

THE INTRUDER

RALPH MENDELSON

THE INTRUDER



SELECTED STORIES

One-Off Press
Prescott

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*In Ralph's behalf: this collection is dedicated to Phil,
Connie and Addie, Mary and Jocelyn, Sally, and to the
memory Lois.*

—WM

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INTRODUCTION

In 1991, while I was working on my second book, Ralph gave me his two novels and a collection of short stories to see if I could do something with them. He had been attending writers' workshops, including Bread Loaf, and was getting his stories published. He was also working on his Masters Degree in psychology. He wrote *Where Did I Put My Glasses*, a book on memory and ways, if not to improve it, to deal with memory and practical, day-to-day issues. He couldn't find a publisher, so he self-published it. With all of this, he was finding less and less time for the labor intensive process of trying to place his stories.

He started teaching an introductory course in psychology at Cleveland State University in late 1993 or early 1994; but in July 1994, he had a stroke, a maximal infarct. What should have killed him did not: but he has suffered from expressive aphasia ever since. I do not think that this would have been as severe if he had a good speech therapist early on. While he was in the hospital, almost completely paralyzed, I visited him for several weeks. We were

in Medford, Oregon, where he had been stricken while on vacation. Other than “hello” and “bye,” he could not speak, and the speech therapist at the hospital said that those words were “automatic words,” and did not signify anything regarding his possible recovery, in fact, “Your father will never speak.” During the afternoon on my third or fourth day there, he struggled for several hours to say something. The words formed slowly, following long periods of stammering and silent exhaustion. Finally, “I think this place is segregated.” Ragged, with some repetition and slurring, that was his first sentence. “Those were just automatic words,” the therapist insisted the next morning. She treated him as if he were a child, and he did not like that. Her opinion followed him home to Cleveland like a bad cold, and his aphasia continues today. The significant thing, however, is not the poor therapy he received, but the nature of his first sentence: it says a lot about him as a person.

Ralph’s first book, *Starlight and Carlyle Dying*, was not good. He was enamored with the Southern Gothic. Following a delightful visit with Flannery O’Connor and her mother—both of whom graciously entertained a Yankee family with iced tea, stories and a tour of the peacocks and peahens—he began work on it. It was forced and contrived, with unevenly developed characters. He had wanted an erotic tone in several scenes, but was clumsy and puerile. The story and the characters had potential, but it was poorly organized, and interrupted with long, often unnecessary, philosophical speculations that favored the author but not the book.

His second book, *The New World*, completed in 1973, was an exciting tale of pre-revolutionary America. It moves at a good pace with fully developed characters who have lives of their own in remarkable times. He found a publisher, but they insisted

on a major rewrite, and he said no. One-Off Press will release *The New World* early next year.

I selected the short stories for this collection from a group of thirty-three. Several stories are a little stiff, and one, “Captain McClancey’s Ice Cream Cone,” may need a comment. It speaks of the WWII years, when Ralph, the narrator, saw the tragic inequities of the Jim Crow Laws while stationed in Florida. As a young, northern, white officer—who later was to be active in the Urban League in Cleveland—he had to grapple with them. It was a different time for both blacks and whites in America. Some of the stories may have been written in the 1950’s, which, had he sent them to her, could explain why Flannery O’Connor agreed to see us. Although the circumstances of our family trip to Milledgeville, Georgia, were themselves more than a curiosity: they became the motive around which the events in *Starlight and Carlyle Dying* were pinned.

Following Sherman’s March to the Sea, November-December, 1864, Sherman’s army moved north through the Carolinas. Cpl. William H. Jones, 18, picked up a book, *Scott’s Poetical Works*, from a table in the burning mansion of “Erwinton,” the Ewrin plantation in Barnwell County, South Carolina. Although a war trophy, William Jones wanted the book returned to its rightful owners: identified only as U. M. Erwin by the inscription in the front of the book. His son failed to return it and thus it got to my mother, his granddaughter, who in 1961 started looking for U. M. Erwin’s decedents. Newspapers across the country picked up the story, and within two months much of the mystery was solved. Ulysses Maner Erwin, a major in the Confederate Army, inherited Erwinton, the family plantation, from his father, James D. Erwin, a general in the Confederate Army. U. M. Erwin’s eldest and most direct descendent was his

granddaughter Dr. Martha Erwin Sibley, of Milledgeville, Georgia, where he had resettled after finding Erwinton destroyed after the war.

My recollection of Dr. Sibley is of a warm, charming, and gracious woman, whose sense of humor was broad enough to find amusement in the intentional absence of her sister from a delightful meal, “because, if you’ll excuse me, y’all are Yankees.” However:

... Tonight, my sister and I are invited to Flannery O’Connor’s, to sit on her porch in the cool, sip whatever she serves to be sipped, and let your ears burn for we are to discuss you and your visit among us.

“Let your ears burn,” Southern-wise means hear compliments. . . .

(letter: Martha Erwin Sibley, August 4, 1962)

Parents give their children many things. Some things, like curiosity and compassion are precious gifts. A son may never know if he can sufficiently say thank you, but this is my gift to my father, his stories, with all my love,

Walton Mendelson
September 2003

THE INTRUDER



SELECTED STORIES

THE GREATEST SAILOR THAT EVER LIVED

SEVILLE, SPAIN: 1489

AS THE RAUCOUS LAUGHTER DIED DOWN, awe-filled eyes turned slowly toward the greatest sailor that ever lived. Magellan was the first to stop laughing. Then Balboa and Bartholomew Diaz wiped the tears of laughter from their eyes and turned toward the master. The others followed. Finally, even Vasco da Gama was silent.

Don Pedro de la Monte y Gonzales, on whom all eyes had focused, spat into the pot bellied stove, took a gulp of warm, dark, beer, wiping the dribble from his beard, then, looking at a blank spot high on the opposite wall, addressed himself to the visitor, the Italian mariner, Cristoforo Colombo, who sat beside him—the earnest visitor whose bizarre ideas had brought on all the mirth.

“I will do you a favor, señor,” Don Pedro de la Monte y Gonzales said, “a favor one seldom receives in this ungrateful world. I will tell you the truth. Everything you have said is contrary to nature and to the wisdom that comes from sailing many years on the high seas. Your arguments are clever. I do not deny that. But beware of clever arguments. They will trap you. Let the voice of experience be your guide.”

All heads nodded approval except the head of the visitor. After allowing a moment of silence out of respect for the greatest sailor that ever lived, who had to take another gulp of beer, spit into the stove, then empty his mug in one long, thirsty, swallow, Cristoforo Colombo spoke.

“Not every experience of the past throws light on the future,” he said.

“You are a very convincing talker,” said Don Pedro de la Monte y Gonzales, “and it is easy to believe you while you are talking. Sail west to reach the East. Yes, of course. But common sense and experience . . . Have you ever been near The Edge? Eh?”

A hum of agreement filled the room. Cristoforo Colombo remained silent.

Don Pedro de la Monte y Gonzales knew there could be no answer. But he did not exult in his advantage. No. With a modesty that could come only from the assurance of superiority, he said, “Experience is the great teacher of man, and I have had more years of experience sailing the great ships than you have had of life on this earth.”



CADIZ, SPAIN: 1507

Don Pedro de la Monte y Gonzales spat into the stove, splashing John Cabot and Jacques Cartier, who had drawn their chairs as close as they could to the greatest sailor that ever lived.

Don Pedro de la Monte y Gonzales cleared his throat. "I attribute my long life—I'm ninety-seven this month—" (he addressed this aside to Ponce de León) "to my never drinking water."

"If it please you, señor," Amerigo Vespucci put in timidly, "we would like to hear the rest about this man Colombo, whom you knew so well."

"Yes, well, there really isn't any more to tell. He made a big name for himself in the world after I knew him. But why? Eh? Why? He found a few islands in the Atlantic Ocean."

"But they are . . . uh . . . quite large islands," Amerigo Vespucci objected, as mildly as he could.

"Yes, large. I'll grant that. Large. But not rich. Not India. He found some large, empty islands that are completely worthless. He didn't find India, did he? Eh?"

Everyone agreed that he had not found India.

"He brought back some illiterate savages he thought were Indians, but he was wrong. Just like I told him. He was wrong. I'll admit he may have sailed farther west than anyone ever did before. By hundreds of miles, perhaps. But . . ."

The old man leaned forward. Everyone in the room knew that he leaned forward when he was about to make a very important statement, and they knew that he made his most important statements in a voice so low it was almost a whisper. Everyone in the room leaned forward and stopped breathing so they would not miss a single syllable of the pronouncement.

RALPH MENDELSON

“He thought he could reach India.” He shook his head sadly. “But he was a young man. All theory. Had no experience, and wouldn’t listen to a man who had.” The old man paused to give them time to consider. Then, almost in a whisper, Don Pedro de la Monte y Gonzales, the greatest sailor that ever lived, said, “But he never even got *close* to The Edge!”

BANCROFT'S TUNE

MISS ELLEN CLOSED HER EYES for the last time at the age of one hundred. How had she managed to reach so great an age?

“You must begin while you are still young, Bancroft.”

Bancroft was only fifty—exactly half her age—and she wanted him to profit from her experience.

“If you follow my advice, Bancroft, you, too, can reach the age of one hundred.”

She gave the usual advice. No smoking. No drinking. No debauchery. A balanced diet. Eight hours sleep. Sunshine and exercise—in moderation.

True enough, but Miss Ellen never mentioned one important reason for her longevity. Reaching the age of one hundred had gradually become her goal in life. After her ninety-seventh birthday, she simply omitted ninety-eight and ninety-nine. This seems like the only plausible explanation for the fact that in the thirteen years that Bancroft worked for her, his age

only went from thirty-seven to fifty, while hers increased from eighty-five to one hundred.

Bancroft had not always been her nurse. She had hired him originally to be what she thought of as her steward. He almost looked the part, which both pleased and amused her. Although his clothes always seemed about one size too small, after she prevailed upon him to buy a suit one size larger, it still looked about one size too small. Miss Ellen, who admitted that she knew next to nothing about men's clothes, accepted Bancroft's original selection. At least he always wore a necktie, and his suits were blandly conservative.

Bancroft looked after the house. He saw that the cook and the gardener and the upstairs maid understood their instructions, which Miss Ellen relayed to them through him. He did the shopping, ran her errands, and acted as her chauffeur when she went out. As the years went by, she went out less and less, until at last Bancroft used the car only for shopping.

