



THE EDGE OF RUNNING WATER

By WILLIAM SLOANE
Author of "TO WALK THE NIGHT"

"William Sloane has the gift of producing those cold chills and miscellaneous reactions known as thrills. . . . What is more, *The Edge of Running Water* is a most unusual item on other grounds, such as manner and construction, a necessity for those who crave a touch of the unknown, a bit of wrestling with the metaphysical and footprints pointing to foul play. Even better than *To Walk the Night*!"

— N. Y. Herald Tribune

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DODD, MEAD & COMPANY

New York

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For W. C. S. and J. M. S.

*The characters, places, incidents and situations
in this book are imaginary and have no relation
to any person, place or actual happening.*

1 THE MAN for whom this story is told may or may not be alive. If he is, I do not know his name, where he lives, or anything at all about him, except that there is something which it is vital for me to tell him. It is a strange, clumsy method of communication, this expedient of writing an entire book without even the certainty that it will come into his hands, and yet I can see no other way of warning him. There is, I think, a good chance that it will succeed. Someday, perhaps in a bookstore, perhaps in a library, he may come on a copy of this narrative. Or someone he knows will innocently mention it in his hearing, and he will be impelled to seek the book out and read it. People somehow manage to learn of the things that are supremely important to their lives or their work. What troubles me is not so much the possibility that he will never come on this message as that it may already be too late.

A great deal of what happened to Julian Blair, Mrs Walters, Anne, and the rest of us there in the house on Setauket Point is purely personal. I suspect that the man whose attention I must catch will be impatient with all that; he will wonder why I have wasted so much of his time with irrelevancies of thought and feeling. Julian himself would disapprove of my presenting the facts in the form of a narrative. And yet, that is the only way I can see to bring home the actual meaning of his project, the significance it will hold for living men and women, and the human effect it must inevitably have.

It would be comfortable to believe that there is no danger. That Julian's research was an isolated, aberrant thing that could not conceivably be repeated. But that is not the history of discovery. It is a curious fact that men who know nothing of each other tend to work in the same direction at the same time. Darwin and Wallace, Mendel and de Vries. Blair and . . . ? It is that unknown name that I have got somehow to reach.

If this man for whom I am writing exists, if he has already begun to unravel out the same thread that Julian Blair followed—I think to the very end—the chances are that no one else will know what he is doing. He will go quietly about his business, taking nobody into his confidence

until his apparatus is complete. At least that is the way Julian did it. Then, unless what I have to say here deters him, he will test the thing he has created. The moment he does so he will learn something that even I do not know. He will find out where Julian Blair is now.

That question must never be answered. A year ago it would have seemed to me ridiculous to assume that there are some facts it is better not to know, and even today I do not believe in the bliss of ignorance or the folly of knowledge. But this one thing is best left untouched. It rips the fabric of human existence from throat to hem and leaves us naked to a wind as cold as the space between the stars.

The fringe of that cold touched me once. I know what I am talking about.

2 THE PORTER woke me at six that morning. My mind came back from wherever it goes during sleep and reluctantly took up the business of apprehending the outside world. It began to listen to the roaring clamor of wheels on rails and observe through a gray-green Pullman twilight the steel curve of the car roof, close over my head. But beyond being aware of these things I had no part in them. As always when I wake, this was that interval of physical paralysis when bodily motion is out of the question, and this time it was evidently going to be harder than usual to emerge from it. The muscles of my legs and back were stiff from offsetting the irregular lurching drive of the train's northward flight. Consciousness and body lay together in my berth, not yet articulated with each other and accepting their particular discomforts passively. Then they flowed together in one sharp synthesis and I remembered who and where I was.

There is something stupefying about the noise and motion of a running train; I felt drugged, reluctant to face the prospect of a new day, and more tired than when I had finally managed to fall asleep in the small hours of the night before. But the porter's hand was thumping insistently against the green curtain:

"Barsham Harbor in twenty minutes, boss. Better be gettin' up."

"All right. Thanks." My whisper must have suggested how thankful I was because he chuckled as he moved away down the aisle.

I began to wrestle my way into my clothes. The process of getting dressed in an upper berth is degrading, especially for a man of my height.

It took me so long that by the time I got to the washroom there was no time to shave. The place smelled stalely of last night's cigars and the water was lukewarm. I cursed myself, the hour, the railroad company, and everything else I could think of, including the necessity for hurry. The whole trip was probably unnecessary anyway. Even before the last strap on my bag was tugged and buckled the brakes were beginning to grind heavily under the floor.

The sleep I hadn't had was heavy behind my eyes and there was a flat taste in my mouth. I stumbled down the Pullman steps and onto the rickety boards of the station platform at Barsham Harbor completely unprepared for the impact of a Maine morning in September. Its sharp brightness struck me like a physical blow and suddenly I was wide-awake.

The sun must have been up for a good hour before I landed on that platform, but a night coldness was still in the air. I shivered as I drew in my first breaths of it. Behind me in the sleeping car *Western Lake* the atmosphere was part of the New York I had left seven hours ago. It had been warm, heavy with the exhalations of people and machinery. This stuff I was taking into my lungs now was different—thin, cold, and reporting the open sweep of fields, hills, and the river. I felt bewildered and out of place. This entry into an unfamiliar air and landscape was too abrupt.

The porter took my tip with a sleepy mumble of acknowledgment and slung his metal stepping stool back into the car. When he heaved himself up after it, there was a sudden wrench in my mind as if I were losing a friend. He was my last contact with the familiar things I had abandoned to come up to this Godforsaken place and I didn't want him to leave me behind. For one instant I had an impulse to toss my bag up into the vestibule after him, swing aboard, and go on with the train. It would be returning to New York that night, I thought, and I wanted to be on it when it did. The prompting not to be left was so strong that I stooped and actually caught hold of the suitcase handle.

Given two more seconds of grace, I might really have got back aboard. I don't know. It was a strong impulse, and as I think over the steps by which I became involved in the mystery and the disappearance of Julian Blair it is easy to believe that there was something prophetic about it. There's no great difficulty about being wise after the event. Anyhow, as I lifted the bag the train hissed, clanked, and began to move. The opportunity was gone.

Not that I knew it was an opportunity. At the moment I was surprised at myself. A psychologist, particularly one with enough confidence in

his science to spend his life teaching its rudiments to the youth and flower of a reputable university, had no business giving in to such infantile whimsies as that half effort of mine to return to the train. So I reminded myself, but instead of turning away at once I stood there with my bag in my hand, watching the steel walls of the Pullmans moving past my eyes in a crescendo of speed and irrevocability. One part of my mind, the professional part, informed me that I was acting like a fool. But there was a less articulate something that reproached me for not being on it. "Why?" I demanded impatiently, but there was no answer. Not then, at any rate.

With a dwindling roar the train shrank down the track and I turned to confront Barsham Harbor and whatever the day was to produce. The most immediate fact was that Julian had not come to the station to meet me. Of course I knew him too well to suppose it would even occur to him to come, but when I saw he wasn't on hand I damned him under my breath all the same. Anne was not there either, and I discovered that I was disappointed about that. Five years ago she would have insisted on welcoming me, would, as a matter of fact, have driven the car down herself and let the policemen who didn't approve of fifteen-year-old girls driving lump it. No doubt she had changed. She was twenty now, of course, and even at twenty most women have developed a reluctance to getting up with the sun. For that matter, I admitted to myself, so have most men.

None of which went far toward deciding what I was supposed to do next. Hire a car, presumably, and go on out to the house, wherever it was. On that point Julian's letter, to my city mind, had not seemed very helpful. I hauled it out of my pocket and looked at it again to make sure.

Barsham Harbor, Me.
September second.

Dear Richard:

I have been extremely busy since we saw each other last. My work has now reached the point where I am in need of your friendly advice and counsel. The problem is one on which I should be willing to consult only such an old friend as yourself. If you possibly can, please come up for a few days before the academic year begins. I beg you not to fail me, if only for the sake of auld lang syne. Anne is with me, of course, and anxious to see "Uncle Dick" again. Come

as soon as you can, the sooner the better. I think I can promise you that this is profoundly important.

Sincerely,
JULIAN BLAIR

Characteristically, there was a postscript added with a blunt pencil at the end:

P. S. We are living in a house they call the Talcott Place. I had much rather you regarded this address and letter as confidential.

Looking it over, I had to smile. That phrase "since we saw each other last" covered a matter of well over four years. But time never meant much to Julian. It had come as a shock, even to me, to realize just how long it had been since we had forgathered, and when his letter reached me I had, in a burst of self-reproach, canceled a number of engagements and caught the first train. Apparently my wire asking him to meet me at the station had failed to penetrate his usual absent-minded absorption.

Two nondescript sedans were parked along the far edge of the platform, and a faded sticker on the windshield of the one on the left said "Taxi". The driver was sitting behind his wheel staring at the station and paying no attention to me in spite of the fact that I was the only passenger on the train who had been fool enough to get off at Barsham Harbor. The man's indifference puzzled me. Without being insulting, there was something contemptuous about it. I didn't want to lug my suitcase across the platform and ask him if he would be so kind as to drive me away in his car, and yet that was just about what I should have to do if I didn't want to spend the morning standing right where I was. In New York, the cab drivers are actually eager to have you ride in their hacks, but not this man.

Before I approached him, I took a minute to survey the town, this place to which Julian Blair had seen fit to come for some obscure reason of his own. My heart sank as I stared toward it. There was something malapropos about the idea of Julian's living in this village. It didn't even look as if the local power plant would be able to supply enough electricity for his ordinary laboratory requirements, assuming that he had built a laboratory. He certainly wouldn't find one ready-made in this fly-in-ambler of a colonial town. The thought of a great electrophysicist in a place that looked as if it must still be using whale-oil lamps was incongruous. An uneasiness crept into my mind. Quaint, even beautiful as this town was, it was no place for Julian Blair unless . . . I disliked

putting the thought clearly, even to myself, but what it amounted to was, unless he wanted to be secret, unless what he was doing was something as unbalanced and pitiful as the obsession that had led to his leaving the university almost five years ago.

Barsham Harbor is built on the rising land along the right bank of the Kennebec. Its main street runs diagonally away from the station, where I was standing, toward the water, and it is no level city avenue but a dirt-surfaced town road that dips and rises to the modeling of the land itself. The huge old trees on each side of the way were solid fountains of green that morning, jetting superbly up against a thin blue sky. Between their boles I could see the white fronts of the houses, square, solid, three stories high. Most of them seemed to have porticoed fronts that expressed inescapably what the people who originally built these houses had thought of themselves. Above the trees one sudden, narrow spire leaped up into the morning sun and glittered like hammered metal.

Beyond the trees and the houses I saw that the road dipped again, and the distant buildings there looked gray and weathered. Stores, probably. In the notch between the last of them was a fleck of blue water, like a tile in a mosaic, and past that again a distant row of hills on the other side of the valley, checkered minutely with farms and wood lots. The whole air of the landscape was glowing with the early sun and the reflected light from the broad surface of the Kennebec.

Yes, impossible as it would be for me to return to it, there is no denying the fact that Barsham Harbor is beautiful. A hundred years and more ago, when it was alive, when it had some meaning and significance of its own, it must have been comparable to any town of its size in the world. Those were the days when Kennebec men were building and sailing the fast ships that had gone down this river before me and away to the four corners of the world. In the sweltering ports of Bombay, Madras, and Calcutta they had sold their cargoes and even their ballast—great chunks of ice sawed in blocks from the frozen river itself and worth a fortune in the heat of the tropics. They had come home again with gold clinking in their strongboxes and their holds full of rum, silks, spices, tea—all the wealth of Ormus and of Ind for Yankee merchants in Boston, Portland, and Bath. Their captains and owners had built those pillared houses in the days when Barsham Harbor was closer to India than to Illinois.

On that bright morning their town was as clear and unchanging as the profile on a Roman cameo. Dead for a century though it had been, its aspect was still beautiful and proud. In all the future decades and centuries through which the town might manage to preserve its shell,

I could not imagine that anything of importance would ever happen here again. As I looked at those white houses they seemed as truly mausoleums as if they had stood in a cemetery. The past was buried in them, not to stir again until the day of resurrection. Barsham Harbor was through with life and with the only phase of time which matters to living beings—the duration of change.

I was wrong about that. One thing more was to happen in Barsham Harbor, a thing both violent and terrible, which its citizens have surely not understood to this day. It is incredible that with even an inkling of the truth behind the events to which they were all witnesses, those people could go on living in their village; it is hard enough even for me to sleep without dreaming of it. How can they look down their own streets and across the river to the point where Julian's house once stood without feeling the hairs lift on the backs of their necks?

I wonder that they can walk the streets of their town and not know that every shadow is haunted. There must be something that is more than night darkness in their lanes after the sun has set. What do they think when they turn their eyes toward Setauket Point, black against the water? Even in the calmest weather the villagers along the lower Mississippi look now and again toward the levee that rises above their roofs. Where the river in flood has once broken through there can be no absolute security and peace again.

Hysterical words. Perhaps I don't mean them too literally. After all, no further danger exists for those townsmen. Lightning does not strike twice in the same place, and if the thing I mean continues to exist at all it does so only in the brain of some man who, like Julian Blair, sets out to travel one certain, dreadful roadway of the mind. It is the people around that man who are in danger without knowing it, not the folk of Barsham Harbor. They are as safe as any of the rest of us. Cut as they are from the remnants of a greater cloth than they can weave for themselves, they are unlikely to produce a man or woman who will duplicate Julian's experiment. Even while he was there among them they did not know what he was about, really. They simply resented him with the blindly obstinate dislike of the countryman for the "foreigner". Now that he is never coming back, they will have forgotten him in a year or two more.

3 FOR THE second time I stooped to the handle of my suitcase. However unlikely Barsham Harbor might look, it was Julian's address and my destination. I was impatient to finish my journey. Also, there was a hollow under my belt where no breakfast rested as yet and I wanted to fill that. I crossed the platform and halted beside the sedan.

"Good morning," I said. No reply; the driver went on looking into space. "Is this a taxicab?"

He turned his head deliberately, then, and looked me over from head to foot without speaking. There was no expression on his narrow face or around the pale flatness of his eyes. When his inspection was completed he nodded once and said, "Ayuh."

The man was disconcerting and, when I spoke again, it annoyed me to hear that my tone sounded apologetic. "I was expecting a friend to meet me, but he doesn't seem to have showed up. I suppose I better go out to his place. It's Mr Blair. He lives in the old Talcott house."

Something happened behind the flat eyes that were watching me, but I couldn't tell what it was. After a minute he looked away and said indifferently, "Reckon I know where it is." He thrust back a thin, brown arm and opened the tonneau door beside me. I slung in my bag and started to follow it. "It'll be \$2," he said.

"That's all right. Do you want me to pay you now?"

"Please yerself."

I took a bill out of my pocket at once. Something in his manner made me want to put him in my debt. "Here," I told him, "and if you're not sure about the place, we can ask in town."

He was putting the bill into a battered wallet with meticulous care and thoroughness. "I said I knew where it was." After buttoning his wallet into a hip pocket he added, "Don't have much occasion to go out that way lately."

"I suppose not," I said. "To tell you the truth I didn't expect to find anyone who would know the way so easily. Mr Blair's letter wasn't very clear on directions. I wasn't sure anybody would know where he lived."

He smiled temporarily, and his teeth were the yellow-brown of a tobacco chewer's. Later I understood that smile. It was for my city man's assumption that anyone could live in Barsham Harbor for more than a few days without being known to every living inhabitant. When he was through being amused, the same indifference, tinged with something stronger this time, returned to his manner. "Ever'body round here knows the Talcott place," he remarked briefly and swung the car down the station drive.

I settled back in my seat with a grunt. "Oh," I remembered suddenly, "I haven't had any breakfast yet. Is there a place in town where I can get something?"

"Ee-lite'll be open, I reckon," he said and cut the car into the street. We went unhurriedly down along its rolling length with the high white houses on either side of us. Most of their windows were still shuttered but the chimneys were smoking. Except for that there was scarcely an indication of life. Our car was the only moving object in sight; everything else seemed transfixed by the brightness of the morning.

The driver cleared his throat. "That'll be extra," he observed.

I reassured him. "All right, but I won't keep you waiting long. How much of a trip out there is it, anyway?" For all I knew the house might be right in the town. If it was, then his charge of two dollars was robbery. When he said, "'Bout six miles," I felt better.

The four business blocks, when we reached them, were a seedy contrast to the stately places we had been passing. Most of the stores were cheaply constructed frame buildings in need of paint, and their show windows were not quite clean. The merchandise behind them looked as if it had been there a long time. More than anything else, this part of the town was without any character of its own. It might as well have been a piece of Gary, Indiana, or Gallup, New Mexico. The Elite Lunch turned out to be an epitome of the meager standardization of the rest. Its nickel coffee urn was not tarnished, but neither was it bright. The stools along the counter were upholstered in a sleazy, imitation red leather, and there was a perceptible film of grease on the surface of the white table where I ate my breakfast.

That meal was far from elite. The coffee was hot enough, but thin and bitter, the egg hinted at cold storage, and the toast was abominable. But I downed all three and the emptiness under my belt disappeared. Some of the uncomfortableness with which the day had begun faded from my mind, but not all of it. The more I saw of the town the less I could understand Julian's being here. It had gone to seed too obviously. The street beyond my window was rutted and lined on its opposite side with haggard ice houses and frowsy garages. There was litter around them all. The clean sweep of the river, which I could glimpse between them, was a pleasant contrast.

It was inconceivable that there was a decent laboratory within a hundred miles of this place. It takes apparatus and a complex set of facilities to work in the field of electrophysics today, and usually a staff of research assistants. Surely Julian didn't have money enough to build and equip a complete place of his own? Even if he had, why locate it here? What

had his letter meant by "advice"? The only advice that occurred to me then was to tell him to get out of this place and back into the world where he belonged.

There was just one answer. He was still living in that tragic dream, born of despair and grief, that had taken possession of him the day of Helen's funeral. He had come here to work on it in secret because there was enough of the old Julian left, somewhere, to realize what his colleagues would think of him if they got wind of it. He had not been able to reconcile himself to the fact of her death and now, after years of inevitably wasted time and effort, he wanted help of some sort from me. How could I help him? What I suspected him of needing was a psychiatrist, not a psychologist.

None of us at the university had heard from Julian for so long that if we had not forgotten him, we had pretty well stopped talking about him. The offer of his old chair in the physics department was still open, of course, and Arthur Wallace and I had occasionally talked over ways and means of persuading him to come back to it, until one day we realized that we no longer even knew where he was. That had been Julian's fault, too, for he had never answered our letters. For a time I had felt that I ought to keep in touch with him merely in order to be sure that Anne was all right. But after her note telling me that she was going abroad to study, even that motive disappeared. The memory of Julian had retreated into the background of my mind.

In saying that I seldom thought of him I don't mean to imply that I had forgotten him. There were too many ties between us for that. The earliest went back to the years when I had been struggling to earn my way through college, tending lawns, firing furnaces, even washing dishes for the education that I was so determined to get. Julian had somehow picked me from his entire sophomore physics course for special attention and, when he found out my circumstances, he made me give up all my outside jobs and work for him as a laboratory assistant. He did it without sentiment, merely as though he were arranging the apparatus for an experiment, but I think he saw something in me that pleased him. Our relationship was a curious one—utterly impersonal and yet intensely close by the very nature of the work together. He had a driving scientific passion for discovery and the apprehension of truth that stimulated me. I learned from him then that the universe was larger than man. I came, in time, to be fond of him, as well as grateful.

There was that past between us, and another. About it I shall have more to say later, but the fact that we had both loved the same woman kept us together even when I had gone into a different field of work and

begun to teach. I thought of Helen often enough, and that meant thinking of Julian, too, at least indirectly. He and I had shared work, love, and grief in a curious pattern. I found myself half afraid to see him; the things that we had in common were strong and deep, and I did not know what they would do to me if they were to rise up again after the truce of years.

Well, there was no use speculating or opening up old unhappinesses. I paid for my breakfast and went out to the car. As I came through the door I saw that my driver was still sitting behind the wheel. Beside the car, leaning in the open window, was a thin, sharp-faced man in blue jeans and a white shirt open at the neck. My driver and this fellow were two of a kind, I thought, a kind that I did not understand and felt ill at ease about, without knowing exactly why. When I came out of the Elite Lunch neither of them was talking, but I had a suspicion that they had been, a moment before, and about me.

Why it should be so disquieting to think that strangers have been discussing you I don't exactly know, but it is. I crossed the sidewalk swiftly and got into the back of the car again. The stranger, never once even glancing at me, bent his body just enough to let me get in without my having actually to shoulder him out of the way.

"All set," I informed the driver.

The thin man nodded to him and moved off down the street without a word. His gait was loose and bent-kneed. The way a man places his feet reveals whether he is accustomed to pavements or the ridges and furrows of ploughed fields.

At the end of the street we swung left and began to go north along a tree-lined road that followed the level of the river and sometimes ran along the very edge of the water. Within five minutes the houses of the town were behind us. In another five the farms at our left had given way to marshy pasture land. All at once we left this river road, angled abruptly right, and rattled across an unrailed wooden bridge spanning a sluggish creek. The Kennebec appeared to have swung to the east of us and I realized that for the last mile or two we had been skirting a bay in the lee of a promontory. Our new road bent constantly further to the right until I saw that we were running almost due south.

"This here's the Point," my driver remarked.

"I see," I replied, wondering why he had suddenly decided to volunteer something for nothing.

"Talcott place's down at the end."

It was a lonely spot, I thought, about as far out of the world as you

could get without going into a wilderness. "I imagined Mr Blair would be closer to town, somehow," I observed.

"Tain't more'n a mile by water. You can see it right across from you at the end of River Street."

"What is the place," I asked, "a farm?"

"Used to be." His tone was uninflected, but I got the impression that he thought it ought to be one still.

"Mr Blair isn't a farmer, exactly."

"No?" He drove on for some time without adding to his question. The car, I noticed, was going slower and, even though the road was rough, I had an idea he wanted an opportunity to talk further. "Folks around here don't exactly know what he is, anyhow," he said finally.

"He's an electrophysicist," I remarked, hoping he wouldn't know what that term meant.

"Do tell." His tone gave me no indication whether he did or did not know what an electrophysicist was. "Reckon you're right at that. Last summer, when he come here, he had the house wired fer e-lectricity. Edison people had to run poles in the better part of two miles."

"Is that so?" I responded, but the information made me feel lighter at heart. Perhaps Julian was really working at something important, then. Anyhow, the fact that he had brought current in to this remote house of his was a hopeful sign.

The driver apparently thought the whole thing was a piece of folly. "Ayuh," he went on, and there was satisfaction in his voice, "he did, and it cost him suthin' I reckon."

"It must have."

There was another pause while we jolted along a road that became progressively worse. Then he cleared his throat again. "Who's she? His wife?"

"No," I said. "I expect you mean his sister-in-law." Some impulse made me add, "His wife's dead."

"Hunh." The sound might have meant anything. Then he declared, "I thought that was the girl."

"Yes," I said. "She must be about twenty by this time."

He shook his head. "I don't mean her. The other one."

"What other one?"

"That woman." His tone implied that he had said all he intended to.

"I didn't know there was anyone else living with him." For a time I said nothing, and then my curiosity got the better of me. "What does she look like?"

"She ain't so much," he declared dispassionately. "Mebbe she's another of them electros."

I started to grin at that, but something stopped me. My eye caught the rearview mirror immediately over the driver's head. In it I could see his pale eyes, watching me intently; the glass was set at the exact angle to reveal everything in the back seat. The sight of those two cold eyes turned back upon me, appraising my least gesture, suddenly gave me pause. What business of his was it how I looked or what went on in this back seat? Did he retail the things he saw in that mirror to the whole town? Probably. This was not the city, I reminded myself.

In the next breath it occurred to me that this man was more than a simple countryman. He had a quality that made me realize suddenly how much of my life had been passed in universities, where people deal with each other according to special standards and codes, and where they conduct their lives with reference to reason and logic. Those eyes were not logical or reasonable. There was intelligence behind them—plenty of it, perhaps—but not the kind of intelligence to which I was accustomed. They had, too, their own kind of curiosity, a private brand which searched for the weakness in you and found satisfaction in it.

When my glance caught his eyes in the mirror I stared steadily into them until he dropped them again to the road. I had a feeling that the man was smiling faintly. At least, the skin at the outer corners of his eyelids had been creased into wrinkles that suggested amusement. Evidently he was not abashed at being detected in his scrutiny of myself.

Our road was running almost due south still, and somewhat to the right of the middle of the promontory between the bay and the river. Toward the bay side the land was low, but on our left it pitched up toward the river so that the actual surface of the water on that side was out of sight. The fields we passed were mostly overgrown with harsh clumps of goldenrod, patches of scrub cedar, and the spindling stems of young tamaracks.

There was something forlorn about the Point even in the brilliance of early morning. The occasional patches of potatoes, squash, or pumpkins only emphasized the idleness of most of the fields. These scrub trees and bushes were the outposts of the wilderness, and I had the sharp feeling that winter and the wilderness were the true season and mode of this land, that man was already in retreat before them. The road, too, was viciously potholed. Whenever a wheel dropped into one of those pits that pocked its surface the whole frame of the car was wrenched.

The only other thing worth remarking was a row of raw, yellow poles running along beside us with a single strand of wire looping between

them. The power line to Julian's house, I thought. The cable looked thick.

We passed at least one farm shortly before we came to the end of that road. Perhaps there were more. Some things about the geography of Setauket Point will never leave my mind, but there are others about which I am not so clear. But however many places there were, Julian's was the last, clear at the end of the Point. I was so busy looking out at the unfamiliar landscape that we had jolted to a halt before I saw the place, dead ahead of us.

"Here y'are," the driver said. And then, "Fifty cents additional. Fer the wait."

I paid him because it was simpler than to haggle, though I suspected he was secretly despising me for not protesting. He took the money with a yellow grin and put it in his pocket.

"Oh, say," he added. "I got a telegram fer Blair's. Come in yestiddy evenin', but my cousin, he just couldn't git round to deliverin' it. Asked me to take it out this mornin'." He handed me the envelope, watching me intently as I took it.

"So," I said. "I know what this is. It's my wire telling them I was coming. No wonder you were at the station. And maybe, no wonder the wire didn't get delivered."

"Asa's been porely this week. He couldn't make it. You didn't git stuck at the station now, did you?" His tone was amused.

I put the envelope in my pocket. "I believe I'll report this," I said, and dragged my suitcase out of the back of the car.

"Folks round here are satisfied with Asa," he observed, still grinning. "I reckon he won't lose his job, exactly, mister."

I said nothing for a minute, though there were plenty of words on the lips of my mind. Then I gave him a steady smile. "That'll be all. You can go back now and tell them how I looked and what I said and how you and Asa worked it so you got a call clear out here."

He met my smile with one of his own; it was plain that he was enjoying this situation. "We ain't so int'rested as all that in city people," he observed. "I wouldn't mind a particle if I never seen another."

"That mirror of yours tells a different story."

The shot told. He pulled the car into gear. "Just got shook out of true on these roads," he said, but he did not look at me. "Wal, if you need a cab any time, the number's 517-J. Marcys have a 'phone down the road a piece. First place on yer right." He cut the wheel hard over, released the clutch so that the car spurted suddenly away from me, and was gone down the road.

The house which I found myself confronting was old and of a sort with which I was not familiar. I was surprised to see how large and high it stood. What appeared to be the main portion was a square, two-story clapboarded building facing south. From the north wall a single-story ell extended perhaps thirty feet and linked the house proper to a barn considerably larger even than the residence part. The whole was made out of wood which the years had turned to a silver gray. The color would have delighted the eye of an artist; it was almost like that of old silver. The house was—had been—handsome, but to me it looked shabby and forsaken. Smoke was coming out of the chimney, but otherwise it looked abandoned; I could not even see curtains behind any of the windows.

In the corner of the ell, where it joined the house, was a door, but that was shut. I wondered whether I should go in there. It looked so unlike a front door that finally I carried my bag around to the south side. There was a fanlighted door there, in the middle of the wall, but it too was shut, and nothing ran to it except a beaten track through the tall weeds which skirted the baseboards of the house. Impatient with my own indecision, I finally walked along this path, my bag bumping my leg at every step, and went up three moldering wooden steps. There was no doorbell. I knocked once or twice. No answer, but when I put my hand on the knob it turned stiffly, and I walked in.

4 INSIDE THE door I found myself in a rather large hall and confronting a staircase which ran steeply up through a low ceiling. The light in the hall was dim, but I could see that the woodwork had once been very fine, the balusters beautifully turned, and the ceiling molding ornamented with dentils that looked hand cut. I put my bag down and said, "Hello, Julian," into the shadows, aware as I spoke that my voice was almost too low to hear. There was no answer to it, anyhow, and rather than call again I tried a door to my left. This room was even dimmer than the hall; the shutters were closed and at first glance I thought the place was furnished. Then I realized that here was nothing but a sort of lumber room, stocked with a broken chair, heaps of excelsior, several packing cases with their sides or tops wrenched open, and a miscellaneous litter of trash.

This, I thought with some surprise, must be one of the best rooms in

the house, and yet here it was full of old junk that belonged in the barn. Julian had never cared much for the niceties of housekeeping, and I would not have been surprised by mere untidiness, but it was somehow disturbing to find a room that must have been intended as a sitting room or parlor full of nothing but discarded boxes and packing materials. I went back to the hall with a feeling of discomfort in my mind.

The door to the right of the stairs opened on a room equally dim, but I saw at once that it must be where Julian lived when he was not working. In the mood that had begun to come over me, it was actually pleasant to discover that the house was really inhabited; there had been an uncomfortable emptiness in the hall. I looked round with interest. It was a long room but wide enough to seem well-proportioned except for the ceiling, which was only some seven feet high, or perhaps a few inches more. There were three windows in the wall facing me, and two more in the wall on my right, but all of them were shuttered. Suddenly I found myself oppressed by the dimnesses of this house, the way it was closed in upon itself, and I did something which under more conventional circumstances I should not have dreamed of. I went over to the nearest window, opened it, and threw back the shutters.

Light streamed in with the intensity of a magnesium flare. The river was acting like a great reflecting mirror; it hurled the morning sun through the breach I had made in the house's defenses. The room leaped into view with a sudden sharpness that was cruel. The shabby furniture, the faded pattern of the wallpaper, the threadbare patches in the dull rug were exposed with bitter emphasis.

My first impression was that the place was dowdy beyond belief, and ill-cared-for. Not that I have the tender sensibilities of an interior decorator, but I don't like living in disorder, and this room was untidy in an unpleasant way. The fireplace at the far end was empty but it was littered with odds and ends of refuse. There was a vase of flowers on the mantel, still fresh and glowing with color, but they served only to underline the drab dulness of walls, chairs, and woodwork. Three or four books were lying on the floor in front of the sofa, one of them open and face down on the faded rug. Magazines and periodicals were heaped in unstable piles on the table. What few pieces of furniture there were looked as if they had been stationed around the room without regard to proportion or comfort. I noticed that the lamp on a table between two of the windows was greasy with kerosene and had a sooted chimney. Julian's wiring had not, it seemed, been for the sake of interior lighting.

Then I saw beneath the superficial appearances of the room. Whoever had built the place—presumably the Talcotts—had known how to take

advantage of a lordly site. As I went from window to window, throwing open the shutters, the whole sweep of the river came before my eyes. This was the tip of the promontory and the room seemed built almost over the water itself. The two south windows looked downstream and revealed the great sweep of the Kennebec's course for miles. It almost seemed that in the clear sharpness of this morning I ought to make out the blue shimmer of the distant sea. The three windows along the eastern wall looked across water also—the width of the Kennebec itself. The river came down out of the northwest in a broad arc and leaned against the peninsula before it swung off toward Merrymeeting Bay and the ocean. Looking out of those windows, I half wondered why the pressure of that running water did not sweep the house away, but I was to learn that the eastern edge of Setauket Point was a natural dike of rock that was a match even for the river, and which lifted the house above spring floods and the winter ice.

Decidedly it was a seaman's location. I felt as though I were in the charthouse of a vessel, and if the first Talcott had not been a sea captain I missed my guess. The very loneliness of the spot where he had chosen to put up his mansion must have reminded him of the space and desert of the sea. I stood in that faded, splendid room, looking out across water and half hypnotized by the dazzle of the sun, and thought that this was no less surprising, in its way, than the idea of Julian's coming to Barsham Harbor. That he should have settled in such a house was beyond me then. In a way, it still is. And yet, there was a certain rightness about it, as I was to learn.

"Well?"

The voice came from behind me. It was sharply interrogatory, hard, but with something musical in it all the same. I whirled round, feeling like a child detected in naughtiness.

A woman was standing in the doorway, looking at me without moving. Seeing the bulk of her I wondered how she had managed to come within ten feet of me without making enough sound to attract my attention. She must have weighed all of a hundred and eighty pounds, and her big, loose-coupled body did not look as if it were easy to control.

I knew at once that this must be the woman about whom the taxi driver had been talking when he asked who "she" was. It was easy to see why she puzzled him and the rest of Barsham Harbor. My first flashing impression was that she looked as if she had once been a queen, and then I recognized that there was something less imperious, perhaps more assertive about her. The two impressions sound mutually exclusive and yet, there was truth in both of them.

For a moment I stared at her, too surprised to speak. Her obvious force and quality were so startlingly offset by the body that housed them. Apparently she had run to flesh as she grew older—there were heavy slabs of it on her arms, which were bare and soft but not mottled, as the skin of older women who put on weight so often is. Under the lusterless black of her dress her thighs looked tremendous, but her ankles were as thin as a girl's. Her feet looked almost tiny; I wondered how they managed to carry her bulk. She had the bosom of a retired opera diva. But for all her grossness, she carried herself with strength and purpose; there was no degeneration in that body of hers.

There was too much powder and rouge on her face. The accented red of her lips, the artificial shadowing under her eyes, the white dusting on nose and chin might not have been so conspicuous in the evening, but in the harsh brightness of this Maine morning streaming through the windows she looked raddled. Like her body, her chin and cheeks had gone to flesh, but under it was the architecture of what must once have been striking beauty, with wide, sharply planed cheekbones and a broad forehead. Her eyes were what remained of that magnificence, dark, so soft that I could see no bottom to them, and full of splendor. More than anything else about her they accounted for the effect of something regal in her appearance. She was looking at me out of them with the unconscious authority of a woman who does not have to ask for anything, but merely demands or takes it.

"Well?" she inquired again. The way she said that one word made me eager to explain myself.

"I beg your pardon," I began inanely. "I was just opening the shutters to get a little light in here."

"I can see what you were doing."

"My name is Richard Sayles." There was no sign that it meant anything to her, so I added, "Julian's friend."

"I have never heard of you."

Something about the way she said that made me think twice and decide not to retort in kind. Instead I bowed and pulled Julian's letter out of my pocket. "He wrote asking me to come at once," I said firmly.

She held out her hand for the letter. "He said nothing to me."

I did not hand her the letter. "Really," I told her, "this seems like an unfortunate way for us to meet. I have taken a liberty in walking in on you this way, but I have known Julian a long time." She said nothing, so I underlined it for her. "I'm afraid I don't even know who you are."

"Mrs. Walters." Her tone was impatient.

I bowed again.

"See here," she began, "Julian doesn't want to see anyone. I think you must be mistaken."

"Not at all," I replied, putting the letter back in my pocket. "If you'll just tell him I'm here, I think he will confirm what I've said."

Evidently she recognized an impasse when she came to one. "He's asleep. He was working late last night. I don't want to wake him."

"Please don't," I begged her. "There's no hurry and I'm painfully early, I know."

She shook her head. "I suppose that's your suitcase in the hall?"

"Yes."

"You can't stay, Mr Sayles. We don't entertain visitors here. I'm sorry that you've had your trip for nothing."

I lifted my eyebrows. "Mrs Walters, I assure you I am not a peddler or a salesman. I'm an old friend of Julian's and he has asked me to come up here as quickly as I could. I gave up a number of things in New York to get here. I'm afraid I must insist upon seeing him. After that, if he wants me to go back, I shall be only too glad to leave."

She shrugged. "You are a foolish young man. You will interrupt his work."

"In the letter he sent me he speaks of that. He apparently wants to ask my advice about something connected with it."

The effect of this retort of mine was surprising. The assurance faded from her stare and she put one hand against the door jamb as if to steady herself. "Your advice?" she asked incredulously. "What sort of advice?"

"I don't know."

"But how can you advise him?" She managed to put an unpleasant emphasis on the first pronoun.

"He didn't tell me that."

"Did he tell you what he was doing?" Her tone was only superficially casual; underneath its surface was a wariness, as if my answer to her question was the crux of something in her mind.

"No."

She drew a long breath and said, "If you are an old friend of Julian's you probably knew him when he was at the university?" When I nodded she went on, "That was when his wife died?"

"Yes," I admitted.

"You are much younger than Julian," she remarked. "Maybe you were one of his pupils?"

"Well, yes, once," I admitted. "I've been on the faculty for almost ten years."

"Oh," she said. Then, as if she were still puzzled by something, she inquired, "Did you know Helen well?"

Echoes went reverberating back and back in my mind, and I felt a natural resentment at the question. "Yes, quite well." That would do for her, even if it didn't begin to express the truth. This cross-questioning began to puzzle me. What made her so assured of her right to talk to a friend of Julian's in this fashion? The calm, impersonal way she kept looking at me while she asked me things that were none of her business was of a piece with her words. "Can I supply you with any further information?" I asked her.

She went on looking at me for a few seconds and then held out her hand. "I'm afraid I have seemed very rude, Professor Sayles. Please excuse it."

Her fingers were soft and unexpectedly cold, but there was strength in them. "Of course," I said. "After all, I did rather barge in and make myself at home."

She glanced over the room with a faint smile. "Not much of a home at that," she observed. "I'm afraid we've been too busy to pay much attention to the house. Julian and I are indifferent to such things."

I put out a cautious feeler. "We're all glad he's working again, Mrs Walters. That is, I was glad to hear it and Julian's other friends will be, when they learn about it. He's too good a man, too important, to . . ." I could not think of a diplomatic way to end the sentence.

"These tragedies, Mr Sayles, come to all of us. You cannot imagine what it means to lose touch with one you have loved."

"Perhaps not." I was content to let her statement ride along unchallenged. That was the easier way and, besides, some instinct warned me against letting this woman know anything too personal. Whatever she might be to Julian, I wanted nothing to do with her.

My lack of responsiveness did not seem to affect her one way or the other. She moved down the room and now, from a position at the farthest window, inquired, "Have you had your breakfast?"

"In the village on the way out."

"That horrible little town!" She was not even turning her head as she spoke.

"It's a lovely place to look at."

"Yes," she said in the most matter-of-fact voice, "it's lovely enough. The people who live in it are the worst feature of Barsham Harbor." I thought of the taxi driver and of his acquaintance who had moved away when I came out of the Elite Lunch, and had some inkling of what she meant. But it hardly seemed probable that the rest of the village would

be just like them. I made no comment on what she had said and after a time she went on, still without bothering to look at me as she spoke. "We have a woman, a Mrs Marcy, who comes over at eight to cook for us and do some of the housework. We generally have our morning meal at nine or even later. Julian is up so much of the night." She sighed. "He works too hard, but I cannot persuade him to slow down. He refuses to pay any attention to his health."

I wondered if what she was driving at was that she felt herself a martyr to Julian's habits. Perhaps she hoped I would intercede with him about staying up too late. But that was wide of the mark—she was getting at something else entirely, though I did not at first see what. "He always used to keep at it night and day when he thought he was on the track of something. In the old days, at least."

"The old days—" she began, and then stopped herself. "You will find him changed," she remarked, still without a glance in my direction. "I hope you won't blame me for that. I have done what I could to help him, but of course I have no right to manage his life."

Again I had the feeling that behind the screen of her words she was trying to pass along some sort of impression to me. What it was supposed to be I could not make out, and felt the discomfort of a man who can't quite hear a whisper addressed to him. Perhaps she wanted me to understand something about her relation to Julian, but I realized that it wasn't as simple a matter as that. I decided she was trying to tell me she was not the sort of woman she imagined I must be thinking she was, that she had not simply happened upon an older man broken and at loose ends because he had lost his wife, seen her opportunity and stepped into the gap. There was no possessiveness in the way she spoke of Julian Blair.

"It's his life," I agreed. "Don't worry about it too much; we all know that Julian won't listen to anyone. Helen was the only person who ever managed to make him take care of himself."

She nodded, and then she said a thing that left me staring at her. "In a way," she remarked judiciously, as if she were weighing one thing against another, "it's a pity that his wife died."

"Good God," I said, "how can you talk like that!"

She looked at me then, and when she spoke she sounded almost as if she were sorry, not for what she had said, but for me. "That must have sounded cold and unfeeling to you. I have a bad habit sometimes of thinking aloud. Don't misunderstand me—I was speaking purely in terms of Julian's work. Like you, Mr Sayles, I believe in Julian—probably a great deal more so than you, as a matter of fact. I have made every sacrifice, contributed everything I could toward his work." My expres-

sion must have showed her what I thought of that high-flown speech, but she went on patiently. "You and I have different ideas about death, too, I don't doubt. To you it is always a tragedy. To me, seldom. Often death shows us which things are of greatest importance. That was certainly true in Julian's case."

I felt out of my depth and beginning to dislike this woman more with every passing minute. All the time she was talking in this bombastic fashion she had been standing by the window, looking out at the glittering water. I saw as I watched her that the pose was theatrical, that she was looking at the river with the eyes of a gaslight tragedy queen. And yet, there was something about her that was close to magnificence. I told myself that all she amounted to was a fat hulk of a woman, no longer young, in a shapeless sack of a dress and with a ruin of a face. And yet, the trouble was that here was something not quite normal—a woman with an old, sagging, lined face who deliberately let the hard harshness of morning daylight play on her face. "Look," she seemed to be saying indirectly to me, "see what a mountain of a woman I am! If I was ever beautiful you can see that there is nothing of it left."

The nub of the matter was that she ought to have been ridiculous and she wasn't. I could not feel like smiling at her, even inwardly. I tried to tell myself that this was a silly, vain old woman, but what I actually felt about her was less definable than contempt. It was a good deal closer to uneasiness; whatever was underneath that flesh of hers and that dramatized manner, it was not weak or negligible. Julian's life must have settled into a strange pattern indeed if it included this woman.

Finally she turned away from the window, knowing that she had got her effect, and moved heavily down the room once more. There was resilience in the way she walked, for all her weight, and the boards of the old floor did not creak under her tread as you would have expected. She went past me and I could feel the vitality in her. When she got to the doorway she paused and said, "I'll step into the kitchen for a moment before Mrs Marcy comes. Just to make sure we have enough to eat. You may care for a second cup of coffee, even if you've already had your breakfast."

"Thank you," I said.

"If you don't mind, we'll wait till later to find a room for you. The bedrooms are all upstairs and I try to keep it quiet up there while he's asleep."

"That's all right," I reassured her. "Any time will do. This is an ungodly hour at which to arrive anyhow. If there had been any other train . . ."

"Of course. This . . . this wilderness is something that we have to adjust ourselves to." Her eyes avoided mine. "Sometimes I wish Julian hadn't felt it necessary to come here at all. But he is right, of course. The more remote we are, the better." She gave me a last quick look and went away down the hall.

I settled myself on the sofa and filled my pipe. The room was more comfortable now that she had left it, but I was far from feeling at ease. This was a curious situation into which I had strayed and, thinking back over the preceding minutes, it seemed to me that I had told Mrs Walters a great deal about myself in return for almost nothing in the way of information about Julian or herself. What she was doing here with him was as beyond my power to imagine as why he was here himself.

Something about the woman stuck uncomfortably in my mind, something less tangible than her appearance or even the things she had said. I could not put my finger on it, but in some way it was connected with her attitude toward Julian. What was there about that which was peculiar? Well, the way she had said "we" in speaking about the two of them. That suggested intimacy, of course, but not the obvious kind of thing at all. There was none of that spurious tenderness that she would have employed if she'd had what used to be called "designs" on him. No, it was something less analyzable than that. There was a tie between them, at least in her mind, but it was not, at any remove whatever, a sexual one. She spoke almost as if she and Julian were partners in some sort of enterprise. Having thought that, I dismissed it because it seemed to me impossible that I could be right. Julian was a great scientist in his way, narrow and limited though he might be outside the field of his own work. This woman was unthinkable in the role of his assistant or collaborator. I let the thought slip away from me.

That curious theatricality of hers. She had acted at moments like a woman dedicated to something—to the return of the Hapsburgs to the throne or some other noble and semipublic conspiracy. It was something that she believed in herself—that much was plain. And in some way I suspected that it was bound up with her self-assurance.

