanking him in patriotic parades, sharing honor seats on platforms in the miscellaneous circuses usual in a typical American community. As Seneca's oldest soldier, Rusty was a symbol it was impolitic to overlook or fail to employ. The mayor secretly wished Rusty were but a symbol, hoped for the day when the symbol and the man became one.

Mayor Porter said forbiddingly, "What's wrong now, Rusty?"

Rusty said, "Dunno for sure, not bein' the mayor. But 'ere's somethin' in the air, if ye ask me." He spat at a finger and held it up. " 'Ere's a big wind blowin' over Seneca. Ye better nail the town down or it'll blow away."

The mayor snorted resentfully, and entered the post office with Rusty's pitched cackle echoing in his ears.

Rusty fussed his overseas cap jauntily over his brow, adjusted himself comfortably, and lowered his eyes in preparation to doze off. There was a stillness and there was also the rhythmic, moody hum of the machinery in the *Leader's* pressroom upstairs.

A heavy tread vibrated the wooden platform porch and scuffling sounds of feet moved closer, stopping. Rusty twisted sparingly, and peered into the face of Shep Ward. Shep was pin-neatly groomed, and gave the earliest hint of girth. The face looked unnaturally relaxed, as though this calm was the result of a sustained effort at control.

Shep teased, "Watched you from across the street. So you're still telling the mayor, eh, Rusty?"

"Mornin', Shep." Rusty's eyes widened fondly as he set the overseas cap back on his head. He liked Shep Ward; looked forward impatiently to each morning's "shop talk" with the *Leader's* managing editor. This liking for Shep Ward was paradoxical to his otherwise vast contempt for humanity universally, but Rusty liked the paradox too. The more he regarded the paradox in the course of his self-review, the more enthusiastic he became about Shep, and the greater his admiration. It was odd, baseless, capricious, and Rusty held to it for exactly these reasons.

Rusty proceeded to set up the premise for this morning's "shop talk." His voice scolded, "The mayor needs tellin', Shep. The crazy way he's running things—"

Shep reached and tickled Rusty's ribs. "What makes you so cussed, Rusty? Old men are supposed to be affable—especially with the Lord watching and about to reach for you any minute." He wagged a finger. "Dammit, Rusty, you won't have any mourners when you go."

Rusty snorted, "Don't want none. No mourners. Ain't no one I'm sorry t'leave and I want no one sorry t'see me go." He pointed at the bronze plaque behind him, and his scratching tones deepened, "If Seneca's the next stop t'heaven fer truth, and Seneca folks are expectin' t'be there, then it's the deep pit fer me—all the way down inter hell."

Shep's finger again in Rusty's ribs failed to divert the old man or stem his tirade. "Nope. Ain't sorry t'go and they's nuthin' t'keep me stayin', except cussedness. I've lived one under a hundred years and damn me if I don't count off better'n ten more if I have to—jes t'be around t'see that atom bomb go off. Damn me if I wouldn't set one off m'self, if I had one."

It was plainly rant, a devil's brew soured by age that men of discernment could readily label and leave untasted. But Shep looked like a man drinking, his brow frowning distaste, but drinking. His eyes looked puzzled, contemplative, as if having sampled, he was now constrained to determine vintage, and then, more than vintage, the subtleties and formula of the brew.

Shep was thinking: Again these tensions . . . the second time in one morning, the hundredth time this week. What soured people? . . . This soured old man, misanthropic a gasp away from death's door. . . . And after an almost even century of life, without a kind word for the hundred years, the hundred times a hundred people he had known. . . .

He looked at Rusty earnestly. Where, he wondered, was the nostalgia for having lived, the chuckling memories of youth and escapade. . . . He tried to read Rusty's wizened face. Was it a canker of age alone; an aggression come of a secret reluctance to call quits; something wholly personal, peculiar to this man greedy enough to have lived too long? Then what

was the warp in the daily faces of the younger and the young—the day-to-day faces of the men and women of Seneca? And what was the warp in the face of Mary, his wife. . . .

Rusty nudged, "You fallin' asleep standin', Shep?"

The thought-lines dissolved and Shep's face lightened slowly. It was a technique of will and the struggle could be read photographically. When he spoke, the teasing note was back. "Keep up that anarchistic talk and you won't get your obituary on the front page, as promised."

Rusty looked anxious. "Yer not foolin' me, Shep, are ye? It's t'be the front page . . . ?"

"On my oath. Not to hurry you, but I've even got it written already. A real story, and a column long."

Rusty looked gratified. "With a headline mebbe?"

"With a headline." Shep glanced at his wrist. "Bull session's over, old soldier. I'm overdue upstairs."

Rusty complained, "Shep, ye been gittin' in later'n later mornin's. We don't get t'talk much. What's been keepin' ye?"

Later and later . . . ! Eleven-thirty was a remarkably early escape from the home skirmishing with a wife that heralded each new day—a wife who had suddenly found goading powers of speech after eleven years of docility. . . .

Shep said wryly, "Just taking things easier."

Rusty made a noise with his nose. "Ye won't be takin' things easier this day, Shep. They's a firebrand upstairs breathin' smoke—waitin' t'greet ye."

Shep showed irritation. No, dear God, no unscheduled callers, no doorcrashers carrying a chip! He asked fearfully, "Who is it, Rusty?"

"Lem Morrissey. He's got his head wrapped up like a mummy. Says Bill Saunders done it fer Lem tryin' t'picket the Bunte plant. If ye ask me, somethin's about t'pop over at Bunte's." Rusty laughed contentedly to himself.

Something pop! Shep crossed his fingers superstitiously. Bunte was Seneca's giant industrial nerve. If something popped! An injury to the giant nerve, and the ache would drive the town insane. . . .

He asked wretchedly, although he knew the answer. "What's Lem here for? What does he expect of me?"

Rusty hoisted a shoulder. "Dunno. Guess Lem wants his name in th' paper fer sure. Heard him say he'd wait it out 'til you got in."

Now Shep looked bedeviled. What did people think a newspaper was! A clinic for broken heads? A pamphlet press serving every cant and cult? It was exasperating—this new mood of intrusion from the outside. What idiocy was it these last years that brought every style of crackpot, crank, psychopath, storming into a newspaper's private quarters, vilifying staff personnel, damning politics, the school system, enterprise, the orderly processes of government . . . ! With Lem Morrissey the worst. Once Lem had chained himself to a steam radiator, demanding that the truth be printed. The truth! Lem's truth. . . . Shep's face flamed. What about a plain

citizen's right to privacy from unwarranted intrusion! Where was an editor's right to write and edit as he saw fit!

He had an impulse to turn away, go off, avoid Lem Morrissey. Shep was convinced that the man was mentally unhinged—more than a little daft from brooding over the street killing of his brother, Niles, ten years ago. Niles had been the apple of Lem's eye, a moving singer of Irish folk melodies, and a labor organizer until Seneca's then Public Enemy Number One, Slip Masterson, had shot him dead. With Niles' death the life had gone out of Lem and a frenzy had taken its place. . . . The meeting was something to be avoided. A conflict with Lem could complete his own unnerving for the day.

Shep asked, "Is Andrews in, Rusty?" Andrews was Spence Andrews, owner and publisher of the *Leader*.

"Nope. Was in, though." Rusty grinned. "Came down 'n ordered me t'move my chair closer t'the post office. But I ain't heedin' him."

"How long ago was that?"

"Round eleven, mebbe. Jes' before Missus Spence came lookin' fer him."

Shep asked apprehensively, "She still here?"

The old man's head went up and down affirmatively. He thrust a hand in front of him, grinning widely. "The information'll cost ye not under fifty cents. Tobaccer money."

Shep dipped into a pocket, then dropped some coins in Rusty's hand. He crossed the wooden plat-

form, paused, shrugged resignedly, and began toiling up the rickety staircase to the *Leader* offices.

3.

At the frosted glass door leading out of the anteroom and into the editorial room, a man rose from the long wall bench and confronted him.

"Want to talk to you for a minute, Ward." The man spoke from inside bandages wound like football headgear.

Shep reddened. "Can I get to my office and get organized for a minute, Morrissey? I'm just checking in."

"This will only take a minute." Morrissey got between Shep and the door. "You'll either say yes or no, do it or not do it." There was a cynical hint. . . .

Feeling trapped, Shep sought a delay for poise, so he removed his coat, folded it carefully, slowly, then laid it down on a corner of the long bench. Finally, he sat down, motioning Lem Morrissey to a seat. Morrissey sat down impatiently.

Shep crossed his legs, preparing, then turned his eyes on Morrissey's face. His eyes were a melancholy gray and as he trained them attentively on Morrissey, an onlooker would approve Shep as a sympathetic auditor, a man of developed conversational zests. The truth, however, was: Talk sent Shep into a sleep state, his habitual sanctuary from the sounds and furies of a close society of neurotics, grousers, jabber-

wockies. This escape, once involuntary, was now a quite conscious process. His infrequent sallies into the tangleweed and warp outside the sanctuary convinced him more of the virtue of his withdrawal—and its wisdom.

"What's on your mind?" he said gravely.

"It's written all over my kisser. I'm not made up for Halloween, Ward."

"Hurt bad?"

Morrissey brushed civility aside. "Why don't you quit sparring, Ward! Let's talk about issues—forget my goddam jaw."

There was a long steel needle reaching to prick him, inoculate him. The warp. . . . Shep moved closer to his retreat.

"Go ahead and talk."

"I want you to print it the way it happened. That's why I'm here instead of home in bed."

"Yes?"

"Saunders slugged me while I was telling the boys what the score was over at Bunte's. Slugged me with an illegal weapon—blackjack, I think—while I was exercising my constitutional rights to free speech." Morrissey paused, his eyes hounding Shep's face. Then, "Got it straight?"

Shep nodded. "Uh huh. Besides, the police report's no doubt already in. That's routine. You could have gone home to bed, Morrissey."

"Crap, mister. There isn't any police report. Like there wasn't the last time somebody broke my head

because they couldn't shut my mouth. The police turn their backs like I didn't exist. Like breaking my head wasn't breaking any law they knew about."

The long, darting needle. . . .

Shep averted his face, rising. The technique was as transparent as a lighted fish bowl. Morrissey was trying to engage him by first cleverly shutting off escape—embroil him by postulating simple questions of justice and legality that could only excite one answer in men who lived with a regard for law and due process. That was Morrissey's way.

Shep said curtly, "Thanks for stopping in, Morrissey."

Morrissey sneered, "Don't thank me and don't write off my remarks as Morrissey sounding off again. I tell you there isn't any police report. I was over to the police. McNulty played deaf, like you're playing deaf now. Said he wasn't going to help me dramatize myself! Cute, huh? The police chief himself compounds a felony and gets away with it by attacking the complainant. Now all it needs is for you to put your seal of approval on it."

The cynical hint was out in the open. It stung, irritated into involuntary retort. "Aren't you doing just that?—dramatizing yourself, I mean. Isn't that what you're doing, why you're here . . . ?" Shep bit his lip. It was a mistake; he'd joined the issue, touched off the fuse. . . .

Morrissey exploded, "Dramatizing myself, bull. Dramatizing conditions, sure. Sure I told the boys,

tried to light a fire under them. Is that a crime! What the hell's wrong with workers knowing what gives, demonstrating . . . ?"

Now engaged beyond retreat. This casuist palming off each passing problem as a significant moment in history needed to be decried, discountenanced. Shep said, "At the very least, you're an alarmist. Your kind of talk is scare talk. It spreads fear, creates a negative psychological state that jeopardizes. . . ." Morrissey made a wrathful gesture and Shep shouted scornfully, "You don't even represent the standpoint of your own union!"

The last was founded on two main planks, beyond Shep's dislike for paranoiacs of the left. One: A Bunte Company press release expressing faith in their production future. And two: A union memorandum urging members to keep faith, and enjoining individual members against wildcat acts. Spence Andrews had ordered them both printed in conspicuous juxtaposition in the *Leader.* Against these, Morrissey was an obvious charlatan representing molehills as mountains—and a *provocateur.*

Lem hooted derisively, "Why don't you come out from behind those rose-colored glasses and see that Seneca's dying a slow death. Scare talk! What're we supposed to do? Starve politely and wait? Wait until it's too late to get started because we're finished! Wait until they empty the jails and stick tommy guns into the hands of gangsters?"

Shep winced. Morrissey's tones were something to

be endured. Definitely a mistake—this uproar. Foolhardy—to have yielded to Morrissey's issue, to have dignified it. To Morrissey, polemic was nurture, sustenance, the food of mania. Better withdraw. . . .

Shep retrieved his hat and coat from the bench. He said with a note of finality, "Okay, Morrissey. We've talked."

Morrissey eyed him steadily. "Does the beating I took get printed?"

Shep hesitated, then, "Yes."

"Slanted to show a couple of the boys were whooping it up—or do you print it the way it happened? How I got set upon while exercising my constitutional rights to free speech. . . ."

Evasively, "I'll check on it, decide."

"Then it doesn't get printed just the way it happened. It winds up with you stone deaf and me a troublemaking sonofabitch!"

Shep shrugged and went to the door.

4.

The thirty steps to the inner sanctum lettered SHEP WARD, MANAGING EDITOR were tonic. Moving through the aisle of desks, each occupant's nod as he passed was an affirmation of himself, a repudiation of Lem Morrissey. The graying copy boy's wide grin was approval, a testament of faith.

It raised his spirits, this home-coming. The chattering typewriters spoke a familiar idiom, a mother

tongue, as they granulated amorphous blobs of life into straight news copy; scooped off the bilge and foam and exposed the naked core. This was the genius of the editorial room, what it was meant to be, and it reassured him in his strength. It was a machine through which the materials of life passed, and in passage were refined, boiled down. And the editor tending the machine, must impersonally appraise, judge for printability, in the great calm that was a well-tempered newspaper.

"Lem Morrissey, 46, and Bill Saunders, 44, lathe hands, had an altercation today outside the Bunte plant. Both men sustained minor injuries that required no hospitalization." This was the granulated story, the bone-dry gist, the only story that could be objectively redeemed from the complex of bias and human passion.

By the thirtieth step and just outside his door, the decision was crystal clear, could never really have been uncertain. Morrissey's version had no place anywhere in the *Leader's* twenty-four pages. Morrissey had sought to emotionalize him as Shep Ward, citizen; prevent the facts from being adjudged by Shep Ward, Managing Editor, a tender of the machine, impersonal to the events of the street and the country around, bounden to the covenant of implacable objectivity.

This then, his struggle and his troth—to work and believe that one level above the nagging compression of people; to pluck the bone-summarized gist from

the forms it had been tortured into, strip it of its tyranny of words and mood. Cleanly—aloof to a gargoyle journalism that made the living press an exhibitor of the deranged thinking of Morrissey, the misanthropy of Rusty. What Morrissey had cynically described as a prostitution to falsehood was just Morrissey's wily way of securing a prostitution to his own choler, his own narrow thinking. A press servile to the aberrations of the unfit, the maladjusted, the angry, couldn't survive. . . .

Shep sighed, feeling revived in his wisdom. The angry were having a recurring cycle of paranoia. That was Morrissey. The angry were children grown old, and who would be buried as children who grew old and never became men and women. That was Rusty. The angry were people caught in the tidal waves of history, shaken by the imponderables of life and death, and therefore frightened. That was Mary, his wife. But the tidal wave would recede, was receding, and the debris would pile up on familiar beaches. Soon the fever would subside and living would again resume its formalized expression. That was as certain as biology. Once upon a decade, he too had shouted wildly and throbbed with the fever—later to subside. So too, would Mary subside and they once again would co-operate in the great commonplace of living.

This was a logic one could believe in, and it was comfortable, heartening. . . .

Dudu, the pro tem city editor (Dudu was acting city editor for almost three years—a temporary

arrangement until Spence Andrews scouted a more experienced man), came up to Shep.

He smiled yellowly. "Lem got your nanny?"

Shep twisted slightly. Dudu was a man to be kept at arm's length and talked to looking away—for reasons of esthetics. His face was boil covered and his mouth reeked of nicotine.

Shep said, "He damn near did."

The yellow teeth showed. "He gave us a time of it before you came. We had to threaten to bean him with the water cooler to get him the hell out of the editorial room." Dudu smirked. "Man, you should've heard the speech he made."

Shep smiled and Dudu, encouraged, went on, "I still don't understand where Lem stands. He's for labor and against capital, yet he attacks labor." A look of incomprehension deepened. "He wrapped up his speech yelling that labor could make no progress whatsoever until the reactionary unions were destroyed."

Dudu's face questioned Shep, seeking enlightenment. Shep made a gesture, then shrugged. Dudu resumed, "Guess there's only one way to figure a cuckoo like Lem Morrissey." He tapped his head significantly. "Labor making no progress! Tie that one. Christ, they've clubbed everybody except MacCarthy's cat into the unions." Dudu stopped, preparing another thought.

Shep smiled. "Cut. I've had Morrissey up to the neck." He read his wrist watch, and grasped the

doorknob to his inner sanctum. "I need that pause that refreshes, so give me at least a half-hour before you barge in with any business."

Dudu showed his yellowed teeth and turned away. Shep paused at the door, a reflex too late to feign preoccupation, a false blindness to the approaching woman. He delayed awkwardly, burning with inner embarrassment at the unfilled fraction of space between them. He watched Merna Andrews, the wife of his publisher, close a glass-paneled door and come toward him. He nodded stiffly to her greeting, his mouth immobile, and then as she moved to pass him, he achieved a look of preoccupation.

He watched her retreating back, watched the generous flesh ripple the folds of her tightly buttoned suit jacket, conscious of a failure in gallantry. Conscious too, and disturbed in the knowledge that he had erected a barrier against her, that he had deliberately begun a formality that had grown into a defense against something in her eyes, something frantic that sought to engage his sympathies, involve him subtly in her story, perhaps turn him against Spence Andrews, her husband.

He watched her disappear through the last door, feeling a sudden flushing shame. The formality closed the door on years of pleasant visits, conviviality, Merna's impeccable hostessing. It was harsh, this unnatural formality with a woman whose food he had eaten and with whom he had many times touched hands, but he knew with a sureness of instinct it

could be no other way now. The careless get-togethers were over, because of something sick and dying between Merna and Spence.

Shep shrugged, resisting speculation. Whatever her story, whatever her actual resentments toward Spence, it was none of his business. To know—meant to take sides. Shep entered his office. Merna Andrews was none of his business. He had business with Spence. and it was good. . . .

5.

When a full half-hour had elapsed, Dudu came in briskly. He had a sheath of papers in his hand, and there was not a little pomp in his manner. Six pencils crowded a vest pocket.

Shep lighted a cigarette and took to staring raptly at the ceiling as a way of dampening Dudu. Dudu partook of these informal conferences hungrily. It was his moment with the great, the mirror of his developing importance—each conference brought him so much closer to entrenched tenure as city editor. Shep was certain Dudu rehearsed his agenda before each meeting; memorized a repartee and journalese that would acquit him validly as a colorful city editor, establish him as one with the peerage.

The strain in Dudu was a strain to watch. Shep wished Spence would make Dudu permanent so that the man could relax, so that everybody else could relax. Shep reached for his cigarette box and held it

out to Dudu. Dudu took a cigarette and set it between his ear and skull.

Shep said, "Anything we really have to consult on, Dudu?" The query was wholly wishful. Dudu made everything and anything a pretext for this rendezvous behind closed doors.

"Lots of little things. Strictly local stuff."

Shep gave silent thanks. That eliminated the sophomoric profundities Dudu eked out of the leading national and international stories of the day.

Shep sped the conference. "Shoot."

Dudu ahemmed. "First, that disturbance at Bunte's. Lem's busted jaw. . . ."

"We don't know it to be a disturbance at Bunte's, do we? We don't know a supporting fact that ties the fracas in with Bunte's—so why involve the plant? All we know is that two men had a fight outside the plant. Two men out of a labor force of thousands." Shep paused.

Dudu prodded, "So—how do we run it?"

A reflective moment, then, "Check the police and check the Seneca hospitals. If it hasn't been reported anywhere, made part of the record, we don't run it at all. We only have Morrissey's say-so. What else?"

"Vox Pop."

Shep raised his brows and Dudu dropped a stack of letters in front of him. "Six in one mail. At least twenty this month so far. And all from the same guy."

Shep ignored the letters and looked inquiringly at Dudu.

"Who?"

"Kahn. The Waco Movie."

"What do the letters say?"

"Same as always. Race stuff, vandalism inside and outside his theater. Strong letters, Shep. Kahn is bent on getting one published."

Shep considered. "Okay, run one. Chop it down, if you have to. Make it reasonable, readable."

"Can't. Can't edit it down, I mean. Every sentence is loaded. Besides—" Dudu looked meaningful.

"Besides what?"

"A memo from Mr. Andrews against controversial Vox Pop still stands, hasn't been withdrawn." Dudu smiled yellowly. "We've got Vox Pop down to nature talk and poetry appreciation."

Shep frowned. "Then file the letters. Why come to me with them. . . ."

Dudu poked a thumb at the top letter of the stack. "This one cancels Waco Movie advertising—*if*—we don't run the letter."

Shep said promptly, "That doesn't change anything for us. The two don't go together—"

Dudu looked away slyly, then held a pamphlet out. "This came from the town librarian."

Shep took it, examined it. The pamphlet was titled *The Races of Mankind.* He said, "Why to us?"

"S.O.S., I guess. Letter attached says this one's the fifth of its kind sneaked into the library periodical shelf this season."

"Sneaked?"

"Uh huh. Library never ordered them. Librarian's hopping mad about it. Sent a complaint to the mayor."

Shep flipped the pages of the pamphlet.

"Who do you suppose . . . ?"

A spreading yellow grin. "One guess."

Even one guess was superfluous. Shep knew. Parks. Professor Parks of Seneca College. As a propadandist, Parks was as subtle as a locomotive. . . .

"What else, Dudu?"

Dudu fussed with his file, extracted an onionskin, and handed it to Shep. "This treatment okay?"

Shep read it slowly, his color draining. It was a union memorandum announcing the installation of Mary Ward as Public Relations Director of the Emergency Labor Council of Seneca.

Shep shrugged. He'd long spent his demurrers and anxieties. Mary couldn't be dissuaded. In fact, couldn't even be brought to discuss it. Just one nuisance remained now. His mortification when Spence found out about it. He dreaded Spence's remarks. . . .

Shep looked at Dudu embarassedly. "Reads okay. Make it page three, and no picture." He laughed scratchily. "Readers will think the lady has an uncle on the *Leader* if we give her five hundred words and a picture too." He turned to some desk papers, abruptly terminating the conference. Dudu fidgeted, looking suspended. Then he gathered up the material he had brought and left the room.

When he had gone Shep got up and crossed the

room to an easy chair. The room was warm and he sat facing the open window so he could feel the breeze on his face and chest.

Deep in the down, his body asleep, an unexplainable sadness surged over him. The tax on him . . . when he could live so effortlessly. He was dog tired, expended to the limit, and it was scarcely 2:00 P.M. . . . The sadness filled his eyes and he stared broodingly into space beyond the area of the office. . . .

Except for his melancholy gray eyes, Shep looked more like a businessman rounding the first turn in his chase of a private fortune, than a professional. The eyes had a character of their own, a quality of life incongruous to the flaccid jaw, the lumpen carriage beneath that would inevitably become roly-poly if unchecked. The eyes were umbilical to his antecedents: a Vermont farmer who broke plowshares from dawn to dusk, and a mother who bore nine children (losing three) without forfeiting her boyish figure or her prodigious energies in the fields, in the kitchen, in the lively social life of the Dutch Reformed church.

Shep's education had been an outpouring of pennies, nickels, dimes, from a row of flour tins hidden atop a large pine cupboard; a twenty-year cache that provoked the first cross word between Esther and Juniah Ward, the latter regarding Shep covetously as a hired hand—the other five growing Wards being girls in a community with an unusual excess of un-

married bachelors and widowers.

Shep had gone on to that "devil collidge," rewarding his mother's prevision with a prepaid mail-order dress every week before Easter, and a Freed-Eisemann twelve-tube radio the Christmas he had gotten his first raise in pay from Spence Andrews. From the day he had bravely commenced his cultural junket, Shep had forgotten that a railroad trunk line made a signal stop in the town of his nativity. Filial sentiments were rewarmed with a once-every-two-year exchange of snapshots (Shep's had chronology, while Mother Esther kept absently sending the same reproduction of herself in a bridal gown in every exchange). All through college, Shep had been a bright-tipped arrow growing straight into the sun. Hatred for frauds, his social idealism (Shep was appalled at wanton destruction of property; believed wars should be outlawed if for this reason alone), his conservatism (Shep was a Republican Constitutionalist since virtual babyhood in a town whose minority Democratic Party numbered its adherents among the atheists, the immoral, the generally improvident and shiftless) had elevated him to class leadership in college.

These great and visible virtues had made Shep pocket rich with prizes and scholarship grants, with a climaxing scroll attesting his classmates' united belief that "Shep Ward is the graduate most likely to succeed."

Then something in the universe had puckishly arrested him, slowing his drive, and that something

could be any of the influences in the complex metabolism of living; money, position, weariness, overpraise; any of these things or all of them—or the universe itself. . . .

A sound of knuckles on the glass pane of the door roused him. It was Dudu's knock.

Shep blinked, clearing his eyes.

"Come in."

Dudu entered and hung at the door.

"Forgot to tell you Mr. Andrews left a message before he went off on a trip." Dudu made an apologetic gesture—"Don't know how it slipped my mind."

Shep asked, "What's the message?"—something stirring in his memory.

"You're to meet with him at his home. He wants you to make it as late as possible, in case he's detained getting back."

Shep sagged inwardly, remembering. It was the morning message on the telephone memo pad—forgotten in the tempo and thunder of the morning. That made the day complete. To home and the unresolved quarrel with Mary, and later, the perfect climax—a fatigue session with Spence, and so to bed.

And tomorrow, behold the dawn, and encore . . . the endless quarrel.

Chapter Two

Shep filled an overstuffed chair, blind to an open detective story magazine in his lap. His eyes followed Mary, his wife, as she pulled a dress over her head, then stuffed a chemise, stockings, items, into a valise.

He studied her movements and expression, waiting for the tight lines in her face to relax. Soon he would have to rouse himself to the ordeal of reconciliation. Better soon, because in a moment Mary would be packed and pride would drive her to the street.

Shep pawed at the moment morosely. In some murky sub-layer of himself he supposed he loved her. Closer to the crust of himself, he resented the shattering vitality of her moods. Getting this new, preposterously self-willed Mary to refill her bureau drawers and wedge the valise back on the closet shelf required a squandering of energy in a tableau

that went on and on unto the last white pellet in the aspirin box.

Shep dog-eared the page and closed the book grimly. Marriage had degenerated into a man-wife problem play. What the root cause of her plaints really was, Shep wasn't sure. He assumed it all sprang somehow from the emotional restlessness of long-married women without babies. Through the years, until recently, it had been easy to abide Mary, easy to parry and reject her when her personality pressed too uncomfortably against the inner circle of himself. More recently, Mary's restiveness had ceased expressing itself in moods and tantrums, but in words and arguments; a critical carp on near-political levels that lashed at him, scorning him for his "degenerate complacency."

Shep looked hard at his wife and his feeling of burden and bother grew. Her movements were vexingly elastic, positive. . . .

A horn tooted outside. It was the taxi come for Mary and her valise. Shep began, "Aren't you behaving hysterically . . . ?"

Mary replied evenly, in tones that made the possibility of conciliation remote: "If it comforts you to believe everybody else in the world is a hysteric—yes, I am."

Hearing and recoiling—this sudden quality in her. This new temper in the once pliable, easily tranquilized Mary left him feeling futile, speechless. A virus had attacked the roots of her personality, dis-

ordering and deranging it—giving her a coarse and decisive speech that repelled him. . . .

Soon he resumed again: "Mary, it's schoolgirl. Adults just don't pack up and leave. Not after eleven years. . . ."

Mary's eyes were a frosty blue as she looked squarely at him. She said, "If they don't, if they live on incompatibly until they rot, I'm horribly sorry for them."

Shep brought his face close, looking sad. "Can't we patch this up, get together . . . ?"

"We're farther apart than the poles, Shep. And the distance increases with every day, with everything you do or omit doing, with every thought you express." Now there was an overpowering bitterness in her tones— "The shameful way you live. . . ."

It nettled Shep to challenge, "How I live! What do you mean, how I live!"

"Dishonestly, unnaturally. Smugly in your ivory tower. You're your own idealized image—and not because of strength, but because of fear."

Shep's mind worked swiftly, framing a reply that would cut to the heart of her tirade, but suddenly there was something fiery in her manner that arrested him. "And don't look so pained just because you're really listening to me for once. It might have done your pompous little mind some good if you'd tried really listening before, earlier in our lives. Reread your editorials, your writings. They haven't progressed one inch in ten years. They're yellow with

age, and so is the content yellow. You're afraid of people, you're afraid of ideas."

Mary moved forward with the force of her emotion and Shep wilted backward involuntarily. . . . "You're a cardboard copy of your beloved reactionary employer, and I'm sick to my stomach apologizing for my lamebrain husband who follows the lines of least resistance."

The blaze died as suddenly as it had begun and Shep watched her bend over and manage the snap lock of her valise. His mouth was dry—a choler raced upward to his neck, cheeks, temple. What Mary had dared blurt was a rowdy attack that trampled too many sacred things. It was a wholly new invective, a new contempt never before voiced. . . . He fought to repress a roar, unsuccessfully. "What do you mean—you're sick to your stomach apologizing for me! Apologizing to whom!"

"To people, little people. You wouldn't know them, Shep. And to my friends who can't understand how you can stick with a publisher as rotten as Spence—a man who's given money to every vermin organization everywhere. And how I can stick with you . . . ?"

Shep wanted to say that all poisonous rumors about Spence Andrews were unproven, propaganda, but he looked sad instead. His fingers reached to touch her, remained on her sleeve. There was a long, deep throbbing pause, and then Mary's voice became unendurably gentle. "It's over, Shep, and forever. We haven't a thing in common and there aren't any

children we owe a make-believe to. So why go on hypocritically . . .?"

Shep moved away and Mary went to the door, opened it, and went out.

Now there was a wild impulse to run after her, but Shep fought it off. It was better to stand pat. Mary would come back once this revolt fizzled out, once she realized that living was pretty cut and dried, far less exhilarating than the trenchant words used to describe it. There were things about a man whose bed and board a woman had shared for eleven years that must bring her back. Eleven years was the whole interior of a woman, the sum total of her virtue, the good and the bad, and her totality.

Shep wandered to the window and looked down into the street. There was Mary, dramatically silhouetted under the street lamp, her valise at her feet, waiting for the driver to open the taxi door. It had been like that eleven years ago; their street corner rendezvous; Mary waiting under a street lamp, valise packed for a runaway marriage—an elopement against the wish of her father who had insisted the young suitor first get a paying job before he thought of wedlock. . . .

He had never gotten that first job, because it had worked in reverse. The job had sought him out. Spence Andrews, skimming off the cream of the graduating class in journalism, had requisitioned him for the Seneca *Leader*. The eleven years had

been years of gratifying personal associations with Spence Andrews, in newspaperman tippling, in discussions and formulation of policy, in a golfing membership in the exclusive Winnepec Club, in salary spurts from $40 a week to $9,000 a year. And finally, in this last year, the managing editorship. . . .

Shep went to the liquor cabinet and poured himself a drink, thinking: Odd if Mary never came back, if this was the final thing. Odd if a complete bust-up really happened over a clash of ideas with a wife with whom he had never really exchanged ideas. . . .

He refilled his whisky glass, then, seeking relief and finding it in levity, he took to chuckling aloud. . . . Funny how women became mental Jukes over abstract bromides men had long discovered and discarded. And what in hell was it that made a man fight and fuss and fret everlastingly in order to keep a tight hold on one woman? Just one woman whether *the* one or not. It was a goddam weakness in the male, a stomach disorder like he was experiencing now, a gastric acidity like from something foul he'd eaten.

Shep got into his coat to go out. He had to kill time until his late evening conference with Spence Andrews, but not in the oppressively heavy way it was dragging in the mirthless, empty dwelling from which one suitcase and one wife had been substracted, leaving zero.

Chapter Three

The past-six gloom was on Maple Street, a back street in Seneca that began at a bus crossing and ran two squares into a pile of sandstone and slate. The built-up areas of the town, consisting of modern design taxpayers, a scattering of four-story apartment dwellings, neat rows of trim brick houses in the pre-inflation $7,500 to $10,000 price class, gable-roofed Victorian structures set behind rising lawns and worth a sentimental premium, were just around the corner.

A street lamp placed midway between RICKY'S BAR and PAGANO'S BARBERSHOP went on. Pagano's was closed. Pagano was at the bottom of the North Atlantic—Nicholas Pagano, 38, having rushed off to get some of the bonus money offered on the Murmansk merchant ship run early in World War II. Some four

years had passed, but Pagano's mother, a duenna with a corrugated face set in a black lace shawl, refused to believe Nicholas dead or dispose of his barbering equipment.

Inside Ricky's the letters on the half-curtained plate-glass window were visibly RAB S'YKCIR, a nightly source of raillery and laughter among the customers. The place was deserted, except for Ricky, who was wielding a broom.