Bancroft had never had a car of his own, and he could not drive very well. He made up for that by driving very carefully, so that Miss Ellen considered him an excellent driver. He enjoyed driving. He kept the big Cadillac clean and shiny. When he drove to the market, he would go several blocks out of his way for the sheer pleasure of driving.

The first time he went shopping alone, Miss Ellen gave him two twenty-dollar bills. The groceries came to thirty-three dollars and sixty-four cents.

"What did you do with the change, Bancroft?"

"I kept it, ma'am."

For a moment, Miss Ellen could not understand. Then she understood. "Did you shop for your mother, Bancroft?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"And did she let you keep the change?"

“Yes, ma’am.”

Miss Ellen almost smiled. “That will be all for now, Bancroft,” she said.

Miss Ellen was frightfully rich. She had so much money that she did not need to be attractive, and she did not need to get married. She had so much money that she did not need close friends. By the time she reached eighty-five, when Bancroft began to work for her, she had no friends at all.

She lived in the best part of the city, a part that Bancroft had never even seen before. Since she had no family, she installed Bancroft in the guest room on the second floor. She had wanted a man for the job because it made her feel more secure. Timid, pudgy Bancroft could never be mistaken for a bodyguard, but Miss Ellen felt safer having him in the house.

Bancroft’s room looked out over Witawba Lake and across to the woods of Witawba Park. The maid kept his room immaculate and made his bed every day. He had his own private bathroom. Bancroft had seen rooms like that on television, but he had always considered television merely an external extension of his internal fantasy world. He had never dreamed of any part of it becoming reality. On summer evenings, Miss Ellen would sometimes invite him to join her on the patio, where they would sit in silence, watching the sun set over the woods across the lake.

Bancroft was seven when his father died. His mother continued to work at the Triangular Paper Bag Company. After work she rushed home to dote on her only child—her only companion, she said, now that his father was gone. As he grew up, she found ways of keeping him home with her. She needed protection. He must not leave her alone in the empty house. That made him feel important. He did not enjoy the loud, rough boys at school, and he felt uncomfortable with girls. He felt comfortable at home with his mother.

His father had left some savings, some insurance, and the mortgaged, four-room house. His mother had to work to support them. By the time Bancroft was old enough to drop out of school, she had become office manager, and she managed to get him hired to keep the warehouse records. Every day he received a pile of crumpled slips of paper from the warehouse foreman, and he carefully copied the numbers from the slips into a book. It was clean work, and it was safe work. And it meant that he and his mother could always be together.

On his mother's death, when Bancroft was thirty-seven, the company found that they could do without his services. The switchboard operator kept the warehouse records in her spare time.

Mr. Warren, who owned the company, discovered that although Bancroft's mother had managed the office efficiently, she had mismanaged her own financial affairs. She had left nothing. She had lost the house. Bancroft had no savings, and now he had no job. Mr. Warren felt that he should do *something* for Bancroft. Mr. Warren occasionally had lunch with a friend of his, a Mr. Arbuthnot, who happened to be Ellen Peabody's attorney. Just after Mr. Warren had dismissed Bancroft, Mr. Arbuthnot mentioned that he had a client who was looking for someone to manage her house. Someone who would be satisfied to do menial work. The man would need no skills whatever. He must be neat and self-effacing, nothing more.

Miss Ellen and Bancroft developed a cordial, but formal, relationship. In fairness to Bancroft, it can be argued that their more intimate relationship began on Miss Ellen's initiative on her eighty-eighth birthday.

"You needn't kiss me if you don't wish to, Bancroft, but I would find it a pleasant birthday greeting."

In fairness to Miss Ellen, she had expected a cousin-like kiss

on the forehead. Bancroft surprised her by kissing her firmly on the mouth. It was not a matter of passion. Bancroft had always kissed his mother on the mouth since before he could remember. He had never kissed any other woman anywhere.

Before that, Bancroft had taken his meals in the kitchen with the cook and the maid. Miss Ellen invited him to take his meals with her. They seldom spoke, but they took their meals together.

No one disturbed the noiseless tenor of Miss Ellen's way. Her only visitors were her lawyer, Mr. Arbuthnot, and her physician, Dr. Emmett.

Bancroft eased the burden of living for her. He knew everything about the house, and he saw to it that everything was kept in tip-top condition. When a light bulb burned out, Bancroft changed it—usually before Miss Ellen noticed it. When the water pipe to the garage leaked, Bancroft discovered it and called the plumber. He had the refrigerator repaired, and when the toaster broke down, he first investigated the feasibility of having it repaired, but decided it would be wiser to replace it.

Miss Ellen told Mr. Arbuthnot about it. "Bancroft takes care of the house as if it were his own."

Mr. Arbuthnot made no reply. If Miss Ellen had looked, she might have seen that Mr. Arbuthnot did not seem pleased.

Bancroft looked into everything. When Miss Ellen could not find her scarab lavalier, Bancroft would remind her where she kept it in her dresser. He took pains to notice where she put her glasses down. When she mislaid them, he would find them for her.

Bancroft looked into everything. He spent hours going through the two photograph albums Miss Ellen kept under the library table. One contained pictures of her parents and of herself as a child. She had always been small, it seemed. She explained

where and when the pictures had been taken. Although he said nothing to her, Bancroft marveled that any child could be as unattractive as Miss Ellen had been. She looked better as an old woman than she had as a child. That was one of the very few observations that Bancroft did not share with her.

The other album contained many pictures of Miss Ellen as a young lady, and some as a middle-aged lady. Several pictures showed the homely Miss Ellen in the company of an amazingly handsome young man.

“Who is that, Miss Ellen?”

“I don’t remember, Bancroft,” she said, quickly turning the page.

Bancroft found a packet of old love letters in a trunk in the attic.

“Who is Jim?”

“I do not recall.”

“Then why do you save the letters?”

Miss Ellen thought a moment before she replied. “Consistent behavior is not a part of human nature, Bancroft.”

She took the packet of letters from him, then handed them back. “Please burn them.”

Bancroft did whatever Miss Ellen asked.

In the bottom drawer of her dresser, under her lingerie, Bancroft found a large book called *Curious Perversions*. It was profusely illustrated. He took it to his room several times a week to peruse it.

One day he took it to Miss Ellen and showed her one of the more complex pictures. “I don’t understand how they do that.”

“Have you read the text?”

“No, ma’am. I just looked at the pictures.”

“You cannot expect to understand the illustrations, Bancroft, unless you read the text.”

Another time he found something in her top drawer.

"What is this, Miss Ellen?" he asked, showing her a small, unmarked, amber-colored bottle, half-full of powder.

She looked at the bottle for some time before she answered. "It's sixty doses of Phenobarbital, a barbiturate, Bancroft. There may come a time when I will want it."

"Yes, ma'am." More talkative than usual, he added, "I know what a barbiturate is, Miss Ellen, it's used to sleep." He hesitated, looking down at her as she sat in her favorite chair, "In large enough doses, some people use it to kill themselves."

Miss Ellen lapsed into silence, but as she had not dismissed Bancroft, he stood, waiting. Finally, she repeated, "There may come a time when I will want it . . . all."

Again she lapsed into silence. Then, looking straight into Bancroft's eyes, she said, "When that time comes, Bancroft, I may not be able to get to my dresser."

"Yes, ma'am."

"If that should happen, will you give it to me?"

"Yes, ma'am, if you let me know you want it."

Miss Ellen's voice sounded unusually low. "That *could* get you into trouble with the law."

"I understand."

"Thank you, Bancroft."

The only time Bancroft ever took a vacation was when Miss Ellen insisted that he spend a week in New York. He had never been there before. In fact, he had never been anywhere before. When she learned that, she gave him the money for the trip and insisted that he go.

He looked out the window of the airplane. During the daytime, he walked around the city, looking at the buildings. Evenings he passed in his room watching television.

"How did you like New York, Bancroft?"

“Very well, ma’am.”

As Miss Ellen grew older, Dr. Emmett found more ways for Bancroft to help her. After Bancroft had been there six years, the doctor would always call him into the room after he had examined Miss Ellen.

“Bancroft,” he would say, “you must help Miss Ellen.” And then he would teach Bancroft a new task.

In her ninety-second year, Miss Ellen began to have difficulties taking care of her personal needs.

“It might be well for you to have a nurse,” Doctor Emmett suggested.

“What’s wrong with Bancroft?”

“Well, you’d do better with someone with training, Miss Peabody.”

“Train Bancroft.”

Dr. Emmett sent a nurse who spent the better part of a week teaching Bancroft to dress Miss Ellen in the morning and to undress her in the evening. Bancroft had grown accustomed to Miss Ellen’s wrinkled face and her skinny arms and legs, but that had not fully prepared him for so vast a difference between the appearance of her wizened body and those of the girls in the magazines he kept in his room. Nevertheless, the reality of her nakedness occupied a large place in his fantasies for some time, crowding out the more full figured women in the pictures.

He had become accustomed to her appearance by the time the nurse taught him to bathe her. He had never touched a woman before. He touched her. Sometimes he touched a particular place longer than the bathing required.

“Have you satisfied your curiosity, Bancroft?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

As the routine became more familiar, he would studiously examine parts of her body.

“You must learn to resist temptation, Bancroft.”

There were days, however, when she seemed to guide his hands to the more interesting places. On other days, though, if he would take the initiative, she would brush him away.

“Your behavior astonishes and disappoints me, Bancroft. I thought better of you than that.”

Mr. Arbuthnot, the lawyer, took care of Miss Ellen's financial affairs. Shortly after her ninety-fourth birthday, Miss Ellen wrote a new will.

“That's a lot of money to leave a man who grew up with nothing.”

Miss Ellen did not reply.

“But he won't know what to do with it.”

“He'll learn.”

“It's a very serious matter, Miss Peabody. If he should ever learn about the will . . .”

Miss Ellen smiled, but she did not reply.

“People do terrible things for money.”

Mr. Arbuthnot brought two colleagues with him to witness the signing of the will. When they had all left, Miss Ellen handed Bancroft a thick envelope. Knowing him as she did, she knew that sealing the envelope would be nothing more than a futile gesture. She did not bother. “Please put this in my safe deposit box, Bancroft.”

“Yes, ma'am.”

Although Miss Ellen was of sound mind, her body continued to deteriorate. Most of her waking hours she spent in a wheel chair. When she walked at all, she used a walker. Bancroft was always at her side to help.