After a time I gave up the puzzle and simply sat, smoking and looking out at the river. To eyes accustomed to the Hudson, it was amazingly empty. Not one boat, large or small, appeared on the whole expanse of water visible from the windows. And except for distant rectangles of ploughed fields and the roofs of a few diminutive houses on the opposite shore, it might have been a wilderness river, more primeval than it had been a century before. Staring at the long blue sweep of it and the unchanging outline of the hills beyond, the utter absence of humanity

from the scene began to depress me. This was a lonely house and a lonely valley; it was not part of the modern world to which I belonged. That was a peopled world, full of human beings and their artifacts, full of movement and activity. This landscape into which I was looking was older and more primitive, unchanging except as the weather and the seasons altered it.

5 FEET WERE coming down the stairs in the hall. The sound of them exorcised the vapors in my mind, and I was surprised at the way my pulse quickened. There was the rapid lightness of youth in the way the footfalls clattered on the stair treads and I knew by their very sound who it was that was coming. Anne. It had to be Anne. What would she be like? Five years would make a lot of difference. . . . I remembered the child, but it suddenly occurred to me that, much as we had been together in the old days, I had never noticed the woman that she was going to be. Naturally not, with Helen there and my whole eyes and heart centered on her. Anne had been—almost—my daughter, just as she had always seemed more like Helen's child than her sister.

In the instant before she appeared I found I could recall surprisingly little of what she had really been, as a person in her own right and not merely Helen's much younger sister. All I was sure about was that when I had taken her to the circus or on a picnic, and later to plays and concerts, it had been fun. She had been quiet, with serious eyes, but when she laughed I remembered that I had laughed too, irresistibly.

Of course she must have changed. But I wished that she could be the same.

When she came through the door I had a momentary shock. She looked like Helen all over again—the same straight carriage, the same eyes set deep and wide apart, the round, strong throat. Then I noticed the differences. Helen had been white and gold, and this girl was brown—her hair, and the even tan of her skin. Helen had walked gravely, and there was always a reservation in her beauty. Anne, I saw, was not so stately. Her mouth was larger, even making allowances for the grin on it now, and her eyes were a darker blue. She was less conscious of herself, I felt, and most amazingly alive, though it may have been that the house and my own mood contributed to that impression.

"Anne!" I said and felt like laughing at something pleasant when I said it.

"Uncle Dick!" She checked her rush forward and stood looking at me. "Good heavens! . . ."

"What's the matter?"

She grinned again. "Why, just that . . . well, I guess I didn't remember you very well." She came over and shook me by the hand. "Welcome to Setauket Point."

"What's the matter with me?" I demanded. "Have I changed?"

"No. I thought you were an old man. I mean, not exactly old, but a lot older than you are."

"You don't seem to like my . . ." I couldn't think of a word that wouldn't sound worse than inane. "After all, you can't expect me to grow gray hair at thirty-three."

She sat down on the sofa beside me and went on looking at me in silence. The expression on her face delighted me—it was so obviously surprised and amused. After a time she remarked, "Well, I'm used to it now. But I'm not going to call you 'uncle' any more."

"That's all right with me." I didn't want to be called anything of the kind after that first look at her. "You startled me when you came in, yourself. For a second it was like seeing Helen again."

She looked away quickly. "Don't say that."

It had been a stupid remark and I was sorry the moment I'd said it. "Anyway," I went on, "I'm glad to see you here, Anne." Even that was awkward.

"You'll never know how glad I am to see you. I've been pestering Uncle Julian to write to you, but I never dreamed he really would. Why didn't you let us know you were coming?"

I told her about the telegram and the taxi driver.

"That's the way they are around here," she observed. "They don't like strangers. At least, they don't like us."

"It's just the old New England reticence."

She looked doubtful. "Probably. Only . . . well, let's not talk about that now."

"How is Julian?"

There was distress on her face. "He's changed. You'll be shocked when you see him. I was."

"Mrs Walters told me the same thing."

"So you've seen her—" she said, and then stopped abruptly. I thought she was listening. "Where is she, do you know?"

"She said she was going out in the kitchen to get breakfast."

Anne glanced back at the door quickly and then began to speak in a low voice. "Look Unc—I mean Dick, I've got to talk to you, but not here. Later. Just follow any lead I give you, will you?"

"All right. But—"

She interrupted me by standing up. "Let's go see if breakfast is ready. You must be ravenous."

"I had something at what my driver called the Ee-lite."

She grinned again. "All you need is a couple of soda mints and another breakfast and you'll get over that," she said, and led the way out of the room. "That is, if Elora Marcy's already here."

I followed. Her yellow sweater made the dark hall seem bright, and I noticed that she could wear slacks and not make the toe of my foot itch. This, I felt, was not going to be such an uncomfortable visit, nor so dreary as its opening had made me fear. I was still not adjusted to the idea of Anne's being grown-up. After all, the first time I had seen her was when Helen left her in my charge for an afternoon and, not knowing what you did with girls of eleven, I'd taken her out to a drugstore and given her two chocolate malteds in succession. From then on she had been just Helen's small sister as far as I was concerned, a youngster that I liked, but a little girl for all that.

"Remember the chocolate malteds?" I said to her back as we went down the hall.

"Yes." Her laugh sounded good. "They make a pretty smooth malted in the Rexall store in town, the only good thing in Barsham Harbor as far as I'm concerned."

"We'll go sample them," I said.

"It's a date." At the door to the kitchen she paused. "Remember what I said," she whispered and pushed the door open.

To my surprise the kitchen was an agreeable room. It was in the north-east corner of the house, behind the room where I had been sitting and, though it was as dingy as the rest of the house, it looked a good deal more lived in. The sun was coming through the windows on our right and making the place bright; I noticed immediately that there was no dust and that both the old stone sink and the kerosene stove were clean and as shining as their age and wear permitted. One thing that pleased me out of all proportion to its actual importance was a geranium growing in a chipped pot on the window sill. It struck me as almost the first evidence I had seen that anyone thought of this house as a place in which to live.

Mrs Walters and Anne exchanged good mornings in an insincere fashion. I noticed that neither of them looked at the other.

"I laid a place for you, Mr Sayles. I'm sure you'll want something more beside coffee."

"Thank you," I said.

We all sat down at the table. The toast was just like the Elite's, but the coffee was not so bitter. On the other hand, it was considerably weaker. I ate as much as I could in order to seem like the untroublesome guest, but I saw Anne watching me in amusement.

"Where's Mrs Marcy?" she asked after she had sampled her own helping of egg—which looked not so much scrambled as smeared.

"Late," said Mrs Walters in a tone that implied she didn't care what Anne thought of the eggs. Then she smiled and remarked, "You two young people must have some good times together."

"Unaccustomed as I am to entertaining college professors . . ." Anne remarked in a thoughtful tone, "I shall do my small best." She turned to Mrs Walters with what looked to me like a sweet smile—too sweet. "We already have a date."

"Oh?"

"Yes. For the cocktail hour and in the local drugstore."

This fencing between the two of them seemed likely to make an awkward moment even more so. I cut in quickly, "That is, unless Julian and I are busy then. After all, he's got first call on my time."

Anne's eyebrows went up but she said nothing. Mrs Walters began to stack the dishes in the sink; her own plate scarcely touched. I wondered how she had managed to grow so heavy if that was all she ate. She looked from me to Anne thoughtfully and finally remarked, "I'll leave the dishes to you, Anne."

"Let me dry," I said. "I'm a great drier—All-American my sophomore year."

"Very good," Mrs Walters sounded indifferent to the problem of the dishes. "If Mrs Marcy doesn't come soon, we'll have to find out what's delaying her." She turned in the doorway. "I'll let you know, Mr Sayles, when Julian is awake."

"Thank you."

"Do you want me to fix a room for him?" asked Anne.

"Later. After Julian is awake. I'll attend to that," she replied and disappeared.

Anne chucked a dish towel in my direction. "I didn't know you were planning to do any work with Uncle Julian," she observed.

"He asked me to give him some advice."

Anne said nothing for an interval of two plates and a coffee cup. Then she looked up. "What did she say when you told her that?"

"She didn't believe it at first. She acted odd about it."

"She would."

"Look here," I said, "what is going on in this house? Who is this Mrs Walters? What is she doing with Julian?"

Anne turned from the sink and looked at me steadily. She was not smiling any more. "I don't know."

The answer floored me. "But surely you must have some idea?"

She shook her head. "I landed the first of August and I've been up here ever since, but I tell you, Dick, I haven't. I can't find out."

"But hasn't Julian told you?"

"No. I hardly see him anyway, except at meals, and she's always there. I haven't been alone with him four times since I came." She stopped abruptly and looked toward the door. It was still open but there was no one there. "Anyhow, we'll take a walk later and a swim. I'd rather say nothing till then. She has ears like a cat."

We went on with the dishes. Just as we finished, the back door opened and a woman came in quickly. She was out of breath and there was a comical look of apology on her thin face.

"Morning, Miss Conner," she said quickly. "I'm sorry I'm late, but I had to help Seth in the barn this morning. He's not so good again."

By the way Anne smiled at her I could see instantly that she liked this little woman. "That's all right, Mrs Marcy. We're making out."

Mrs Marcy looked at the sink and gave a horrified gasp. "You're doin' dishes! You ain't had breakfast already, surely?"

"Not really," Anne replied. "Just something that Mrs Walters prepared with her own fair hands. But that's not your fault. Professor Sayles, here, arrived on the 6:20 and so we were roused out early. Dick, this is Mrs Marcy, the only sane member of our happy household."

"How do you do," she said with a smile twitching the corners of her mouth. I could see that Anne delighted her.

"Look out for him," that young lady went on. "He's a college professor and you know you just can't trust them. Absent-minded. Lots of mornings he forgets to put on his trousers, even."

Mrs Marcy giggled. "Looks like you both remembered this morning," she observed with an eye on Anne's slacks.

I laughed. "Good for you, Mrs Marcy," I said and we shook hands. "I see you know how to handle the younger generation here."

She laughed. "It's not so easy, but I do my best, Professor. Now you give me that," and she removed the dish towel with one dexterous swipe. "I don't allow any men to dry dishes in my kitchen. They ain't trustworthy."

Anne observed, "He's not so bad."

"Maybe not. But as time goes on they get less and less help, more and more of a nuisance. Take my advice and start keepin' him out of the kitchen right now."

Anne avoided my eye. "The voice of experience," she said lamely.

"Yes, child. I'll have to hump myself now, so you two run along. Oh, Miss Conner . . ."

"What?"

"Is she mad on account of my bein' so late?"

"Good heavens, Elora! You're only a few minutes late. Don't worry about it."

"I don't want no ruckus with her." She looked as if she meant it. And yet, it was hard to imagine that even Mrs Walters could be severe with this person. She had the bright eyes and quick movements of a bird, and there was something ingratiating about the way she talked and smiled. Neither Anne nor I made a move to leave the kitchen in spite of her edict.

Probably I wouldn't have believed, at that moment, that she was only thirty-two. She looked ten years older and her hair was already fading into gray. Fourteen years of farm housework and the bearing of four children had faded her hair and skin, if not her eyes. She looked as if she didn't weigh more than a hundred pounds. Later, after she was dead, I learned something of her story. Married the year she got out of high school, and plunged at once into the grim business of making a living on a Maine farm, she hadn't really had more than half her youth. The children had come along at intervals of a year or so, and after the fourth she was middle-aged; when she smiled you could see what having them had done to her teeth, for one thing.

Prematurely aged she may have been, but she was not old in her heart or her courage. She must have had to get up at four to do the housework at her own place before she came down the road to Julian's, but she was as lively that morning as if the day were just beginning for her, instead of half over by any ordinary standards. Nothing daunted her, and the last thing she must have thought about was sparing herself. As I remember her again, I feel the sadness that comes when one thinks of a lost opportunity. I should like to have been able to do something for Mrs Marcy.

Anne was putting dishes away in the cupboard. "Never worry about Mrs Walters," she advised. "If she doesn't like your being late, walk out and let her see how she enjoys running one place, let alone two."

Mrs Marcy shook her head. "We need the money. Seth's sciatica's back on him again. I don't know what we'll do if it gets any worse."

"That's a shame. I wish you'd let me help you."

"That's sweet, child, but I'll make out." She poured a cup of water into the geranium pot and I understood then where the plant had come from. "You folks goin' to be staying on much longer? They was here till November, last year."

Anne shook her head. "I'm going away the fifteenth. But of course I don't know about Uncle Julian. I don't suppose he'll stay here all winter, but he might. And she'll stay as long as he does."

"Oh, yes," agreed Mrs Marcy. "Well, the longer the better for us."

Anne said, "You need a vacation," in a tone that expressed how impossible she knew that idea was.

"Not me," said the little woman brusquely. "But it would be right nice for Seth if he could go south this winter. The cold doesn't do him any good. And now, if you'll excuse me, I'll just put the mop to this floor."

We went out the back door into the yard and stood there in the sun for a while. I filled my pipe and Anne lit a cigarette. She must have seen some sort of look on my face, because she remarked, "I've acquired a few bad habits, Dick," and laughed. I apologized and told her not to mind me. The more I looked at her, with the sun putting red-gold lights into her hair, the more I felt that it was going to be difficult to find a new basis for our relationship. If she had been a pupil in one of my classes, it would have been easy. I had long ago developed an immunity to all of them, no matter how charming. But Anne was a different problem. I felt responsible for her in a way, and there was the past, in which she had loved me as her "favorite uncle" and I had played with her, helped her when her homework was puzzling, given her elaborate toys at Christmas, and done all the other pleasant things which had seemed to stem naturally out of being Julian and Helen's closest friend. When they had married, I had been glad of Anne. She gave me an outlet for the frustration I had felt. . . .

Five years had changed everything. That much I perceived. But what to do about bridging the gap I could not wholly see. It was a problem that solved itself quickly, but at the time, it perplexed me. I did not want to go back into the past, and the present was decidedly odd. So I said nothing, but stood there smoking and looking at the sky and the bay, and every once in a while at Anne.

Finally she threw the end of her cigarette into the road. "Well, this is nice, but I want to talk to you, Dick. And we're too close to the house."

"You know more about this neck of the woods than I do. Anywhere you say."

"Did you bring a bathing suit?"

When I told her that I had, she suggested that I get it, and I returned to the hall and my bag. Mrs Marcy was dusting in the living room. I waved to her but said nothing. In three minutes I was back on the road.

"Good," said Anne when I rejoined her. "There's not much to do hereabouts, but the swimming makes up for it."

We wandered along together and it was pleasant. The air was beginning to feel warm and you could smell the grass and the rich scent of the earth itself. My pipe tasted good and the sun was warm on my back. Our shadows went across the field ahead of us, and by their lengths I judged that it was about nine or perhaps later. I felt too content to bother with a watch.

After ten minutes or so we came to the edge of the bay. Here, almost at the Point's end, the shore line was not marshy; we were actually standing several feet above the water and on the edge of a cut bank. Below us was a twenty-foot crescent of brownish sand which was still in shadow and looked damp. Across the bay and at least a mile to the southwest the town lay white and green along the farther shore.

"This is where I swim," Anne said, breaking a long silence. We sat down and hung our legs over the edge of the bank. "I come here twice a day sometimes," she went on. "It's almost as private as if you were on an island. You need a place like this to come to, away from that house."

"I see what you mean."

She turned her face to me and there was a look of quiet contentment on it that I had not seen before. "I came up here just to be with Uncle Julian a while and because I thought I ought to come. It hasn't been much fun so far, but it was almost worth it just on account of lying in the sun here and watching the water. Sometimes it seems to me the river is alive."

"Yes," I said. "Yes."

She kept on looking at it for a time without speaking and, as I watched her, I thought that it had been a long while since I had felt so baselessly happy and relaxed. The whole world was fresh and shining, the water was one shade of blue, the sky another, the meadow grass along the bank was stirring in a faint breeze, the air was sweet, and the sun was making Anne's hair gleam. Her face was half in shadow, but as I studied it, I could see that it was a woman's face and not that of a child or a young girl. There was character in it, strength in the spring of her jaw and the line of the cheekbone but not obstinacy, humor in the corners of her lips. The young fellow that got her, I reflected, would have something worth holding on to. That thought ended by annoying me.

"I'd never believe Julian would pick out a place like this," I said.

"That's the way I felt, at first," she answered slowly. "But I think he likes it. Not the way I do, but because it's so far away from everything. He doesn't want people."

"For that matter, he never has."

"I know." She pulled a long stem of grass and put it between white teeth. "But he's more of a hermit than ever. Dick, he's changed. I said that before, didn't I? Well, I don't want to prejudice you, but I'm . . . worried about him. He's so thin, too. He's not well at all."

"Of course Helen's death was an enormous shock to him. It was to all of us."

She nodded and without looking at me asked, "You were in love with her too, weren't you?"

"Yes."

"Are you still?"

It was a question I had not put to myself for a long time, and I was not sure of the answer. Helen's image was fresh in a part of my mind, but it did not hurt to think about her any more. A lot of water had flowed under the bridge since the time when I used to dream about her. "No," I told her finally, "I don't think I am."

"I should have thought Helen . . ." she began and then hesitated. "Why did she marry Uncle Julian instead of you?"

"Because she'd been married once before, I think."

She looked puzzled. "I don't quite see that."

"Well, Ed Norton was a louse. He treated your sister like the dirt under his feet, once he had got her. And she married him when she was too young. So he took all the youth out of her, made her afraid of passion and of the future. The divorce hurt her a lot, too. Helen wasn't the kind that could take a thing like that in her stride. What she wanted after that was something gentle and settled, and someone whom she could cherish, if you'll forgive the old-fashioned word, without having to love the way I wanted to be loved. Julian was peace and security to her, and he needed her. Besides, she had you on her hands." I grinned at her. "You were a handful, too."

Anne nodded. "She was practically like a mother to me." She nibbled the stem of grass. "To Uncle Julian, too, in a way."

"In another way," I agreed. "He was forty-five when he married her, and he'd never had anything like Helen in his whole life before. Everything he'd been suppressing up to then was fastened on her. He didn't love her, he adored her." God knows I had had ample opportunity to watch Julian's happiness. I knew more about it than anyone else possibly could. "She gave Julian everything he'd never had—a whole new life

beyond his work. She brought him out into the sun. She was beautiful and she was kind, and she made him happier than he'd ever been."

"No wonder," she said slowly, "that he's so queer now. I never thought about it in quite the way you describe, but I can see you're right."

One word struck me sharply. "Queer?" I said. "What do you mean by queer?"

For a time she did not answer and there was hesitation in her silence. Finally she turned to me. "He's obsessed in some way, Dick. Some way that isn't natural. And it's connected with Helen in his mind. The only times we've really talked since I came up here were all about her. It made me feel creepy. He never mentioned her as if she were dead. You know, he'd say 'is' instead of 'was' and so forth."

I digested that for a time and the more I thought about it the more my heart sank. This visit was going to be a difficult one. The time before I had had no luck trying to argue Julian out of a preoccupation, and it sounded as if . . . well, as if he hadn't forgotten anything. Still, I could not see just how a lot of the present facts were compatible with the unwelcome hypothesis that was forming in my mind. "What about this Mrs Walters?" I inquired. "I don't see what she's doing here."

Anne lay back on propped elbows and looked up at me with eyes squinted from the sun. "You don't seem swept off your feet by the lady," she observed.

"I'm not. And I don't see what she's doing here."

"When I first came I simply thought she was after Uncle Julian," she remarked. "But I'm not so sure now. She's been with him more than a year—or so I gather from things they've said—and she's with him all day. Anything that woman couldn't get in six months wouldn't be worth going after with a vacuum cleaner. So it can't be matrimony."

"Money, perhaps?"

She shook her head. "I don't think so. Uncle Julian isn't exactly rich and he's been spending huge sums on all sorts of things for his laboratory, or whatever is in that room of his. I worry sometimes for fear he hasn't any left."

"How about yours?" I knew that Julian had been the trustee for Anne's inheritance. She and Helen had divided the Conner estate equally, and Helen had left her half to Julian. It must have amounted to somewhere around seventy thousand dollars. Anne was to get her share outright when she came of age, and the idea that Julian could in any way have been false to that trust was too sickening to entertain. Still, I was relieved when she answered.

"Mine is all right. He turned it all over to me on my eighteenth birth-

day. Government bonds, it was in. I put them in a bank in New York." She frowned and said, "He wanted to borrow some the other day."

"Good God!" I said with a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach. "How much?"

"Five thousand dollars."

"I suppose you gave it to him?"

"Not exactly. I told him he could have it if he'd tell me what was going on and why he needed so much."

"You shouldn't have promised even that. What did he say?"

She sat up again and kicked the bank hard with her heels. "He said he couldn't tell me, but that he needed some more equipment, and that once his work was finished he thought he would be able to repay me. She heard about it and told me I was a fool—that I'd lost a chance at a fortune, and that he'd borrow it elsewhere. That was meant to make me feel bad," she observed, "but I didn't. I don't care about the money. Uncle Julian could have it all as far as I'm concerned. But I tell you, Dick, I don't want him to go on the way he's going. He's so sick and old! I don't want her to have it, either, but I'm sure he didn't want it for that. It really was for things he uses. Twice since I've been here a truck's arrived with cases and cases of things. I don't know what they were, but I think that he and she spend all their time up there working on something or other. In fact, I'm sure that's all they do together. I don't think Uncle Julian cares about her and I know she doesn't even like him. They watch each other sometimes. You'll see."

"I should think you'd be relieved that there's nothing more to it than that. You sound bothered."

She shook her head. "After you've been here a day you'll be bothered, too. I hate that house. I loathe the people in the town, and the way they look at us. You'd think we were gangsters in a hide-out." There was defiance in her voice.

"Well," I told her, "it isn't for long. Summer's almost over."

"Yes," she replied, but not as if the thought made her particularly happy.

We sat there in the grass for a long time, talking about ourselves. She told me about the years since I had last seen her, most of them spent abroad. Behind her words it was easy to see that she had been lonely but unwilling to come home to Julian, whom she had never understood or loved without reservation. The fact that she called him "Uncle Julian" and always had since Helen married him was an indication of the way she felt toward him. And he, I suppose, was glad enough to have her take over the responsibility of her own life, leaving him free.

She seemed to have done a good job of it, and a notably mature one. The allowance from her money had enabled her to travel modestly and study what she felt like, so she had gone first to London and then to Paris, looking into the things that interested her and doing a good deal of hard work, too. She told me she'd had a job in the export office of a French textile company, for one thing, and another as assistant to a woman in charge of the entertainments on a Mediterranean cruise ship. Then she had studied drawing and fashions, working bitterly long hours for almost nothing in a Paris couturier's shop until she thought she had something to offer in the way of experience. A buyer from one of the New York department stores had been impressed with her when she decided to look for an American job, and the upshot was that she was back in her own country with a position waiting for her on the first of October.

She told her story with no sense of bravado and I could see that what she had done suited her perfectly, however unlike the conventional thing it had been. It gave me a sense of satisfaction to know she was going to be in New York.

When she asked me what I had been doing, I could not find anything to match her own account. A certain quantity of work performed, two promotions in academic rank, a few published articles, a couple of camping trips. That about summed up the five years. But it seemed to interest her; when I admitted that I was now an associate professor and in line to become a department head in a few years, she nodded as if she were satisfied.

"You always did work hard," she observed. "I can remember that." She looked at me and grinned again. "But really you aren't much the way I remembered after all. I expected to find you wearing a beard by now."

I rubbed my chin. "If I don't manage to get a shave pretty soon, I'll be wearing one all right."

She stood up. "Well, you'll find the house pretty primitive, but I guess the shaving can be managed. We don't have a tub though, and if you want a bath you'll have to take it in the river. I'm going in now." She made a grimace. "Swimming is absolutely the only entertainment we have to offer, and I've been doing a lot of it; twice a day, when it doesn't rain. Even Mrs Walters swims." After a pause she added, "She swims well, too. You'd be surprised."

"I don't like to think of her in a bathing suit."

Anne laughed. "It's quite a sight." She pulled the yellow sweater up over her head, which disconcerted me until I saw that she had a bathing

suit on underneath her clothes. "There's a clump of willows over there where you can undress," she observed when her head emerged from the sweater. "But look out for bees. I got stung once."

I went over to the willows and got into my trunks, thinking about how warm and brown her shoulders had looked, and how fantastic it would have seemed to me yesterday to be told that at ten the following morning I should be thinking about a girl's skin and the sun on her hair.

When I returned to the crescent of sand, Anne was already out in the water, swimming with an easy steadiness. I went in after her; the first shock of the plunge was breath-taking because the water was frost-cold, but after that it felt fine. The blood began to race under my skin and I could feel the grubbiness of the train disappear in the swift rush of water along my body.

I caught up with Anne a couple of hundred yards offshore, and we stopped to tread water and look around us. It was amazing how low the shores looked from where we were, and how distant. We were in a level world of blue which sparkled as we turned to face the sun. Anne shook the water swiftly out of her eyes and said, "Don't you like it?"

"It's superb."

Anne turned on her back and began to kick gently with her feet. "Nothing matters when you're out here," she said. "Everything's clean and . . ." she paused slightly, "real." Then she said, "I'm glad you're here," turned over and began to swim toward the middle of the bay.

I followed her, wondering why she had paused before she said "real." Then I stopped thinking at all and we raced until we were winded. By that time the shore was perceptibly remote and I began to notice the chill in the water. Anne had stopped too, and I looked at her, panting and laughing, with her head mounted on the flat water like John the Baptist's on a plate. "This water is pretty cold," I observed.

"I'm used to it now," she answered, "but I'll have had enough in a few minutes. Let's swim back slowly."

So we did. I watched the flash and lift of her arm as it came out of the water, and the arc of ripples that pushed along in front of her bathing cap. The sun caught the wet rubber and made a point of fire on it. I found myself matching my strokes to hers, so that we were swimming beside each other in the same rhythm, sliding through the water like parts of a single entity. The patch of fire on her cap held my eyes until I was half hypnotized without knowing it, and only the grating of my fingers on the beach sand snapped the spell.

We stood up then and looked at each other. Drops of water fell from

her body like fragments of light, and for an instant it seemed to me that there had been nothing whatever prior to this moment, that we had swum up out of some infinite reservoir of being until we stranded on the shore of the world. It is impossible to describe such an experience in the vocabulary of psychology, or any other, for that matter. It simply *was*. We stood there looking at each other, half smiling, not conscious of things but of everything fused into one universal sensation which vibrated in me to the tune of our swimming. I saw that Anne was lovely, smoothly and strongly made, but it was inevitable that she should be so. A sense of enormous contentment and satisfaction flooded through me.

The enchantment began to dissolve. She gave a laugh and splashed through the shallow water to the beach. I followed, and we sat on a log together in the sun, without speaking. The heat began to take the water chill out of our bodies and we relaxed. Anne stretched her legs ahead of her and dug her toes into the sand. "You see why I like to come here," she said.

"Yes."

"This was special, though," she said, half to herself, and I was glad because I didn't want it to have been that fine every time before.

After a while we got cigarettes and smoked until we were dry and warm. The sun was high and I began to remember why I had come to Barsham Harbor. "Julian must be up by now," I said. "Probably I ought to be getting back to the house."

"All right," Anne replied and there was regret in her tone.

We pulled on our clothes and I had to be diplomatic about that because she was right about the bees. There were a dozen of them buzzing in the willow alcove where I dressed. Afterwards we walked back across the meadow, not saying much. Halfway to the house I said, "I'll let you know what Julian has to say and then we can have another talk."

"Yes." Then she added earnestly, "Try to see him alone. Don't let her be there when you talk to him or you'll never learn anything."

"All right. But don't take her too much to heart. She's not the companion for a summer vacation, I admit, but there's no point in resenting her."

She looked at me steadily. "I don't resent her," she answered. "I'm afraid of her."

"Nonsense."

She said nothing to that and we walked on to the house. The magic had gone and we were just two people again, each wrapped in our own thoughts. We walked slowly.

6 FIVE YEARS can change a man considerably, and Anne had warned me that I should find Julian unlike my memory of him. Even so, it hurt when I walked into the living room and saw what he had become. He was sitting in a sagging armchair with his back to the windows and the light, but even at first glance I saw that he was old. His narrow, angular face had never had much color in it, but now the skin was parchment tight and stiff over his cheekbones and his lips were bleached to a thick gray, as if there was almost no blood left in him. My second glance showed me he had lost something else, too—the sense of discipline which had always been characteristic of him. I remembered him as a neat man, controlled in his movements and meticulous about his clothes. This haggard figure in the shabby living room of the old house was another man, some sort of senile changeling. His clothes were not only rumpled but dirty. There was a triangular tear in the knee of one trouser leg. His shirt looked as if he had slept in it, and he was not wearing a tie.

For a moment he sat there motionless, looking at me, and then he pushed himself up by the arms of the chair and rose to meet me. As he stood there I saw that he was trembling almost imperceptibly. A sudden feeling of pity rose in my throat, and I went across the room quickly and took his hand. “Julian! It’s grand to see you!” I said and hoped my voice did not betray what I was thinking and feeling.

Seen at close range, his face was not as lifeless as it had appeared at first. The eyes were alive and burning with the same eagerness that they had when he was working in the second-floor lab of McCann Hall in the old days. Only there was another quality there now, an intensity which was more than eagerness. Their brightness struck me as more than normal and I looked away from them after a second.

His hand when it took mine was dry and cold, but the pressure of his fingers was strong. “Richard,” he said, “it is generous of you to have come so promptly.” He looked at me appraisingly. “You seem to be keeping fit and you don’t look a day older.”

“I’m fine, Julian. What about you?”

He smiled then, a curious smile which did not match his words. “As you see. I have only a little time left, but enough . . . enough.” He gestured to a chair. “Sit down. Good. We can talk in comfort. I suppose you’ve seen Anne already?”

“Yes,” I told him.

“She reminds me of her sister,” he said and gave me the same quick, inappropriate smile. “Don’t you think so?”

"In some ways."

"Well, I hope she will help to entertain you in the intervals when I am working."

I filled a pipe, not because I wanted to smoke but to give an air of casualness to what I was saying. "It's fine to hear you're working again, Julian. We've all missed you. I suppose you know that you can have your chair back any time you want it. Arthur Wallace has arranged for that."

"A good man. And thank you. I expect you had something to do with that, Richard, as well as he. But my work is here. And it is almost done. Afterwards I shall . . . retire." He paused before he used that last word and I did not like that hesitation. He must have seen me look at him sharply, because he went on in a stronger voice. "As a matter of fact, Richard, my strength is failing me rather alarmingly. That is why I sent for you in such a hurry. I must finish my work quickly or not at all."

"You've got plenty of years left, Julian. What you need is a rest. You've been at it too hard."

He shook his head. "It's the other way round, my boy. The work keeps me alive. Without it I should have died long ago." He smiled again and this time it was all right. "But this is morbid and unimportant. I must tell you wherein I think you can help me." His eyes fastened on me and he spoke more rapidly. "I venture to think that this errand on which I have called you is important. Even, perhaps, the most important thing in the whole world, not only for me but for every living person. I'm on the threshold of an enormous advance in human knowledge—the most enormous advance you can conceive of."

Sometimes a man's craft obtrudes itself upon him without warning or welcome. It was so with me at that moment. Hearing Julian speak, watching the tense way he was leaning forward in his chair, noticing the way the tendons ridged his throat I caught the outlines of what was not less than hysteria and more likely a deranging obsession of the mind. The thought made me miserable. I looked away from him so as not to see any more of it, but he did not notice. His voice, dry, strained, hurrying with an unnecessary urgency, went on.

"Yes," he was saying, "I'm on to something, my boy. I'm on to something that nobody since time began has found the real key to. Oh, a lot of them have worked on it, one way and another. Even inventors like Edison, I understand. But he didn't have the . . ." for the first time the spate of his words slowed and he hesitated. Some of the unnatural brightness in his eyes faded. He licked his lips and found a word that I felt was not the whole of his meaning. "The incentive that I have. I've got

to succeed. Everything depends on it, everything. One more step, one small step, and I'll have it. You can help me make that step."

"I hope so," I said. "What is it you're working on, Julian?"

He leaned back in his chair and looked away from me. There was stubbornness in the set of his jaw. "That I can't tell you. It isn't wholly my secret, for one thing. For another, I'd rather not discuss it. I want only the answers to a few questions."

Here, I decided, was the place to call a halt to the vaguenesses and ambiguities in which we had been dealing. "Julian," I said firmly, "you know very well that I'll do almost anything for you. I'd be an ungrateful so-and-so if I didn't. But you've been talking in large terms. I think I ought to know what you're after before I give you any dope I may have, for your own sake as well as mine."

"Nonsense," he retorted. "You ought to be willing to trust me."

I decided to let him have it straight. "I would, under ordinary circumstances. But these aren't ordinary circumstances. You must see that. What sort of thing is it that you have to come to this Godforsaken place to work on? None of us has heard from you in years. This whole business is strange, Julian. Knowing you, I assume that everything is all right, but I've got to assure myself of that fact."

"Is that all?" he asked quietly when I had finished.

"Not quite," I answered. "I think you've been working too hard, Julian. I honestly believe you ought to take a rest. Anne thinks so, too. I'd much sooner persuade you to relax for a while than I would help you go on killing yourself by overwork."

He waved my words away with a gesture of one hand. "Come out with it, boy. What you really mean is that you think I am unbalanced and you don't want to encourage me in my insanity. That's in your mind, isn't it?"

"Well, you used some extreme words a minute ago, Julian. This thing of yours must be important, but you make it sound earth-shaking. Maybe you've brooded on it till you've lost some perspective."

His face was set and white when he turned it on me. "You're wrong, Richard. You're entirely wrong. As for my taking a rest, there will be time enough for that when my work is finished, and finished it is going to be, perhaps in a week, certainly in a month. I'm not crazy, my boy, but even if I were it wouldn't matter because the thing is done, anyhow. It works!" His voice, which had reached a crescendo, faltered. "That is, it works in a way, but not as I want it to do, and that is where I know you can help me. I've got to get the rest of it. Otherwise it means making my results public without the final step. Someone else will make that." The

tension went out of his voice and he began to sound old and weak. "I don't want to wait any longer, my boy. I'm tired."

"Julian . . ." The distress in my heart was clouding my judgment and I knew that I ought to be on my guard. "I'll help you, of course. I don't want to know anything about the details of what you're doing. Just the general idea, that's all I ask." Doubtless this project of his was a legitimate, valid enterprise. In five years he must have found out the impossibility of what he had been planning when he left the university. But if he were still obsessed with it, I was not going to help him further into madness. "I don't think I'm asking anything unreasonable," I told him.

He shook his head. "Perhaps not. But if I tell you what it is, you will want to argue about it and I haven't strength nor time for argument now." He hesitated and drummed his long fingers uncertainly on the arm of the chair. Finally he said, "I'll strike a bargain with you. If you answer my questions—give me the data and references I need if you haven't the material yourself—then I'll tell you what I'm doing. But only afterward, and only if you promise me you will tell no one and do nothing. That's fair enough, isn't it?"

Without being able to see clearly why I thought so, I knew this was a moment of danger. His unwillingness to confide in me could mean only one thing—that he was still determined to reach Helen, assure himself that somewhere she still existed. If I refused to help him find her—or pretend to help him because, of course, no one could do more than that—would it not be more dangerous to his sanity than if I answered his questions and let him do what he liked afterward? My loyalty was to Julian, but which course would help, and which injure, him I could not tell.

The room seemed to close in on me. Between pity and doubt I could not decide what to do, and in that moment of indecisiveness I lost my last chance to checkmate Julian. Like a fool, I attributed the apprehension I felt to a mere personal concern over my friend, over his health and happiness. I should have known better. There was more in the warning my mind was giving me than could be accounted for in any such personal way. Behind the screen of my concern for Julian lurked thoughts that I did not dare allow to come forward, for fear of their implications. There was, for instance, the vague perception that Julian talked like a nervous man, obsessed by a tragic delusion, but still able to perceive reality from shadow; and the positive knowledge that he was a great man, too brilliant not to be able to complete almost any enterprise to which he had set that terrific mind of his. His own confidence in what he had accomplished so far should have impressed me more than it did.

For all that, I think anyone in my position would have done what I

did. I decided that the only thing I could do was to humor Julian, be sympathetic, and do what he asked until the situation was plainer to me.

"All right, Julian. I'll help you any way I can. Though what I know that will be of any use to you . . ."

He smiled again, momentarily, and leaned forward in his chair. "Good," he said, "good." His face was terrifyingly intent. "What I am after is this . . . you have been doing certain work in your field that has interested me very much. I want to ask you some things about it."

Although I had expected something of the sort, I was surprised all the same. "I've done very little research these last years, Julian."

"That piece of yours in the *Journal* suggests otherwise, my boy. Now about these brain currents that you've been measuring . . ."

In the last twenty-five years many doctors and experimental psychologists have been measuring the minute electric impulses which the living brain gives out. A machine called an electroencephalograph records these pulsations on a ribbon of paper that resembles a ticker tape. Each brain seems to produce a certain distinctive pattern of its own, and there are rhythms characteristic of sleep, concentration, or various kinds of emotions. Furthermore it appears that fatigue, various drugs, and many other things may influence those patterns.

Bill Rogers and I had got interested in the subject as a sort of hobby. At first we'd done little more than talk the subject over from the medical and psychological approaches. Then Bill had suggested that his hospital work gave him some unique opportunities for experimentation, and we had taken all sorts of brain records in the various wards there. One thing that excited Bill was the idea that pain might someday be "damped out" electrically in cases where drugs were dangerous. I was more interested in the phenomena as a whole, and particularly as they appeared in infants and in moribund cases. Some of my dope had been published later in the *Journal*, but of course I am a teacher and not a research man except incidentally.

It was not altogether surprising that Julian should be interested in the thing. These minute, rhythmic impulses are electrical, as I've said, and Julian was an electrophysicist. His radio tube improvements, the Blair Wave Trap, and a lot of radar stuff he worked out are still in use. But as he went on questioning me, I began to feel that his interest was not as abstract and coldly scientific as I should have liked.

All the while I was answering Julian's questions I had an inkling of that. I felt progressively more and more uncomfortable as his delight at my answers mounted. He kept nodding his head and jotting down notes in the shabby memorandum book he always carried. When I opened my

suitcase and found an envelope of the encephalograms—the ribbons of paper tape marked with the trembling, jagged lines which depicted the electric pulses of the brain—about which I had been speaking, his excitement was close to frightening. He pored over those things, holding them close to his eyes and moving his lips soundlessly as he looked. Now and again a question came from him abruptly, and it is a measure of Julian's genius that whatever he asked went straight to the heart of some difficulty or other which Bill Rogers and I had debated fruitlessly. In half an hour, or perhaps a few minutes more, he had sucked me dry of what I knew.

7 THAT CONVERSATION with Julian has a fantastic quality as I look back on it. There in that faded magnificence of a room, with the running sweep of the river beyond its windows, we talked in the dry phrases and formulations of science. But all the time we were, between us and without knowing what we did, creating a horror. The sequence of our words was like an irrevocable syllogism, building step by step to a conclusion which was neither rational nor, in the abstract, credible. It was deadly just the same.

Something was born in that hour, something that Julian's mind had conceived years before and which was now in the very moment of parturition. He must have known, partly at least, what was happening, for the gathering triumph in his face and words gradually conveyed itself to me. At first I felt excited by his excitement, swept along by his enthusiasm. Then misgiving began to creep again into my mind and it seemed not so much strange as alarming that I should be telling this man things which appeared to possess some significance to him which they lacked for me. Finally he closed his notebook with a snap and put the encephalograms into the envelope again.

"I want to look these over with more care," he said. "I'll return them to you in a day or so. Perhaps I shall need to ask you something on one or two more points. But I think not." He spoke with a confidence which I found disquieting.

For a moment I was tempted to demand the graphs from him at once. The abnormal brightness of his eyes, the way his hand trembled when he put the envelope in his pocket, the feverish intensity of his examination of me had showed that far from pacifying the demon which was driving

him, I had merely goaded it on. "I'm damned if I see what all this proves, Julian," I told him. "If you can make something out of that stuff I've told you, you're way ahead of the rest of us."

"Perhaps," he said slowly, "I am not looking for quite the same thing."

"You haven't told me yet what you *are* after," I reminded him. "Don't forget your promise."

"I haven't," he said absently and then was silent for a time. His eyes wandered to the door and I knew that having got what he wanted from me, he was impatient to be out of the room and away, working on it. "Richard, I am afraid I should not have made that promise."

This was certainly not the old Julian, who would as soon have falsified an experiment as gone back on a promise. It gave me an unpleasant jolt. "Don't back down," I said. "You don't get out of this room until you tell me what you're after." My tone didn't sound as jocular as I'd intended.

His eyes swung back from the door and rested on me thoughtfully. "Very well," he said finally and with regret in his voice. "A promise is a promise, I suppose." He licked his lips and went on in a matter-of-fact tone which made what he said all the more insane. "I am working on the problem of immortality."

I cursed myself for every kind of fool in the calendar. "I see," I said, trying to sound noncommittal. "How are you tackling it, exactly?"

He shook his head. "I can't tell you that, my boy. Scientifically, of course. The way that men of reason and intelligence should have approached it centuries ago. I have constructed an apparatus which I shall give to the world when it is completed."

"Then it isn't finished?"

He looked uncomfortable for the first time. "Not wholly. I find that I have omitted an important element, a factor of . . . control. Your answers to my questions, though, ought to give me what I need there."

"But you believe this thing of yours is going to work?" I could not keep the incredulity out of my voice. It was difficult to remember that he was not, could not be, rational. Since he was not a sane human being, of course he felt sure his device, whatever it was, would work.

To my surprise he hesitated. Finally he looked away from me and said, "In a way, Richard, it is already successful. But as I say, the element of control is lacking. Your data should—must—supply that. I think I shall be able to report success in a week or so. Perhaps even sooner." I saw the hands, linked in his lap, tremble as he spoke.

The monstrosity of what he was claiming swept over me and I forgot all discretion. "God in heaven, Julian!" I burst out. "You mustn't do that . . . you mustn't talk this way. Listen to me. You've got to listen to

me. This is a mad project. It's blasphemous. It's impossible." As I spoke I wished that I were absolutely sure that it was impossible, but though every atom of sense and reasonableness in me affirmed that Julian was simply crazy, a cold dread that he wasn't fastened on me. "Even if it isn't impossible," I went on as earnestly as I knew how, "have you stopped to think what such a thing as you are trying to do would mean, Julian? What its effect would be?"

His thoughts seemed miles removed from my outburst. When he answered, his tone was quiet and gentle—I felt ashamed and confused by it because it made me wonder which of us was outside the normal pale. "I was afraid you would take it that way, Richard," he told me. "It is not my business to speculate what the effect of a discovery will be. Every new instrumentality of the human search for truth can be used or abused. You know that."

"But this is different. This is dynamite." A thought struck me. "I'm assuming that you think you can prove immortality?"

"Yes." That single syllable fell into the room with unarguable finality. In spite of myself I was impressed with the way he said it, momentarily completely convinced. Julian Blair was a great man and he made no positive affirmations unless he was sure. Time after time he had done impossible things. His theories, when he enunciated them, might sound radical and extreme to his contemporaries, but the event had invariably justified him and them. All that prestige was behind his single word of affirmation. Now of course he was old—senile. Something had slipped in that delicate and brilliant mind of his. But I could not be *sure*.

It never occurred to me that Julian could be both right and wrong.

After a long pause I said something that was foolish because I knew the answer to it already. I asked the question only because I wanted to put some words into the pit of silence that lay between us. What I said was, "But Julian, why? Why should you want to . . . to do this thing?"

He brought his eyes back to me with an expression of faint surprise around them. "Surely I don't have to tell you that?" he said. And then I knew that what I feared was true: this work of his was not a labor of research, of pure science applied to an enigma presented by the physical universe. It was, instead, something intensely personal and urged upon him by emotion. I remembered the day when he had begun on it. For five years it had been in his mind, growing, spreading, burgeoning, until finally it had crowded out everything else. It was, if you like, a cancer of the mind.

8 NOT MANY of us had come to the cemetery that day, partly because of the weather. But Helen and Julian had always preferred few friends and close ones, so that her funeral would not have been large under any circumstances. Julian, Anne, and I had driven out together, after the church service, and watched in numb silence the end of that torturing ritual with which we dispose of the bodies of our dead. I remember that the rain made a drumming noise on the roofs of our umbrellas and that the grave was a brown scar on the green of the cemetery lawn. Looking into it, I had seen the standing water at its bottom. It seemed to me a sacrilege to put any part of Helen into such a pit. . . . Anne's hand was cold and hard in mine as we stood there, and I doubt if she, or I, or Julian even heard the minister's well-thumbed phrases.

Helen Blair, who had been Helen Conner, was the only woman I had ever loved. I went right on loving her after Julian and she were married; I was too fond of him, and she was too necessary to me, for any complete severance of our relationships. Anyhow, I had been in love with her before Julian had even met her and she had refused me twice before he had proposed at all. That she had preferred a man twenty years older than herself was natural enough under the circumstances, but the wonder was that Julian, with his enormous indifference to the ordinary human experiences and his relentless urge toward work and discovery should ever have fallen in love.