Ricky set the broom down momentarily, pawed at the light switch, turned it on, then returned to his sweeping. Out of the narrow corridor between the brass footrail and the twenty-foot mahogany bar came a bumper crop of dead matches, butt ends, an enameled lipstick cylinder, crumpled cigarette packets.

Later, with the sweepings from the evening before heaped into a corner, Ricky puffed behind the bar and began tapping the shoulders of the bottles with a feather duster. This task done, he grabbed a kitchen towel and began to huh and spit into long-stemmed display glasses, finishing each in turn and arranging them in pyramidic design against the wall-sized blue-glass mirror.

There was a noise at the street door and Ricky squinted, trying to identify the face mushed into the plate-glass. The sounds persisted and he went to the window and rapped on it, pointing attention to a large hand-lettered sign that read: THIS BAR WILL BE CLOSED DURING THE PRIMARY VOTING HOURS OF

6 TO 10. JOHN P. MCNULTY, CHIEF OF POLICE. The face backed away a foot, paused peering, then vanished.

Ricky leaned on the ledge facing the blue-glass mirror, and began to tap out a tune to pass the time. He was attracted to the reflection of his face. It was a handsomer face in the blue glass than the one he got every morning in his shaving mirror. The tissue seemed tighter and the signatures of a dozen middleweights who had plowed through him to fatter purses, were character bumps enhancing his manly appeal.

He smiled experimentally into the mirror, adjusted his upper plates, ran a flat palm over the stacomb shine on his hair, turning his head sidewise and exposing an ear with its lobe missing. The missing lobe memorialized his graduation from ring trial horse to sluggerdutch in the "labor relations" business. Ricky never regretted losing the lobe of his ear to a bullet that might have scored dead center in his skull. It was the one time Slip Masterson had fired without absolute conviction, and the last time Ricky had tried to pocket a side dollar while working for the Big Fellow.

Ricky tapped out several bars of the tune, humming accompaniment, and frowned trying to identify the song. Soon it came to him and he began to sing-talk "On the Atchison, Topeka, and the Sante Fe" without getting the words right. Judy, his six-year-old and the golden wonder of a black-haired union,

had been filling the house with it for months. Ricky tried the words again, bringing Judy's face up close to him and watching her mouth minutely as she shrilled the words and melody.

A warmth rose through him and moisture glistened his eyes as he watched and listened to Judy. Keeping her in front of him and in the foreground of his thinking day after day did a lot for his self-respect. . . . It was fine being a small-time tavernkeeper. It could be a slob's life, but it was honest labor and a fine thing for the responsible father of a great little kid like Judy. . . .

Ricky beat the orchestration out faster, and went back to humming the words. . . . Besides, the old days were gone. The striped silk shirts and thousand-dollar bills were a pipe dream that had never happened. . . . His eyes wandered to a framed photograph of a ten year younger Ricky, sportily dressed, with a horseshoe diamond stickpin centered in his cravat. He studied the photograph, then shrugged. . . . Gone, and gone forever. A lot of stuff that had been okay with Balcony Benito riding high was gone and over. A wop would be eaten alive if he started throwing his weight around. Il Duce, all the way from Guadalajara to a gutter in Milan, had made them the laughingstock, a vaudeville gag. . . .

A silhouette wavered at the front door. Ricky squinted, making out the face of Professor Parks. He watched Parks bend forward, adjust a second pair of spectacles over the ones he was wearing, read the

sign, then move on without bringing his head back up.

Ricky stared at the place Parks had occupied. . . . There was an old coot he could never figure out. What brought him from the tony end of town to guzzle in a back street joint? A professor who had written books, a man with words you couldn't cut through with a bread knife. . . . Ricky clucked his tongue. . . . Slopping up Scotches in the back end of town would finish him sooner or later. Talk was getting around. . . . Ricky shrugged and rang up No SALE on the cash register, taking a pack of Camels out of a compartment. . . . Let someone else put the professor wise. Ten Scotches a night added up to profits he rang up from four beer drinkers. . . . He arched a look at an octagonal wall clock. It was 7:15.

Someone was trying the door—a large-framed fellow with a fedora pulled down to his eyes. Ricky motioned him away. The fellow persisted, clamoring at the door. Ricky went to open it with angry hands.

"Bar's closed, mister. Don't you read!"

The fellow tipped his fedora to the back of his head, then took Ricky by the ear with the missing lobe and tugged at it playfully.

"Hiya, Rick."

Ricky's jaw dropped and he stood staring dumbly.

Slip—Slip Masterson!

He forced a grin, then forced it wider. There was a ton of lead in his stomach. He closed the door apprehensively, then resumed staring dumbly.

Slip began to move about energetically, like a man working a stiffness out of his muscles. He peeled off his gabardine coat, threw it across the room, took his hat off, held it in front of him and punched his fist through the crown. Then he wove toward Ricky in a pugilistic crouch and buckled the bartender's legs under him with a sweeping blow to the pit of the stomach.

Ricky sat down on the floor and Slip began a laugh that drew the room closer. Then he jumped on the bar, dropped to the other side, selected a bottle, uncorked it, and drank it one-quarter down in a single, long gurgle.

Ricky asked thickly, "How'dja get out?" An inner sense of catastrophe made him ache to lumber into the street yelling POLICE.

Slip grinned. "Scared, Rick? Scared of harboring a fugitive—even if he used to be your boss?" Then as the plea in Ricky's face changed to panic and the sweat began to form a paste on his brow, Slip vaulted back to Ricky's side of the bar, reached down and pinched the ear with the missing lobe. "Relax, Rick. No one's looking for me. I was sprung on the up and up."

Ricky shook his head slowly. "You were sprung?"

"It's a long story, Rick—" Slip winked. "Some new evidence came up proving I could've been innocent. That didn't hurt with the parole board." A finger poked into Ricky's cushions of belly fat. "You can't keep an innocent man locked up forever."

Now Ricky had the feeling he used to get coming off the floor after the referee had raised his opponent's hand and the crowd was pushing toward the exits. Something had happened to him that he was still nebulous about and that something had made him less than he had been before the event.

Slip reached into a pocket, then waved a paper.

"My parole—in writing."

It was all a joke and Ricky knew he had to enjoy it with Slip—had to! He got up from the floor smiling foolishly.

"Why don'cha sue for false arrest?"

Slip clapped him on the shoulder. "Now you're talking!"

Encouraged, Ricky rejoiced anew. "Like I swore at your trial, you never came near enough to Morrissey to kill him. You were home asleep and that murder gun was a plant."

Slip guffawed appreciatively and went for the whisky bottle while Ricky went back ten years—remembering.

. . . The town had been boiling over. No jobs, and too many guys with their hands out. Then, overnight, the hands out begging had closed into fists, become a regiment on the march. With that, Slip Masterson's Mutual Protective Association became a gold mine, with Slip pocketing percentages for goons imported by the wagonload. Easy dough, and lots of it, and a picnic laying the demonstrators out like tenpins

with practically no opposition, until Niles Morrissey, a crazy kid with a gift for talk took over the leadership of the demonstrators. Morrissey had soaked up punishment like he liked it, had gone in and out of jail like it was an honor he'd earned, had put the finger on Mayor Porter and the business big shots—until Slip finally shut him up with a bullet in the guts. . . .

Flushed from drinking, Slip observed humorously, "You'll set your hair on fire with all that thinking, Rick."

Ricky stared silently, in the grip of a mounting desperation as the realization dawned that Slip's return must mean a new order and a new score sheet. Finally he said weakly, "What about Shep Ward, Slip . . . ?" It was the utmost he could bring to resistance to a terrifying future.

Slip said indifferently, "What about him?"

"He worked up the case that put you away— He'll be on you again. . . ."

"With what—a typewriter!" A brush of the hand, and Slip dismissed it. Then, "Shep's still working for Spence Andrews, isn't he?"

Ricky nodded. "But Andrews didn't go to bat for you. He let Ward run those articles that brought you to trial."

Slip winked with a whole side of his face. "Times have changed, Rick." He worked his hands exuberantly. "Changed back, I mean."

Chapter Four

1.

Shep walked up Raleigh Street toward North Broadway, Seneca's main street. Seneca lay in a valley set between sudden flame-green hills. A great part of the town had a gracious charm with its trim houses set back behind bristling lawns bordered with sharp-scented flower beds. Shutters were popular, expressing the great American preoccupation with privacy, and each house was a deep entity with a hidden inner life. Now, with night sinking and moonshafts parting the branches of trees, the streets had the great imperturbable calm of mannered living and god worship.

Lights were going on, first singly, then in twos and threes, opening some of the quiet drama of the inside to a peeking stroller. Shep peeked in as he passed,

and saw pin-perfect arrangements of furniture, people in preoccupied personal movements, faces glued behind glass staring him down stonily, a flashing buffoonery in a child's grimace. He wondered about these people bolted inside, these people he served, who read his writings. He knew them as an expressionless mass, with but one face. Through his years in Seneca his circle of personal relationships had widened one person at a time over long periods.

Shep turned into North Broadway, walking briskly, nodding to a few greetings. North Broadway was self-consciously commercial, set apart from Seneca, drawn into a tight straight line like an out-of-bounds district. The town fathers were shrill cackling hens rewarming zoning ordinances hatched by their forefathers. Retail establishments were herded into the Broadway reservation running north and south, and no amount of able pleading by Seneca's businessmen and their lawyers could bend the tight straight line around any of the forty-odd corners bisecting Broadway's course. The town fathers were a prehistoric rock against which the tides of empire lashed helplessly. And so, while the town expanded to the utmost of its incorporated limits, and the interior spaces were populously planted with thousands more mouths to feed, shoes to shod, hearts to delight with cinematic treats, the stores continued cramped for space, as ever, while their owners dreamed nightly of new, revolutionary, elastic walls.

There were side street enterprises that took up

some of the consumer crush, but these only happened in what could be loosely called the "slum" or depressed areas where houses clung to the fringe of an arc, in the center of which Seneca's factories were sprawled. Here the first immigrant institution of Poles, Italians, Negroes, and their American-born offspring, were segregated by the simple tyranny of property values and snobbishness. These people, too, were unknown to Shep, and to much of Seneca itself, although they were many. They kept to their precincts, lived intensely among themselves, moved almost apologetically through the main avenues, drove up to the Supermarkets in creaking jalopies, got in nobody's way.

North Broadway's complement of stores, theaters, bowling alleys, was divided from South Broadway on one side by a domed building that served as the city hall, and on the other side by the Seneca courthouse, where Judge Henderson ran a monkey court and balanced the town's budget almost singlehandedly at the expense of the few carousing stepchildren-citizens of the town, and the motorist-strangers whose car brakes squealed an inch beyond the white line at the main traffic light crossing. It was not unusual for Judge Henderson to materialize personally from somewhere with a carpenter's winding steel measure in hand.

Shep entered South Broadway, continued on for

a few squares, and stopped at the Waco Movie. He read the marquee, then the sign posters, lingering over obscene crayon and chalk scribblings he assumed to be the handiwork of a larking gang of kids. He started through the Waco lobby, nodding to Milton Kahn, the owner and proprietor, who was in the cashier's cage while the regular cashier was getting a bite of supper.

Shep had reached the side door away from the ticket taker, when Kahn called out "ticket" in a peremptory voice.

Surprised, Shep sidled over to the cage and flashed a friendly smile. "Press courtesy, no?"

"No." It sounded unfriendly, final.

Shep dug into his pocket and pushed a coin toward Kahn observing with faint sarcasm, "Business that bad?—"

Kahn said grimly, "You should open your letters to the editor. And once in a blue moon you should print one you don't like."

Shep frowned, then said irritably, "Look, Kahn, the letters you've been sending would only stir up racial feeling—make a grown-up issue of kid stuff that'll pass over like Halloween. The *Leader* is a lot more experienced with public opinion and public reaction than you think."

Kahn looked long and silently at Shep and then turned away without replying. Shep reached to retrieve his coin, but left it there instead and turned toward the street.

2.

There was a pause in the living room in the home of Milton Kahn. It was the pause between supper and bed, and the children were sitting on the floor near the handsome Capehart radio-phonograph, listening to the current installment of the "Lone Ranger."

Ernie, a serious-faced seven-year-old with blue eyes and closely cropped brown hair, was emoting with the desperate action of the script. His sister Wilma (pronounced Vilma), nine, was listening with a pained expression. The program was not of her choice, and a long period of hand-to-hand struggle for the dials had been conciliated by Erika, the mother, whose Solomon-like wisdom had decided that each would have their own choice on alternate evenings. Tonight was Ernie's night.

Erika Kahn was in a corner of the settee, waiting out this pause between the children's final washing, teeth brushing, good nights, and the pile of supper dishes in the kitchen sink. The last maid had been lured into the mechanical trades during the war opportunity for women. Now, with the war long over, Erika didn't think to find another maid. The chores had become habitual, even enjoyable.

Erika Kahn was a medium-height woman with broad shoulders and biggish hands and feet. Her face was hollowed dramatically at the cheeks, her hair was blond and upswept into a rear bun. Perhaps

once beautiful, there was a quality of beauty in her manner and a strong suggestion of great and dramatic sensitivity. In this pause, her eyes brooded at the children beneath in a profound sort of look that could not be too unlike the first awakening in the delivery room. Yet Erika was not really a profound woman despite her set habit of staring as though near sightedly trying to see a person or object in her path. Her principal emotions were fear of people and a longing for the simplicity of her girlhood in the hills of Bavaria. These emotions were bound up together and were, at the base, one and the same.

People frightened her and in crowds she felt a wild desire to run. The compression was stronger, more suffocating, since they had originally taken quarters in this multiple dwelling to escape the wartime fuel problem in the one-family house they had occupied during their previous fourteen years in Seneca. There had been safety in the high picket fence erected around their yellow-brick and gray-flagstone house; erected despite Milton's gibes and laughter. Here in this building, people swarmed around her, touching her. Here footsteps were always clamoring on their landing while she listened with an intensity that held her body taut until the door slammed closed next door or across the hall, or the steps became distant and dying.

In these last years, she understood people less and less and distrusted them more. They seemed wilder, fun maddened beyond enjoyment, hungering. Nights

were unsafe; casual talk was tumult and bitterness. Erika had stopped going out after dusk, even to the movie house her husband owned. She scheduled her shopping for the quieter, unbusy hours of late noon, when the neighborhood women were in their kitchens.

An experience of a week ago was still alive in her. With the children in school, and alone near the greenhouse where the pathway of McKinley Park dipped under a footbridge, a boy of seventeen had come up behind her silently and caught her arms from behind, his kneecap in the center of her back. She had struggled with her voice failing and on the ground he had pressed against her. It was a minute before she found her voice again, screamed until the boy snapped to his feet and streaked away. . . .

Evenings were lonely once the children went to bed and she sat up waiting for Milton. Milton usually checked the cash when the box office closed just fifteen minutes after the feature went on, then he came directly home. Milton was an anchorage holding her securely. Milton had an aggression, viewed the world tolerantly, laughed indulgently at its confusions, had an enthusiasm for living. He joshed her out of her misgivings, made decisions surely, spontaneously, as if each vexing situation she related to him was one he had encountered before, in his life before her, and had a remembered plan of successful procedure to apply to it. Erika drew her strength from Milton. Being close to her husband brought

her own father, now twenty-five years dead, nearer. The few times Milton showed uncertainty were times she drew closely into herself, into her fears. There were such times, but they were few and they passed.

The "Lone Ranger" ended and Wilma snapped the OFF button just as the commercial began. Erika said with a slight rise of voice, "And now—washed and to bed."

Wilma wheedled, "Can't we sit and talk—for five minutes." Ernie chimed in, "Huh, Mummy? Just five minutes—until eight o'clock."

The gold-painted German clock in a bell jar atop the mantel read 7:45. Ernie was still struggling to master the complexities of reading time.

Erika looked at their faces tilted toward her supplicatingly. It was a nightly ritual; these procrastinations before being tucked in were delights she could not deny them. It was a togetherness the children reveled in, so she said, "All right. Until five minutes to eight," and sat deeper in the settee, preparing to half-listen to their chatter.

Wilma began hurriedly against the ticking minutes while Ernie frowned, thinking of what he would say. Wilma said, "Betty Henderson's mother is making her a long white satin dress with a green sash."

Betty Henderson was the *bete noire* in Wilma's life. The freckled, pug-nosed daughter of Judge Henderson was popular without effort, received the highest grades without being called upon in oral test, was leading lady in the playlets acted out before

the entire school in the main auditorium, even though she kept fumbling her lines and had to be cued constantly. Wilma's social fortunes and young girlish cheer fluctuated in the sun and frost of Betty Henderson's unpredictable temperament.

Erika asked idly, "Is the dress for another school play?"

Wilma's flat, wide brow drew. "It's for her communion next Sunday at St. Joseph's."

There was a plea in the upturned angle of Wilma's face as she stared full into her mother's face. Erika didn't dare meet Wilma's eyes and she pretended to look at the clock.

Ernie was still frowning, unable to think of anything to say vyingly adult. His frown deepened as he blurted, "I'm now a best friend of Timmy Saunders."

This was a development since it was but two days ago that Timmy, the dauntless son of a brawny factory worker, had charged into Ernie and sent him sprawling into a mud puddle.

It was a way of returning her gaze to the children and perhaps distracting Wilma, so Erika showed a lively interest in Ernie's conquest of Timmy Saunders. She said artificially, "Did you convince him that little gentlemen did not play roughly?"

Ernie denied it, quite as masculinely gruff as Timmy would be. "Naw. Timmy said I could join his gang if I proved myself." Ernie's face shone proudly. "And I did prove myself."

Erika asked, her eyes now unable to avoid Wilma's,

"How did you prove yourself, Ernie?"

"Beating up Joey Sachs."

Erika roused herself wearily to the task of instructing Ernie. "Why did you have to do that?"

"Because he's a Jew." Ernie said it wrathfully, bringing his little boy upper lip closer to the base of his nose.

Erika felt a wrenching desire to scream, but remained mute and listened to Ernie say in a hard and cold voice she was certain could not be her son's: "Every day a different boy in our gang has to beat up a Jew or else he stops belonging."

Ernie's face softened and he scuffed his behind a foot along the floor, closer to the settee, and put a hand on Erika's lap fondly.

He's telling me this, Erika thought, because he's sure somehow that beating up a Jew isn't rowdy or ungentlemanly and in no way affronts my teachings. And now his hand is on my knee because he wants to have me share in his happiness over being an accepted member of Timmy Saunders' gang. All this has to do somehow with not belonging and being alone, a feeling I have known since I was a little girl and my father died.

Erika put her hand down, covering her son's, and looked at his closely cut hair, his blue eyes, the well-formed nose in his square little face. The physical characteristics came from her side of the family. Ernie looked like so many of the little boys she had grown up among. . . .

Wilma felt out of it and dropped her head on Erika's lap. She sighed and said closely and persistently, "Mummy—why can't I go to St. Joseph's? Just on Sundays?"

A heat was now bubbling all over Erika. She had eluded Wilma for a year; had plied her with Sunday outings, visits, and movies—as a substitute for St. Joseph's. She realized sorrowfully that a substitution was impossible. Betty Henderson and the whole community of nine-year-olds were alive throughout the normal school week with the Sunday-past excitements of St. Joseph's. It wasn't worship or even a child's great natural curiosity about God, Erika knew, remembering the spirited fun of her own Sunday-school days. It was the pull of the group to the bosom of their games, songs, make-believe, their dressing up in white satin and green ribbons. Milton couldn't understand it in his complex of Jewish sensitiveness and agnostic thinking. Milton believed almost fanatically in assimilation; bitterly assailed the professional hierarchs who held Jews together as Jews for their own profit and power. He believed passionately in the voluntary surrender of Jewish identity, an identity Milton knew to be a savage fiction perpetuated for purposes of confiscation and pogrom—a plot Jews themselves blindly and egotistically abetted. "Lose yourself among the greater institutions of the country you belong to and forever rid the world of the lie of the victim race" was his credo. Yet—balking unreasonably on the question of St. Joseph's, Milton

said with a force that forbade demur. "Teach them to believe in science and evolution. Let them decide about religion for themselves—when they're old enough." Erika couldn't dispute it; in fact, didn't dare, since Milton's positiveness was mainly his strength, and she needed him to be strong.

The clock chimed eight times. Erika reached over Wilma and unbuttoned the back of her dress, her free hand tapping Ernie's head. Her voice shook a little as she said, "It's five minutes over. Now, washed and to bed."

The children went off to bed and Erika sat waiting for Milton to come home. There was a fever inside her and questions were flooding her mind. Should she tell Milton? How . . . ? She came to know, waiting, that she must. This night she needed his sureness and his strength.

The gold-painted German clock chimed nine times. Milton was tallying the cash.

3.

Milton Kahn paced the lobby nervously as the lights on the marquee of the Waco dimmed. In the box-office pen, an over-rouged woman with her hair scalloped on her brow and kinky frizzled on top, hooked a CLOSED sign on the front cut-out and began the preliminary totaling of receipts. Kahn audited her total when she finished.

The Waco Movie occupied a prominent location on South Broadway. It was sandwiched between a Piggly-Wiggly Supermarket and Goody's ice-cream parlor. The Waco offered potluck in pictures but a workingman's admission price of twenty cents for the single matinee performance and thirty-three cents for the single evening performance. The evening show began at eight-fifteen sharp; the theater emptying at eleven o'clock.

Kahn exhibited what he could get, choosing with some discrimination and reserving the better pictures for the continuous week-end showings. Many of the heralded Hollywood superspectacles came to the Waco late enough for them to qualify as revivals, but except for a few good-humored requests for "East Lynne" and "The Birth of a Nation," customers showed no concern. There was no dearth of exciting Westerns and this seemed to be adequate compensation for almost everybody.

On this night the marquee read: THE INVISIBLE DEATH. ALSO SHORT SUBJECTS. A single showcase on either side of the narrow theater entrance held stills showing scenes from the main presentation. The stills were mainly "menace" characters with faces set in a variety of repulsive grimaces, holding others at pistol point. On the sides of the theater facing the street were colored posters showing actors in distorted attitudes of fright and suffering. Across the face of these posters thundered the title: THE INVISIBLE DEATH. On these posters, in the white spaces, someone had

done black crayon lettering that read: DEATH TO THE JEWS. An unfinished sentence on one poster, begun in too large a script for the available white space, read: DO NOT PATRONIZE— It was finished in chalk on a sidewalk square below—THIS —— JEW THEATER.

The cashier called to Kahn, "Don't need an adding machine to get tonight's total. I can do it on my fingers."

The intelligence was superfluous. Kahn had seen the yawning gaps in the front, center, and rear of the three-section auditorium, as the main feature had flashed on the screen. Business had been falling off, unaccountably, for weeks.

Kahn shut his mind, trying hard not to draw inferences, leap to conclusions. It was unaccountable and there could be no demonstrable relationship between the obscene writings outside, waning business, and the knife-slashed upholstery everywhere inside the theater. They were unrelated happenings, sheer coincidence, really meaningless . . . meaning at most a trap waiting to close its jaws on his emotions. . . .

The usher came out ready for the other phases of his work; setting the new offering for the next day on the marquee, general cleaning, finally to end his day's labors by turning up all the emptied seats, report damage, check all umbrellas, books, purses, items he might discover, in the Lost and Found room; then closing the theater.

Victor, slightly hunched because of a curved spine, paused inquiringly in front of Kahn. Kahn said, feeling a sudden sense of shame, "Throw a pail of water over that chalk writing on the sidewalk, Victor."

Victor hunched away and for the life of him Kahn couldn't help feeling the chore was something he should have done himself; that it was something intimate to himself, something Victor shouldn't see.

Kahn resumed pacing the lobby. He was damp with perspiration and the palms of his hands prickled as he opened and closed them.

Victor came back with the empty pail and stood in front of Kahn inquiringly. Kahn withheld his own gaze, now instinctively fearing the smallest change in Victor's usually obedient look. Perhaps now having read a family secret boldly lettered in chalk on the sidewalk, and having erased it for a man who could order him as an employer, there must be a subtle change in the servant-master relationship; a contempt, an irritation that he was dependent as a non-Jew upon a Jew boss. . . .

Kahn said, "Change the marquee."

4.

Sam Mason, the policeman, came into the lobby and sagged against the box office, weary of his weight.

Sam said, "How's the pitcher tonight?" It was his contribution toward admission. Sam made a habit of sneaking thirty minutes of movie while he sat in the

back row with his shoelaces open, letting his feet swell and ease before his next round of door testing.

Kahn didn't really want to complain again, but the words tore themselves from him. "Sam, did you see my posters defaced outside?"

Sam dropped a little lower. "Yeah."

"Got any idea who's doing it?"

"Could be a lot of people, Kahn."

Kahn bit his lip. He had never known himself to be so close to hysteria. Talking about anything to ponderous, slow-witted Sam Mason was crazy. Sam Mason was a mechanical man, moving mechanically about the sheerly physical business of eating, sleeping, and trying doorknobs after dark. Nobody who was anybody, or who had read one book through, had anything to do with Sam Mason except hand him a cigar, a souvenir orange, a passing hello, or open a theater door to him without tearing a ticket stub. Yet suddenly Kahn heard himself exclaiming hoarsely, "What do you mean, it could be a lot of people!"

Sam shifted his weight and said with a surprisingly easy speech, "Lots of people here in town are burned up at the Jews."

"Why . . . ?" Kahn's mouth was full.

"The Jews got us into the war, people say—" Sam looked solemn. "And a lot of the boys never came back."

"It's a damned lie!" The scream heaved from his whole body.

Sam looked startled. "It's none of my saying, Kahn. I'm only repeating—" His tones became indignant. "Whaddaya holding me up for! My feet are killing me."

Kahn found control. "I'm sorry. What I mean is that this marking of my signs must stop."

Sam said grumblingly, "I'll make out a report." He worked a small black book out of his pocket. "It's only kids that's doing it, I'll bet'cha. And how ya gonna catch the little bastards?" He dragged toward the interior, scribbling. "McNulty'll only tell me to keep my eyes open. Keep my eyes open on a mile long beat!"

Kahn said, "It's got to stop, Sam!"

"What you need is a special watchman." His tones brightened. "Masterson's back in town. Take your troubles to him, why don'cha? Slip's a good fly cop." Sam was lost inside the theater.

Kahn's face set tightly. He had few fond memories of Slip's thugs reaching for the little envelopes on the first of every month. . . .

5.

Kahn left the Waco and stopped at Mori's lunch wagon for a cup of coffee. It was a nightly routine, and Mori siphoned a cupful from the coffee urn and set it down in front of Kahn. The wagon was empty and Kahn was glad of it; glad also that Mori was an inarticulate fellow who bustled about with a shine

rag or lolled silently at the cash register picking his teeth. He wanted anonymity desperately, until composure would again mask his face.

There was a maddening crisscross of thoughts running back and forth inside his head. . . . What was the face of a Jew, he wondered? Was there one face, or was it merely the language of anti-Semitism that herded all Jews under one roof? Didn't it matter that their eyes were blue, black, the colors of the rainbow; their hair blond like his daughter Wilma's, brown like his son Ernie's; their noses large, small, long, short? Was the military victory over Hitlerism not enough to repudiate the philosophy of pogrom! Was anti-Semitism something the conquerors took from the conquered for use along with territory, gold, treaty clauses? Was it a fixed idea, a living cell in the universal intellect, a way of life that transcended the ephemeral formulations of politics, science, religion . . . ?

Kahn bent over the coffee, wetting his lips. It was perplexing, unnerving—this label "Jew" that turned the foundations of his life into quicksand, no matter the time and courage of his toil to make the structure strong.

Suddenly, Mori inquired, "What's eating ya, Kahn?"

Kahn looked up tensely, "What do you mean?"

"I was just wondering," Mori hoisted a shoulder slightly. "Yer looking like the wrath of God."

Kahn glared and disdained answering.

Suddenly, like an unexpected blow, Mori said, "Is it the Jew-baiting going on . . . ?"

Kahn said witheringly, "I didn't invite you to enter a discussion with me, Mori!"

Now there was a look so earnest on Mori's face that made Kahn feel ashamed. Mori said, "I'm just trying to give ya a piece of advice—"

Kahn met Mori's eyes, struck by a note in his voice. Mori said, "Victor, your handy man—you better can him before he burns your theayter down."

Kahn stared unbelievingly, and Mori nodded emphatically. "Victor's behind a lot of the trouble you been having." He leaned over confidentially, "Victor's a troublemaker. And there's money lining up behind him. Big money."

Kahn repeated vaguely, "Big money . . . ?"

"The biggest, the way I got it. You dope out just who for yourself!" Mori added cautiously, "Mind ya, I got no proof—"

"But why . . . !" Kahn's voice was strangled.

"Can't say for sure. I never was good at figgering schemes." Mori grinned, "But I always was good at getting an earful while passing up coffee and." A pause, and Mori continued complacently, "Wanta know another earful I got—?"

Kahn nodded distractedly.

"A school strike, starting in the grade schools and working up. White kids are gonna stay out until the shines go somewhere else."

Kahn's eyes burned questioningly and Mori shrug-

ged. "Like I said, I ain't so good at figgering schemes."

Kahn rose, dropped a dime on the counter, and went out into the street. The night air smarted his eyes as he proceeded in a walk-run past the tangle of stores and homes. He reached Orange Street, crossed it, and entered McKinley Park. He sat down at the base of the memorial obelisk to Appomattox, exhaustedly.

He was thinking: Should he tell Erika, his wife? He wanted to. He had many times withheld telling her of the many irritations of the day away from home, but he wanted to confide this one great thing in her. He needed her to reassure him. He had to feel the glow of her rewarming his blood. . . .

. . . He would tell Erika! But first he would tell Spence Andrews. He had much to tell Spence Andrews; so much that had been festering inside him . . . ! Kahn's hands clenched. . . . Tell Erika, but first tell Spence Andrews! A newspaper couldn't be run like a barbershop, or a theater. It was a business, but it also belonged to the people. Without it a people were savages, lost. . . .

Chapter Five

The primaries were over and a small group of drinkers, mainly steady patrons, were scattered here and there in Ricky's Bar. Some were sitting in booths, engaged in small talk; others were on stools staggered along the bar, posing deadly looks into the blue-glass mirror. The evening was sixty minutes old, and those who were there were drinking faster to make up for the enforced dry pause. At his accustomed place at the far end of the bar, Professor Parks was perched on a high stool, his processes focused on the third Scotch since the hour had begun.

Earlier, Slip had gone out and while he was alone Ricky had taken drink after drink, without any relief in the tension in his muscles. Now Slip was back, carrying a large bundle which was wrapped in heavy tar paper.

Slip set the package down in a corner of the bar he had reserved for himself, and opened a penknife, cutting the cord. Ricky sidled over, "What'cha got, Slip?"

Slip broke into the tar paper. "Ten years, Rick," he said. He took the books out and stacked them on the bar, holding the last one face forward to Ricky. "The *World Almanac*. Each book tells you about what went on in a certain year." He opened a book, chuckled, then set his face in a scholarly pantomine. "I gotta catch up on American history. Time stopped for me while I was holed up."

Ricky grinned humorlessly, and Slip continued, "I once got a book out of the prison library." He tapped a book in the pile. "It was this one. The *World Almanac* of 1937. I had read as far as 'Presidents' when the feeling came over me that if I didn't bust out I'd be as dead a fish as Martin Van Buren. So I made a break through the prison library. Caved half the old librarian's skull in and held him as hostage for a deal with the warden. . . ."

Ricky waited interestedly while Slip lit a cigarette. "It didn't go. The old gent began to make with the groans like a man who had only minutes left." Slip blew smoke. "I'd hit him too hard. Couldn't let him die, so I had to let the warden and doctor get to him. They patched him up with a silver plate in his skull, and from then on he had me marked as a stinker. Wouldn't give me a book for love or money." Slip patted the pile of books. "All through the next year

in solitary and after, the only thing I wanted was to get that almanac book back and go from p to z." Slip opened a book and began to peruse it.

Ricky turned away, unable to shake the feeling that Slip was more than a little off—that jail had done something to the Big Fellow's mind. Wild, he thought, like an animal out of a cage. And his voice, louder than was necessary for just talk. And drinking, like his stomach was a tank, with that slap-happy look like a postcard from the beach that said in big grinning type "IT'S GREAT TO BE ALIVE."

Ricky turned to pour himself a double whisky. . . . Damned if he'd mix in anything Slip had up his sleeve. . . . He sneaked a look at Slip reading. . . . Funny Slip being paroled. On what new evidence? The case had been airtight with Slip's alibi and his testimony for Slip blown higher than a kite. Shep Ward had traced the serial number of the murder gun to a shop in Chicago; had then cinched the guilty verdict with an eyewitness brought back from Kansas whom Slip had scared out of town. Guilty. Guilty as hell, and twenty years to life. . . .

There were calls for beer. Ricky played the spigot, ruled off top foam, and set them down mechanically. Parks was dreaming into his glass and Ricky fixed his fourth Scotch without being ordered to.

Shep came in and found a place at the bar.

"Double Scotch."

Ricky set the drink up, looking apprehensively from Shep to Slip and back again. Slip caught a re-

flection of Shep in the blue-glass mirror and came striding over.

"Hiya, Shep."

Shep stared, momentarily at a loss, then said carelessly, "Out of the Bastille, eh?"