He had to lift her into her bath, and he carried her from bath to her bed, where he dried her and dressed her. It was not hard; she weighed less than a hundred pounds.

Miss Ellen knew that if she ever took the powder, Bancroft might be accused of killing her. She tried to forestall that possibility by telling Dr. Emmett and Mr. Arbuthnot about it.

When she told Dr. Emmett, he said, "That would be a terrible thing to do."

"As terrible as the pain and suffering people go through?"

Dr. Emmett solemnly shook his head in disapproval.

"I can't avoid death, but I can avoid the pain and suffering."

"There are better ways of handling that."

"I will make that decision for myself. But whatever happens, you must make sure that no one knows. There is to be no autopsy. Do you understand? No matter how suspicious the circumstances may appear, there is to be no autopsy."

When she told Mr. Arbuthnot, he said, "That would be a terrible thing to do."

Miss Ellen smiled.

"And if Bancroft finds out about the will . . . You're putting a terrible temptation in his way."

Miss Ellen's smile struck Mr. Arbuthnot as aloof. "He knows about the will," she said.

"He knows!"

"He thanked me for it."

"Miss Peabody!"

"There were tears in his eyes . . ."

The memory of Bancroft standing before her, hot and red with embarrassment, stammering out his thanks, brought tears to her own eyes, which may account for her failure to notice Mr. Arbuthnot's frown of disapproval. Over the course of his career in the law, Mr. Arbuthnot had come to know the ways of confidence men and fortune hunters.

"That's a terrible temptation," he repeated.

"I'll take that chance."

Bancroft's Tune

“In my many years of practice, Miss Peabody, I’ve seen many good men corrupted for far less than three million dollars.”

“If he shortens my life painlessly, does it really matter? I’m ninety-six, and I live in a wheel chair.”

Mr. Arbuthnot solemnly shook his head in disapproval.

“I want you to promise that no suspicion will fall on him. I made the decision, and it is entirely my responsibility.”

Mr. Arbuthnot continued to shake his head. “I don’t like it.”

Miss Ellen spent the last months of her life confined to her bed. Bancroft did not leave her side except to do the shopping, and then he would have the cook stay with her till he returned. Miss Ellen had a very large room. Bancroft had a cot moved into it so that she would never be alone.

After several months, Dr. Emmett had nurses in the house around the clock. Bancroft moved back to his room, and the night nurse stayed in the room with Miss Ellen.

Bancroft and the afternoon nurse were sitting in the room when a sound issued from Miss Ellen’s throat that Bancroft had never heard before. The nurse felt for a pulse. She looked at Bancroft and shook her head mournfully.

Bancroft telephoned Dr. Emmett, Mr. Arbuthnot, and the Olmstead Funeral Home, as he had been instructed. He dismissed the nurse. After she left, he sat in the room alone with Miss Ellen.

Two husky young men arrived from the Olmstead Funeral Home. He took them to Miss Ellen’s room.

“May I watch?”

“It would be better if you don’t.”

Bancroft went downstairs and stood on the patio looking out across Witawba Lake to the woods beyond. After a while, one of the young men appeared.

“We’re leaving.”

“Thank you.”

Bancroft walked to the back end of the driveway and watched them drive Miss Ellen away. Then he went back to her bedroom. He sat in the chair a while, looking at the empty bed. She had not asked for the powder. He took it out of the drawer and sat in the chair staring at it.

He used the glass from her bathroom. He filled it with water, then returned to the chair, where he sat holding it. He poured the powder into the glass, and stirred it while staring at her empty bed.

As soon as he had swallowed the bitter liquid, he wiped the bottom of the glass on his sleeve so that it would not leave a ring on Miss Ellen’s table.

THE INTRUDER

HARD AS HE TRIED, Teddie could not run. Something seemed to bear down on him, so that he could hardly stay on his feet. He moved forward slowly, while the clump, clump of The Intruder grew louder as it drew nearer. Teddie dared not turn to look. He had not seen the movie, but some of the big kids from third grade had told him about it. They told him The Intruder was big and horrible, but he did not know whether it was black or white, nor did he know which would be worse. He did not know what it would do to him when it caught him, but he knew it would catch him, and he struggled on in cold dread. The clumping drew nearer and nearer.

Teddie awoke slowly into the black living room in which he had slept every night as far back as his memory went, but his terror grew as he emerged sweating and panting from the nightmare. He knew he was awake, now, and he knew that the clumping was real, and that it was approaching the door of the apartment.

The old tenement was honeycombed with hallways and stairways. Teddie had explored them all. But this stairway led only to his family's apartment. The door of the living room in which he slept opened directly onto the stairway.

The crash of a fist on the door petrified the boy. He pressed himself flat against the back of the sofa and held his breath.

"Hey, what the hell! Open the door!"

Teddie did not know the terrifying male voice.

The man shook the door hard, then paused. In the brief silence, Teddie heard his parents stirring in the bedroom, back through the kitchen. He wanted to flee to the protection of his mother, but he lay pinned to the sofa, sweating and shivering.

The door crashed open, and a stranger staggered clumsily into the room. "Hey, turn on the God damn light," the stranger commanded, addressing himself to the dark corner in which Teddie lay sobbing.

A single light bulb, hanging from the center of the ceiling, came on, almost blinding Teddie. His father stood in the kitchen doorway.

"What you-all want?" Henry asked the stranger.

The stranger was a huge man, tall and fat. He looked stupidly around the room. Then he smiled at Henry. "Let's have another drink."

"You crazy? What you mean, bustin' in like that, wakin' folks up?"

The stranger stamped his feet to shake the snow off. "It's mighty cold out there tonight. Let's have one more drink, hey? Just one more."

"Wakin' up the boy," Henry added. He was short and slight. He had to look up at the stranger. "He got to get his sleep. He got to get up for school. He only seven years old."

"Man, you ain't very polite. I said I want a drink." The

stranger made a threatening move toward Henry. "Now you get me a drink."

Henry shivered in his rumpled pajamas. He began to take a step back, but he heard Ruth stirring in the kitchen behind him. "You get out of here, hear? You let peaceful folk alone."

The stranger's smile disappeared. "Say, nigger, you get me a drink. You shut up and get me a drink."

"Now look here, mister, this is *our* house, not yours. You go on and leave us be."

"Now that ain't no friendly way to talk on a cold night like this," the stranger said in a mean voice. "You gonna send a man out in that cold?" He approached Henry with a slow, steady menace.

Henry looked wildly about the room as though searching for help, but he saw only the terror-stricken eyes of his boy, frozen and trembling on the sofa. Again he heard Ruth stirring behind him. He stood his ground.

"Hell, I'll have to help myself," the stranger said. "Get out the way, nigger." And he swiped Henry with the back of his hand, knocking him to the floor.

Ruth stepped into the kitchen doorway, a butcher knife in her hand. She glared at the man and made jabbing motions at him with the knife. "Get out of here!"

The stranger stopped. "Say, what the hell's the matter with you-all? All I want's a little friendly drink."

"Get out!"

The stranger held out his arms as if to appeal to her. He smiled. "Now that ain't no way to be. Why don't you and me have some fun, huh?"

"Get out!"

She had stopped, and that seemed to embolden him. He smiled broadly at her. "A little sweet, *nasty*, time together, huh?"

“Shut up that kind of talk in front the boy!” She resumed her jabbing and took a step forward. The stranger was still approaching her. In their confusion, the knife nicked the man’s finger. He screamed with surprise, stopped, and sucked the cut.

“What you-all trying to do, kill somebody?” he asked when he realized that the cut amounted to nothing.

“Get ’round back of him, Henry,” Ruth ordered, never taking her eyes off the man, and still threatening him with the knife.

Henry had not risen from the floor. He had lain on his side, his hand caressing the side of his mouth, wiping the blood from his broken lip. He rose at Ruth’s command, backed away from the man, and started to circle slowly behind him.

“Now don’t you folks get huffy,” the stranger said, backing away, trying to keep both Ruth and Henry in his vision. “I ain’t gonna harm no one.”

Ruth kept coming at him, jabbing the knife at him, and she kept encouraging Henry to get behind him. Henry cautiously followed her instructions. The stranger began to perspire.

“I’m goin’” he said apologetically. “I just thought you-all wanted a little fun. I didn’t mean no harm to no one.”

He backed through the open door, keeping watch on them both. Ruth did not stop her slow approach, while Henry stood between him and the boy.

The stranger took hold of the door, drawing it shut behind him as he backed out of the room. When the door was almost shut, he thrust his head into the room and shouted, “God damn you motherfuckers to hell!” at the top of his lungs. Then he slammed the door and fled. They heard him run down the stairs.

There was one table in the room. Ruth pushed it against the closed door. She threw the knife on the table. There was one chair in the room. She sank into it and cried.

Teddie ran to her and buried his head in her lap, sobbing.

“I’m scared, Mommie. I’m scared.” She ran her hand over the back of his head and neck. She stopped crying, but she sat there staring sightlessly before her. Her muscles went slack, and she breathed deep. Henry still stood where he had been when the stranger left. She stared at him without seeing him.

Suddenly she returned to the present. She patted Teddie gently. “You go get in my bed. You sleep with me from now on. Your daddy, he sleep in here.”

She felt the boy tremble. “Now get,” she added. “You be all right. I see that you all right.”

She slapped Teddie’s behind affectionately as he started toward the bedroom. She watched him disappear into the gloom before she turned back to Henry.

“Why didn’t you fix that door?”

Henry sank onto the sofa and dropped his head onto his hands.

“I told you fix that door,” she said.

“I don’t know how to fix a lock. You got to get a lock man for that.”

“What about a bolt?” she asked as though she were tired of arguing. “I told you to buy a bolt. All you need to do is screw it on.”

Henry avoided her eyes.

“Damn!” she exploded, rising. “You ain’t good for nothing. Nobody can’t remember the last time you worked. What you do all day? Don’t do nothing ’round here. I has to clean up the house and make the meals and everything after I get home. What you do anyway? What good you ’round this house anyway?”

She walked angrily around the dingy room, surveying it as though for the first time. “House!” she repeated. “Jesus! Ain’t this *really* livin’ !”

Her eye caught the butcher knife lying on the table. She stopped, stared at it for a moment, then picked it up, gripping

the handle firmly. "A jungle. Wild animals like that man come bustin' in scaring little boys, and no one to stop 'em."