Not that any man could have overlooked Helen once he had seen her. She had a still, sharp beauty that made you notice and respect it, and a poise that had matured in her struggle to rise above the experience of her first marriage. When she was finally free of Ed Norton she arrived at a kind of compromise with herself and life that gave her tremendous control over herself, and deep simplicity of thought and feeling.

The statement that it was natural she should have preferred Julian to me needs amplifying. What made it so was her determination to found her life on something other than the heat and the insecure glory of young love. Julian needed her and, as she saw it, I did not. She could give him a life that would be richer than anything he had ever known and, if not the kind of love I wanted from her, at least a deep and sincere affection. Julian represented peace, security, and a tranquil future, and in those days he was far from the sort of person I have pictured, feeble and old, sitting in a broken-down armchair in the house on Setauket Point. He was a vigorous and distinguished-looking man of middle age then, the kind of man that exactly suited her need.

In the three years they were married, Helen made Julian's narrow life over into something rich and warm. To watch him come out of his dry reserve, crack the brittle shell of his past routines, until he actually learned how to laugh and mix a cocktail was a delight to his friends. For me it was, I'll admit, a painful pleasure. But for all my feeling that I had lost something which I should never find again, I was glad for both of them. It was a measure of her quality—and his, too, now that I think of it—that I never resented Julian.

In only one way Julian did not do better than I could have done myself. That was Anne. She had taken to me from the start and Helen was glad, I think, to have me around to make up for some of Julian's deficiencies as a foster father. That was what it came to, for she had been almost a mother to her younger sister, and the idea of Julian as Anne's brother-in-law was somehow ridiculous. She refused to call him anything more intimate than "Uncle Julian," and though she was fond of him, it was I who played with her and bought her chocolate malteds.

Helen died, very suddenly, of pneumonia. Her death was merciful in its speed, but the very abruptness of it was too much for Julian. One week he was this new, richly happy person that Helen had made him. The next he was a widower overwhelmed with the despair that comes to a man who has loved late in his life and lost his happiness before he has grown accustomed to having it.

After the funeral service Mrs Wallace had taken Anne home with her, but Julian wanted to walk and I was the logical person to go with him. He said nothing for a long time. Our feet splashed in the puddles of the curving walk and the rain slithered down the polished surfaces of the headstones on either side of us. There was nothing I could think of to say to him; we simply walked on together slowly and heavily.

When we turned down Jefferson Street he lifted his head and looked at me like a man returning to consciousness after an operation. "I do not see how I am going to live without her, Dick," he said. His voice was steady and quite dead.

"She wouldn't want you to feel that way," I answered him gently. "She wanted to make your life rich and happy. She did that. You mustn't throw away what she gave you."

He shook his head. "That part of it's over now," he remarked as if he were making an incontrovertible statement.

"You mustn't let it be over. She wouldn't like that. The way to feel about this is the way she'd want, I know. And that is to hang on to the things she gave you and make her memory something for joy, not sorrow."

It sounded pretty evangelical in my own ears, but it was the best I could do.

Julian hardly seemed to have heard me. He said, "No," in a dull voice, but the word was addressed to something in his own mind, not to me. After that there was silence between us for several blocks, until he murmured something in a key too low for me to catch.

"What's that?" I asked him.

"'Stupid,' I said. It is stupid that we should know so little about what happens when . . . when a person dies. I have never thought about that before. All this agony . . ."

"Yes." The sorrow inside me made it difficult to follow what he was saying. I wanted to be alone, to remember Helen to myself, to get used to the fact that she was gone.

"If I knew I was going to see her again."

"You will, Julian. Of course you will."

He looked at me curiously. "Do you believe what you say, or are you just saying it?"

"People have always believed that," I said.

"Do you?"

Miserably I had to tell him that I didn't.

"You're a psychologist," he said finally. "Your science is supposed to deal with the human personality. And you understand no more than I about this thing."

"I know."

"You haven't even any definite evidence that death is the end of everything?"

"No."

He struck his fist against the palm of the opposite hand. "Then I don't see how you can believe anything about it, one way or the other. Belief must be founded on some sort of knowledge or else it's superstition. Either you believe a thing because the evidence supports your position, or you are simply ignorant. In the dark."

"I'm not so sure of that, Julian. There's more than one way to know a thing."

"There is only one way to know anything. Experiment, test, check. Collect data and verify them. If the data affirm your belief, then you know."

"You can't do that with things like death and the soul."

"Have you tried?" He shook his head and walked on with lowered head. He was not looking at me or at anything else; his eyes were so wholly turned inward that I had to lead him down the sidewalk and across the streets. He was walking like a man asleep and I was hardly

more aware of the physical world than he was. Each of us was walled up in a private cell of grief and pain.

I left him at the door of his house. "Good-bye, Julian. I'll be over this evening." Then I remembered something. "Don't forget that Edith is going to bring Anne over some time this afternoon, after lunch," I said. "The kid will need a lot of comforting, Julian."

"Of course. Of course. I won't forget." But his attention was not on what I had said. "Good-bye, boy. Don't come this evening unless you want to. I shall be busy. I've got to think about this thing."

"No, Julian. Don't go over it in your mind any more. It won't do any good. She wouldn't want you to do that."

There was impatience in his tone. "I shall not be brooding. I must plan what I am going to do. There is no time to lose. I can't tell how long . . ." He went up the front steps of his house, stumbling once, and let himself in. I turned away with a sense of foreboding added to the misery in my heart.

Of course I had gone to the house that evening. I was so desperately lonely myself that I might well have gone simply because misery seeks company, but all through the afternoon I had found myself thinking about Julian and concerned over him. What I found when Anne let me in was unexpected. Julian was working. He was sitting at the long table which he used for a desk with a litter of papers around him and a stack of books beside his chair. It looked as if he had been there for hours.

"Hello, Julian," I said. "Don't let me interrupt you."

"That's all right," he replied without even raising his head.

I looked at Anne. Her white face with the dark circles under her eyes was puzzled. "He's been doing that all afternoon," she said, with a despairing break in her voice. "He wouldn't even eat any supper."

"How about you?" I asked. "Are you all right?"

"Yes," she said in a small voice. "I'm all right. I'm fine." Then she broke away from me and went out of the room, almost running. There was desperation in the pound of her feet on the stairs.

Perhaps it would be best to let her cry it out by herself, but Julian's absorption in what he was doing while a youngster like Anne was in need of comfort and love made me angry. He hadn't even looked up when she ran out of the room.

"I must say, Julian, that this is a curious time to be doing whatever it is you're working at. Don't you think Anne needs us more than—"

"No!" he interrupted in a harsh voice, turning in his chair to look at me with eyes that were too bright. "The child's grief will have to run its course. We can do nothing for her. Nothing immediate, that is." He

struck his hand down on the table top. "Year after year, century after century, people have been feeling as she does—as we all do—this evening. Bitter and aching with grief. They comfort each other with empty, meaningless words, with prayers, with all the rigamarole of religion. It seems to me stupid and cowardly. If they had more courage and vision, more confidence in themselves, they would not take this fact of death so supinely. Long before this they would have done something about it."

"There isn't anything they can do."

He gave me a look of contempt. "How do you know that? Have you ever tried to find out, one way or the other? You, a psychologist, who ought to be more concerned with it than any other scientist? No, of course you haven't. You leave the whole question to mediums, quacks, crystal gazers." He looked at his papers. "My own colleagues seem to have been no better. Sir Oliver Lodge!" His voice was acid. "And Arthur Conan Doyle with his pictures of fairies! It's disgusting, almost the whole lot of it." His voice dropped to a more normal level. "Let me tell you something, Richard. I am a man of science. And science doesn't let things go by default. It investigates. That's what I'm going to do."

"Investigate what? God, Julian, you sit there and talk like this the very day that . . ." The sentence was better left unfinished.

He stood up and began to pace back and forth across the rug. I remembered thinking for the first time that he was looking his age. "I'm going to find out. This day of all days is the one to begin. This morning you said that people have always believed that we saw again those whom we have . . . lost. Presumably, you meant by that, after we ourselves have died?"

"Yes. Something like that."

"Well, I'm not going to wait for death." His voice was calm, but there was purposefulness behind it. "It will take time, but I think I shall succeed."

His attitude troubled me. The bitterness that was driving him into this project was all too apparent. "Listen, Julian," I began quietly, "I admit what you say as to the desirability of this thing you have in mind. But as a psychologist, even if I can't tell you anything about what you want to know, I can say positively that you are starting on it at the wrong time, when your emotion is obsessing your mind. Wait a while before you begin. Rest for a month. Perhaps take a trip somewhere with Anne. Then come back to it if you want to, with a reasonable amount of detachment."

He shook his head. "Waste a month? Every day will be a month in itself, without her." He sat down at the table again and picked up his

pencil. "I have been making a survey to see how much reputable scientific work has been done. Apparently even less than I had supposed and none of it leading to any useful conclusions. I don't expect I shall find much of value in the whole background of the subject . . ." His voice trailed off in the intensity of his concentration.

Obviously there was no more use talking to him. After waiting a few minutes to see if he would remember that I was still there, I went upstairs to find Anne. She was in her room, face down on the bed, not even sobbing. When I touched her, I discovered that she was rigid all over, so tight with grief and loneliness that she hardly knew for a while that I was there. I shan't describe what happened between us in that dim room, but when I left she had cried herself out and was almost asleep. All the while I was comforting her, I felt a bitterness against Julian for letting the girl suffer alone as he had. I promised her everything I could think of to make her feel less lonely, and she clung to me desperately. It was horrible, and I don't remember it in any detail.

The clearest picture in my memory of that night is the one of Julian, gray-faced and oblivious of his surroundings, still working at his desk when I came down and let myself out of the house. I did not speak to him.

In the months that followed, Julian and I did not see each other a great deal. That was largely my own fault and choosing; I did not want to be reminded by seeing him of the fact that she was lost to both of us. I thought about Helen a good deal in those days, and much of it was stuff of a self-conscious morbidity which shames me when I remember it. Once or twice I even went so far as to blame Julian, in my thoughts, for her death. That was wildly irrational, I knew, and stupid. All the same, the sight of him woke something in me that I did not want to feel. So I stayed away from the house except when I called to take Anne out. Even then, as far as possible, I put Julian out of my thoughts.

That accounts, I suppose, for the fact that I did not pay much attention to the idea that he was still interested in the problem of immortality. I was too busy licking my own wounds to wonder much about his. When he resigned at the end of the year, it did occur to me to wonder whether he had got over that tragic notion, but I did not ask him about it. That would have made an awkward moment intolerable. Julian was set-faced, quiet, almost indifferent at that last meeting of ours. He spoke to me absently, as if he didn't care whether I had come or not.

The house was sold that summer. Anne, as I have said, had gone abroad. Julian began to fade into the background of his friends' thoughts,

even those of us who had been closest to him. We wondered why he did not answer our letters. We learned, at last, that he had moved from the house in Scarsdale to which we had been writing, and we could not discover where he had gone.

Until that letter of his had arrived to stir the memory, I don't suppose I had thought seriously about that *ignis fatuus* of a project of his more than once or twice. He had become a figure which existed wholly in my past; I felt about him as much a sense of a final separation as I had about Helen. More and more, too, I had come to recall Julian as the man with whom I had once worked; the genius who stood for something superb in science. Perhaps that was because Arthur Wallace and some of the others felt that his leaving the university was an irreparable loss. Julian's work, his achievements as a research scientist and discoverer, were the things we talked about at the Faculty Club on the rare occasions when we did discuss him.

9 ALL THE time that I was answering Julian Blair's questions there in the house at Barsham Harbor, I was struggling to realize that the greatest man in his field had devoted five long years to this madness; that the words he had spoken that night long ago had not been simply the expression of a distracted sorrow. It was bitterly sad to think of this man, my friend—and more than that a great and important person in his own way—mired in such a swamp of emotion and misdirected aspiration. That affirmation of his about having proved immortality stuck in my consciousness. It was the pathetic index of how far his mind had wandered from reality.

"Julian," I said, "if you have really proved immortality—"

He interrupted me. "I must have spoken somewhat imprecisely on that point, Richard. The truth is that with the data you have given me, I shall be able to prove it."

"Then you haven't . . . ?" I let the question taper off in mid-air because I couldn't bring myself to end it. To go on, to say, "spoken with Helen?" was so fantastic that it gave me a feeling of revulsion. Even as it was I found myself looking away from him and embarrassed.

He seemed to understand what I was getting at. "It takes time to get accustomed to the idea, my boy. I know that. No, I have not talked to her, but I know that she is there, waiting. Yesterday, while I was ex-

perimenting, I thought for a minute . . . but it was not so. Merely certain epiphenomena which I find slightly puzzling." His voice lost some of its confidence; there was a note of indecision in it which came close to uneasiness.

Listening to him had given me a sense of despair. The very directness of his emotion, the intensity of the excitement behind his eyes frightened me. He must be lost beyond recovery; the certainty of it settled in me like a lump of cold iron. To hear the Julian Blair whose lecture on "The Scientific Nature of Proof" was one of the events of the university year talking like a faith healer or a swami was a nightmare. I told myself that of course he was deranged, that his mind was sick and that he was not to be judged, but that didn't exorcise the feeling of miserable finality with which I looked at him. He had wandered far down this private road of his, and I wondered whether I or anyone else could turn him back.

Finally I said, "Julian, I don't know what to tell you about this. I'd rather think it over before I say anything more. Only, take it easy." I forced myself to go over to his chair and pat him on the shoulder. There was still enough loyalty and affection left in me for that.

He stood up and smiled at me as if I were his son. "Richard, you are a good friend and a kind one. By all means take time to think this over. But you cannot seriously expect me to 'take it easy,' as you put it. When a month's work—perhaps less, much less—will put the whole thing right in my hand?" His tone was amused and yet remote. We walked together to the hall and he turned and patted my arm. "Don't worry about me, Dick. I know what I'm doing." He did not look back as he went up the stairs, taking them a step at a time and with his long-fingered hand, serpented with blue veins, sliding up the banister beside him. Slowly as he went, with his physical weakness obvious in every step, there was something triumphant in that ascent of his.

For a minute or two after he had left me I did nothing, simply staring after him up the stairs with my thoughts in chaos. I could hear his footsteps overhead, going along what must have been an upper hall, and then the sound of a door closing. It was not a loud noise, and yet the house quivered slightly as if from the moving of a heavy weight, and I wondered briefly about that. Afterward, nothing but silence.

There seemed to be nothing more sensible to do, so I went back to the living room and sat down to put my thoughts into some kind of order. I tried to imagine what I ought to do next. Julian had pumped out of me everything he wanted to know and I did not believe that he would have any further interest in me. Probably Mrs Walters would not be distressed,

either, if I were to catch the evening train for New York. It was clearly the sensible thing to do.

On the other hand there was Anne. To leave her alone in this house seemed like an act of desertion, illogical as that feeling was on close examination. I told myself that Helen would have wanted me to stay and keep an eye on her, but that was an evasion. Whatever I did or did not do about Anne would not be for the sake of a woman five years dead whose image in my mind was now as evanescent as the smell of lavender in an old drawer. It would be for myself. I admitted that to myself, but left its implications alone.

The notion of two nights in a row on the train was repellent. I might as well stay, now that I was here, at least for another day. It was a part of the world new to me, and I ought to see something of it. Swimming with Anne had been fun and I wanted to do it again. Maybe some sensible way in which I could deal with Julian would present itself. There were still ten clear days before I had to be back at the university and I saw no reason to put too abrupt a termination to this visit.

While I was still engaged in this childish form of self-deception Mrs Marcy came into the room, complete with broom, dustpan, and cloth. She seemed surprised and put out to find me.

"Oh, Professor Sayles! I didn't know you were in here."

"I'm just going. I won't be in your way."

"Lands! It wouldn't be a disturbance. It's nice to see a new face in the house." She leaned her broom against the end of the sofa. "Seems like a crime, this big house and only two people in it till Miss Conner came. I like folks, Professor Sayles, and there's plenty of room. I hope you're goin' to stay a while."

Her hospitable offer amused me, particularly since it was not her house, but it warmed me, too. It was pleasant to find that I was wanted, at least by one person—two, I corrected myself. "Thank you," I answered. "I am not sure how long I can stay, but overnight, at least. I've never been in Maine before and I want to see something of it. I never dreamed there were places like this up here."

She grinned. "We say 'down'," she corrected me. "Yes, it's a beautiful house. My own folks built it."

I was surprised. "I didn't know that."

"Yep. The Talcotts. We lived here more'n a hunderd years, I reckon. My great-great-uncle Amos, he bought this land and put the place up. Used to be a sea captain." She looked out the window thoughtfully. "They say the river was full of ships in them days. Uncle Amos went to India and China and South America and I don't know where-all." Her

face lost its brightness. "I'm the last of 'em. And times ain't what they was, around here at least."

"It's still a beautiful old house."

"It is, isn't it? Wherever you look, practically, your eye finds water. Feels almost like you're in a boat right on the river. That's why Uncle Amos got it, I reckon. He called it 'The Anchorage', but it's been the Talcott place so long people don't call it anythin' else." She paused. There was something old and proud in her thin face and I knew, that no matter what happened to her, she had this memory of her ancestors to make her seem important to herself. "Uncle Amos died right in that room above here." She gestured toward the ceiling. "He used to lie in his bed by the window with a spyglass, they say, lookin' down the river fer the ships comin' in."

"It must have hurt to see the place go out of the family."

She shrugged. "You got to take things as they come. Seth was put out more'n I was, I expect. I kinda wish we could have got *somethin'* out of it, but the bank had the mortgage and they sold it fer that. That and the back taxes . . . Seth claims it's a mortal shame to see farm land like this goin' back to goldenrod and scrub pine, but I tell him we ought to be thankful these folks have money to pay fer cleanin' and cookin'. I don't know where we'd be without it, the way times have been this year." She took up the broom and began to sweep. "I expect it's a blessing in disguise, Professor Sayles. And I aim to do what I can. *She* don't know nothin' about keeping a house, that's sure."

I sat there for a while watching her tidying the room and wondering how she could be so cheerful. It must have been a bitter experience to come back as hired girl to the house that her own family had built and inhabited, but she gave no sign of it. She was humming as she worked, and the tune was "Someday My Prince Will Come," from *Snow White*. Listening to her, a lump came into my throat.

"Can't give this room more'n a lick and a promise today," she remarked finally. "It's a right big house and today I'm supposed to clean out that room of his after lunch."

"Mr Blair's room you mean?" I asked in surprise.

"Yes. Uncle Amos's room."

"I didn't suppose he'd allow anyone in there."

She stooped and began collecting the cigarette stubs from the empty fireplace. "You're right about that, mostly. But once a week they let me in to sweep the floor."

As casually as I could I put the question that was engrossing me. "What's he got in there?"

She turned round to face me and leaned back against the channeled pilaster which supported the mantel. "That's the question folks around here keep askin' me over and over. Seth fair devils me to find out an' that cousin of his, Harry, that drove you out here. All I know fer sure is that there's somethin' in the middle of that room as big as a grand piano, only more square-like. Before they let me in she always covers it with a lot of blankets an' sheets, so I can't tell you just what it's like under 'em. An' I don't get much chance to look, I can tell you that . . . All the time I'm sweepin' an' dustin' the window sills that woman stands right in the door, watchin' me, an' I have to keep humpin'." She shook her head. "But I don't reely care if I don't find out. There's a slew of wires snakin' in an' around that thing, whatever it is, an' I don't aim to git mixed up in them."

"Naturally not."

She turned back to her cleaning, crouched beside the fireplace like a sparrow, with her voice half muffled in it. "He does make a mess in there, though. The floor's a sight. Little pieces of wire an' a lot of stuff that looks like gray sawdust, an' bits of copper an' hunks of glass, an' papers all over the place. You never saw such a mess of torn-up paper. In little tiny pieces, too, like he didn't want anybody to read what was written on 'em. *She* makes me burn it—all the stuff that will burn—once a week. Stands right over me while I put it in the stove. They ain't lettin' a soul in on that thing of theirs, Professor Sayles, I tell you."

"Inventors are likely to be that way."

She straightened up with the dustpan in her hand. "I guess you're right, though he's the only one I've ever seen." She collected her broom and dustcloth. "I'll tell you something, Professor Sayles. The folks around here don't understand a man like Mr Blair."

"I suppose they don't."

"It's a fact. Even with us needin' the money like we do, I have to argue it all over again with Seth every week. You know," she laughed apologetically, "some of them thinks he's makin' one of these atom bombs like you read about in the papers. It was Cy Williams at the express office put that idea into their empty heads, if you ask me. Spreadin' all them stories about Mr Blair getting this shipment from one electric company an' that from another. I didn't hardly know how to answer 'em till I got some idea what Mr Blair reely was doing."

Momentarily her final sentence slipped past me as if it were nothing more important than the rest of what she had been saying. Then it struck home so abruptly that I came close to gasping. She was so calm about it that I looked at her incredulously. There was no sign in her expression

that she considered Julian's invention anything but the most natural in the world.

"Oh," I said lamely. "I didn't know you knew what it was."

She smiled pleasantly. "I didn't have an idea, first off. But I kinda put two an' two together. Not that I'm one for poking my nose into other people's business."

"Of course not. I didn't mean that."

"No offense taken. You see, with them tubes an' things he ordered, an' with all the wire on the floor, an' all that, I just had a feeling what it was. Mr Blair's shy an' quiet—he don't look well at all to me—an' I figured he wasn't the sort to be makin' a bomb. Though if he was to do it, I could suggest a few folks he could use it on." She compressed her lips and nodded defiantly. "Then one time I heard the noise of the thing an' I said to myself, 'Well, if it ain't some new kind of a radio he's got in there'." She stopped and looked at me to see how I was reacting, and there was the look of a child that thinks it has been clever on her face.

"Noise?" I was trying to keep something horrible from coming into my mind. "What kind of noise?"

"You know. First that kind of humming, like when the set's first warming up. An' then a lot of sounds. Mostly static, it seemed like to me."

A curious wave of coldness was sliding down my spine. She wouldn't be so calm if she knew where that noise came from. I checked myself at that point. Where Julian would claim it came from, I made a mental correction. There was something I had to know immediately. "Tell me," I said and the words almost stuck in my throat, "does his radio ever get any voices? Talking or singing?"

She hesitated. "I expect it ain't that far along. It doesn't reely work right yet, but it's only the last week or so I've heard it at all. I guess he'll have it goin' better directly; about all you can tell now is it's goin' to be some special kind of radio. I haven't heard any voices, exactly. All I could tell was that it was one of them short-wave things."

"How did you know that?"

"Well, they say those things will get broadcasts from all over the world, though most of the time they don't sound so good to me. But this one of his has got the same kind of faraway note to it."

The breath seemed to be coming into my lungs with less effort. "But you never heard anything you could recognize?"

She reflected a minute, leaning on her broom and staring at the ceiling. "Well," this came slowly, "'bout a week ago he had it turned on one evening when I was washin' the supper dishes. I could hear it plain enough, even clear down in the kitchen. An' it sounded then like it *might* have

been voices. Only there was too many of them at once to make out anything separate. If you've heard the people cheerin' at a football broadcast, you'll get the general idea of what I mean."

"I see." It was absurd how hard my heart was still hammering. For a moment I had been imagining something ridiculous and outside the bounds of sense. I felt ashamed of having given credence, even for an instant, to the thought that Julian might, indeed, have done what he claimed to be on the point of accomplishing. Even that instant's belief had showed me how frightening it would be to believe that he was *not* deluded. To let the world of the dead back in upon the living was a conception so horrible that I was shaken—a blasphemy more frightening than anything the theologians had ever conceived. . . . And then I was smiling to myself as I understood what it was she had really heard.

That humming, that confused murmur—it was obviously nothing but tubes heterodyning in some way. Perhaps there had been an aurora borealis that night—it seemed to me that I'd heard it did funny things to all sorts of electric apparatus. If the thing made a noise, as Mrs Marcy said, it was a noise which it induced itself. Yes, I told myself, there was no doubt that was what she had heard.

I felt weak and happy with relief.

When I could trust my voice again, I said, "Well, Mrs Marcy, it's too fine a day to waste indoors. I'm going out and enjoy some of your famous Maine air and scenery."

She nodded with the birdlike jerk of her head that I already thought of as characteristic. "It's a beautiful state, the state of Maine. In summer, that is. Winter is something else again."

We left the living room together and, as we turned down the hall toward the kitchen, a thought occurred to me. "By the way, Mrs Marcy. I wouldn't say anything about hearing the set working to anybody. Especially to Mrs Walters and Mr Blair."

She gave me a dry grin. "Don't worry. We scarcely so much as pass the time of day. She ain't exactly sociable."

I grinned back at her. "Poison ivy?"

She shrugged. "If you stay away from it, you never need worry," she remarked.

I thought of that afterward. It was the soundest sort of common sense and yet, it failed her.

10 MRS WALTERS was sitting on the edge of the back steps when I came out the kitchen door, in the shadow made by the wall of the ell that ran out toward the barn. To my momentary astonishment, she was stringing beans. Little as I had seen of her, it startled me to find her at a natural household task; I had the instantaneous feeling she had been expecting me and that the beans had been pressed into service to complete a picture of herself which she was trying to draw for my benefit. Nothing in her face betrayed any surprise when I came in sight; she barely glanced up and promptly returned her gaze to the level meadow and the bay beyond it. The slow, even movements of her fingers were uninterrupted: pick up a bean with the left hand, snip off the tips with the knife in her right, two precise motions to strip off the strings, and a third to deposit the finished bean in the enameled cook pot in her broad lap. . . . She was the quintessence of naturalness.

In saying that she was expecting me, I am merely guessing. Mrs Walters was too clever a woman to make even the smallest slip; I never found out just how her intelligence worked. Even Julian, I think, never understood all that was in her mind, though he must have had one appalling glimpse, at least, of what she was capable of doing if she had to.

Anyhow, she was waiting for me on those steps and my instinct told me so at once. I debated going past her and on up the road with merely a casual word. If she wanted anything of me, that would force her hand, make her at least call after me. But I dismissed the idea instantly. She might see just why I had done so; the less she realized her effect on me the easier things were going to be—and the more likely I was to be of help to Julian. I sauntered calmly down the steps and sat on the bottom one.

"Gorgeous day."

"Yes." I thought again that there was some kind of music in her voice. "Those clouds mean rain, though. Perhaps this afternoon or tonight."

They were piling up over the far shore of the bay, only a low line of them, but they had not been there at all a few hours before.

"This is beautiful country," I said. "It's the first time I've been in Maine."

"Really. I suppose it is handsome. I never notice the places where I find myself."

"Oh, come now. Don't tell me you'd as soon be in Boston or New York as here?"

That experimental cast failed to produce a rise. If she had lived in either place, her reply gave no inkling of it. "There is no difference of

importance," she declared. "My life is turned inward, Professor Sayles. I live in my mind and the surroundings of my body don't make a bit of difference."

This curious speech was delivered with a calmness that left me no loophole for further attack. Whether she actually meant what she said or not, the subject was closed. But I did not have quite wit enough to understand that; after I had seen more of her I should not have mistaken the note of finality in her voice. I tried again and, because I was challenged by her attitude, led a stronger card than I should have. "All that surprises me, then," I said, "is that Julian should come to a place like this. He's as indifferent to his environment as you are to yours. I supposed you were the one who had an enthusiasm for Maine."

I could not see her face without craning around, but I knew there was a smile on it. "Oh, no," she said. "Julian came here, I guess, to find privacy and freedom from interruption."

"He seems to have found the ideal place for that."

Her silence was so negative that it made me uncomfortable. I turned round and saw that she had withdrawn her scrutiny from the meadow and the clouds and was watching me, not narrowly or critically, but with an incurious steadiness that made me feel awkward and out of place. "You have talked to Julian already," she said, and it was a statement, not a question. She was perfectly well-aware that I had done so, and there was a suspicion in my mind that she had also managed to overhear most of what we had said.

"Yes," I admitted. "We had a talk. I'm afraid I was not able to help him much."

Even through the back of my head I could feel her eyes continuing to regard me with the same persistence. "What do you think of what he is doing?" she inquired as if it were the most ordinary question imaginable.

"What can I think?" I retorted. She had taken me off my guard. "I'm not competent to judge, of course. But I think the same thing that every sane person would. I think it's mad." Then I began to regret the impetuosity of my reply. "Of course, it means only that Julian has never got over the shock of losing his wife. He loved her with his whole heart and her loss was a disaster for him. This idea of his is a compensation mechanism. He is not necessarily mad, but the idea is. That's what I think."

She smiled slightly. "I can see you're pretty strong-minded about it. What makes you believe that on the subject of this . . . what did you call it—'compensation mechanism'—he is insane? If that's what you meant." Her tone was not at all combative; it was neutral and reserved.

"His morbid obsession with death. His fantastic notion that he can prove immortality by making a machine to talk to the souls of the dead. His conviction of the importance of his work, his absorption in it to the exclusion of everything else. His coming here, burying himself from his friends and his proper world."

She nodded. "I see. On your own premise, you are quite correct, Mr Sayles."

"My premise?"

"That Julian's project is impossible."

"No normal person would consider that it was possible."

Speaking in a soft voice, but with the most complete conviction she answered me. "Julian's mind transcends the normal. And the thing he is trying to do is possible."

I tried to put the contempt I felt into my look. "See here," I turned and told her, "I'm not nervous, overwrought, broken, like Julian. You don't need to give me any of that."

She flushed and the darkness behind her eyes seemed momentarily to dilate. The blade of the kitchen knife in her hands trembled slightly, and for a second I was afraid of her and alert. Then her face changed to amusement and she looked at me as if I were a refractory child. "Professor Sayles, you are an ignorant man, but you seem to be intelligent, so perhaps I can say this without hurting your feelings. When you come to appraise Julian Blair and what he is doing, don't forget that you are doing so wholly from your own point of view. You are still a young man, in some ways I think a very young man, and there are a good many experiences still ahead of you."

Her manner and what she said were difficult to tolerate. "Thank you," I told her. "I shall remember what you say."

"That's wise of you," she said as if she had not heard the sharpness in my tone. "There are a good many things you and your science have left out of account, Mr Sayles. Julian is tackling one of them now. If he succeeds, you admit he will be the greatest man in all human history."

"If," I said and then changed my mind. "Will he? I wonder?"

She turned away and began to watch the white ridges of cloud piled along the southwestern horizon. "All of us are too much concerned with this life," she remarked; she spoke as if what she were saying was an obvious fact instead of a philosophic platitude. "It is time that a man like Julian turned to the truly important problems." After that she was silent for a while, but I knew she had not finished and decided not to interrupt. When she went on again, her tone was more personal and definite. "I have devoted my whole life to the thing to which Julian is

now devoting his, Mr Sayles. You cannot ask me to consider him insane."

That turned me round again in my seat and I stared at her to see if her look gave any clue to the meaning of that cryptic statement. But her large, heavy face was without any expression and she was watching the horizon again. "You . . . what?" I said at last.

"I thought you knew that," she answered and there was something like regret in her voice, as if she were sorry she had told me anything that I had not heard before. "I was certain Julian would tell you. I am what you would call a medium."

That was it, of course! That explained everything. . . . Why she was with Julian, and what there was about her that made me uncomfortable. A sense of relief went through me with the insight. It seemed to me that now it would be easier to help Julian. I had only to deal with a woman who was, after all, simply a member of a group of fakers. Every sensible person knew that mediums were cheats and frauds. I told myself triumphantly that however skillful and deep-seated her influence with Julian might be, it was still vulnerable.

"Yes," she went on quietly, "I am what we sometimes think of as a station. A person who lives mostly in this world but occasionally, in a limited way, and very partially, in the other." She smiled again, almost maternally. "I suppose you are one of the skeptics who does not believe there is another world."

"I am a real skeptic and I don't know whether there is another world—or not," I corrected her. "If there is, it must be one which is fundamentally unknowable in terms of human cognition."

"Cognition!" There was an edge of mockery in her voice. "You have a fine set of words to express your own prejudices." Then she sighed. "Well, I won't argue with you, Professor. Perhaps I'll have an opportunity some time to show you how limited your knowledge is."

"My vocabulary is probably no better than it should be," I said. "And I agree that there is no point in argument. But I want to tell you that I think you are doing a very dangerous thing, Mrs Walters, one that you should stop at once."

"What do you mean?" Her voice was harder.

"I mean leading Julian deeper into this morass of his obsession with the loss of his wife," I said. "You are giving him hope and encouragement. Did you ever stop to think that he is, fundamentally, a scientist? That this pseudo truth you are giving him will be at war with the whole pattern of his mind, even if he seems consciously to welcome it? That you will ultimately produce a breakdown there—if it hasn't happened already?"

She stood up abruptly. "You are insulting," she said scornfully. "Insulting and ignorant. Julian would have had a breakdown, as you put it, if he had not found me. I gave him the hope he needed to go on living. Which is more than your wonderful science did for him. It was his science that almost destroyed him, not me."

She had her hand on the knob of the kitchen door. The blazing anger that looked out of her eyes made me afraid. But we had gone too far to withhold any thrust. "Very altruistic of you," I remarked, looking her full in the face. "All of Julian's friends ought to be deeply grateful to you, Mrs Walters. I wonder how you have been able to afford this generosity of yours?"

My meaning did not escape her. I watched the barb sink in and saw that she smarted under it, but I had expected it to produce an instantaneous retort that would show her in the true colors of the game she was playing. Instead, she was silent. She gave me a slow glance of smoldering anger and contempt, turned on her heel, and went through the door without a backward glance. She did not even slam it behind her, but closed it quietly and firmly. I was left to stand there and inspect its panels, bleached by the sun and weathered to a neutral silver-gray.

When I turned and began to walk along the road away from the house, it came over me that I had played my cards foolishly and that she had trumped every trick but one. She had given one point away—that she was a medium—but only because she was certain that I would find it out anyhow. For some obscure reason I felt ashamed. I had been rude, even if calculatingly and for good reason. But the anger with which she had met my final sneer was not, I felt convinced, a theatrical performance. She meant it. Whatever she was, she was not a pure and simple cheat. Much as I wanted to discount her, I had to admit to myself that when she spoke of her calling she had sounded genuine, in spite of her magniloquent words. And though I was convinced that mediums were never genuine, the deception in this case plainly included herself as well. She believed in her own power.

That fact made me pause in my thinking. I wondered whether I was competent to form such a judgment. Everything I had ever heard about mediums had convinced me that nine out of ten of them were charlatans. The tenth was a victim of self-delusion; if you were willing to admit that clairvoyance and telepathy were possible, the results which that tenth psychic could sometimes obtain were explicable in terms of those powers. And impressive though it might be to admit that one person could read another's mind or perceive objects with an inner eye which could penetrate walls and mock at distance, it was still as far as ever

from accepting the notion that anything human survived the phenomenon of death. Or, if survival were a fact, that anyone could communicate with the other side of the barrier.

Despite Mrs Walters' faith in herself that she could actually bridge that gap—if it was a gap and not the ultimate abyss—I never for a moment believed it. I do not believe it now, though it is less easy to dismiss the hypothesis. But what was fatally wrong in my thinking, there on that empty road, was that since she was not what she claimed to be, she was not, therefore dangerous. . . .

It should have occurred to me that, even in despair, Julian would be a hard man to fool and that Mrs Walters must have shown him evidence of something more important than occasional flashes of telepathy. If I had thought about that for a while, tried to imagine what she had been able to do which would interest him, I might have caught a glimpse of what was likely to happen. Instead, the problem presented itself to me in a completely irrelevant light—the question of what I ought to do about Julian.

The answer was certainly not obvious. I mulled it over in my mind for a good while, but in the end came back to the only real idea I had, which was to wait a while, see more plainly what was going on, and try to persuade Julian to let me examine his work. Once I reached that point I counted on being able to see the flaw in it—the reason why it wouldn't do what he claimed. I never doubted that such a flaw existed. Perhaps I might be able to break him of this delusion at once, but if not, the entering wedge would have been driven. He had suggested that he'd achieved some partial success. (How partial they both were, I thought—Julian with his invention, Mrs Walters with her contact in the "other" world.) Very well, then. I would persuade Julian to demonstrate to me how far he had got. He would have to talk to me as one scientist to another. That in itself would help. He would be reminded of his own innate standards and see that he was being false to them.

The plan was naïve, of course. I see that now. But it might have worked. Even now I can't say positively that it wouldn't have done what I hoped. But there was never an opportunity to test it. And when Julian unwittingly gave us a demonstration of what he had accomplished, I did not know it for what it was.

11 THAT PROOF did not come till later in an endless day. Meanwhile, the hours dragged along one after the other. By noon the weather had grown sultry and the bank of clouds across the bay was higher and darker. The air was without motion and full of an impending violence that made the hairs at the back of my neck prickle. There was certainly going to be a thunderstorm later.

By the time I had finished thinking out what I was going to do, it was almost noon, and I turned my steps back along the road to the house. As I walked toward it, the sun-heated air from the road made its image waver and tremble before me. It stood up at the end of the Point almost as naked as a lighthouse; there were no trees around it, and the three cubes in its composition—barn, ell, and house—were related to each other as arbitrarily as boulders on a beach.

Lunch, like breakfast, was in the kitchen; apparently it had not seemed worth-while to Julian and Mrs Walters to clean out the junk in the other front room and eat there. It was typical of the whole ascetic and yet slovenly way in which they seemed to be living. The meal was desultory. Mrs Marcy cooked well, but the dishes she set before us were all hot and there was too much of them. We were not harvest hands. Julian barely picked at his food, swallowing a mouthful now and then more out of deference to Anne's insistence that he eat something than out of any appetite. She hardly ate more herself and spoke scarcely at all. I felt that she did not know just what the *status quo* was and thought it better to take no chances. She kept one eye on Mrs Walters most of the time, with now and then a grin in my direction. It was pleasant to see her across the table from me.

The only one who enjoyed that meal was Mrs Walters, who sat on my left. She was as silent as the rest of us, but this time she ate steadily and with a heartiness that was faintly revolting to me.

None of our few and unimportant remarks is worth reporting. Twenty minutes after we sat down we had all left the table and gone our separate ways. Julian retired upstairs, presumably to continue his work, though Mrs Walters reminded him that he would have only an hour or two before it was time to clean what she called "our room", which I understood to mean the laboratory. He nodded and said that he would be through in plenty of time. Mrs Walters stayed in the kitchen talking to Mrs Marcy about supper and instructing her to fix a bed for me somewhere upstairs. I didn't pay any attention to what it was all about, but I am positive that it was mere household routine.

Anne and I wandered outdoors. Somehow I was beginning to feel that

the less time I spent inside the walls of that house the better. Each time I stepped out one of its doors I felt indefinably relieved, freer. We wandered across the meadow again and lay down in the grass under the big maple tree near the edge of the river bay. It was peaceful there and I felt relaxed. My pipe, when I got together the energy to light it, tasted good. Anne lay beside me looking comfortable and intermittently braiding grass stems into some sort of bracelet. I knew she wanted to talk to me after a while, but that she was waiting, as I was, for the heavy mood of lunch to lift.

"Well," she said finally, "what do you think of our happy home, God bless it?"

"I don't like it."

"Were you shocked by Uncle Julian? He looks so old and sick to me."

"Yes," I said, "and I've been wondering whether to tell you what he had to say. Maybe I'm doing you a rotten trick, Anne, but I think you'd better know about it." And I told her what he was doing. She listened to me without interrupting once; the only way I could judge the effect of what I was saying lay in observing the steady drain of the color out of her face.

"He's really sick, then," she said when I finished speaking, "in his mind, too."

"I'm afraid so."

"And where does she come into all this? Or didn't he tell you that?"

"No, but she did. We sat on the back steps and had a chat." I told her about that, too.

"So that's it," she said, still weaving the stems of grass together. "What do you think we ought to do?"

"In a minute," I said. "Meantime, there's one more thing. Mrs Marcy came in after I'd talked to Julian. She chattered away for twenty minutes or so. And she told me something odd. . . ." I was conscious that my voice gave away some of the disquietude which the remembrance of that bustling little woman brought me.

"Don't tell me," Anne said, rolling over and sitting up in the grass, "that there's something queer about Elora, too? Elora—isn't that a sweet name? She must have been adorable ten or twelve years ago." Her voice sounded as if that was almost before the dawn of recorded time.

"Ages ago," I agreed drily. "The point that seems odd to me is that Julian and Mrs Walters keep the thing covered when Mrs Marcy's in the room. Or so she says."

Anne frowned thoughtfully and thrust a stem of grass between teeth that were white in her brown face. She sat so long without answering

that I almost forgot what I had said in watching the leaf shadows brush to and fro across her forehead. Then she shook her head. "They're both taking no chances on letting the great secret escape them, Dick. But I don't see anything curious about covering the thing up. If only to keep the dust of sweeping off whatever it is."

"Well," I said slowly, "maybe there isn't. Probably it's just my imagination working overtime. There's something about this place that makes you do more wondering than thinking, anyhow. But if I were making a complicated piece of electrical machinery, I don't think I'd bother to shroud it over so even a Maine farmer's wife couldn't look at it. It's a stupid sort of precaution. A bit of dust wouldn't matter enough to go to all that trouble, and Mrs Marcy couldn't grasp the least thing about it by looking at it. And Mrs Walters is right there, she says, all the time she's sweeping."

"Yes . . ." Anne agreed without conviction. "Maybe they're afraid it would scare her."

If there were any truth at all in the superstition that coming events are foreshadowed, then was the moment for it to have been revealed. But I heard those casual words of Anne's with no reaction, no feeling of pre-science. I laughed—and I should like to be able to call back that laughter now—without bothering to retort. The idea was so simple that it could not be true. Only later, when I saw the figures which are now nothing but puddled lumps of melted wire, did I think of Anne's remark again. A great many more important things than the first sight of those seven . . . things . . . happened to me before I saw the last of the house on Setauket Point, but none that come up more easily against the dark side of my lids when my eyes are closed.

Anne herself attached no importance to her suggestion. She grinned at my laughter and went on, "Anyhow, it doesn't seem to me to matter. The problem is what we're going to do."

"What I thought of this morning was trying to get into Julian's confidence to the point where he'd let me see this mechanical marvel of his. Perhaps he'd be willing to let me work with him and help him on it. I once had a laboratory job under him, you know. Little by little I might be able to prove to him that the thing won't and can't work, all the time pretending to believe in it myself."

It was Anne's turn to laugh. "Boring from within. You talk like the Communist party line. But it might work, at that." Something must have occurred to her, because after a moment her voice took on assurance and lost most of its underlying amusement. "You've got something there, I

think. It's the best suggestion I can think of. Provided you have the time?"

"I've got ten free days."

"That ought to be enough," she said, and though her face and tone were both sober, I had an idea she was smiling to herself about something. "Only look out for that woman. If she gets an idea what you're trying to do, or if you get her jealous of her standing with Julian . . ." She bit through the grass stem with an audible crunch.

That consideration gave me no pleasure. "She's going to be awkward," I admitted.

We had been talking earnestly but not, I think, with particularly heavy hearts. There was something exciting in the situation for both of us. I knew that no matter what happened I should enjoy the next few days because I could spend part of them with Anne. She must have been glad of any company in that lonely house and relieved because I had showed up. But simultaneously we realized what a tragic and pathetic sort of conspiracy we were cooking up. We each loved Julian, in my case remotely but genuinely for all that, and we had been forgetting him.

"Listen, Dick," Anne said, turning toward me and putting her hand on mine, "we've got to pull this thing off. We can't fail. It's sure to be the end of Uncle Julian if we do. I'll try to keep her out of the way as much as I can. But don't fail."

"I'll try not to."

"Do you think he believes the thing is nearly finished?" she said, to break the awkward pause that followed.

"I think so. I told you what he said about it, and Mrs Marcy seems to have heard it humming, so he must have put the current through it, at least." I told her about the noises that Mrs Marcy had described.

Anne looked at me steadily while I spoke, and there were amazement and something else in her face. "So that's what that noise is!" she exclaimed when I had finished.

"You've heard it too?"

"Yes. The humming. And the other thing too."

The same cold thrill that had gone through me once before that day, when I had been talking to Mrs Marcy, swept into me again. I told myself I was a fool to be so affected by hearing that Julian's machine made noises. But if it made a certain kind of noise . . . I put that thought out of my head. The thing could not work and that was that. Still, I wanted to be reassured. "You didn't hear any voices, I trust?" I made my voice sound light and casual.

"No." The look was still on her face. "I never even thought of voices,

though what Mrs Marcy said about the cheering is close to it, in some ways. It wasn't such a loud noise. Maybe I mean that it sounded as if it were coming from a long way off. A roaring noise, like a waterfall, only coming to you down wind from very far away."

"Far away." It was strange that Anne and Mrs Marcy should have chosen the same phrase to describe what they had heard. It was not a particularly helpful description and somehow I didn't like it. I turned the words over in my mind, trying to form an audible picture from them, but it was no use. It was just a phrase that I didn't like.