Slip said amiably, "That's Sunday talk, Shep." He raised his glass. "Ain't you gonna congratulate me?"

Shep raised his glass in mock ceremony.

Slip chuckled. "Not sore, are you?" There was a baiting note.

Shep asked uneasily, "Why should I be?" The suppressed laughter in Slip that kept threatening was disconcerting.

"I was your big case in '36." A little of the laughter came out. "You were the mighty racket buster."

Shep drained his glass. "You've got me confused with another fellow."

Ricky came closer, surveying them anxiously. Slip said, "Reunion party, Rick. Keep filling 'em up." He clapped Shep on the back affectionately. "So it was another fellow, eh?"

Shep stared at him curiously. There was a healthy glow in Slip's cheeks that spread to his ears. There wasn't five seconds of prison pallor on a man who'd done ten years. . . .

Slip took some clippings out of an inner pocket and set them down in front of Shep. Now the laugh was rising upward as though released by powerful inner springs. "Look 'em over. See what a rover boy you used to be."

The clippings were yellowed with time and frayed from handling. The top one read: WHY IS KILLER MASTERSON STILL FREE? Shep scanned the subhead and lead paragraph almost unfamiliarly. It all read like a high school essay written by a yearling in the community civics class. He wrested his eyes away and drained his glass.

Slip said, "Strong stuff, huh? A million words calling me a dirty name. Shep, you emptied the dictionary into them pieces."

Shep said wryly, "I had writing talent."

"You wrote fine. I been reading and rereading the pieces for ten years."

Slip sorted the stack of clippings on the bar, patterning them into a fan spread, his hands spanning over them. Shep watched the hands fascinatedly. Slip's great hands slighted him, made yesterday seem unreal, more farcical. The brave words in those frayed articles of his could never have put those great hands under lock and key. The hands could close on his mouth and shut off speech forever. Slip's hands could press his in an everlasting handshake, leaving stumps at his armpits. . . .

Shep said involuntarily, "No hard feelings, Slip?"

"Nope. Not a one." It was said readily; sounded incredibly as though Slip really meant it.

"But those articles put you away."

"In a way, and in a way—not."

As if in an uncontrolled and wholly automatic response, Shep heard himself saying, "What do you

mean—in a way not?" There was a heat blowing up from his stomach. . . .

"The skids were greased. You just gave me a little extra shove." The laughter was gone now. Slip seemed serious, grimly slugging through a bog of thought. "The way I've thought it out—it was in the cards for me to retire from the picture."

Shep observed satirically, "For a fellow facing ordinary retirement, you certainly broke a lot of heads and terrorized a lot of witnesses."

"Yeh, I know." Shep recoiled from Slip's fingers squeezing his shoulder almost fondly. "Thinking of the clink gave me the shakes. But no kidding, Shep. I knew I was headed there—felt it in my bones—even before you wrote a line."

"I know, you had your fortune told."

"No, Shep." Slip was remarkably bent on remaining serious. "There was the handwriting on the wall reading, 'Quit, guy. Lay low until the tide comes in again. You're getting on people's nerves. They're tired of all the noise you're making.' Even an old hooky player like me could read them signs, Shep. Society was all primed to give the gangster the heave-ho just for the hell of it. . . ."

It was glib, subtly mocking—mocking him. Shep said indignantly, "So they convicted you out of sheer boredom! It didn't matter that you had killed a man in cold blood!"

Slip was irritatingly unimpressed and unremorseful about what District Attorney Mahoney had raged

was a "fiendish mockery of our customs and our courts of justice—a blatant and lawless savagery." There was an undertone of derision. "Niles Morrissey? Nobody dropped a tear when he went—except maybe his own family. Nobody really gave a damn about him, and a lot of guys had a private celebration. Mahoney worked himself up over the killing after not giving a damn for three months—and then only because he saw which way the wind was blowing and saw an opportunity for himself. . . ."

Shep began a retort, but kept silent, remembering. There was an element of probability in this hind vision coming from Slip. Mahoney, born poor and fiercely ambitious, had used the publicity of the Masterson case to elevate himself to the post of assistant federal district attorney. . . .

"It figures, Shep. Everybody began to yap about reform until they got themselves hypnotized. Even bums I had enough on to hang. . . . Morrissey! You didn't really give a damn about him either, Shep. You were just sounding off, selling salvation, hoodooed by your name all over the front page."

Shep wanted to make loud denials, affirm himself a once defender of the oppressed, but reached for his glass instead. Soon he said, "Then you're not hoping to skin me alive?" He smiled ironically. "I'm forgiven for persecuting you!"

First fingers clumped fondly into his shoulder, then Slip said, "Shep, I love you. You saved my life."

It was in the middle of a swallow.

"I was knocked off a thousand times in ten years, Shep. Reform got to be popular like the Lindy Hop, and everybody took a flyer at it. Every day in the clink I read how Dillinger, Coll, Schultz, this one, that one, was knocked off. Then when devils got to be scarce, people went gunning for the whole Republican Party—" Slip frowned, entangled in his own thinking. "Anyhow, a lot of guys got it and everyone of those corpses was me—only there I was safe in the clink with the State paying guards to protect me. If I'da beat the Morrissey rap, sure as hell I'd be dead today. Skin you alive! Why, Shep, I wouldn't hurt a hair on your head."

Ricky kept coming with the Scotch bottle and Shep tugged his top shirt button loose. The heat was now great billowing waves in his head. Instead of a reprisal he had worried over a little through the years, here was applause. Slip was hailing him as his savior. The man he had helped put away ten years ago was felicitating him for his good deed. Goliath resurrected was calling David father . . . !

It was farcical, but Slip clapping him on the back and squeezing his shoulder fondly over and over proved a living truth, pointed a living logic. Beneath and beyond the tragedy of struggle was a man's secret desire to empty his own ego into the universal ego, like halving an egg and spilling its contents into a vast communal pastry. Slip standing beside him was proof that somewhere slumbering inside the roughneck was the justborn wanting nothing more than

to become the fetus again. . . . Slip had murdered Morrissey, using a gun. He had murdered Slip, using a pen. Just the excesses and whoop-de-do of men who really yearned to bake a community cake. When the rest of the world wearied of killing their Morrissey and got around to the final simplification, hello brother, there's plenty more room at the bar. . . .

Shep clapped Slip on the back. "How's it feel being free?"

"I always been free, Sheppie. While you guys outside been knocking yourselves out and knocking each other off, the ten years were a long, sweet rest for me." Shep grinned broadly and Slip motioned to Ricky. "Rick, get that stack of books and set 'em up here."

Ricky set them up, and Slip rang a finger lightly along them. "The *World Almanac,* Shep—1936 to 1945. All I had to do with that stretch came under J—jails. I was just one number added to where it gives the total prison population."

The waves were now outside and his head was bobbing up and down on them like a cork. Listening now with difficulty, it sounded preposterously as if Slip was proud of the insignificance of his role during the ten rollicking years of world history. . . .

"Eat, sleep, lay around—that was me. And when I wisened up, I stopped playing hard guy and kept clear of solitary. I got to play baseball, take in a show, squat in the sun. All this time you guys were running around in circles trying to parley NRA, WPA, WPB, OPA, Hitler, Tojo, into a cash buck—until you were

punch drunk. Take a look in the books and get a line on what you've been through. . . ."

Shep said thickly, "Quite a spiel, chum. But you're just as passé now as you were then." He shook an admonishing finger unsteadily. "So don't go getting ideas. . . ."

Slip raised his glass, winked at Ricky, and a laugh began to rise. "Passé! Whose on the floor sleeping off the ten-year grind . . .?"

Chapter Six

1.

There were no depressions of footprints on the thick oriental rugs, no ashes in the opaque crystal trays, and the books were in neat rows behind glass. The Andrews home was overscrubbed, unused. Facing each other on a waxed grand piano, were portrait-photographs of Biff Andrews in an overseas cap, and Lana, his sixteen-year-old sister.

Merna Andrews and Spence sat opposing each other; she looking impassively into a current novel, and Spence knitting his face over the *Leader*. Merna's face was expressionless. Only the eyes emoted, but these were hidden from Spence behind extra-thick reading glasses. The glasses had come to mean more than a visual aid to Merna. They were her armor,

her shield against the pressures of an evening at home with Spence. Spence's face was mobile, overactive, as if it were a screen sensitized to each stir in living. His pantomime was mainly vexation.

Spence flipped the pages nervously, his face acting and reacting, and then, the bursting need to comment aloud became unbearable, so he said in his usual indifference to whether Merna listened, or cared, or understood, "The way the country's going, we better give it back to the Indians." A pause later he looked up from a news item and added, "Or maybe apply for membership in the U.S.S.R." He looked briefly toward Merna, then returned to his page with his face a register of disgust.

What Spence never knew was that Merna did listen without participating, a whole volume of reply coursing through her mind. She was thinking, He's off again, playing the game of grand strategy; seating himself in the front row with the experts, so that he'll be able to brag to the business leaders in town, and when he's tired enough to make the mistake of spending an evening at home—to me. He may be as great a thinker as some say he is, but I can't help but feel sorry for the poor devils who let him do their thinking for them. Her eyes lifted to the photographs of Biff and Lana, lingered slightly, then dropped back to her book.

Soon Spence looked up again, braiding his face. "The further we get away from fundamental principles of Americanism, the more of a mess we get in.

There's a whole revamping needed here at home if this country is to survive. Dammit, somebody has to find a way of reassuring people about the future, or they'll run wild, go to hell with themselves." He stopped, chafing impatiently for sounds of approval that would encourage him to extend and expand his remarks. He thought irritably, This cold fish I'm hog-tied to for the children's sake. I wonder if her vocal cords are paralyzed like her body. Doesn't she ever want to let go, talk, say something, anything! If not for the kids dammit, I'd divorce her. He flung the *Leader* to the floor and looked across to Merna to see if the gesture would distract her, rouse her. Merna turned a page of the book, intent on it.

Lana came in with a numbed little face and her breasts full against a cerise sweater. She walked silently across the living room to the staircase, and ascended the stairs. Spence swung his head, and watched her compact young girl's body until she was out of sight.

He asked, frowning, "What's eating the kid?" One of his few home exhilarations was Lana's fond peck at his cheek. Another was Biff's close resemblance to him. Biff had been mobilized in the last months of the war; was now snafu somewhere in the Far East.

Merna thought wearily, I suppose it's time I told him. It's been a month now, and all the steaming he can do will be an anticlimax. Poor Spence is in for a lot of blows and I'll need all my endurance to live with the noise he'll stir up in his disappointment

over Lana and Biff. She eyed Spence covertly. I suppose what heart he has will be broken, but I can't feel sorry for him—or myself. Spence had his way utterly with them and they're his children, not mine.

Merna said simply, hoping perhaps to prepare Spence by giving it to him in two separate statements, "Lana's not well. She's being treated by Dr. Nassoit."

Spence looked perplexed. "What's the matter with her?"

It was an ugly word and Merna wasn't sure she was pronouncing it correctly. "Dr. Nassoit says she's being treated for gonorrhea."

She suddenly felt Spence suffocatingly close as he gritted his teeth a foot away from her face. "Are you crazy, Merna!"

Merna closed the book and put it down beside her. "I'm just repeating Dr. Nassoit's diagnosis to you, Spence."

Spence darkened, sputtered, then blurted with an incongruous small-boy quality in his voice, "But that's not a kid complaint. That's something that comes from . . ." He stopped on the verge of saying "playing around." But the meaning was plain.

"Not necessarily, Spence," Merna minimized. "Dr. Nassoit said it can be picked up in school washrooms, in restaurants, toilets, and places."

Spence was hysterical in relief. "Sure! Sure a kid can pick it up that way." He saw Lana's lovely face and he surged with a great pity for her. Seeking further relief, he said, "It can probably be passed

along by some goddam filthy servant. Why in hell don't we insist on health certificates from the domestics, Merna! I don't care if they are sensitive about it." He ruled, begining to steam, "From this minute on, everyone in our employ here must submit to a thorough medical examination for venereal disease. I don't give a damn if they squawk to high heaven and quit." He recovered, then said fearfully, "And don't let Biff know about this. There's no use upsetting him."

Merna nodded, thinking, Just like Spence, looking for the easiest way out of thinking about Lana whom he believes he loves so devotedly. God help him if he brings himself to cross-examine Dr. Nassoit and finds that Lana has been a woman since she was fourteen, and with no great pride in her womanhood. God help everybody else in Spence's path and God help me because Spence will retaliate by making us all pay for Lana's mistakes. He'll blame us all and never blame himself for his complete possession of her since she first began to toddle. . . . He'll always believe he made her strong by never giving her standards, or letting her cry instead of bribing her to stop. He'll purge himself of blame by pointing to her generous allowance, her freedom from restriction, his championing of her against schoolteachers afraid of his prestige and importance. . . . Not really caring, Merna felt a little sick inside thinking of Spence's coming disappointment in Biff; rudderless, confused Biff; made too much of for too few gifts, pampered

and molded by a father who didn't know him at all, or care to probe. Biff, utterly without an identity, wrought into a chip off his father's wooden image; taking himself and his melancholia furtively behind closed doors. Not really caring, and long resigned, Merna felt a little sicker inside because what was to come would seek her out and disorder the mechanical tidiness with which she lived; would perhaps stun Spence into divorcing her, for her failure in mothering, her failure as a wife, and because appearances before the world would no longer be needed.

Spence rang, and after a moment the butler appeared. Spence ordered a double whisky, and a pause later drank it thirstily. He called out to the butler, "I'm expecting Shep Ward. Send him right in when he gets here."

Merna was rummaging her mind for an excuse to escape upstairs, when Spence lamented, "Can't understand what's got into Biff. Why no letters. . . ." He eyed Merna quizzically. "You been mailing our letters to him?"

Merna started guiltily. The lament and questioning of her was a frequent event, but it always caught her unawares, sending shivers through her. Soon she was able to nod and say mildly, "Biff was never much of a letter writer, Spence. Never so much as a postcard, even as a boy camper."

Spence made a face and let it drop. Merna's relief was slow in coming. Her sense of guilt and conspiracy was oppressive, frightening. . . . When Spence finally

discovered she had been readdressing his letters to Biff secretly! If only she had disregarded Biff's first postscript plea of "Don't tell father!" The boy's letter then, as his few letters since for more than a year, were posted from a rehabilitation center in the United States. Merna shuddered. This sudden cabal with a son who had never confided in her before, ever before. . . .

There was the small commotion of somebody's arrival in the main hall, and Merna arose and started for the staircase as Spence reached down, picked up the *Leader* and resumed reading it.

2.

Shep Ward came in a trifle unsteadily and sat down facing Spence Andrews. The night air and a finger in his throat had sobered him somewhat.

Spence looked up briefly, and said tonelessly, "How've you been, Shep?"

Shep smiled faintly, took a cigarette out of a monogrammed case, tapped it, and lighted up, waiting. In his years with Spence, there had never been a single occasion when a conference hadn't begun with Spence aloof, absorbed in his thinking, while he sat waiting and smoking.

Soon Spence said energetically, "Get your thinking cap on, Shep. We're not fanning the breeze tonight just to pass the time."

It touched off an oppressive inner boredom for

Shep. The years had lessened his capacity for matching intensities with Spence, for enduring Spence's hammer-blow speech in these informal conferences. Spence had played championship football in his youth, and was the perpetual halfback plunging through center; his whole chemistry contracted toward the last white line.

Shep shifted his feet comfortably, his eyes dutifully on Spence, Looking, he was suddenly aware of the stamp of age on the publisher's face. There were pouches under the eyes, and the mouth line sagged badly. Shep sighed inwardly, aching to drop off to sleep. If only Spence would mellow with age and relax, stop carrying that football, learn the art of idle talk, stop his fanatical preoccupation with politics. . . .

Spence began the conference in a gratifying monotone. He said simply, categorically, "We're junking our conservative point of view for what approximates a liberal position."

Shep first stared, then sounded his surprise. "I don't get it!" He didn't get it and what Spence said so summarily, so conclusively, was impossible. Through the years in Shep's experience, and before that in the decade of Spence's ownership, the *Leader* had greeted each day and its 60,000 readers austerely in her conservative dress. The whole of the staff fingering policy, however slightly, in the headline leads, in the selection of material from the wire and mail welter, in the special feature departments, in

the Vox Pop sampling, on the editorial page, were beholden to the frosty conservatism of the newspaper —whatever their private convictions might be.

It was impossible, a canard, and Shep wondered bewilderedly if there was a practical joker side to Spence he had never taken notice of. He waited, his stare rebuking his employer as his sense of burden deepened. For the fatigue he felt, frivolity was no less an odium than intensity.

Soon Spence continued, "For a fact, Shep, and wipe that idiotic look off your face. You can believe in my statement as it stands. We start our new policy as soon as we reasonably can. The members of the staff that want to along with me can. I'll judge their capacity for change by what they show in the weeks to come. Those who can't go along can drop out, or be fired. In any event, there won't be much of a personnel problem since I've looked the field over and have passed the word around that salaries can be better here than most newspapermen looking for a spot may suppose." Spence smiled pleasantly. "Not to hold anything back, Shep, I've got enough applications in my drawer to restaff fifty per cent of the paper within twenty-four hours. As far as special features are concerned, we're dropping one or two when the contract year expires and substituting a couple of first-rate syndicated writers who have a so-called liberal following." He concluded reassuringly, "There won't be too many transition pains, I promise you."

Shep said, "I think I'm entitled to your confidence, Spence. To know why."

Spence considered, then got up on his feet. "I'll try to make it as clear as I can." Shep cupped his chin in concentration, leaning forward in his chair, as Spence began pacing up and down. Soon Spence began, selecting his words carefully, "We've talked a lot of late about new conditions in Seneca brought on by the war and since. The voting picture and stuff like that—" He waited for Shep's nod, then resumed, "There are other problems Seneca and America have to get set to meet. Wages are up and soon will have to come down of their own weight. Capital will have to be more conservative than ever in the way it sticks its neck into production because there simply aren't any markets worth a nickel anywhere except at home—and these are already leveling off, falling. Nobody anywhere abroad has a dime and I can't see any sensible businessman tossing his investment cash into a bottomless pit, without a ghost of a chance of getting anything back." He stopped, then said, "I'm giving it to you sketchily, Shep, but you see the economic laws operating to create such a condition, don't you?"

Shep began to nod agreement, voice his wonted mechanical "Sure," when a sudden uneasiness inhibited his responses. The text of what Spence had said made a point, begged for easy agreement, yet now reviewing it in a solemn chamber of his brain, it seemed somehow specious, like a motivated head-

line compelling a focus in order to obscure and misrepresent the lower-case story below, the deeper story. He said cautiously, "What's all that got to do with questions of *Leader* policy?"

Spence frowned reprovingly. "Concentrate on it, Shep. Seneca is now more of a workingman's town than a middle-class residential town. People have changed over, strangers have come in and stayed on. As things are, the active population are mostly workers with a special interest and a special point of view. If we want to influence these people, we've got to talk their language. Dammit, look at our circulation figures and interpret them. They've been static, have even decreased about twelve per cent while the town's grown in size! Why . . . ? Because all we've been doing is readdressing ourselves to the same people who've been buying the *Leader* all of their lives." Spence beat his palm. "Shep, we can't go on openly antagonizing the plain everyday worker so that those who do read us don't believe anything we say, while the others just don't buy our paper!"

Spence's eyes were prodding him, demanding approval. Shep hesitated, then said equivocally, "Does that mean we're pro-union and the rest of it?"

He missed a look on Spence's face that quickly dissolved. Spence said, "I said we change our policy. Maybe I should have said we modernize it to meet new conditions. We can't win circulation and support among workers by calling them names—so we won't call them names. We've got to show concern for their

problems, and by that win their loyalty. There are a lot of revisions we'll have to make, a lot of rightabout-facing even. A lot of things we've fought against the last dozen years or so are here to stay whether we like it or not. . . . If we go on blindly attacking those things, we're in a vacuum, we accomplish nothing. If we take, let us say, a more strategic position on some of the things we don't like, we can at least hope to control and limit them. . . ."

There it was. All set up for Shep's endorsement and signature. Shep contemplated it. A more strategic position? It was double talk, circumlocution, sleight-of-words come from a suddenly wary man. Wary! That was a dimension in Spence new to Shep. The hard, vivid outline of Spence in his experience was a portrait with every expression clear, unmistakable; a dogmatic Andrews, wantonly himself, contemptuous of opposition in his headlong charge through center.

Shep stared, searching Spence's face. This Andrews was unfamiliar. And now regarding him intently, urgently, there was something chameleonlike in the publisher's face. The face no longer represented the man as closely, as surely, as before. Or was it his imagination? Shep struggled for a return to his accustomed equanimity, a way out of a spell now insidiously enveloping him. There were phrases clamoring in the chambers of his mind. Phrases in a racking medley, with what Spence had left unsaid emerging the clearest and most persistent. Or was he imagining

that too! Yet these most persistent sounds had the same insidious sting as the furies long dinned into his ears by Mary. . . . Or was that also his imagination? Was it all a tricky technique in suggestion unraveling the comfortably spun threads of his thinking, to the end that he would become helter-skelter, unsure. . . . He shifted unhappily, and his eyes looked haunted. It was a hell of a time of life for a fellow to be unsure, loosely knit, at cross-purposes with himself. . . . Damn Mary and double damn that god-awful chameleonlike look hounding Spence's face, and hounding his imagination!

Spence was looking at him quizzically. Soon he laughed and said affably, "You're looking bothered, Shep."

Shep said, "The strategy, Spence—isn't it a little deep?"

"An old Seneca team play, Shep. A change of tactics, simply. We're out of scrimmage now. Lines are too equal in strength." Spence winked. "A fake forward pass to throw the opposition off, then an end run to the goal line. Catch?"

"Not too good. It's still—a little deep."

"Then stop beating your brains. Have faith in an old footballer. Just remember, when you play to win—anything goes."

Anything goes! The thought jarred, like a blow. Shep winced under it, and crept deep into his hideaway.

Spence rang for the butler, grinning broadly at

Shep. "We'll have a nightcap and pick up where we left off in the morning. You get a good night's sleep. We've got a mountain of work ahead of us."

Chapter Seven

1.

Biff Andrews sat tipped forward on a bench in the large waiting room of the Seneca Township Station, listening to the echoing retreat of the train. A workingman entered, set his dinner pail down loudly, and took a seat. Biff tipped forward slightly more and put his fingers to his lips, shushing the noise of the dinner pail.

. . . Two hundred yards up in the darkness, a small boy's shout away from the swimming hole at the edge of Jenkinson's truck farm, the train was stumbling almost to a stop, so as not to leave the ground while it took the hairpin curve. Biff raced into yesterday, rising from his seat, shouting in the fullest pitch of his voice, as the train huffed, gained speed kicking backwards, gained speed laboring noisily, then

emptied into its distant and mysterious void, leaving its hoots suspended in the atmosphere. . . .

Biff subsided, and the workingman smiled at him understandingly. "Celebrating, eh? Don't blame ya. Could stand one or two myself." He came close and studied Biff's sleeve. His face wrinkled. "What outfit you from? I don't see no insignia on your sleeve."

Biff ignored him, not hearing; weaved across the room, and went out the door. He lurched kicking a huge image of himself on the sidewalk, then stopped. He opened and closed his right fist, searching. The duffle bag wasn't there. . . . The duffle bag wasn't there, a 'steenth of a second ago it was; the moisture from holding the strings tightly was yet on his palm. Biff looked about suspiciously as though the missing duffle bag had a deeper meaning than its loss. . . .

He went forward faster humped up. The air was good against his aching eyes and after some blocks he leveled off. A big truck rumbled a whisk away from him and the citified areas of town began. Under the street lights and sure of the pavement under his feet, his bones were becoming alive. The natural colors were back on the face of the world. His movements became less automatic as the streets became his. He hooked a finger at the statue of a maternal virgin in the wide archway of St. Joseph's on Vermilion Street. The looping lawn was seeded, hoed, weeded, familiarly, just the way it was yesterday and before. He circled an arm at the chipped granite of Seneca College sitting in the belly of Christenberry Street and

called out "sir" to Dean Tompkins, clownishly clamping his nostrils against the rancid tobacco breath of the noble educator. . . . He reached Orange Street, crossed it and entered McKinley Park. In the deep of the little park he veered off the glinting walk, scaled the low iron railing and sat down at the base of the memorial obelisk to Appomattox.

Bells broke the night ten times and the omen of bugle sounds in his ears sent him crouching at the rear of the structure. His heart began hammering, plunging, and the sweat steamed through his hair. He waited in an agony of reaction until the hot smell of thousands of marching feet fouled the air, blew into his nose. . . . He dropped to his stomach and began to inch forward, inch, then dead dog, inch, dead dog, to the low railing, then deep into the last rim of yielding soil where a cement line parted the dirt and asphalt . . . waiting. . . .

The rhythmic shuffle of feet beat closely against him, came closer to his sights. There were thousands of them, pelvises jutting forward in the line of march. Waiting. The column fanned past him and he moved stealthily to pick off one of the marchers in a quick swooping movement. He moved and spun her around toward him. Under his chin the full length of her body was momentarily taut, then began to slide downward to his shoetops. . . . He dropped his hands, tightening his fingers under her armpits, when a blow exploded against the back of his head and he hit the walk in a blinding flood of blood. . . .

It was a distant tomorrow in a deep sleep and hands were moving on his brow and in his hair, dusting his knees and shanks. The voice was a tuneful scale of sounds all spread out. "That guy hit you like he wanted to kill you, soldier." The arm was strong around his waist, drawing him to a bench. . . . Hands felt in his shirt pocket, lingered searching. Then a cigarette was pushed into his mouth. . . .

The cigarette flared, touching him into life. It tasted good, revived him. He breathed deeply taking air, straightened his lap, stretched his toes luxuriously, and dropped one arm on his companion's shoulder. . . .

Cora sat with her eyes and ears alerted, uncomfortable under the blindingly bright moon. It wouldn't do for her to be caught on a park bench with a drunken soldier. Her prestige as Slip Masterson's woman was wearing as thin as the memory of Slip's once prominence. In these ten years without Slip, the night stick was as close to her bottom as the tail on a monkey. Prowling patrolmen had grown to be smug about her, rowdy in their speech as the subtleties of her profession dropped away. . . .

Cora hid her head in Biff's shoulder as footsteps came to life, passed, and died. Biff gathered her in, bent down and kissed her on the mouth. Cora drew her head free, peeled a crust of lipstick from her lower lip and whispered, "Not here, honey." She filled her voice with surrender, half rising. "It's nice and comfy at my room. . . ."

Biff brought her down heavily. "Here," he said hungrily, racing into yesterday. Here—his memory gushing song. . . . Here—the summer breeze on the walks, the dancing leaves, the cotton candy snow. . . . Here—the vast spaces of his life; locking arms with middy-bloused freshmen, with bobbysock sophomores, with upswept seniors. . . . Locking embrace in the great quiet near the Botanical greenhouse a dart below where the walk dipped under the bridge. . . . "Here," he demanded, his mouth opening over her, his breath fuming stale alcohol.

Cora moved her head from side to side. "Quit it. You'll bring the cops running." Coaxingly, "Come on. I got a radio we can tune in." Biff shook his head fiercely, and Cora contracted, her free hand gripping the back of the bench, gathering to fling free. Half out of his pocket a flat folded leather prodded her hand. She moved her hand around it, identifying it. It was his wallet. Her hand closed on it as she hurtled to her feet and ran a few steps forward. She turned to look apprehensively. Biff remained sitting, indifferent to her escape, his head sagging to cushion against his chest. Cora tucked the wallet in her bosom and sauntered off, laughing contentedly to herself.

2.

Now half-drowsing. Time tumbled, droned. A dog pattered up and sniffed at his feet. A patrolman came by and rapped his ankles gently with his billy.

"Can't sleep here, son. You'll find plenty of overnight flops on Macon Street."

Biff struggled up, rousing, and moved on—away. There was a cold numbness in him that needed a warming drink. The last hour was hazy, dimmed out, illegible scratchmarks in the looseleaf of his consciousness. For a long time now he had an amazing facility for erasing the present, the moment ago—containing it in an enveloping darkness like slamming a vaulted safe door on the interior of the present. The phenomenon was even more curious. The longer ago past leapfrogged the present and moment ago, filling its place, radioing messages, pattern pictures, distant sounds and voices, to the antennae of his consciousness. It was easier to remember five and ten and more years ago than five minutes or five days ago. It was easier, and more pleasant . . . but the vaulted door kept stirring and needed to be watched . . . banged shut. . . .

Biff moved through the Seneca streets, cutting in toward lighted restaurants and bars, then hauling up abruptly in front of each and moving on. He felt wonderfully lucid whispering to himself, "ought to get a drink, got to go home—ought to go home—got to get a drink, got to get a drink. . . ." Little women came toward him looking up to catch his eye; faces dimly remembered leaped at him with dissolving recognition as he whirled by. Flying past neon-lighted Goody's ice-cream parlor he photographed a stag group in loud plaids. Reaching the corner and dark-

ness, he developed the negative and it was clearly himself wearing six faces and six plaid suits. . . . Looking at this little beehive of himself he was moved to amusement, to chuckling. Chuckling, he hauled up in front of Mori's lunch wagon, went in, and as Mori turned a perplexed face toward him, Biff broke into gales of laughter that brought the tears rolling down his cheeks.

Mori moved closer, studying Biff's face intently. Soon he said, "Say, you're Spence Andrews' kid!"

Biff bowed grandiloquently, barely recovering his balance. An only diner at the counter moved three swivel stools closer without rising. Lem Morrissey said with instant wrath, "You're wearing the wrong uniform, sonny."

Biff shook his head furiously, like a dog throwing off water. Mori shot an angry look at Lem, admonishing, "Nix. That stool ain't no soapbox. And lay off the kid. He looks sick."

Lem said, "Drunk, you mean. . . ."

Mori made rapid movements at a nickeled urn and put a cup of steaming coffee in front of Biff.

"Here you are, soldier. Get this down."

Biff weaved over the coffee, caught at the cup, and drank splashing. Mori refilled the cup and set it close to Biff's fingers. Biff drank with better method. Then he turned and stared into Lem's scowling features.

Staring, his eyes hounding Lem's face. Straining to recall half-obliterated minutes ago, his foot in the door closing on the present. Minutes. Then Biff said

in the manner of a recitation precariously remembered and which had no thought-meaning to the speaker, "In the wrong uniform. . . ."

Lem's nostrils were scenting like a terrier tensed in the first moments of fight, and quick alarm settled on Mori's face. Mori pointed a thumb at Lem, then gestured violently to the street door.

The alarm signal went unheeded. Looking at Lem, it was plain that reason was nothing before emotion. His lips crept back. He shuddered with the strain of his mood.

Lem snarled, "In the wrong uniform, I said. You were out there killing the very guys trying to make the world safe for the Andrews, sucker!"

Biff's eyes fixed on Lem fascinatedly, his eyes following the drama of Lem's face. Mori pleaded, "Pay no attention to Lem, kid." Mori tapped his head covertly, just inside Biff's view. "Lem's just got it in for people."

Biff's cheeks twitched nervously near the eyes, his lips working. He spoke as though pushing a weight aside. He spoke to Mori, keeping his eyes fixed solemnly on Lem.

"Who's he?"

Lem answered. "Lem Morrissey. Morrissey! Maybe you don't remember the name. You were coming out of diapers when your father had my brother killed. Morrissey!"

Mori looked aghast. "Pay no attention, kid. Lem's raving. No matter what they say about your old man,

he had nothing to do with Niles Morrissey's killing. Nothing whatever. Lem just thinks peculiar."

Mori howled, starting around the counter, "Will ya get the hell out of here, you troublemaking sonofabitch!"

Lem kept his seat and said, "And I'm next. Old Andrews has me tagged next. That's why Masterson's walking the streets again. To shut me up."

Mori stopped on the patron's side suddenly, as though struck by something. He looked thoughtful, then made mumbling noises to himself, absorbed in a schoolroom problem in addition.

Minutes later, Mori's face seemed to spread. He said, "Say!" looking into Lem's face.

They watched Biff get off his stool in little wiggling movements, stand bellied out in the middle, then straighten up, stiffening.

Biff reached down, grasped his coffee cup and aimed it to throw. Mori ducked involuntarily, needlessly. It was thrown in an utterly other direction and smashed to fragments against a wall.

3.

The neon lights of Goody's ice-cream parlor went off. Victor hunched in the shadows outside the Waco, fumbling with his key ring. The giant lock cylinder turned, closing the theater.

Victor waited impatiently for the street to empty of its scattering of stragglers. The day had been hard

and there was yet much work ahead organizing notes for a speech he would make the following night at a group meeting. In this latter, Victor was fastidious, thorough, and many hours would be required—far into the morning.

Victor presided over weekly meetings in the basement of the furnished-room house he lived in. Victor owed more than six months' back rent, but his landlady was too awed to press him for payment because Victor exuded an inner greatness that made her want to be on his side when the day came.

Victor's meetings were attended by mostly old people; pensioners, seniles, spinsters, and Bill Saunders, who acted as sergeant-at-arms and exchanged significant glances with Victor whenever possible. The group took the name of "Jesocrats" and many of the old people, believing in the name, carried the Old Testament under their arms to each meeting. Victor listened deafly, and Saunders in a grave, spiritual calm, while the old ladies and the old men organized an opening sermon and closed the meeting shrilling, "Mine eyes have seen the glory."