She slammed the knife on the table. "God, if we could live like people! And what the hell you doing about it? We better off without you."

Again. Henry's head sank into his hands. He made no attempt to reply.

"You just in the way," Ruth said. "You ain't no more use around here than that stranger come bustin' in."

She put her clenched fists on her hips and glared down at him. "I got two dependents," she mocked. "Like the boss-man at the laundry say. He say, 'You got two dependents, Ruth. You got boys or girls?' And I say, 'I got two little boys, boss, only one of 'em's my husband.'"

She walked slowly toward the door to the kitchen. She stopped in the doorway. "We better off if you just disappear, just fade away. Least then I be able to feed and clothe my baby."

Henry sat motionless after she left. She had turned out the light, but he neither stirred to turn it on nor lay down to sleep. The thoughts, the old bitter thoughts, ran through his mind. He could not have expressed them to her. They jumbled through his mind in lumps, and he could not make them out clearly, but he had long since stopped trying to understand them. They had grown so familiar that he felt no need to understand them.

Tramping the sidewalks. He could see the broken paving stones and the trash—a spilled garbage pail and a run-over rat—and his feet tramping, carrying him nowhere. Blazing summer, freezing winter. Nowhere to go but walk on.

"Sorry, we're not hiring."

Sometimes they didn't say it directly. "What's your trade?"

"I ain't got no trade, but . . ."

"Well, I'm sorry, but . . ."

The Intruder

White folks need work done in the yard: mowing grass, sweeping leaves, shoveling snow.

“I can do most anything, lady. Just give me a chance.”

The policeman in the cruiser didn't think so. “Hey, nigger, what the hell you think you're doing around here?”

Asking for work. Asking for a chance—not a big chance, just enough to maybe get a start. But the words don't come.

“Get your black ass out of here!”

Begging for a job. Begging for a chance. Begging for money, for clothes, for anything.

Sure he took a drink sometimes, if he had the money, or if a friend had a bottle. It broke the pain. It made him feel for a moment that he was somewhere he was supposed to be.

A truck rumbled by. Its headlights flashed into the room for a moment. Then the black returned, blacker than before.

When the alarm clock went off, Ruth got up. She tousled Teddie's head.

“Hey, boy, you got to get up, now. Time you get up for school.”

She went to the dresser and opened a drawer, but as she started to reach in it, she suddenly straightened up and listened. She stood for a moment, drawing the neck of her cotton nightgown tight around her throat with one hand as if to keep warm.

She turned away from the dresser. She fumbled her way through the kitchen, feeling her way with her free hand as though it were dark and she had never been in the room before.

“Oh,” she moaned as she entered the living room. The freezing gray cold seemed suddenly to pierce through the windows, through the walls, from every side. She shivered violently. Her fingers worked the nightgown as she clutched it to her throat. Her other hand made its way slowly to her lips. “Oh, my God!” she whispered. “Oh, my God Jesus!”

Teddie crept into the room cautiously. "What's the matter, Mommie?"

Without looking at him, she put an arm around him and pulled him tight against her. She drew herself up to her full height, her jaws clenched for a brief moment.

"They ain't nothin' the matter, Teddie," she said in a low firm voice. "Don't you fret none. They ain't nothin' matter."

"Where's Daddy?" the boy asked, but she did not reply.

Then suddenly she said, "Now you scoot back and get yourself dressed."

She watched him go through the kitchen door on his way back to the bedroom. Then she turned to examine the room, looking carefully into every corner. He had gone, all right. And she knew he would never come back.

Well, good riddance. It was true—they could get along better without him. But she felt a pang, a touch of the loneliness she must look forward to. A cold, empty house, with a boy, but without a man. Nothing left, now, of those foolish dreams that break the monotony of the steamy hot laundry machines. She would dream still, but the old dreams of a husband and a child—dreams about a family—would shrink to dreams about the boy. She herself would be squeezed out of them. Only Teddie, now—Teddie's future. Teddie, the only one of them now who might have a future. Henry, she knew, had gone forever.

Damn him! He'd pushed the table away from the door to get out, so anybody could have come barging in after he'd left—like that stranger.

She pushed the table back where it belonged. The knife lay on the table where she had left it. She picked it up slowly, gripping it tightly as she had the night before, her jaw clenched tight. Then she relaxed and put it away in the kitchen.

The Intruder

She'd get the lock fixed right away, and she'd get a bolt they could slide shut at night for extra protection.



But she had been unfair about Henry. He had known, when he left, that the apartment would be unprotected. So he sat down on the top step just outside the door to guard it till Ruth awoke. He would die before he'd let anyone get past him. He sat there through the long night.

He would get a job somehow. He would not come back till he had a job. He would get a job in a factory—a good job—and he would not come back till he had his first pay in his hand. He would save his money so they could live in a better place. So Teddy could have toys and clothes and books—maybe even go to college. So Ruth could have new clothes, too, and an easier time of it. They would never be hungry, and they would always be together. Always together. Happy.

Her alarm jarred him out of his reverie. Stealthily, like an intruder, he tiptoed down the stairs, turned up the collar of his old coat, and went out into the freezing gray dawn.

LOVERS MEETING

SHE LAUGHED SOFTLY as she tied the hangman's knot. He would never dream that she could tie such a knot. She had learned how from a book in the public library—she had been too cautious to bring the book home. She had puzzled many hours over the drawings of the knot. Then she had come home and practiced.

She had kept the rope under the seat in her car. He never looked in her car. She sneaked it out to practice when he was away at work. Then she would return it stealthily to the car, trying to make it perfect. He looked everywhere in the house; she had no private places in the house safe from his brutal intrusions. Except the kitchen—but her sense of the fitness of things prevented her using the kitchen.

Slowly her laughter stopped—ever so slowly. Her gray eyes stared gravely into space. The grief spread gradually over her entire naked body as the remembrance came over her that Arthur had gone, and she sobbed.

Arthur! Arthur! she cried aloud through her sobbing. But he had gone forever.

Lovers Meeting

He had looked so handsome the day he left: taller than his father, his eyes flashing a proud anger. But so young. Hardly twenty-six.

He had talked of leaving before, many times, but she had never believed that he would. The idle threats of a child who will get over his hurt. Arthur's father—her husband!—had thought so, too. But then, she reflected, he had never understood Arthur.

She hid her face in her hands to shut out the vision of his punishing Arthur. So many times! Such a little boy! The brutal questionings—the accusations—the declarations of disbelief. She, upstairs, crying.

She had made a hair appointment for Wednesday and had four card games scheduled next week. That way no one would suspect.

They had eaten breakfast together as usual. He had asked if anything was wrong with her, but he always asked that. Still, he had been acting strange lately, asking questions about every little thing she did, the way he had six years ago, just before he had sent her away to that awful hospital with all those crazy people. But no, he had not suspected.

After he left for work, she had brought the rope in from her car. Then she had undressed. That had not been part of her plan, but the day was unseasonably hot, and it had seemed the natural thing to do. She had not planned that he would find her naked, but so be it.

She idly visualized him finding her young, firm body, taut with health and youth—forgetting, in her reverie, the wasting and softening effects of the thirty-two years that had passed since their marriage—forgetting the effects of sedentary living, of childbirth, sickness, and neglect.

She had wanted to name the boy Galahad, but she knew the child's father would scoff, her friends would snicker, and his—

Arthur's—future friends would jeer. So she had settled for Arthur.

The water pipes that passed near the ceiling at the foot of the basement stairs would hold her weight. She had tested them many times, letting her weight fall with a jerk. They held fast; they were strong enough. And because they were close to the stairs, he would see her as soon as he came into the house—at least he would see her legs or her feet as he entered the back door, coming in from the garage.

He would be bound to see her. Her feet, at least, when he came in from the door. You faced the cellar steps when you came in the back door, and the steps ran straight down. He could not help seeing her feet as soon as he came in.

Her naked legs and feet, hanging—the ceiling would conceal the rest. She could see him running all panicky down the stairs.

“Darling,” he would shout as he cut her down and then gently lowered her to the floor in his strong arms.

“Darling, why? Whatever it is, darling, I'll make it up.”

But he would come too late. She could see the amazement on his face. Yes, he would cut her down all right, but it would be too late, and he would never, never, never be able to change that. He would be too late, and she could see him crying over her cold, limp corpse.

“Darling,” he would sob, and then, in the crazy sing-song of grief, tears streaming down his face: “Why? Why? Why? Why?”

But he would know why, and he would be sorry, then. He would be sorry the rest of his life.

She wiped the tears from her face. Where had the time gone? He would be home soon, home from work. She had not yet completed the knot. She must work fast.

What had she done since morning? She had cleared the breakfast table. She had washed the breakfast dishes, cleaned the

kitchen, made the beds. Then she had brought in the rope and had undressed. And then what? Where had the time gone?

She had eaten no lunch. Some time around noon she had stretched out naked on her bed. Perhaps she had slept. Perhaps she had dreamed that Arthur had returned, that Arthur had never left, that Arthur was still her beautiful little boy who would never leave her. Her beautiful little boy who would live with her forever.

It had grown late. She must hurry or he would come home and find her still alive. She walked swiftly and silently through the kitchen to the basement, carrying the rope with her. With practiced hands she tied it to the pipes. The rickety old chair stood nearby, where she had kept it for years. She dragged it to the spot and climbed onto it. Standing on the chair, she could slip her head through the noose.

The gravel in the driveway crunched as his big car drove in. Now she must hurry or it would be too late. She could hear the car pass the basement window. She could hear it pull into the garage. He had turned off the motor. He would be in the house soon. She paused. Then she heard his footsteps on the gravel drive. Then she kicked the chair away.



He had left the office early. She had been acting odd lately, and he felt concerned. He had overheard her laughing quietly to herself at times when he was sure she thought he was not near.

But he had not driven straight home. He did not enjoy home; he did not like to be home. He had driven aimlessly through the city, simply wasting the time. So he had arrived home no earlier than usual.

The kitchen lights were on. That burned him up. It burned the hell out of him. She was always turning lights on in broad

daylight. He could bet she wasn't even in the kitchen, probably not even in the house. His anger carried him into the house in a hurry. He paid no attention to anything else. He noticed nothing but the needless waste of the burning lights. He rushed into the kitchen. Just as he thought, empty. She had turned on the lights she hadn't needed, and then left the room. "Hello!" he cried. "Anybody home?"