"Any sort of electric circuit with tubes and a speaker in it can be made to give off a noise. As Mrs Marcy said, like a short-wave radio that's not tuned to any particular station. There's a phenomenon called heterodyning that might produce such an effect."

Anne looked unconvinced. "Uncle Julian ought to know that, I should think. I hope you're right and that's all it was." She looked away and said, very quietly, "All I can tell you is that it wasn't a pleasant sound."

"Not a bit like a lot of happy angels making music before the Lord?"

"Don't!" she said sharply and lay down again in the grass without letting me see her face.

The sultriness of the afternoon began to make us both drowsy. The smell of hot meadow grass and earth was heavy in the air which was suddenly very quiet. I lay beside her and my eyes began to close. I didn't want to think; it had already been a fairly long day as far as I was concerned. I relaxed, maybe I dozed. At any rate, the next thing I noticed was that Anne was shaking my shoulder.

"The sun'll be under those thunderheads in a few minutes," she was saying. "Let's have another swim first."

Apparently she had gone back to the house while I lay there, because she had our suits under her arm. I stood up, groggy with sleep, and we went down to the small cove. Anne was right about the approaching storm; the clouds were towering high over the far shore of the bay and looked swollen and black. I left my clothes rolled up in a tight bundle and stuffed under the thickest willow I could find.

Anne was waiting for me on the sand; she looked minutely small under the great loom of the clouds beyond her. We waded out together. After the moist heat of the meadow the river felt sharply cold and clean—I was wide-awake at once with that heightened perception of everything round me which lets me know how seldom it is that I am altogether alive. The water, I noticed, was the color of amber and Anne's long legs below its surface were turned to gold. After a time I stopped swimming and dived to find out if I could reach the bottom. I went

down a long way, with the water getting darker and colder and heavier around me as I pulled myself down, but I didn't touch anything. Evidently the bay was deeper than the configuration of the shore suggested.

"Deep out here," I said when I got back to the surface.

"Yes. Isn't it a wonderful color? Mrs Marcy says the sawmills up the river dump sawdust into it, and that's what makes it look like liquid amber."

We swam on toward the approaching storm. Lifting my head to look at the far shore, I saw the edge of the cloud shadow racing across the river to meet us. There was something tremendous in its coming, soundless and swift as an avalanche and, for a moment, I had an impulse to flail my way back to shore before it could sweep over me. But it was moving with the speed of an express train; by mutual consent we stopped swimming and watched the edge of darkness bear down on us.

"Oh, here it comes!" Anne exclaimed like a little girl and plunged under the surface as if to escape its impact. When she came up the shadow was far over us and striding across the quarter mile of water to the Point. We turned and followed it. Now, with the sun covered, the water felt colder. Once in a while we stopped to look up at the towering blackness of the clouds over us. Thunder was muttering along the ridge across the river and there was an occasional pale flash of lightning under the fringes of the clouds. At last we saw the rain, silver-gray and opaque as a wall, sweep down the shoulder of the valley, obliterate the roofs and streets of Barsham Harbor, and charge out across the river. Puffs of wind struck the water ahead and around us and suddenly we were swimming through a crepe of ripples.

"We're going to get caught in the rain!" Anne shouted to me. Laughter and excitement were in her face.

"We better hurry if we don't want to get soaked," I answered and she grinned again.

In two minutes the edge of the squall was hissing in the water round us, slashing the surface of the river with an intensity that made it hard to see the shore toward which we were heading. We swam on, and I heard Anne suddenly singing in exultation:

"His chariots of wrath,
The deep thunderclouds form,
And dark is His path
On the wings of the storm."

I hadn't thought of that hymn for years, but it seemed to belong with the moment. . . .

It may seem that I am including a great deal in this narrative which has no real bearing on the story of Julian Blair and the thing that happened in the house on Setauket Point. Perhaps, but I believe that even in a laboratory it is difficult to separate the experiment from the whole nexus in which it is performed, and in life impossible. My evidence will be more valuable for being presented in its setting, and every detail seems to me important. For instance, as a psychologist I should have to admit that by the time we reached the shore, I was sufficiently out of breath so the blood was pounding in my ears, and any statement of what we heard at such a moment should be discounted because of that simple physiological phenomenon.

This time there was no question of drying ourselves on the beach. We put on our shoes and rolled our clothes into tighter bundles. Then we struck off across the meadow toward the house, running not fast but steadily. Anne, I saw, was no more winded than I was—and I keep myself in good physical condition—and she ran with an effortless reach and drive of the legs that was pleasant to watch. The first frenzy of the rain had abated and the wind, at our backs, was less fitful as it slanted the rain over and past us in long streaks. There were still random bursts of thunder, but the heavy artillery of it had subsided. Our shoes made squelching sounds in the soggy grass.

It happened as we passed the maple tree under which we had been lying earlier in the afternoon. Between one step and the next I found myself stopped, as if I had run into a wall, or come to the edge of an unexpected cliff and halted instinctively. For a second I did not understand why I had brought up short, and then I knew. It was the thing Anne and Mrs Marcy had tried to describe to me. By the time I was fully aware of it, the noise had stopped, but the echo of it was still in my ears. . . . From ahead of us somewhere—I felt certain that it was from the house itself—had come such a sound as I have never heard in any other place. It was a deep and indescribable thing, as single and yet as multiple as the noise of a tempest or the roar of a rock slide. An instant after it had reached us there was a sharp rush of wind and a stinging splatter of rain across my naked back, so that I checked my stride only momentarily and was running again toward the blurred loom of the house ahead in the same second, perhaps, that I had paused.

In saying that the noise came from the house, I must add that there was, then, no evidence to support that statement. Nothing more than intuition. No light flared behind the windows—there was nothing visibly altered in the aspect of the house which was turned toward us. But I knew the sound had come from it and the echo was in my ears as I ran.

So strong was that echo that it made me doubt the evidence of my eyes. That sound had had the timbre of catastrophe in it and yet, my eyes assured me that everything was as it should be. But no thing-as-it-should-be had produced that noise. There had been a tremendous quality about it, muted by distance and softened by the hiss of falling rain, but still terrifying. I thought of the echo that reached the people of Japan when the island of Krakatoa exploded two thousand miles and more away from them, in Sunda Strait. Listening to the percussion of that enormous event they must have felt the same vague terror and confusion that were in my own mind.

Anne, still running easily and lightly, turned her streaming face toward me and, in the twilight of the storm, I saw that her eyes were wide—with excitement or something less definable. “That’s it!” she cried, “that’s the noise.”

“Good God,” I said.

“The loudest it’s ever been,” she told me between the deep draughts of her breathing.

After that we wasted no more words. Together we pounded across the meadow and, long before we reached the house, the breath was whistling in my throat. Ahead of us, through the rain, the house began to loom larger and more distinct. When we were within two hundred yards of it I looked up once and saw something that puzzled me. There was a patch of white behind the blank darkness of one of the second-story windows, a vague glimmer of something that was the size and outline of a human face, though I could make out no features at all except, I thought, the eyes. I wondered who was watching us come pelting home. Julian? Mrs Marcy? . . . It didn’t matter. In two strides more of our running, that face was gone.

Maybe there had been nothing there except my imagination. I forgot about it immediately and it did not come back to my mind until events had forced me to review every least detail of this afternoon.

Panting and blown we flung through the kitchen door. There was no one in the room and it looked utterly normal. A pot of something was cooking on the stove and there was a good smell of steam and condiments in the air. We did not stop even to put on our clothes, but tossed the bundles onto the table almost without pausing and went on through the door into the hall.

That was where it was. I heard Anne give a gasp as she reached the foot of the stairs, and then I was looking over her shoulder and feeling suddenly numb. They were all three there—Julian, Mrs Walters, and Mrs Marcy. Two of them had whirled as they heard our feet on the boards behind them. The two were Julian and Mrs Walters.

12 MRS MARCY was lying at the foot of the stairs, on her back, with her arms flung out. Her face was a flat gray-white and her eyes were closed. It was dim in that hall, and we were both winded and trembling with the aftermath of our sprint across the fields, but Anne and I had the same impression when we saw the woman lying there. In her limpness, in the sprawl of her arms, there was something not quite natural, a distortion that was almost imperceptible and which made me think of a doll flung into a corner by a child bored with playing.

In the next second, Mrs Walters was kneeling beside that motionless figure. "She's had a fall." Her voice was decisive, almost unperturbed. "Did you see it happen, Julian?"

I was shocked at the way he looked—like a man who has received a sudden knife in his back. His eyes were staring and black, and he wavered as he stood there, three or four steps from the bottom of the stairs, with one hand on the balustrade to steady himself. "I . . . I don't know," he answered finally in a thin, groping voice.

"Of course you do," said the woman, without looking at him. "She must have slipped coming down the stairs. Or perhaps she fainted right on the stairs and fell. Didn't you hear it happen?"

Julian's eyes were still unfocussed on anything. "I don't know," he said. "I don't know."

I shook the inaction of surprise from me and started forward.

"Wait a minute, Mr Sayles," the woman was saying, and her voice was so calm and steady that it was soothing, "let's get her on the sofa." She picked Mrs Marcy up as if the burden was no more than a child and strode into the living room. As I followed, I noticed that one thin, freckled arm hung down, the palm of the dangling hand turned oddly outward from the limp body. I saw that, but I didn't think about it.

As a matter of fact, I did not behave with dispatch or assurance in those first few minutes. It was a shock, of course, to come on that scene at the foot of the stairs, and somehow a surprise, too. The note of disaster in that noise we had heard in the meadow had not prepared me for this ugly yet comprehensible accident. Mrs Walters' calmness, the certainty with which she acted, kept me from anything except an incredulous contemplation of the whole scene. Probably fate was wise in making me into a college professor. I do not seem cut out to be a man of action.

Mrs Walters put her burden down on the sofa and bent over it. Without turning round she said, coolly and rapidly, "Anne, there's a bottle of aromatic spirits in my room. Get it at once, please. Bring a glass and a spoon, too. Water in the glass. Mr Sayles, will you give Julian a hand? This has been a shock to him."

Hypnotized by her assurance and uncertain of myself I went back into the hall. Julian was still standing on the same step, staring down at the boards where Mrs Marcy had been lying a minute before. He was swaying on his feet, the look of blank surprise and horror still on his face. When I put my hand on his shoulder I felt his whole body trembling. "Julian," I said, "are you all right?"

"I'm all right." His voice was so low that I could scarcely hear it. Then he added something to himself, words that were hardly more than the sound of breath. I could not make them out.

The next few minutes are a kaleidoscope in my memory. Some way or other I got Julian down the steps and into the living room. I made him sit down in a chair. The only part of that which sticks in my mind is wholly irrelevant—the patch of wetness on his shirt where I made him lean against me. Then Anne's feet came hurrying down the stairs and the next thing I noticed was the white look of strain and alarm on her face as she brought the things Mrs Walters had requisitioned. The big woman was the only one of us who seemed to be in perfect command of herself. She put a spoonful of the aromatic spirits between Mrs Marcy's gray lips as calmly as if she were oiling a sewing machine. Anne and I stood behind her helplessly, looking down at the unmoving body huddled on the sofa. We could not see much of it over the immense black curve of Mrs Walters' shoulders and back.

Suddenly she straightened and confronted us. "Put some clothes on, you ninnies," she said harshly. "Anne, as soon as you're dressed, get the car out of the barn and go to town. Get a doctor. Don't waste time stopping at the Marcy house, either. Their phone will be out—it always is after a thunderstorm. And hurry."

She was right, of course, and we retreated to the kitchen and found our clothes, still bundled. They were not really very damp—at least, mine weren't. Anne disappeared upstairs. I changed right there in the kitchen and I changed fast. These events which I am describing here in all the detail that I was subsequently forced to remember were actually happening to us with great speed. It was natural, I think, that we did not see what was going on.

By the time I had pulled on the most essential items of clothing, Anne was running downstairs. She scarcely paused on her way through the kitchen. "I'll get the car out and warm it up a minute," she said. "You can finish tying your shoelaces while I'm doing that." The kitchen door slammed behind her.

As I lifted my head from the second shoe I saw that Mrs Walters was standing in the door to the hall, looking at me. She was, indeed,

leaning calmly against the doorframe and I noticed with reluctant admiration that there was no confusion or uncertainty on her face. It was as placid as if this emergency were a matter of routine. "Mr Sayles," she said in a level voice, "I'm assuming that you will go with Anne. I think an older head will be a good idea."

"Of course I'll go," I said. "Unless you need me here, or something."

"No, there's nothing more to do here. She's come to, now—the aromatic spirits I suppose—and she's not in any pain yet. But if she's seriously hurt, naturally she will be as soon as the shock wears off. You and Anne will have to hurry. Look out for the road, though. It will be like grease after this rain."

"Certainly," I said, irked by the didactic tone of her speech.

She must have caught the irritation in my voice. "Excuse me if I sound bossy, but I'm in a rush. I don't want to leave her alone too long, even if she does seem to be all right, really. Anyhow, Mr Sayles, I meant that about not stopping at Seth Marcy's house, partly for the reason I gave you and partly because I don't want that fool of a man over here till we're sure his wife's all right. He'll make a scene and a whole mountain out of a molehill, and not do her any good."

Much as I did not like that woman, I had to admire the sure, executive way she was handling the whole miserable business. I told her that I was not cross, and to get on back to Mrs Marcy, and promised that we'd return with a doctor in an hour or less, and that we wouldn't stop at Marcy's—though I had some mental reservations about that last. Then a horn honked outside the door and I went out into the yard.

The rain was still falling, but not in gusts and torrents. It looked as though it might stop in half an hour or so, but it was still coming down fast enough to make me sprint for the battered Ford sedan in which Anne was sitting. Maine mud and dust were plastered all over it, but the motor sounded smooth under the hood. Even before my door was closed Anne was wrenching the car around and stepping it up from gear to gear. As we straightened out into the road the machine slewed sickeningly and I perceived that this was going to be quite a ride. The storm had soaked the loose top dirt of the track and turned it into a slimy lubricant between our wheels and the underlying hardpan. We skidded at every rut.

"How about chains?"

Anne didn't take her eyes off the road, but she grinned. "Haven't any, Dick. Don't worry." We struck a pothole. When the car was back on an even keel she said, "Do you think we ought to stop off at Marcy's any-

how? It'll be a mile, and ten minutes, out of our way if the phone isn't working."

"No," I answered. "I guess Mrs Walters is right about that. We won't save much time even if the phone is working and it seems to me like a poor gamble."

"Probably." She avoided a crater full of brown water and wrestled the car back across the slimy surface of the road. "Seth Marcy's nobody's pet, anyhow. I've only seen him a couple of times, but he's the kind of man who doesn't open his mouth unless he has something unpleasant to say. I feel sorry for Elora."

"We'll forget him, then, till we get a doctor. After that we can go to his house and tell him."

We went on, not exactly racing but making incredible speed for the condition of the road. Anne handled the car with a magnificent blend of daring and judgment; I thought we weren't going to make the bridge at the turn by the creek, but we got across it by a hair, and when we hit the road along the far bank of the bay the going was better. Even with the chances Anne took, I did not feel nervous about her driving. There was competence in the way her hands were resting on the wheel, in the way she sat behind it, alert but not tense. It was, indeed, strangely pleasant, that ride. We were in a private world of our own, with rain on our roof and streaking down the windows, shutting us in together. I liked it. For a mile or so I forgot our errand, forgot the bleak house behind us, and thought of nothing except that this fortuitous intimacy was different from anything that had ever happened to me before.

After twenty minutes or perhaps a little longer, the unlovely center of Barsham Harbor was flashing past our windows. I have often wished since that I had looked at my watch more frequently that day, but it was still in the side pocket of my coat, where I had put it when we went swimming, and I remembered it only as we pulled into town. It was ten minutes after four then and the light was already beginning to fade, thanks to the clouds and the rain.

Our luck seemed to be out from the moment we hit the town. There were, it appeared, three doctors in Barsham Harbor. Dr Peters was out on a call. Dr Solomon, whom we tried next, had gone to Bath and was not expected back for several hours. The third and last was a Dr Rambouillet. His house was beyond the Catholic church on the other side of the railroad tracks and his small shingle looked inauspiciously new. But he was at home.

"Dr Peters is the Marcy family doctor," he said to us when we told

him our errand. "I think you'd better get him. The people here . . ." he shrugged with the Latinity of the French Canadian.

"He's out on a call," I said. "This is an emergency."

With no more demur he picked up his bag and got into the car. "All right, but don't say I didn't warn you." The teeth under his narrow black mustache were startling when he smiled. He couldn't have been over twenty-eight. "I'll do what I can," he declared, "and then turn the case over to Dr Peters. You see," and he smiled again disarmingly, "the people in Barsham Harbor either do want a French Canadian doctor or they don't. We keep to our own sides of the fence. Or perhaps I ought to say, of the tracks. You understand?"

"Yes," I said, "and sympathize . . . What was your school, Doctor?"

"McGill. And the ink is quite dry on the diploma."

I laughed. Anne was too busy driving to pay much attention to what we were saying. The day was drawing in and she switched on the lights when we turned right at the bridge. I watched the road slither and dance under our wheels. The thought went through my head that it was impossible I had got off the State of Maine express only that morning. This day had been going on for half a lifetime already. I was tired and sleepy. The thing to do would be to get to bed as soon after supper as was decently possible.

The sight of the house ahead of us, black and solid in the twilight, reminded me that there was plenty still to be done before any of us could think of supper or sleep. Anne slid the car to a stop right at the kitchen steps, and we piled out and through the door in a hurry. The situation on the other side of the threshold made me, for one, feel stupefiedly foolish.

13 WHY I should have been so taken aback by the sight of Mrs Walters setting the table I don't quite know, except that we had come racing home to the house to cope with an emergency, and Mrs Walters at a household task was nothing like what I had expected. Perhaps it was her calmness that stopped me in my tracks, the very domesticity of her appearance in a big, blue-figured dress and an apron, leisurely laying out knives and forks. When she turned to face us, there was a look of embarrassment on her face.

"Oh, dear!" she said in the warmest tones I had yet heard from her. "What a pity you've had all the hurry and trouble for nothing."

"For nothing!" Anne's voice was incredulous.

"I'm afraid so. Mrs Marcy is perfectly all right again. I suppose I took it too seriously when I saw her lying there at the foot of the stairs. She frightened me and I jumped to the conclusion that she was badly hurt. But she got up not five minutes after you'd started. I made her wait round for a while, but she was so obviously recovered that I finally sent her home. She insisted she was entirely over it, but I felt it would be better if she did not work any more today. She kept trying to help me and finally I sent her home, as I said. You were gone a long time."

Dr Rambouillet put his black satchel down on the floor and sighed, but it seemed to me that there was an expression of relief on his face. "You are sure she was all right?" he inquired. "No sign of sleepiness? No thickness of the tongue? No difficulty in speaking?"

"Not that I could see." Mrs Walters had returned to her table setting and I noticed that the hand with which she put out the water glasses was entirely steady.

That woman was, I think, a great actress, the greatest I have ever seen. Nothing in the way she looked, spoke, or acted, was other than natural, ordinary, even casual. After a silence that was long enough to show how calm she was, she turned to us and went on; "I wasn't sure I should let her start home so soon, frankly. I loaned her my umbrella and I went part way down the road with her to make sure. She was all right. I'm positive of it. She didn't seem to have even a sprain. Her only complaint was that she had a headache."

"Well . . ." the doctor said uncertainly, "from what you say, there should be no danger of a concussion. And evidently there were no broken bones."

Mrs Walters bridled at the reluctance in his voice. "I would not have let her take a step out of this house if I hadn't been sure she was all right. Of course, you can stop by at Marcy's and see her, if you want, Dr . . . ?"

"Rambouillet," said that young man politely.

"Oh. Are you the Marcy's usual doctor?"

"No," he answered shortly. "Dr Peters was out on a call."

The minute he said that she had him right where she wanted him. But the way she managed it was masterful and, even now, in remembering it, I am moved to a grudging admiration of the way she carried it all off. "I see," she remarked so casually that I barely caught the note of triumph in her voice. "Well, then, I suppose they'll have called him by this time if there's any need."

Rambouillet nodded. "Undoubtedly." He turned to Anne and me. "I'm sorry, but there's apparently nothing here for me to do. And since I didn't come out in my own car, I'm afraid I'll have to trouble you to run me back into town."

We said we would and Anne went upstairs to get a coat. I offered the doctor a drink, which he declined, and forced him to accept three dollars, which he felt he hadn't earned. A call was a call, I pointed out, and he was entitled to a fee even if there had been no patient. He put the money in his pocket finally, with a wry smile. "A young doctor in this town," he remarked, "has no right to refuse anything that comes his way." We chatted quietly in that warm, agreeable kitchen, hardly aware of Mrs Walters as she went about the room. And yet, it crossed my mind once or twice that she looked more attractive than she had in the morning. The lamplight was kind to her face and there was a touch of femininity about her dress that was welcome. I wondered idly why she had changed. Probably she'd got wet walking back in the rain after giving Mrs Marcy her umbrella.

Later I came to have a different opinion about that, but at the time I hardly thought about it at all—what dress Mrs Walters wore was a matter of no interest or importance to me. Or so I would have considered if I had thought about it at all, which I didn't.

Anne came back in five minutes and the three of us went out to the car. The rain had slacked to a drizzle and night was at hand. A heavy gray twilight shut the house in upon itself and the heat of the day had gone; the air was cold and raw. Mrs Walters stood in the door and watched us as we drove off; the lamplight came out from behind her and threw a blotched, half-formed shadow of her big body across the yard.

As we drove in silence back toward Barsham Harbor I thought how puppetlike we had all been, moving around at the ends of our strings while Mrs Walters pulled them. Able and competent she certainly was, but it was impossible to like her. Since Mrs Marcy was all right, the episode had turned out to be a trivial one and yet, it seemed to me that Mrs Walters had acted throughout it with a firmness and decision that were somehow unnecessary.

The truth was that I was full of that petty resentment which a man feels when he thinks a woman has acted with more authority and energy in an emergency than he himself has done.

On the trip home I drove the car and Anne sat beside me. In the glow of the dash light her face was tired and thoughtful. I thought how very young and sweet and defenseless she looked, and wanted to put my arm

around her. But that would have been ridiculous. After all, a practically middle-aged college professor has no business making passes at girls. Besides, I was afraid of doing anything to mar the feeling between us. After a while she stirred in her seat and looked at me. "I'm glad Mrs Marcy is all right," she said slowly. "I like that little person, Dick. She's had so much hard luck in her life."

"I know."

"If that woman let her walk home and she wasn't perfectly all right, I'm going to make trouble about it."

"She was all right. I doubt if Mrs Walters makes many mistakes in the course of a year."

That brought a smile. "I suppose you're right. It's nice not having to confront her alone, Dick. I'm glad you're here."

"It sounds contrary to common sense," I said, "but I'm glad I am too."

We said no more on the ride. As the Marcy house dropped past us on the left I had a momentary impulse to turn in. But I didn't yield to it. There seemed no real necessity. When the car finally slithered to a stop in the yard, Mrs Walters opened the kitchen door and called to us. "Hurry up, you two. Supper in five minutes."

I put the car in the barn and went back to the house. For the first time that day I went to my room to get ready for the meal. It was a square, small cubicle with two windows looking northward and also down onto the yard and the roof of the ell. There was nothing in it but a cot, a battered washstand, and one chair. The single candle they had given me burned small and cold on the stand; its light wavered and leaped in the raw air so that the place was full of sudden, shapeless shadows. As I changed my shirt and combed my hair I felt an uneasiness which I recognized coming back into my consciousness. It was a kind of mental discomfort, rather than anything stronger, and it had been in my mind more than once in the course of this day.

By a sort of casual introspection I tried to find out what, specifically, it was that bothered me. The house, for one thing, I decided—if you are not used to dark, cold rooms with a single candle for light the experience is a strange one, belonging to our ancestors' ordinary routine of life, perhaps, but not to that of a modern city dweller. And Mrs Walters. I did not like her, or the dark that had settled over the house—Julian ought not to have such a woman around and why hadn't he put electric lights into the rooms since he had wired in the power? The lamp in the kitchen and the candle in this room were separate islands of light and there were too many shadows between them. I thought of the hall outside my door and it seemed to me that there might be someone in it, but when I looked out

it was empty and silent. I thought of the shadowy living room, of the river water noiselessly running and running almost under the sills of its windows. A hundred years and more this house had stood here, alone on the Point. A hundred years of sun and storm, of winters and summers, of dark and light. It was old, but it was not its age that gave me the tight feeling I had in the pit of my stomach.

In the end I had to give up the effort to discover what I thought was wrong. There were too many possibilities and nothing probable. The accident, when I thought about it, did not seem to explain the feeling wholly, though I admitted to myself that when I had seen Mrs Marcy lying in that unnatural way at the foot of the stairs I had thought for one instant, "Now it's happened." But that was obviously meaningless. As it turned out, nothing had happened. And equally, if the accident had been important in some way, I could not see why or to whom—except Mrs Marcy—it was important. What the "it" was that had happened I did not understand, though I assigned it to the feeling of imminence which had come over me earlier in the afternoon. That, in turn, was unquestionably caused by the approach of the thunderstorm. Still, the lightning and thunder, and most of the rain, had long ago swept away to the northeast and it seemed to me that the air was as charged with suspense as ever. Suspense, I reminded myself, is a purely subjective matter. There was no way of telling whether the way I felt had any external foundation or not.

Difficult to believe though it may seem, I paid little attention to the notion that Julian and his invention might account for my disquietude. I felt pity and sorrow for him, but they were ordinary, normal emotions. As for the thing he had made, it was only too apparent that it was harmless—like those perpetual motion machines that unbalanced inventors are forever producing. No machine could approach the complex sensitivity of the human mind itself and, if our brains had not, after centuries, given us any sure proof that the individuality survives the fact of death, then it was certain that Julian's machine wouldn't either. Perhaps, if I had been superstitious, I would have been inclined to give more weight to that project of his. The house would have been "haunted" by its presence and the potential presence of the myriads of voices that were supposed to speak through it. But they weren't there. Of that I felt sure. Just as it was self-evident that a physical machine could not be expected to produce a nonphysical result.

The very impossibility of the machine's working brought home to me the difficulty of doing anything to help Julian. His frailty told me how little time there was left in which to save him, if he could be saved, and the driving eagerness I had heard in his voice when he talked showed

how strong was the obsession I should have to break through. The impression which he gave of being cut off from all reality distressed me when I thought about it. I had promised Anne not to fail, and promised myself, too. I owed something to Julian and, as I thought about him, I was ashamed of myself for bothering with the vague fancies and premonitions that had been running through my head. Why had I puzzled so much over them and so little over how I was to save my friend?

As I stood in that dim, cold room, trying to straighten my tie in the shadowy disk of my shaving mirror, no answer came back to that question; only a vague feeling and intuition that the question itself was not the crux of the situation. It is hard to convey intangible suggestions in the rigid forms and patterns of words, but what I felt then was a kind of fear. The trouble was that it was a fear without an object. All I was sure of was that I was not afraid of Julian and not even for him, except in a general sort of way. Neither was it Mrs Walters. Thinking about her intensified the sensation slightly, but she was not the source of it, and the fact that it apparently had no focal point began to annoy me. I was like a man walking down an unfamiliar street in a strange city, late at night, with a vague substratum of uneasiness in his mind. He does not say to himself, "Maybe I am going to get held up and beaten in this place." He simply feels uneasy. But if he sees the shadow of a man shouldered back in a doorway his fear rushes together like wind to the heart of a cyclone. It fastens itself on that figure and embodies itself with its image. My fear seemed to have no such focal point; it colored the rest of my thoughts but it had no shape of its own.

That, I was forced to tell myself finally, was evasion. In the back of my mind I did know of what I was afraid, but it was senseless to allow it to color my consciousness so poisonously. It was nothing more specific than the noise that we had heard, Anne and I, as we ran toward the house in the rain. But why was I afraid of that sound, or rather, of hearing it again? I finished my dressing quickly, not liking to think about it. For from the moment I had remembered that noise I found myself listening for it again.

Mrs Walters was still alone in the kitchen when I got downstairs. In spite of all my thinking, not more than ten minutes had passed since I had gone upstairs. The table, I saw, was completely set and there was a comfortable smell of food in the air. I said "Hello," and she answered with a smile that would have been all right if we had been the best of friends.

"Supper's almost ready," she observed.

I brushed that aside. "Mrs Walters, there's something I want to talk to you about."

She smiled again, more thinly. "Very well, Professor Sayles. Only let's be quiet. I have given Julian a sleeping tablet after the shock of this afternoon. It ought to make him sleep clear through tonight, but I don't want to take a chance on waking him. He needs all the rest he can get."

"Certainly." I kept my voice low. "This is it. When Anne and I were running back to the house just before we found you and Julian and Mrs Marcy, we heard a noise."

"Did you?" Her voice was without intonation.

"Yes." She was looking at me steadily. I returned her stare and went on, "It was an odd sort of noise. We thought it came from this house."

She dropped her glance. "Perhaps it did. You haven't told me what it was like." Her tone was wholly indifferent, and while she spoke she carried a plate of soup from the stove and set it at one of the places.

"A sort of roaring, pulsing, crashing sound," I said and the words sounded silly in my own ears.

She did not permit herself a smile. "Goodness. It sounds complicated. No, I didn't happen to hear it, but of course I know what it was. So do you."

"Maybe I'm obtuse, but I don't think I do."

She went back for another plate. "Nonsense, Mr Sayles. Thunder, of course. Sometimes here in the valley the claps echo back and forth. I've heard something like what you mention once or twice myself."

"The thing sounded as if it came from this house."

She shrugged. "From somewhere over the roof, perhaps. I may have heard it and forgotten it because of everything that happened right afterward. I don't know. What difference does it make?"

"It wasn't thunder," I said quietly. "Mrs Marcy told me she'd heard it once or twice before. And she must know the sound of thunder in her own country. And Anne described it to me—before it happened."

That seemed to have an effect upon her. She put the second plate down with a clatter and looked at me coldly. "You seem to have lost no time around here, Mr Sayles. Talking to Mrs Marcy and Miss Conner as if you were some kind of private detective. What's on your mind?"

"Julian's my friend, Mrs Walters. I find him in a strange sort of ménage and obviously a sick man."

She gave me a look of contempt. "You're worried about Julian, so you talk to Mrs Marcy about him!"

"No. I didn't talk to her about him. She told me about the noise

amongst a lot of other things, all volunteered on her part." I despised myself for bothering to justify my actions to this woman.

For a time she paid no further attention to what I had said. Then she stopped doing things around the stove and turned to confront me. "I told you what the noise was, Mr Sayles. If you don't believe me, there's no sense our wasting time about it. You can talk it over some more with Miss Conner—and Mrs Marcy—if you're still determined to make a mystery out of a simple, natural thing. The three of you seem to have found something in common. Thunder."

The scorn with which she delivered this retort did not affect me, but clearly there was no point in going on with the subject. I sat down in a chair and kept my mouth shut. She looked at me once or twice as if she hoped I'd give her another opening and then went on with her work. At the end of an uncomfortable silence she remarked, "I shouldn't wonder if it was that very clap of thunder that frightened Mrs Marcy. Something must have made her slip on those stairs."

I agreed to that hypothesis indifferently and went on watching the purple light outside the east window fade to blackness across the inky water of the river. The rain had stopped but the night was sullen and lowering.

Mrs Walters did not seem anxious for another long silence between us. "You know," she said, "I should have asked if you knew first aid, Professor. It never occurred to me. You might have been the very man we needed." She smiled at me and I still did not like it. "I'm rather accustomed to taking care of sick people, so I just jumped right in. I'm afraid I was rather bossy."

"No," I answered, wondering idly what she was getting at. "I'm no expert on what to do till the doctor comes. I was glad you took charge." I turned to look at her. "You must have done a good job. I thought the woman was badly hurt."

But that was not what I had really thought. The moment I had caught sight of that fragile, tumbled body at the foot of the stairs I had thought I was looking at death.

The big woman was watching me carefully. There was an alertness that amounted to tension under the make-up on her broad face. "She gave me a turn, too. She looked almost as if she was dead, didn't she?"

I nodded.

"I was never so relieved in my life as when the aromatic spirits brought her round. It's wonderful what that stuff will do." She gave a little laugh. "But up to then I was really frightened about her."

"You picked her up and carried her to that sofa as if you were used to that sort of thing all your life," I said, trying to make my tone sound admiring. It was a stupid little speech, as awkward as most efforts to give the devil his due, but I was surprised at its effect upon her. She bit her lip and turned away. After a while, with her back still turned toward me, she said, "Oh, that was nothing." And then, after a pause, "She wasn't heavy."

14 ANNE CAME into the kitchen a few minutes later. She had on a dull-green dress that brought out the lights in her hair and the warmth of her skin and, for a second, as I looked at her, some of the depression went out of my mind and I forgot how tired I was beginning to feel. Supper was a silent meal because none of us seemed to be able to conjure up a topic of conversation that wouldn't leave one member of the trio out of it. After we'd eaten as much as we wanted—which in my case was no great amount—we washed dishes together by a sort of common consent. Personally, I don't like cleaning up after a meal—I did too much of it when I was a boy—but anything was better than leaving the warmth and company of the kitchen to adventure into the silence of the rest of the house. Anne, I think, felt the same way. After we had finished, Mrs Walters laid a tray for Julian, ". . . in case he wakes up, though I hope he won't," as she put it, and then there was nothing more to do in the kitchen.

A trivial thing happened as we started to leave the place. Anne had just said, with no cheer in her tone, "Well, we can sit in the living room for a few minutes," and picked up the lamp on the table when Mrs Walters went over to her with sudden swiftness and took the thing out of her hand.

"You can't have that," she declared sharply. "I don't want to have to stumble around here in the dark if Julian should happen to need anything." And she put the lamp firmly back on the table.

Anne looked startled and indignant for a moment and then turned away. "I'm sorry. I didn't know you wanted it there." She looked at Mrs Walters speculatively. "You take wonderful care of Uncle Julian," she observed.

"I try to," Mrs Walters replied in a level voice.

We groped our way through the black hall and into the living room.

Anne lit the lamp in there, but the pool of yellow light it spilled brightened only a fraction of the place; the shadows in the corners were thick and smooth as velvet. I put a match to my pipe and Anne smoked a cigarette. We sat together on the sofa, not too close together, and watched Mrs Walters in the chair by the lamp. She had a basket of mending.

"What holes Julian does make in his socks," she observed at last. "He's got to get some new ones. Remind me, Anne, the next time we go to town."

Anne grunted. "You don't need to do all that," she said in a voice that was perceptibly too considerate. "Mrs Marcy does the darning."

"I know," Mrs Walters answered shortly, but I noticed that she went on with what she was doing.

For a while Anne and I talked in low tones about the past, about the university and things we had done together when she was a kid. "The girls used to tease me about you," she said once. "But they were only jealous." I grinned at that, but it was not an altogether happy feeling. After a while our small talk ran down and the silence took complete possession of the room. Fatigue was heavy in my body, but I was scarcely sleepy. Instead, it seemed to me that I was noticing things with more than normal distinctness. It was preternaturally quiet. I began to wish that the river outside would make more noise instead of slipping to the sea without a sound. My ears felt empty and, literally, I could hear the sound of my own heart and of Anne's breathing beside me. All the while I was listening, waiting to hear something and it did not come. After a time I transferred my attention to Mrs Walters and wondered what was going on behind those eyes of hers. Nothing, to judge from the placidity of her expression and yet, I was sure that she was alert and aware of Anne and myself, perhaps even of what we were thinking. Was she listening, too?

Then I yawned and that seemed to break the shell of quiet in which we had been enclosed. "You must be dead for sleep," Anne exclaimed suddenly in a contrite voice. "It's practically bedtime, anyhow. Let's all go up."

My legs were heavy when I hoisted myself back on them. "To tell the truth, it has been a long day. And your fresh country air has a numbing effect on a pair of city-poisoned lungs like mine."

Mrs Walters nodded. "It has been a long day," she agreed. "Not the happiest possible one for your visit, Professor Sayles. But there's always tomorrow."

"Absolutely," I agreed. "Well, if you'll excuse me . . ."

She did not rise from her chair. "Certainly. Anne, you go along up,

too. I'll follow you in a minute. I see there's still one more sock to finish. But don't wait for me; I'll be all right alone."

A flash of irritation went through me then, as it did so often after the things she said, because there was something obscurely contradictory between her words and the tone in which she uttered them. The way she spoke managed to imply that she wished one or both of us would stay there with her till she was ready to go. I could not see a reason in the world for obliging her. Companionship, at least of the negative sort that Anne and I had provided, could not be what she wanted from us. Neither could it be worry. Confused and unpleasant as the events of the day had been, they were over now. Or so I thought.

Anne went over to the mantel and lighted a candle. "Time to re-tire," she said and made a child's face. As I followed her, I turned once and looked back into the living room. Mrs Walters was still sitting there quietly, drawing the thread steadily back and forth. The needle gleamed in the lamplight, but her face was turned half away and shadowed. "Good night," I said softly, so as not to wake Julian. "Pleasant dreams," she returned negligently, without lifting her head.

My room was colder and darker than before. Anne came into it for a moment and lit the candle on my washstand. "All the discomforts of a fine old colonial home," she said, smiling, and then her face was suddenly grave. "Oh, Dick, I can't tell you . . ."

"What, Anne?"

"How glad I am you're here. For Uncle Julian's sake and mine. I haven't known what to do . . ." Her voice sounded near tears.

I patted her shoulder. "It's going to be all right."

"If you say so," she replied. But there was doubt in her voice. "My room's next to yours, by the way, and hers is right across the hall. If you need anything, pound on the wall and I'll get it for you."

"Thanks. I won't. Unless it's waking up in the morning. You can pound on the wall when it's time to get up."

Then we said good night and I thought of all the other times we had done that in the old days. . . . It wasn't the same at all, of course, and yet, I was reminded of the past in spite of myself. This time it was she who shut the door on me. I was left in the bleakness of my room, shivering; I undressed in silence, without bothering to unpack anything except my pajamas, and got into the cot before the candlewick had stopped glowing.

When I surrendered my weight to the bed, I expected that sleep would wash over me in a minute or two, if not immediately. For some reason it didn't. Even my eyes remained open for a long time, though there was

nothing to see except the faintly lighter oblongs of the windows, unbroken by a single star. I deliberately made every muscle in my body relax, but still sleep didn't come, though in those days I never had any trouble about losing myself in unconsciousness the moment I went to bed. But this time my senses were still on the alert even after my body was utterly limp and, when I finally closed my eyes, oblivion was not complete.

Going to sleep is a mysterious process anyhow. The senses don't blur and fade simultaneously and merge into nothingness. The first one to go, of course, is sight, the minute the eyelids are lowered, and then I suppose the next to vanish are taste and smell, though it was a long time before I stopped being aware of the reek of the candle smoke in the air. For an even longer time I was conscious of the rough feeling of the blanket under my chin and, as for hearing, I don't believe I ever did wholly stop listening.

There was nothing to hear, nothing important. For a time there were the sounds Anne made in the next room, but they were soon over. And then the occasional crack and creak of an old house settling itself for the night. Outside the windows was the faintest possible rustle of air and every once in a while the minute plop of a drip from the eaves. These were trivial sounds and yet I kept hearing them in spite of myself. My mind stubbornly refused to relinquish its last sentry and I went on listening. Perhaps it was for the sound of Mrs Walters coming upstairs, which I did hear after a while. She made very little disturbance about it, but I heard her come up the stairs, and it sounded as if she hesitated once or twice on the way up. Then she came down the hall; I could follow that cautious progress of hers there, too, and when she stopped for a long time outside my door I was not surprised. She was wondering, I knew, if I was asleep. I gave her no clue, though I had an irresistible impulse to utter one loud mock snore to startle her.

Even after the door of her room had closed behind her, I could not abandon myself wholly. . . . I was still listening and I faced the fact that what I expected, or dreaded, to hear was a recurrence of that sound of the afternoon. Whenever I thought squarely about it, the echo of that damnable noise went booming in my inner ear and, as I lay there, I could feel the prickle of sweat breaking out on the palms of my hands. What could have made such a noise?

The conviction was borne in upon me that Julian had progressed very far indeed with that thing of his. It, and it only, could account for the sound. Anne had even recognized it. . . . We should have talked more about it, especially on the second ride back from town, when we were

alone and safe from being overheard. But I knew why we had not. There was nothing we could have said about that noise because there was nothing familiar in it. And there was the possibility that Julian might be right, and that the reason the sound we had heard was so strange and terrifying was because it came— I put the thought out of my mind.

Lying in the dark with nothing by which to measure time except the beating of my heart, minutes or hours may have passed before I fell asleep. I have no precise idea how long I lay there listening, or even if I ever was wholly asleep. Probably I was, because the next thing I knew was that something was happening outside the house. The thing that woke me was surprising. My room, as I have said, looked down on the court between the shoulder of the house and the narrower strip of the ell back to the barn. Its windows faced almost north, and hence along the road that led up the Point and ultimately to Barsham Harbor. The corner of the barn was between me and most of that road, which was perhaps why the sound of feet on it had not waked me sooner. Anyhow, there was the squelch and thud of feet outside. Someone was approaching the house and the tempo of the steps was hurried. Whoever it was had a long stride and was hurrying, though not running.

The moment I opened my eyes I could see a faint line of yellow light along the underside of the top window casement on the left, a gleam that alternately dimmed and increased, but which was growing progressively brighter. Although I had never in my life seen that sort of thing before, I knew at once what it was—the light from a lantern carried by a walking man. I got out of bed with anxiety of a nameless sort plucking at my thoughts and went to the window. I was right. It was a lantern, swinging along the road, but I could see little of whoever was carrying it.

Even before the sound of knuckles on the back door I was into my trousers and shoes and was pulling on my old varsity sweater over my head. Quick as I was, Anne was ahead of me; I bumped into her in the hall outside.

"Dick," she said in a whisper. "What is it? Who's there?"

"Dunno. A man. That's all I could tell."

The knuckles were more urgent against the door and we stumbled down the stairs. Hot paraffin spilled on my hand from the candle I was carrying. Anne was right on my heels as I blundered through the hall and into the kitchen. The knocking sounded much louder in there, of course, and there was an urgency in it that suggested anxiety. And then, in that second as we were coming through the kitchen doorway the last vestige of comfort or security was stripped from us by a single word. It

was spoken from the other side of the door, in a low voice, by the man outside.

"Elora!" he said and his tone was half-angry, half-anxious.

Mrs Marcy's name, of course. I heard Anne give a gasp as she heard it. We both knew then who was on the other side of that door and the knowledge was appalling. It could only be her husband. And that meant—

The lamp in the kitchen was still burning and everything was completely ordinary. I blew out my candle and put it on the table as I went across the room. The bolt stuck in the door and I had to tug to get it open. All the while his knuckles were rapping against the panels. "Just a second," I said urgently, and then the bar slid back and I turned the door handle.

He was standing on the top step, a tall, slightly stooped farmer with a dark face and sullen mouth. In the air that blew past him into the room there was the ammoniacal pungency of the cow stable. He stared at me with momentary surprise and then pushed past me into the room. "Where's Elora?" he said harshly.

Anne was looking at him with recognition and a white face. "Why Mr Marcy," she told him in a thin voice, "did she come back here for something? She went home hours ago."

"Ain't been home yet," he replied, and stared round the room with anger and bewilderment. "Not since mornin'." He pointed to the lamp. "Her light's still goin', too."

"Her light?" I asked in confusion.

"Yeah. You can see that from our house. When it goes out I know she's started back. But it's past ten now. I come over to see what was keepin' her."

"Listen," I told him. "Your wife went home early. She had a minor accident. Nothing serious. But Mrs Walters decided she oughtn't to work any more and sent her home in the afternoon. She even walked part way with her. She must be home."

"She ain't."

We stood there for a minute staring at him. I know that alarm was going through my mind siren-loud and sudden. Something was terribly wrong. "Sit down a minute," I said. "We'll tell you the whole thing."

He took a chair grudgingly. There was a truculence about him that made you dislike the man on sight, and yet he was Mrs Marcy's husband and entitled to know what had happened. I gave it to him in as few words as I could.

He listened without interruption, though the rigidity of his big body

in the chair suggested that he neither believed what I said nor cared much about it, one way or the other. He was not going to be easy to deal with. When I mentioned Dr Rambouillet's name he snorted, but that was the only sound he made until I finished. "So," I concluded, "if she hasn't reached your house, we'd better go look along the road." Under the heavy impact of his silence I began to feel resentful and, when he made no move to get up, I added sharply, "If she's had a concussion, she may be lying unconscious. We've got to find her at once."

"She ain't on the road," he said heavily. "I come that way."

"Perhaps she wandered off it or you missed her."

He jerked a splayed thumb toward the lamp. "How come the light?"

We explained that Mrs Walters had left it there in case Mr Blair needed anything in the night. It sounded unlikely enough in my own ears as I told it, but he gave no indication of whether he accepted it or not. After a minute he grunted and got to his feet. "If anything's happened to her," he said, "you folks'll hev to answer fer it." In two strides he had picked up the lantern and was out the door.