When the report on finances was rendered by the elected chairman of the finance committee, Victor rose to comfort everybody, expressing confidence that finances would soon be forthcoming, were already being arranged somewhere, and that the cellar meeting place would soon yield to quarters of magnificence and comfort. When queried on the details

of this anticipated revenue, Victor made ambiguous references to "prominent people" and "leading forces in Seneca society."

In between these matters, Victor read excerpts from selected works, interpreting and annotating in brilliant expositions that were great organ peals to the forgathered. Then, finally, wet through and through with the passionate sounds he had made, Victor delegated some of the least infirm to make hand copies of mailing lists, and others to enter personal data about Seneca's people on 6 x 8 file cards. Victor never stated what use he intended to make of this mailing list and dossier, and the congregants never thought to ask him. None really minded the chore. It was a useful way of whiling away a day that otherwise dragged for the many.

After the meeting and alone in the cellar, Victor wrote in longhand far into the dawn. It was during these hours that Victor felt himself ressurrected from his shattered body. (A draft board doctor once, in classifying his malady, had marked it "kyphosis.") As his pencil flew and the pages filled up, his stature grew and grew, grew high above the eye level of the people he craned up to daily, and whom he despised.

Among the things he wrote was:

> The Jew debases us. We have challenged him to carry his own spear and fight his own war and be finally and honorably exterminated, only to have him spread his hands emptily, helplessly, preferring that we perish from the poison of our

own thinking. Is this the insidious conspiracy of the Jew against the assassins of Jesus Christ?

Victor wrote this and more like it, but the majority of his writings weren't so philosophical, so intrinsic, so tortured. His main brief was coldly intellectual, pragmatic, a scholarly examination and appraisal of the successes and mistakes of the historical years 1922 through 1945. He had marked the name page of his text "Geo-Politics: A Critique," tentatively. A pencil line was drawn through the title, proof that he doubted the permanency of his decision on nomenclature. . . .

Victor looked up and down the street. It was now totally deserted. He took a piece of white chalk out of his pocket and knelt, writing on the sidewalk.

Soon he stopped.

He arose, consulted his watch, and hurried off to his labors.

4.

It was like the last ten years had been a nightmare from which she was now awakening. Those lean years and that terrifying feeling of waste that grew as her womanhood drained. . . . Deep shudders ran through her, then Cora's eyes brimmed and she wept a little. Slip had come up the stairs lugging a valise and a bundle of books, like a man back from a week-end business trip. A one-armed bear hug, with his other

hand taking stock of what she had—and the gaping years were filled in. Now there was a man in the house again. And sounds in the flat she could listen to, take comfort from. Sounds like the running water now with Slip in the bathroom getting washed and shaved. . . .

Cora sat herself in front of a chintz-skirted kidney table, and studied her reflection in a hand mirror. She pouted her lips practicingly, running a fingernail along the grooves of her teeth. The teeth were white, even; the smile was still good. She drew the skin from her swelling bosom over toward the armpits, making them look firmer. Then she let go and they sagged lumpenly. She drew her robe tight, and adjusted a clasp just below where the swell began.

The water stopped in the bathroom, and Slip came out in his pajamas. He peeled the top, and went through familiar motions that made her eyes brim again. After a shower and a shave Slip had always puffed out his chest, knotted and unknotted his back muscles in little ritualistic exercises, then shadow-boxed. Cora listened happily to the sounds, to each fierce intake of breath Shep timed to each thrust of his fist. It was good no longer needing to fill every corned of the three rooms and bath all by herself. Her life was once again snug little corners and cosy little boxed-in spaces. There was her vanity bench fixed so that the wall was at her back, the little bandbox kitchen, the narrow aisle against the wall at the far end of the big double bed. All the other spaces were

Slip's, as before, and he was big enough and active enough to fill them all at once, leaving her hemmed in deliciously. . . .

Slip stopped mugging and whirling and said, "How's about turning in?"

He pulled the light string soon after she nodded, and got into bed. Cora moved cautiously in the dark, dropped her robe, and climbed over Slip to her far end of the bed against the wall. Slip patted her affectionately as she went over him, his hand staying as she curled into her narrow aisle.

Now lying quietly in the dark, there were sudden little embarrassments in her, and which she also sensed in Slip. Now lying unrelaxed in the dark with Slip's hand flatly where he'd put it, she felt the estrangement of all the years for the first time since Slip had come up the stairs. She no longer knew his touch, and worse, she kept wondering what his face looked like as he lay beside her looking up at the ceiling. In those long ago years, she knew his touch. It had remained alive on her flesh while she bathed, at the hairdresser's, while she ran personal little errands. In those long ago years, she knew his face in the pitch dark just as though soft lights were playing on it while she watched closely. . . . Now she lay wondering what expression it wore—a little afraid. The hand was not the same. It had changed. It made her want to get deeper into the shucks, out of reach.

Slip heaved to a side facing away, and said, "Sleepy?" in a brittle voice.

It wasn't Slip, because it wasn't his sort of talk just after going to bed. Cora moved in closer, catty-corner, and choked her breath as she waited. There had been old signals of movement that used to do instead of talk. . . . Slip remained motionless, didn't heave and flipflop facing her. She knew the signals were lost.

It's all changed, she thought, and maybe it wasn't so sure that Slip would fill up the place like before. It's all changed, and the change is mainly me. I'm somebody else. Slip knew he was coming back, and it was only time that stood between us, because he was Slip, always sure of himself. I didn't know, and couldn't know, because I'm me and I've never been sure. . . . Now he's back, and I'm an unfamiliar object, and lying here I can feel that he knows it. His touch could never get under the crust of many many since him. . . .

Cora stared into the darkness, widening her eyes as though trying to break a spell. Funny I can't reassure Slip or myself that I'm really me, welcome him back and mean it. Funny I can't do things that holds a man even against himself. Funny this embarrassment. Is it because its been too long and there have been too many things in between and I've aged a hundred years as a woman? . . . Is it that Slip's the last man in the world I want to expose myself before, the only man I never want to show the last ten years on my body?

That was it, and Cora finally understood it. Slip was the only man who could see her in double focus,

before and after, in the same one look, in a single intimate moment. It was a shame she couldn't bear.

Slip suddenly heaved, flipflopped facing her. Cora said in a rush, "How was it in jail, Slip?"

"Three guesses."

"How'd you go free?"

"Ways."

Silence.

"What now, Slip?"

"One thing and another."

"Same old stuff?"

"No, not the same old stuff."

"Smart. Things have changed."

"I'll still get mine. With back interest."

"Ward's still around."

"Don't mean a thing. Just a paper bag."

"How about Andrews?"

"No problem. We're playing with a new deck now."

"I don't get it."

"Skip it."

She didn't know his thinking any more. She tried to flipflop and face the wall, but Slip was now holding her, signaling.

Cora said, "Wearing anything?"

"Must I?"

"Yes. You'd better."

Slip heaved and flipflopped facing away. Now Cora could see him as though there were soft lights playing on his face while she watched closely. She knew the expression he wore and what his face was like as

he lay looking up at the ceiling, breathing unevenly.

Slip got out of bed and pulled the light string. His face was chewing as he got into his pants, shirt, tie, socks, shoes. He opened the closet door, took his valise and bundle of books off a shelf, and set them down near the door. He bent forward peering into her vanity mirror and ran a comb through his hair. He set the comb down and picked up a flat man's wallet, revolved it in his hand, and arched a look at Cora. He opened it, read the identification card in the celluloid window, then went through the pocket compartments. He read several papers, then restored the contents carefully, folded the wallet closed, and gestured it at Cora inquiringly.

Cora said drearily, "Got it in McKinley Park."

"When?"

"Tonight."

"I'm keeping it." Slip put the wallet in his pocket.

"Why?"

"Reasons."

Suddenly, "Say, who was that kid?"

"Weren't you introduced!"

Slip pulled a roll of money out of a pocket and dropped it on the vanity. He looked at her intently. "This ought to take you a long way from Seneca. Write for more if you're ever stuck."

"Must I?"

"Yes."

She suddenly understood, knew his thinking. She

was an embarrassment, a liability while she remained. With Slip back, she must go. Slip had a stake in Seneca, something more than sentiment.

Slip went to the door, opened it, and crossed the threshold. He said emptily, "So long."

The door closed.

She listened to the sounds of Slip going downstairs. There were two hall doors he had to go through to get to the street. One squeaked slowly on a rusted hydraulic spring. It was the first door, inside the hall. Then the street door slammed closed, reverberating through the halls and sending waves of sound up the single staircase and through the flat.

The sobs that were first deep growling noises in her belly and chest stormed into her face, uncontrollably.

Chapter Eight

1.

The alarm whirred and Shep worked to a sitting position on the edge of his bed. Soon he got up and went to raise the shades, wincing at the streaming sunlight. He came back to sit on the edge of the bed, and scratched his leg, arm, scalp, chalk white.

The whole environment of the room was new and bewildering with Mary gone. The furnishings, pictures, oddments, seemed suddenly impersonal; the place had the hangdog look of a furnished room. Mary was gone, and his unappeased stomach acidity in this first unattended bachelor morning, established her departure finally and acutely. He missed Mary swarming about him until he downed a glass of hot sugared lemonade. Missed the lemonade mainly, only . . .

Shep idled, feeling vague. What . . . should he do first in the customary morning routine that would get him to the office? It was as if the routine had gone with the rest of the junk crammed into Mary's suitcase. And now, with the feeling of vagueness, and the morning misery in his stomach, Shep took to feeling sad.

It was a rotten shame for a man to be suddenly all alone with himself, uncared for. A wife had no more right to quit cold, pack and go, than an employee, a soldier in battle, a maid. He bitterly resented her leaving, but there was nothing special about her that he missed, he told himself. There was nothing Mary did he couldn't get done by some elderly woman available for hire. The scarlet chapters were long by the board. Dammit, it was plain to the naked eye that once-comely Mary had deteriorated into every other woman and her sister. He missed her, yes, but mainly because she was part of the legend of his younger days. A safety box into which he had stored trinkets and memorabilia. . . .

He reached for his shoes and socks and began to put them on. It was that part of the dressing routine he customarily did last. Then shod, he made for the bathroom, plugged in his Schick, and began to shave.

The telephone had a sepulchral tone ringing in the narrow foyer. Mornings were a bedlam of inter-office communiqués detoured to his home by underlings long familiar with his morning inertia, with

Mary taking down copious memoranda. Shep moved the button on the Schick, and went to the telephone.

It was Dudu.

Shep held the receiver at arm's length, deaf to what Dudu was saying. Then he said, "I'll be in around ten." He added miserably, all of him parched for that first sip of coffee Mary always held out to him while he shaved, "I've got to stop in somewhere for breakfast."

It failed to stem Dudu.

Shep put his ear to the receiver. There was an excitement in Dudu's tones. "Say it again, Dudu, and slowly. Who's dead?"

It came over slowly and clearly. "The boss. Andrews!"

"No horseplay. I'm in no mood!"

"On the level. His butler found him dead an hour ago."

It was impossible to reject it as a hoax. Dudu was an earnest, humorless plodder, with a dishwater personality. Not a prankster. If it was a hoax, Dudu himself must be the butt of it.

"Did you check!"

"Doublechecked and then triplechecked. Spoke to the butler, to Mrs. Andrews, and to Sergeant Carmody."

It was true! Shep inquired, "Heart attack?" Andrews had spent much argument proving not only that cardiacs could live, but that cardiacs could be

competing athletes and do with four to six hours' sleep even in their fifties.

"It wasn't his heart. He was shot. That's all I know —so far." A dead silence, then, "You run it down, huh? Out of respect for the boss, you personally should cover it."

Shep said, "Yes, of course," huskily. He didn't dare trust his voice.

2.

It was just after ten o'clock when Shep climbed the broad low stoop of Andrews' baronial mansion and wielded the huge brass knocker. There was already a murky foretaste of noon in the air. The Andrews' lawns were manicured plateaus set off by hedges cropped into huge ball shapes. Dogwood and wistaria scented the air and a thin spray blew from a Renaissance fountain bustling with plump cherubs holding bows and arrows.

The butler opened the door, nodding stiffly, then drew up offishly as Shep strode past him into the shuttered living room. There Merna Andrews was lost in the sunken seat of an enormous wing chair. She looked like one who was painfully awakening from a sleep. Lana moved restlessly about in a straight chair, her mouth hung open, and half of her out of a dress that was a hairbreadth fit.

Across the room, almost out of sight in the gloom, Sergeant Carmody leaned at an angle against the

wainscoting, his hat uptilted, an unlighted cigar jabbing sentences at an aide who took them down in shorthand in a palm-sized book.

Shep moved past Merna mumbling an awkward condolence and went up to Carmody. Carmody stopped dictating and said jealously, "Horning in a little early, aren't you?"

There were overhead noises, then a scuffling of feet down the staircase. Shep looked inquiringly and Carmody explained waspishly, "It's Doc Ingalls."

Doc Ingalls was an undersized man in a ten-gallon hat with a harsh voice, whose shingle outside his home read VETERINARIAN—PHYSICIAN, and who regarded the official post of coroner as his by divine right, having held it for thirty-six years. He entered the living room followed by Whitey, who did part-time police photography.

Ingalls started to speak, when Carmody pretzeled his face admonishingly and made a slight hand movement toward Shep.

Shep asked in annoyance, "What's eating you, Carmody?"

"You're early, too early. There's nothing for the press until later."

There was an offensive bully somewhere in Carmody that Shep had always despised.

"You can't censor news having to do with Andrews. The story's too big. . . ."

"Big, sure. That's why I don't want any interference until we wrap it up."

There was also a greedy little boy somewhere in Carmody. He wanted to be a prominent functionary in Andrews' burial and the year-out crackerbarrel gab that lived after.

Shep finally asked, "How was Andrews shot?" The question had been suspended in his mind since Dudu's phone call. . . .

Doc Ingalls involuntarily started to answer and Carmody signaled him to silence. Carmody stipulated, "There will be no story until we get into this thing. . . ."

"You can't stop us from printing the fact that Andrews is dead. . . ."

"That much is okay. But no story—yet."

Shep agreed, "No story."

Carmody made a slight hand movement toward Ingalls. Ingalls' voice surged, "Andrews was shot in the back. The bullet entered the heart and caused immediate death."

Now it took, like a delayed reflex. Ingalls' concise bulletin touched off the reaction. It was true. The colossus Andrews had been annihilated by a bullet—in the back. Shep's eyes grew bewildered, as though he was now hearing it for the first time that morning. He stared and the circle of himself, Whitey, Carmody and Ingalls, suddenly seemed close and suffocating, like men touching hands and sharing one single breath in a séance. He left his place in the circle absently and struck a match, holding it to the tip of Carmody's cigar. Carmody set his cigar in the flame,

inhaled, then puffed a thick, steamy odor into the circle.

Carmody spoke with his eyes on Shep. "About what time was Andrews shot, Doc?"

Ingalls hemmed professionally, then, "Probably sometime between midnight and 2:00 A.M. Can't say for sure until . . ."

. . . Until we can do a mechanical breakdown of the corpse. But before that Shep wanted to see the old man on his back, lifeless. There was something forcing him. . . .

Carmody said, "Come on, Whitey. We got to get statements from Mrs. Andrews, the kid, and the butler."

Shep started toward the stairs. Carmody bounded after him.

"Where do you think you're going!"

Shep took hold of the balustrade. "I want to take a look at Andrews."

"What the hell for!"

Shep disdained the rebuke; took the stairs two at a time. Carmody stared resentfully after him, gargoylish in a blue fog of cigar smoke.

3.

Spence Andrews lay in a crouch with his hands upflung over his head, just one light patch away from the open French windows. He was naked above the bottom half of lounging pajamas. Despite the full

pattern-crusting of blood where the bullet had burned into the raw flesh, the pajamas weren't visibly spotted, and no blood had dripped to his felt slippers, or to the oriental carpeting.

As Shep stared, the body seemed to cringe closer into a corner. A wave of giddiness seized him and he looked away, into the next room. The bed was unrumpled, the room pin neat. It was a setting that disowned the mess in the corner near the open French windows. . . . The corpse was something blown in by the night wind, a soiled newspaper blown in through the open window, into a corner of the room. . . .

Shep stepped across the low threshold to the balcony. He held his head down and the fainting symptoms passed. He sneaked a look at an angle of Spence's face, for the life of him unable to refrain from seeking every small detail of inventory . . . unable to arrest a growing proprietary interest, a feeling of partnership in Spence's death. . . .

The eyeballs were rolled back and the sockets seemed dilated. Shep watched for the active little muscles in the corners of the eyes that always emphasized every point Spence had made in all their association. The eyeballs held him hypnotically, and the giddiness threatened him again. He wrested his eyes away and looked out at the smart landscape below.

It was trim, seen from a height, and had a postcard quality. Honeysuckle clung to the white picket fences; hyacinth beds, rose beds, flowers he couldn't

identify, were impeccably coiffured. Spence had applied himself prodigiously to horticulture, with the well-formulated plan and intensity of fetish inevitable to anything Spence squandered himself on.

A current of voices from open windows below was floating upwards, seeking his hearing above the drone of natural sounds. Shep listened. Carmody was interrogating Merna Andrews, pausing solemnly while his aide recorded her replies in his palm-sized book. Soon the harsh tones of Doc Ingalls broke in, faded. A fraction later, the front door slammed. From his height, Shep watched the stunted physician move along the flagstone walk to the wrought-iron gate. He watched him move down the street walk, his feet ripping along in rapid, furious little movements, and as the distance grew it looked as though Ingalls would kick his wide-brimmed hat off. Ingalls was rushing a medicine-bag full of bromides into Seneca's proper. The *Leader,* when it appeared, would be a piddling after-echo, its front page no news to anybody within reach of Ingalls' strident herald cries.

Shep left the balcony, avoided looking at Spence, and quit the room.

Downstairs, the aide scribbled industriously. Merna was in her chair, still, unmoving, with her eyes closed. A step away, Carmody was brooding weightily. Beyond him, Lana was lifting a foot out of a slipper, then setting it back in.

Carmody moved to a position between Shep and

Merna. He scowled. "You didn't disturb nothing!"

Shep ignored it, and sat down on a piano stool.

Carmody took a half-filled glass of water off the piano, sipped, set it down carefully, then leaned confidentially over Shep.

"Got any ideas on who did the killing?"

First Shep shrugged blankly, automatically, then his mind took hold of the query as Carmody went back to his interrogation.

True, Spence's death, now indisputably true and he had seen it with his own eyes, but the manner of death . . . ! It required more than sight verification, more than simple acknowledgement of a final and irrevocable truth, to accept the frightful detail of an assassin's bullet come from behind. Shep shuddered. Bang, in the back, dead. Period to a man's thoughts, burdens, dreams. Period to the delicate integration of brain, heart, liver, breath. . . .

. . . The killer? . . . An emotion flooded his thinking. Common thug, the lowliest, the act of a madman. An enemy, yes, as any man of Spence's stature must have enemies. But not in the back, not honorably, not with honor.

. . . An outrage, and somehow personal, somewhere he had a share in it too. Like Spence, its signification had touched his back into a sheet of flame. Like Spence, the vandalism, the criminality, had struck at the roots of his own structure. . . . Eleven years! The act had defiled the community he had shared with Spence. If the motivation had been a contest of

viewpoint, a twopenny bullet in the back was a stated conclusion repulsively anarchic.

Shep burned with a sense of injury and shame, now feeling intuitively this polarization of himself with the world of Spence Andrews. The treacherous attack was upon him too. It demanded his vengeance. The assassin must be found, then destroyed. He must find the murderer! It was his clear duty. Not alone because of the crime, but because of the wanton trampling of symbols without which a man must always live defensively and in terror. The shot symbolized the rout of reason, a nihilistic contempt for the free exchange of ideas, the lunatic infringement of a creature man on an individual's right to himself, a man's right to sleep unmolestedly behind the fortress sanctuary of hedgerows and a front door. A bullet in the back was the retort of the sadist and bigot!

Now the fire in Shep became fever pitch as his senses stirred to the concert of his philosophy and emotions. The vagueness he had felt all morning was gone, eliminated. The corpse had become a clarified concept. The vagueness he had felt before, for long before, was gone in this mystical reunion with a younger himself, this return of a vigilant, moralistic, crusading himself. . . .

. . . Find the murderer, yes, then destroy him. For Spence, for himself, and for an abstract ideal of which the two of them had been an infinitesimal but integral part. If it were Kahn, Parks, or any other of

the score who had quarreled with Spence, baited him publicly, sent him poison pen missives, denounced him in handbills, denounced him . . . even Mary, his wife . . . yes, Mary too . . . whomever, no matter the merits of their argument or grievance—the bullet delivered from behind was proof of their disorder, their unfitness to raise the banner of their own beliefs. . . .

He searched the probabilities; reviewed the line of suspects by conjuring up their faces. Kahn, Parks, Lem Morrissey. He shut his mind and his mind's eye to Mary impatiently, unsuccessfully. Impossibly Mary, fantastic, he told himself, and conjured up Mac the union official. Exasperatingly, Mary stood beside Mac in his mind's eye. He turned away from the parade irritably, then suddenly thought of Slip. Slip with the demented laugh, thumbing the tattered columns of a decade ago in an obviously fixed monomania. Slip, hypocritically concealing his vengefulness toward his jailers. . . .

There was a stir, and Shep watched Merna come toward him. She stood before him, hesitating, and he reached and touched her fingertips, pressing them. She went up the stairs.

Shep arose, and went over to Lana.

"Go out and get some fresh air, you poor kid."

Lana looked at him gratefully. Carmody said, "I need her for a statement."

"It can wait, can't it? The kid's been through a siege."

Carmody looked no, but said, "It can wait."

Lana pushed her toe back into a slipper, got up and left the room.

Carmody brought his face close to his aide, and the aide began to drone what he had of the butler's statement.

> Andrews came home just before the supper hour—about 6:00. Dined alone. Then adjourned to the living room. There he read, studied reports, chatted with Mrs. Andrews until Shep Ward came for a conference. Time was about 10.30 P.M. Mrs. Andrews retired. Ward left sometime after eleven. Andrews lounged around reading. Phone rang close to midnight. Andrews answered it himself. Shortly after, Andrews retired for the night.

Carmody spoke to the butler. "That sums it up—or is there something you want to add?"

The butler considered, then, "No, sir."

"Do you know who made that late phone call to Andrews?"

"No, sir."

Carmody said fretfully, "Not much to go on, so far." The aide closed the palm-sized book and put it in his pocket. The butler turned to leave, and Carmody called to him, "That phone call—" The butler paused, turning toward Carmody.

"Yes, sir?"

"Was it a friendly call?"

"I don't know what you mean, sir."

"What was Andrews' attitude on the phone?"

The butler drew himself up stiffly. "I couldn't say, sir."

"Okay, okay. I meant nothing."

The butler left and Carmody wheeled toward Shep. "What was that chinning session about last night?"

"Routine."

"Business?"

"Yes."

"At eleven o'clock?"

"The butler said ten-thirty."

"Okay, ten-thirty. Still kind of late, no?"

"Not especially."

"Can I get a statement from you on exactly what you and Andrews talked about?"

"Why?"

"Procedure."

Shep thought, then shrugged, "Sometime. But not right this minute."

Carmody looked as if he was about to make a ruling on it, wavered, and gave it up.

"You want to see this murder cleaned up?"

"I definitely do."

"Then co-operate. You must have some suspicions about it. You were close to Andrews."

"I haven't thought about it much—yet. When I do, I'll let you know."

Carmody said nastily, "You're not going out to

make a hero of yourself—"

Shep smiled faintly. "No, I'm not." He turned to leave as Carmody cautioned, "No story, remember."

The butler held the door open for him and then stepped across the threshold with him in a quick surreptitious movement.

"That phone call, Mr. Ward . . ."

"What about it, Richard?"

"I think, sir, that I do know who it was."

"Who was it?"

"Parks. Professor Parks of Seneca College. The professor had telephoned many times before. And quite as late—"

"But how do you know it was Parks?"

"I heard Mr. Andrews say 'You again. Now what is it this time, my erudite friend?' 'You again,' Mr. Ward, in that displeased tone Mr. Andrews used suggested Professor Parks to me."

Shep regarded the butler thoughtfully.

"Why didn't you tell this to Sergeant Carmody?"

It was obvious by the look on the butler's face that the reasons were innate to him. He said however, "As a matter of principle, I couldn't. I wasn't sure."

Shep smiled. "Thanks, Richard."

The door closed.

Outside, a few steps down the walk, Lana stood absently holding a sprinkler can over some rose-bushes. Shep went up to her and for an instant they stared eye to eye. Then her whole body surged con-

vulsively and her legs were running in space. Shep turned away from the Andrews' estate as a carload of police specialists drove up to the gravel driveway.

Chapter Nine

1.

Seneca College's Freshman class in sociology were in their seats, waiting for Professor Merton C. Parks. Room 407 was a quite typical small-town American classroom with the bright sun slanting in pleasantly and narrow lines of potted plants atop the long window sill. Quite typical, but with this difference: There were some empty seats; the postwar G.I. rush back to college had had less than a 10 per cent effect on the over-all enrollment, for one reason or another. In this Freshman class, the age average was close to its prewar quotient of eighteen years plus.

On one section of the blackboard, a diagrammatic outline improvised the day before by Professor Parks, set forth that portion of the week's material for lecture and study. It read, in part:

V: The Races of Mankind

a. The customs of different races
b. The anthropology of the human family
   1. Physical characteristics of races
   2. Color
   3. Blood

Parks had opened the term determined to teach basic sociology as a correlation of the most modern sciences, adhering to no set curriculum—a procedure even the more willing of his students found most confusing. Recently, without explanation to the class (the class grapevine was, however, remarkably well informed), Parks had reverted to the standard curriculum provided him. This improvised free outline on the blackboard was yet another reversion—back to the mode with which he had begun the term. There were profound happenings inherent in this new one-day development, as the grapevine speculated excitedly, and the class was impatient for the happenings to materialize.

In a corner of the blackboard, someone had written:

Potted
Parks
Pontificates
Polysyllabically

The word "pukes" had been half erased and the

word "pontificates" substituted. The wag, Mitchell (Mitch) Bronson, the year's Freshman football find and son of the town's number two family, had relented somewhat in the mellow afterglow of afterthought.

Professor Parks came in at a cautious gait and sat down. He was a man of sixty, his skin drum tight, his cheeks sunken. His forehead showed two wisdom bumps, with a thick vein running down the center and into the bridge of his nose. Seated behind his cluttered golden oak desk, the upper half of him visible, Parks gave the impression of concentrated energy about to spark and crackle like green-damp twigs on a bonfire. He invariably remained sitting during class lectures, since a giddiness in his legs made walking movements uncomfortable, unsafe. This semester he had multiplied his consumption of alcohol and much of it lay unassimilated in his legs.

Parks said, "Ventura, will you please erase the blackboard." He gestured toward the corner of the blackboard that contained Mitch Bronson's printing, without looking up. Anthony (Tony) Ventura rose eagerly to the chore.

Parks fussed through battered notebooks, while his stomach trembled. There was a gnawing desire for drink, for the immediate blissful blackout of conscience. The whole effects of drink, however, were perverse, ironic. The nightly escape into alcohol

was a veil over his mind that lifted promptly with the 9:30 A.M. arrangement of the class in their seats. Like an alarm of habit, the first minute of the morning's opening session found the veil evaporated, the befuddlement lost, the alcohol down in his legs—and his mind alive, acute.

Now, confronted by his class and deprived of the wished-for befuddling of his faculties, it was hard to blunt his thinking perforce in the manufacture of half-truths and plain nonsense he had long ago assayed, debated, and condemned. Just turned sixty, and as if in a sudden enlightenment, Parks had set a torch to the granary of his mind, destroying the stored dogmas and voodoos of a lifetime in a purge by fire.

At the outset of this semester, he had appeared in his new intellectual dress, brimming with the desire to dry-clean the curriculum. On this occasion, he had confronted his class dressed in new tweeds, the cobweb of hair plucked from the bridge of his nose, and carrying a brief case bulging with new textbooks he had imported from across the state boundary. Two weeks later, he had been routed from the threshold of change. His assaults on the myth of the sacred ego, his irreverence for dearly cherished bunkum, had brought him bolt upright against the ivy-laced courtyard wall with Dean Tompkins deploying the firing squad into position.

The true bill marking Parks' dereliction had been sworn to by Mitch Bronson after a flaming classroom

incident. Parks had announced that the peoples of the earth were one family as part of his introductory lecture remarks to the term's work. Mitch had stormed to his feet to deny that he was a biological brother to Tony Ventura, the dark-skinned, pigmy-sized son of the janitor in the Bronson five-and-ten. Despite his better judgment, and even though thrown into panic by Mitch's vehemence, Parks had rashly flung himself into the debate—probably because Tony's face was staring up at him hopefully. Later, Mitch's father had followed a telephone call to Dean Tompkins with a written memorandum. An oath of penitence had won a reprieve but not a pardon, and Parks had remained to sit silenced behind his golden oak desk—back in his twenty-year-old suit, and with the cobweb back on the bridge of his nose.

Thenceforth Parks was suspect, patronized in faculty meetings, disdained by Dean Tompkins. A pointed editorial had appeared in the *Leader,* declaiming against propaganda in education, and a few snide innuendoes had appeared in the running text of Shep Ward's Saturday column "The Gist of It." With his probation had come a note-taking fetish in several of his students—notably Mitch—who submitted, without official discouragement, memoranda on Professor Parks' every departure from the straight line of Silbey's *Introduction To A Study Of Society,* copyrighted 1905. If not alcohol, Parks' only escape came of stealthy reading and copious longhand entries in a massive ledger. These entries and readings were

done in the seclusion of his parlor while he shared the light of the student lamp with his spinster sister Etta, who sat crocheting whimsical mottoes on towel cases, pausing occasionally in her handiwork to frown at the barbarian title of her brother's open book. The ledger, now containing more than 200,000 words —a great many of them the verbatim oral history of his audiences with Dean Tompkins—was willed to posterity, unless Etta outlived him and burned it, according to her threat.

In this pause, the students were catnapping and Parks began lecturing lamely, proceeding from where the lecture had been left the day before. They had covered everything up to "3. Blood" sparsely, inconclusively, with Parks wary of Mitch's pencil racing over his scratch pad.

Parks said hollowly, "There are four known types of blood each child can inherit from its forebears. These are called *O, A. B,* and *AB.*" He hesitated, and sneaked an involuntary look at Mitch. Their eyes met; Mitch's holding his in a hard stare, his pencil raised threateningly.

Now the gnawing in Parks' stomach grew more intense and he dropped his eyes to his desk, staring sightlessly at his lecture outline. He uncorked his fountain pen absently and scratched doodles in a margin, then wrote "Mitch Bronson can have the same blood as an African bushman."

The pause grew heavier and some of the students had begun sprawling in attitudes of sleep, when the door opened and Dean Tompkins came in. He stood looking about the room disapprovingly, neglecting the formal amenities usual to such a visit. Then his eyes fastened on the improvised outline on the blackboard.

It wasn't the least movement of his finger so much as telepathic communication between affinities that made Mitch leap up from his seat, walk with confident swagger to the blackboard, and erase the outline.

Parks and Dean Tompkins stared at each other for a moment, then Tompkins humphed scornfully, turned on his heel, and headed for the door. Parks bounded from his seat with a sudden great energy in his legs, reached the door simultaneously with Dean Tompkins, grasped the dean's coat and pushed him unceremoniously through the open door, slamming it violently in his face.

2.

Shep walked through the somber corridors of Seneca College, on his way to Room 407. The dark umber walls were heavy with mementoes of its eighty-odd yesteryears. There were crudely drawn maps of early Seneca; spirited scenes of George Washington at Trenton, at Valley Forge, crossing the Delaware; unsmiling group pictures of annual graduating

classes; a smudged facsimile of the original Declaration of Independence; photographs of Seneca's many successful football teams. The largest of the latter was one marked in white ink as the team of 1909, undefeated in its fourteen-game schedule. This picture had been arranged with the squad circling from the captain of the team, who bulked in the center foreground. The wearer of the fearsome scowl was Spence Andrews. A span away was a posed father and son photographic portrait. It was Spence and Biff Andrews, arms interlocked, close in facial and body resemblance.

Dean Tompkins came down the corridor toward Shep in movements that were a flashing signal he had much to say and Shep was just the man he wanted to say it to. He approached, drew Shep against a wall, his mouth expanding, and the smell of tobacco was asphyxiating. His eyes burned into Shep.

"Ward, I'm convinced that Professor Parks is insane."

Shep drew back. "What now?"

The lava broke through the crater as Tompkins talked furiously against Shep. Then, summarily, "It's senile dementia, if not worse, and every day we permit—that man—to occupy a faculty seat, we do our sons a grave injury."