The silence did not surprise him. He seldom found her home when he arrived. Card games, he reflected bitterly, take time. Such arduous sport demands long, hard hours of its devotees. So: neglect the house, neglect the home—neglect husband, family, friends. For what? For an empty life of cards. A house of cards.

She should have filled her life with something more important. But what? She was not bright. She had never been bright. He could not say why he had married her, but it had not been for her brains. And the boy had inherited her mentality—perhaps even her tendency toward emotional instability.

He had never understood his own insane love for her.

The crushing disappointment of their wedding night had grown gradually into a bitterness that had later spread over his life, physical and spiritual, like a dull but ever-present ache. He had often thought of divorce. But when he had been away on business trips, he had come to realize that divorce would not help. During even so short a separation, the ache had persisted, complicated by a senseless but insistent longing to be back with her. And when she had been at the asylum—nowadays, he reminded himself, they call such places by more innocuous names—the doctor had kept him away only with difficulty. He had hardly been able to bear the separation.

He had tried, repeatedly, the other solutions. He had found, with other women, the intense pleasures he had expected to find in marriage. But at the very peak of his excitement—his arteries

and his brain throbbing with a senseless ecstasy—he felt the awareness that soon, his desires fulfilled, his mind and his soul dull with satiety, he would have one desire yet unfulfilled: the desire to return home—to her.

He wanted something. But what? Away from her, it seemed that he wanted her. With her, something else. Life had been a seeking, never a finding. It was a journey without direction or purpose. A journey without an end.

Yes, a journey without an end.

And the boy. It was too bad the way he left. Not his going—good for him to be on his own—but it was too bad the way the boy left.

He would get a drink and watch television till she returned. Whiskey or beer? The unseasonably hot weather suggested beer.

No beer in the refrigerator. Damn it to hell! Neglect the house, neglect the home. He slammed the refrigerator door. He could find whiskey, ice and water in the kitchen, but he was determined, now, on beer. She should keep some on ice. He had told her a thousand times to keep some on ice. He would tell her again, when she came home. And he would tell how he had to go down into the basement to get a bottle—after a miserable day at the office, trudge all the way down into the God damn basement to get a lousy bottle of beer. Damn it to hell!



She had stopped breathing, her heart had stopped beating, but she was still swinging slowly, like the big pendulum of a grandfather clock that had run down, as he started down the stairs.

THE MOST HACKNEYED LINE

“I LOVE YOU,” Frank said, looking intently into the eyes of his image in the mirror.

He gazed more longingly at the image. The image returned his gaze with equal longing.

Working himself into a passion, he repeated with greater vehemence, “I love you.”

It was a dumb line. He had told Walter a dozen times that it was a dumb line, but Walter had insisted.

“It’s the unexpected familiarity of the line that makes it effective,” Walter had explained.

“Unexpected familiarity, hell,” Frank had protested. “It’s trite. For God’s sake, Walter, it’s the most hackneyed line in the English language. It’s hopeless.”

Walter had smiled his infuriating smile. Frank sometimes wondered if success hadn’t gone to Walter’s head. His last play, *Things*, had been the surprise smash hit of the season, and everyone knew it—including Walter, naturally.

The Most Hackneyed Line

Frank remembered with embarrassment how he had belittled that title before their opening in New Haven.

“*Things!*” he had exclaimed. “Who do you think will come to a play called *Things?*”

And Walter had smiled his infuriating smile. And Walter had been right: so many people flocked to see to *Things* that it almost set an all-time record.

“But to walk onto a bare stage,” Frank had argued, “just the two of us. I say, ‘I love you’—and that’s the climax?”

“All you have to do, Frank, is say it as if it’s never been said before.”

Frank had stared at him with disbelief.

Walter became very serious. “Say it as if you’d just invented the phrase. That’s all.”

That’s all! Good God!

Frank had never realized how ugly his face in the mirror could look when he was out of sorts. He stared at the ugly face in the mirror and shouted, “I love you, you son of a bitch.”

That wasn’t bad. As a matter of fact, that wasn’t half bad.

He tried it again, saying only the “I love you,” and just thinking the, “you son of a bitch!”

His voice rang with emotion. Not the right emotion, but maybe he was getting closer.

Everyone had told him he was doing it just right, that it really brought the play to an exciting climax, but in his heart, Frank didn’t believe it.

Walter had praised him during rehearsals, but he didn’t feel within himself that he had it right. Even Julia had praised him. Julia played the part of Imogene Rideout, to whom the line was addressed, so she should know, but Frank couldn’t tell with Julia any more. After nineteen years together on the stage, their acting

styles blended perfectly. But after seventeen years of married life, well, their professional lives ran smoothly, but their private lives were far from smooth.

It was not that they were having trouble. Not really. They got along as well as any seventeen-years-married couple.

But life was easier when they suppressed their feelings and acted like a loving couple. Acting was so much more natural than real life. Because they were acting virtually all the time, Frank could never be sure what Julia was really thinking. So, even though Julia had praised him, Frank could not be quite sure what she meant.

Holy Christ! The stage would be absolutely empty for thirty seconds—an age to the people out front. Then they enter at the same time, he from stage right, she from stage left. They walk slowly, silently toward each other. They stop ten feet apart. He says, “I love you,” and that’s supposed to bring down the house.

It couldn’t be done.

Yes, they told him it was wonderful. It worked. But he didn’t believe it. And if he didn’t believe it, how could he make it work?

“I love you,” he told the mirror plaintively.

He saw the lips of the image move in perfect unison with his, but the image remained silent.

“I love you, Imogene.”

That was better. He could feel that it was better. He had urged Walter to add something to the line.

“What could I add that would not detract?”

“Something, Walter. Anything. Can’t I even speak her name?”

“You can *think* her name if you wish. But don’t speak it.”

He would think it. But for now, while he rehearsed it, he would say it aloud.

“I love you, Imogene.” And he said it loudly.

Then something unexpected happened. For some reason that he never understood, even though he often wondered about it afterwards, he said, very loudly, "I love you, Julia!"

That was it, by God! It felt perfectly right now.

He could see her when he said it. Not Imogene Rideout, but Julia—Julia as both the gorgeous young girl he had married and the middle-aged woman with whom he was married. But now her eyes sparkled, no longer accusing, and her laughter dispelled the sullen silence he had come to expect. He saw the bubbling enthusiasm she, no they, had once shared for their life together.

"I love you, Julia!" Even louder and stronger than before.

What a difference that made! He could not speak it, of course, but he could think it. He could think *Julia*.

He closed his eyes to take a better look at her. He was surprised by what he saw.

When he looked into the mirror, he did not see himself: he saw Julia looking out into the golden future of their perfect marriage. He saw her eagerly looking forward to a life of supreme happiness. He saw hope.

His passion was genuine, now. He could feel it through his entire body. He spoke more loudly, more firmly than before.

"I love you, Julia!"



Julia had finished dressing forty minutes early, as she always did. She dismissed her dresser, turned the lights out, and sat back in the rocking chair to float gently into her part. The commonplace world of everyday disappeared, and the world of Imogene Rideout gradually took shape around her.

She thought about Imogene's story and about her life. She

did not think of her lines. She knew her lines. She thought only of Imogene and her world. She thought about the things that Imogene did in the play and the things that Imogene did outside the play—things never mentioned in the play. She saw the world of the play through Imogene's eyes. Her imagination had created an entire life for Imogene, and she reflected, now, on Imogene's childhood, her adolescence—things Walter had never dreamed of when he had written the play.

It was easy to leave the world of her everyday life and enter the world of Imogene's life. Everyday life had become insipid, vapid, almost distasteful. It wasn't that they had trouble. It was just that they had formed a habit of living together, and the only thing they seemed to have in common was that habit. They seldom talked because they had nothing to say to one another.

Their best moments were when they were working on a new play together. Then they talked a great deal. It was all shop talk, but at least it was talk that they were excited about. They worked well together, and they enjoyed that. But after the rehearsals they lapsed into silence once more. It would be worse now that the play was opening. There would still be work to do, but not like before. They would read the reviews, now, and make caustic remarks, and then fall into a silence more deadly than ever.

Imogene's world was new. Julia enjoyed creating her world. She enjoyed taking the hints that Walter had put into the play and developing them into a full-blown life. Perhaps that was what made her so successful: she lived the lives of her characters more fully than the playwright himself had imagined them. It gave her an escape. Escape? She tried to avoid the thought that she lived the lives of her characters more fully than she lived her own. But she knew that becoming the center of a make-believe world—becoming Imogene Rideout or any other make-believe person—gave her the greatest happiness in her otherwise barren life.

Her alarm was very soft and musical. Just loud enough to remind her that she must leave the room if she was to follow her regular custom of being in the wings before they would call her.

Frank's door was closed as it always was. He did not come on till the first scene was almost over. He would rush up at the last moment, as he always did. She paused at the door. He was practicing something. Julia could never understand how he could practice right up to the last minute, but he always did. It always struck her funny.

Frank, the great Frank Turner, behaved like a novice, fussing and fuming over some piece of business or some line that he thought he had not mastered. Then, on stage, he would turn out a performance that would knock 'em dead.

It was just part of his ritual. A superstitious ritual, like hers—always leaving her dressing room before she was called. But he took it so seriously! The perfectionist in him would not let him accept assurances of his colleagues that he had already mastered his part. It *was* funny.

Laughing to herself, she put her ear against the door.

"I love you, Julia!" she heard him exclaim.

The laugh within her died, and she stood stock-still, listening. Once again she heard, more firmly, more passionately than before, "I love you, Julia!"

For a moment, only for a moment, Imogene's world dissolved, and she was Julia Lamond—the young, vivacious Julia Lamond, head-over-heals in love with romantic young Frank Turner who had so ardently pursued her. Drifting confusedly between the world of Julia Lamond and world of Imogene Rideout, she turned slowly to resume her walk.

He was rehearsing his line—that odd, climactic line that had given him so much anxiety. She knew that. She knew he had been

troubled by that line, and she knew, now, that he had found a device to bring it to a pitch that satisfied him.

He was only rehearsing, of course. He was simply using her name as a device. But it was *her* name that brought the line to life.



Walter looked frantic. His face was always white at an opening, and he always had a phony smile plastered on his white face, believing that he was encouraging the actors.

They stood looking at each other for some time. Walter fidgeted, but Julia, returning to the world of Imogene Rideout, forgot he was there till he said, "Where's Frank?" in a hoarse, desperate whisper.