Anne produced a flashlight from the hall and slipped it into my hand. We followed him without exchanging a word. Her face was still white and she was biting her lip. Outside, the night was raw and dark and a breeze had sprung up heavy with the smell of the sea. Anne and I let Seth Marcy go ahead of us and followed without exchanging a word. There was nothing I cared to say that I wanted him to overhear. So we went down the road in a triangle, Seth in front with his lantern, and the two of us, a few feet apart, with the flashlight trailing him. After some yards I went over to the side of the road and I confess that I was extremely frightened. If Mrs Walters' story was a true one, I knew what we should find there, but if it wasn't . . . well, that didn't bear thinking about. The story she had told *had* to be true.

The prints were there, all right, and my heart gave a powerful thump of relief when I saw them. It was all right, then, and Mrs Walters had not been lying. Though their edges had been softened by the tail end of the rain, which had fallen after they were made, the footsteps were distinct enough, punched heavily into the mud.

"Look!" I called, and Seth Marcy stopped and came back to me with his lantern.

"There are yours," I pointed out, "fresh and sharp. These others are blurred a bit but you can see them all right."

He stared down at them, his face heavy and uncompromising, but there was no misreading that track in the mud. Two sets of women's footmarks, with water shining in them blackly where the heels had sunk

deep, headed in the direction we had been going. And a single set coming back toward the house. "You see," I said, "here's the two of them going toward your house, Mr Marcy. And this other single set is Mrs Walters coming back."

He nodded heavily. "Ayuh." I was rather ashamed of myself over the triumph that I was feeling. After all, these prints told us nothing about where Mrs Marcy was now and it was selfish to be as relieved as I was. But we in the Talcott house were at least substantiated in our story. There had been no criminal negligence on our part.

Seth Marcy stood staring at the footprints for a full minute, and then grunted and turned on down the road, holding his lantern low and walking carefully to one side of the impressions. Every few steps he paused and re-examined the tracks. Thus we proceeded down the road, anxiously and wordlessly, for perhaps a quarter of a mile. Seth stopped then, so long that Anne and I had time to catch up with him. When we arrived, we saw what it was that had halted him.

There were a cluster of prints in the mud beside us, a number made by each woman. I could easily distinguish between Mrs Walters' thinner, higher heels, and the wide, run-over ones of Mrs Marcy, although without that difference it might not have been too easy. The shoes were within a half size of each other. From one cluster, a line ran back toward the house we had left. "This must be where they separated," I said. "There's Mrs Walters, going back to the house."

The farmer grunted. "Looks like it. Here's Elora, goin' on." He picked up the lantern and began to walk forward more slowly. The two of us stayed right behind him, now.

"The mud must have been awful," Anne remarked. "Look how deep she sunk in."

It was true that the prints were deep, but I remembered the greasy gruel of mud on the road that afternoon and was not surprised. We kept on. Mrs Marcy's steps had evidently been steady enough at first; they were spaced evenly and in a straight line. But after a couple of hundred yards they began to waver and straggle uncertainly from side to side of the path. The picture was all too easy to reconstruct: these footprints had been made by a woman who was staggering. For a few yards they would run straight again, and then angle off in confused sorties, sometimes toward the center of the road and again toward the field grass along its edge. In the glow of the lantern Seth Marcy's face was set and the block of his jaw muscles stood out under the skin of his cheeks. He followed each of those pitiful divergencies in his wife's track patiently and without a word, but little by little his stride began to lengthen.

Abruptly he came to a second halt and when we reached him the reason was plain. In the mud was a rounded hollow, deeper at the end toward our line of direction, and beyond it the smudged outline of a hand which had slid through the mud. Either Mrs Marcy had slipped or she had half fallen from weakness, catching herself on one knee and one outflung hand. None of us was an expert trail reader, but the meaning of those marks in the mud was primer plain. I thought of the two women, their backs toward each other, going their separate ways, and Mrs Marcy faint and dizzy with weakness. Why hadn't she called out? Maybe Mrs Walters had gone too far to hear her. It was a picture that I didn't want to reconstruct in my mind.

We pressed on more rapidly. There were other places where she had slipped and fallen—at one of them we could make out the mark of the curved umbrella handle and I told Seth Marcy what it was. He did not seem to hear me.

It was just after that when the anxiety in my mind turned to a sick anticipation of tragedy. The lights of the Marcy house were already in sight, ahead, and well to our right. The road in to it cannot have been more than a few rods beyond where we stopped, which was at the entrance to a rough sort of track which cut sharply off across the fields. It was nothing more than a haying road for farm wagons and machinery, but it was, even in the glow of one lantern, a perceptible turnoff, and it led to the right, just as the true entrance to the Marcy place did farther on. And the prints of Mrs Marcy's shoes turned down that miserable byway.

When he saw that they did indeed leave the road, Seth Marcy gave a groan like a man in unbearable pain and began to run heavily down the false track into which, by some horrible error, his wife had turned. Anne and I pounded along after him and, as we ran, some change in the sky, or perhaps the sudden absence of tree masses against the night dark told us what must be in his mind. For this rough trace of a road ran straight toward the river.

We found the umbrella, its ribs broken and its handle coated with mud, caught against a scrub alder at the point where the field road turned again, to the left, and ran along between the edge of the field and the river. But it was a turn that Mrs Marcy had never made. We stood for a long time beside the last print of her shoes, staring down at the crumbled lip of sod, and below it, perhaps ten feet, the strong black swirl of the Kennebec where it cut in against the shore.

Seth Marcy stood there beside us like a man in a dream, looking down at the edge of the running water with dry, hot eyes. After a minute his

lips moved. "God damn her," he said, "may her soul burn in hell for this."

Neither Anne nor I thought for an instant that he meant his wife.

15 FROM THAT moment on, the night became a confusion and a madness of futile activities. I remember scrambling down that bank for one last, hopeless, stupid inspection of its slope, with Anne saying over and over, "Dick! Look out! Come back! . . ." and Seth Marcy running heavily up and down the edge of the bluff like a dog that has lost the scent of his quarry. There was no beach at the foot of that bluff, nothing but the deep swirl of the water against the same ledge of rock that lower down provided Julian's house with so firm a bulwark against the winter ice and spring floods. There wasn't even a tree against which she could have caught. For a minute I debated shedding my clothes and swimming down along the bank with the currents of the ebbing tide and the river boiling along together. But the enterprise, though it did look possible, was clearly both dangerous and foolish. Nothing would be gained by it.

When I scrambled up the bank, Seth Marcy was already plunging across the field toward his house. "He's going to telephone," Anne said, "and then go into town for boats."

"They won't find her," I said. "But I suppose I ought to go with him."

"No," she replied. "He said for us to keep out of it, that we'd done enough harm already. Oh, Dick!" Her voice broke and when I found her in the dark and put my arm round her shoulders, I felt that she was shaking. "It's so horrible!" she said in a small, broken voice. "She was sweet, Dick, and she never had any fun and now she's gone."

"Easy all," I told her. "Don't let go. Come on, now, we've got to get back to the house."

All the way home her hand was cold and tight inside mine and once I thought how glad I was to be there with her. But most of the time my imagination was racing ahead, trying to foresee what this pitiful business was going to lead to in the next few days, and what I could do to protect Anne and Julian. And the more I considered it, the more it seemed to me that we were in for a very unpleasant time indeed.

Mrs Walters was in the kitchen when we got back, tired, muddy, cold, and at least on my part, half stupefied with loss of sleep. I told her

the story dully, not even bothering to watch her while I spoke. She said little, exclaimed with horror when I came to the part about the river bank, and finally declared in a low voice, "It's my fault, Professor Sayles. I accept the entire responsibility for what seems to have happened. I never, never would have let her start home unless I'd felt certain she was all right."

"I believe you," I said, "but I only hope to God the rest of them do. Particularly Seth Marcy."

She made no reply to that but poured out two cups of coffee, and Anne and I sat down to drink it. I discovered that my teeth were chattering and, when I picked up the cup, my hand trembled so that I hoped Anne wouldn't notice it. She kept looking at me most of the time and the sorrow and regret in her eyes made a lump come into my throat. "Elora was a darling," she said once. I nodded. There wasn't anything I could think of that would help.

When we finished the coffee, Anne and I went into the living room. Mrs Walters said that she would make more of the stuff and that we could do what we wanted. "They'll be coming here later, of course," she added. "There's not much use in going back to bed." I made up the fire and some of the chill began to retreat. After that, there was nothing to do except wait. Through the south windows we could see that the black sweep of the river was sprinkled with distant lights, low against the water. I knew they were lanterns and flashlights in the bows of boats. They moved back and forth across the water, crawling from shore to shore with a grim persistence.

Anne saw them too. "They're looking now. I suppose there isn't a chance . . ."

"I shouldn't think so."

"She'd never be able to swim, of course . . . I hope it was quick for her."

"You mustn't think about it."

She lifted a white face to me. "I still can't quite believe it, Dick. How could she have taken that wrong turn? This is almost like her own back yard, this land around here."

I had been thinking about that and, even though it didn't wholly satisfy me, I said, "She must have had a bad concussion. They don't always show up right away."

"Oh. Yes, I suppose you're right."

"Now listen," I told her, "we've got to stop thinking about what's already happened and get ready for what's coming."

"Coming?"

"Yes. There'll be people here after a while and they're going to ask us a lot of questions. Even an accidental death . . ." That word was heavy in the air between us.

She nodded and the firelight was red gold in her hair. "I hadn't thought of that."

"Furthermore, they'll all blame us for what's happened. Seth Marcy isn't going to be easy to deal with, though I guess most of what he feels will be directed against Mrs Walters."

She looked at me and her lips were thin and pale across her face. "It *was* her fault, Dick . . . If only we'd stopped at Marcy's on the way to town."

The same regret had been tormenting me. Being wise after the event is one of the things I do best and it occurred to me that if we—or even one of us—had gone over to the Marcy house after supper to ask about Elora it would have looked better. As it was, it seemed clear we had acted in a way that would look stupid and callous to any outsider. But there was nothing for it but to face the music, try to behave as decently and calmly as we could, and make any recompense we could find to Seth Marcy.

"Sure it was her fault, partly," I agreed. "But I'm to blame somewhat, too. We should have done it differently." I decided to talk it over with her. "I've been wondering if we ought to get a lawyer," I began, "but the objection to that is people will think we are protecting ourselves because we feel guilty."

She shivered. "The people here . . ." Her voice was low. "They're going to hate us anyway."

I began to pace back and forth across the room and, even in the absorption of what I was thinking, I noticed how my shadow swelled and shrank against the far wall of the room. "The only thing is to tell the truth and take the consequences." The prospect was a bitter one. "We'll have to hope they believe us."

Anne looked puzzled and it seemed to me that her face was paler than before. "What else can they think?" Her voice was low and there was a tremble in it.

"Nothing, of course," I said, damning myself for a fool. "We may have been stupid, but that's the worst anybody could say."

"What's the worst anybody can say?" Mrs Walters had come into the room with the noiseless step that was one of the things about her I was beginning to hate.

"Anne and I were just talking about how all this was going to sound in Barsham Harbor," I said. "We both think they'll hate us."

She sat down on the sofa and looked at the pair of us in turn. "And what if they do?"

Anne stared back at her. "I should think you'd be a little worried about it," she said and her voice was bitter now, instead of afraid. "If you'd been listening to Seth Marcy and what he was saying, you wouldn't be so calm about it. He hates us. All of us. And you most especially." Her tone was clear and hard; it rang in the room.

Mrs Walters folded her hands. "Don't shout at me," she said. "I want Julian to get all the rest he can." She studied the tips of her fingers and then flexed them slowly in a movement so feline and relaxed that it made me want to look away. "Seth Marcy is a lout. I know his kind. You leave Seth Marcy to me; if he tries to make any trouble I'll take care of it—and him."

Those words of hers may read like sheer bombast, but they did not sound so in that shadowy room. I was shocked by the cold determination in her voice, the flat indifference to a tragedy which had happened only hours before. "You know," I said as quietly as I could, "there's not a chance that Mrs Marcy is still alive?"

She nodded without speaking.

"Well, we're all responsible for that simple, elemental, and horrible fact, Mrs Walters. You more than the rest of us."

She gave me back as good as I gave her in the matter of glances; her eyes were perfectly steady and as deep as the shadows behind her. "Professor Sayles, I should expect more self-control and judgment in a man who's no longer a boy." Anne moved then as though she'd been flicked with a whip, but Mrs Walters never so much as glanced at her, and for my part I hope I did not give any sign of what I was feeling. Her voice when she went on was controlled, but there was something cold and light in it that was close to contempt. "I'm as sorry as you both are for this accident. But Mrs Marcy died quickly and with no pain. There was nothing here in this life for her anyway. I'm sure she is happier at this moment than she has ever been before." Something in my look must have warned her, for she added with what I still believe to have been sincere conviction, "Death isn't the terrible thing most people make it out to be."

"Of course not," I said and the pulse in my throat was so strong it partly choked me. "It's hardly more important than a dropped stitch when you're knitting, is it?"

At that she got up and went to the window. When she finally answered, with her back toward us, her voice was smooth and low, but I was sure that there was some reason why she wanted to keep us from

watching her face while she spoke. "I forgot," she remarked, "that neither of you has faith or understanding. To you, what has happened to Mrs Marcy must seem tragic and irrevocable. I am sorry for that." For a while after that there was silence in the room and, when she spoke again, her voice was wholly different, strained, taut, as if some control over herself were slipping. "We are all tired and frightened," she said. "It was my fault. I should not have let her go the rest of the way home alone. But when she was with me she seemed so perfectly natural . . ." She waited for one of us to make some comment, but Anne shook her head at me and we kept silent. "You must have seen how it was by our footprints . . . She was walking along like a person who was absolutely uninjured." The inflection in her voice at the end of that sentence was too faint to be definitely questioning, but I knew that she expected one of us to reply. And with that knowledge I suddenly became curious as to why, exactly, she wanted us to speak. Did she expect some approbation for her caution in going part way home with Mrs Marcy? Or—and I could not see where this thought led—did she want us to admit that we had seen the footprints?

Anne had brightened at her words. "Yes," she said eagerly, "that's right. There are the footprints. Dick, that ought to help with . . . them—don't you think? And with Seth Marcy, too."

"They'll help," I said and then added reluctantly, "but they won't be enough to absolve us."

Mrs Marcy's tone was edged with scorn. "You talk as if we were going to be tried for something."

I shrugged. "Well, I don't know much about small towns, but I suspect we shall be tried and found guilty on every street corner."

"Nonsense. Guilty of what?"

"Criminal negligence."

She confronted me angrily. "Are we back on that same old track?"

"All right, Mrs Walters," I said, "if you're tired of old subjects, here's a new one. There'll be a coroner's inquest when they find the body. We'll all be questioned then. And it's going to be hard to answer some of those questions. Notably, why you didn't go all the way home with Mrs Marcy, and why one of us at least didn't bother to go over later to find out how she was and whether she was all right."

"Inquest!" Her tone was short, as though the thought had jolted her.

"But yes," I answered. "So Anne's thought about the footprints is a good one. It may help to clear your skirts."

Contempt and impatience were stamped on her face. "If both of you would stop talking as if I—as if we—were guilty of something, it would

be at least sensible. I admit I hadn't thought about the inquest, but after all it's not going to do us any harm to be able to tell our story in public."

Anne and I let it go at that. I did not trust myself to say anything more to Mrs Walters and she behaved as if the two of us were no longer in the room. She had turned back to her window. I wondered if the boat lights were still crawling back and forth across the invisible water. It was impossible to tell from her stance what she was seeing, if anything; her heavy body was simply at rest beside the window, bulking there without tension or an expressive line in it. After what seemed like—and may even have been—ten minutes, she turned away and passed us without a word. At the door to the room she paused and turned back toward us, the way actresses of the old school used to stop in their exits and turn back on the audience for one last line. "I'm going up again for a while," she said. "Call me if you need me. There's coffee on the stove if you want it or if anybody comes. I won't take my clothes off, so I can come right down." Neither of us answered, but I nodded. "And my advice to you both is not to sit round talking each other into a state of nerves. You both need sleep. They'll make enough noise when they come." Then she was gone. A stair tread creaked once when she put her weight on it and after that everything was silent.

We sat together on the sofa. This time I did put my arm around Anne and from the way her head went down against my shoulder I knew she wanted it that way. After a short time she said, "Do you mind sitting here a while? I'm tired, but I can't bear going into my room alone and I know I couldn't sleep."

She was soft against me and the smell of her hair reminded me of the grass and the morning sun by the beach. "I'll stick around as long as you want me to," I said.

"Thank you, Dick. It's been a long time since I've done this, hasn't it?" "Yes."

"I'm glad you're back," she said and then looked up at me. There were circles under her eyes, I saw with a quick contraction of the heart, but she was laughing. "And I'm glad to be back."

"Don't do things like that to an old man," I said.

She stopped laughing and looked at me intently. "I suppose you *are* old, aren't you? Twelve years older than I am. Well . . ." She dropped her head against my shoulder again and sighed.

We sat there together for a long time. After a while I got out my pipe and smoked it once, and then a second time. Anne used up several cigarettes, but most of the time she stayed with her head down, lean-

ing against me while I thought about her, and about the mess we were in, and how much I wished things were different. I tried hard to be happy about one thing, which was that at least this business had brought Anne and me back together again in a single day. It might have taken weeks or months to recover our old intimacy without the pressure of disaster to bring us together. But the thought wouldn't work. It ought to have been a good thing to feel glad over, but it simply wasn't.

That in itself interested me as a psychologist. I knew that I was fond of Anne, just as I had been when Helen was alive, and that the events of this long, incredible day had wiped out the constraint that would normally lie between two people who have been separated for years. I even had enough sense to know there was a good chance that I would ultimately find myself in love with her as well. The very feeling of her weight against me, the sensation of her warmth, the scent of her hair—these things were keenly present in my thoughts. But not as I wished they were, clear down into the center of myself. There was something underneath my awareness of Anne, something cold and inhibiting.

They say that in Alaska the summer warms the surface of the land so that you can grow crops on it, but that underneath the ground is frozen even in August. That is something the way it was with me that evening in the living room of the house on Setauket Point. I think, if I had kissed her then and told her that I loved her, abrupt as it would have seemed under ordinary circumstances, she would have understood and responded to it. But I didn't because I couldn't. There was something in the way, the only thing, I suspect, that can come between a man and a woman when they love each other, and it was to lie between us not only then but later.

The sundering thing was fear. You can love when you are cold, hungry, sad, swiftly frightened, even when you are otherwise bored, as honeymoons go to show, but not when you are afraid. And I was afraid.

It was quiet in that room, unmovingly, oppressively, chillingly silent there and through the whole house. The faint hiss of the lampwick and the sounds of our breathing were the only ones in my ears. I knew that, because I was listening—nominally for the return of Seth Marcy and perhaps others with him. They would come here whether they found her or not; I was certain of that. But the noise of footsteps was not the only one in my imagination. There was that other sound, the thing we had heard as we ran across the meadow in the rain. . . .

It must have happened the very instant that Mrs Marcy had fallen on the stairs. I wondered if it had really been the reason why she had slipped? There might be nothing more in the two things than coinci-

dence, but I am not a strong believer in that kind of coincidence. No, there was some kind of connection and I was far from feeling certain that it was the obvious one. If people fell down stairs often when there was a . . . well, a clap of thunder. . . . But they didn't. And that hadn't been a clap of thunder.

My thoughts revolved around this point over and over again in futility. I would shut my eyes and try to think just what that sound might have been, and instead there against the lids I would see Julian and Mrs Walters at the foot of the stairs, looking down at Mrs Marcy. She had seemed small, lying there, like a bird that had run into a windowpane and stunned itself or broken its neck. Probably Mrs Walters was right and she hadn't had much of a life. Whatever it had been, it was over now. Perhaps that was, as Mrs Walters claimed, a merciful thing. . . .

I jerked myself back from this kind of thinking with horror. Never before in my life had I entertained such a stupid and morbid notion as that death could be preferable to life—any kind of life, no matter how dismal. Although of course if Julian could actually prove that there was another life afterward . . . And that concept brought me up short. There must be something in the air of this house or in its silence to make me think in this maudlin fashion. Then I remembered how tired I was. That would account for everything—fatigue poisons in the blood.

16 WE HAD a long wait that night, Anne and I, before anyone came to the house. Once I went to the back door and out along the road a short distance. But there were no headlights on it coming our way, though I could see that the Marcy house was still lighted. And straining my eyes in the blackness, I thought I could make out a cluster of yellow light flecks between me and it, far off to the right. That would be another party gone down to read the story in those footprints and look, as I had done earlier, at the cut bank and the black, silent sweep of the water against the shore. Remembering how it pressed in against the rock and ricocheted back and out again from the land, I felt a kind of horror. I am a good enough swimmer, but even fresh and uninjured, I should not have cared to go into the river where those footprints ended. I went back to Anne without a word and held her close again.

It must have been long past two in the morning when a car finally

did drive up to the house. The two of us had heard it coming—in spite of fatigue our ears were preternaturally sharpened—and we were standing on the back steps when it swept around the end of the barn and the headlights flooded blindingly over us. I felt like an insect pinned to a board.

Whoever was driving brought the car to a sudden halt and switched the lights down to dim. There was the slam of a door and then, as the driver came between us and the headlamps, I saw to my surprise that it was a woman. All that I could tell about her at first was that she had thin legs and was wearing heavy, sensible oxfords. It was not until she was almost up to the steps where we standing that I could get any idea of her beyond that.

She was, I saw then, a woman of somewhere between forty and fifty, spare, erect, with the kind of long face and heavy nose that are supposed to be typical of the New England spinster. She had a bandanna of some sort tied over her hair and was wearing a tailored suit which was something short of fashionable. Her walk suggested that she used her legs for getting across country rather than fascination. And yet, there was nothing daunting or formidable about her. I liked the way she came over to us and did not begin speaking till she was on the steps.

"Hello," she said then, and her voice was open and quiet, grave but not somber.

"Good evening," I said.

"I'm Ellen Hoskins. Is my brother here yet?"

"Why, no. I'm afraid I don't know any Mr Hoskins. Anne, do you?"

"No," said Anne, her voice sounding so cordial that I knew she liked this woman just as I had. "But that needn't matter. . . . I'm sure I've seen you in town. Will you come in?"

The woman said "Thank you," and came into the kitchen. "My brother Dan," she told us, "is the sheriff."

Anne's "Oh!" was less cordial.

Miss Hoskins smiled. "But he's quite human. He asked me to bring the car out here and wait for him. He ought to be along any minute." She looked at us pityingly. "You must have had a horrible evening of it."

"Yes," I said and then, moistening my lips, "have they found her?" She nodded.

"Dead?" Anne's voice was steady but faint.

"Yes. I'm sorry."

The news was no more than what we had both known we should have to hear sooner or later, but for all that it settled into my mind cold and hard. A sudden wave of sadness went over me—sadness and fear, as I

had to admit to myself. I wondered what was going to happen now.

Ellen Hoskins was looking round the kitchen. Her eye traveled to the lamp, still burning on the table, but it did not pause there. She surveyed the whole room quietly, as though it interested her. Its placid, shabby orderliness seemed to please her in some way and she nodded to herself. Anne and I looked at her with curiosity. It was hard to tell what she was, though if her brother were sheriff, presumably she belonged to Barsham Harbor. Still, I decided, not entirely. Her tweed suit, though old and unashamedly patched on one elbow, was well-tailored and I thought the brown sweater under it had probably come from England. There was something crisp and assured in her manner that was puzzling at first, until it occurred to me that it was businesslike. Her hands, too, were not those of a housewife, country or town. Their fingernails were short and uncolored, but they were polished. And her shoes, though they were dark with age and wear and smeared here and there with mud, were definitely handmade.

She drew a deep breath. "It's good to get inside," she observed. "Summer's about over and the nights are cold."

Anne's response was quick. "Would you like a cup of hot coffee?"

"No, thank you. But Dan'll be glad of one when he arrives. It's been cold out on the water, I expect."

"Come on into the living room," I said. "The places to sit in there are somewhat softer."

She grinned at that. "I can see you're not from this part of the world," she said and then added, "either of you."

"No," I admitted and we went into the front of the house. Through the window at the end of the room I noticed that the night was now wholly black and empty. The lights had gone from the water.

Anne drew a deep breath and said, as if the words hurt her throat, "They . . . they found her quickly, didn't they? We thought it might take a long time."

Ellen Hoskins settled herself in the chair where Mrs Walters had sat earlier that night and began to fish in a side pocket of her jacket. "There's an eddy below Barsham," she said matter-of-factly. "One of the men—Harry Miller his name is—happened to think that with the tide ebbing, if there was a body in the river, it ought to appear there. So he waited a while and finally found her."

"Oh." Anne's face was white and she sat down quickly on the sofa again.

The sheriff's sister watched her a moment and then produced a package of filter cigarettes, extracted one, and lighted it. "It's a horrible thing,"

she said, and in spite of her casualness and unconcern her tone showed that she meant the adjective. "But you mustn't think too much about it, Miss . . . ?"

"Conner," I said and added, "My name's Sayles. Richard Sayles."

She nodded as if our names interested her in some way. "Thank you. My point is that you ought to take this as quietly as you can. And don't worry about Dan's coming here to talk to you. It's his job, of course, even in cases of accidental deaths."

"We understand that," I said, with enough emphasis on the final word to make her smile.

"But not me? Well, Dan's a good sheriff but the sight of a pencil and a piece of paper is more than he can stand. He foists off the notes on me—when I'm home, that is."

"That must be interesting." Anne was smiling again.

"Sometimes." Ellen Hoskins was noncommittal. "But a lot of it's just hard work—or tragic."

"We'd all give a lot if this hadn't happened," I said into the pause that followed.

"Seth Marcy is taking it hard," she observed with what was too ladylike to be a sniff, "in spite of the fact that so far as I know he never did anything to make Elora's life pleasant, or even tolerable." Her manner changed. "But I should be careful if I were you, all of you. The people here are different from the ones you're probably accustomed to. They'll blame you for what's happened."

"It wasn't our fault."

"No, Miss Conner, but it *is* going to look that way to most of them. And then—" She broke off, abruptly, and put her head on one side. "I wonder what's keeping Dan?"

"Was he coming straight here?"

"No, he was going to see Seth Marcy home and come on to talk to all of you."

"It doesn't matter. We're not sleepy," I said.

"Maybe not, but you ought to be. You both look tired. And you, Professor Sayles, only arrived today. The train always tires me and probably it does you."

"So you know my title and when I arrived?" I was puzzled.

"Oh, yes. In Barsham Harbor we know everything half an hour after it's happened. Your arrival was all over town by the middle of the morning. And I deduced the 'Professor' part from the fact that you came from New York and have a more or less unusual name. Knowing that you are visiting Julian Blair, I conclude that you must be the Richard

Sayles who wrote *The Elements of Experimental Psychology*. I'm a secretary at Cambridge in the winter, in the Department of Psychology." She gave a sort of dry smile. "You see how easy it was."

"I see why your brother is sheriff, Miss Hoskins."

She laughed at that. "Oh, I don't do any of the sheriffing. I take Dan's notes for him and type them, but he does all the hard work."

This was a clever woman. For all the pleasant homeliness of that long face of hers and the angular awkwardness of the way she sat in her chair, I was conscious of her shrewdness and mentally decided that it would be well to be cautious about what we said to her.

She took another pull on her cigarette and remarked, "I hope you're not offended by my knowing who you are."

"Not at all," I told her. "Flattered. But there does seem to have been a good deal of talk about Julian and the rest of us in the village."

"Inevitably. They haven't much else to do, so they talk about anybody and everybody. And when there's nothing else to say, they gossip. They've been gossiping about this house and the people in it, ever since Professor Blair came. Furiously. And without anything really to go on. Which means that they've had to make up stories, for instance one about an atom bomb that a lot of them are convinced Mr Blair is inventing." She tapped the ash off her cigarette with an abrupt gesture. "Dan's going to have some trouble, I'm afraid."

I had a suspicion what that last remark meant. The good folk of Barsham Harbor, with this tragedy for a pretext, would expect the sheriff to take some kind of action—action against Julian, or Mrs Walters, or all of us. Seth Marcy, of course, and that cousin of his who'd driven me out from the station. The thought of those two men made me uncomfortable. They wouldn't be easy to reason with.

Ellen Hoskins seemed unperturbed by the silence that followed, but after a time she looked from one of us to the other. "By the way," she said, "it's not my business, but where are the rest of you?"

"Upstairs. Julian—Mr Blair—isn't strong, and after Mrs Marcy's fall he took a sleeping tablet." Some unpremeditated impulse made me add, "At least, so Mrs Walters told us. He doesn't even know what's happened yet."

It seemed to me that she sat up a trifle in her chair. "So. The fall was a great shock to him, then?"

"Yes. We all thought she was badly hurt for a minute." But even while I was making that reply it struck me as curious that Julian should have been so shaken by the accident. He must have changed a great deal, I reflected. In the old days he would never have been so disturbed by an

event that affected him only at second hand. Impersonally kind and troubled he might have been, perhaps, but not reduced to the white and trembling figure I had taken in charge. All at once there was a thought in my mind which I had not summoned: that accident to Mrs Marcy must have meant something to him, something important. But how could Elora Marcy have been anything important to Julian in any way at all? The idea was ridiculous.

"From what I hear," Ellen Hoskins was saying, "your Mrs Walters is quite an unusual person."

"That depends on what you mean," I answered cautiously.

She had the grace to smile. "You don't need to worry. I'm not here in any official capacity. Maybe I just have the Barsham curiosity."

Anne broke in on that. "I can't understand why she hasn't come down. She's a very light sleeper. She hears the smallest noise."

"She must be worn out," Ellen Hoskins commented.

"Yes," I agreed, but the explanation was unsatisfactory to some watchful segment of my mind. I still believe that Mrs Walters should have come downstairs when Ellen Hoskins arrived. I think she overplayed her hand, just that one time. She overplayed it because she should have realized that neither Anne nor I would be quite willing to believe that she was really asleep. And yet, it is actually possible she really was asleep. That day must have put an intolerable strain on her.

However it was, the three of us went on talking inconsequences for what seemed like an eternity, trying not to let the tide of silence dammed-up in that house flood over us. At least that was what Anne and I were talking for. Ellen Hoskins appeared to have no purpose but the social one. Once I thought to myself that this conversational night piece was fantastic beyond any credence. There we were, chit-chatting away as if it weren't three in the morning and as if this Ellen Hoskins' brother hadn't just been fishing a woman's body out of the river. A woman who had been alive, walking, talking, singing to herself in this very house a few hours before. And my friend, Julian Blair, lying asleep and drugged upstairs; this was going to be nasty for him in the next few days. And Anne . . . The pieces of it began to fall apart in my mind with fatigue. I could barely keep myself awake enough to make a decently conscious remark now and again. To this day I cannot remember what trivia we discussed in that half hour before the sheriff came.

17 THE CLUMP of feet on the back steps brought my attention into focus again. I got heavily up from the sofa and went out to the door. As I stumbled through the dark hall I tried to remind myself of the need for caution, discretion, a tight rein of restraint on everything I said or did from this moment on.

The man outside was knocking before I got to the kitchen and he made a peremptory noise of it. You could have told by nothing more than the way he knocked that he was the law. When he came into the lamp-light I saw that he was a big man, something like his sister in face, but heavier of nose and jaw. The humor that lay in the corners of her mouth was missing from his. He looked strong, solid, and not quite grim. Thoroughly determined would be closer to it. After my first glance at him I knew that nothing could be done to alter anything about this man's actions. He would do his duty as he saw it and the chips could fall anywhere they chose. We introduced ourselves and I took him into the living room. He didn't offer to shake hands, by the way.

"Hello, Ellen," he said. "Sorry I kept you waitin' so long. Took longer at Marcy's than I expected." He looked the room over once, without interest, and settled his gaze on Anne. "You're Miss Conner, I calculate."

"Yes, I am." Anne's voice was low but steady and calm; she was clearly in complete control of herself and I felt a rush of admiration for the way she sat there, her head high but not defiant, her eyes level.

Dan Hoskins wasted no more time on the civilities. "Well, it's kinda late and I'll try to get this over with fast as I kin." He looked at us inquiringly. "You don't mind if Ellen, here, takes a few notes for me?"

"Not at all," I assured him.

"Good." He smiled faintly. "She likes to help me out—gives her something to do. Well, you two just tell her your addresses so we get *that* down all right and proper."

Ellen Hoskins had produced a notebook and several pencils, sharpened to needle points as I observed. I suspected that detail was typical of her. She was the kind of woman who never needed to ask for anything. We gave her the facts about ourselves while the sheriff watched the two of us without expression. Then he cleared his throat.

"This ain't anything reely official," he observed, "but I figger I better collect all the information I can as quick's possible. Folks in town is kinda wrought up about the whole thing and it'll be best for all concerned if we get it clear right away."

"Sit down," I suggested, "if it's just informal. All of us will be glad to tell you what we know. Shall I call Mrs Walters?"

He shook his head. "Not yet. By the way, where-at is she and Mr Blair?"

I told him about that and then suggested that if he wanted information I could tell him the story of the day as Anne and I knew it. Then, if he wanted to ask any questions, he could. Ellen Hoskins frowned when I advanced this proposal, but her brother seemed to approve.

"Might's well," he agreed. "Mebbe I ought to keep you two apart and see if you tell the same story, but God knows you've had a plenty time to go over it already. Shoot."

"Stop me if I go too fast for you, Miss Hoskins," I said.

She looked up from her notebook. "You've got only one mouth," she remarked drily, "I expect I'll be able to keep up with it."

"She's used to perfessors," her brother observed with satisfaction. "You don't need to worry about her."

I launched into the account of the day's events, summarizing them briefly up to the moment of our return to the house and the discovery of Mrs Marcy lying at the foot of the stairs. When he heard that Anne and I were not actually in the house when the accident occurred, the big man frowned.

"So neither of you saw it happen, then?"

"No."

"D'you know if anybody did?"

Thinking back, I found that I was not wholly sure about that. "I don't believe so," I said. "Mrs Walters did say something about Mrs Marcy's having fallen, but I'm reasonably certain she used a word like 'must'. 'She must have fallen,' or something like that."

He turned to his sister. "Make a note to ask about that, Ellen."

"I've already got it." Her voice was wholly uninflected.

"How did she look when you saw her lying there?" He sounded as if he assigned a good deal of importance to my answer and I noticed that he was alert, for all the relaxation in his posture. Not in any tense or overt way, but with the patient expectation of a fisherman staring at the cork float on his line.

"Why . . . I don't know, exactly. Sprawled out and limp, I should say. She was right at the foot of the stairs, as I said, and lying perfectly still. Her face was grayish and her eyes were closed. At least I think they were."

"Yes," said Anne in a low voice.

The big man nodded. "Go ahead."

"Then Mrs Walters picked her up—almost right away—and carried her in here to the sofa. I did notice then that the poor woman's arm hung down rather peculiarly. Her hand was turned out from her body, instead of in."

Dan Hoskins grunted at that and turned to Anne. "You see that, too?"

"No. I didn't notice."

He turned back to me and revolved one square, thick hand at the wrist. "Like that, hunh? Like her wrist—or her arm—was busted?" he suggested.

I nodded. "But of course it couldn't have been. The tracks along the road later pretty well disproved that idea."

"So? Well, anyhow, the reason I asked was that when we found her it seemed like both her arms was busted." He paused but I could think of nothing to reply. After a time he went on, dubiety in his tone. "Maybe not, of course. We'll know more about that when Doc Peters turns in his report. And then again, maybe it was the water did it."

"She couldn't have carried that umbrella if she'd had two broken arms." He looked puzzled at that, so I went on to finish my story—the whole miserable business, including our stupid failure to call at the Marcy house to find out about her. He listened with attention and never once interrupted, but I felt that my story was clashing with something else that was already in his mind. There was a stubborn set to his mouth.

"Sounds like you're right about the broken bones," he admitted when I finished. "But when we found her, seemed to me like she was all brukken. O' course that current sets in against the rock pretty hard when the tide's ebbin', but . . ."

I wondered what he was getting at. If Mrs Marcy had any broken bones, it was clear enough that the current must have been responsible for them. Else how could she have walked as far as she did? Mrs Walters was no fool, either. She would never have let the woman out of the house if she had thought Mrs Marcy was seriously hurt. Her remarks about Seth Marcy proved that to my own satisfaction.

"But you saw those tracks in the mud, I suppose?" The question was put in as tactful a tone as I could muster, but I wanted to be sure that nothing which could exculpate us, wholly or in part, was omitted from those precise, rapid notes that Ellen Hoskins was taking.

He studied the palm of one big hand for a moment before he answered. "Yup. I saw them. I reckon there ain't much doubt about how it all happened." Somehow his tone contradicted his words, though he sounded not so much skeptical as dissatisfied. After a while he gave us the clue to what was in his mind. "It seems kinda queer to me, her fallin'

in that way, even if she had hurt her head. This farm here and the next one were about second nature to her. Must have been . . ." He closed his hand and looked up. "Wal, you can't help me there. I'll have to talk it over with Doc Peters."

The way in which this man asked his questions and thought aloud interested me. Generally, instead of looking at us he kept his eyes fixed on some corner of the room, or the line of the baseboard. Once, long ago, I had had a Latin teacher who did the same thing in class—never looked at you when he called for a recitation, but stared at an Alinari photograph of the Forum before Mussolini and said, "Mr Sayles, can you give us the future perfect of *eo*?" He'd been the shrewdest teacher in school, for all that, and big Dan Hoskins made me remember him. In a moment he called on me to recite again:

"You and this young lady wasn't here, then, when Elora left the house?"

"No. She was gone when we got back from town."

"Uh huh. And you didn't worry about her, special?"

"No." I went on to tell him briefly about my conversation with Mrs Walters and suggested that he ought to question her about that part of it.

"I'll git to her," he remarked calmly and went on to make certain from me that the first indication we had of anything wrong was Seth Marcy's arrival at the back door. When I finished, he sighed, "'Bout what I expected, but thank you just the same, Perfessor. Now, just think back on the whole thing once more and see if there's anything you'd want to add to your statement."

That last word stuck in my mind. I didn't exactly like its implications. "Statement?" I said. "I don't see why I have to make a statement. There's no crime here."

"No," he admitted, and then paused. "Fact is, I'd like to make sure this thing ain't put in the wrong light around town, Perfessor." He cleared his throat. "Like I said, folks is some stirred up. Nacherally. Elora was well-liked and it'll be hard fer a lot of them to believe she'd make a mistake like walkin' off the medder road into the river, even considerin' she'd had a crack on the head. Fer Seth's sake, and yours, you understand, it would be a pity if anyone was to think she . . ." his voice stumbled, "say, jumped into it a-purpose."

I stared at him. The very notion was fantastic, but I began to see what he meant, or thought I did. "Oh. But they couldn't blame anyone round here for that, even so. I'm positive she didn't commit suicide, but even if she did, it wasn't because of anything connected with us here."

"No?" His voice was noncommittal. "I'm not sayin' it would be. Es-

pecially Miss Conner and you, Perfessor. But if you'll excuse my way of putting it, Mr Blair and that Mrs . . . Mrs . . ."

"Walters."

"Walters, they seem like kinda queer people to us here in Barsham. We ain't accustomed to foreigners." There was a sudden half smile at the corners of Ellen Hoskins' mouth at that last word. "They bein' queer, let's say, and it bein' queer that Elora Marcy would walk into the river off her own field, there's some will make a connection." He looked directly at me and from his manner I guessed that what he was going to say was to be something he regarded as vitally important. "Just what is it that your Mr Blair's workin' on here, Perfessor?"

The question took me by surprise and I knew the consternation it caused in my mind must be visible on my face. The control I had been able to keep in the course of the examination so far was instantly dissolved. It was impossible to foresee the results of any answer that I might make. I damned myself for not having prepared for this emergency. I should have had a good, workable half truth, or even a plausible lie, ready to meet that inevitable inquiry. For if I answered it truthfully, Dan Hoskins and all Barsham Harbor would assume that Julian was mad (which I had to admit to myself he probably was) and immediately connect his insanity with Mrs Marcy's death. Perhaps they would believe that Julian had driven her insane by the sheer madness of his project, or infected her with his own mental trouble, as if insanity were a contagious disease. Added to that, of course, they would be properly horrified and suspicious.

The problem we had to face was how to convince Dan Hoskins and, through him, the whole of Barsham Harbor, that there was no connection between the tragedy of the afternoon and anything which Julian was doing in that upstairs room of his. After all, that was no more than the simple truth—or so I assured myself. Yet the thrust of fear that had gone through me at the sheriff's question should have taught me better. There was a connection, more than one connection, between Mrs Marcy and the invention of Julian Blair. Somewhere in my mind I was aware of that, but what the relationship between the two things was I did not know. Meantime, Dan Hoskins was waiting for his answer.

"Why, I don't know that I have the right to divulge anything about that," I began, sparring for time and an explanation of my hesitation in replying. "Julian's work is hard to describe to anybody who isn't an expert, anyway. He's an electrophysicist, and he's an expert on electric waves and circuits. He made a lot of the improvements on the modern radio tube, for instance. Right now he is studying some faint electrical

phenomena that no one knows much about yet. Waves that are something like radio waves, if you want to put it that way."

"Hm . . ." The sheriff sounded mildly amused. "The talk is that he's buildin' a machine to make a bomb. Suthin' that could blow the earth to Kingdom Come."

The unconscious irony of that struck me so swiftly that I wanted to burst into laughter. I managed to throttle the impulse into a smile. "No, Sheriff, nothing like that." Then I added, "Mrs Marcy did tell me she'd heard the same story. But she knew better, too."

"I see," he said absently. Following the line of his eyes I saw that he was watching Anne. There was anxious apprehension on her face and in the way she was leaning forward to look at me. Her expression, every line in her body, revealed much more openly than anything I had said how deeply concerned we were with Julian's invention. If I had hoped the sheriff could be decoyed from that scent, I knew that after one look at Anne it was a forlorn expectation. Well, I reflected, she was young and tired, and she couldn't realize how much she was giving away to a shrewd man like Dan Hoskins. Probably it was a secret we shouldn't be able to keep indefinitely under any circumstances.

The sheriff watched Anne for a moment and then shifted his eyes again to the baseboard. I had the uncomfortable certainty that he could observe all he wanted or needed out of their corners. "I see," he said again and went on, slowly and casually, "Mr Blair wasn't usin' Elora in any way to help him with his work, was he?"

"What?" I was genuinely startled. "Good God, no!"

"All right, all right," he said soothingly. "I'm lookin' as much fer what didn't happen as fer what did." He scratched his head. "You're certain sure Elora wasn't mixed up in whatever it is the old man's makin'?"

It gave me a shock to hear him call Julian an old man, but of course that was true of him, physically at least. Only . . . it had been such a short time ago that Julian was far from old. I called my mind back with a jerk to the question. "I'm positive. All she ever did was to sweep out his work room once a week."

"Yestiddy?"

"I think yesterday was her day for that. I'm not sure. But honestly, Sheriff, I can't see any connection. Mrs Marcy tried to find out from me in the morning what Mr Blair was working on." That was stretching the truth a good deal, but this was no occasion for moral scrupling. "I didn't tell her much, so she finally informed me that she was certain Julian's work was on a radio of some sort. She poked fun at the people who talked about a bomb."

He nodded his head several times, heavily, and was silent. At length he sighed. "You can't think of anythin' more you'd like to tell me? I'm clean out of questions."

Fatigue was numbing my brain until I was almost unsure whether I was awake or asleep, but I went laboriously back over the story I had told. Most of it was the truth, if not the whole truth, but it finally occurred to me that I had made it unnecessarily meager. Mrs Marcy's fall was a natural accident, but I could at least suggest a cause for it, and thereby make it somewhat more credible. "Yes," I told the sheriff, "there is one thing. It's possibly not important, or even relevant, but if I'm going to sign any statement I'd like to have it included. The point is just this: Coming back from the water toward the house there was an exceptionally loud and alarming clap of thunder."

Surprise was openly printed on Dan Hoskins' face. "Thunder?" he said as if he had not heard me rightly.

"Yes. The noise was so sudden and loud that it even frightened me in spite of myself. It must have been very near the house. ('Another of my slippery half truths,' I thought. 'It was in the house or there's something the matter with my ears.')

I'm inclined to believe that it must have startled Mrs Marcy while she was coming downstairs. She slipped and fell."

Ellen Hoskins was watching me, I saw, with speculation in the set of her eyes, but she said nothing. Her brother nodded without much show of interest. "Put that down, Ellen," he said. "More'n likely the perfessor's got something there."

18 ANNE'S STORY was substantially the same as my own of course. She told it in a low, steady voice that betrayed no emotion and in considerably fewer words than I had used. The sheriff listened to her with attention but no great show of interest. He did not interrupt at all and, even when Anne reiterated my statement about the noise we had heard, he asked no question, though there was a quirk in Anne's tone when she called it "thunder" that I thought would arouse his vigilance.