An oppressively silent moment. Shep always felt at a loss in Tompkins' presence, abashed, somehow resisting being drawn into the knowing fellowship the manner of Tompkins with him invited. In his

few tete-a-tetes with this ever angry man with hostile eyes and huffing speech, Shep had listened, merely hearing with his mind dead, while he bobbed his head commiseratingly. Tompkins was undoubtedly right (Shep had a tendency to automatic acceptance and respect for constituted educators since his boyhood), his grievances the greatest as he recited them with a passion no man could impugn or question. Parks' asserted instability was something vague to Shep, a hearsay he had never bothered to sift objectively, accepting Tompkins' passionate say-so, and accepting mainly Andrews' great and sentimental reverence for Tompkins as all the proof needed. Besides, Parks had a little personal prestige with him. He had had too many views of him as a soppy old man craning his neck over Ricky's bar far into the night.

Shep fidgeted awkwardly. He said politicly, "Time something was done, if it's that bad with Parks."

Tompkins huffed and promised, "Something will be done. I'm going to call Spence Andrews right this minute and have him print the faculty body's demand that Professor Parks resign."

Shep began a reply, then reconsidered abruptly, and merely nodded. Tompkins would know in good time about Andrews. Telling him now, here, would precipitate a situation he was utterly indisposed to.

Tompkins huffed off, and Shep continued on to Room 407.

The room was empty but for Parks, who was bent over his desk, writing in sudden swooping motions. Shep approached the desk and Parks looked up, then set his pen down. Shep stood looking curiously and Parks bore the scrutiny with ripening defiance in his features. There was a deep, unexpected dignity in this old man with the great brooding forehead, and Shep felt unaccountably awed. There was little likeness between this man and the soppy drunkard he knew by sight at Ricky's and on many of Seneca's back streets.

Shep said, "Sorry to intrude, Professor Parks, but it is most urgent that I put some questions to you."

Parks motioned to the row of seats and Shep took one, then, feeling submerged in the low seat, he arose and sat on the desk instead. He began rapidly, "You called Spence Andrews on the telephone last night just before midnight."

Parks nodded.

"What did you talk about?" He felt a little absurd asking it.

Parks clucked his tongue and didn't reply. From his look, the question was clearly out of order—and none of Shep's business.

Shep hesitated uncertainly. The purpose that had filled him to overflowing as he drove from Andrews' to Christenberry Street was trickling from cracks in him. The savagely stabbing questions and the psychological traps he had formulated in order to assess the responsibility and guilt of this peculiarly com-

plex man he was here opposed to now seemed excessive, valueless. Dipsomaniac or senile psychopath, or even dog with a bad name, Parks there in front of him seemed aloof to any mathematical game he might devise. So Shep said simply, in a not unfriendly tone, "Spence Andrews was murdered in cold blood sometime after midnight. That's why I'm here. I have no personal desire to appear unduly inquisitive, believe me."

Parks shaded his eyes with a hand to improve his focus of Shep. Shep looked up at him earnestly. A moment passed, then Parks shook with what seemed to be silent and gigantic inner laughter.

Shep came bolt upright, on his feet.

"Is it funny!"

The vein down the center of Parks' forehead showed more prominently. His tones were amused and serious both. "It is justice."

Shep stared incredulously. It was so; Parks was balmy, crazy as a March Hare, a classic case of senile dementia—Tompkins deserved a grand award as a master diagnostician.

With his voice narrowed ominously, Shep said, "You don't seem regretful—"

Parks replied evenly, provokingly, "Regretful, hardly. The news is a happy event, a most happy event."

"Dean Tompkins swears you're crazy—and you certainly are for my money!"

Parks shrugged unconcernedly and Shep's indigna-

tion became an immense heat. His voice raged through some of the preformulated savagely stabbing questions: "You'd been telephoning Andrews regularly at weird hours, hadn't you? In those phone calls you'd been rowdy, intrusive, abusive, hadn't you?" The word "rowdy" was something added to the original formulation. "Last night you phoned him late, as you've admitted. At that hour you were drunk, stewed to the gills from too much whisky at Ricky's. Drunk and irresponsible, weren't you!" The accusation of drunkenness was improvised malice, not the original formulation. There was a delight, a relief in the stinging invective. . . .

Parks began to speak and Shep listened. "Drunk and abusive, yes. One must be so to bring himself to approach Andrews. I phoned him demanding that he print my resignation just as I worded it. He agreed to print my resignation—but not in my wording." The low, slow monotonic tones had a strange force. "I was to be denied an inviolable right—the right of my own final word about myself. I could only resign in the words of Dean Tompkins—the language of Spence Andrews. I—could only resign in shame."

It swept Shep up, bound him into the mood; sought his credulities, engaged them. His anger waned, dropped away. However reluctantly, there was a moral he must nod to, acknowledge. A man had a right to pen his own last letter of farewell—a suicide had a right to phrase his own death note. If this recounting were actual, true, Andrews had

been arbitrary. . . . Arbitrary perhaps because Parks lacked the sense of approach to a man like Spence Andrews.

. . . Yet, Parks, even if insane or borderline, or whatever, had a right to call himself Napoleon or Jesus Christ in the final hour of decision. And now staring at the gaunt apparition impaled against the blackboard, Shep was certain of the man's insanity. The legs were trembling and the mouth was forming endless unspoken sentences.

Shep asked, "Did you kill Andrews?"

Parks seemed suspended in dream. The lower half of the mouth was grotesquely low, working loosely, as if by itself, isolated from its power source.

Shep repeated, "Did you kill Andrews?"

"A thousand times." Parks said it almost inaudibly.

"Did you enter his home last night and kill him? Shoot him?"

Waiting for Parks again to rouse himself to the question, Shep doubted that the man was the killer. The man had the hatred, and alcohol could produce the will to kill where an actual will did not exist—but Shep doubted that Parks had killed Spence Andrews. Still, he waited for Parks to reply and the reply surprised him.

"Yes, I believe I did. I killed him, yes."

Looking intently into Parks' face, Shep mulled it over, and mulling it his doubts about Parks accumulated. The killer evidently had climbed the trellised wall to the balcony of Spence's bedroom—an act that

required supreme stealth and agility. Hardly a feat possible to Parks' trembling legs. Too, the killer needed all of his wits in flawlessly perfect organization to accomplish his deed without leaving a finger mark, a shred of garment torn away during the acrobatic ascent, a footprint somewhere on the great loping lawns. Hardly possible for this split personality now claiming the deed. . . .

Shep asked curiously, his interest in Parks fading, "Would you have killed Spence Andrews?"

The answer came promptly, "Without compunction, the slightest compunction. Yes, kill him as everyman must."

It was a task keeping pace with the multiple personalities festering in this old man whose face was now fanatical where minutes ago it had been moody, reflective. Whatever the moot pros and cons regarding Parks' intellectual integrity and teaching fitness, the man was mentally unsound and warranted summary dismissal from every contact with the young men of Seneca College. Shep went to the door and Parks bounded up to him.

"Aren't you going to arrest me for the murder of your employer?"

Shep opened the door and retreated across the threshold.

"No, I'm not."

"Then I'll surrender to the police. I cannot permit a less guilty man to submit to arrest—"

Parks' remarkably rapid deterioration into the

lowest depths of lunacy in the short course of a fifteen-minute interview had Shep's head spinning. He hurried down the somber corridors leaving Parks alone and unattended, vainly protesting his guilt.

Chapter Ten

1.

There was an afternoon pile-up at Ricky's bar. Men and women were bunched three deep. Ricky was rushing back and forth behind the bar, setting drinks down, scooping up emptied glasses. A cacophony of chatter swirled about the room, some talking in Polish, some in Italian, the most in English. Ricky spotted Shep as he came in and proceeded to prepare a Scotch and water. It was waiting for Shep as he wedged into a narrow space.

Shep raised the glass, sipped, and set it down.

"Needs ice, Rick."

Ricky spooned an ice cube and dropped it into the glass. Shep asked, "See Slip around?"

A worried look moved across Ricky's face. He puck-

ered his brow like a man with a lot on his mind, a lot to get off his chest, but said meagerly, replying to the question, "Was here earlier. Said he'd be back."

The tumult at the bar was dividing itself into separate little acts. Closest to Shep, a big-faced man was orating, "Came the war, and they shoved a poster at us every time we asked for a pay boost. Work until your guts gave, strike and you were a Nazi lover. It was an emergency, and we had to be heroes seventy-two hours a week." He spat. "Well, the war's over, suckers, and we're still working for beans, promises, and horse meat. And now if we ask for a pay boost, we're betraying the American people by bringing on inflation!"

The clique around the big-faced fellow nodded individually in solemn agreement. A slight fellow with a pencil-line moustache who looked as if he was trying hard to be a man among men said with synthetic gruffness, "Sure it's all fouled up. The whole thing's a lot of crap. I laugh myself sick watching all the crap that goes on."

A heavy-set fellow whose muscles bulged through slits in the sleeves of his blue workingman's shirt said, "Whad'ja expect? Ya let the polacks, the spics, and the guineas grab off the gravy and send it back to the old country. And with that, ya lend-leased the moochers half of what we own. Christ, it's one and one why we're all up Mike's."

The very oldest man in the clique spoke out of the stored-up wisdom of his years. "Saunders is right.

What we had we gave away. Saunders is damned right."

Saunders said righteously, "Damned tooting I'm right. You guys better wake up—fast."

A girl of about twenty-five with a wild laugh that punctuated her every small speech waved a photograph at Ricky. The girl said, holding her laugh in leash, "It's Nig—the guy I'm going to marry." A wild laugh. "Take a good look. That's a captain's uniform Nig's wearing." A wild laugh. "In the Chinese Air Force."

Ricky turned the photograph in his hand. "I don't get the Chinaman angle. Nig's American, ain't he?"

A wild laugh. Then, "Sure. But that's Nig for you. When they drafted him, Nig swore he'd come home a general. The war ended too quick for that. Came V-J Day and Nig was only a second looey." A wild laugh. "So Nig gets himself discharged in China and joins up with the Chinks. Right away they upgrade him to Captain." A wild laugh. "I'll be a general's lady, if I can only hold out."

A man pressing closely said teasingly, "Write and tell Nig you can't hold out. You're going to marry me."

A wild laugh. "How can I, jerk, when you're married already. You ain't plotting bigamy, are you!" A wild laugh.

A fellow who'd been blowing his breath on Shep's neck, nudged him to attention. "You're Ward of the *Leader.*"

Shep nodded.

"I'm Lansdowne, remember me? Used to clerk in the Gorham Hotel. Checked you in there lots of times."

"Hello."

"I'm over at Bunte's now. Store clerking in the tool room."

"Good."

"You interested in something for the paper?"

"What about?"

"How they're still keeping nigger mechanics on at the plant—this long after the war. You ought to print that."

Shep asked vaguely, "Why?"

"You kidding! Hell, the only reason the shines are kept on the job is to keep the rest of us from squawking about layoffs and wage cuts. You ought to print that."

Shep inquired, "How do you arrive at that?"

"A nigger'll work for less and let the bosses burn their ass without complaining. The bosses want us to remember that and go along any which way they like." He paused, then nudging, "Will you print it?"

Shep said, "I think not," showing dislike.

"Then we'll burn the nigger's asses, mister, and you'll goddam well print that because it'll be news, page one."

Shep turned away deafly, wondering what was suddenly eating Ricky. Ricky was glowering at the man called Saunders.

Saunders said, "I asked you for another beer—twice."

"No beer." Ricky looked mad through and through.

"I don't get it."

"I ain't serving ya. Can ya understand that!"

"The hell you ain't. Get it up!"

Ricky wet his lips. He was trembling uncontrollably. "Not from this guinea you won't get served!"

Watching him, there was a bluster and rage, yet Shep got the feeling that calling himself a guinea was a painful experience to Ricky. Shep looked wonderingly—this sensitivity about origin was something new in Ricky, just as his violent anger standing there eyeing Saunders was an unwonted break in Ricky's usual easygoing calm and good fellowship.

Saunders brandished a fist inches away from Ricky, then withdrew it with a gesture of disdain. "Aaaah," he began, summoning his thoughts—"You can keep that slop for your eyetie greaseballs. I don't know why I spend good American dollars in this joint anyhow." Saunders pushed from the bar to the door.

Ricky threw a glass an instant too late. Saunders had turned down the street. . . .

Ricky was white and shaking. Shep consoled, "Get hold of yourself, Rick. That loudmouth doesn't count for a row of beans."

The fellow with the hair-line moustache observed, "Trouble with Saunders is no woman. His wife's been dead five years."

The very oldest man said resentfully, "You're dead wrong about Saunders, son. Women ain't bothering Bill Saunders. Never has. And I know Saunders just like I knew his pop and my pop knew his grandfather. There was a Saunders that signed the first incorporating charter when Seneca held only a hundred Indian fighters and Main Street was a pasture. That's how far back Saunders goes. He's riled all right—but not over women. It don't matter to Saunders if he never has a woman. Don't tell me about Saunders."

The street was filled with a screech of whistles and the crowd began to thin out. The fellow with the hair-line moustache clapped the elder on the back. "Saunders for President, pop. Okay with you?"

Pop said, "Okay with me."

2.

The place was now nearly deserted. Shep tapped his glass and Ricky refilled it. Shep followed Ricky's eyes to the door. Slip was coming in.

Slip observed, "This is getting to be a regular hang-out with you, eh, Shep?"

"I want a word with you, Slip."

"More talk, eh? Shep, words is got you hoodooed." Slip got up on a stool. "Rick, you look sick."

Ricky poured himself a drink, downed it, and wiped his mouth with a sleeve. "I'm damned sick."

Slip roared a laugh. "Maybe you got Shep's disease. Thinking too much."

Shep looked squarely at Slip. "Where were you between midnight and morning, Slip?"

"You kidding?"

"No. I want to know."

Slip made a fist. "Where do you want to get it, Shep?"

"In the back."

Slip looked perplexed. "Whatever the gag is—quit it, Shep." His tones were tired.

Shep said steadily, "It's no gag."

"You want to know where I was between midnight and morning?" Slip said it as if it were incomprehensibly complex.

"Yes."

Ricky fussed busily with the bottles on the blue-glass ledge, watching Shep and Slip closely through the mirror.

Slip said tentatively, "Suppose I was to say that I was right here from midnight to morning—then what?"

Shep caught a furtive shaking of Ricky's head.

"I wouldn't believe it."

Slip reached for his drink and drank it thirstily. Shep regarded him thoughtfully. Slip looked overtired, like a man who hadn't slept the night. His eyes were bloodshot.

Shep asked, "Where are you staying, Slip?"

Slip disdained the question with a brush of the hand.

"How are you figuring on making a living, Slip?"

Slip suddenly grinned. "I'm looking for work. Got a job for me?"

"Wasn't it a condition of your parole that you have a job?"

"I got a job. A good one."

"Where?"

"You'll know soon enough. Just hold your water, buttinsky. And no more bull. I'm in no shape for it."

Being adroit would avail nothing—that much was obvious. If Slip had any connection with the murder of Spence, he was good enough an actor to play possum. If he had done the killing, he was old enough a hand at felony and murder to leave no trail. Shep started to put the cards on the table, declare Spence's murder, when a newsboy's hawking yips drifted in. The boy poked his head in the doorway, swishing a newspaper toward them inquiringly. It was the regular late-morning edition of the *Leader*—held up three hours in deference to the story of its publisher and owner. The boy hawked, pivoting one foot for a speedy exit. "Publisher found dead! Spence Andrews found dead! Read all about it!"

Shep watched Slip intently. Slip didn't seem to hear—or if he did, it didn't seem to sink in. Ricky ran forward. "Did'ja hear that! It's your boss, Shep. Andrews. He's croaked. Hey, gimme a paper."

First Slip looked blankly at Shep, then he reached and wrested the paper away from Ricky. He read forming the words with his lips, then he held the paper away as though finding difficulty in focusing.

The bulletinized box on the front page was done in large-point type.

There was not a betraying register in Slip's face. Just the unnatural, mechanically dazed look of a man who hadn't slept the night. If Slip had done the killing, he was a consummate actor.

Slip threw the paper toward Shep. "Is this where I was supposed to be between midnight and morning?"

Stubbornly, "Someone killed Andrews, and you had as good a reason as anybody."

"Crap. I had no reason."

"That's your story."

"And this is my story—Andrews stood up for me with the parole board. Plus that, I'm working for him as circulation manager—I mean was." Slip glared. "Now go on. Go roll a hoop, boy scout."

An interval that reached to eternity and back. It didn't penetrate. It glanced, bounded away, glanced, like a rubber ball bouncing off a brick wall. Shep stood transfixed, with his mouth gaping.

Bang, it exploded into every corner of his mind at once.

"Andrews stood up for you with the parole board—hired you . . . !" He was aware of his eyes popping.

"Aw, go to hell." It was the tone of a man dismissing the village idiot.

Go to hell . . . ! It touched off more explosions inside. . . . If the implications continued to fire, he'd melt to the ground. . . .

Shep's eyes were now frantic, boring desperately

through Slip's bland façade, seeking secret writing on a hidden screen that only clairvoyance could reach. . . .

It was a great lie, he told himself desperately. An infamous lie designed to destroy men of law, send them flying at the throats of their neighbors; a lie that lashed men into armies, and armies into war. It was that kind of lie. It had to be! Even an old footballer like Spence had an ethic, just a single ethic. Not a victory at any cost. There was a price that no man would pay, a price that beggared victory. . . .

Shep braked his thinking, cut off the engine. Another time, the posthumous search of Spence Andrews. Another time, and more calmly. The man needed to be understood. Meanwhile . . . this conspiracy to discredit, this propaganda to first destroy Spence, then destroy him. This great lie.

Shep regrouped his wits. It was a lie that must collapse for lack of foundation. The lie could be perceived, overcome. A voucher for Slip with the parole board must be a matter of record. So too, the claim of a job with the *Leader.*

This reasoned thinking reassured him. The champion liar of the world had stubbed his toe. . . .

Shep confronted Slip suddenly. "You killed Andrews, and I'll go to hell and back to prove it!"

It was a sudden wallop that landed. Slip's bloodshot eyes looked dazed, dopey. Soon the bluster began, but it was labored, palpably phony.

"Jesus Christ, you're not really going to try to pin that on me!"

It rang falsely to his ears, and the waves of relief kept flowing through him. "Slip, you killed Andrews. Killed him." It felt good saying it over. . . .

"You're nuts."

"You killed him, and Christ, I'll prove it." The confidence was wine in his veins, a remembered exhilaration. He was wonderfully again at grips with something. It was yesterday come back; the same old ten-pins in a familiar bowling alley, with a master bowler in motion. Slip's guilt was as sure as those faded clippings in his wallet. . . .

Slip was now the cornered rat, guiltily anxious to equivocate, stave off the reckoning. . . . "Shep, you're forgetting I said I was here all last night. Right through until the A.M."

It arrested motion; sent a shiver. If the time alibi could be made to stand, even perjuriously . . .! But that furtive shaking of Ricky's head before. . . . Shep looked at Ricky anxiously, apprehensively. . . .

That furtive shaking again! Ricky was giving the lie to Slip's alibi. Sweet triumph, he was back in motion.

He said in a rush, "You'll never make that alibi stick, Slip. Don't even try."

Slip glared, cursing at Ricky. Ricky looked choked for breath, whitening. Shep yelled, "Ricky's not perjuring for you, Slip. Not this time."

Slip's huge fist lunged, and Ricky was momen-

tarily dumb. Then with blood spurting from his mouth, his eyes met Slip's stubbornly. "Shep's right. I'm not your man any more." He opened his mouth and took his upper dentures out. "I got a family."

Slip turned to Shep slowly, thoughtfully. "So you're hell bent on proving I killed Andrews. . . ." His anger seemed to have evaporated.

Shep nodded.

"So my remarks last night didn't go over. To you I'm nothing but a dumb gorilla. . . ."

It sounded unstudied, almost sad. Shep looked at Ricky's broken mouth, then his lips drew and he said derisively, "You trying to pose as incapable of murder! Christ , don't get that corny. . . ."

Slip regarding him levelly. "I'm trying to stop publicity I don't want, and also keep you from playing chump." He moved closer. "What percentage for me in killing Andrews? What payoff? You know I go where the dough is. . . ." He brought a wallet out of his pocket and dropped it before Shep on the bar. "Take a look inside and see if Spence was worth more to me alive or dead."

Shep stared, then said, "What's in the wallet—promissory notes?" The attempted sarcasm fizzled. The sureness in Slip, his unruffled manner, was frightening. . . .

"Take a look."

Now doggedly resisting the wallet, afraid of it. "What could you have that Andrews would buy . . . ?"

"A story. His kid wasn't soldiering. He was sitting

it out in a nuthouse." Slip's voice rose, "Don't keep looking at me like I'm pulling something. Open the damned wallet and see for yourself. See the papers, see the letter in it from his old lady. Be sure to read the address on the envelope, where it went to." Slip made an offended gesture. "And then don't tell me Andrews wouldn't have gone flying for his checkbook—the way he carried on about his prize kid. . . ."

Shep's hand trembled reaching for the wallet, fumbling through it. He read through a haze, aware of Slip's amused eyes on him, mocking him.

He read, piecing the papers into a pattern. It was true. The story was a blackmail bonanza—especially if Spence were alive. More than jealous of his reputation—Spence had idolized his son.

Shep looked up, flushing under Slip's triumphant look. It was a few seconds before his lips could shape a sound. He made no attempt to fence, or hide his surprise. "Where did you get the wallet?"

Slip shook his head. "I'll just tell you Spence's kid was roaming the streets of town last night. And where I got the wallet and the time of night is an alibi even a hurricane couldn't knock over."

Shep repeated tonelessly, "Where did you get the wallet?"

"Go to hell." Slip was confident again, and contemptuous.

Shep swooped gratefully at the drink Ricky set down. He gulped it thirstily and then burst into wild laughter.

Slip squinted suspiciously. "What's funny!"

Circulation manager! They were teammates, partners. Circulation manager and managing editor. The village idiot was in partnership with the criminal he had once hounded into jail. It was a joke to titillate the queen whore of ironies. Shep's face mottled as the laughter grew more uncontrollable.

Slip nudged him indignantly, "What's so goddam funny!"

3.

Monkey court was in session behind the shed at Jenkinson's. Six boys were in attendance. Five looked solemn, juridical, forming a circle. The sixth boy was in the center, trying not to look frightened. This one was on trial.

It was near the end of the lunch period. The start of the second half of the school day was perhaps three minutes away. A dash down the weeded footpath of Cypress Lane, and then a shorter dash turning right at the twelve-foot POULTRY FARM. CHICKS sign—was school.

The boy in the center suddenly bolted for Cypress Lane. A thrusting foot, flawlessly timed as only agile little boys could, tripped him. He got up whimpering, "The bell's soon, fellers." He looked around the circle; looked singly into each face. The faces remained grim, and now there were some tears. "Please!"

The school bell pealed. The echo hung, died slowly.

Timmy Saunders narrowed his eyes. He said, "Confess you're a Jew!"

The accused sniffed back. His eyes flamed. "I ain't!" He touched a plump and pink boy who was closest to him and begged, "Tell him I ain't a Jew, Bobby."

Bobby drew back forbiddingly. Then, stiffening clumsily, he said, "You are a Jew. Cause your father's a Jew. We seen it written on the moving pitcher sign."

The accused looked around the circle; looked singly into each face, seeking a denial. The group met his look stolidly, bravely, until the last. This smallest boy of the five was trembling uncontrollably, so he shouted squeakily, "You are too a Jew, and you beat up Jews. That's worser."

Timmy Saunders nodded approvingly. "And making out he's not a Jew to get in our gang—" His brow darkened, "Bet'cha he got in to be a spy."

The accused said, "I didn't."

The boys looked to Timmy uncertainly. Timmy leaned toward the accused and a forelock dropped to the middle of his brow. He brushed it away and said sternly, "I now pernounce you guilty."

The smallest boy of the five shifted uneasily. He squeaked, "W-what do we do now?"

Timmy was opening a boy scout knife resolutely.

The blade gleamed; moved an inch from the con-

demned's face. The condemned bit into his underlip, sniffing back, and didn't move. He winced slightly when the point of the blade met his cheek, and shut his eyes tightly. Then he gathered more of his underlip into his mouth.

But he didn't move.

The boy called Bobby exploded into tears.

The smallest boy of the five looked green, then vomited up his sandwich luncheon.

4.

Lem Morrissey was propped up in bed with an ice pack set in a towel under his jaw and knotted on the top of his head.

Mac, a union official delegated to call on Lem, stood room distance away. He said, "What you did at the plant the other day was an individual act. . . ."

Nora, Lem's wife, stirred a cup of bouillon thoughtfully and then handed it to Lem. She returned to a position that enabled her to look from Lem to Mac, from Mac to Lem, without twisting.

Lem sipped his bouillon silently.

Mac turned to leave, saying, "Mind you, nothing personal. I'm speaking as I've been instructed to speak." He hesitated, then, "The union's been lax with you out of respect for your brother, who is one of our martyrs."

Lem blew into his bouillon, making an ugly sound with his lips.

Mac bridled, then shrugged. He went to the door, held it open, and said, "The next time you go haywire like you did and act individually, the executive committee will recommend your expulsion."

Lem yelled after Mac, both hands supporting the towel under his jaw, "As an enemy of the workers, is it to be! With a rogues' gallery picture of me in the shop paper!"

Nora ran to close the door behind Mac.

She dallied at the door, thinking: Mac's a big noise with the union, yet there isn't a mark on his handsome Irish face. And his bushy eyebrows are combed as nice and gentlemanly as you could wish. He's for labor and he gets wages for it and everybody respects his world outlook and nobody breaks his jaw. Why can't Lem be more like him, so we can live in a new house on top of Clover Hill like Mac and Catherine do, and spend more time loving together instead of Lem spending his whole time hating alone. This was a time for loving, a time for dreaming and laughing without a care in the world. Now, before she changed. Now, with peace again in the world. . . . If Lem didn't hurry she'd change, or maybe Lem's hard words of hate would change him—get him altogether crippled one day or even brought straight to Leary's funeral parlor to have his face painted and his bushy eyebrows combed—like his brother Niles.

Nora crossed herself and went to take the cup from the floor beside the bed.

5.

The over-rouged woman in the box office of the Waco Movie hooked an OPEN sign on the front cut-out of the cashier's window. Her hands were nervous and her eyes stared fascinatedly into the lobby.

Sergeant Carmody made motions with an unlighted cigar, while an aide wrote into a palm-sized book. A patrolman retreated from the path of a moving mop. Victor was mopping industriously, his eyes on the floor.

Kahn's eyes followed Victor's moving hump in a dazed look. After a while he said, "This is insane," as if that summed it up, explained it, ended it.

Carmody said, "Sorry, but it's my duty." He motioned his cigar at his aide. "Read Templeton's statement the way you got it down."

The aide read:

> While on foot patrol last night, I saw Milton Kahn loitering on the corner of Spence Andrews' home. The time was about 10:30. I saw him there again on my next round. The time was then about 11:30.

The patrolman volunteered, "Like I said, Sergeant, I didn't get suspicious, seeing who it was. Anybody else hanging around that time of night would'a been hauled into the station house."

Carmody nodded understandingly. Then, "Sunrise Heights is a long way from home for you, Kahn. And

a funny place to be hanging around at that hour—" A pause later, he added, "And on foot."

Kahn's eyes remained elsewhere.

Carmody said, "Doc Ingalls reports Andrews was killed around midnight."

Kahn roused himself to speech. He spoke as though Carmody was just out of earshot, spoke into the deep lobby at Victor's moving hump. "You're not really implying that I murdered Spence Andrews. . . ."

"I'm implying nothing. I'm just doing my job."

The aide blurted—an instant sooner than Carmody's flash of forbidding disapproval, "What in hell were you doing outside Andrews' close to midnight?"

Kahn spoke closer to himself, "I—I wanted to see him—I thought."

Carmody's voice quickened. "What about?"

Kahn was silent. His eyes were fixed on Victor. Victor was whispering to the patrolman, wearing a look that made Kahn cold through and through. . . .

The patrolman came forward and pulled Carmody aside, talking rapidly and earnestly.

Kahn kept staring at Victor and there was a moving hand scratching white chalk marks on the slate of his mind. Kahn read and reread them, read and reread them. . . .

Carmody came up to him. He looked a little embarrassed, then gathered himself and said gravely, "Kahn, I arrest you on suspicion of murder."

Chapter Eleven

The thin spray from the Renaissance fountain blew into the scented air. Shep climbed the stoop and wielded the huge brass knocker.

The butler opened the door. He looked around furtively, then whispered, "She's terribly unstrung, sir. Gave me my notice. Says I'm to go."

Shep found her in the shade-darkened sitting room. She seemed smaller, dwarfed, as though she had crumbled and bits of her had fallen away.

His greeting went unanswered.

Shep sat down, his eyes dissimulating the shock of her appearance. So suddenly old, her face; it spelled out her age to the minute. Spelled out suffering.

Suffering? Queer, he thought, this anguish now; for a woman whom he knew to have hated with such

secret intensity. Perhaps then, the hatred could have been reconciled, could have been overcome while Spence was alive. Perhaps if these hidden, truer emotions had been more revealed, the ruthless force of Spence's power drives could have been tempered. He watched her mouth quiver, and his compassions warmed. . . . Now, this anguish; so late, so many unused years. The pity. . . .

Shep said gently, "Shut away like this, you'll brood yourself into a breakdown, Merna."

Her eyes found him; fixed on him peculiarly. She spoke as if to herself, "It's better alone. . . ."

"Where's Lana?"

"Away. Away at my sister's. I—packed her off."

Shep looked into her face earnestly. This was the question he had come to ask. Please, Lord, not clumsily. . . .

"Where's Biff, Merna?"

She stared back at him and their eyes locked. Finally she repeated, "Biff. . . ."

Had she uttered the word as a question? Shep frowned. Christ, was it news to her!

Could it be? Shep's mind ran back. There had never been the smallest suggestion from Spence that Biff was in a bad way, was sick. The reverse, in fact. To the very end, Spence had exuded pride in Biff, had chafed for his home-coming, had exploded irritably over the long delay in letters, the absence of letters. Plainly, Spence had never known. . . .

Conceivably, Merna too never knew. Did not know

now. Shep hesitated. How to get it across? How to say it?

"Biff's back, Merna. He was seen in town last night."

There was not the smallest stir in her. Her eyes held his in a fixed, staring steadiness. Shep continued, "He's back and no one knows where he is now. Evidently came in on a late train. I've asked around, looked for him."

He studied her, waiting. There was no reaction. Just a stare; the eyes abnormally white, abnormally round. Just the fixed look of death. He fidgeted miserably. Better get up and go. Stop being an insurance adjuster at a wake. Leave mourners the dignity of their hour. . . .

But the question had to be asked!

"Have you seen Biff, Merna?"

It came unexpectedly, with a sudden strength that startled.

"You mustn't look for Biff!"

"I don't understand."

No answer. But now her face was alive. Not loose, but taut.

What was it, he wondered? Just her grief? What? There was a missing detail. He sought meaning in her face, and something clouding his vision fell abruptly away, revealing part of a picture.

"You've seen Biff, Merna. You have seen him!"

Her lips parted. But no words came. Finally she nodded.

"When?"

"Late—last night."

Late! A demented son had visited late, and later, Spence had been murdered. The implication was frightening.

Shep said nervously, "Then you know all about—how he is?"

"Yes."

"Where is Biff now?" The tensions in him were mounting crazily.

No answer.

"Merna, it's important! Dammit, it is! Tell me, so I can take steps. Don't wait until it leaks to Carmody or somebody. Christ, don't. They'll scandalize it. . . ." He was almost screaming.

No answer. She seemed not to hear.

"Merna, don't you see it—the connection! Biff was here, the way he is. Then Spence!"

His hysteria caught her. He knew by her face that she had finally gotten the implication. Christ, he'd practically shoved it down her throat.

Now she spoke, driving herself. "Don't look for Biff. Don't, Shep! Let him go back, so they'll treat him. There's good in him. Good better than I dreamed, ever dreamed. Nothing bad. Just kinks. Just Spence." She ended fiercely: "Spence is dead and Biff is my son. Leave him alone!"

Shep stared bewilderedly. What was she saying, this crazy woman! Her speech had nothing to do with the bald implication he had set up for her to see. Or

did it! His look grew fearful. Was she conceding Biff's guilt! Saying yes, Biff murdered his father, but let us overlook that, let Biff cure himself, be a better man someday. . . .

Better put the question clearly, unmistakably, to her. Implications could be interpreted any which way. Just ask simply, did Biff murder his father. Shep began, then stopped abruptly. His face whitened and he stared at her in a flash of divination.

Her eyes dropped guiltily, and now the whole world fell abruptly away from his vision. Now he could just see her and something standing nakedly between them. He wanted desperately not to look at it; he wanted to run blindly from this naked thing that was holding him almost hypnotically.

He heard her beg, "Please, Shep, don't ask me that question!"

Not Biff—Merna! Merna had murdered Spence.

He heard himself say, "It—was you."

She nodded slowly. He looked behind him involuntarily, fearful that they might be overheard.

She was sudden at his side, her hands imploring him, binding him to her. "Shep, be my friend. . . ."

"You killed him." His voice wrenched. . . . "Held a gun out and shot him in the back." He stopped; there was a gag in his throat blocking a flood of speech. In the back! Not the crazy climax to a crazy, emotional moment. In the back! Brutal calculated, savage. God nor man could condone it.

He fought the gag free, and the bottled speech rushed out. Her hand leaped to his mouth, her fingers pressing deep. "No, Shep. You never knew Spence. He murdered me too. And the children. Shep, listen. Please!"