"Don't worry about Frank, Walter. You know he always rehearses till the last minute on opening night."

The stage manager hurried up to say, "You're on, Miss Lamond."

Before she went on, she put her hand on Walter's shoulder and said, "Don't worry, Walter. Everything'll be fine."

TWENTY-FIVE CENTS TO DETROIT

I ALMOST MISSED THE BUS. It was so blizzardy that I had stayed in the officers' club as long as I could, peering out the frost-covered window. The snow made it hard to see the bus till it was close; then suddenly the headlights lit up the swirling snow in a brilliant glare.

There was no one outside as the bus approached, so the driver merely slowed down. I waved and ran in front of the bus just far enough to make him stop. It was a dumb thing to do, but I didn't want to wait an hour for the next one.

"What the hell you think you're doing?" the driver growled when I got on. "It ain't easy to see on a night like this."

"Sorry," I said, although I wasn't. I put my dime in the fare box and listened to the two rings that announced the amount I had paid. Tempers had worn thin during the three years of war shortages since Pearl Harbor, so I paid no attention to the driver and took a seat halfway back.

When we stopped at the gate, an MP made a perfunctory check of the bus; then five soldiers got on. There was enough

light from the MP's barrier for me to identify the last two as Canadian.

The fare box intrigued me; I had never seen one like it. It took nickels, dimes, and quarters, and it rang a bell once for every five cents' worth of fare. Each of the soldiers put in 25 cents—the fare to Detroit—and the bell rang five times for each of them.

Twenty-five cents was a lot of money in those days. I'd been in quite a few restaurants in Detroit where you could get a complete breakfast—and a good one, too—for 25 cents.

I had to change buses at Michigan Avenue to go to Wayne, and since that put me on a different bus line, it meant a second fare. But it cost me only a dime to ride to Michigan, so I had gotten only two rings from the fare box.

When we stopped at the first traffic light, the driver opened the door to let in a blast of freezing wind and a fat, middle-aged woman. She was panting as though she had run for the bus. Nothing strange about that; if she had missed it, she would have had an hour's wait in the storm for the next one. She put her fare into the box, and it rang five times.

When she finally caught her breath, she said, "Driver, do you know that you've only got one light on?"

The driver pounded the dashboard with his fist, and I could see a brightening of the snow blowing across the windshield.

"Got 'em both on now," he returned, and that was all the thanks she got.

About a mile farther down the road, we came to the housing project that marks the halfway point between the air base and Michigan Avenue. In the daytime, you could see a neat group of buildings erected since the beginning of the war for housing the blacks who worked in the many factories in the vicinity, but through the storm only rows of blurry shadows were visible.

The bus slowed down, and I wondered why until I made

out the glow of two cigarettes ahead of us in the black, snowy night. When the door opened, I could see two people taking a last puff before getting on. They were both big people and black, but I wasn't really paying any attention to them as they walked by me to take seats at the rear. I was caught up in wondering if I would have noticed them had I been the driver, and wondering how he could tell they wanted the bus, since they had not been any where near a bus stop. Of course, on such a stormy night it was probably safe to assume that anyone standing by the road would be there only to catch the bus.

Usually when people get on a bus they are thrown off their feet by the sudden starting impulse, but this time the driver waited patiently until the two of them walked to the rear and sat down in the very last seat. Then, instead of setting the bus in motion, he turned halfway around in his seat and stared straight ahead of him, as though looking out the glass panels of the door instead of the windshield.

When he spoke, his voice was low, but loud enough for everyone to hear above the wind, and he had an air of forced patience.

"Where are you going?"

"Detroit," the woman answered.

"You only paid one fare."

"What's the fare?" she asked.

"Twenty-five cents to Detroit. Two bits apiece."

"I put half a dollar in the box," she said.

"I'm sorry, but you didn't. You only put in a quarter." His voice had become cold and hard, as though it took great strength to suppress his outrage.

"Why, I didn't," the woman protested. "I put in half a dollar."

"I'm very sorry, but you couldn't have put in a half-dollar. This fare box don't take nothing bigger than quarters."

“But I put in two quarters.”

“I’m *very* sorry, but you’ll either have to get off the bus or put in another quarter. The bell only rang five times.”

There was a note of triumph in his voice as he presented the evidence of the bell. He continued to sit in his peculiar position, making no sign that the bus would ever move again.

After some unintelligible whispering in the rear, the man rose and slowly walked forward. Everyone turned to watch him in the eerie light that the snow reflected into the bus. Our heads turned as he walked past us. We all watched as he stood at the fare box, groping in his pocket for the coin that would set the bus in motion.

The two Canadian soldiers were sitting directly opposite me. “I saw her put two quarters in,” one of them said in a voice just loud enough for everyone to hear. For a moment there was silence, then his companion said, “So did I.”

“Well,” the driver said, obviously to the soldiers, although he was now looking up at the man, “the bell only rang five times. I’m sorry.”

The man sorted the change he had taken out of his pocket, found a quarter, and put the rest back. Then he looked into the rear of the bus. “Honest,” he said, “she paid.”

“Look, I ain’t gonna move this bus till you put a quarter in that box.”

Very slowly, very deliberately, the man reached for the fare box, standing aside so that everyone could see—and everyone was watching. We saw him drop the quarter into the slot, and we waited for the five rings. There was no sound.

“Maybe the bell don’t always work,” the woman suggested, weakly, from the darkness behind us.

The driver hit the fare box with his hand. Still no bell.

“The bell don’t work,” the woman asserted more boldly.

The driver muttered something and hit the fare box again. When he got no response, he hit it again and again, muttering more violently.

The first Canadian soldier spoke up more loudly than before. “I saw her put two quarters in the box.”

The driver shook the fare box as hard as he could. Then, finally, he gave up. He took five nickels from his coin changer and handed them to the man in silence. Then he jammed the gearshift lever into first and started with a jerk that threw the man back into the aisle. The man caught the backs of two seats to keep from falling, then walked slowly to the rear. During the rest of the trip, the couple talked together in whispers just loud enough to hear but not loud enough to understand.

The driver did not speak again, but he continued to hit the fare box from time to time, and sometimes he shook it. He found a strip of metal that he pushed down the slot, but nothing happened.

When I got off at Michigan Avenue, I noticed that he was about 30 feet short of the regular stop. The freezing wind made me gasp, and I turned my coat collar up. As I stepped into the thick slush thrown up by the traffic, the door closed quickly behind me, and the bus started off at once.

A young black woman was standing at the bus stop in the flurry of snow beneath the street light. She waved at the bus as it started up, and shouted, as it drove past her. She turned and ran after it, as though she assumed that when it slowed down for the intersection, it was slowing down for her. But the bus barely paused before turning right, and in a moment, even the tail light disappeared in a blur of snow.

I had to walk past her and cross Michigan Avenue to get my

RALPH MENDELSON

bus to Wayne. She was standing there, gazing after the bus, her arms hanging lifelessly, her mouth open in amazement. As I walked by, she quickly collected herself

“How come he stopped so far back?”

“I don’t know,” I said. The driving snow gave me an excuse to keep my head down and my eyes averted. “Maybe he didn’t see you.”

FOR SALE CHEAP

FREEZING WIND BLEW a gust of snow right into the dingy office when Carl opened the door. Carl recognized Wanda's father at once.

"Why, hello, Mr. Dombrowski! Come on in." Carl did not even try to hide his astonishment. "Wanda went home hours ago."

Carl closed the door against the storm as soon as Mr. Dombrowski had moved in far enough to let the door clear him.

"I let everybody go at three today because of the storm." Then, fearful of the old man's reaction, Carl added, "But they'll all get paid for a full day."

When he got no reaction at all, Carl went on. "You know, I almost didn't even go to the door. Nobody ever comes around here this late. I don't think anybody's ever come around here this late. Here, have a seat."

Carl motioned toward the near side of the double desk and started to the other side himself. Mr. Dombrowski took a few steps forward but then stood still.

"I let everybody in the factory go home at three, so I

thought Wanda should go home, too.” He smiled. “Only the boss works late.”

It would have made Carl feel better if the old man said something. With a crazy like Mr. Dombrowski, anything could happen. Nevertheless, he almost laughed. Seeing Mr. Dombrowski reminded him of the car, because Wanda had told him that her father had sold it about three weeks before, and that was the most recent news Carl had heard about him.

Carl had first noticed the car about two months after the attempted robbery that Mr. Dombrowski had thwarted. Mike, Mr. Dombrowski’s boss, let the old man park the car at the side of the lot, behind the air pump. In the windshield, facing the street, Mr. Dombrowski had put a sign:

**Like New
\$1000.00**

Wanda had told Carl about the beer salesman. He wanted the car for his son. His son worked in the stockroom at Ace Electric, and the beer salesman wanted to buy the car for him. He had asked Mr. Dombrowski about the car when it was first up for sale.

“What do you *really* want for it?”

Carl could imagine the cold blue eyes staring at the fat, gregarious beer salesman. He could hear the cold tone of the old man’s voice. “One thousand bucks.”

He had to create the beer salesman’s appearance and voice in his imagination. Carl had never seen him. “It ain’t worth a nickel over two-fifty.”

But he knew Mr. Dombrowski’s voice, void of any emotion. “One thousand bucks. Take it or leave it.”

The beer salesman stopped at the gas station three times

For Sale Cheap

every week, and each time he asked about the car, but the old man would not take a nickel less than \$1,000.00, and the salesman would not offer a nickel more than \$250.00.

Carl looked at the car every time he drove in for gas.

**Like New
\$1000.00**

Mr. Dombrowski kept it polished, and he drove it around every weekend to keep up the battery and to be sure it was in good shape. Late in the fall, just before Thanksgiving, after the car had been standing in the yard for about six months, Carl noticed that the old sign was gone from the windshield. A new one had taken its place.

**4 Sale
Cheap**

The new sign did not sound like Mr. Dombrowski. Carl asked Wanda about it.

“That beer salesman told him to do it. Psychology, he called it. He said, you put the price on the car so that’s the first thing people see, it makes them think how much money that is. Maybe they’ll pay a thousand bucks after they see the car, but when you show ’em the price first, it scares ’em away.”

“Well,” Carl mused, “maybe he’s right.”

Wanda looked skeptical. “He said, make the car sound cheap, and people will look at it. They’ll think they’re going to get a bargain.”

“Maybe he’s got the right psychology at that.”