After she had finished, the big man sat silent for some time, slumped in his chair and staring at the rug. He lifted his eyes after a time and stared directly at Anne. "Miss Conner."

"Yes."

"When you came back from town with Dr Rambouillet, was Mrs Walters' dress wet?"

Anne knitted her forehead for a second. "No. She had on a different one. In the morning and early afternoon she was wearing a black crepe. When we came back she'd changed into a dark-blue wash-silk she has."

The sheriff grinned. "You got that, Ellen?"

"Naturally I've got it." Her fingers moved like a pianist's when she was taking notes. She was never a word behind. I began to envy the Cambridge professor who had her for a secretary.

Dan Hoskins seemed to have come to a dead end. He stretched his tree-trunk legs out in front of him and knocked the tips of his heavy shoes together slowly and rhythmically. It made a noise that was too loud for the hush of the room. The rest of us simply sat, waiting for his next move.

"I'm a nacheral-born fool, I guess," he said. "There ain't no real call I can see to keep you folks here any longer, or ask any more questions. O' course, I'll have to talk to Mrs . . . Walters before I go. But somehow I got a feeling . . ." His voice trailed off and he went back to knocking the toes of his shoes together. Then he cleared his throat. "Miss Conner," he began almost diffidently, "would you give me some kind of picture of how you folks are all connected?"

Anne was surprised. "You mean, what relation we all are to each other?"

He nodded. "Something like that. More, how you know each other, how it comes that you're all here at once in this house."

"Oh." She began to explain that Julian was her brother-in-law, mentioned Helen's death, floundered through an awkward explanation about me, flushing when her voice stumbled, and added that when she'd arrived she'd found Mrs Walters with Julian, and what she'd been able to gather about that. "She's sort of an assistant of Uncle Julian's," was the way she summed it up, finally.

That, it seemed to me, was a dangerous simplification. If the woman herself did not subsequently admit what she was, Julian himself was likely to do so, and I didn't want the sheriff to begin wondering, later, if we'd been holding things back from him all along the line. Besides, it seemed to me that I saw a safe way of explaining Mrs Walters. In thinking it would simplify things at all I was reasoning from an abysmal ignorance of Barsham Harbor and the way its people thought and felt. It would, perhaps, have been better if I'd kept my mouth shut then, but I wanted to forestall the obvious, scandalous implications in Mrs Walter's

presence in the house. "Wait a minute, Sheriff," I broke in. "There's more to it than just that."

He grunted. "There must be. They been here alone, or pretty much that way, most of the summer."

Ellen Hoskins frowned. "Really, Dan, I'm afraid you have an unpleasant imagination."

"Never mind about my imagination. Human beings're human." His tone was impatient but indulgent.

"What I was going to explain," I went on firmly, "is this. When Mr Blair's wife died, it hit him very hard. He's never really got over losing her. So he did something that even the greatest scientists have done, more than once, in the same situation. He turned to spiritualism."

The big man snorted. In spite of my own convictions, which were all in agreement with him, the scorn and contempt he managed to make vocal in that short noise drove me to Julian's defense. "All right," I said sharply. "You've a right to despise the subject if you want, but there's nothing unusual or disgraceful in being a spiritualist. Lots of sane people are, I assure you. Even some scientists, as I said. And that's the explanation for Mrs Walters. She's what is called a medium. Julian believes that he can communicate with Helen—with his dead wife, that is—through her. That's why she's here."

"Have it your own way, Perfessor."

"It's the truth," I said wearily.

"Of course it is, Dan." His sister's voice was quietly amused. "In Barsham, Professor Sayles, they relish their scandal and Dan's no better than the rest."

I thanked her with a smile, but what she said made me wonder whether I had been altogether wise. "By the way, Sheriff," I told him, "I don't know whether it will help particularly to have the fact of Mrs Walters' being a medium known. Perhaps it would be better not to mention it."

He snorted again. "Don't worry. I ain't going to tell it. Folks would laugh at me fer listenin' to such trash. Some of 'em, that is . . ." His voice lost its certainty. "And the others might not take kindly to the idea of havin' one of those things in these parts, anyhow."

"Thank you." I tried to sound ironical.

He waved a large hand. "Don't mention it. Well, young lady, that's your story, eh?"

Anne nodded.

The sheriff pulled his watch out of his vest and looked at it. "Gettin' late. Or early, I should say. But I calculate we may's well hear the

others right now, if there's no objection. It'll save me a trip back later."

"Certainly." I got to my feet. There was no sensation except that of leaden weight in my legs. "At least, I'll go call Mrs Walters. I don't know about Julian. She may have given him a lot of opiate. The shock was severe, you know. He's still sleeping and I wish you'd take him last, if at all."

"O.K. Let's have the woman first. You two don't need to wait up. Just send her on down and get some sleep. From the looks of you, it'd be a good idea."

His thinly veiled command was not as welcome as it should have been. I was dead tired, fatigue had seeped into every cell of my nerves and muscles, and yet I did not want to leave that room. I wanted to watch the encounter between Dan Hoskins and Mrs Walters. I wanted to be there in case she flared up and undid the job I had tried to do in presenting our story. I felt, without knowing quite why, that we were going to need the sheriff on our side and I dreaded the prospect that Mrs Walters would estrange him. But Anne was already on her feet and walking slowly toward the door. Clearly, there was no pretext by which we might stay and perhaps it would be wiser to get some rest. We were likely to need it in the next few days.

"All right," I agreed. "We'll call her and send her down to you. There's coffee on the stove if you need it. And wake me if I can help."

"Sure, sure," he replied and we went out together. Going up the stairs, Anne and I exchanged no words. I put my arm around her and steadied her, but there was no emotion connected with that. The sense of unreality and dream was upon me strongly, then, and even Anne was a part of it. We were not real people, I thought, but only shadows on a screen or words on a page. We could not feel anything real. The sound of our feet on the treads seemed to come from a long way off.

We knocked on Mrs Walters' door. Her voice, when she answered, was not sleepy. "Hello," she said. "Who's there?"

I told her and explained that she was wanted downstairs.

"Wait one second till I come out," she said urgently through the door. "I want to talk to you a minute."

When she opened the door and came into the circle of our candle's light, it was plain that sometime before she had been at least lying down in her blue dress. It was creased and wrinkled, and her hair straggled round her face. Most of the make-up was gone from her cheeks and lips, and she looked more than ever like a human ruin. But I swear there was no fear and no weakness in that face, or in the way she held her big,

loose body. She stared at us each momentarily, as if trying to read from our faces what had been happening downstairs. It may even be possible that she was, but I think she had no occasion to wonder about that. I think she had been listening outside the door. She was too clever to leave anything to chance or guesswork. And she was in too tight a pinch to let even the smallest slip occur.

"I hope you told the truth," she said to us in a low voice.

"Of course." I could not resist adding, "And you'll be all right if you do the same thing."

She smiled at that and it was a thin, cold smile. "Thank you, Mr Sayles. I was only hoping that you hadn't embroidered your story with—noises, let us say, or stupid conjectures about me."

"I mentioned the noise. As a clap of thunder, which I still don't believe it was. And we told Sheriff Hoskins that you were a medium. It seemed to me better to do that than to let him go on thinking what was actually in his mind."

"How chivalrous of you." Without another word she turned down the hall, moving in the dark like a cat, and went soundlessly down the stairs.

Anne and I stood there in the dark hall until we heard a murmur of voices begin in the living room. Then we separated without a word or a gesture, and went at once to bed. This time I did not lie awake, even to listen. No matter what lived in this house, or what danger might be in its air, I could not think longer about it. Sleep came up over me at once, with Lethean intensity.

19 THE SUN was shining when I woke the next day. For a time I lay on my cot, simply observing the intense blue of the sky coming through the window and feeling the animal pleasure of a rested body. When I stretched, the blood in the muscles of my arms and legs felt like rich cream. I was content, and even more than that. I thought of Anne. I would see her again on this day; no wonder the sky was so bright. And then I remembered everything else, in a series of heavy resurgences of memory, and the good feeling went out of me.

It wasn't particularly cold when I got out of bed, so I knew the morning was probably well advanced. And when I went downstairs to forage for breakfast, I found it was close to eleven. To my surprise, Julian was

sitting in the kitchen drinking a cup of coffee and picking at a piece of toast.

"Hello, Julian," I said. "I see you slept late, too."

He looked up at me, and I saw that his face was haggard and gray. "Yes. Later than I should have. I have no right to lose a morning in this fashion, but last night . . . yesterday, seems to have been a shock to me."

"Did the sheriff wake you?"

"Yes. Almost at dawn. I should have stayed up then and gone to work, I suppose. But I was tired . . ."

The coffee on the stove was still hot. I poured a cup for myself, found some bread and butter and an orange, and sat down opposite him. "What did Hoskins ask you?"

"Routine questions. I had not heard about the accident until Mrs Walters told me when she summoned me. It was tragic." He massaged his face with his hand and took another sip of coffee. "I would give anything if it had not happened."

"We all would give that, I guess." When he made no further comment, I asked, "Did you see the woman actually fall on the stairs, Julian?"

His face was grayer than before, I thought, but his tone was steady. "I was in my own bedroom, Richard. I couldn't have seen her fall."

"My theory is that it was the noise that frightened her into falling."

He moistened his lips. "So you heard that?"

"Of course. Listen, Julian, what made that noise?"

As if he had been rehearsed in the answer, he said, "Thunder. It's often very loud and startling here in the valley."

I gave him a look which I hope expressed my skepticism and went on with my breakfast. "I suppose," I said at last, "you wouldn't be willing to use me as your assistant while I'm here, Julian? There's not much else to do and we used to work well together in the old days."

He smiled at that and there was human warmth in the look he gave me. "For an undergraduate, you were a remarkably capable laboratory man, Dick. But I don't need any help. It's best, I am coming to believe, if I work wholly alone. And besides, I'm relying on you to give Anne some fun."

"I'd have time to do both."

"No, Dick, no." He looked at me somberly. "What do you think of her?"

"She's a good kid."

He nodded. "And a lovely one, too. Dick, if I should ever have an accident—say like Mrs Marcy and fall downstairs—I want to ask you to

keep an eye on Anne. I've bequeathed what little property I have left to her, in my will. You're the executor."

"But Julian—"

He held up a thin hand. "Don't protest. There is no one else I could ask to do it."

"All right," I said. "I'll do my best."

"That's all I want," he said and finished his coffee. The piece of toast which he had been holding when I came in was almost untouched. I wanted to urge him to eat more, but from the way he shoved it back I was sure it would be useless. "Well, Dick, it's good to have you here. Perhaps I did not sound too cordial yesterday and I'm sorry. You're a comfort to us right now, though. I'm only sorry all this should have happened."

I told him not to worry and that it was nothing, and he moved out of the room. Even before I had finished speaking I could tell that his mind was abstracted, that he only half heard me, and as he went through the door his head was bent forward as I remembered it when he went into the lab in the old days. Without his telling me, I was sure he was going to that room of his where he worked and the thought gave me a twinge of uneasiness. Surely there were more important things to settle today? But I did not try to call him back. He had gone beyond me, beyond every other living person as well, I think. There was no way I could have held on to him. Even if I had known then what was to happen in the next forty-eight hours, I could not have held him back. Julian, in those last days, was scarcely a living person at all, as I have come to realize in thinking back over the whole terrible story. He was alive only because of the purpose that was in him, the determination to perfect that device of his before letting the death that was in every fiber of his body actually triumph.

After I had finished eating and washing my cup and saucer, I went outside. The sun was blazing down with a thin, sharp sort of autumn heat which felt good on my neck and shoulders. There was a chill in that house behind me that never wholly left it. Apparently the storm had blown itself out—there were a few clouds far to the east, but elsewhere the blue was unbroken. I let my eye range north to where the Marcy house stood, but there was no apparent movement around it. After a while a car came crawling down the road and turned into the drive, but that was all. That, and the fact that there was no one in the fields around the place, and no sound of any sort. It was a Sunday silence, but it wasn't Sunday.

I strolled aimlessly across the grass and down toward the bay. Looking at water is one of my favorite ways of doing nothing. Even if the thought

of swimming was ridiculously inappropriate, and in spite of the fact that I should have loathed the sight of the river because it had just killed a woman the night before, it seemed better to stroll toward the bay than up the road past the ominous silence of the Marcy house. So I went toward the bay. The grass was quite dry again and the ground no longer muddy. Everything was so precisely the way it had been yesterday I could hardly believe that the things my memory told me had occurred were possible. Even when I remembered them most actively, they were not altogether real, as the sun, the grass, the blue sparkle of the water was real.

Anne was sitting on the bank over the swimming beach. She was wearing a tweed coat with a pattern that looked loud to my conservative masculine eyes and a plain dark-brown skirt. The sun was in her hair and lying gold on the skin of her neck and hands and bare legs. She was kicking against the cut bank with the heels of her sport shoes and staring out over the water. I dropped down beside her.

"Hello."

"Hi."

The ensuing silence lasted a long time. Finally she sighed and said, "It's hard to believe it all, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Who'd you see this morning," she went on after a while. "Walters?"

"No. I had breakfast with Julian. Then I came on out here. I didn't want to hang round the house. I didn't see her at all."

"I did," said Anne. "Something's wrong there. She's desperately unhappy about . . . yesterday, I suppose. Or else something that happened this morning."

"What?" I couldn't feel much interested.

Anne shook her head. "I don't know. I just wondered if you'd noticed it . . . Did Uncle Julian tell you the inquest is this afternoon?"

"No. Is it?"

She nodded. "We're all to go. At least, so Mrs Walters says. I had breakfast with her. It wasn't cosy. She only spoke to me once and then it was to tell me that." She pulled a stem of grass and put it between her teeth. It was so much like yesterday that I felt confused for a moment, as though time had slipped, or I had become misplaced in it. Anne went on after a time. "She looked as if she had been crying. I think perhaps she and Uncle Julian had words this morning. Anyhow, she went into his room earlier to see if he was awake and she was gone quite a while. I could hear their voices through the door, but not what they were saying."

She nipped the grass stem again. "It would be fine if they really quarreled and Uncle Julian sent her away."

Her mood struck me as odd, but my own was no more explicable. We both felt detached, passive, wholly centered in the moment. The past and the future were equally uncomfortable, and so we were just existing as nearly as possible in a pure present. There was nothing in our words or actions that morning to suggest that we were more than the most casual acquaintances and most of the time, I think, we were hardly aware of each other. Most of the time. But there were the moments when I would notice the light in her hair, or the faint fragrance of the perfume she was wearing, and I would be aware of her, all right. She hardly looked at me.

We stayed there by the water till one o'clock and by the time we returned to the house, lunch was on the table. A vile meal it was, too—canned peas, some warmed-over stew, and pale yellow, slippery canned peaches that reminded me of college commons. I looked curiously at Mrs Walters while I was putting down as much of the food as I could manage. She was obviously outfitted for town, in a stiff blue dress. Her hair was more carefully arranged than I had yet seen it, and her make-up was straight again. But there was a sullenness in her manner, even toward Julian, and she obviously resented all of us. "You might have come in sooner," she said to Anne, "I had to get the lunch singlehanded." And to me, "I made your bed, Professor Sayles. But if you want any more tidying up than that, you'll have to do it yourself." As I recall, she did not address a single word to Julian.

There was something defiant about him. He ate more than he had at breakfast, rather as if to avoid the necessity for speaking than as if he were hungry. He must have been working hard. There was a black smudge on one cheek—the one he always rubbed when he was concentrating, I remembered, and his hands were grimy.

After the meal, Anne went over to him and gave him a kiss on the top of his head. "Now Uncle Julian," she said, "you go up and wash your hands, fix your hair, and put on a tie. Dick and I aren't going to take you to town looking like a mechanic."

"But that's what I am, my dear," he said absently. All the same he got up and went obediently out. Mrs Walters followed him without a word to either of us, but the look she gave Anne was eloquent. Anne grinned sweetly back at her and went on collecting the plates. I felt the usual helpless embarrassment of the male caught in the cross fire of a women's skirmish. When the door closed behind Mrs Walters, Anne gave me a

grimace that was funny enough to make me laugh. I hoped that Mrs Walters didn't hear it, but I suspect she did.

The kitchen, though, was a cheerful place after Julian and Mrs Walters had left. Anne and I washed the dishes slowly because it was something to do, and had a good time till the last one was racked away. Then there was nothing to think of but the trip into town.

We left the house about half past two and the ride was a stiffly silent one. Julian sat with Anne in front, and Mrs Walters and I occupied opposite corners of the back seat. We neither looked nor spoke at each other in the course of the drive. All four of us were preoccupied with what was to come and yet, though we knew that we were going to face the hostility of all Barsham Harbor, we were not united by the opposition we were to confront. "This," I thought, "is no way to go into a thing of this sort," but I could not see what to do about it, so I kept silent.

As we passed the road into Seth Marcy's farm, a car swung out of it and followed after us. It came in so patly that I felt the driver had been waiting for our car to appear. Once Anne slowed down and pulled over to let it get ahead, but whoever was driving refused to go past. He kept his car an even distance behind us all the way into town.

20 THE INQUEST was to be held in a courtroom on the second floor of the County Building. We had no trouble in finding a parking place and as we stepped out of our Ford the following car drove up behind us. It was the taxi in which I had ridden from the station the morning before. Seth Marcy got out of it and so did the driver, whom I recognized at once. They stared at us without any expression and waited till we entered the building and started up the stairs. Then they came after us, walking with the slow, loose-jointed stride of countrymen. I could feel their eyes on the back of my neck.

We found seats toward the front of the room and sat down. It was rather a dingy, large courtroom and there must have been well over a hundred people in it even before the presiding magistrate, whoever he was, arrived. I presume he was the coroner, but I don't know his name and never did. The irrelevant details of a situation like ours don't impinge much on your mind. Dan Hoskins was there, of course, and I saw Dr Rambouillet sitting across the aisle from us. It was some time before I noticed Ellen Hoskins. She was sitting at a table with a man who

looked like the court clerk, methodically sharpening a pencil with a pocket sharpener.

Most of the time before the hearing opened I spent looking at the people in the courtroom. They were a grim lot, on the whole. We New Yorkers become used to audiences which have a good deal of more or less ebullient blood in them—Italians, Spanish, all sorts of foreigners—that were who have still not become “typical” Americans. Here it was different. These people were all of the same stock and startlingly alike underneath their superficial differences. They were, on the average, tall and inclined to thinness. Their faces were sharp and gray or weathered. Men and women, they had a look of being on the defensive toward life in some way that I could not define. They were inclined to shabbiness—again by New York standards—and there was a faint truculence about the way they sat and the looks they cast in our direction.

Good people they might be, but narrow and cold was the way they looked. I thought as I surveyed them that it was lucky we were innocent of any sort of wrongdoing. It would be hard to find an impartial jury among a people like this.

The jury was, actually, a cross section of the spectators. It was wholly composed of men, most of them apparently farmers, and all middle-aged or older. They were not in the least ill at ease in the jury box. Now and then a dry smile would cross the face of one of them, a long-boned fellow with a mackinaw jacket who sat on the end of the second row, when he caught sight of someone he knew in the audience. But it seemed to me, looking at them, that they were serious and dignified about what they had been called upon to do.

The formal proceedings began almost on time. The magistrate seemed to have no particular plan of inquiry. He took evidence first of all from the man who had found the body—Harry Miller. His testimony was nothing more than what Ellen Hoskins had told us the night before. Then Dr Peters was called to testify, and here the examining officer showed a nice sense of economy by using the doctor first to identify the body, and then to describe the medical aspects of its condition.

Some of what he had to say belongs in this record, though it has already been suggested. Dr Peters was a large, dignified medico with white hair and a weighty gold watchchain. As the dean of the Barsham Harbor doctors and coroner’s physician as well, he spoke with a good deal of dignity, and weighted his sentences with technical words and terms even when they were not necessary. He reported that when he first examined the body of Mrs Marcy she was already dead. I felt an insane desire to smile at that.

"Can you give us the precise cause of death, Dr Peters?" The coroner's tone was deferential.

Dr Peters looked grave. "The cause of death might briefly be described as internal injuries," he declared, "that is, hemorrhage resulting from such injuries." He proceeded to launch into a Virgilian cascade of Latin terms, of which I recognized only a few, including the astounding fact that Mrs Marcy had received an apparently terrible blow across the chest which had resulted in a fractured sternum, or breastbone, and a ruptured spleen. Further, both her arms had been broken.

A ripple went through the courtroom at his testimony. I know that it took me wholly by surprise, and even the coroner appeared incredulous. "Then you do not believe, Dr Peters, that the deceased met her death by drowning?"

Dr Peters looked pained. "I have testified as to the cause—or causes—of death. None of the symptoms of drowning were present. There was no froth in the deceased's mouth or nose, nor even in the trachea and bronchial tubes. Neither was there water in the stomach." He paused and cleared his throat. "The definitive test for drowning is the Gettler test. It depends upon a chemical analysis of blood taken from the pulmonary vein. If pulmonary blood contains a higher percentage of salt than the normal, the diagnosis is death from drowning in salt water. If the blood contains a lower salt content than the normal, the diagnosis is, of course drowning—more technically, asphyxiation—from submersion in fresh water. In the case of the deceased I did not apply the Gettler test."

He paused and the coroner supplied the cue for which he was palpably waiting. "Can you tell the court why you did not apply the Gettler test, Dr Peters?"

"I can. There were two reasons. One, that the pulmonary vein had been ruptured as a result of the injuries which I have already described. The other, that the deceased—ah—entered the river at a time and point when the water was, in view of the condition of the tide, brackish." He brought the word out with a fine flourish of the tongue. "In my opinion the test would have been of no practical value."

That was Dr Peters' testimony, though it took much longer to deliver than to summarize. I listened to it with amazement. It seemed to me entirely incredible that Mrs Marcy should not have died as all of us had assumed she did. And yet, in spite of his bombast, Dr Peters was clearly testifying with knowledge and authority. Pompous he might be, but I could not believe that he was ignorant of his facts. I stole a look at Dr Rambouillet, but that young man's dark, handsome face was composed.

Apparently he saw nothing in what his colleague was saying at which to cavil.

The coroner was as puzzled as the rest of us. He asked Dr Peters if he had any idea what could have occasioned the numerous injuries he had described? Dr Peters pointed out that his province was not speculation, but that the injuries were consonant with the deceased's having been struck violently across the thoracic—"or chest"—region by a bar or the edge of a plank. "Although," he concluded, "a fall against such an edge as I have mentioned might have produced the same result, provided the deceased had fallen from a sufficient height." He added that he had no reason to assume such a fall. In reply to a question from the coroner he admitted that he had been the deceased's personal physician "since the day she was born" and that he knew of no complaint which would have rendered her liable to sudden dizziness, or to fainting.

When he finally stepped down from the stand, my mind was in turmoil. If Mrs Marcy was not alive when she went into the river, then how explain a thousand things? Her regaining consciousness, for instance? Her walk toward her home? When, and under what circumstances had she died? Obviously not in our house nor as a result of her fall on the stairs. Though I wondered, numbly, whether the edge of a stair tread could have inflicted the injuries which Dr Peters had described. It seemed impossible and yet . . .

Seth Marcy was the next witness and he made a bitter one. He described his long wait for his wife's return, his eventual decision to come after her, and his summoning Anne and myself to the back door. "Her lamp was still burnin' in their kitchen," he said. "Tell me why that was. It was the only time she left it on. You can't get around that. They're hidin' somethin', and I look to this trial to git it outa them."

The coroner rapped with his gavel. "Now, Seth. This ain't a trial, and you've got to be careful about accusing people."

Seth's face flushed dark, but he said nothing more, returned a few sullen answers to minor questions and stepped down from the witness chair. As he strode along the aisle to his seat he almost brushed against Mrs Walters and his thin, hooked mouth went down at one corner. "You dirty whore," he said out of the corner of it in a low voice, "you'll pay for this." Then he was past her and into his seat behind us.

Mrs Walters said nothing, but her face went white and I saw that she was trembling. There was an anger in her eyes that was terrible. I would not have chosen to incur Seth Marcy's hatred, but I'd have taken it any day in preference to the ice-cold wrath that looked out of Mrs Walters' eyes.

Our turns came next. Mine was first; I told the same story I had given Dan Hoskins, but I put as much emphasis as I could upon the thunderclap. The fact that I was a college professor and one from a New York university did not seem to please most of the courtroom; there were sneers on several faces confronting me. When I admitted that I had no idea how Mrs Marcy had met so terrible and violent a death, the taxi driver laughed contemptuously and loud enough so that I heard him. It was possible, I suggested, that in falling from the bank she had struck against a ledge of rock, but I admitted I had not noticed such a rock at the place where Mrs Marcy had fallen. I added that the evidence of the footprints, which I described in as much detail as I could remember, was plain and emphasized that Seth Marcy had been as convinced of their authenticity as I was. I pointed out that he had followed them in advance of Miss Conner and myself.

It was surprising how much latitude the coroner permitted. He interrupted seldom and allowed me to tell our side of the story without correction. "Thank you, Professor Sayles," he said when I had finished. "I reckon you've told us what we want to know."

"Or what he wants us to know," said a voice from one of the benches toward the rear of the room.

The coroner pounded with his gavel. "Silence. This is a court of law. If there ain't decent order here the room'll be cleared."

With that, I went back to my seat and it was Anne's turn next. She told the same story that I had and again there were no questions. I began to feel uneasy. There was a growing air of hostility in the room which was inescapable and I wondered why we were given so much latitude. It seemed to me that the coroner would naturally try to please the people to whom he owed his office, after all, by giving us an uncomfortable time of it. But on the contrary, he was quietly kind to Anne.

I looked at her on that raised chair and felt my heart contract within me. She didn't belong there. Her clothes, bright and smart by comparison with what any other woman in the room was wearing, were too gay for Barsham Harbor. Her hair was too gold, too much like sun in a room that was not meant to be other than shadowy. She was too lovely a contrast with the people who were here to look at us and judge by their own harsh standards. Beauty is a hateful thing if it is of a kind to shame you. And Anne seemed to me to shame these people. They stared at her with a sort of impudent curiosity, or at least the men did. That made me inwardly furious. The women stared coldly at her, but there was no mercy in their eyes.

Anne's voice was low and steady. She behaved as if she were accus-

tomed to giving evidence, and her story was clear and direct. She told it her own way, too. I think no one would have been willing to believe that we had rehearsed our evidence beforehand. When she finished she turned to the coroner. "I don't know if what I'm going to say belongs in your records, but I do want to say that this thing that has happened is horrible and that I—that we all—feel terribly about it. Elora and I were friends, really. She was an adorable person . . . I wish it hadn't happened. That's all."

The coroner thanked her and she stepped down to a buzz of low-voiced comment in the room. I could not tell exactly what they thought of her, but I suspected it was the inevitable judgment—that is, the men were half won over by her sincerity but the women contemptuous. At least one thin, blowsy housewife a few seats away muttered something to the pallid man beside her which sounded like "baggage".

I find it hard to convey the inquest as it seemed to me while it was going on. My own emotions were too chaotic for exact definition—they were a blend of confusion underlaid by fear, of uncertainty, of surprise, of a gnawing anxiety as to what all this was going to mean for Anne, Julian, and myself, bitter regret that I had not secured a lawyer, and over them all a sort of numbness. The whole thing was too far outside anything that had happened to me before. I felt responsible for the group of us; it was up to me more than anyone else to see that we came out of this mess without tragedy and yet, I felt helpless to alter the course of events.

Never, in the most unfamiliar parts of Europe had I felt so alien as I did there in that Maine courtroom. The lot of us were simply cut off from everyone else. When the coroner had reproved Seth Marcy for calling the inquest a "trial" he was only technically correct. For we were really on trial, in the eyes of Barsham Harbor. One of their own people had died a horrible and inexplicable death and we were somehow mixed up in it. We were outlanders. They meant to be sure that we did not get away with it. I squeezed Anne's hand when she sat down again beside me.

"Good work."

She did not reply. Her lips were pressed together hard and her fingers gripped mine. I knew that she wanted to cry and wouldn't permit herself to do so.

Then Mrs Walters was called to the stand. Instantly the buzz of comment took on a new note, more sibilant, deeper in tone. They had been waiting for her.

21 MRS WALTERS took her place with an unruffled composure, gave her name and address without being asked for them, and settled herself in the witness chair. The coroner looked over at her above the rim of his glasses.

"What is your position in Mr Blair's household?" he began at once.

"I am Mr Blair's housekeeper and assistant."

"How long have you occupied that position, Mrs Walters?"

"Over three years."

"I see. What do your duties as 'assistant' consist of?"

"I help Mr Blair with his experiments."

The same voice in the rear of the room which had heckled me suggested, "Ask her what her duties are as housekeeper, then."

The coroner's gavel was peremptory. "That's enough of that, Hank Mason. If you can't remain silent, you'll have to leave this hearing." But the muscles at the corners of his mouth were twitching.

Mrs Walters said quietly, "I will answer any question which is put to me. But so far as I know, I am not on trial here. I do not see why I should tolerate insults."

"Now, now," said the coroner. "Please speak only in answer to my questions. Tell us what you personally saw of the accident to Mrs Marcy."

Mrs Walters' response was instantaneous. "Nothing, directly. Mrs Marcy had finished cleaning the room where Mr Blair and I work. She was on her way back—I suppose to the kitchen. There was a sudden, very loud clap of thunder and it seemed to me I heard also a faint sort of cry. I left the room where I was and went to the head of the stairs. Apparently Mr Blair heard the cry, too, because we met at the head of the stairs. When we looked down, there was Mrs Marcy lying at the bottom. For a moment we were too surprised and alarmed to do anything. Then we went down the stairs. We stood there a moment, looking down at her, and Mr Sayles and Miss Conner came in."

She told the rest of the story substantially as she had before, putting great emphasis upon the fact that she would not have let Mrs Marcy leave if she had not been sure she was fully recovered and, even so, that she had gone part way with her. She admitted that she had been at fault in letting Mrs Marcy go at all, but declared that the woman had insisted. "It's easy enough to see now what I should have done," she concluded. "But it wasn't so easy then. People fall more or less all the time and usually without any serious damage. I have had some nursing

experience. I was satisfied that she was all right. But if there is any blame, I am willing to take it."

When she said that, it seemed to me that her eyes were fastened on Julian, but he did not acknowledge her glance in any way.

"When you carried Mrs Marcy to the sofa," the coroner said, "did you examine her in any detail? Can you tell us, that is, if she had any of the injuries which Dr Peters described and which I am sure you heard?"

Mrs Walters shook her head contemptuously. "If she had, I would never have let her leave the house. And she could not have left it, either, because she would have been dead. Dr Peters testified that she died of those injuries. But she did not get them from whatever accident she had in our house. She may have struck a rock in her fall into the river . . . I don't know how she got them."

Seth Marcy stood up in his seat. His face was livid and the finger he shook at her trembled. "You lie, and you know it. Why was her light left burnin' in the kitchen, right where she always puts it? Answer me that if you can!" He sat down again, shaking with hate, and behind him a murmur of approval rose from the room.

Mrs Walters was calm, while the coroner pounded for quiet. "Let the court put the questions," he shouted as soon as he could make himself heard. "This here's a court of law." He turned to Mrs Walters. "I was comin' to that question next. Seth Marcy testified his wife used to leave the lamp in your kitchen burnin' in the window until she started for home. Then she would put it out, and Seth knew she'd left your place. You knew of this arrangement?"

"Certainly."

"Then how do you explain the fact that you arranged the lamp so as to give Mrs Marcy's signal to Seth?"

The look Mrs Walters gave the coroner and the court was full of the most contemptuous scorn I have ever seen. "Why," she said as if speaking to a class of stupid children, "I thought of course that she was already home. I left the lamp lighted for my own convenience in case I had to get something later for Mr Blair. Seth Marcy is making something up out of whole cloth. If he had the least intelligence he would see that there was no sense in what he's been saying."

"Please stick to the questions I ask you, Mrs Walters. This court isn't to find out what you think of Seth Marcy—or any of the rest of us for that matter."

A murmur of satisfaction rose from the room and I damned Mrs Walters under my breath. She was not doing us any good and I knew that the rest of us would be judged by her. These people would tolerate no arbi-

trary words from any of us, but least of all, from her. She was the focal point of their scorn and hate.

When the room had quieted once more the coroner went on with his examination, but it was plain that he was at a loss. He no longer knew what questions to ask; the evidence was at an impasse. Mrs Marcy had not drowned, but had been killed by a blow or a fall. She had fallen in our house, but her injuries could not have been sustained there because she had been able to walk home. Mrs Walters was stubborn in her testimony. After a time he gave it up and dismissed her from the stand.

The confusion in his mind was apparent in his next act, which was to call Dan Hoskins to the stand and question him about the footprints. The big sheriff was terse and direct in his evidence. He declared that although the rain had somewhat defaced the prints, he had tested them with Mrs Marcy's shoes ("Yes, the ones she had on when we found her.") and a pair which Mrs Walters had given him early that morning. He was in no doubt but that the prints had been made by the two women. The trail was an easy one to follow and its meaning inescapable.

"You believe then," the coroner demanded, "that the previous witness's story is correct?"

The sheriff nodded slowly. "I ain't got no choice but to believe it. The shoes fit the prints and you can see what was happenin' to her practically every foot of the way. Them prints are still there. I've looked at 'em twice. You can't git away from 'em."

The coroner went on to examine the big man about the way in which he had heard of the "accident", his connection with the search, his inspection of the ground, and his interrogation of us. As I listened to Dan Hoskins' replies I came to understand why Anne and I, at least, had been so gently handled in the examination. He was obviously concerned to make plain his conviction that we were not involved in anything criminal. "These folks gave me straight answers, so far as I'm a judge," he said once. And again, "There ain't any evidence I can see against anybody—at least so far." I knew that he was speaking not to the court but to the courtroom and the heavy silence with which his audience listened to him indicated how little they liked what he was saying.

"Maybe these folks were kinda careless," the sheriff declared at the end of his testimony, "but that's the wust I can say in the light of the evidence."

"Have you any theory as to how Mrs Marcy came by the injuries Dr Peters described?" The coroner's voice was openly puzzled.

Dan Hoskins shook his head. "I guess Perfessor Sayles is right. She musta hit a rock ledge. That current there could slam a body against the

stone with turrible force, I calculate. If you ask me, she was unconscious but alive when she went into the water. Or maybe just conscious enough to fight a little against the water. Inside the first few seconds the river slammed her up against the rock."

The coroner thanked the sheriff and recalled Dr Peters. He was questioned at some length as to whether the sheriff's explanation were a possible one. This time the doctor was not so positive. He admitted that with a chest injury of the extent he had found, there was no likelihood that Mrs Marcy would have drowned, in the technical sense. He said he believed the injuries had been sustained before she went into the water at all, but declared that it would be impossible to testify certainly on this point. He could, however, say "with assurance" that Mrs Marcy must have been struck immediately after she entered the river, for there was no water in her lungs, and undoubtedly instinctive breathing would have forced her to draw breath within a minute, thereby pumping water into the lungs and stomach. He gave it as his opinion that she would not have been capable of drawing a breath after the injury.

By this time even the slowest thinkers in the spectators had begun to see the intricacy of the problem. There were head scratchings on the part of the men and a steady hiss of whispers from the women. My own confusion had been supplanted by a deep feeling of alarm. Something had happened to Mrs Marcy which was not yet explained. What it was I could not begin to imagine, but it must be connected either with Seth Marcy or with us. Seth was a brooding, angry man. Everything that I had seen of him made me positive that he was capable of violence, even to his wife. On the other hand, if his actions when he discovered what had happened to Elora were forced and nothing but pretense, then he was a superb actor. Beyond all that, there was the evidence of the foot-prints. . . .

On the other hand, both Anne and myself were clearly not connected with whatever had actually happened. I, at least, could be wholly positive about that. Which left Julian and Mrs Walters. Julian was, I considered, out of the question. . . . My thoughts had reached this point when he was called to the stand.

Julian's testimony was curious. He gave it in a thin, uncertain voice which must have made a bad impression on the coroner. Certainly it did on his audience. He began by declaring that he had been in his room when the burst of thunder of which we had all spoken occurred. He had come out into the hall with a sense of vague alarm and found Mrs Walters hurrying toward the stairs. He had seen Mrs Marcy lying at their foot. "I was, of course, horrified." He said the words as if he did not

entirely mean them. "I am afraid that I did not make any close examination of Mrs Marcy or participate in what the others were doing to help her. It was a great shock." His voice quavered when he said that. He meant the last few words, at least, I decided.

"Mr Blair," the coroner began after a pause, "you are a scientist?" "I am."

"Would you tell us why you came to Barsham Harbor?"

Julian looked trapped. His eyes flickered round the room and he moved his hands nervously on the arms of the witness chair. "Why . . . for no special reason. That is, I wanted a place as isolated from large cities and power lines as possible. The location of my house is ideal for my purposes."

"In what way?" The coroner seemed determined to pursue the subject.

Julian drew a long breath, and said, "My work is concerned with delicate electrical impulses. If you like, they may be compared to very faint radio waves . . . I was anxious to carry on my researches as far as possible from heavy-duty electric machinery of all kinds and other disturbing influences. That is why I came to Maine. That, and its isolation from the more populous parts of the country. I am both a scientist and an inventor. Secrecy, in the early stages of a research, is important."

The coroner said "Thank you," in an unsatisfied tone. He looked hard at Julian. "Would you be willing to tell us the nature of the problem you're working on now, Mr Blair?"

"I would prefer not to do so except to say that it involves research into very minute electric impulses."

"Was Mrs Marcy aware of the nature of your work?"

Julian looked surprised. "It never occurred to me to wonder. I do not see how she could have been."

The coroner frowned. "When this work of yours is completed, Mr Blair, will it have any commercial application?" For the first time I noticed that the coroner was reading these questions from a slip of paper on the bench before him. I looked at Dan Hoskins. He was listening to Julian with complete concentration and I saw that Ellen Hoskins' pencil was racing across the paper in front of her. It had occurred to me for an instant that perhaps these questions had been supplied to the coroner by the sheriff. I discarded the thought. Their very phrasing was against such an assumption. But Ellen Hoskins might have written them.

Julian looked still more surprised. "I do not see what all this has to do with Mrs Marcy," he declared in the firmest tones he had yet used. "But although I have not thought about the commercial applications of my

research, I can say that I do not believe they will be very widespread. By that, I mean that my goal is not an ordinary commercial one. It is more . . ." he paused and groped for the next word, "humanitarian. And for me," he added with an undertone of defiance behind his words, "the problem does not arise in any case. I intend to make the discoveries which arise out of my work public property the moment I am convinced they are sufficiently advanced to do so."

Then I knew. In a single flash of intuition I saw one of the strains which was operating in that household of ours on the Point. The clue was the sudden stiffening of Mrs Walters' back as Julian delivered his last sentence. Her eyes narrowed and she stared at him angrily. *She* did not want that mad invention of his made public. Furthermore, she believed it would work and she was angry at the thought of Julian's giving it to the world. For a moment I was incredulous. She couldn't *really* think that thing would do what Julian expected. She must have joined forces with him originally on a very different assumption—that he was an ideal client who would pay well and go on paying as long as she could consciously—or perhaps it was subconsciously—delude him. But now, she believed that he would succeed and she was determined that when he did he would not turn over his discoveries to the world.

It was a terrific commercial opportunity, of course. Julian was quite wrong on that point, at least. In one flash I saw the whole thing as it would be—the duplication in secrecy of Julian's machine, the advertising, the publicity, the carefully publicized proofs of the invention's actual validity. The long and pitiful queues of people who were bereaved, waiting to pay for the privilege of a few minutes' intercourse with those they had lost. . . . A blackness came in front of my eyes. I felt suddenly dizzy and, more than that, afraid.

Odd that in all the talk with Julian, and all the high-flown things that Mrs Walters had said to me, I had not once felt a real conviction of the possibility that Julian would succeed. But in that clash of anger and wills in the court I saw a stronger rebuttal to my skepticism than in anything which had gone before. Both Julian and Mrs Walters were convinced, so convinced that they were already at odds over the future of the machine which Julian had fathered. He had actually done it, then. . . . And even as I thought that, a revulsion occurred in my mind. "By God," I told myself, "you're crazy! He can't have. It's utterly and absolutely impossible!"

22 THE CORONER was persistent. "What I am getting at, Mr Blair, is the question of whether, if Mrs Marcy had known of your work, she could have given away its secret or in any way affected the progress of your research?"

Julian frowned. "My working model," he declared, "is so complex that I doubt whether more than a few people in the entire country could grasp its nature, even after prolonged examination. I do not see how Mrs Marcy could have understood it in the slightest."

(And yet, Julian, the most ignorant savage quickly finds out about a rifle, even if his most "prolonged examination" will not reveal the nature of that deadly tool. It was typical of you to assume that no one could know a thing unless he understood how and why it worked. But people do not think that way. They see only what it *does*, and understand the forces and instruments of their world by their effects, not the principles which lie behind them.)

Apparently the coroner had come to the end of his questions. He hesitated and I saw him glance down at Dan Hoskins, who gave an imperceptible shake of his head. Whereupon Julian was excused from the witness chair. Then followed one of the most curious speeches I have ever heard. The coroner addressed the jury as if they could help him resolve the problem which confronted him. He reminded them that they had seen the body and that it was their duty to decide how Mrs Marcy had come to die. If they felt that she had met her death by misadventure—"or accident, that is"—they were to find a verdict to that effect. If, on the other hand—and here he shrugged—they had any idea that she had died as the result of negligence, or deliberate intention on the part of some person or persons, they would bring in a verdict to that effect. He himself could not comment on the evidence beyond remarking that it was contradictory and confusing. On the other hand, there appeared to be no ground for suspicion that anyone could have desired the death of Elora Marcy or stood to profit from it in any way. While the witnesses from the house where she worked had admitted to a certain lack of suitable caution in letting her leave their house, there was apparently some reason to suppose that almost anyone would have done the same thing in their place. The evidence which Dr Peters had presented was one thing they had to bear in mind. And another was the evidence of the sheriff and the footprints. . . .

It went on like that for some time and had I been on that jury I would have been puzzled to know what sort of verdict the coroner expected me to reach. He simply laid his own perplexity in their laps and said in

effect: "I don't know what to make of this, but maybe you do. Anyhow, you've got to bring in a verdict."

The jury was out for a long time. At least it seemed so to all of us. When they filed back into the court there was a look of sheepishness on most of their faces. The foreman stood up with some embarrassment. "We've talked this thing over, Ben," he said to the coroner, "and we don't figger to know any more about it than you do. So we kinda reached a compromise. We find the deceased met her death as the result of internal injuries like Doc Peters said, but we don't know how she come by 'em." He sat down and wiped his forehead with a blue bandanna handkerchief.

A babel of talk burst out in the room behind us. Everyone stood up at once and began shuffling, not back, toward the door, but down forward, where we were sitting. The final words of the coroner were lost in the general noise. Almost at once Dan Hoskins was standing at the end of our bench, beckoning to us.

"This way. You better go out the side door."

We followed him without further urging. None of us wanted to stay behind in that crowd. The noise at our backs was louder and there were some shouts which I could not make out. We found ourselves almost at once passing through what must have been a judge's chambers and then down a private stair of some sort. Julian and Mrs Walters were the first in the single file by which we descended, and I brought up the rear. Although no one came after us, the skin on my back crawled as we went.

The sheriff wiped his own forehead when we reached the sidewalk. "Git in your car right off," he said, "and go on home. I'll expect all of you to stay there till you hear from me. And listen. For God's sakes be careful what you say and do. I never seen folks so stirred up."

Our car was almost opposite the door by which we came out. I drove, with Anne beside me, and we went down to the highway by back streets. The impulse to stamp on the throttle was panic-strong in me, but I managed to resist it. We rolled out along the edge of the bay at forty-five and as Barsham Harbor dropped behind us I began to breathe without feeling as if a bar or iron were clamped around my chest. Anne's face beside me was white, but she lit a cigarette with steady fingers.

"Fools," said Mrs Walters after a time. "Small-town ignorant fools, that's what they are."

None of us could think of a suitable comment to that and we drove on in silence.

"That sheriff better keep them in order," she went on, after a silence.

23 DUSK HAD drawn in by the time we reached the house and once more the chill of autumn was in the air. Anne and Mrs Walters went about the preparation of supper in silence. After I had put the car in the barn, I foraged round until I had collected all the wood I could find. Then I went into the living room and built a roaring fire.

"Swell!" said Anne when she came in and saw it. "Now, if we just had some—"

"I have," I told her. "In my bag. You bring glasses."

What obscure impulse had led me, day before yesterday, to buy a bottle of Scotch and put it in my suitcase I cannot say, but I was never gladder of anything than of the first draught of that whiskey and well-water highball we drank in front of the fire. Just the two of us. Mrs Walters stayed in the kitchen and impatiently refused an invitation to come and join us. Julian had gone upstairs the moment we had got back to the house and, though Anne knocked on the door of his room, he declined to come down. He told her that he would appear for supper, but that he did not want to be interrupted until then. So we drank alone and I was not sorry to have it so.