He pulled away, rising, but her weight was against him. He fell back into his seat.

Her eyes lighted over him. Listen, he must hear her out! Her digging fingers demanded it. Listen to her case, her plea of not guilty.

"Spence was bad all through, Shep. Never a husband, never sympathetic. Never once after we married. Never kind. Just greed, conceit, tyranny. Just himself, Spencer Andrews. For twenty-four years, Shep. I lived always in hiding. . . ."

He resisted it. "If it was that bad, why didn't you just up and leave? Divorce him?"

Her breathing was hard on his face. "Wanted to. You must believe me. I wanted to in the beginning, but lost my strength. As I grew weaker, I just lived in hiding. Spence did that to me, to everybody. People grew weaker around Spence. Even strong people. People much stronger than me. . . ."

It touched a chord; touched his own pain. He knew now: Spence attracted you, removed your sting, tied you to him. Afterwards and forever, Spence's strength was the only strength. Sometimes it nourished, but when it failed you, betrayed you . . . It was the way he felt now. This pain. . . .

But murder!

"But murder, Merna. That answered nothing. Served nothing. . . ."

She was calmer now, closer to control. "Hear me out, Shep, then be my judge. Biff came home—in his state. He had fled from a mental hospital. He said he had come to see Spence, not me. I—sensed something in his wild talk. Something—terrifying. I fought with him, made him keep talking—made him talk to me." She stopped, then resumed slowly, "I don't know exactly what this means in psychological thinking, Shep. I don't understand it, except intuitively. But you've got brains, you'll know. Biff said he had been running away every minute he lived in uniform. Running into high walls, never running anywhere, is how he said it. . . ."

A pause; then in deliberate tones, "Think of the torture of it, Shep. And remember Biff as you knew him. Strong Biff, athletic Biff. Long months of running, shame, lost pride, lost manhood. Then longer months in hospitals, abroad and here. Locked up as a crazy man. Shep, I'd like you to read his letters." Her voice broke convulsively. . . . "When he'd dream, it was a nightmare involving Spence. Always Spence. He'd awaken screaming, violent. One night he nearly strangled a sleeping patient. Only a miracle prevented that. . . . In these dream stages, Biff was put in a strait jacket and isolated—for weeks."

Her hands nudged him fiercely. "I'm speaking of my son, Shep!" The tears came suddenly, briefly. Then, "All that was what Biff told me with his head

on my bosom. He also said that he wanted to have it out with his father. That that was a recurrent dream. I didn't know what that meant in psychological thinking, but I knew Biff could kill Spence, strangle him. . . ."

Her tones quickened, "Somehow, I got to him, inside him—for then. I quieted him, soothed him. I made him promise to steal away as he had come, and return to the hospital. Not to see Spence that night, not waken him. Just return to the hospital. I wired them to expect him, begged them to wait, do nothing, ask no questions. Biff had lost his wallet somewhere. I gave him money. We kissed, and parted. . . ." Her shrunken face was yellowly luminous. "It—was sweet, Shep. My son hadn't kissed me since he was seven."

A long silence.

Her eyes were hunting him, seeking his weakness. He struggled to elude her, reject the naked horror she wanted him to legitimize and shelter.

True, Spence was no good, a wrecker, megalomaniac. Her proofs were good, and his proofs too. But murder! Not murder; never. Murder wasn't the measure of evil, or its payment. Murder was evil, alone, of itself. Spence's crime and murder were two crimes, separately. He must think so, believe so, and escape before his helplessness grew.

He pulled away, opposing her, and balled his hands into fists. She swayed, seemed to crumple, and he caught her and pulled her up straight. Her sobs vibrated against him, and her head crept close to his

chest. The sobs rose and soon were vibrating through him as her grief stained his front, enveloped him, then poured into him.

He was joined in her grief. It was inseparably their grief. And as her agony grew unbearably, so too was her secret, his.

Chapter Twelve

1.

It was deep in the afternoon when Shep crossed the porch to climb the rickety staircase to the *Leader's* offices. The straight chair was unoccupied; the block arrangement beneath the legend SENECA. NEXT STOP TO HEAVEN was now visible. Rusty had taken his aching back and misanthropy home. It was a relief, not having to run Rusty's gauntlet, Shep told himself.

Upstairs, there was first a diminuendo, then the typewriters slowly died. With the familiar, chattering idiom stilled, the quiet was heavy, intense. The editorial room had lost its voice, its motor power. An energizing plug had been pulled from its wall socket —from Spence's room. . . .

As he moved down the aisle, bodies formed tragic

lines and bereaved-looking faces turned to him, looked up to him, seeking his eyes. The graying copy boy left his path passively, like a child. His mouth was drawn down at the corners. He looked uprooted, newly orphaned in this more than twentieth year with Spence Andrews' *Leader*. Shep patted him in passing, feeling somehow ineffectual.

He felt insufficient, suddenly embarrassed before their grief. Their eyes were on him, their distraught faces supplicating him. Something was expected of him, something. A word, a tear, a eulogy; something that joined hands with their shock, formally established him as chief mourner, closest to the deceased. . . .

Shep kept silent, veiling his eyes. Feeling as he did, he couldn't affirm himself one with them, or take the leadership their grief held out to him. There were cold currents inside him. Currents begun in Ricky's, and swelled into a riptide at Merna's. What Slip had declared, he now believed utterly. Spence, in whose death image he had seen himself, had been a spurious kin. He was now shielding Spence's murderer, allied to her by his silence; sharing in the deed he would solve and expose just hours ago. . . .

Dudu moved toward him slowly. At the end of the aisle, Dudu motioned him aside like a gossip with tidings.

"Been phoning everywhere for you, Shep." Dudu's face had *important* written all over it.

"What's up?"

"An arrest. Maybe the murderer."

"Who!" His throat caught.

"Kahn."

Shep stopped a sudden, involuntary outcry. Soon he said, "Official?"

Dudu hesitated as if he hated to mar the absoluteness of the drama. "Dunno," he said regretfully, "it came in as a telephone tip about fifteen minutes ago."

"You checked?" Shep asked mechanically. His mind was clouded, and he must not permit it to clear. Merna . . .

"Uh huh. Called headquarters on it."

"And?"

"No confirmation. McNulty acted snotty about it."

"Assign anybody?"

"Nope." Dudu's pebbly eyes glittered. He was principal in a big scene, and playing it! "Figured it might need handling. Saved it for you."

There was an urgency in Dudu's manner that gave Shep the feeling of rushing in all directions at once. He glared hostilely. Handling! The word was phony, a nonsense fledglings and idiots confused with orderly news gathering. . . .

Slow down. Plenty of time to gather himself, contemplate, weigh, decide, Shep assured himself, seeking the comfortable envelopment of inertia. "Handling" merely meant loafing over to headquarters, a few routine inquiries, some scribbled memoranda. Plenty of time to think it out, trace his course in his mind. Press time was eight hours over, eight hours

early. Happenings in the rash of this day were tomorrow's page. And by tomorrow's page, this day's local events would already have been retailed, tattled, and slept on by Seneca's citizenry. The *Leader* merely confirmed what everybody long knew, memorializing this patent knowledge for history and the Seneca library binding room. . . .

. . . Then what in hell was this sense of haste Dudu was pressing on him! Even as news, suspense; if he didn't have the actual murderer in his vest pocket, if he didn't have the murderer lumped in his throat, there was no hurry. Both linotyper and pressman were home asleep, clearing their bleary night eyes. Extras just weren't the mode of Seneca journalism. There was no news competition other than the grapevine and a union shop paper. Andrews' murder had been one of the few extras in the *Leader's* history, a phenomenon that would be remembered and revived in the talk of old-timers along with V-J Day, the death of Mussolini, and the atom bomb. . . .

. . . Sure, plenty of time for decision. Meanwhile, let the story peter out, as it must. End with official apologies; end as a circumspect newspaper box hinting a dreadful police *faux pas*. All an extra shouting *Arrest Made In Andrews Murder* would satisfy was that preposterous look of scoop idiocy on Dudu's repulsive face. . . .

Dudu nudged scoldingly, "You oughta get out on it, Shep. It's hot. Kahn could be the killer."

Scolding tones from the yellow-toothed orang-

outang! Shep's eyes stormed at Dudu. . . . Why, you stupid sonofabitch. Kahn's as innocent as . . . So innocent, I can free him by telephone. All I have to do is throw up, and he goes free. Just puke in Chief of Police McNulty's lap. . . .

Shep said frostily, "I'll handle it in my own way, Dudu."

Dudu looked perplexed, then shrugged and moved away. Across the room the door flung open. There was a rush of skirts in an unfamiliar briskness, but a familiar face. Shep stared, his eyes moving over her, sampling her legs, the corseted compactness of her figure, the bold curve of her breasts. It was Mary.

The lines in her face were tightly drawn, as ever. Looking at her and watching her approach, instinct, and custom too, told him what her errand was about. Kahn, or Slip—probably both. The domestic storm hadn't abated with his new bachelorhood. It had moved from home to office. Mary, his wife, was a visiting delegation.

Could he absorb her, resist her? With what strength —now?

2.

Shep entered the Seneca station house and submitted his hand to a vigorous pumping by Police Chief McNulty.

In its immediate effect, the handshake was a test of strength, with the good chief invincible. It also

had a deeper meaning, a hidden purpose. As McNulty explained braggingly, when in his cups, the handshake was a method in character reading; McNulty having through lifelong exploration of its subleties, learned to distinguish the weak from the strong, discern potentially criminal types, generally classify humanity. The handshake also serviced McNulty as a lie detector, not a few of Seneca misdoers having come a cropper in the McNulty maw.

Shep recovered his hand, took his handkerchief out and closed his fist on it, soaking up the moisture on his palm. He looked patiently at McNulty, dissimulating. He'd always disliked this addlebrained comic of the station house.

McNulty fixed his bright eyes on Shep. "Is it the story . . . ?"

Shep nodded.

The bright eyes began dancing. McNulty found chuckling humor in each small (and great) stir in the station house. He said, "Looks like we got it practically solved, eh?"

The fat contentment in McNulty was something to be endured. McNulty had married Hannah, sister of Randolph C. Porter, Mayor of Seneca. McNulty, in effect, had married his job.

Shep's voice grated, "You're not serious about Kahn murdering Andrews!"

A smug, sage look, and the round face went up and down. Shep raised his tones, "Don't be a fool, McNulty. Don't be a goddam fool!"

"Hey, what's got into you!" The alarm in McNulty's face dissolved into puzzlement.

"Kahn didn't murder Andrews. He couldn't. . . ." Shep's mood failed. "He—had no reason to, I mean. What possible motive?"

"Hate, Shep. It was hate." McNulty savored the word, repeating it. "Hate—was the motive. Carmody and I talked it over with Mayor Porter. Not officially, mind you. But we figure it was hate that made Kahn go for his gun. Made him hang around Andrews' place until he got up the nerve he needed to go in and do the shooting."

"Mac, it's crazy—" Shep began, then stopped, struggling to contain himself. It needed an effort to keep his temper from snapping at the infuriating look of wisdom on McNulty's moon face.

"Hate was the motive, mark my words." A digit lectured at Shep. "The European kind of hate. Kahn couldn't see Andrews' politics."

Shep stared incredulously. It was dippy; a hideous *opéra bouffe* insisting on its reality, insisting that it be believed. The best brains in Seneca had conferred solemnly, prejudged, satisfied themselves. All that was needed now was to model facts to fit the prejudgment. And now staring as he was, and flushing shame to the roots of him, he must dissimulate, mask his true thinking, and reply, asinine in kind, because truth was buried deeply within himself—his lips were sealed to truth. . . .

Shep said, "Even if there were—differing points of

view, as you say. . . . Even granting dislike. But hate, hate enough to kill! It isn't reasonable, Mac."

"Maybe it isn't, and maybe it is. Anyhow, these ain't reasonable times, Shep. People've forgotten how to shake hands. Everybody's suspicious of the guy next door, the other fellow on the job—"

McNulty looked pleased with what he was saying and how he was saying it. He continued, "It's a ball game with no umpire, and everybody carrying a gun in case of an argument. Don't tell me there's no hate. Sure there's hate. Hate with 'Made in Europe' printed on it." McNulty's face darkened. "Dammit, it's like this country was in the middle of Europe!" He bent over and pulled a drawer open angrily. "Hate enough to kill, you want—" He held a sheet of paper out to Shep. "Just look at this!"

Shep read it. It was, in total, a confession to the murder of Spence Andrews. An embittered, incoherent piece of writing—signed MERTON C. PARKS.

"You're discounting the confession?"

"Parks was home, right under his sister's nose, when Andrews was shot." McNulty spat. "Nutty as a fruitcake."

"On what evidence are you holding Kahn?"

"Opportunity, first. Patrolman Templeton put him right near the scene about the time of the murder. Plus that, Kahn sounded off against Andrews more than once. We got witnesses to that. Plus that—" McNulty broke off warily.

Shep prompted, "Plus what?"

"Under your hat? We're still working up this angle."

"In strict confidence."

McNulty hesitated briefly, "There's the matter of Kahn's gun. A gun supposed to be on his theayter premises, according to his permit. And a thirty-six at that." McNulty's voice sharpened significantly, "It was a thirty-six that killed Andrews."

Shep frowned. "What about the gun? I don't get it."

"It's missing."

"Missing?"

"Yep."

"How does Kahn explain it?"

"He doesn't." McNulty shrugged. "Hasn't opened up once since we brought him in. Like somebody cut off his tongue."

So far as it went, it was a case against Kahn—and against him. Shep's face set grimly. The missing gun gave him an obligation to Kahn as great as his obligation to Merna. Greater. Kahn was an obligation to his conscience. While Kahn remained under a shadow, in prison, he couldn't give his silence to Merna. . . .

"How'd you get a line on the gun, Mac?" Shep asked. To free Kahn, he must know. He must free Kahn, to give his silence to Merna. If there was a way to free Kahn, yet be silent. . . .

McNulty grunted noncommittally. The chief of police had reached the limits of his willingness to reveal.

A silence held awkwardly between them, and as it grew McNulty began to twist in obvious restlessness in his self-enforced inhibition. It was evident that McNulty needed to be jollied, kibitzed into a blabbermouth breach of official secrets. . . .

Shep said amiably, "It all sounds like a sweet bit of police activity, as I think of it. The missing gun does point squarely at Kahn."

McNulty beamed, and Shep coaxed, "C'mon, Mac. Let me have some citizen's pride in the department."

McNulty hesitated, then as if reticence was beyond his powers of endurance, "You won't spill it?"

Shep shook his head violently. "Honor bright."

"It'd put a crimp in our investigation if you did."

"Not until you give me the green light. On my oath."

McNulty's face came forward contentedly. He opened his mouth, and the niagara gushed free. . . .

Chapter Thirteen

1.

The cellar steps sounded a warning, frustrating his furtive descent. Shep completed the bottom half of the wooden staircase flat-footedly.

On level ground, he paused warily, prepared to bolt back up the stairs. He blinked, staring into a pit with gray-black shadows festooned around the borders. An overhead bulb in the center of the room threw a harsh white spotlight on a long table that was strewn with papers. The man hunched over the table kept on with his writing, oblivious to the arrival.

Shep dared closer to the stare of the light bulb, then remained waiting. Victor looked up distractedly. Recognition was slow. Then, after an instant in which to quell an emotion, Victor said conversation-

ally, "Hello, Ward. What brings you . . . ?"

Now suddenly nervous and uneasy, Shep withheld replying. Coming here, tiptoeing down the cellar staircase, he was unfamiliarly new to himself. He was a stranger memory could not trust. Now, he couldn't predict the next minute, even have faith in the first speech of this new man he mistrusted. Here, with Victor's eyes questioning him, he had a feeling of danger, of crisis. The anger that had driven him to the cellar was not his own chemistry, but another's.

Smiling falsely, Shep finally said, "About the story, Victor. McNulty tipped me to it. . . ."

Victor looked relieved, then said churlishly, "You picked an hour, Ward. Can't it wait?"

"There's—an edition to get out. Just a couple of minutes, a couple of questions. . . ." His teeth felt false displaying them.

"Couple of minutes is the most you can get," Victor said firmly. "I've got company coming, lots to do. . . ." He fussed with some of the strewn sheets, arranging them into a neat pile, then looked up and smiled. "Tomorrow, I don't mind visiting with you all day."

"What's all the paper work?" His hands felt clumsy gesturing.

"Notes," Victor said briefly, forbiddingly.

"Jesocrats?" He had a compulsion to say it.

First a careless nod, then Victor looked at him for a long time. Shep said, "Making a big thing out of your baby, eh?" It was the compulsion again; not the

easy, painless agreeabilities of his older, remembered self.

Victor's eyes fixed on him coldly. Shep met his eyes, returning the cold stare, holding it steadily as if success in this was a matter of honor. Staring, it was soon impossible not to blink. Waves of blur finally got him. His eyes teared and he looked away.

He heard Victor say, "Ward, you better go now. It's been a couple of minutes."

The new, unfamiliar man had grave shortcomings. His hands were ice cold, his heartbeats rapid, irregular. And worse, he utterly lacked a tip of tongue strategy of speech. . . .

The new man said, "No one invited me down, and I'll leave when I'm ready!" Hearing it, Shep winced. The man who had come down the cellar stairs was a ninny.

An automobile horn outside burst into the pause between them. With it, Victor seemed to pop from his chair.

"What's eating you, Ward?"

"Guess!" Shep recoiled. Christ, more ninny talk.

"You're crazy—or drunk!"

Shep accepted the affront eagerly. Good. Good being insulted. It gave new man and old, unity, a common resentment. All free men insulted could react with undifferentiated sameness, no matter the difference of habit or chemistry. Snarl, get tough. Shep's brow darkened.

Drunk am I! Reach down and twist the little

humpbacked hatemonger into more of a pretzel than already. Crazy, am I? Follow the blood in your fingers. Strangle petty annoyances. Squeeze . . .

Victor jerked desperately, lip-screamed, then screamed with his whole face without sound. Shep's fingers dug and the neck flesh was soft and white. It was the beginning of ecstasy. . . .

Victor's eyes closed blindly and his body sagged in the noose. Shep let him fall.

He stood suspended in the atmosphere like a balloon on a string. He dipped in a rapt study of the angry red grooves on the white neck flesh. Staring, his eyes fixed lumpily in front of him, as remembered fears overtook him. The angry red grooves were a wanton effect, without cause or authority. The new man was violent. Repudiate him, and run! Run, escape this manic creature who created effects without cause!

He moved in tortured little circles, desperately trying to shut his ears to a hysterical chattering inside him that kept pumping the blood to his fingers. He moved, now more surely, his fingers thrusting in rapid purpose, while the voice inside raged wildly.

Stop! Stop this search!

The hard-packed drawers squealed off rails, then overturned into a heaping junk pile on the long table. The thrusting fingers worked the single pile into many, creating a simplification.

Searching, sacking. Pile one: Papers and words.

Words in pencil, words in ink. Words typewritten, words mimeographed. Playing cards. A gavel. Paper clips. Rubber bands. Paper clips, rubber bands, paper clips.

Victor was moving, moaning, retching.

Pile two: Correspondence. Metal cuts. Stacked reprints from selected works held together by a rubber band. A pocket-sized Bible. Sponge eraser. Pamphlets.

Victor was gathering life with each seizure.

Pile three: News clippings stapled. A harmonica. Gun. A day ledger. Crayon pencils. Rubber bands, paper clips.

Victor got up off the floor and sat down on a chair. He looked dazed as though after a fitful sleep. His raw, bloodshot eyes followed Shep almost indifferently.

Shep lifted the gun amateurishly, then stabbed it at Victor. "The gun . . . ?" His voice was high pitched and thin.

Had Victor nodded?

Cause! It followed effect, legitimizing it. The hysterical chattering inside grew wilder. Shep shouted, "But why, why in hell!"

Victor was spinning energies, renewing himself. Muscles worked, then there was life in his face. A waking luminosity. It was the face of insanity. He spoke twitchingly, "Ward, you're crazy! You'll pay for this!"

The insult! A tremor ran through his arm, into his

fingers. The metal whacked, opened Victor's cheek.

Victor held with all his strength, then began to cry dully, helplessly.

Now there was an inexorable tug, pulling him deeper into the orbit. His mind was blank, waiting for a wisdom to be inscribed. . . . Shep opened the ledger and cleared his eyes, preparing them.

Page, debit. Page, credit. It was a greengrocer's daybook. A circumspect record of cash received, cash disbursed. His eyes were now a camera, photographing and printing simultaneously, filling his mind.

Ready, click.

Sam Bronson. $1,000. May 10th.

Sam Bronson. Give him flesh. Photograph him from memory. Bronson, affable, corpulent, businessman, churchgoer, father, husband. Nicest guy in the world, except when in argument. Mulish in argument. A single taxer.

Click.

Jennifer Gates. $25. May 12th.

Jennifer Gates. Unmarried. 74. Organist in the Baptist church. Grand old lady of the annual flower show.

Click.

Damon Porter. $100. May 12th.

Damon Porter. Perennial chairman of the County Board of Supervisors. Grocery store owner. High-score bowler. Son killed at Okinawa, posthumously awarded Distinguished-Service medal. Brother of Randolph C. Porter, Mayor of Seneca.

Click.

Natalie Gilchrist. $5.00. May 14th.

Natalie Gilchrist. Mental case whose ramshackle dwelling on Fanwood Road bore a crudely lettered sign that read COLONEL PINCKNEY OF THE SENECA TRUST COMPANY WANTS TO STEAL THIS HOUSE. The interior of the Gilchrist dwelling was an arsenal of shotguns, weapons; ready to withstand an eviction siege.

Click, click, click. Vincente Ferri, Susan Cooper, Mrs. Thomas Kranz, Aileen Kouenhoven, Lena Robbins, Jed Burrows.

All good people.

Names and money and dates. Dates told only in the month and day. Suspended in a timelessness. No marked year, as though the process it represented was eternal, unbound by the rigid laws of use and obsolescence, beyond the circumvention of death. . . .

Now this entry, sudden in his vision. This entry that came to astonish, to stun, to tear his pride to shreds, but yet of which he had always secretly known as now he knew. And even if he had not really known, even if he had been lulled by that mind he had put to sleep—if he must save bits of pride—he had been warned by Mary. . . .

Click.

S. Andrews. $2500. May 15th.

S. Andrews. Give him flesh. Give the corpse a brief instant of resurrection. Photograph him from memory. S. Andrews. Collector of miniature ivories,

daguerreotypes, porcelains, Georgian plate, and other people's honor. Unitarian. Par Golfer. Publisher. Footballer with the habit of victory. Scoundrel. Dead man.

Dead man. . . . It was a bell tolling in the empty air. It was a hand closing on his in partnership, a partnership in murder. Merna's hand. Because now he rejoiced in Spence's murder. Now he was jealous of it. More than share in it, he wanted an equal half. It was all that was left of pride, or could be. By shielding the assassin, he too had murdered his betrayer. It was an honor to be sought after, rivaled for. The debauched had killed the debaucher. . . .

Shep put the gun in his pocket. With this fever he now felt, he also felt purpose. Kahn would go free, and Merna's secret would be kept. His responsibility to Kahn was great, and his debt to Merna was greater. She had murdered his despoiler and jailer to free him. Dead with Spence was the Ward of the last years. An earlier Ward had been restored, and merged with this new, purposeful man whose fingers burned. It called for hallelujah, prayer. He had escaped his own destiny. . . .

Was there something stirring against him!

Shep started suddenly, twisting. Victor was as he had been, seated, breathing hard, looking hunted and desperate. Nothing. Yet this suggestion! It was in Victor too. An almost imperceptible tightening, tensing. . . .

There was a vibration overhead, closer than the

street. Closer, inside the house. Suddenly it came. The cellar stairs sounded its warning.

Shep ripped ledger pages, cramming his pockets. Victor made a wild leap, screaming at the top of his lungs. The hands grabbed at him and Shep brought his knee up savagely. Victor's scream cracked rising.

Now they were coming toward him. Big in the low-ceilinged cellar. They were grotesque shadows on the floor and on the kalsomined cellar walls. Shadows touching him, shaping a vast net. Bill Saunders and Slip. Saunders in front, his face working. . . .

His skin goose-fleshed and his heart began failing, as the net drew closer, engulfing him. He could see the net and the long table between them. He could see Slip's big hands. . . .

A single sound came from the pit of his belly as Shep hurled his fist up from the socket, up to the light bulb. The bulb crashed in a spray of lightning that was a fleet illumination of red, pink, and green, like the dying gasp of a Roman candle.

Pitch black.

Rioting sounds. The table crashed, splintering, as someone fell over it. Shep ran blindly, by instinct. A cellar post numbed his shoulder, spun him around. He found the staircase, struck his shins on it.

The street.

He ran wildly, in rout, without breath. A block. Another block. Cut back down side streets. He'd lost his sense of direction.

Gagging; he was sick, close to collapse, but afraid

to stop. Caught, he'd never run again. An alley. Over a fence. Another side street.

Tottering; his lungs were in a vise. They blew out. He fell face forward on the sidewalk, waiting for the hands to tear at him.

Waiting; an eternity passed. Shep rolled over face upward. His lungs were sucking in great draughts of the night. Sucking, faster, faster, like a racing motor in a stock-still machine.

He had outrun Slip's big hands. He was alone under a million stars.

His breathing slackened, normalized, and now reason revived, reviling him. That consuming terror, the terrible helplessness before the first blow—was it the inner reality of him? This wretch on the sidewalk—was this his true measure?

Shep got up on his feet.

This crumbling plaster, was it his true structure?

He walked.

Had it been fear through all the long years? Had fear and not the calm of belief been the secret of his myopia, his retreat over a whole decade, his assignation with Spence? Then where was the courage of his youth? Did it still live somewhere in him? Or had it been courage, really! Had Slip divined its false substance, wisely terming it "boy scout?" . . . And Mary, had she divined it?

Once a boy scout and then the fat, safe years. Now the fat years had been shot in the back. . . .

He quickened his stride. There were sounds somewhere behind him, stalking. He ran, looking over his shoulder. He was afraid. . . .

2.

The large wall clock in the station house read 12:55.

McNulty peered through eyes glued down to slits. He shook free from sleep, then registered alarm.

"What in thunder's happened to you!"

Shep surveyed himself, flushing under McNulty's scrutiny. His coat was torn at the armpit. One knee showed through his trouser leg. His right fist was blood caked and purplish; the arm was useless. Now made aware, the arm began to ache.

McNulty whistled. "You sure look a mess. And your face looks like you been crying. Who beat you up?"

He hadn't been, but suffer the ignominy. . . .

Shep dug into a picket. He dropped the gun on the counter.

"Is this Kahn's missing gun?"

McNulty turned the gun over in his hand. Then he found a sheet in a desk drawer and mumbled to himself. His eyes grew wider.

"Serial numbers check all right." His brow furrowed. "Where'd you get it?"

Shep hesitated. He was borrowing fear for tomorrow and tomorrow. Finally, he said, "From your

tipster, Victor Arents. Kahn's handy man at the Waco."

The bafflement in McNulty's face presaged talk, talk. Talk that had to be averted, for now. Not now. Not with the ache in his arm, the ache all over, the fainting nausea.

Shep said hurriedly, "Kahn's the butt of a dirty frame-up. That ought to be plainer than hell now. Turn him loose at once and go get Victor."

McNulty protested, "I can't turn him loose. Not tonight, I can't. Not 'til morning. It needs a judge's okay." He saw the flare in Shep's face, and appeased, "First thing in the morning." He gestured at the wall clock. Less than seven hours."

"And Victor?"

"Morning's good enough for that too. You can give me a complete statement on it then."

There was a stubbornness close to the surface of McNulty that required a tug of wills, an expenditure he did not have. He couldn't spend more of himself in the drama of this night, in more drama. . . .

Shep said drearily, "Call Mrs. Kahn. Tell her everything's okay officially. That her husband will be released. . . ."

McNulty nodded. "You can count on that."

Shep hesitated. He wanted to linger. Overhear McNulty's telephone reassurance to Erika Kahn. But there were barely minutes left of him. He had a desperate need to wash, free himself from the smell of his own blood. A matter of minutes, or he would

never be able to erase the stains of crying, or find restoration again. . . .

3.

Moon patterns crackling through the blue-black shades, and the cotton puffs of snow pushing from the grooves along the sills of the bedroom windows, were still details in a winter scene.

Erika Kahn sat on a Boston rocker on the threshold of the children's connecting bedroom, dividing herself evenly, and listening dreamily to thin streamers of sound that blew into the rooms from the jet underneath the gas logs.

The streamers hissed, swirling upward into the cubic vacuum.

Soon, her skirts were wet against her, as the sealed rooms grew closer and her head and lungs inflated. And as the density grew, her face began to burn. . . .

A sound came from inside her as she began to float. A laugh. . . . It was a laugh released from a long hidden voice.

Chapter Fourteen

Dudu's voice grew higher, filling with emotion as he continued. "It was a blast like the flat was choked up with gas for a hundred years. It took the fire department and two volunteer groups from neighboring counties four hours to get it under control." He stopped and looked quizzically at Shep.

Shep chafed under the scrutiny, conscious of every detail that met Dudu's puzzled appraisal. He had a sunken look, disordered hair, the collar of his shirt gaped open. He was the antithesis of his customarily spruce grooming.

Dudu said, "Is all this news to you! Where you been anyhow? I phoned you every hour all night long."

"Sick," Shep said heavily, avoiding Dudu's eyes.

"You sure picked a time!" Dudu shook his head dubiously. "Anyhow, we got something of an edition." He consulted his wrist watch. "Due off the presses any minute now." There was a hint of criticism in the tones, "You can read all about it."

Read! The story was burned into his consciousness in letters of fire. Open gas jets in the Kahn apartment, and a burning pilot light in the gas refrigerator in the kitchen. . . . He'd heard the story numberless times from numberless people flowing homeward in his morning path. With the blast, Seneca had taken to the streets. Not a few had been up all night.

"What casualties? Besides Erika Kahn. . . ." He spoke covering his face. There was too much showing in his face. . . .

"Her kids. The building super. Old Jennifer Gates in the apartment upstairs. She'd been ailing in bed, and the flames trapped her."

Jennifer Gates! The irony cut deeply. Jennifer Gates. Unmarried. 74. Organist in the Baptist church. Grand old lady of the annual show. Jennifer Gates. $25. A caused effect. Jennifer Gates burned to ash by a match struck in the Jesocrats basement. . . .

Dudu continued, "That's the dead. Add twenty smoke and shock cases hospitalized, and there's the total." Dudu shook his head dolefully, "It was cheap at that, considering the whole damn building gutted before they got the fire out. For a while it looked

like the whole town might be in for it. . . ." Dudu paused, then his voice wrenched, "What a way to bow out! It wasn't suicide. It was mass murder."

Shep winced. It was like listening to a sentence uttered by a supreme tribunal. Mass murder. . . . Something had to be justified, rebutted, before his thinking ran away. . . .

Shep said, "Erika Kahn had morbid tendencies, Dudu. Suicide was latent in her personality."

"Yeah," Dudu agreed, "I always got the feeling she was jackrabbity."

Shep looked at him gratefully. Good. Good, this quick endorsement.

"Still, the way things stacked . . ." Dudu stroked his chin. "Kahn in a helluva fix. The boy with his cheek stitched up. . . ."

The quick, hopeful feeling ebbed. His thoughts were rushing headlong again—into ambush.

But where was his guilt? No more than any man had he set the explosion in Kahn's apartment. The chain of motion that had maimed Kahn, scarred his son, destroyed his family, had preceded—an eternity earlier—his, Shep's, first knowledge of Merna's guilt. The despondency that had driven Erika Kahn hadn't been sudden, something in that fateful hour. It had been a despondency long matured, spawned in earlier causes. The spark that had sent flames roaring into the night had been struck weeks before, two thousand years before. . . .

Whatever his guilt, if there was any, it was not

greater, nor as great, but much less than any man's. Proof, this deep feeling of ruin, the grave in his heart. . . .

Knuckles sounded the glass on the door. Dudu reached for the doorknob automatically.

McNulty.

McNulty flickered an eyelid, then motioned covertly at Dudu. Shep stared at him, reacting to the signal slowly. There was something queer about McNulty's face. Some lines had been rearranged. The looseness and the joviality were missing.

McNulty repeated his signal impatiently, and Shep said, "All right, Dudu."

The door closed.

McNulty harrumphed noisily. He was plainly uneasy. Soon he said, "Kind of a bad night all around."

Shep nodded wearily.

McNulty came closer, speaking low. "About Victor —and all that business—"

"Yes?"

McNulty hesitated, like a man feeling through unaccustomed thoughts. Soon he said anxiously, "Got it in the paper?"

"No." Shep amended, "Anyhow, not today."

McNulty seemed relieved. Now his manner was more relaxed, almost cheerful. "Kahn went free an hour ago. We wiped the record clean. Like he was never arrested."

It was ghoulish. Shep said resentfully, "A little late, McNulty."

McNulty reddened, started a retort, but said nothing. His brow drew, again mired in unaccustomed thoughts. Soon he began, "What his wife did, she did for other reasons, Shep. Maybe account of the boy, maybe other things. Anyhow, it was something in her mind."