“Psychology my Aunt Fanny!”

“You don’t think so?”

“The only psychology is what he’s using on Dad. He told Dad he’s trying to help him sell the car. But you watch: he’ll get

the car for his boy one of these days. Dad doesn't think so, but you just watch."

The new sign did not reflect a change in Mr. Dombrowski's position. He refused any offer a nickel below \$1,000.00. He got a few offers, but they were always below \$1,000.00.

He would shake his head. "One thousand bucks. Take it or leave it."

Three times a week he would get an offer from the beer salesman. Two hundred and fifty bucks. Not a nickel more.

Then, about three weeks before the old man's unexpected visit, Carl noticed that the car was gone. He asked Wanda what had happened.

"The beer salesman got it."

"He paid a thousand bucks?"

"He paid two hundred and fifty."

"How come?"

"I don't know." Wanda tried to drop the conversation, but Carl persisted, so she said, "Dad thinks it was just a tough break. He chased around to find the people who had offered him more, but the ones he found had already bought something else."

"That's too bad."

"Too bad," Wanda repeated in a bitter tone. "I told him that salesman would outtalk him. Butter him up. Soft soap. But Dad said no. It was just tough luck. The salesman tried to help him. Gave him good advice, like about that sign. What he really did was get Dad so riled up with his two-fifty offer that Dad stuck to his thousand dollar price till he'd chased everybody away and nobody was interested but that dirty cheat."

The beer salesman's victory had not surprised Carl, because he had been studying Mr. Dombrowski, and he thought he had him pretty well doped out.

Carl had first met Mr. Dombrowski almost eight years

before. Sometimes Carl would take Wanda home after work, and sometimes her father would be there. Wanda would always introduce them. She seemed to assume that no one who ran a factory would remember her father.

Carl had cultivated Mr. Dombrowski, especially after he had his picture in the papers for gunning down the two bandits who tried to hold up the gas station. At first Carl had thought he didn't look like he had it in him, but as he saw more of him, Carl understood him better. He was short and stocky. His hands looked powerful. But it was mostly in his eyes. It was also, Carl thought, because he didn't shave very often, and he never wore a hat, even working the pumps in the dead of winter. The old man's hair was thick and iron gray, and his face was weather-beaten from working outside every day. But it was mostly the pale blue eyes that seemed to look right through you to something in the distance beyond.

When Carl had come to know Mr. Dombrowski better, he had a strange feeling about that act of heroism.

It wasn't anything Mr. Dombrowski ever said or did or even hinted at, because Carl never talked to him about it. It was something Carl felt about him, mixed up with something Carl felt about himself.

For Carl had been a hero once, too, slogging through the mud of Viet Nam. He had been decorated for leading his battle-weary platoon against a clump of grass huts they called a village. Crazy from hunger and fatigue, they had shot down everyone in sight. Carl had been able to convince his superiors that the pile of half-starved corpses had been a band of well-trained, well-armed guerrillas. When someone asked where the arms were, Carl suggested that the village must have been raided by other guerillas after they left.

The old man could have chased away the bandits who tried

to hold up the gas station without killing them. Scaring them or even wounding them, maybe, but not three slugs in each man.



Carl walked around to his side of the old double desk that filled a large part of the small office. He used the side of the desk opposite his own for visitors. The old man still stood three steps in from the door, just far enough to allow Carl to walk around him.

Mr. Dombrowski stamped the snow off his shoes and brushed it off his shoulders and off his coat.

“Oh, don’t bother with that,” Carl said. “We have snow tracked in here all day.”

The old man said nothing, so Carl went on, “It’s so dark, I was afraid to answer the door. It’s—my gosh!” He looked at his watch, and he carefully avoided his usual interjections because he knew of the old man’s narrow, religious hatred of blasphemy, even the meaningless blasphemy of common speech. “My gosh, it’s six o’clock already. Take off your coat, Mr. Dombrowski and sit down.”

Carl turned to sit down, and in turning he faced the old man and saw that the old man held a pistol in his hand and was pointing at him.

“What . . . ? What . . . ?” Carl slowly raised his hands and stretched them wide open to show how defenseless he was. “What do you want?” he was finally able to say.

The old man’s face showed no more emotion than when he was filling a gas tank. “You ruined my girl.”

“I what?”

“You ruined—”

“You can’t mean . . .” Carl shook his head. “You’re not serious . . .”

The old man stretched his arm, bringing the pistol closer to Carl. Carl thought he saw the fingers tighten their grip. He thought he heard the old man repeat, “You ruined—”

“I did not! I never touched her!” Carl was screaming. He could not stop himself from screaming. “I never touched her! I—I’ve been nice to her, sure. We get along fine. But it’s just work. It’s just part of the job. I like Wanda ’cause she does a good job, and she works hard, and she’s a nice girl. But that’s all. My God! I’m a married man! I’ve got kids! I’ve got responsibilities! Running this plant. I can’t get mixed up with girls. I—I never touched her!”

He paused. Mr. Dombrowski stood motionless and silent. Carl kept his hands level with his shoulders, but he gesticulated as his excitement increased.

“You’ve *got* to believe me!” Then he sounded angry: “Sure, I’m nice to the people who work for me. I’m good to the men in the plant, and I’m good to the people in the office. When we had two girls here last year, I was just as nice to that Jean as I ever was to Wanda. Are you going to shoot me for that? Because I treat people decent? Because I try to work with people like friends instead of like a slave driver? Can’t you understand that, for God’s sake? Just because I’m decent—try to be a decent boss and treat her like a human being instead of a wage slave! So you’re going to shoot me for that!”

Carl stepped back, exhausted.

“She told me. It was you.”

“She *told* you!” Carl gasped. “How could she—?” He laughed a mirthless, desperate laugh.

“She told me.” He held the pistol forward a few inches.

Carl shook his head. “I don’t get it. I just don’t get it. Unless

some guy got her in trouble, and she's covering up for him. That's it. She got in trouble, and she doesn't want you to know who the man is."

Mr. Dombrowski's eyes narrowed slightly. Carl tried to read his mind as he went on. "I don't know why she'd pick on me. God knows I never did her any harm at all. But she must be in love with the guy—really in love. So she doesn't want you to know. She's afraid you'd kill him, and she'll do anything to save him. Even framing me. She's even willing to let me be killed to save her man.

Mr. Dombrowski was shaking his head. "She didn't get in trouble. She didn't get in trouble."

"She didn't?"

As he saw that Carl understood him, his face clouded over, and for the first time, he looked angry. "Worse than that. Them things you have so you don't get nobody in trouble. You do what you want, but you don't get nobody in trouble. I know." He nodded his head, now. Angrily nodded his head. "She told me about them things. In the safe, she said. With the whiskey."

"In the safe!" Carl gasped. "With the whiskey!"

"In there." He nodded toward the safe. "I know."

The old man squinted down the sights of the pistol, but he still hesitated. He seemed to expect Carl to confess, or to collapse from guilt, and he would gun him down as he sank, overcome by his tortured conscience.

Carl's eyes bulged, and he gasped for breath as though he were being strangled. His voice had dropped to a whisper, but he looked the old man straight in the eye. "There's nothing in the safe." He reached toward Mr. Dombrowski with both hands, as though imploring him. He shook his head again, slowly this time. "There's nothing in the safe. No whiskey. Nothing else,

either.” He motioned toward the safe. “There it is. Take a look yourself. It’s wide open. Go ahead. Take a look yourself.”

Mr. Dombrowski turned, looked at the open safe, and frowned, but he did not start toward it. When he turned back to Carl, he seemed to forget to sight the pistol, which still pointed at Carl, but more tentatively than before. Instead, he squinted suspiciously at Carl.

Carl’s voice had returned. “Go ahead,” he urged. “I’m not trying to trick you. You can keep me covered.”

Still the old man hesitated.

“All right,” Carl shouted, “if you want me to, I’ll throw everything out onto the floor, so you can keep me covered. You can stay right there, and I’ll show you everything in the safe. I’ll throw it right out there on the floor. I’ll empty it. You’ll be able to see there’s nothing left in it.”

Carl thought he saw the old man’s jaw working, forming unspoken words. The old man’s frown deepened.

“For Christ’s sake, Dombrowski,” Carl thundered, “what the hell do you want? Are you *afraid* to see what’s in there? Are you afraid to find out what *isn’t* there?”

The old man seemed frozen. Even his frown seemed frozen.

Despair softened Carl’s voice. “Damn it, Mr. Dombrowski, there it is. See for yourself. She’s trying to cover up for somebody else, but the proof’s right there. She doesn’t want you to know who it is, but you can see for yourself it isn’t me. See for yourself what’s true and what isn’t true.”

Carl saw Mr. Dombrowski slowly drop his gaze until he seemed to be studying the desk. His face seemed troubled. The arm with the pistol drooped.

“I’ll show you anything you want to see. I’ll show you anything in the safe or anyplace else. I’ll empty it out for you,

and you can see for yourself. Or you can take a look in the safe yourself. I don't care. All I want is to show you the truth. That's what you want, isn't it?" When he got no response, Carl shouted, "You want to know the truth, don't you?"

The old man seemed to recoil under the impact of Carl's challenge.

"I don't know what Wanda did, or what you found out, or what she told you, Mr. Dombrowski, but I never touched her, believe me. I've been nice to her, and when she's worked late, I've taken her home because this isn't such a good neighborhood, and I thought it was the right thing to do. But if she's been running around with somebody, believe me, I'm not the guy. And if she said it was me, she's covering up for somebody else. Take a look in the safe, Mr. Dombrowski. Go ahead, take a look and see if I'm telling the truth."

Carl paused for breath. He watched the old man sink down in the chair across the desk.

"So what good would it do to shoot me? You'd go to jail, and Wanda and her boy friend would be free to do whatever they wanted."

Mr. Dombrowski held his two hands out before him, resting his elbows on the desk as though he needed to support himself even though he was sitting down. The pistol still pointed at Carl, but he held it loosely.

"That would help a lot, wouldn't it, Mr. Dombrowski. I'd be dead, and you'd be in jail, and that guy, whoever he is, would be free to lay her every night. How'd you like that? How are you going to feel when you're in jail, and you know he's laying her every night? Hell, he could move right into your house and live with her."

The old man slumped forward slowly, resting his head, at

last, on his outstretched arms. But the pistol, held very loosely now, still pointed across the desk.