We did not talk about the afternoon, nor mention the disturbing inconclusiveness of the inquest. We did not even comment on the ways in which Julian and Mrs Walters had behaved. Instead we talked about things we had seen and done on our respective travels in Europe, about the foods we'd eaten, the wines we had drunk. It was pleasant merely to listen to the way she spoke, softly and with humor. From time to time we clinked the rims of our glasses and took another sip. The firelight was comforting in that room of shadows. Anne felt the same relaxation, almost contentment. Once, after a silence she said, "This is the first time things have felt right, isn't it?"

"Yes," I admitted.

"And that's funny, because things aren't at all right, really."

"We won't talk about them now. Later. But let's have this as long as we can."

We stayed there in front of the fire until Mrs Walters came into the room and informed us tersely that dinner was ready. A minute later we could hear her knocking at Julian's door, but when she came into the kitchen where we were sitting down, she said shortly, "He won't come. Says he has to work. I'll take a tray up to him."

The meal, like all the others in that house, was a quick and silent one. At least until the very end. Then, to my surprise, Mrs Walters looked at

me and said, "What did you think of that farce this afternoon, Professor Sayles?"

"That we were lucky to come out of it comparatively scot-free."

"Nonsense."

"And that I still don't see what happened to Mrs Marcy."

"You don't? Why your own explanation is the only possible one."

"Is it?" I said softly. "Maybe. But it is so unlikely that I'm not satisfied with it. Don't forget, I looked at that bank where she went into the river. There's no ledge there sharp enough to do what Dr Peters described in the way of injuries."

She leaned forward and looked heavily into my eyes, as if she wanted me to feel an additional weight behind what she was saying. "But there are *underwater* ledges, Professor Sayles. It must have been one of those."

"No," I answered. "I don't think so. A body weighs much less in the water. Even the full sweep of that current wouldn't do to a person the things that happened to Mrs Marcy. Waves—a heavy surf—might possibly. But not the steady thrust of that river, strong as it is."

She drew back and her voice was lower. "You are quite mistaken. You must be. There is no other way it could have happened."

"You're very positive," I told her.

"For Julian's sake, at least, I should think you'd be equally positive."

"Why?" I demanded. "I'm sure Julian had nothing to do with the whole thing. I'm not, to tell you the honest truth, so sure about you, Mrs Walters." The moment I had said it my doubts rushed together and I knew that in some obscure way I had hit close to home.

She stood up and it seemed to me that she was making a tremendous effort to master herself. "Don't you see what you are doing when you make such statements, Professor Sayles? Can't you understand that if there is too much doubt about the way that poor woman came to die, the first thing that will happen is that we shall all be investigated?"

"Very likely," I told her. "'Let the galled jade wince, our withers are unwrung.' In other words, I have no objection to being investigated." I looked full at her. "Have you?"

"Good God!" she flung out at me, "must you go on thinking in this childish, superficial way? Can't you see that any investigation would result in the police coming here, in their going over the house? Have you no imagination whatever? Where do you think they'll look?"

"Everywhere, I suppose."

"Yes, everywhere. Including Julian's laboratory. And then what do you think would happen?"

The fury of her outburst, the way she flung words at my head as if

they were scalding hot, both amused and irritated me. "I don't know what would happen, Mrs Walters. Nothing very serious, I should think. Julian said that no one could understand his apparatus but a few experts anyhow."

She shook her head with a sort of wild impatience. "He's just a child, Julian is. He cannot imagine how things will look to an ordinary human being. He's right so far as the principles go. I don't even understand those myself. But I tell you that one look in that room of his and we should all be in a serious predicament, Professor Sayles. You haven't been there, so you don't know, but you've got to believe me when I say that. The police would never keep their mouths shut. They would tell what they saw. And that would be the end of our chance to finish the work here. Those horrible people in Barsham Harbor would never leave us alone, once they heard . . ."

"Heard what?" I asked sharply. Her whole manner was so wild and excited that I was afraid she was going to have an attack of hysteria.

The sharpness of my tone apparently brought her to her senses. She made a visible effort to get control of herself. "I've said too much," she declared finally, in a milder voice. "I realize that you can't believe in what Julian is doing. But I do. And it will be the end of everything if that sheriff and his men come poking into this house. Even if you believe Julian is mad and that I'm—well, I can guess what you think of me and perhaps some of it is true—you might stop to consider that it will kill your friend Julian Blair if his work is destroyed now. So, Professor Sayles, the only course for all of us is to tell the same story that we've told already."

"It's too late," I told her. "After that verdict at the inquest, the sheriff will be bound to investigate the whole thing until he finds out the truth." I looked at her hard and long. "My story has been true. Anne's story is also true. If you and Julian have not told the truth, this is the time to come out with it."

She gave me a single sidelong look out of her dark eyes and moved toward the door. "What a fool you must think I am," she said and shut it behind her.

Anne stared at me speechlessly. "Well, well, well," she said. "You certainly struck oil."

"Yes." I picked up a dish towel. "Let's clear this mess up; we can talk while we work."

"Immediately, sire," she answered and began filling the dishpan. "I couldn't tell what that was all about. Could you?"

"No. But she told us one thing. If there was anything funny about

what happened to Mrs Marcy, the motive for whatever part Mrs Walters had in it is plain enough. She wants to protect Julian until he finishes his work. She won't stick at anything to do it, either."

"What do we do now?" she asked after a while.

"Nothing," I said. "Nothing until I get a look at that device of Julian's and find out why it would be so fatal to have anyone see it."

"That won't be so easy, Dick. He keeps the door locked every second except when he's actually going in and out of the room."

"He must have a key," I said. "If we get hold of that the rest will be easy."

Her reply was a noise which, if it wasn't a snicker, was an exact replica of one. "Dick, this is too absurd. We're plotting together like a couple of characters in a B picture. It's all ridiculous, somehow."

"Maybe. It wasn't so funny earlier today."

"Or last night." Her tone was apologetic. "But let's not forget our original plan."

"What?"

"To do what we can for Uncle Julian."

"Yes," I said. "I'd rather lost sight of that. Well, let's think some more before we decide on anything."

"*You* think," she said. "You're the brains of the conspiracy . . . If only there were somebody around I could vamp for you."

"There is," I told her.

"Who?"

"Me."

"Good heavens," she said, "I've been working on you all along."

24 THAT EVENING was a strangely happy one. For one thing, Anne and I had the living room to ourselves. Mrs Walters was nowhere to be seen when we came out of the kitchen, nor did she put in an appearance thereafter. Julian was apparently up in his room; from time to time we could hear the sound of steps over our heads and once a thump that suggested his having dropped a tool. But otherwise the house was silent and we were alone in it. Thinking back on that strange interlude, I believe that Mrs Walters had decided she could no longer trust herself to talk with us and that she felt she had said too much already. So she went to her room. I imagine she even went to

sleep. She had nerves of iron, that woman. Much as I hated her then, bitterly as I remember her now, I am compelled to admire her. More than once I have caught myself hoping that she is still alive somewhere. I cannot imagine what she would be doing, or how she was able to explain herself if she did make a new start—in another country, perhaps, or at least, another part of this one.

But Anne and I were not thinking too much of her. We were not really thinking much about anything. We sat on the floor in front of the fire and sipped whiskey and water at intervals that were not too long. I know that the strain of the afternoon had begun to tell on both of us. We were thoroughly relaxed, disinclined to anything important, though we both knew, I think, that we were living that evening not in peace but an armistice. The fire was warm on our faces and the liquor grateful in our stomachs. We smoked. We talked occasionally and lightly. The things we said have no place here because they had nothing whatever to do with the story of the house on Setauket Point. But they were pleasant and full of meaning when we said them.

Once, when the firelight fell on Anne's face at a certain angle, I remembered Helen. The recollection, I found, did not hurt. Instead, it was oddly embarrassing. All at once it seemed to me that I had let part of myself live too long in the past. I was not ashamed of having loved Helen, but rather of the fact that it had taken me so long to get over it. A love that is true to living persons and existing realities is steadfast and fine. But I saw then, for the first time, that a love which was fastened upon the dead and true to nothing but a past that was finished, is not a good nor true emotion. If it went on too long, it could become an incubus, throttling a man from the real life of the present, which is the life that we were fashioned to meet and experience.

After a long time I said something of that to Anne. I knew that it would have to be explained sometime and that it would be easier now than ever again. She listened to me quietly and said nothing after I had finished. I wanted not to stop then. I wanted to tell her something of what I felt about her, but I found that I could not. In that house I could confess to things that were over and dead. I did not seem able, somehow, to go on and talk of the future, of anything which looked beyond the instant in which we were.

The fire had died to coals when we finally left it to go upstairs. This night I did not put my arm around her, as I had the time before when we went up those stairs together. We said good night in the hall, whispering because we did not want to wake Julian if he had gone to sleep and we

said it almost as casually as if we had been strangers. That seems strange to me now, but it was inevitable then.

My room was cold and bleak. I undressed as quickly as I could and lay down in the thick dark. It was the proper time, I told myself, to think things over carefully, to sum up the inquest and that amazing scene in the kitchen with Mrs Walters. But my mind refused to tether itself to any one subject. It ranged over an extraordinary melange of things. It tossed up at me the picture of Ellen Hoskins, sitting beside the court clerk and taking her own notes, presumably for her brother. She was a shrewd woman, that sheriff's sister. Much cleverer, perhaps, than her brother. No wonder he let her assist him. . . . Then there was the recollection of Anne's brown legs swinging against the cut bank. . . . The curious timidity in Julian's face at the inquest . . . and then there was nothing. I was asleep.

When I woke to a room that was still as black as blindness I thought at first that I had been having a nightmare. My skin was cold with perspiration and my heart was pounding with that terrible fear which half strangles you with its intensity. And there was a horror in my mind, unformed and unrecognizable, but washing up over my consciousness in great black waves. I wrestled with that fear as Jacob wrestled with the angel. I told myself that I was awake now and that there was no more cause to be afraid. But there was.

I heard the sound at first almost subconsciously, as I must have been hearing it in my sleep. It was not loud, but I knew it for what it was—the same sound that the two of us had heard in the meadow at the moment when the storm was over the house. But this time there was no storm. The night outside the window was still; I could see stars in the sky. And yet the noise was present in my ears and there could no longer be any doubt at all where it came from. It was in this house.

At first that one fact was all I was able to decide about it. The cold, heavy air of my room was threaded with sound which appeared to have no point of origin and which was as much a vibration I felt through my skin as a resonance in my ears themselves. If you have ever waked in a Western night to hear coyotes howling on a ridge, you will know something of the primitive, irrational fear that it induced in my mind, but nothing of its quality. Perhaps the slither of a snake's scales across a stone floor. . . . I thought of those things and others as I lay there listening. I remembered a night I had once passed in an anchored boat. There had been a small leak in her hull, and all night long I had heard the gurgle and bubble of the sea, deep and very cold, coming in through her bottom. It had not been a dangerous leak and we pumped it out easily in the

morning, but the chuckle of the water as it came up from that gulf under our keel and invaded our small floating world had remained in my mind as a symbol of dread.

Not that the thing in the air of that old house resembled in any physical way these sounds that I have described. It was rather a sort of cold, humming whisper which seemed as I lay listening to increase and increase by such imperceptible degrees that whole minutes must have passed before it was recognizably louder. At the beginning I had to strain my ears to catch it, but after a time it was inescapably easy to hear. Then it stopped abruptly and there was nothing but an occasional night noise in the timbers of the house. I began to relax. The air was easier to breathe without that undertone in it. When it began once more it was so low that I was unsure at first whether I was hearing it again or only remembering. After a while there was no possible doubt and I lay there, feeling fear collect in me more and more coldly and insistently, until the tension was almost unendurable. Any kind of action was preferable to this lying in the dark with terror for a bedfellow. I swung my legs over the edge of the bed and got up.

By the time I had groped for matches in the pocket of my coat and got the candle lit the noise had stopped. I stood there in the raw air of the room, holding the candle in a hand that shook in spite of all my will power, and staring stupidly toward the door. How long I waited like that I have no way of reporting. Long enough to be chilled to the core, at any rate. Gradually I was aware of another kind of noise, a faint rustle which came through the wall behind me. Anne was moving in there and the thought steadied me. No matter what was happening it was my job to keep unafraid and calm. She must be as terrified as I, and she would need whatever strength and poise there was in me. I started toward the door.

Before I had taken three steps I knew, rather than heard, that the noise had begun for the third time. It was in the air again, as intangible as the first smell of smoke and more frightening. The boards under my bare feet were like ice, and it took all my resolution to keep walking cautiously toward the door and the thing, whatever it was, that was making that sound. Julian's invention it must be, of course, but I wondered what his invention really was; what abominable sort of thing would make that noise. . . .

It was louder when I opened the door into the hall and, for the first time, I was aware of the general direction from which it came. A hall ran past me to right and left, and the noise was stronger toward the left. As I stood indecisively looking along that dark passage, there was a click on my right. Anne's door was opening cautiously, the yellow shine of her

candle came through it and in a second she was beside me. She could not have been as cold as I, for she'd had sense enough to put on a long red dressing robe and slippers, but she was shivering violently.

"What is it?" Her whisper was low.

"That thing of Julian's I suppose. Beat it back to your room, Anne. I'll look into it."

"No. I don't want to be alone."

"All right," I told her, "but stay behind me."

We went down the hall toward the crescendo of that sound and, as we walked, I noticed a curious thing to which I paid only casual attention at the time. There was a draft along the floor of the hall, a trickling creep of air that froze my ankles and made the hem of Anne's robe flutter. It was a quiet night. I should have thought more about such a draft of air around our feet, about where it was going and what had set it in motion. But I was so deeply preoccupied with the business of forcing myself to approach the source of that rushing, humming whisper of fear that I could think of nothing else.

Our candles threw a good deal of light when we started, but by the time we had covered half of the eight full paces that lay between my door and the one to Julian's workroom, they had begun to flicker and burn blue. My shadow tumbled and darted ahead of me down the hall, cast by the light from Anne's candle. There was something horribly incongruous in the way it alternately shrank and grew on the boards before me.

No, I don't think I shall ever forget that short eternity of a walk from my door to Julian's.

His door, when we came to it, was tightly closed. To my surprise there was no knob on it, in fact, nothing at all except a new round brass lock that shone yellow in the light of our candles. The door, I saw, was not like any of the others in the house. They were old Maine pine, paneled in a graceful twofold cross. This door was perfectly flat and when I touched it I perceived that it was not even made of wood, but of metal. The cold of steel came through the paint to my fingers.

The noise was on the other side of that door. There could be no doubt of it. It was louder here than at any other point and I could discriminate a number of the elements that went to make it up. There was, below everything else, a humming, tonal constant, but besides that there was a faint, roaring sound which I find it hard to describe, but which was something like the noise of a firebox in a furnace that is running full blast. And then, mingling with those two elements, was a third which I could recognize—the hiss of moving air. The draft which had swirled round our feet was strong in front of that door. Air, it seemed to me, was being

sucked into the room, forcing its way into it through the crevices where door and jamb met, brushing past Anne and me as if it were impatient to seek the heart of that sound.

I wondered at that motion of air, of course, but only with a small segment of my attention. The rest was engrossed in listening. In both Anne's mind and mine, I think, the irrational fear which that sibilant, roaring hum evoked was overlaid with another, horrible sort of dread. Suppose that noise should change, should alter, should begin to define itself? As we heard it then, it was a sort of echo of chaos, but if it were to change and become coherent? If, indeed, there should be whispers that were not those of air in motion?

The anticipatory dread of voices was so tremendous that for a time I could only stand before that steel door, pressing the fingers of my free hand against it to steady myself. Half consciously I began to mutter to myself under my breath: "The dead do not come back. No matter where or what or *if* they exist at all, they will not speak through this thing of Julian's. He is mad, and it doesn't matter that he is a genius and that I know it. He is mad and there is no possibility that there will be more than one voice on the other side of this door. Julian's voice, yes, but only his. Never that of Helen, or Mrs Marcy, or the old captain who used to lie in this room and look down the river. They are all gone."

The noise continued. It grew louder, until it seemed to me that the floor trembled with it. The air that went past us whittled the flames of our candles to bluepoints. I could not stand it a second longer. With my clenched fist I beat against the door. "Julian!" I shouted. "Julian! Stop it, I say! Turn that damned thing off!" My fist made a kind of metal thunder against the door and, though I was ashamed of the way my voice trembled when I shouted, I kept on yelling until the noise on the other side of that door stopped.

It ceased abruptly, with a roaring crash that was almost like an explosion. It was, on a lesser scale, the clap of thunder that Anne and I had heard in the meadow.

The sudden hush that followed that final crash rang in my ears almost as loud as the clamor of the minute before. Anne drew a deep, uneven breath. "Thanks," she said, whether to me or to the silence I don't know. We stood there together, shivering and weak, and waited. I was determined to speak to Julian. He would have to leave that monstrous business of his alone, at least for the rest of this night. The kaleidoscope of all that had happened since I came to Barsham Harbor rushed over me; I felt tired, bewildered, afraid, and more than anything else, angry.

Two things happened at once. The door before our faces opened the

fraction of an inch and Mrs Walters came heavily down the hall at our backs. Julian's voice, hoarse with some emotion which I could not define, came through the crack of the door. "Get away," he said. "Get back down the hall and I'll talk to you. But get back from this door."

Mrs Walters was saying, in a tone of sneering triumph, "So, Julian. You see I was right!" She looked at us with contempt. "Hasn't either of you enough sense to stay where you belong?" she demanded.

I put my hands against her shoulders and pushed her backward down the hall. "Later," I said. "We'll have all this out in the morning. But not now."

She retreated. From the expression on her face I think she was surprised that I had dared to touch her.

Julian came out of his room before we had time to become further embroiled. He opened the door, I noticed, just far enough to slip out and then drew it shut and locked it before he turned toward us. His face was gray-white in the glow of our candles—burning steadily now that the draft was gone from the hall—and his eyes were rimmed with the black stain of fatigue. He came toward us down the hall as if his strength were almost gone. Apparently he had not yet been to bed. At any rate, he was fully dressed in the suit he had worn to the inquest.

"Never do that again," he said and his voice trembled with wrath. "Never!"

"See here, Julian," I said in as restrained a tone as I could bring myself to employ, "you simply cannot run that damn' thing of yours in the house at night. Neither I nor Anne can bear the noise it makes. You ought to be in bed."

He looked at me dully. "What time is it?"

"I don't know. After midnight."

"Two in the morning," Anne's voice contributed.

"Trying to do it all yourself, Julian?" Mrs Walters' tone was harsh and sarcastic, but her face was strained and there was pleading in it.

Julian made a motion toward me. "All right, Dick. No more tonight, I promise. In the morning I want to have a talk with you." He sounded merely tired. There was no more anger in his voice.

"Good," I told him. "Only get some sleep first. There's no need to work yourself to death you know. You mustn't drive yourself so hard."

He shook his head. "I'm not so sure, my boy. Not after today—and yesterday," he added as an afterthought.

Mrs Walters was still staring at him. "Three years, Julian. Three years. And you lock me out at the end."

His voice was dull, everything but fatigue and despair was gone out of

it. "You know why that is, Esther. I cannot trust you any more." With that he turned on his heel and opened a hall door across from the steel one which gave onto his workroom. "Good night," he said heavily. "Anne, my dear, I am sorry that you were frightened. It's all right now."

The three of us looked at each other after he went. Mrs Walters was haggard, her face modeled by frustration and unhappiness. I felt an uncomprehending pity for her. "Well," I said with an unpleasant false brightness, "we may as well get some sleep now."

Anne's shoulders shook, and suddenly she was crying and clinging to me. Over her shoulder I said to Mrs Walters, "All right. I'll take care of her."

She looked at us for a slow minute, almost as if she doubted our existence, turned, and went back to her room. We were left standing together in the hall, and I forgot about everything else while I used my arms and hands and lips to exorcise Anne's tears. I put our candles on the floor, and after that it was easier.

25 BREAKFAST next morning was a strange meal. None of us had slept much, so that we all looked hollow-eyed and as if we hated each other. Certainly there was a coldness between Julian and Mrs Walters, but it took no overt form because none of us said anything. I ate my food with determination and coaxed Anne to swallow a few mouthfuls of toast beside the coffee which we all gulped.

When we were clearing up the dishes, Mrs Walters announced that we would have to drive into town to buy food. She volunteered for the trip, but I think she was relieved when I vetoed that idea at once, and declared that Anne and I would go. I had no intention of risking the effect of Mrs Walters' appearance in the streets of Barsham Harbor.

It was odd how our spirits lifted when the two of us got past the Marcy house and onto the open road. The day was gloomy enough, with an overcast sky and a thin, cold wind that came down the river valley as though it were scouting the way for winter. But the car ran smoothly, we were warm in its cabin and, most of all, the house on Setauket Point was behind us.

"I was a dreadful baby last night," Anne said.

"I'm glad you were," I answered. "Knowing that you needed support was the only thing that kept me from losing my own grip."

The memory of that eternity in front of Julian's door made us both silent.

Long before I was ready for it, Barsham Harbor was on our either hand. Without discussion we selected the A & P store that stood at the far end of River Street. It was out toward the edge of town, for one thing, and, for another, it was a chain store and I felt that it would not be so likely to serve as a gathering place for . . . well, for people who might be talking about us.

All the same there were a good many people there when I went in with the grocery list. I wouldn't let Anne come in with me, and I'd made her promise to lock the doors of the car. She didn't argue about it. The moment I pulled open the screen door I knew that this was not going to be pleasant. There had been a hum of voices before I entered, but in almost no time the store was heavy with silence. They were all looking at me and they had all stopped buying—if that's what they had been doing. Clerks and customers alike, they stared at me.

The mass silence and hostility of a group of unfamiliar people can be a terrible thing. I felt my skin crawl when I went to the counter. The clerk who waited on me was a pallid youth with adenoids. He took my list, looked at it, and began taking the things off the shelves without a word. It was a big order and, by the time he'd finished collecting it, two cardboard cartons were pretty well full. I paid and the clerk shoved the two boxes toward me without a word. I had a struggle to get them both into my arms, but I knew better than to ask him to carry one of them out to the car for me.

As I went toward the door a voice behind me said, "Some people can eat, I guess, no matter if there's blood on their hands." It was a woman's voice, harsh and bitter with prejudice. I paid no attention. Another voice, this time a man's, observed, "If I was them, I wouldn't be buyin' all that food. I'd take the fust train," and a third added, "And they wouldn't need but a one-way ticket, at that." The rest I could not distinguish clearly; there was only a hissing gaggle of voices at my back.

As I was loading the boxes into the car, a man came out of the store after me. He was a heavy-faced fellow with huge shoulders and some kind of badge pinned to the inside of his coat. "Buddy," the man said.

"Yes."

"Don't take that talk about leavin' town too much to mind. Don't none of you go till Dan Hoskins gives the word."

"And who are you?"

"Pete Barnstable, Deppity." He touched the badge.

"Thank you," I told him. "And let me give you a word of advice, while

we're both on that track. Don't take sides. All we ask is justice." It sounded fatuous when I said it, but it made me hot with anger to find one man who should have been open-minded so obviously join the rest in hating us.

He spat into the road, just past my foot. "You'll git justice," he remarked briefly and went back into the store.

We drove home without talking.

26 JULIAN WAS waiting for me in the living room when we returned to the house. I looked at him with something close to dislike. Perhaps it was the aftermath of that five minutes in the store, but it occurred to me that I had had about enough of this house and the people in it. I wanted to leave it and them behind me forever. Anne I wanted to take with me when I went, but beyond that I did not care. I reminded myself that Julian was my friend, had given me the opportunity to go into my own chosen field of work, and that there were inescapable ties between us. But they meant nothing in my mind at that moment.

"Hello, Julian," I said dully.

"Richard. I have been waiting for you to come back . . ." he hesitated and then went on with a rush, "to have that talk that I promised you last night."

"Anything you want to tell me, Julian, I'll be glad to hear. But I don't know that I can help you. I don't know that you ought to go on with this notion of yours. It's absurd to believe it will work."

He stood up and the corners of his mouth twitched with something that might have been a smile. "No," he said, "it's absurd, as you say. And yet, last night, you were hammering at my door and shouting—"

"I give you that. But the damn' noise gets on your nerves." That was the most complete understatement I think I have ever made.

He nodded vaguely. "I suppose it might, if you were not as familiar with it as I am. But come, my boy. We cannot talk here. I don't want anyone to overhear us. We can talk best in my room, I think."

I followed him up the stairs. He climbed them so slowly and with such difficulty that I had to wait on each step until he was above me once more. Watching that weak and uncertain ascent of his, I felt once more the pity and the desire to help him that had been so strong in me on the first morning of my visit. In all this confusion and tragedy Julian had

behaved with more poise than the rest of us, an undeviating control over himself which contrasted with my own behavior of the night before. But then, he knew what it was all about. There was no reason for him to feel fear.

Julian's room was a good deal like mine in its bleakness, though it was smaller. There was something monastic about the meticulously neat bareness of that cubicle where he slept. It must have been a servant's room when the house was first built, but the fact that it was immediately opposite the door of his workroom was obviously the reason for his selecting it. We sat on the edge of his narrow cot, and I filled and lit my pipe. Julian watched me with impatience.

"Richard," he began, "before I show you my work in the next room, I want to explain it to you in some detail. Otherwise, you will not be able to appraise the nature of the difficulty that confronts me."

"I wish you would," I told him. A sense of sudden excitement came over me. This was the opportunity for which I had been waiting, the chance that Anne and I had tried to plan for. If I was ever to be able to save Julian, it would be now, in the next few minutes. I shook the lethargy and resentment out of my mind and leaned forward to listen.

"You probably know," Julian began, "that a good many men have tried to do what I am engaged in at the moment. That is, create a mechanism for communication with those who are no longer alive."

"I didn't know that."

"Oh yes. All kinds of machines have been built. Even Thomas Edison tried his hand at one. But of course he never completed it. He had not the background, for one thing . . . In any case, these machines have had one element in common. They have proceeded upon the principle of delicacy. The men who built them apparently believed that sensitivity of mechanism was the most important thing. So they used delicately balanced scales, or needles. Or they created, in a room where all other conditions were controlled, a diaphragmed pressure chamber, wired to reveal whether there was any sentient control able to alter pressures on either side of their instrument. And so on. Hundreds of such experiments must have been made. I surveyed them all years ago. All were failures. Inevitably, because they proceeded on the wrong basis. Radio itself, for example, would have failed as an important medium of communication had it been compelled to rely on nothing but the old-fashioned crystals. It was the vacuum tube, or valve, that opened the way . . ."

He stopped speaking for a moment and I noticed that he was kneading his fingers together as though this summary of his were causing him intense pain. Then he went on, his gaze fixed at the gray sky beyond the

window. "When I had finished my survey of the preceding work in the field, I was discouraged. I realized that I should have to begin at the very beginning and I knew there might not be enough time in which to finish. So I did something that you will believe was weak and credulous, Richard. I went to seances." He looked sidewise at me to see how I took this statement; then apparently reassured by my lack of surprise, he continued: "I can only compare that experience to Benjamin Franklin's, in his investigation of electricity. He found it in the lightning, so to speak, but mostly there was nothing but darkness." He smiled at that, slowly and with relish. "Not a bad joke, my boy. 'Mostly there was darkness.' But once in a while there was a flash of revelation. I won't bore you with accounts of them. They convinced me, personally, that Helen was not . . . gone. That she was still alive, and waiting for me. It was in those days that I first met Esther Walters."

I knew that was the way it must have been, but I was not quite prepared for the sudden wave of sympathy that came up in me as I listened to Julian. Something about that desperate search for reassurance which had taken him so far afield, into places and groups of people that must have seemed fantastically unrelated to his academic life and his own rigid standards of work, made a lump come in my throat. He had always had courage. . . . I had to remind myself that I was there to cure Julian, not to abet him in his obsession.

"Of all the people to whom I went," he continued, "she most clearly demonstrated the power to transcend the immediate physical world. I say 'immediate' because, Richard, I am coming to believe that in the space-time continuum there is, perhaps, another world, and that what we call death is more like a . . . removal . . . from our world to that other one. I hope in a moment to give you some proof of that. Anyhow I began to think about my problem in a new way. It was, essentially, a question of bridging a gap. I looked into many things before I satisfied myself that the gap could be bridged." He looked at me gravely. "I am talking to you as if you were still an undergraduate, Dick. But I want to be clear and untechnical, at least at the start."

"Quite right," I assured him. "You understand that I know nothing about this problem of yours. We psychologists leave it alone."

The irony that I had intended missed its mark. "Yes," he remarked tolerantly, "I know you do. You put rats in mazes. One of *your* fellow scientists," and the way he pronounced that word made me squirm, "once went so far as to put a crab in a maze. The miserable creature darted into one blind alley after another. Then, when it could not solve the maze and reach the food, it huddled in a corner and pulled off its own legs, one

after the other . . . That crab was an experimental psychologist of the first water." He gave me a dry smile.

"What I did next," he said finally, "was to attempt to discover how, or in what way, the occasional seance, the rare medium of Mrs Walters' type, was able to bridge that gap and why the process was so unreliable. My work on this point led me back into my own field of electrophysics. I came to the conclusion that the human nervous system is, in part, an electrophysical field, to put it crudely, and that the elaborate machinery of the seance was a rough and unreliable method of charging that field with a certain potential. In some way which I do not wholly understand, that potential is what bridges the gulf between ourselves and the others."

This was getting beyond me. It seemed the rankest form of wishful thinking on Julian's part, a hocus-pocus of hypotheses that no sane research man would bother with for a moment's time. But Julian was never wholly a sane man. His genius was too great for any such label. He was now, however, so fully launched into his explanation that I had no time for reflection. "Of course," he pointed out, "I knew that my time, like that of every living man, was limited. In my case only a few years remained to complete the work. So I was unable to make the exhaustive researches at every point in my progress which you and my own colleagues would no doubt regard as essential. I formed the conclusion that the uncertainty of the seance, or of the single medium, and the transitory manifestations of the true other world, were due to the difficulty of building up this potential and the relative speed with which it was discharged. It occurred to me that I might reasonably expect to achieve far better results if I could create that potential, independently of the seance room and even of a medium."

His eyes were now alive in his head. They no longer looked burnt-out and heavy with weakness and fatigue. His voice was louder, more sure of itself. He stood up and began to pace up and down the room before me. "So I studied the whole matter of the body's electrical fields. I measured them by certain criteria. I reduced my problem to a formula. And I began the construction of a machine which would make that formula a fact, which would build and maintain the potential of which I have spoken, not only at the level of the seance room or the mediumistic trance, but with infinitely greater power." He paused in his striding and for the first time his voice lost its assurance. "Possibly I have employed too much power."

"Is this machine of yours complete, Julian?"

He shook his head. "No, because it does not do all the work for which it was built. And yet, I have put into it everything I know. Everything I

have been able to discover. There have been times when I was certain of success. But last night—and several times before as well—I have been genuinely distressed by the appearance of certain epiphenomena that I had not expected and which I should like to show you for the benefit of your opinion. Of course,” he said, more to himself than me, “you will not be able to understand my invention. But you may be able to suggest something in connection with these epiphenomena . . . they worry me a good deal.”

“Is that noise one of them?”

He looked away from me swiftly, as if to hide something which I might read on his face. “You can judge that better in a few moments. All that I want to add now is that Mrs Walters is at the end of her usefulness to me. She does not understand that fact. Of course I am grateful to her. I shall see that she is rewarded for what she has contributed.” He sighed. “But that does not appear to satisfy her. She wants control over what we have worked out together. We have quarreled about this and a day or two ago I discovered that, against my express instructions, she has been tampering with the machine itself.” He hesitated for a second and I saw his tongue slide over his gray lips. “Tampering is not quite the right term. Experimenting with it. Naturally, in spite of all my warnings and in spite of my telling her that we must proceed with great caution, she has no real understanding of the enormous energies, the terrific potential which the apparatus creates . . .” Something passed across his face as he spoke that elaborate sentence. It was a shadow, whether of sorrow or horror I could not quite determine.

“I have forbidden her further entry to the room where the apparatus now is—across the hall, as you know. She believes that I am trying to exclude her from the final fruits of the research. She also is afraid that I mean what I said yesterday, in that dismal Barsham Harbor courtroom, about making my discovery public without commercializing it.” His face darkened. “Mrs Walters is a paradoxical person. I think she is as genuinely eager to . . . communicate . . . as I am, but she wants also to make a business of it when we have succeeded. That, of course, is impossible. This is my last piece of work, Dick. I want it to mean the most to the whole world. It should be—it must be—absolutely free to anyone who has need of the same kind of assurance as that for which I have been hungry these last years.”

When he had his voice once more under control, he said, almost humbly, “Well, that’s the story. I have told you because there is a chance that you will need to know it. And because, if you are to observe with intelligence what I want to show you you will have to understand at

least as much as I have told you. I know that you will never repeat it, even to Anne."

"Of course not, Julian."

"If you have any questions, save them until later. I want to give you a demonstration now, before we are . . . interrupted."

I wondered how he expected us to be interrupted, but forbore putting the question. Instead, I followed him out of the room and across the hall. The steel door opened to his key and I stepped behind him over the threshold. I heard the door click shut behind my back.

27 THREE PEOPLE only had seen that room in which I found myself: Julian, Mrs Walters, and Elora Marcy. I was the fourth. Whatever was in here, it would be strange. My heart was hammering at my ribs, and expectation had keyed my nerves high and tense. Julian's long speech had impressed me. It had left a thousand unanswered queries behind it, but it had convinced me that I was to see something of a sort which no one had beheld before.

My first sensation was one of disappointment. The four windows of the room were shuttered so tight that no light at all came into them except a gray crack or two that left the room almost black. Then there was a click and a sudden blaze of strong light. Julian had turned on a great reflecting lamp that was fastened to the ceiling. The very shock of electric light was a considerable one. The rest of the house, a century old, and the candles and lamps to which I had grown accustomed in the two days I had been in it, made the sudden flood of white light that struck my eyeballs seem unbelievable and out of place. I blinked and looked round me. And then, in one sudden instant, I knew why Julian had kept his apparatus covered when Mrs Marcy came in to clean. The first sight of it nearly stopped the heart in my chest.

The thing was right in the middle of the room and there was almost nothing else in the place except a pair of wooden kitchen chairs and an old table littered with papers. The walls were bare and discolored with age, but I knew that, like the living room below it, this had once been a noble room. There were windows along the east and south walls and, in the sharp light of the ceiling reflector, I saw that they, too, were of steel like the door. The green paint on their inside surfaces glistened as if

they had just been completed and I guessed that they had not been open, in all probability, since the day they were installed.

The apparatus itself was so much of a nightmare that my glance slid off it the first time without any precise attempt to understand what I saw. My impression was of seated figures, human and yet horribly not human, ranged round a black table with a sort of lectern at one end. . . . On the second inspection I saw the thing more intelligently. There was, indeed, a table, its top made of ebonite, or some similar plastic, and rubbed to a polish, so that it caught the light from the ceiling in a sort of dark mirror and gave it back to the eye in flashes of negative light.

They were sitting around this table.

There were seven of them. One, with its back toward me, at the rear end of the table, and three along either side. The far end, where the lectern was, appeared to be empty. They were, I saw, all alike, all polished till the copper of their wires glowed, and they were holding hands. At least, their arms ended in five filaments of wire and these were, in each case, linked with the fingers of the figures on either side. From head to foot they were made of wire and there was something terrible in the fact that I could look clean through them. Ludicrously enough, though their posture was that of seated figures, there were no chairs. Instead, they seemed to be fastened to the table itself and supported by ebonite braces at regular intervals.

I looked for one freezing instant at the tableau and then, half-hysterically, I began to laugh. "Good God, Julian," I said, "when you duplicate a seance, you duplicate it. This looks like a Black Mass in a futurist play."

He smiled absently and went down the room. "Yes, I suppose it is a bit startling at first. I suspect, too, that a good deal of this is unnecessary. But as I told you, I had no time to experiment at every step of the way. Having discovered how to increase my bridging potential, I made my electronic fields from circuits as close to the ones which actually exist at a seance as I could."

He went down the row of those fantastic figures, touching one after another. "We have our silly moments, I suppose, Mrs Walters and I. We've named them all."

"Have you really?" I said in a faint voice.

"This is Hugo," Julian remarked. "Mrs Walters named him after a man that used to come to her seances. She told me once he used to try to pinch her in the dark. I've never known whether to believe her." He patted one of the figures on its insubstantial head. "The others are various people, of course. I call the one at the end of the table Arthur. You know,

after Arthur Wallace. He loves to preside at any kind of meeting. Or used to."

"He hasn't changed," I replied. It was difficult for me to speak at all. Surprise, the kind of aberrant impulse of humor that makes you want to laugh in church, and a deep alarm and revolted incomprehension made my throat thick. Was it possible that this gleaming travesty of wires and plastics was the source of that sound that had gone whispering through the old, shadowy house and terrified me the night before past all endurance? Had it created that torrent of noise that rolled over Anne and me in the rain-lashed meadow?

Julian was matter-of-fact, of course. It was a familiar story to him and, in one unexpected way, I felt no unfamiliarity myself. Julian's handiwork was always distinctively his own. Even here I recognized the style of his work, once the first shock of my surprise had worn off. The apparatus shone just as all his equipment had gleamed in the big laboratory back at the university. The absence of every comfort and convenience except the essentials was typical of him. And the curious blend of literalness and imagination, that had made him one of the great creative minds of our time, was evident in this last project as in all the others. Only a literal mind would have been directly impelled to so tremendous a project in the first place. And that same literalness had made him re-create this optical travesty of a seance in the second.

"Come here, Dick," he said when I remained rooted by the door, staring at his handiwork, minute after minute. "I know this is a curious experience, but I have brought you here not to look at my apparatus, but to show you what it does." He was standing at the upper end of the table, behind the thing that looked like a reading desk. I went toward him, walking wide around the table, and looked over his shoulder.

It was not a lectern, but a control board. Its face slanted toward him and the dials that sprinkled its slope were, I saw, lighted dimly from below. In the middle of the thing was a single large handle which appeared designed to move in a slot in the face of the instrument itself. Below the table, I noticed, and across the floor, electric cables snaked to a number of outlets along the wall.

"Lord," I told Julian, "but you've polished everything off neatly. It looks completely finished."

He gave me a single abstracted glance. "Yes. I like things neat. But that is not the point, either. We must hurry; I want you to have plenty of time to observe the phenomena of which I spoke. Are you ready?"

I swallowed. "Yes," I answered.

He pressed a button and the ceiling light became dim. There remained

plenty of light by which to see. I think I could well have read by the light which remained, and that is important in view of what I am about to describe. Julian was talking more to himself than to me, in a low, rapid voice. "I am not sure whether light has an inhibiting effect. It does, of course, in a seance, but that may be a human psychological factor unconnected with the bridging potential. Generally I reduce the amount of illumination and I believe, too, that the power should be applied slowly . . ."

His hand came to rest on the control lever. The fingers gripped it until their joints were yellow-white. He moved it perhaps an inch from left toward right and waited. Nothing happened at first and I began to breathe more comfortably. Then I was aware of a low hum, like that which an old-fashioned radio set makes when the tubes are warming. The skin at the base of my neck began to crawl, but I damned myself for a fool. This was all normal enough.

Julian listened to the hum for a time and then nodded his head and moved the lever again. The hum became deeper, but Julian paid no attention to it beyond a casual glance at the dials in front of him. Once more he moved the lever and this time I was aware that he expected something to happen. He looked up from the panel in front of him and stared down the table. The seven copper figures sat there immovably. I guessed that current was pulsing through them, but nothing was changed in their surrealist outward aspect.

In what way I first became aware that an alteration was taking place in that room, I find it hard now to say. The noise of the tubes continued, deeper than before, but it was so low a hum that I could not believe it would be audible outside the room. It was definitely not the sound I had heard the night before. I think that the first thing I noticed consciously was the air around me. It was moving, not in any one direction but in eddies and whorls, like water in a saucepan before it comes to a boil. I felt the twists and turns of draft touch my face and then my hands, and finally they were brushing against me from head to foot. Julian, I saw, paid no attention to this phenomenon, at least for a while. Then he turned to me.

"You feel that?" he asked.

"Of course; what is it?"

"Air," he answered, and then left the panel and went to the nearest window. "We had best open this somewhat," he remarked and tugged up the sash. Then he fumbled with the steel shutter behind it and swung it open. There must have been a wind on the river. At any rate, I saw his hair move and blow.

After a while it seemed to me that the air which was eddying in the room had settled to a steady single direction. At any rate, I was aware of a draft against the back of my neck, but no more of the tendrils of motion which had brushed my face. Julian was again at the control panel, his eyes once more fixed on a spot which was apparently somewhere over the middle of the table and above the heads of Hugo, Arthur, and their nightmare companions.

"What do you see?" His voice was hoarse and low.

I strained my eyes in the direction of his gaze. "Nothing." But I *heard* something, so faint that I could not certainly have identified it if I had not been expecting it. The sound of the night before was in that room with us. In spite of being prepared for it, I was once more, irrationally, afraid.

"Now watch!" Julian's voice was shaking. His hand moved the lever over to a point midway between the left and right ends of its slots with a motion so jerky that I knew the thing, whatever it was, that he wanted me to observe was going to happen. There was a sudden stir in the air at my back. I could feel it streaming past me now with renewed speed and the humming roar of the machine deepened. As I stood there, following with my own eyes the direction of Julian's stare and listening to that unimaginable sound roll through the room around us, I began to understand that the noise did not come from the machine, nor was the hurrying river of air that passed us both being drawn into any part of Julian's apparatus. Something was happening in the sheer empty space above the center of the table.

To this day I cannot be sure what the thing was that I saw happen there. It began as a point of blackness which I could see with great distinctness because it was between me and the far wall. "Point of blackness" is not a good description, and yet I hardly know what else to call it. There against the grayish-yellow of the room's faded wallpaper was a thing, suspended in the air as it seemed to me at first. It was in no way human. It hung there, pulsing faintly and unevenly, but always growing with each expansion slightly more than it shrank with the contractions. When I first noticed it, the thing was the size of a large pea. I have called it black and yet it was actually a colorlessness so intense (to define the thing in terms of its opposite), that it seemed to absorb the very glance with which I looked at it.

I can remember nothing further of the way that thing appeared to me, or of the emotions I experienced watching it. My memory presents every detail of what followed, but not as a part of my own experience. As I stood there, my eyes fixed on that black focal point, I lost awareness of

myself in an emotion so appalling and overwhelming that there is no accurate term for it. Fear it was not, for I was past the point of being afraid. I think perhaps the word "awe" comes closer to it than anything else. . . .

The blackness over the center of the black table grew. It expanded in the air with steadily increasing speed. The seven figures never moved, never looked at it, were deaf to the sound that filled my ears and hammered at the walls of the room till it was wonderful that they did not shatter. As the thing grew, it became more clearly three-dimensional, although that description is in itself meaningless. We know, in actual experience, nothing which is not three-dimensional. Dimension is a fact with three attributes, length, breadth, and thickness, but they are triune and inseparable aspects of material existence. Not so this heart of darkness that beat in and out, to and fro, larger and smaller, over the center of the table. It had no dimension at all. It consumed dimension, negated it, developed like a parasite on the shape and frame of the familiar world.

Julian was staring at it with the same fixed look. His hand still rested on the control lever, but the knuckles were no longer white with contraction; he was paying no attention to anything but what was in front of us. The wind which was streaming through the window had risen till it shrieked like a gale and his hair blew forward, thin and stringy, toward that center of nothingness in front of us. I saw him lean forward slowly, reluctantly, as if he were being pressed from behind. I saw my own hand, white and shaking, go down against the face of the control panel and stiffen into a brace, though I was not aware of moving it, nor even of the weight of driving air behind me that must have forced me into the action.

The edges of the blackness were not precise. They wavered and changed like the outer rim of a whirlpool and, as the thing got bigger, I noticed that it had a sort of penumbra, a rim of shadow through which I could make out the shapes of wall and floor and ceiling behind it.

Let me say at once that there was nothing about this presence which suggested life, either present or past, to me. It was no more alive than a tornado or a maelstrom. It was simply an existence of forces so enormous that I could not grasp what they meant, or what was actually taking place. But I did see the inexorable spread of that thing, saw it numbly until it bulked as large as the table and the room grew dim because it was between us and the light on the ceiling. In its larger diameter it must have been several feet through at that moment. Dust, bits of stuff, the papers on Julian's desk were being snatched up by the wind and carried into that blackness in front of us. None of them came out again.

I am sure that the very air which rushed into that chasm is gone forever. . . .