Shep looked hard into McNulty's face. Plainly, McNulty too had fought a morning long battle with himself. He watched McNulty fidget, watched the color flame deeper in his cheeks. Plainly, McNulty hadn't found justification either. . . .

"What's done's done, Shep. Over." McNulty harrumphed noisily. "I told Kahn you were the fellow who went to bat for him, recovered the pistol."

"Thanks, Mac." He was unaccountably grateful for this insight given Kahn.

"Hell, it was a good trick, Shep. A damned good trick!" McNulty said heartily, exaggeratedly. Then, his eyes contemplating Shep gravely, "I advised Kahn not to jump to conclusions, show discretion. Leave decisions to the department."

"Conclusions about what?"

"About—the gun mix-up."

"Frame-up, you mean."

McNulty said mildly, "Maybe frame-up. Anyhow, you can bet we're looking into it. Now a meaningful note: "That's why it's good you did not jump headfirst into print. Understand?"

Shep sensed the drift, but said, "You tell me, McNulty."

McNulty cleared his throat. "There's more to some things than you suppose at first look, Shep. A hell of a lot more sometimes. That's what I always tell myself whenever I get hot under the collar—" McNulty tortured his voice into smiling persuasion, "And Shep, I ain't been wrong much yet—looking at things like that."

Shep picked at it. It said nothing, it said a lot. It was a meaningless passage whose summary philosophy sought to enlist all listeners. It was the synthesis of all meaning, it had no meaning. It could be applauded and embraced, it could be ridiculed and rejected. Understanding it, Shep chose to misunderstand it. He said, "Do you have a point, McNulty?"

The smiling persuasiveness fell away, like a light button switched OFF. Now McNulty's tones were nettled, and his face showed resentment at being forced into the ordeal of an explanation.

"Shep, look at my position. Last night you gave me a gun and a story. Right?"

Shep nodded impatiently.

"On the strength of it, I buzz Judge Henderson, and Kahn walks out of a mess with clean hands." McNulty paused.

Shep asked suddenly, "You phone Mrs. Kahn last night!"

McNulty drew finger lines on his breast fervently. "Cross my heart. Phoned twice and got no answer. Figured she was fast asleep."

"Go on."

"Okay, that much so far. This morning I went after Victor." McNulty brandished a fist. "Mind you, I would've pulled him in in a jiffy if I thought I had something."

"Didn't you, by Christ!"

"Not on the face of things. All I had was your story, Shep. Not even on record yet, and sworn to. Just something you told me in the dead of night."

"And something I gave you. The gun. Remember!"

"Okay. And Kahn's gun." McNulty hoisted a shoulder. "Now—without personalities, and only from a strictly legal point of view—what does that prove?"

"Theft of the gun. That's larceny. Conspiracy to frame a murder rap on an innocent man. That's a felony." Shep's face tightened, "Want more?"

McNulty said evenly, "That's your story. But does it prove it?"

Shep stared. "What're you driving at?"

"Just that Victor swears you're lying. Swears the gun's a plant to discredit him, discredit his testimony against Kahn. Shep, he even insisted on preferring charges against you. Charges of felonious assault." McNulty paused, then continued, "I talked him out of that. Told him to hold off until I looked into matters. Like I told you—and Kahn—"

"Victor's lying. Lying in his teeth!"

"Maybe he is. I don't know." McNulty leaned forward significantly. "He's even got witnesses, Shep."

"Who?"

"Saunders, for one. And Bill Saunders is nobody's

lollipop, Shep. A good piece of Seneca goes along with him."

Now he understood it in all its naked force. Beneath the surface of their words, they were dueling. This wasn't an inquiry, or a policeman's legalistic dilemma. There was more in issue between them than what was being said. McNulty was consciously opposed to him, and defending something he believed in devoutly, good or bad; the good with the bad and the bad with the good. And, if pushed, as he was now pushing McNulty, the police chief would defend it with his life. . . .

Shep said bitterly, "I suppose another witness is Slip Masterson!"

Now McNulty seemed almost mellow. He was finally at home in accustomed thinking, finally fully on the record. "You're getting all worked up, Shep. Relax, man. I just wanted you to see what I come up against. Want you to get the department's problem." His fingers beat time on the wooden surface of the desk. "It's a—delicate setup. If we make a wrong move, it could mean civil war."

"You're letting Victor's gang bluff you, McNulty."

"Now you're leaping without looking and thinking again, Shep. Jesus, I never knew you to be such a hothead like this before." A reproving look, "You been living in Seneca long enough to know a few things."

"I know this—" Shep blurted heatedly, "Victor is an obscene little hatemonger. That movement he's

cooked up is in the business of selling hate for profit. Step on him now, and we won't have gas explosions that blow the sides of buildings out. Let him grow . . ." Shep bit his lip. He was being recklessly voluble before a hostile auditor. Better shut up, and get the hell off the center of the stage, get into a corner. If he could deny the voice clamoring inside him. . . .

McNulty said doggedly, "Now you're into politics, free speech, and a lot of stuff 'way over my head, outside my job. Let's keep it down to you against Victor last night. . . ." McNulty leaned forward earnestly, hunching his immense shoulders. "Like I advised Kahn. Stay clear of conclusions. Be smart! Don't stick your neck out and get your head chopped off."

Was it a threat clearly expressed? Shep stared into McNulty's face intensely.

It was.

McNulty held an enameled cigar case out. "Have a smoke."

"No, thanks."

McNulty bit an end, lighted the cigar, and puffed thoughtfully. Then, "One more thing, Shep. And the Lord love you as a man of peace and wisdom, if you hand it over without an argument—" McNulty paused.

"Hand what over?" The inquiry was superfluous. He had expected the demand.

"Them ledger pages you picked up last night. Put them in my care."

"Why?"

Evasively, "You committed an unlawful act, taking them. Give them to me and get out from under."

"And if I say no?"

McNulty's mouth fixed. "I can't take no for an answer."

"Who ordered you not to! Who insists that you get them back!" Shep stopped, horrified at what he had unmistakably heard himself say.

"Your tongue's running away with you Shep." McNulty continued patiently, "The Jesocrats, and mind you, I'm not speaking for or against them, have a right to hold lawful meetings and keep books. A right it is my duty to uphold, until authorized otherwise. And when one of their officers makes a complaint that certain private papers have been seized or stolen, it is my duty to look to their recovery." McNulty stopped, waiting.

Shep said, "Has there been a formal complaint?"

McNulty hesitated. "Not formal—yet."

"Then I'll wait, since there's no police urgency."

A wrathful gesture. "No weasel talk, Shep. I came for the pages." McNulty reddened slightly. "To keep the peace in town, and for your sake. I swear by all that's holy, for your own sake too." A pause, then peremptorily, "Give me those ledger pages!

It was the forceful demand of a man who would use force. Shep faltered uncertainly, and as his indecision continued, a feeling of futility rose through

him. He said slowly, "Give me a while, McNulty. I want to think."

"Dammit, man. I can be a friend to you."

"I said just a while, McNulty. Time to get some things straightened out in my mind." His eyes were tensed and strained meeting McNulty's searching look. He could feel the antagonism between them suddenly die, as the plea in his last speech engaged McNulty's comprehension. It was a face-saving plea, purely. The plea of an already impotent man that he be spared the last humiliation—emasculation. Time to think was a condition of surrender laid down by the conquered. . . .

McNulty said suspiciously, "You sure you haven't got any of the Victor rumpus in the paper. . . ."

Shep shook his head listlessly.

"Then I'll call on you later." McNulty started for the door. At the door, he stopped, making a last search of Shep's face, satisfying himself.

Shep wanted to say something as he stood motionless submitting his face. Say something, repudiate his plea for time, re-engage McNulty. Just for pride, if nothing more. Just for shame. . . . But his throat was thickening, and the fear was all over him.

The door slammed.

Shep fell into a chair wretchedly, wretched in the knowledge that another moment, another threat, one more hostility, and McNulty could have closed his hand on the ledger pages.

And sitting, with his eyes blindly on the wall, he

knew that soon he would yield the pages. Lacking purpose, he couldn't resist. Resistance feeding on fever alone, or on confusion, was aimless, worthless, self-destroying. And what was pride, of itself. . . .

He had crossed McNulty briefly, futilely. As futile as a shout against the wind. He was on a battlefield without weapons.

Chapter Fifteen

1.

Shep stood on the porch, more to the post office side, loitering indecisively. He had a craving for the trivial, the sheerly recreational. Odd little nothings one went about emptily, unimportantly. Like Dutch-treat billiards. Or midday lounging in the movies.

A dog carrying a bound parcel in its mouth trotted regimentally beside his mistress. Shep chuckled appreciatively; winked wisely at the mistress as she passed. He watched them enter the post office. It was a diverting touch. A thing far from the hard, warped outer shell, closer to the core of living.

A couple sauntered by, chattering in avid overtones that suggested rib-tickling nuances. Shep smiled, lightened. It looked attractively an ideal state of being. A thing to belong to.

He tapped a cigarette against the back of his hand. Tapped it again. Examined the result. Tapped it. It was wonderfully absorbing; this trade gesture of integrated people with great inner calm.

He lighted the cigarette, inhaled, expelled in slow lazy motions, as though demonstrating a process to onlookers. He blew languorously, making smoke rings, then went to sit down.

The empty chair? Rusty?

It was the second consecutive morning he'd missed seeing the chattering old reprobate. That certainly was something to think about; a preoccupation to be entered into wholeheartedly, explored fully. His eyes grew fond, meditative. Rusty was away baiting his pensioned nephew. Or perhaps himself down with rheumatism. The weather had been unseasonable. Snow, sleet. Poor Rusty! Anyhow, rheumatism was a forty-eight hour infirmity with the hardy old soul. Forty-eight hours, and Rusty'd be back on his tilted chair. It took a sight more than rheumatic twinges to kill the old soldier.

Kill!

Shep took a rapid puff. Fudge to the morbid. These pestilences nourishing in his mind— Scat! The dead were done, were yesterday. There was today, and tomorrow.

Today he would bury yesterday.

Tomorrow? Tomorrow, perhaps, he would seek an old happiness anew. Mary . . .

Mary, I've been a dunce. Ox-dumb. Only that.

Never ulterior with a deadly intent. . . . Just a smug fool, an old fuddy duddy. Sweetheart, boot me one and unpack your valises forever. No more fights. I'll agree, for comfort. Compromise, to end disagreement. Indulge, to honor your freedom to opinion. And soon we'll be older and old, and all these compressions we bring to living today will be meaningless, as yesterday's clash is meaningless today. What has meaning, today and tomorrow, is this loneliness. Only this loneliness. . . .

Merna!

Merna, I hereby resign my interest in your secret. You keep it, for yourself. If you stay sane, keeping it—my sympathies. If you cannot, and surrender it —my sympathies.

Now there was nothing to make him tense. Slow up, puff leisurely. . . .

Slip!

There was no room in his living consciousness for Slip. Neutralize him, expel him. Later, he'd see McNulty, complete the transfer, and finish. Never for him to change the world. Even a little. It took another kind of fellow utterly. His die was set, the mold marble. Much water, much time. Many immutable mental sets. . . .

Besides, there was fear. . . .

Revolutionaries and reformers were of stouter stuff. Less imaginative. Each to his ability, up to his ability. And each man dies in his own way.

It was a way; the one way. It was the first truly

clear note emerging from the week's incessant chattering inside him. Finally, an arrow pointing an escape from his hideously unsettled thinking. It cut across the swirling confusions in a straight line. It was a straight line, free of illusion, freed from self-deception, free of improbable heroics. . . .

Shep puffed rapidly, and the cigarette flared brightly. Sure! Conquer fear by knowledge, knowing himself. Know himself as he was now, and inevitably must be later and tomorrow. Know this, see the marble mold and read its face everlastingly. Know, before the fantasies that had lured him into a dangerously mad game, into Victor's cellar, blinded him to his own destruction. . . .

Believe as before that violence was the last argument, the final retort of the futile and disordered. As he had believed, when first viewing Spence's corpse. As he had believed it before his fingers were hot in Victor's throat. . . .

He chain-lighted another cigarette; ground the first stub underheel. He must not relinquish this belief! It was only security. If lost, he must recover it. He had no secret strength. Continuing in confusion, he would become chaos. Over and over again repeat the degradation of his flight through Seneca streets, nauseated by the smell of his own blood. If he struggled, confused as he was, fought on a battlefield without weapons, poor even in a logic that sustained and heartened, that degradation must ever inevitably be. . . .

One course then, only! Conquer fear by disowning the symbols of struggle. Refuse to fight, aloof to the provocations of the spoilers and the spoiled. Make peace with all men so that he could meet them casually. Indifferently, as before. Dead to their thinking; warmed by his own serenity. He couldn't walk looking backward over his shoulder, cringe before Slip's big hands, wrangle with McNulty, live outlaw, rankling, like Lem Morrissey. . . .

Think through now! The hour was growing late. He had been swept to the brink by a conspiracy of events. The chain of conspiracy was evident. As evident as if he had been a spectator watching a hypnotist devil a subject. Mary had thrown the suggestion, and from then on he had been prey, susceptible to the influences of Slip, Merna, Victor, McNulty. . . .

Leave children their morbid game. It was the only way, for him. He played badly.

He chain-lighted a third cigarette, puffed evenly, then fast, faster. Peace in his breast was impossible. There was an ache that persisted, like a malignant tumor. . . .

2.

There was a propulsion greater than the act of walking. He wanted to turn and go uptown, but he continued southward, as if there were huge, magnetic fingers drawing him to Maple Street.

Leaving the main stem, the sharp daytime sounds

of Seneca life, the human and mechanical, hollowed off, droned distantly. One sound persisted, ran into his ears. Footsteps . . . quickening. They vibrated his entire body. Then from behind, a tug at his sleeve.

Shep whirled; his hand rose to ward off a blow.

It was Slip. An unexpectedly affable Slip, grinning good-naturedly.

"Hiya, Sheppie."

Shep struggled to keep a violent revulsion from showing in his face. It was impossible to smile, dissimulate, bask in the sun pouring from Slip's face.

Slip said, "C'mon, Sheppie. Come out from behind that tin shield," his eyes enjoying the situation.

Forcing, Shep cleared his face of emotion. Slip linked arms. "That's better," he said approvingly. "C'mon, I'll buy you a drink."

He was armless, off the ground like a kite, obedient to the strongest man in the world.

Slip observed quietly, "Big doings in Seneca last night."

Casually said, but it hovered between them like the first memorandum in a diplomatic exchange. Shep kept silent; kept his face clear. He could feel Slip's sidelong scrutiny.

Passing Pagano's barber shop, Slip pulled up short and came face to face with him. "Before we got a forest of ears around us, Shep, I wanta get you straight on something."

"Straight on what?"

"Victor. We don't go together. Anyhow, not the

way it looked last night." Now earnestly, "Framing Kahn was something Victor cooked up all by himself. A personal grudge. . . ."

"Why?"

Slip spoke thinking it out. "Hated Kahn, I guess. Hated to see Kahn making profits, while he worked as lobby boy for wages. Saw a chance to boot Kahn to hell and took it." Slip paused. "Anyhow, what Victor did was strictly on his own."

Shep stared at Slip curiously, reading his expression. The command soiree had a touch of absurdity. Slip was anxiously seeking acquittal. Shep said, "What are you trying to sell me?"

"First, me." The voice sought to be believed, "I don't want you to think we're back where we were ten years ago. That I go around knocking heads together at so much a head."

"What do you do—organize Jew-baiters into the Jesocrats!"

Slip frowned. "Just like I thought, Shep. You got it all balled up. You read those ledger pages wrong. It's organizing, all right. But organizing against troublemakers, all kinds. And forget Victor. He doesn't count a nickel's worth. He's a little guy in something that's already too big for him. After last night, we're set to give humpbrain the bums' rush. Before he louses up the whole movement. . . ."

"Movement!" It was a refinement that had to be deprecated, scorned.

"That's what I said. And that's what I want to get

across." Slip's eyes held him. "If you'd read those ledger pages right. . . ."

Silence. Slip was waiting for him to digest what was left unsaid.

Slip continued, "See why it's no good for you to think of me as a mug, an ex-con just an article away from another stretch." Fingers touched, pressed into Shep's arm. "You made good last night because I held Saunders off. I had to poke him one to stop him. I did that because I like you. Because I think I'm wise to why you sometimes pop off like a screwball. . . ."

The fingers bore in. "It was Kahn that brought you down that cellar. You were playing cops and robbers again—and I can understand how you felt. You came for the gun and nothing else." Slip waited for a reply. None came, and he continued, "That's what I told Saunders and a lot of other people. I told them it was that barrel-backed sonofabitch Victor and the gun he swiped that drew you to the cellar. That in the excitement you took some other things by mistake. . . ."

The fingers were signaling him to reply, accept this recapitulation, acquiesce comfortably, safely. Shep stared, and it was McNulty talking to him, searching his face. And before McNulty, Spence. Different faces, same meaning, same faces. Different talk, same meaning, same faces. One speech, one face. . . .

The fingers.

"Saunders is on the prowl with blood in his eye. Looking for you, Shep. I think he's all wet, jumping

to wrong conclusions." Slip paused significantly, then clapped him on the back. "What say we go get that drink now?"

At Ricky's door, Slip inquired easily, "What's with Spence's kid?"

"Damned sweet of you to be so concerned." This was an issue he could lock horns on.

Slip looked embarrassed. "Okay. So I looked bad on that wallet angle. Let the yen for an easy buck make a mug of me." Slip grinned disarmingly, "Takes time for an old dog to learn a new routine, Sheppie."

It was candor more than he could abide. Satisfied with his silence, his failure to thunder a defiance heard round the world, Slip was accepting him overwhelmingly. Shep said, "What's put you into a confessional mood? Why this Christ-awful candor . . .?"

Slip grinned happily. "So we can get along. Go on living in the same town."

They pushed through the door into Ricky's.

3.

Ricky stopped dead still, and Slip threw his head back in laughter. "We got Ricky confused, Shep. Look at the worry wrinkles. He don't know how to figure us." Slip looked significantly at Ricky. "Or who to root for."

Ricky stooped and took to rinsing glasses industriously. Slip's hand described the room. "No wonder

the joint's deserted. Sourpuss scares the cash customers. . . ."

There was a single other patron in the room. Great shoulders and a wild mane cradled in outflung arms—off in a corner booth, snoring.

Slip said, "Two up, Rick."

Ricky mixed two drinks, set one in front of Slip, and left the other a reach away from Shep. There were drops of sweat on his face.

Slip raised his glass and dipped his arm fraternally in Shep's direction. "Here's to peace on earth." His tone was close to hilarity.

Staring straight ahead, Shep worked a face muscle sidewise at Slip in a sickly grin. He brought his drink closer, then let it stand in front of him. Slip waited, then shrugged and gulped his own drink down.

Slip put a bill on the bar. "Break it, Rick. Let's get some life into this creep joint."

Ricky rang up NO SALE, then set coins down in front of Slip. Slip went to the juke box.

The juke box came to life in floating waves of color. A record swung out of the pile-up, spinning. A needle sat down, freeing the music. The first song played.

By the light
Of the sil-very moon

Slip threw himself into the song wildly, racing it to a finish.

The silence was sudden, ear splitting.

Ricky put a cigarette to his lips with a shaking hand. Shep's hand rimmed his untouched whisky glass. He stared hypnotically into the liquid. The room was warm, too close. He fiddled with his vest, then pulled the buttons open as though they were a zipper.

Slip said, "Set 'em up." He looked happy; a step below the peak of a mood.

The second song played.

And with propriety
Society
Would say Mar-ie

Slip ran through a stanza at lung capacity, moving to Shep. Under the music, he said, "So Mary's gone lefty, Sheppie."

It took seconds to penetrate.

The song ended.

Slip said, "Make the drinks double, Rick. Me and Shep are s.o.l. with our women."

The third song rioted, filtering into the fourth. Now there were no sudden deafening silences. The uproar of each bar climax hung in the atmosphere, mixing with the music.

The Andrews sisters took up the screech.

Slip was in a mad vaudeville of chorusing, stomping, hand clapping; hounding Ricky for refills, gibing at Shep, running emotions with his voice amuck.

Slip was very drunk, drunker than with liquor.

Now the juke box was more than a din. It was a fellow lunatic to Slip, and as inexhaustible. Listening, Shep had a wrenching desire to outshout it, stop it, stuff gauze into it, tape its mouth, straitjacket it.

The man who had been snoring off in a corner booth got up, weaved across the room, lingered at the door for a last look of disgusted disapproval, and left.

Another song.

The juke box died in a long, hovering echo, and the door had closed before anyone was aware of his entrance. He stood wildly silent, his clothes bunched around him without line or detail.

Shep turned his head simultaneously with Ricky's warning cough.

Kahn.

Shep stared. Somehow, it was no surprise. Kahn had never before entered Ricky's, but it was no surprise. It was no surprise because it must be that somehow the insistence of his thinking had summoned Kahn. As magnetic fingers had drawn him to Ricky's, Kahn had obeyed a psychic summons projected by his, Shep's, thinking. And now, confronted by Kahn, Shep knew a relief, an end to suspension. This was the test, the reality; the living theater in which imagination could take flesh, voice, enact its drama, speak the lines that had been flogging his mind all that day, and then bow and be gone forever, its life spanned, its role exhausted. Whether the end brought

applause or opprobrium, didn't matter. The flesh performance alone mattered. The performance done; imagination must finally die, freeing its host. Freeing him. . . .

Shep raised his glass for the first time. It was warm and brackish going down. Then, conquering the tumult inside, Shep said, "Hello, Kahn."

Kahn spoke like a man watchful of his expenditure. "I—came to thank you, Ward."

The relief was suddenly gone. Worse, he lacked the exquisite balance that could only come of inner veracity; true, deep, personal suffering. The balance that enabled parry, even permitted one to speak indignantly, crossly. Shep said almost inaudibly, "I did what I could, Kahn."

Kahn said, "And I am grateful. I owe you my exoneration. And my wife, Erika, would be pleased too, if she could know."

The argument was exposed. Here, in the innuendo of this speech, was the argument nakedly revealed. Now he need but to defend, deny, fend the accusation, contradict it. . . .

If he but could. . . . Shep looked at Kahn, and knew he couldn't. He was joined with Kahn, both accusers; himself both accuser and accused. It was the same as before. Shep said helplessly, "Believe me, I did what I could."

Kahn said, "And I thank you."

Shep said drearily, "You blame me." His eyes dropped before Kahn's steady look.

He heard Kahn say, "My life couldn't wait like yours. For us, each moment was filled with disaster, Ward."

It was that degree of his guilt, lifted out of the complex, set aside to stand by itself. He had acquitted Kahn before a sleep-doped chameleon, while a family anguished in waiting prepared to die. He had asked justice to dally, wash the stains of crying and the smell of blood, get a good night's sleep, before setting to work.

Shep said, "I'm sorry, Kahn. Terribly, terribly sorry." He was sorry, all through him, and it was a strangely good feeling. . . .

Ricky exploded into speech. "That bastard handy man of yours. He oughta be strung up!" Kahn closed his eyes tiredly, and Ricky raged, "Kahn, ya gotta hound the no-good Jew-hater into a conviction. He's gotta get the limit!"

Kahn awakened slowly, looking an ounce renewed. His eyes went from Ricky to Slip to Shep. "You do it, you worry about it. The Jew-hater is your problem, your sickness. Hating, hating the Jew, is a drug. Without these pills, you cannot endure the pain of your own disease. It has killed Erika, my children, me. A few deaths these. So many less of us, so fewer pills for you, and so much closer are you to your real pain. So much closer are you to the murder of each other, first."

Slip whistled derisively. Kahn's hands clasped and the tones wrenched from deep within him. "All day

long I thought about it, tried to understand it. I am a Jew, someone to shame, to kill, even though I don't feel like a Jew. Even though I have not been to synagogue, in Jewish prayer, since I was a boy of seven—my Ernie's age. I lived for forty-five years thinking I am someone I'm not, until you come along and write on my theater signs, reminding me that I am not an American and an honorable businessman because I am a Jew, and a Jew can be none of these things. I am a Jew, and the taint is on my gentile wife and my un-Jewish children. That was hardest to understand. Why they had to die because I am a Jew. . . ." He stopped, choking back an emotion.

Shep had an urge to touch Kahn, comfort him. But he just listened, gravely respectful, as Ricky was listening too. Now the emotion in Kahn was sharper, forcing him. "Live closely, as you do, as I find you here at this bar." His eyes circled Shep and Slip. "The respectable journalist who said I was making mountains out of childishness, and the gangster. Live your dark, infected, and tortured lives; live herded in your gentile ghettos, until the pain of your disease wastes you, wastes your cities, ends your world." He laughed oddly. "And it will, as it must! The poison is in the veins of your living. Your blood stream passes it on to your newborn. . . ." He stopped, spent.

Silence.

Ricky was staring at Kahn self-consciously, in a mixed look of fascination and humiliation found in the faces of children in the court of their elders. Look-

ing at Ricky, Shep knew him, realized him utterly. There was something they shared commonly, he and this inarticulate man with the disfigured face who lived so close to instinct. They shared, in fact, many things. They both felt ashamed and impotent; both hungered with an unfulfilled need for manhood, for a richer, more audacious plan for living. Here, standing trial before Kahn, they both felt confused, fearful, misspent. He had sensed this kinship once before in Ricky's outburst at Saunders. He knew it now, completely, by Ricky's open resemblance to himself, the resemblance that had held him in the wall-size blue-glass mirror while Kahn was speaking, the resemblance now in Ricky's face turned toward Kahn.

The silence deepened.

Slip spoke first. He cupped his hands in front of him in a soundless pantomime of applause. "Nice speech. Maybe you've really got something there." He gulped a drink. "But I wouldn't know." It was indifferently said, with an easy strength.

Watching and reacting himself, Shep knew there was a lot more he shared with Ricky. A more positive thing, quivering to be unleashed. He knew this by the look of profound hatred Ricky flashed at Slip. They both hated Slip as they both hated those who laughed for tears, as they both hated those who were too calloused for sentiment, as they both hated those who were too full in the face, too strong for mercy, too big to double over with fatigue and fainting. As Ricky could. As he could. . . .

As Kahn must, if the great tensions surging in him weren't driving him to more furious expenditures. . . .

Shep saw it first in the begging look in Ricky's face. He knew it by Slip's sudden, short, mirthless laugh.

Kahn was holding a gun rigidly in front of him.

Shep regarded Kahn quietly. The gun seemed remote to the scene, intrusive, a rare and anomalous thing unrelated to this sick man with the feverish eyes whose breath was now whistling painfully. It was the eyes that chilled him, settled like a block of ice in his stomach; not the gun. If he was afraid, he was afraid for Kahn.

Slip said in a surprisingly contained voice, "Is it murder or suicide?"

Ricky yelled an agonized "Shut your damned mouth, Slip!"

Slip shifted positions in a single step, making Shep a cover before him. He said, "If it's murder, call your shot. The respectable journalist—or the gangster."

There was a flashing signal in Slip's tone behind him, and Shep twisted, tardily. He was suddenly spinning violently with a sharp pain in his back, and Slip was over Kahn, doubling Kahn's arm downward, forcing the fingers at the wrist, cursing crazily. . . .

They fell, wrestling on the floor.

Shep bounded back, pulling at Slip wildly. Ricky climbed over the bar wielding an empty quart bottle.

It was the sound of a gun fired into a bale of cotton.

Ricky froze into a picture pose, holding a bottle overhead. Shep's fingers fell away with a piece of Slip's jacket. Their eyes showed horror as they watched Slip disengage himself, rise slowly, and straighten up.

Kahn lay heaped, still.

4.

Shep hung dumbly, like a man impaled on barbwire, watching blood splotches seeping through the left side of the waist and slowly widening its area. Momentarily, there was the curious look about Kahn of a man more stunned than dying—dead. Then the stare in the widely opened eyes became fixed.

Ricky closed Kahn's eyes, first the right eye, then the left eye. He removed the gun from Kahn's loose clutch, pocketed it, and got up off his knee. He went to the door, turned the lock, and drew the blind. His expression hardened as he said irrelevantly, "He's dead."

Slip looked momentarily befuddled, stupid. Then, as his awareness returned, the stupid look dissolved and he said, "Let's get him off the floor." He stooped and reached down.

In the last instant, Shep's senses responded. He sprang to life, fuming in an instinctive reaction. "Keep your goddam hands off him, Slip!"

Ricky moved in threateningly. Slip backed out of the encirclement and went to lean against the bar.

He watched Shep and Ricky move Kahn aside, then watched Ricky cover Kahn's face and front with his white bartender's apron.

Slip said uneasily, "You guys are acting as if I plugged the poor bugger."

Shep said, "We better phone the police, Ricky."

Ricky tramped behind the bar, poured two drinks, set one in front of Shep, and swallowed the other. After gulping, Shep said, "You had no business jumping him, Slip. No damned business."

Slip's face twisted. "Whaddaya, crazy! He was talking himself into a couple of killings. Come outa the ether, feller. You oughta thank me for saving your life."

Shep remained silent, his mind turning crazily. Had Kahn come to kill him? Kill what he had contemptuously termed "the respectable journalist?" Had an accidental fatality in struggle spared him? Was there no neutral island. . . .?

Shep said gloomily, "How'd the gun happen to go off?"

Slip said, "The gun didn't *happen* to go off."

Ricky leaned forward bristlingly, and Shep said, "I don't understand. . . ."

"Kahn did it to himself. Turned the gun on himself and pulled the trigger."

Shep glared, now somewhat seething inside. Slip's statement was sure, final, believable, yet he, Shep, for reasons vaguely understood but urgent, wanted to believe in Kahn's death as an accidental outcome of the

struggle with Slip, a mortal wound received in combat. . . .

Shep said strongly, "You could be wrong, Slip!"

"You're lying, Slip!" It was Ricky speaking, his tones vibrating with excitement.

Shep looked raptly into Ricky's face. That curious harmony, the amalgam of moods with Ricky he had felt before, was back. Ricky, too, resented the verdict of suicide.

Slip squinted suspiciously. "What in hell gives with you guys! Why are you trying to pass it off as an accident?" He looked searchingly from Ricky to Shep, and shrugged, "Okay, call it an accident. I don't give a damn."

Ricky said, "It wasn't an accident, Slip." He gazed fixedly at Slip, as if preparing him, then said slowly and deliberately, "It was murder. You killed Kahn."

Slip stared in openmouthed astonishment, and as Shep's eyes reacted to Ricky's, he heard himself shouting excitedly, "Ricky's right. Damned right. You killed Kahn." There was a strange, wild, exulting in his breast. . . .

Slip recovered his speech. "If you monkeys hope to pin a bum rap on me, better forget it fast." There was a trace of anxiety in the venom. "You'll never peddle it, the way it stacks. The Jew came in with a gun, bear that in mind. His own gun killed him."

Shep's mood wavered. Slip's precise summation was a note of reality in an improbable figurative game. He now looked at Ricky doubtfully.

Ricky said, "You grabbed his gun, then shot him. That's how Kahn died, Slip." His eyes held Shep relentlessly. "And that's how Shep saw it too."

Slip reached across the bar in a sudden savage thrusting motion. Ricky backed away a step, and held a gun out. "Get back, or I'll kill you. Kill you with the same gun you used on Kahn."

Slip withdrew, cursing. "Rick, you're crazy. You'll never put it over."

Ricky said, "There are two of us to put it over. Two of us that saw it the way it happened."

"Shep's not that crazy," Slip said with his eyes shaming Shep, demanding that he keep to the truth.

Shep hesitated, wavering uncertainly. Ricky said, "We either do it this way, Shep, or Slip wins every time."

It was waiting for his endorsement, or repudiation. The bartender was imploring him to agree; the gangster was demanding that he cling to an ethic. Could he say yes, and side with Ricky in a lawlessness against which he would counsel all men? Could he agree to an anarchy that required him not merely to condone, but to collaborate, make a lie actual to evidence that tries and convicts in the judgments of man, in the courts of his law? Shep looked at Slip, saw his eyes that now were showing fear as they watched him, waiting for him to speak. He saw the betraying tensions in Slip, the nervous working of his hands, and observing, it occurred as a revelation that the power had passed to him. For this moment, in this instant

of decision, the power was his. He was bigger than Slip's great hands.

He looked over to Kahn. What would Kahn's position be in this moral deadlock? If the answer was yes, would it melt Kahn toward the journalist he had held in contempt while alive? Or would he just laugh at the fratricidal futility of the infected living. . . .

Shep said, "You grabbed the gun, stood off and killed Kahn. In cold blood. Deliberately."

It was said, done. He stirred to the wild elation showing in Ricky's face. He felt it radiate to him, envelop him, pound through his own blood stream. Now he was shouting, "It's two against one, Slip. Two against a paroled murderer. You'll never maneuver out of this, never squirm free!" Wonderful, this escape from sobriety, from truth. . . .

Ricky waved the gun, raving, "They'll throw away the key, you blackhearted sonofabitch!"

Slip screamed, "Perjure, Shep, and you'll burn in Hell!"

Perjure! Christ, at the top of my lungs until I'm blue in the face. Shep's face worked malignantly, "Stack the Bibles up like you did those *World Almanacs,* and I'll swear on every one of them, Slip!" He laughed in wild triumph. It was wonderful, this escape into frenzy. Frenzy had annihilated fear. With the enemy clearly in sight, he was winning his fellow man's applause. Ricky was applauding him. . . .

He was sightless, reveling, happier than he ever remembered being before in his life, when the hands

caught him, paralyzing his resistance. He was facing Ricky, in front of Slip, shielding Slip from Ricky's gun.

Shep stumbled backward helplessly, his body lumpenly responsive to the arm coiled around his neck. Slip unbolted the door with his free hand, opened it, then flung Shep from him.

The door slammed closed.

Shep stood still for minutes. Soon he said hoarsely, "He's gone, escaped."

Ricky was surprisingly complacent. "He'll skip town, and we make good on our bluff. And the longer he keeps running, the better our story looks, and the worse it looks for him. I couldn't have wished it better." A deep sigh, and Ricky added contentedly, "And with Slip the hell out of Seneca, I can start sleeping nights."

Shep stared uncomprehendingly, then said, "Suppose he doesn't run? Suppose he calls our bluff?"

Ricky shook his head. "Wrong, Shep. I'll bet my saloon against a nickel you're wrong. He'll run the way he ran outa here, and keep running. And after awhile, he'll jump at his own shadow. His nerve's gone. Those ten years in the clink softened him up more than he even knows himself. I got onto how mush soft he'd gone that day he split my mouth and busted my uppers, then wound up soaping you, explaining things. . . ."

Ricky pointed to his ear with the missing lobe.

"The old Slip'd never let up until he had everybody seeing everything his way, or else. The old Slip'd never soft-soap you, or explain anything." He shook his head firmly, "Nope. He was back trading on something he no longer had. Why do you think he was swigging all that booze, and all the time laughing like a maniac—if he wasn't just jabbing himself in the arm, trying to sell himself that pipe dream about a comeback. . .?"

Ricky laughed happily, "Christ, he was scared shitless when we pulled our bluff. All he could see was prison gates." He set two glasses down, and filled them up. "I was hoping for something like this. I lay awake the last couple of nights wondering how to frame something on Slip. I knew he had to be stopped before he got started. Before the clink was too long ago for him to remember, before he dug in so deep only dynamite could blast him out of Seneca. . . ."

Shep nodded mechanically, lost deep in himself. True, Slip had been frightened. And true, all these things in Ricky's exposition, yet he now knew that he stood alone, detached from Rickey. The mystic fusion of identities with this saloonkeeper hungering for respectability, was over, as if a spell had snapped. Ricky's acceptance of this climax, more, his contentment with it, were Ricky's limits. As a climax, it lacked soul, meaning. It lacked virtue, beyond mere opportunity. It had been just a moment, a drop in an eternity, an ecstasy and hysteria for its own sake, a symbolic hour. Life and hate had been breathed into

a symbol, a villain had been hanged in effigy. But the symbol was false, and the wrong villain had been hanged.

Thinking, Shep understood it better. The symbol of the gangster, weak behind the façade of brutality, was not the meaning he must wrest from his pain. Nor was Slip the true effigy he must assault. Slip was a straw man behind whom other men—men hardier and more complex—stood. Burning the straw men could not refine the earth. The rootstock remained . . . .

No. He couldn't touch glasses with Ricky and toast a victory, as the saloonkeeper was now asking him to do. The abortion of truth might produce justice against Slip, but that was only a skirmish, a too-loud, noisy affray obscuring subtler, more intrinsic struggles. It was an ancient journalistic trick: Subdue the truly significant and important with the sensational; bury the drama of life by front-paging a sex murder. Slip was the overtone, the sensationalized. The drama, however, remained. . . .

Shep pushed his drink away untasted. It was not the answer to his needs. Nor was Ricky his prophet. The moment had dazzled, but it was gone. As orgies must, it had died at the peak of its frenzy. The angry dead could not be appeased with a blood sacrifice. Nor could the guilty buy respite with penitence alone . . . . Unlike Ricky, he couldn't go back to sleeping nights.

Ricky said, "I better phone the police now." He

looked sharply at Shep. "Get your story straight in your mind." He reached for the telephone and Shep went to the door. "Shep, you gotta stick around until the cops get here."

He couldn't stay. There was thinking through to do. New thoughts were pushing into his mind. Thoughts that would waste if he stayed here with Ricky, if he let Ricky's opportunity hold him and distract him. . . .

He opened the door and said restlessly, "It's no good, Ricky. No damned good."

Chapter Sixteen

The click of billiard balls mixed with the sharp sounds of voices in the narrow hall, as Shep continued a story above the SENECA ACADEMY. BILLIARDS. PING-PONG. Crude lettering on a peeling wall identified the second landing as the CENTRAL LABOR COUNCIL OF SENECA.

Shep stopped just inside the threshold and scanned the scene hesitantly. The shellacked hardwood floors and the benches bordering the sides of the walls suggested a dance hall. There were neat piles of folding chairs off to the side. A hubbub, mainly somber toned with an occasional pitched polemical phrase, rose from men conversing in compact little groups. It appeared that a meeting had just been concluded, and these men were the straggling remnants.

Dallying, Shep was torn between the urge to descend the stairs and melt into the night, and the urge to see Mary. The urge to see Mary had irresistibly prodded him into coming here. But to what purpose, he asked himself wretchedly. Why confront her now, with his fiber unraveled. . .? Now, when he was more surely the cartoon of himself she had charged him with being in leaving him. This compulsion to seek her out was the measure of his futility. What did he expect from her?

A man detached himself from a knot of talkers, came toward the exit, and stopped to look at Shep. He said sardonically, out loud, "Whaddaya know, fellows, we got the working press with us."

A chorus of voices formed into hooting sounds. Lem Morrissey said, "Strike meeting's over, Ward. But seeing you tore yourself away from a double Scotch to report on us radicals, I'll be obliging and let you in on what happened." He leaned forward confidentially, "We voted strike, the way the Kremlin instructed us to do. It's all set, except the date. The date's a top secret you better get your spies working to find out." A laugh compounded the affront; the mirth continuing through the halls, down the stairs.

Nonchalance and the careless manner was impossible in this sudden zoo of scowling faces and taunts. Shep stood his ground uneasily, staring into the broken groups, as he bore with the rioting insults. It was hard to believe that so much conscious dislike for him existed. So much dislike, so many people. He had an

impulse to count noses, diminish and defeat his unpopularity by repeating the number thirty-seven. His unpopularity was thirty-seven, not this herd of angry faces. . . .

A heavy-set man with carefully combed eyebrows came up to him. He spoke with an Irish thickness to his tongue. "Don't mind the boys, Ward. They're a little excited tonight."

Shep said in careful tones, "What's got 'em in the animal state, Mac? And why am I the butt?"

Mac pursed his lips. "The boys sweated through a lot of big decisions tonight. Consequently, they're edgy." He looked shrewdly at Shep. "And I don't have to tell you why they wouldn't give you a vote in a popularity contest, do I, Ward?"

There was a moment of silence.

Mac said finally, "There'll be a news release mailed to the *Leader*. Mary's getting it out now."

Shep stared moodily without replying. His wife was preparing a memo to the press. In the morning, a news paragraph would be brought in by Dudu for his review and initialing. As always, it would be a skeletonized gist, bare in its fifty-odd words. Formal, concise, brief; barren of the counterpoint that had flamed between the victors and losers in this meeting hall, barren of the spilling emotions, the wrath of the Lem Morrisseys. Fifty words. Humanity tortured into a bone-dry bulletin. Not one of the words memorializing the aftermath of jeers heralding his appearance in the union hall. . . .

He looked at the broken groups curiously. They were back to talking among themselves, lost in great anxieties that showed in their faces, sounded in their tones. He looked into Mac's square, intelligent face, saw the worried lines. He looked at the groups again, his mind stirring. They had taunted him, and it was easy to be stung into unreasoning hatred of them, into embittered retreat. Yet that frenzy in their hooting and insults—so familiar. Not more than an hour ago in Ricky's saloon. It was the spilling frenzy that came of long-bottled emotions, gnawing fears, deep frustrations. Their great dislike for him was as great and of a kind with the dislike he and Ricky felt for Slip. It was the same dislike Kahn had shown for him that night at the Waco box office, and later—just before he died. It was the same and of the same consuming degree Parks had revealed in a classroom of Seneca College. The jeering chorus had been an echo of Mary's leave-taking speech. It was the same dislike he felt for the memory of Spence Andrews. . . .

It was the dislike, the boiling hatred, men must feel for their betrayers and oppressors, for the wicked and corrupt, for greedy men and indifferent men, for men who sought victory at no matter what cost. These men in this hall then, like he, were desperate for understanding, for freedom from fear. And now, looking at them, he believed he understood them. And he knew, too, that if he remembered only the jeers and failed to clutch this understanding, if he resisted and resented them now, if he sloughed off their truer mean-

ing, he would continue in all directions at once, while his fiber unraveled to the end.

The urge to see Mary was now overwhelming. Shep said, "I'd like to see Mary, Mac. For a minute."

Mac's eyebrows lifted slightly, and he motioned Shep to follow him. They went down the long room, past the conversing groups. Shep passed unnoticed. The men had forgotten his presence; were totally absorbed among themselves.

They proceeded through a door, and into a boxlike room housing a desk, a typewriter, a mimeograph machine, a filing cabinet, and Mary. She was typing busily, looking as he had never known her, with her hair cascaded on top. She looked up, and stopped her work.

There were depths in her dark brown eyes that couldn't be looked into. She looked businesslike, efficient as he had never realized her, a stranger-woman. She nodded to him, and asked Mac, "What was all the noise about?"

Mac shrugged and said equivocally, "Mainly the boys needing to let off steam."

Shep said, "Mac's being gallant, Mary. The—reception was in my honor exclusively. The boys were expressing their deepest appreciation of me."

Mary looked at him attentively, drawn by his candor. Shep watched an expression in her face slowly warming into life. It was an old look he suddenly remembered missing; a photo-glimpse into a carefree day when her feminism was all there was to Mary.

It was a look that lessened his loneliness.

Mary said, "Poor Shep."

It imbued him to talk some more, talk in the same vein, win the exquisite companionship of that old look for a while longer. He grimaced, "Poor me, and how! Everybody's howling at my heels, trying to make a meal of me." He threw his chest out. "Statue of the most hated man in Seneca, U.S.A." He stopped, flushing. There was an involuntary throb in his voice. He wished Mac would leave. Christ, in a minute he might start bawling like a baby.

Mary said, "Are you the most hated man in Seneca, Shep?"

Shep looked at her closely, assuring himself. The look was lingering. "Hated, you bet!" Now he felt his tongue rattling in his mouth, in his enormous mouth. He was a barrel with its contents gushing from a dozen gaping holes. "The gangs hate me. The chief of police hates me. An hour ago someone wanted to shoot me. And you heard your union a minute ago." He stopped, biting his tongue. Good Christ, was this why he had to see Mary!

Mary's brow drew. "Who wanted to kill you, Shep?"

His eyes haunted her face. The blessed look was still there! It was concern for him. There was something left of the twelve years. Now, by Christ, why didn't Mac show enough sensitivity to leave. The tears were that close. . . .

But Mac looked preposterously interested for a but-

tinsky outsider. His face wore the expression of a man trying to piece sense out of what he was overhearing.

Mary repeated her question. Shep fumbled for words of reply. Answer her, and keep that look on her face forever. Answer her, but answer in a way busybody Mac wouldn't understand. In a way only affinity could divine. . . .

His thoughts gushed faster than his tongue could go. "Kahn wanted to kill me. I beat the hell out of Victor but McNulty couldn't get a phone call through and I went home to sleep." It echoed back beautifully confused, far beyond Mac's comprehension. It was a secret dialect only old married folk could share. He continued, "I seized the gun, then Slip grabbed for it. By that time it was too late for Kahn's family. He wasn't thanking me a bit for getting the goods on the Jesocrats." He pointed a finger to make a point. "One thing though, I chased Slip out of Seneca even though I disagree with Ricky."

Mary, his wife, understood. The look widened until it was her whole face. More, the look sparkled, jeweled in tears. She was plainly proud of him.

But she was sorry for him, too. That was plainer.

But it was the greatest reward for blundering a blunderer could hope for. It was the most satisfying nothing that could ever befall man. This was the way husbands and wives should part, finally and forever. A parting look, jeweled in tears; a warmth that fills incomprehensible areas of cold space. They were part-

ing now, for the first time. He could live alone forever, after this.

Mac's face was churning in perplexity. Shep smiled contentedly. He had plotted his communication perfectly. Mac, the busybody, didn't understand as did Mary, now finally his ex-wife.

Suddenly Mac said, "What about your getting the goods on the Jesocrats, Shep?"

There was irritating disbelief and challenge in Mac's tones. Shep made a face. Mac was a man cursed with a disciplined mind; a scoffer who resisted belief before proofs; a man who must be convinced through an oversimplified constructional process, like the blankety graphs and charts papering the walls of the boxlike office. Shep took the ledger pages out of an inside pocket and handed them to Mac.

Mac read them carefully, whistled, then handed them to Mary. He said, "Ward, you've got dynamite there."

Mary said breathlessly, "What are you going to do with them, Shep!"

Shep stalled his reply. It was a question he hadn't answered for himself. He had known what he was going to do with them—until a few hours ago. Or had he. . . .? Finally he spoke, averting his gaze, "McNulty wants them. Said he wants to investigate them. . . ."

Mac snorted, "Wants to kill them, you mean. He'd get his backside burned if he didn't."

It irked, hearing it from Mac. It was a wisdom he had long ago arrived at by himself. Shep said, speak-

ing to Mary, "I figured that. Figured McNulty had orders to recover them. So I stalled giving them up. . . ."

Did the look now hover uncertainly?

Mary said quietly, "There's just one thing to do with those ledger pages, Shep."

Mac added, "Or you had no reason to go after them in the first place."

Shep shifted feet restlessly. They were wedging him into a narrow corridor where whimsicalities alone would not do for logic. In order to endure, he must be as resolute in his meanings as Mac. He said tentatively, "Those pages could blow Seneca wide open." McNulty's words came to his lips involuntarily. "They might provoke civil war."

Mac sniffed, "There'll be civil war anyhow."

This was a poser. Heads it is, tails it is. Shep started to speak, but Mac interrupted passionately, "The crazy way things are going, we can't miss having what practically adds up to civil war. Use these papers right, and you can strike a blow against reaction. A big blow!" He gripped Shep's arm. "You're a hard cookie to figure, Shep. Bucking the Jesocrats, defying McNulty even for a second—" The grip tightened, and the intense black eyes shone at him.

Was Mac accepting him, bidding him welcome, brother?

"Shep, can I trust you with something? Will you swear to Mary you'll keep mum, until we're ready to make it public?"

Shep nodded vaguely. Mac said, "The boys didn't

just vote strike tonight. They voted general strike, *if*. It all hangs on an 'if.' *If* they can't negotiate their problems at Bunte's. And Shep, they're starting out thinking they won't get to negotiate peaceably and decently. They're thinking that management is set either to dictate, or refuse to take its seat at the conference table. That management is determined on last-ditch union busting." Worried lines deepened in Mac's face. "Extremists had a field day at tonight's meeting. Lem Morrissey made a speech. We couldn't get him to sit down for forty minutes. And when he was through, he got a big hand. For the first time in as long as I can remember, Morrissey was applauded to the rafters. . . ."

Mac resumed solemnly. "See what I mean by civil war? Management plays tough. They can afford to hold out, play a pat hand—they think. Meanwhile the strikers' war chest peters out, the boys get hungry and desperate, and the hotheads and extremists go to work on them. Suddenly everything goes haywire. Suddenly nobody believes in anything, nobody obeys the rules. It's now a knock 'em down and drag 'em out fight, and nobody can even spell the word negotiations any more. Nobody remembers that the basic issues are a dime more an hour, seniority on the job, paid vacations, sick leave. Picket lines get bigger, tougher, and pretty soon everybody gets panicky. Labor begins to look like a red army about to march on the seat of government. Instead of an American problem calling for team play, it's now a class war. . . ."

Mac rustled the ledger pages, then brandished them like a club. "That's when these swindlebundists have a picnic. Overnight, they're out of the cellar and located in the biggest hall in town. Money pours in like Niagara Falls, certain people figuring anything is insurance against bolshevism." Mac wiped his brow, then, "I don't want to lay it on, Ward, so I'll just say this and then shut up. The press has a certain responsibility to all the people. And where it muffs it, or ducks it, it is defaulting its job and playing right smack into the hands of America's enemies. That's why you got the works when you showed your face among the organized working people of Seneca. That's why you wouldn't get one vote from any of them in a popularity contest."

Shep pondered the speech soberly. It didn't seem pat, all together, a system of answers that provided a lever a man could seize surely. A lever a confused man could seize. . . .

Shep said, "It sounds mixed up. Full of elements of chance. Isn't there a simple line you go along with, believe in?"

The answer came promptly, loudly. "Hell, no! We just do the best we can, and hope to hell we're on the right track. It's as balled up as life itself. All we know, I mean the majority of us, is that we try to do what seems right. Moderate, and hope for the same treatment—moderation." Mac's face set grimly. "If we flop, if we can't ask and get all we're entitled to, if we can't knife honestly to the heart of an issue before the

worms eat into it—capital and labor co-operatively—" Mac kissed the air, "it's the pay-off. So long, America. We'll all end up with exactly what we fought a war to prevent. And that's exactly why we don't dare fail. Our kind of democracy must be made to work, or it's curtains for the rest of time."

Shep looked to Mary; watched her head nod in agreement with Mac. Mary said, "It's a fight, Shep." Her lip trembled, "A critical one."

Shep stared at her, struck by her emotion. It wasn't as arrogant, as contentiously smart alecky, as he had once thought. It was far more humble than he could ever have believed.

He said, "Afraid?"

She nodded simply, "Desperately."

Shep looked to Mac. "And you, Mac. Are you afraid?"

"Right down to my boots. And twice that scared every time I look at my kids and try to figure out what kind of a tomorrow they're due to get."

Shep's eyes brooded into Mac's face. Fear, by his own confession. Like him, this man of the disciplined mind was afraid and confused. Like him, but with this difference: Here was effort, a battlefield with weapons. Mac would go down fighting, as he had wished for Kahn.

As now he wished for himself.

Chapter Seventeen

1.

The lights were burning late in Shep's office. Shep was hunched over some papers, writing in pencil. He completed a line, checked a noun in his open thesaurus, then ran his pencil through the line, rejecting it. Soon he completed a page, scanned it mutteringly, then crumpled it and threw it into the wastebasket. He reached for a fresh sheet, and then sat contemplating it. This had been a night-long pattern, with a single page out of every five surviving the wastebasket.

He pulled a stack of opened literature closer and began word reading avidly, like a man exploring a new vocabulary. He needed new words for this night. His mind was word bound; the same muscles had

been flexed the same way too long. The old words would not suffice, if he was to forge a new weapon . . . .

He plunged into his renewed research into prose models. A line from the middle section of a paragraph caught him; opened a mood. He jotted it down, assayed it critically, then reworked it, paraphrasing. Again, later, a whole passage from another book arrested him. He juggled it in his mind, then tinkered with it in penciled notes. It defied renovation, rewrite. He finally set it down verbatim, in quotes. The passage was a touchstone. His pencil flew as he turned the leaves of books, seeking cues, and soon a written page filled. He reviewed it, and his mood expired. The result was a set of attitudes; strange postulations to which he was a stranger. The habitual mimicry, that stamp that marks a text as the product of one writer and no other, wasn't there.

He read it again, slowly, memorizing it, seeking an organic identification with the written page. Finally he pushed it aside disgustedly. As a piece of journalism, it was a fraud. It wasn't research. It was copycat, frantic plagiarism, pastepot and shears editorial writing by a hopeless neophyte. As words, they were trenchant, compelling, but they weren't his words. Nor were they veritably his thoughts. A whole new school of thinking had developed during his stationary years. A library of belief and counterpoint had been resolved, a culture born and matured. Men of his age and contemporary level had been at grips with

the materials of life all the years he had crept deeper into the vacuum.

He brought the papers back to him, now accepting them. He couldn't contribute. He could merely quote the better qualified. To contribute on professional levels, it was back to the classroom, humbly. Perhaps there was yet time to learn. . . .

Dudu looked in. His voice grumbled, "Linotyper and pressman want to know can they get started—"

Shep blew smoke out of his mouth, and stared at Dudu out of bloodshot eyes. "They can, Dudu. Everything but the front page. I'll need another hour on that."

Dudu wrinkled his forehead, but said nothing.

Shep said, "Those photostats ready?"

"Uh huh."

"Bring them to me. And be sure to bring the originals."

Dudu left, and soon returned. He dropped a packet held together with a clip on Shep's desk.

Dudu said uneasily, "Need me any more tonight?" He read his wrist watch, then kept his arm ostentatiously in view. It was 11:55.

Shep narrowed his eyes hostilely. "Very tired, Dudu?"

Dudu averted his gaze. "I'm beat."

It was lame, a stall, a lie, and Shep knew it. Dudu was afraid of this night, wanted to get away so that he could disown it, claim ignorance of it in the aftermath.

Dudu yawned prodigiously. "Can I make a break?"

A retort formed furiously in his mind. Shep suppressed it with an effort. Finally he said in deadly calm, "If you got to, you got to. Just hang around long enough to let Mrs. Andrews in. She ought to be along any minute."

Dudu started to go. Shep called after him, "Tell the men to double the run."

Dudu said quibblingly, "That's a lot of paper."

Some of the irritation broke through Shep's control. He shouted, "Dammit, tell the men to double the run."

2.

Merna hadn't bothered to dress. Her clothing looked hastily put on, indifferently chosen. She looked unbelievably thin, ill. Looking at her, Shep was touched, moved protectively. He took her hand and drew her closer to his desk.

"Thanks for coming, Merna. Sorry to get you out of bed."

"I wasn't asleep." Her eyes were red-rimmed slits. Her hand shook putting a cigarette to her lips, inclining toward Shep's lighter. She forced a smile. "Why the midnight summons, Shep?"

"A meeting on policy, Merna. Things to be discussed." The speech was a macabre reminder of Spence to his ears—Spence's sudden meetings at unorthodox hours. . . .

She closed her eyes, then dilated them. Her voice whispered, "Do what you wish, Shep."

He motioned to the material on the top of his desk.

"That is what I wish, Merna. What I need to do." He took a deep breath—"If you'll allow it."

She said, "I allow it," with her eyes elsewhere.

"Better look it over, Merna. There'll be repercussions—"

She dropped wearily on his desk chair. Soon she began to read. A long time passed and Shep thought she had fallen asleep. Finally he prompted, "Well, Merna?"

She said vaguely, "You're sure of all this?"

"I have the proofs."

Her eyes were curious. "What did you mean—you need to do this?"

It was a hard question to reply to logically. In this, to the extent he had gone, he was yet acting instinctively, emotionally, like the night he had stolen into Victor's cellar. Later, perhaps, when it was over, accomplished, he might assay it, taking a living logic from it, a logic that could be expressed. Later, when the lines of struggle formed and he reviewed them, then perhaps he would know and choose his place. Just now, it was a thing to do, an affirmative deed, a self-rebuke in headlines. Just now, at most, it was a pause in flight, an end to flight, or the beginnings of new flight tomorrow. Tomorrow when the *Leader* had been distributed widely as never before, he would

know that one thing finally and irrevocably—could he stand, or must he run. . . .?

She was waiting for his answer. She seemed glad to be engrossed in something, desperate for something away from the worn paths of her own thinking. He said, "I need to mainly because of a sense of outrage. And because I'm lonely, confused, angry at myself." He laughed hollowly. "My reasons don't quite measure up to that heroic splurge you've read."

She said quietly, her eyes contemplating him, "Those are strong reasons, Shep. And good ones."

He shook his head. "Not good enough. They're so far too personal. I'm doing it because I need to, because it means more to me. I'm not doing it for anybody, really. I'm doing it for me—"

She didn't seem to be understanding him. Shep continued—eager to talk about it. "Merna, it's an act motivated by a sense of guilt. A guilt I've got to expel so that I can keep living with myself." He grimaced, "Let's just say I want to confess today, so that I can be comfortable tomorrow. I want someone to clap me on the back and assure me that I didn't murder anybody after all."

She huddled as from a blow. Shep said contritely, "I'm sorry, Merna. My tongue's running away." He paused until the moment eased. "Anyhow, for me the question remains—Am I just retouching an old boy scout snapshot of myself for a day—then the mad rush for an easy chair to park my bottom on—?" He added, "If they'll let me."

She picked a sheet up, looked at it absently, then set it down again. "And if they don't let you, Shep. What then?"

Slowly, "I don't know. Run maybe."

"You won't, Shep." She motioned to the material. "Not the way you've begun. Not with this defiance—"

Shep looked at her intently, then said, "Defiance at your expense, Merna. All I can lose is my job. Maybe take a few cuffs and blows—" He stopped, swallowing hard. He couldn't accept her blind agreement—an agreement motivated by gratitude. . . . "You stand to lose the *Leader.*"

There was something quivering in her face. Shep bit into his underlip. Unutterably stupid—worrying a woman close to public loss of her whole existence, and her life too. Still, the *Leader* was a bounty, a collateral parcel of the world's goods, and there was Biff. After Merna, there was Biff. And Lana. . . .

Shep said, "There will be advertising cancellations, ill will, boycott. That's how it goes generally these times. Maybe even something rougher. I don't know exactly what the opposition can be, or do." Shep shrugged, "Anyhow, there'll be hell to pay when the *Leader* hits the street—"

She thought for a long time, then asked, "What would he—Spence—have done? Would he have printed it?"

"Hell, no." He stopped suddenly, looking perplexed. "Didn't you read that planned front page?"

"I did, some. Not carefully." She added hurriedly,

"But I understood what it means to do." She stared at him diviningly. "I missed something?"

Shep nodded. "The list of contributors. One simple reason why Spence could never print those ledger pages."

She turned to the desk, reading closely. Soon she turned back to him. She said, "Spence was—like that?"

"It was the habit of victory, Merna."

A long silence that drew them close, closer. Shep said quietly, "There's more of the same, Merna. For the next day, and the next—if we go to press, if I go on. More on Spence too. Damaging stuff, dirt, me twisting the knife pretty violently. We'll make news, but when I'm done, you won't have a paper."

She said, "Do it, Shep."

"You're sure—you've decided?"

"It's been decided for me. By our lives, by the way Spence died." There was the ghost of a smile. "You stand to lose too, Shep. The paper is more of your future than mine. I was at my lawyer's this evening. You're trustee for life, for as long as you want to be—"

Shep touched her arm. She drew away. "Do it, Shep, this time, and the next day, and the next. And while you confess your guilt, print mine."

Now she permitted his touch. Shep said gently, "You've thought it out?"

She shook her head slowly. "I've—forgotten how to think." The ghost of a smile played. "Perhaps with these obituaries you give Spencer Andrews, some people won't condemn me—so much."

Shep stared at her, then said huskily, "Some people won't."

3.

It was late morning when Shep left the *Leader* offices. Crossing the wooden platform that fronted the building, he saw Rusty in his accustomed place. Rusty's chair was tilted against the building and he held a newspaper open to the front page.

Rusty looked from the page, wearing an expression of bewilderment as he peered up into Shep's face. He opened his mouth to speak, then closed it and shook his head from side to side continuously as Shep moved past him wordlessly and unfamiliarly and entered the street.

Walking more rapidly than his energy allowed, his eyes felt blind and deep in his skull from the sleepless night in his office, from the early morning and morning hours of staring into the wall, staring out the window. He forced his vision. The streets seemed deeper, more dimensional. They were great spaces that reduced his size to nothing. Spaces that only imagination could fill. . . .

Entering North Broadway, a change took hold of his throat. The spaces were suddenly contracted, and he seemed to grow into something of conspicuously giant size—all balloon with a massive face like a vast gargoyle on a moving float with thousands watching. The whole town had poured into small confined

squares, overflowing into the gutters. Something had emptied the trim little dwellings, the flats, the infinite cubbyholes of the town around, and that something had magnetized them to the town's main street. The whole town was solemnly standing up to be counted as he toured past them.

He turned from the density into deserted Raleigh Street, conscious of two clear images in the great blur of people in his wake. McNulty against the window of Arthur's shoeshine parlor, and Bill Saunders, aloof from the crowd, waiting just at the turn into Raleigh Street.

He walked slowly, setting his feet down hard, then setting them down softly, letting the feet behind him fill the pause in the rhythm.

The monotone of a thousand buzzing voices had echoed over and again in his head and drained out of his ears, when he was finally and totally disposed to the new sounds moving with him.

Click, click; his own feet. Then click, click; Bill Saunders' feet. Then mmmmmmm, muted like a far-away droning noise, yet with an effect as close upon him as hands touching him. It was behind him, but he saw it and knew it as if his eyes were a mirror held before him. An automobile inching in his wake, threatening the space between them. Another look into his secret mirror and he knew it was Slip, none but Slip, and that Ricky had been wrong in his prediction that Slip would run from Seneca, that Ricky had been wrong, wrong. . . .

He quickened his stride, moving in sudden purposed tangents, hurried but poised, like a man seeking the shortest path to completion of a pressing errand. The sounds became disorganized, as he soon was; lost, louder, now behind him, now to the right, to the left, louder. He was leader of a squad playing follow the master determinedly. . . .

In sight of the red and white cottage he owned and occupied, he had an idiotic urge to pull up short, turn, and gasp his pledge to be right out again, back in the game, again in the leadership, after a shave and a wash and an aspirin.

Inside, he bolted the door behind him and fell against it until the room stopped swimming in his vision. The room stopped, and the familiar things each found their groove. Slowly the rushing tides in his chest receded as the familiar, comforting things enveloped him; as something about the room, like a smudge erased from a precious object, stirred him. The furnishings, pictures, oddments, impersonal yesterday, were suddenly again personal.

He saw the nutria coat first. It was carelessly over a chair, dipping to the floor, as a thousand times before. Then he saw Mary, like an awakening. She was smiling and holding a pot of coffee that sent steaming vapors ceilingward. She was smiling and again it was an old look he remembered missing through the long years. He watched it gratefully, with a complete nostalgia, even though now watching it he knew it

meant something more than the carefree time when her feminism was all there was to Mary. Looking at her, unable to return her smile outwardly, he knew that Mary was home, and it was home, and that the endless quarrel had been her defeat as his, and now it was his victory and hers, and that the smile yet lingering in his view was the first minutes of a union begun long ago but to be consummated today—and tomorrow.

Mary spoke, "Coffee's nice and hot, Shep."

Shep went into the bathroom, filled the basin, and went through a number of flurried motions. Mary held the cup of coffee out to him while he plugged in his Schick and trimmed the growth on his face. He took the cup, sipped, and returned it to her. He washed and rewashed his hands as though this one detail in his ablutions was of surpassing importance.

Mary followed him to the clothes closet, then to the bedroom bureau, watching him silently as he changed his shirt. He took the coffee cup from her hand, sipping it precariously, as she worked his Paisley tie into a bow. Then he drained the cup to the bottom, handed it to her, went to the window and looked out.

He had unbolted the door when Mary's hand closed on his arm. "Wait, Shep. Mac phoned he was coming over right away. He'll have some people with him."

He watched Mary pull the bolt back, grateful for the interference, eager for her wisdom, eager to fill himself with it. Better to wait. Better than valor, not

to be foolhardy. He had done much, up to the measure of one man, one untrained man bewildered by strange, new weapons. Better to wait; better, or this passing moment could be all he would ever know of Mary's home-coming.

Click, click.

There were sounds in his ears, sharp, close to the bolted door, as close as hands touching him. Sounds that sent his senses into a panic and sent his feet into fierce motion.

The pull was away from the sounds, into the bosom of the room, into the shelter of Mary, away, as he unbolted the door, paused holding it open wide, then ran into the sounds like a man resisting the pull of gravity.

FOR NEWSPAPER MORGUE -- BIOGRAPHIC DATA ON -- JOHN ROEBURT, AUTHOR

JOHN ROEBURT
101 West 42d Street
New York City, 18, N.Y.

"VITAL STATISTICS"

Age, 36 Born, New York City
Married, to Agda Roeburt, Fashion Designer
Offspring, daughters Jill and Joan
Residence, New York City, and New Canaan, Conn.

Occupation: Writer: Novels, Radio, Screen, Magazines.

Credits:

Books: "Jigger Moran" (1944)
"There Are Dead Men In Manhattan" (1946)
"Seneca, U.S.A." (June, 1947)
"Death Is A Long Time" (Fall, 1947)

Radio: Adventures of the Falcon
Bulldog Drummond
Inner Sanctum
It's Murder (National Safety Council)
Wide Horizons (co-scripted Eddie Dowling's show)
Appointment With Life etc.

Screen: Dark Memory (original story and screenplay, for Eastern Sound Studios on contract, to be produced August, 1947, Melvin Douglas starring)

Magazines: Features, mainly racket exposes. Material has appeared in Esquire, American Mercury, Scope, Pageant, Digest and Review, In Short, Frauds, Everybody's Digest, and elsewhere.

Occupational Background: Teacher, Journalism and Short Story
OWI Editor
Propganda Analyst, Radio Research, Columbia U.
Cabdriver
Antique Dealer
Ghost Columnist
Reporter
Screenwriter

Memberships: Authors League
Radio Writers Guild
Mystery Writers of America

(photo attached)