How long it took the thing to grow until it was almost at the edge of the lectern I could not say. Several minutes, certainly. Some blind instinct of self preservation moved in me then, though it was nothing conscious. But somehow I managed to get my left hand over Julian's and grip the handle of the control. With every ounce of power I had, I slammed it back to the starting point.

Instantly, so sudden was the release of the pressure from behind, we both staggered backward, away from the table. The black gulf into which we had been staring vanished as though it were a light which had been turned off. The room sprang full into the glow of the lamp. Simultaneously, the air, meeting at the heart of the space where the thing had been, roared tumultuously in our ears.

And then the room was still, silent, unchanged.

We looked at each other without words. Both of us were panting; I felt spent, as if I had run for miles, and there was a thin ringing in my ears. Julian groped his way to the desk chair and sat down, trembling. He buried his face in his hands and did not look up for a long time. I stood staring down at him vacantly, my mind empty of anything except wonder that I was still alive and an incredulous surprise that nothing had altered. The thing had left no trace behind it.

He looked up at me after a time and licked his lips. "You see," he said.

"Yes."

After a second long silence he said, slowly, "I told you that I would show you the other world. Well?"

With some difficulty I remembered back to our talk in his room before this demonstration had begun. "Oh, yes. But Julian . . ." I could not think how to go on in any rational terms.

"What?"

"This . . . thing . . . you just showed me, that cannot be the other world you meant. That black thing was no world. It was opposite to any world at all."

He shook his head. "You're wrong about that, Richard. It is her world . . . Helen's . . . I know that. But I have not found the right door. Surely you see that this is at least the right track?"

I did not answer that question. Instead I demanded, "Why did all the air rush into that thing?"

He looked away and his voice was very low when he replied, "I don't know."

And yet, it seemed to me that perhaps he did, that the same theory that was formulating itself in my own mind must have been in his, and long before now. But believing as he did that he had discovered the formula for the one thing he wanted, he would never believe that he had actually found something else. He would even reject the single hypothesis that could explain what we had just seen. In that moment of insight I felt pity for him and yet, I was more afraid of him than anything else.

"What am I to do?" he asked me, his face still averted. "I tell you, Dick, I do not see where I have gone astray on this thing. I've checked and rechecked my figures. I've tried one set of adjustments after another. You heard me doing that last night . . . and still it is always the same. Sometimes it happens more quickly than others." He put his hand on a black notebook in front of him. "All the data are here. All my work for six years. It must be right . . ."

"Let's get out of here," I told him. "I can't think in this place. I want to talk to you, Julian. But not now."

He stood up stiffly and walked down the room. I followed him. The table gleamed as before. The seven figures along its edges sat there on their nonexistent chairs, their faceless heads turned toward its center, their copper fingers still in contact. I wondered then how Julian could have named them. Still, Clotho, Lachesis, and Atropos were named, and if men had found words for those three fatal sisters, it was permissible, I suppose, to christen the things around the table.

Julian unlocked the door without a word and we went through it. He was silent as we crossed the hall. In his room again I made him lie down. "We won't talk just yet," I told him. "Stretch out a while and rest. I want to think. This afternoon is time enough."

He looked up at me heavily. "Perhaps. All right."

"I take back everything, Julian. I thought you . . ."

"I know," he said wearily. "Thank you, Richard. I feel easier now that you have seen that black . . . node. We must work together on it, find out why it isn't what we want, and discover what we can about it."

The thought of creating that thing even once again made me deadly afraid. "I'll talk to you later about that, Julian. Promise me you'll rest a while now. And promise that you won't go back into that room again alone. It isn't safe. If I hadn't moved that lever for you . . ."

"Yes," he said again, "I know." He brushed his hand across his eyes. "Thank you for that."

"One more thing, Julian," I said. "I want you to give me the key to that room."

"Why?" He was instantly alert.

"Because I don't trust you. I think you're planning to go right back there when I leave this room."

"I'll rest. I promise."

"Give me the key and I'll believe you. I promise not to go in myself or to let anyone else in. But to tell you the truth, Julian, I'm afraid of that thing of yours. Unless I know that you won't be going back in there, I won't be able to think clearly about this whole problem."

"You'll return it when I ask?"

"Yes," I said. I could not persuade myself that I intended to keep my word, but Julian must have decided to trust me. His secret had become, I think, too much even for him to carry alone. He took the key out of his pocket and handed it to me. "Here."

I dropped it into my own pocket with a sense of triumph which I did not want to analyze too closely. Then I pulled a blanket up over him. "Get some rest now, for God's sake," I told him. "I'll call you in time for lunch. I may even lie down myself. I feel a bit rocky somehow."

"It's a relief to know that you understand about it now," he said. "I think I can rest to advantage. But we must have another talk this afternoon. There is something else I think I had best tell you."

"Sure," I answered and left him lying there. His eyes were closed even before I got to the door. He looked old and weak.

I went down the stairs heavily and quickly. I wanted time to think, to arrange the chaos of impressions in my mind into some coherence. The cold air outside felt good on my face. I walked up and down in the grass in front of the house and tried to reason things out. The more I thought about that apparatus of Julian's, the more sure I was that it was beyond my understanding. But other things began to fall into a sort of pattern. After a time I went to look for Anne.

28 I FOUND her in the barn, washing the car with a sort of desperate concentration. I knew what was wrong, of course, but there had been no way I could warn her about the sound. When it began she must have come out here to get away from it and, in desperation, begun to clean the automobile.

"It's all over," I said.

She straightened suddenly and looked at me with panic in her eyes. Then she caught her breath and smiled. "Dick!"

"All quiet along the Kennebec," I told her. "I've seen Julian's invention."

She said quietly, "You look as if you'd seen a ghost."

"No ghosts," I said. "But something. A nice little something."

"As bad as that?"

I sat down on a saw horse. "Worse."

"I suppose you don't want to tell me?"

"I can't," I said. "I promised him."

She nodded. "All right. But what I don't know won't hurt me and it's a relief to be sure that he hasn't succeeded."

"Yes . . . well, maybe I'm wrong in thinking I know what he's actually accomplished. But I don't think so and I think he knows it, too. Only he won't admit it to himself. And it's got to be stopped. If that thing ever got out of control . . ." I thought of that for a moment and then pulled myself together. There was something else I had to do before I could be sure that the peril in Julian's apparatus was ended forever. "I have to talk to Mrs Walters."

Anne stared at me as if I were suddenly demented. "All right. She's in the kitchen, I think."

"Don't come with me," I said. "This isn't going to be nice."

I left her polishing a fender; once I turned and looked back. She was still there. I saw her give a sort of mock salute with her hand and then flourish the chamois with which she was doing the car. It felt good to see her, just to know that she was there. Because what I had to do now was a thing which I could contemplate only with loathing.

On a sudden impulse I did not go in the kitchen door, but went round to the front and wrenched open the door into the hall. Then I went upstairs to my room and took the bottle of whiskey out of my bag. I poured about four stiff fingers of it down my throat and then sat down to think.

I would have to act quickly if I was to prevent Julian from going on with that thing of his. And yet, there was a pang of regret in my mind at the thought of what I had to do. For he had accomplished something that no man before him had ever achieved. He had gone out to the very edge of the physical world, and beyond it. In some way which I did not begin to understand, that black thing I had seen was an aperture. What it opened into, or upon, was no concern of mine; I did not want even to speculate about that. There was nothing on which to go. But my theory about its nature was the only possible one—of that I was sure.

I took another small and careful drink. The evidence for my conclusion was purely circumstantial. But that was plenty. The rush of air into

the center of the thing, as if it were being drawn into a complete vacuum; the fact that neither the air nor the things it had carried with it returned; the very appearance of the blackness, like an extra-dimensional whirlpool; and, above everything else, the cold conviction that the thing which Julian Blair's potential created was beyond all the bounds of our universe. It seemed to me that something in my mind recognized it.

That was absurd, of course. And yet, how had Julian created this thing? By magnifying the radiations, the waves given off by the human brain and nervous system. Something like that, according to his own account. I snatched my thoughts back from the gulf toward which they were headed. If man were not altogether a physical being, if he possessed in himself a contact with an existence neither spatial nor of time, and if that contact were to be artificially produced, even by sheer imitation of the sort to which Julian had openly confessed, then . . . then what would be created would be no bridge, but a mechanical, arbitrary rent in the warp and woof of the fabric of the physical universe. A lesion, indeed, through which everything known streamed into the unknown. A hole in the dike. No, that wasn't quite accurate. A leak in the helmet of the diver would be closer.

I got up then and went down into the kitchen. Mrs Walters was there, not working but simply sitting heavily in a chair, looking out the window. Her face looked older than it had before, and there was something at once defiant and defeated about her. I sat down across the table and looked at her.

"Mrs Walters, I want to talk to you for a few minutes."

She turned her head slowly away from the window. "About what? I should think you had accomplished everything you wanted, *now*." There was bitterness in her final word. "He has showed you the communicator. You know as much as I do. More, perhaps, because you are a scientist and I am not. But remember that I contributed as much to that thing as Julian. I have given him everything I could. I have worked for years. I have protected him—and it—in ways that you and all your kind would never have the courage to do. Now I suppose he's through with me."

The whiskey was warm inside me. I felt a certain impersonal pity for her, a desire to make this easy. But I did not dare. "Listen," I said, "that thing of Julian's is dangerous. Maybe he knows how dangerous it is, but if he does he won't admit it. I doubt if you have any conception. I'm not even sure that I'm right. But I'm sure enough to act on what I believe. Have you got a key to that room?"

"No." Her voice was heavy and noncommittal.

"Have you ever had one?"

"No."

"I want you to promise me that you will never, even if you have the opportunity, touch that thing again. At least, until I am sure about it."

She smiled unpleasantly. "So it's got you, too," she observed. "You see now that your friend Julian is not mad, as you thought so charitably when you came here. And you want control of it for yourself."

"Have it any way you like," I said. "But I know one thing. Nobody must touch that machine of his again."

"I make no promises," she said.

"In that case I'll have to threaten you."

There was an abrupt stiffening to her bulky body, a sort of wary tension to the way she sat. "I have nothing of which to be afraid."

"Haven't you?" I said. "Well, perhaps not. But I think you do. Something recent, Mrs Walters. Something connected with Elora Marcy."

The words fell into the silence between us. She made no answer to them. I went on. "I think I know one thing, now. That is, the way Mrs Marcy was killed. I think, to go a step further, that the thing that made those injuries across her chest, that broke her arms, was not a rock ledge, nor even the edge of a stair. I think it was the edge of a table."

She stared at me. "You're crazy." Her voice was no more than a whisper.

"Am I? I hope so." I got up. "But unless you're quite sure that I am, I suggest that you do as I say. Remember, Mrs Walters, how that air jams you forward toward the blackness? Suppose some one were in that room. Suppose that some one had separate access to that room only once a week—when she had temporary possession of the key to let the cleaning woman in. Suppose that person was afraid that the apparatus was almost finished and that the man who had built it proposed to throw it away by making it public. Suppose that he had been working alone on it a great deal. What do you think such a person might do?"

"This is all impossible."

"Certainly. But while Mrs Marcy was sweeping the floor, this person—a woman—went to the apparatus. She lifted the covering from the control panel. There was the lever, convenient to her hand. There was the opportunity to find out, once for all, if the thing worked. In such a blinding instant of temptation, even a woman of your control might have weakened, might have lost all caution. Might have thrown that lever over toward the right, and thrown it too far. The blackness sprang into existence and with a strength of which you had never dreamed. Mrs Marcy was, perhaps, between the window and the open edge of the table. The gust of air struck her back. She was a light woman, anyhow.

She was hurled forward—and killed . . . How did you manage to shut the machine off?”

I had her. She made no sign of defeat, but for the first time since I had known her, she was looking down, at the floor. Her voice was low. “The control panel saved me. My body must have knocked the lever back.”

“Lucky,” I commented. “But your moment of stupidity was over. You thought of everything. How you managed Julian I don’t know. Perhaps you’d got Mrs Marcy’s body to the foot of the stairs before he saw you. Perhaps he knows the whole thing. Anyhow, he was stunned—by your treachery and the accident itself. You persuaded him to let you handle it. You saw us coming across the meadow and persuaded us that Mrs Marcy had had a fall. It was a wonderful job. Then you got us out of the way, Anne and me, and covered up what had happened.” As I spoke the details of what she must have done came crowding into my mind. “You have small feet. You went out in the rain twice. First with your own shoes. Then with Mrs Marcy’s. That second time it was you, not she, who went into the river. That took courage. I admire you for it. Anne said you were a wonderful swimmer, but I forgot that until this moment. I suppose you landed down near the house here?”

She nodded. There were no words left in her.

“You put Mrs Marcy’s shoes back on her body. Then you carried it out of the house and put it in the river. I suppose the whole thing didn’t take half an hour. You came back to the house, changed your dress, and were waiting for us when we got back with Dr Rambouillet.”

“What are you going to do about it?”

“I don’t know yet. You haven’t, at least in my eyes, committed any crime. I suppose that technically and legally you’re guilty of several things. But the criminal thing you did was to turn on that apparatus of Julian’s when he was not in the room . . .”

“I had to know,” she said.

“What I don’t yet understand—any more than you—is what that apparatus of his really does. All I know is that it’s a horror, more dangerous than if this house was stored solid with plutonium. That’s why I want your promise that you will never touch that machine again.” A thought occurred to me. “And that you will go away from here at the first opportunity. As soon as the sheriff gives any of us permission.”

She stood up at that and the humility was gone out of her. She had heard the worst there was to say and she was fighting now, suddenly. “And leave you alone with Julian? I hope you don’t think I swallow that sermon of yours about the danger of the communicator? Julian and I

know that it is not yet perfect. But you've seen enough to know that it will work. You've seen the edge of the other world—about which I think I know more than you." She sneered openly. "After all, Professor Sayles, you're only a two-bit professor in a college. You aren't the kind of man that Julian is. But you want the glory of being associated with him, now, at the end, when the years of work are over. Well, I won't do it. I want something to show for what *I've* done. I won't go away. I intend to stay right here. Get me out if you can."

I looked at her steadily. "I've warned you."

She gave no ground. "You can't do a thing to me without involving all of us. And Julian most of all. Put that in your pipe and smoke it."

"Mrs Walters," I said, "I've told you everything that's on my mind. After this morning, I won't hesitate to involve all of us if I have to do it to get that damn' thing of Julian's stopped."

"Including Anne, I suppose."

"Including her if it's unavoidable."

"Thank you," she said, "for telling me so plainly what you intend to do." With that she walked past me and out the kitchen door. It slammed behind her.

I felt good about that interview. It seemed to me that I had been right, that I had taken the wisest course, and that the control of the situation in this terrible house was now in my hands. After a time I changed my mind. That was when I heard the roar of the car backing out of the garage. By the time I got outside, it was already diminishing up the road toward the village. I watched it go with complete incomprehension. It was only when I saw Anne standing beside the doorway, looking after the car with as much bewilderment as my own that I understood how far out of my control events actually were.

29 "FOR HEAVEN'S sake!" Anne sounded half amused, half furious. "You said you were going to talk to her, but I never thought you were going to have that much effect. She's mad, Dick."

"Oh, yes," I admitted.

"She came stamping out the back door and just climbed into the car without a word. I was doing a front fender when she got in. She just backed the car right out from under my hand." She held up the chamois skin in proof. "What in the world did you say to her?"

"Amongst other things, I told her she was responsible for Mrs Marcy's death and how she fooled all the rest of us. I threatened to tell somebody about it if she didn't do what I wanted, which was to go away at once."

"So she's running away?"

"No," I admitted slowly. "I don't think so. I think she's trying to steal a march on us. If she does . . ." My mind raced ahead, trying to estimate the probabilities and it seemed to me they were not promising. "If she does, it will almost have to be at Julian's expense."

Anne said, "I don't know what you're talking about. What did Mrs Walters have to do with Elora's death? She didn't kill her, did she?"

"No, not that bad." I summarized most of it for her, being careful to say as little as I could about the nature of what I had seen in Julian's work-room. I said that there had been an "accident" in there, and then hurried on to the rest of the story. Anne listened without interrupting me. "Now," I said, "she's gone. But I have an idea she'll be back. And I don't know what to do in the meantime."

Anne remarked thoughtfully, "We better tell Uncle Julian. Then I think we might have lunch, cooked by my own fair hands." She was even smiling.

I liked the way she took it. Not a reproach to me for having bungled things nor a single word about the likelihood that we were in for an even more unpleasant time than anything that had happened so far. As we were walking back to the house, she remarked once, "Poor Uncle Julian," and that was all. In the kitchen she turned and confronted me quietly. "Before you talk to Uncle Julian," she said, "I just want you to know whatever happens, it'll be all right with me."

"Thanks." The word seemed inadequate, so I tried thanking her another way. That was better. Finally I said, "Darling, this is the craziest thing of all. I'm twelve years older than you . . ."

"In that case," she said softly, "I think it's high time you stopped being a chivalrous idiot."

So I did my best.

30 JULIAN WAS actually sleeping when I went up to his room. I woke him as gently as I could and told him that he had better come down right away and have a talk. He looked at me curiously. "What's happened, my boy?"

"I'll tell you later, Julian."

He got up and straightened his clothes. "Let me have my key again."

"No. You won't need it till after lunch, at least. You've been half starving yourself lately, Julian. You eat with us first and then we'll see."

He sluiced his face in the washbasin and combed his hair in the old, impatient way. "Richard, I just want to remind you that you are a college professor and not a male nurse."

"The rest did you good," I told him. "You sound pretty chipper."

"Yes. But this is all a waste of time. I must get back to work right away. Have you been thinking about our problem?"

"Yes."

"And what is your conclusion?"

"After lunch," I said inexorably. "Come along now."

Anne's idea of a meal was infinitely more edible than Mrs Walters' had been. Julian ate a surprising amount, and though I wanted to burst right out with my story, and explain what had happened, I managed to restrain myself. Still, the tick of the kitchen clock seemed to me faster and faster.

As soon as the meal was over I told Julian directly that I had confronted Mrs Walters with the facts about Mrs Marcy's death. He listened without any comment.

"That is so, Richard," he admitted finally. "At least, it must be. I was not, as you surmised, in the room when the accident occurred, but I knew what must have happened. Somehow I was so startled and horrified that I did not think as clearly as I should have. I let her do what she wanted. It was all about as you described it. She came to me afterward, told me what she had done, and I agreed to back her up. I wish now—"

"Meantime," I interrupted, "she's gone to town. Or somewhere. And I'm afraid of what she may do."

"If she tells the true story, with variations," Anne inquired, "what do you think will happen?"

The same wonder had been in my own mind. "I suppose we'd have to submit to a second inquiry. Anyhow, I think the thing to do as soon as we can is to get a lawyer."

Julian's expression had been slowly changing as he thought over what I had told him. A set look had come into his face. "Richard," he said finally, "I want that key. I want it right now."

"Listen, Julian. Don't go back to work yet awhile. Not till I've had a chance to talk to you about that other part of it."

"Are you trying to tell me that you won't give me the key?"

I began to be alarmed by what I saw in his face, but I held my ground.

"Yes, Julian. That's what I mean. The key stays in my pocket until after this whole mess is over. That thing of yours is too dangerous. I don't think you understand quite how appalling it is, Julian."

He looked as if I had put a knife in his ribs. "But Dick, can't you see how little time . . ." His face was pitiful. I found myself suddenly hating the role I was playing. "You must realize, Dick, that if anything were to happen before . . . before I finish, everything will be lost. It will be failure. You're enough of a scientist to know that no one else could complete my work?"

I knew that. I know it still. I trust with all my heart that those words of Julian's were true, but there is just a chance that they were not. And I hope that if there is anyone, now or ever, who tries to follow in Julian's track, he will be fully aware, as Julian was not, of what his work will mean. That whirling gulf of blackness is not a mere danger, like nuclear fission. It is, in the end, a breach in the whole of life. How much it is capable of devouring once it is set loose I do not think any one can predict.

Julian's plea made me feel like a traitor, but it did not shake my determination. Even treachery to a friend can be the lesser of two evils. I turned through the door. "Let's go into the living room a minute," I said to him. "I want to try to explain, Julian, why I'm doing this to you."

I remember a few things after those words. I recollect opening the door into the hall. I have a vague image of a sudden burst of stars inside my skull and then a roaring blackness diminishing into oblivion. . . .

The next thing I saw was Anne's face, bending over me, white and frightened. My head was a jumble of pain and confused thoughts; it appeared to be lying in her lap. After a while I made out the shape of the stairs and knew that I was still in the hall.

"Dick," she was saying, "Dick darling!"

"I'm all right." The pain in my head was so terrific that I could hardly think. But there was something more important than my head, something I had to remember. "Where's the key?" I said and began to fumble in my pocket. It was gone, of course.

"Lie still," she said. "You'll feel better in a minute."

"The key, Anne. He's got the key." I tried to sit up, but it was no go. "Listen, darling," I said. "Don't worry about me. Go upstairs right away and listen at his door. Find out where he is, somehow. And come back and tell me."

She lowered my head to the floor gently. "You be absolutely quiet, now."

"Sure," I said. "Only hurry."

I lay there through several eternities of time until I heard her feet on the stairs. "He's in his laboratory," she told me. "Working at something. He wouldn't let me in."

"Oh, God," I said and tried to sit up again. This time I succeeded after a fashion. When the walls, floor, and ceiling of the hall stopped going round I looked at her and tried to smile. "You'd never think he was strong enough to hit that hard. What did he do it with?"

She held out the heavy-duty flashlight that they kept in the hall. "This. It weighs pounds. How do you feel now?"

I examined the back of my head with cautious fingers. "There's going to be a lump there. But I'm better. I don't think he broke anything." I got a firm grip on the bottom of one of the balusters and hauled at it. After a while I was on my feet. Once again the room spun round me, but this time it came to rest sooner. Anne was watching me. "Give me a hand," I said. "I'll try that sofa in the living room for a while. And if there's any ice, you might bring me a chunk of it."

With my arm over her shoulders I managed to make the living room. Julian must have hit me a fearful crack; the whole back of my head was throbbing with every pulse beat. Anne told me to lie still while she got something and slipped quickly out of the room.

I tried to think what was to be done. There was no sense reproaching myself for a fool. I had simply underestimated the desperation that keeping the key from him would engender in Julian's tortured mind. The imperative thing was to stop him from trying that apparatus of his again. My head was throbbing like an anvil on which incandescent iron was being beaten into shape, but a single idea did come to me. If the power cable could be cut, the current would be shut off. That would stop him and it was the only thing that would. But I dared not send Anne out to climb a pole and cut it. If Mrs Walters had not taken the car, she could have thrown a rope over the cable, fastened it to the bumper, and simply pulled till something tore loose. But any such expedient was out of the question now.

I tried standing up alone. That was no dice. The agony in my head and the weakness in every part of me made it impossible to take a step. I sat down on the sofa with a groan.

Anne heard it as she came in. "What are you trying to do?" she demanded. "Sit still."

She had brought some pieces of ice and a towel, and she put them immediately against the back of my head. It may not have been the medically orthodox thing to do, but it helped. The waves of fire inside my skull gradually went out. "Thanks," I said after a time. "That's the

ticket, all right." She was looking at me with such anxiety and sympathy that I wanted simply to surrender to it. But the thought of Julian kept me from it. I wondered what to do. "So he's locked himself in up there . . ."

"Yes."

The house seemed utterly still. "I don't hear the noise."

"It isn't going."

"It will be," I said. A thought struck me. "Listen dearest. Do me a favor and don't argue at all about this. Get clean outside this building and just wait. I want to try to talk to him through the door. But if I'm right, this house is no place to be in right now. God knows what he will do. He knows that he hasn't got time for anything much. He may turn that thing on full. If he does, I don't want you to be around."

She kissed me. "You don't suppose I'm going to leave you, Dick?"

I wanted to argue with her, but there was no opportunity. We heard something that made me aware the time for talk was over. There was the noise of a car, two cars, three, roaring into the yard. People were arriving, and I thought I could guess who and why they had come.

"All right," I told her. "This is the pay off. Stick with me and don't say a word more than you have to."

31 THEY CAME through the back door without knocking. We could hear their feet in the kitchen. In a minute the living room was full of them. Big Dan Hoskins was the first, moving with a deceptive calm. Behind him was the man who had spoken to me outside the store that morning, the deputy, Pete Barnstable. Seth Marcy, of course, and his taxi-driver cousin, his narrow eyes sharp with excitement and a vicious sort of satisfaction. There were others, too, several of them. Last of all, two women.

One of them was Mrs Walters. The other, inevitably was Ellen Hoskins, looking quietly anxious. I wondered what Mrs Walters had told them all, but there was no time for speculation.

"Where's Blair?" the sheriff demanded, looking down at me.

"Upstairs," I told him.

He whirled on his feet and started for the door.

"Wait a minute, Sheriff, and listen to me before you do anything. He's locked himself in up there, and he's desperate."

"Desperate or not, he's got somethin' to answer for."

"What?"

"Causin' a fatal accident. Failure to report the same. Connivin' to cover the hull thing up."

"The bastard," said Seth Marcy and his voice was heavy with satisfaction.

"Most of that," I pointed out, "was done by Mrs Walters, here."

"You're all guilty, if it comes to that. But Blair's gonna be under arrest the minute I lay my hands on him. I done my best for you people, but I'm through." He went out the door. There was a general surge after him. "If I need the rest of you," his voice came back down the stairs, "I'll call you."

There was silence in the room for a minute after he left. They stared down at Anne and me on the sofa, their faces heavy with anger and a kind of fierce pleasure. I felt cornered, but I hope I didn't show it. Anne sat perfectly quiet beside me. After a minute she opened her compact and powdered her nose. It was the first time I had seen her do that and I knew it was a gesture of defiance. Ellen Hoskins chuckled, but Seth Marcy scowled. He shouldered his way past Pete Barnstable and halted in front of me.

"Git up," he said to me.

"Don't, Dick," Anne said and then to Seth Marcy, "He's hurt."

"Not as much as he's going to be." His heavy boot caught me square in the shin. For a moment I thought the bone would break. He drew his foot back again. "I aim," he said slowly, "to teach you something, you dirty woman-killing son of a bitch." That time the kick did not land. Ellen Hoskins caught his ankle on the backswing with the crook of her umbrella handle.

"Your language is nasty, Seth," she said calmly.

"Yeah," said Pete Barnstable. "That's enough rough stuff, Seth. We'll give these folks what's comin' to 'em, legal." He grinned.

"You see, Professor Sayles, I am not a good person to threaten." It was Mrs Walters' voice.

"Shut up, you," said the deputy.

I looked at Ellen Hoskins. The pain in my leg and the heavy throbbing in my head made it hard to keep my voice under control. "What did she say to you?" I asked.

Ellen looked at me curiously, without pity but with no hate. "She simply told Dan how you had all arranged Mrs Marcy's death to look like an accident. How Mr Blair planned the thing, how she made the foot-

prints, how you, Professor, put the body in the river before Miss Conner and you drove into town and got Dr Rambouillet."

"You believe that?"

"I don't know."

Anne looked at Seth Marcy steadily until he dropped his eyes. "For the first time," she said pleasantly, "I see how lucky Elora really was. I used to wonder where she got those bruises on her arms. I see now, of course. You used to beat her."

Big Dan's feet were loud on the stairs before there was any answer to Anne's quiet speech. He came into the room and confronted me. "Well, you were right. He's locked in there, all right, and he won't come out. It's a steel door, and I don't reckon it'll break easy. We'll have to go in through the windows."

"There are steel shutters on those."

He glared at me. "Go outside, Pete, and take a look." The deputy reluctantly made his way through the crowd. After he had gone the sheriff demanded of me, "You been inside there?"

"Yes."

"What's he got in the place? Any weapons? Guns?"

"Nothing," I told him, "but a piece of scientific apparatus. But I wouldn't break in. If I were you, I'd get out of this house as fast as I could."

"Why?"

"Because that apparatus of his is the most dangerous thing I've ever seen in my life." The difficulty of explaining that seemed too much to me in the state I was in. "I have an idea you'll be finding that out before long. Did Mrs Walters tell you about it?"

"She said it was some kind of a crazy machine for talkin' long distances."

"That's right," I told him, "very long distances. For talking with the dead." I let that sink into a silence that was suddenly so intense that I had an insane desire to laugh at the lot of them. "The reason Mrs Walters didn't tell you the whole story, as well as the reason she wants to implicate us with herself, is because she believes in the thing. She thinks it will work and she wants to have it for herself."

The sheriff was nonplussed. He looked, I was interested to notice, first toward his sister. Seth Marcy said, "Let's cart the whole lot of them back to town, Dan. A coupla nights in the cooler and they won't talk brash like this rooster any more."

Ellen Hoskins voice was cool. "You don't seem to believe in this invention of Mr Blair's."

"Not in that way," I answered, "but I meant what I said about its being dangerous." I thought perhaps she might believe me, so I went on. "I saw it work this morning. It builds up a potential somehow—creates a vortex in space—I don't know exactly what. But if he turns it full on, the lot of us may—or may not—be here after it's over."

She nodded. "Dan," she said, "why don't you let Professor Sayles talk with Mr Blair? Maybe he can persuade him to come out."

"No," I said. "He won't come out for me. You'll have to get through that door somehow. Maybe a blowtorch will do it." Then I remembered my earlier idea. "Anyhow, Sheriff, don't think too much about getting him out right now. The most important thing of all is to cut off the electric power that runs that thing of his. Tell one of your men to do it right away, for the love of God."

He looked at me curiously. "Why?"

"So he can't work it," I answered impatiently. "Hurry up, I tell you."

The big man did not move. "That ain't in my province. Anything I do to get him out is one thing. Destroying property except in line of duty is another."

"He's just tryin' to distract you, Dan." It was the taxi driver again.

"You folks talk a lot out here," the sheriff said. "I can't tell the sense from the lies." He made no further move.

I opened my mouth to plead with him once more, but before I could say anything, Pete Barnstable came in, his jaw sagging. "That's right about the shutters, Dan. You can see it from the ground that they're made outa steel, like a safe. And they're all shet tight. Reckon we won't git in that way."

The sheriff nodded. He told off a man to drive to town and bring back a blowtorch at once. As an afterthought he ordered Ellen Hoskins to go along. But she shook her head. "I can look after myself, Dan. And you'll need a record of what happens. I'm needed here."

He shrugged his tremendous shoulders. "Have it your own way, Ellen," he said. Then he looked over the room. "I don't guess we'll be needin' the rest of you," he observed. "You better clear out. This here's the law, not a tar and featherin'. Or a wire pullin'," he added for my benefit.

They showed no disposition to leave at first, but he simply stood there and waited. After a while they began a sheepish sort of exodus. In five minutes the room was clear except for Seth Marcy and his cousin. Dan Hoskins looked at them. "I'll call you if I need you," he said.

Seth stood his ground. "I aim to stay right here till you get that crazy bugger out'n that room, Dan. It wuz my wife."

Ellen Hoskins sniffed audibly. For my part I did not care what happened. Things were beginning to seem shadowy to me. The pain in my head and my leg were almost unendurable. I simply sat still and waited. Most of my mind was not in the room, anyhow. With Julian locked in that place of his upstairs I felt it didn't matter much what happened down here. He knew—he must know—that this was his last opportunity with the thing on which he had labored so long and with such passionate hope and faith. What chance was there, I asked myself, that he would not try it once again? And having tried, and failed, would he not throw that fatal lever clear to the right? My imagination failed to picture what would happen then.

The sheriff cleared his throat indecisively. "All right, Seth," he said at last. "You can stay, if you behave yourself. But he'll have to go." The cousin shifted his narrow eyes from Seth to the sheriff and back again. Neither of them gave him a sign. In the end he muttered to Seth, "give him one for me," and went out. We could hear the sound of his car starting out back and then the rasp of gears. He was gone.

"Now, Perfessor, I want you to go upstairs with me and we'll try talkin' to him through the door once agin. Ellen, you and Miss Conner and Mrs Walters stay down here with Seth and Pete."

I stood up on my good leg and set the other to the ground. It hurt like the devil, but I could stand on it. As I went past Seth Marcy I looked him in the eye. "Like to try it again?" I asked.

"Sure." He started a punch that might have killed me if it had landed. I caught him full in the throat with my fist and let him have the other under the ear as he went down. His breath came out of his windpipe with a heavy gurgle. "That's for the shin," I said, "and to help you keep a civil tongue."

"You shouldn't have done that, Perfessor," the sheriff said while I was pulling myself up the stairs.

"I know. You didn't see him kick me in the leg a minute ago, while I was sitting on the sofa, but your sister did. If she wants to press the charge, go ahead."

He grunted. "Seth's kinda mean sometimes."

The hall was dark. We stood at the head of the stairs and looked round us. "Listen," I said to the sheriff, "I want you to promise one thing. If you begin to hear something you've never heard before, don't stay with me. Go down those stairs like a bat out of hell and get everybody outside at once. That thing he's got in there is perfectly capable of destroying the house. Don't believe me if you don't want to. But your sister's down there."

He looked at me carefully, as if to find out whether I was telling the truth, then nodded, and we went slowly down the hall together. The window at the end was a dull gray; twilight was already gathering in the air outside. We stood a while outside the cold steel of the door, listening. Julian was moving around inside. There was the occasional clink of metal on metal and another sound that puzzled me at first. It was, I realized finally, Julian muttering to himself. The sound of his feet on the floor when he moved was hurried.

"Julian," I cried and pounded on the metal. "It's Dick. Open the door."

"Go away." His voice was urgent, defiant, curiously roughened, as if he were breathing hard and with difficulty.

"Julian, for the love of God! Leave that thing alone. The house is full of people. It isn't safe."

His steps came rapidly across the floor, louder as they drew nearer. "Richard," he said and I could even hear him panting, "I will never open this door. Get away from it. You're only making me lose time."

The sheriff stirred at my side. "We'll have to burn the door down if you don't come out, Mr Blair. This is the law. Dan Hoskins, sheriff."

There was something hysterical in the laugh with which Julian answered him and then we could hear his footfalls receding. I had a sudden flash of understanding. He was laughing because a lummoX of a country sheriff wanted to stand between him and the greatest enterprise—and the maddest—which a man ever undertook.

I tried once more. "Julian!" I shouted and hammered at the door till my fist ached. "Think what you're doing! Anne's here. If you start that thing again, you may be endangering her. Let me in, for God's sake!"

His voice was curiously thin and faraway as it came to me through the steel of the door. "Too late," he said. "Too late, Dick. This time I'm going to find out . . ."

The rest of what he may have said was lost in the whispered hum that began to fill the air round us. The sheriff turned a white face in the gloom of the hall. "My God!" he said.

I gave him the hardest push I could from only one sound leg. "That's it, you fool!" I shouted. "Get them out of here. Then cut the wire if there's time. I'll keep on trying, but get downstairs and get them out."

"Jesus," he said wonderingly and then he was off down the hall. His feet lumbered loud and heavily on the stairs, but I did not listen to his going. The draft was beginning to suck round my ankles.

"Julian! Not all the way! Julian!" I could hear no answer. Very likely my voice never reached him at all. The roaring tumult of that thing inside was growing with every passing second. I could see it in the eye

of my imagination, hovering now in the space between the ceiling and the black table, already ominously grown. If only the power had been cut off! But it was too late now. I turned to go down the hall. The farther away I was when it happened, the greater the chance that I might escape. But I had no real hope, only an instinct to try even the most forlorn chance.

The wind in the hall was so strong now that I could scarcely make progress against it. The noise was cataract loud, but even through it I could hear the timbers of the old house cracking. Dust began to fill the air so that I could scarcely see my way. It came swirling up from every crevice between the boards, sucked out by the air. I looked back. The steel door, it seemed to me, was coming loose on its hinges. I could see a thin line of yellow light along the top and bottom of its surface. The noise of the maelstrom inside was so terrific that I could no longer hear. It was like being in the heart of a cyclone.

Somewhere on my way between Julian's door and the stairs the thing happened. The old house had been strained beyond the power of shipwright's timbering to resist. There was a series of crashes. Plaster fell from the ceiling somewhere; boards screamed as they were wrenched loose from their moorings of a hundred years. And then there was a clap of thunder so loud that nothing which had gone before it mattered.

I found myself lying on the floor of the hall. I was numb, almost without feeling of any sort. Plaster was scattered in fine lumps over my head and shoulders, and it gritted under my palms when I got myself heavily into a sitting position and leaned against the wall. But the thing was over. I drew a deep breath and coughed; dust and powdered plaster were in every cubic centimeter of the atmosphere. Gradually I pushed myself up against the wall. I wondered dully about Anne. The sheriff had had enough time to get her out. I prayed that he had. Then I began to grope my way back down the hall, littered as it was with wreckage. Why I went that way instead of toward the stairs I could not have said. But go I did, feeling my way along the wall. I made slow time of it, partly because I was dazed and more because the air was blindingly full of plaster dust.

Before I had gone ten feet a voice bellowed up the stairs behind me. I knew it must be Dan Hoskins, but I paid no attention. The dust was beginning to settle and I could make out the rectangle of the window. The whole of the sash had been torn away, but the frame was still there. I put each foot down cautiously, and tried to see whether the floor was complete under me. It seemed to be.

The door of Julian's room was gone from its hinges. I stumbled into

the place, my eyes smarting. The place was so altered, even in the gray light of the three windows from which the shutters appeared to have been blown bodily inward, that I hardly knew it. Plaster, lathing, boards, bits of glass, fragments of ebonite, and pieces of wire were everywhere. The ceiling, I saw, had been forced inward and was wrecked over the whole of its middle. The floor bulged upward, except at the center, and there it gaped open in an irregular hole that must have been several feet across.

"Julian!" I shouted his name aloud, but I knew that he would never answer me. That he must, inevitably, be dead.

There was no reply. I moved cautiously into the room, looking in the litter at my feet for what I dreaded to find. Before I reached the center of the room the white, sharp glare of a flashlight cut through the murk behind me and I saw the bulk of the sheriff in the doorway.

"Perfessor," he shouted. "Are you here?"

"Yes, I'm here," I said.

He came cautiously up to me, walking close to the walls. The remnants of the floor creaked under his weight, but it held. "Where's Mr Blair?"

"I haven't found him yet."

He ran the finger of his light over the floor. I have never seen anything so completely devastated as that room. It seemed to me, as he picked out one fragment of debris after another, that there was, on the whole, less volume of wreckage than I would have expected, but greater destruction. One steel shutter was lying near the edge of the hole in the floor. Another still hung, bent limply double from a single hinge, so that it lolloped into the room like one of Dali's deliquescent watches. Of the table there was no trace except the fragments I have mentioned.

"There he is," the sheriff exclaimed suddenly and began to circle the rim of the crater in the floor. I saw what he meant. A body was lying almost on the lip of the hole. The sheriff stopped opposite it and crawled toward the thing. Gingerly he reached out a hand and drew it toward him. It came with a sudden and horrible ease and, as it moved, it made a scratching noise on the floor. I knew then what he had found. Not Julian, but one of the seven who had sat around the table. His lamp played on it for a moment, and then I heard him scuttling abruptly backward.

"Jesus!" There was unadulterated horror in his voice. "That wasn't a man, Perfessor."

"I know. There were seven of them once. I can't see the others, but maybe these snarls of wire are what's left of them . . ."

The sheriff, back against the comparative safety of the wall, played his light over the room. His hand shook, but he did it methodically. The bar of light probed the place from corner to corner and from end to end. Twice he moved to scuff at a heap of rubble. When it was all over he came and stood beside me. "You try," he said.

"There's no use," I told him. "He's not here."

"You mean he got away? Damn it—"

"No, he didn't do that either."

"What are you givin' me, a Chinese puzzle?"

"Call it that if you want. But don't look at me, Sheriff. Try looking for that steel door. It must have weighed two hundred pounds, and where is it now? There's a shutter or two missing and a lot of other things that were in here. They're gone, too. Some of them," I said slowly, "were a lot heavier than a man." The numbness that had clotted my thoughts began to lift. "What about the others?" I demanded, and my voice sounded surprisingly loud and harsh in that room. "Are they all right?"

"Yep. I got 'em out, like you said to."

"Let's go, then," I said. "There's nothing here."

"We ain't found him yet."

I started for the door. "I'll look downstairs, under the hole in the floor. If I find him I'll holler."

"Do that." He sounded suddenly as if the whole thing were a nightmare past believing. I left him still pushing at heaps of rubbish with his foot. But I knew he wouldn't find Julian.

There was almost nothing in the living room under that hole up into Julian's laboratory. Even the plaster must have been sucked clean through, up and into that maw of darkness there at the last. I shouted through the hole: "Nothing at all down here. Not even plaster!"

The sheriff's voice boomed down at me. "Wait outside, Perfessor. I'll be down in a minute."

They were all standing in a huddled group on the edge and triangle of ground at the end of the Point, almost at the water's edge a hundred yards away from the house. The moment I started toward them there was a cry and a figure came flying across the grass toward me. Anne. Her arms were round me in one instant. That made up for the rest of it. We held each other for a while and laughed and babbled incoherencies, and she exclaimed at the plaster in my hair, and we kissed each other. Then I hobbled over to the rest of them with my arm round her. I looked at Mrs Walters first.

"He's gone," I said.

She did not flinch. "And the communicator?"

"What's still there is wire and powder. I think the thing got most of it."

Ellen Hoskins' voice in the dusk was cold as steel. "It was all for nothing, then Mrs Walters."

The big woman turned and faced her. "So you believe that ninny of a girl."

Ellen's voice was still light, but its tone was unyielding. "You're a great actress, my dear. But you should never have asked him that question about the communicator. That gave you away. You must have wanted it very much."

Mrs Walters said nothing. In the shadow it was impossible to make out her impression. Suddenly she spoke. "Look!" she said. "The lights on the road!"

We all turned our heads at her exclamation. Far up along the head of the bay and even closer, along the road down the Point, we could see the head lamps of cars. There seemed to be dozens of them, headed toward the house. It gave me a sensation of panic to see them coming on. I knew who was in those cars. The people of Barsham Harbor.

"Reckon they heard the explosion," said a voice that sounded like Pete Barnstable's.

They must have done so, of course. I wondered what would happen to us when they arrived. It was in my mind that we could expect short shrift from them, but I was too tired to care.

Mrs Walters was no longer in front of me when I dragged my eyes away from the oncoming lights. None of the shadowy outlines I scanned seemed to be hers. "Where's Mrs Walters?" I asked with a sudden feeling that something was happening of which I ought to be aware and wasn't.

For a second, no one answered. Then we saw her, on the very tip of the Point, standing alone. There was enough light left to turn the water of the river to a dull steel color, and show the line of ripples where the current sucked against the ultimate rock and swirled away toward the sea.

We all shouted. Pete Barnstable broke into a lumbering run, but he had no possible chance of catching her. She was into the river before he had gone three steps.

That was the last of it, the end of her ambition and her dream. The river took her out of our sight and world. Once I thought I saw the black outline of her head against the water and the flash of drops as she lifted her arm to swim. But I could not be sure.

32 SOMETIMES Anne and I wonder whether she got clean away, swimming with the ebb of the tide till she came to land in some deserted place. If she did so, we have never heard of her since, and there is not much chance that it was so. The river had been kind to her once, there at the end of the haying road by Seth Marcy's farm, but I do not believe that it was again. That water was too cold, too deep, too implacably strong even for her indomitable will. We are both happier, I think, in believing that Mrs Walters never left the river again and yet, when we speak of her, as we sometimes do, it is with a reluctant admiration.

As for the rest of it, we do not talk about that often. We were, I suppose, exceptionally lucky to come out of the whole thing with no more than several uncomfortable days of interrogation and examination in Barsham Harbor. The crowd of shouting, angry citizens, who arrived at the Point soon after Mrs Walters escaped, meant business. What they might have done without the presence of Dan Hoskins I don't care to speculate. He took us through the seething crowd of them with a heavy-shouldered insistence, a glowering obstinacy about doing his duty. Even so, he might not have succeeded if he had not had the fire to attract their attention to something besides ourselves.

The house began to burn within a few minutes after Mrs Walters had plunged into the river. The cataclysm that destroyed Julian's laboratory must have ripped the insulation from the power cable somewhere and, of course, the whole building was tinder dry after a century of existence. It burned high and yellow against the dark sky. Perhaps she saw it from the water before the end, lifting her head to gaze back at the house for one final look. We watched it from the sheriff's car as we went toward the town along the far shore of the bay. The distance shrank it to a house in a microcosm, but it burned with a fierce, bright splendor.

Of Julian we speak scarcely at all these days, but neither of us believes, I think, that he was in the house when it burned. We know that he was neither there nor in any other part of this substantial earth. Where that black vortex may have taken him I do not even speculate. It may have snatched him to itself as it must have devoured everything that it could tear loose from that room. But the few times when I have tried to imagine what that final moment was like for him, my mind does not picture it quite that way. The funnel of blackness must have grown hideously

large by then. Perhaps it filled most of the room, from ceiling to floor. I think Julian may have made no effort to resist it. At least, in the picture in my mind, he is simply walking into it, like a man going through a door. . . .