“Right into your own house, that you worked so hard to buy. Where you lived with Mrs. Dombrowski, God rest her soul. That would be great to think about while you’re rotting in jail for the rest of your life, wouldn’t it! That he’s in your house, in your own bed, with Wanda!”

Carl saw the man’s head move as if he were saying something. He strained to hear. Very feebly, the old man said, “She’s dead.”

Carl sank back into his chair.

The old man nodded his head.

“Wanda’s dead?”

The old man continued to nod his head, and Carl found himself turning to look at Wanda’s desk. Then he rose and slowly walked to the other side of the desk. He stood alongside the old man, who resumed nodding his head even before Carl asked the question.

“You mean, you . . . ?”

Carl rested his hand on the slumped shoulder before him. He reached down and gently removed the pistol from the nerveless hands on the desk. The old man was muttering in a foreign language which Carl took to be Polish.

“Don’t you think we should phone the police?”

The old man continued to nod his head.

“We’d better phone the police,” Carl said.

They sat across from each other, the one muttering in his foreign tongue, the other silent but watchful, fidgeting with the pencils on his desk. When the police arrived, Mr. Dombrowski blurted out his painful story so briefly and bluntly that even the officers seemed surprised.

“You can always reach me, either here or at home,” Carl repeated to the policemen as they took the old man away. He closed the door behind them. Relieved to close out the horror of the last half hour, he turned and rested his body against the door.

“My God!” he said aloud, shaking his head in disbelief. “Wanda!”

After a few minutes, he walked slowly to Wanda’s desk and sat down on Wanda’s chair. He had often sat there in the past. He would sit there to type a memo when she got up to file her papers, and the seat would be warm. He would feel the warmth of Wanda’s body in the seat. Now the seat felt cold, and he imagined that it was the coldness of poor Wanda’s corpse that he felt. It would always be cold now.

He sat there a long time before he suddenly reached down to the bottom drawer of Wanda’s desk and opened it. Two glasses rested rim down on a clean piece of Kleenex. He picked one up and put it on the desk. He took the whiskey out of the safe and poured what he judged to be a stiff jigger, then added water from the water cooler. He sipped the drink at his own desk, but, as he did, and as he refilled the glass so many times that he forgot the count. He stared at poor Wanda’s desk.

Suddenly he picked up the phone, listened obediently for the dial tone, and dialed.

As he counted the rings, waiting for someone to answer, he began to doodle on the scratch pad.

“Hello.”

“Hi, Alice.”

“Oh, hi.”

“Look, sweetie, I’m gonna be a little late.”

“Surprise. It’s after seven now.”

“Look, sweetie, I can explain everything. I have a humdinger of an alibi this time. A real humdinger.”

“Carl, when you’re fried, you always think you’re clever.”

“O.K., sweetie. O.K. But just you see. I’ll tell you what. You just turn on the TV and pick up the news. Then you’ll see what a real humdinger it is. The seven o’clock news.”

“It’s after seven already.”

“O.K., the eight o’clock news. The nine o’clock news. Whatever. Just turn on the news. They ought to have it by now. It’s—believe me, sweetie—it’s a real humdinger.”

“Well, congratulations, dear. So now you’re on TV!”

“Look, sweetie, if the kids are still up—”

“Forget it!”

“But look, sweetie, I’m only trying to be a good father.” He heard the click when she hung up, but his momentum kept him going. “You keep telling me,” he slowed down, “I should . . .”

After he finally put the phone down, he studied his doodle on the scratch pad. Not bad. Carl had always enjoyed lettering, and he could letter beautifully. He had earned more than half of his college expenses working for a sign painter, and he was proud of his talent. He put the finishing touches on his doodle, elaborating the fine old English black letter.

4 Sale Cheap

He sat for some time, rapt in admiration of his work. Perhaps he had missed his calling. Perhaps he should forget about making money. Throw it all over. A man with his ability in lettering could always find a job.

When he stood up, he realized that he had either drunk too much, or he had drunk it too fast, or perhaps both. He rinsed the glass at the water cooler. He wiped it with Kleenex from the top drawer of Wanda’s desk. He took a second piece to spread

under the clean glass, but when he went to put the new Kleenex in the drawer, he found himself faced with the second glass still standing on the old Kleenex. He stared at the glass troubled and perplexed. Finally he picked up the unused glass and looked at it closely.

“Damn!” he exclaimed, and threw the glass into the waste basket, smashing it. He crumpled the old Kleenex and threw that in, too.

He spread the new Kleenex, then rested the glass on it, rim down, and closed the drawer. He closed and locked the safe. With much effort, he put on his overshoes, his heavy overcoat, his gloves, and his muffler. Then he turned to see if he had forgotten anything.

He had. Earlier in the day, he had used the calculator on the extra desk in the corner, and he had left the plastic dust cover lying beside it. He walked slowly back to the desk, took off his gloves, and carefully put the cover over the machine.

Dust can be harmful to office machines.

MIMI'S LOVER

Alice was laughing so hard she felt as though she were falling into the house, although she knew she was forcing the laugh to some extent. Paul had not finished reading the paper. He was probably lingering over the sports section.

"I've got a juicy bit this time," she said, interrupting his reading.

"Yeah?" He put the paper down.

"You think I'm naive. Well, you ain't heard nothing yet. Nobody could be naiver."

Paul just sat and waited for her to go on.

"I went over to Mimi's with the trays I'd promised—you *do* remember her party tomorrow night?"

Paul frowned. "Of course."

"I suppose you do. You always forget when we're going out, but after all, I just mentioned it when I left."

"Yeah, I remember," Paul said casually, but Alice noticed with amusement that her oh-so-worldly husband blushed, and she

thought she detected some confusion under his apparent nonchalance.

“Well,” she continued, “I don’t know what in the world made me do it, but when I got there, instead of going right up to the door, I noticed a light in the window, so I went over to knock. You know: like a joke. What a joke! Well, I went through the bushes to the window, and I saw Mimi and Freddie sitting on the sofa—of all things—kissing! They had the TV on, but they weren’t watching.”

Paul frowned again, as though he had some difficulty understanding the story.

“It just tickled me to see them,” Alice went on: “a married couple making love on the sofa, and all that sort of thing. I could see Mimi pretty well, but Freddie had his back turned. But anyway, I thought I recognized them, so I knocked. Well, just as I knocked—you know, I had my hand in motion so I couldn’t—I just *couldn’t* stop it—well, I suddenly realized it wasn’t Freddie.”

“Huh!”

“It wasn’t Freddie. It was somebody else.”

“My God!” Paul exclaimed with a force that surprised Alice. For all his sophistication he seemed dumbfounded. “Who was it?”

“I don’t know. He looked familiar, and Mimi introduced me to him when I went in, but I was so confused I didn’t get his name—or his wife’s, either.”

“His wife! Was his wife there?”

Alice felt guilty gloating over her discovery about their best friends, but she could not resist shocking Paul—unshockable Paul, who was so proud of knowing the ways of the world.

“Well, let me tell it the way it happened,” Alice said, pretending to be calm so that she could enjoy her triumph for

the moment. "I knocked on the window, and you should have seen them jump."

"What—what were they—I mean, what were they *actually* doing?" Paul was blushing again.

Alice shrugged. "They were just kissing. And that sort of thing."

"What sort of thing?" Paul demanded.

"Don't get so shook up. They were—well, I'm not sure where his hands were."

"But that's important!"

"I didn't notice."

"You didn't notice!"

"I thought it was Freddie. When I realized it was somebody else, it was too late. I'd already knocked. They jumped apart."

"My God!"

Alice had no idea Paul would take it so hard. Perhaps she hadn't realized what their friendship with Mimi and Freddie meant to him.

"Well, anyway," Alice continued, "they jumped apart when I knocked. Then I went to the door—what else could I do?—and they let me in. They looked so innocent—maybe too innocent—but I was so nervous I was afraid I'd drop the trays, and I didn't get the man's name."

"So you don't know who he was?"

"No. They both asked why I hadn't gone right to the door, and they asked with that air of innocence as though they were just trying to make things easier for me. And then they invited me in to watch TV, and of course I went, but I wasn't very comfortable."

"I should think not."

"We carried on a silly conversation until Freddie arrived."

He'd been out gathering up some things for the party with this man's wife, and I was introduced to her, but I didn't get her name either. I left as soon as I could."

Paul was actually pale, and Alice was glad that he was. He had always been so cynical before whenever something like this had happened, Paul had always shrugged and asked what else anyone could expect: that's the way people are. But Mimi and Freddie were such good friends—Alice felt better knowing that Paul did care enough to be upset.

"I'm so nervous about going to that party," Alice said. "I don't know how I can face them—and that other couple will be there, of course."

"They will?"

"Yes. Isn't that awful!"

The weather turned cold, so that most of the guests wore coats. When Alice and Paul arrived, Mimi directed them upstairs to put their coats on the beds. "Women in the master bedroom, Alice. Paul, you turn right and put yours in the guest room." She seemed perfectly calm; Alice looked in vain for a sign of guilt.

Elaborately carved, heavy wooden scrollwork separated the stairway from the milling crowd in the big hall below. How like Mimi, Alice thought: the big old mansion, really beyond Freddie's means, decorated with the extravagance of a bygone era. Alice had seen it a hundred times, and the same thought occurred to her each time. She examined the carving closely. The elderly couple who had built the house fifty years ago had told Mimi that they had paid more for that hand-carved screen along the staircase than Freddie and Mimi had paid for the entire house.

Near the top of the stairs, still studying the carving, she happened to glance through an opening and was astonished to see the man she had met the night before. Mimi had set up a folding screen in front of the door to the kitchen. There was just

enough room behind the screen for two people. Mimi was there, turned away from Alice. The man was facing Mimi, so that Alice could see his face. He could not see her—the elaborate design pierced with only small openings made it impossible to see anything on the stairway—but Alice instinctively drew back. Nevertheless, she continued to watch him.

“But you’ve *got* to!” the man said. Alice was amazed that she could hear him so clearly above the hubub.

“Don’t be an ass,” Mimi replied. She opened the kitchen door and started through it. She turned back to him; now Alice could see her face clearly. Mimi looked disdainful. “I mean it, don’t be an ass.”

The man stepped out from the screen into the crowd, and Alice proceeded up the stairs. She wanted to tell Paul, but a man whom she did not know came out of the guest room where Paul was putting down his coat, so she smiled at him and turned toward the master bedroom.

Alice had been in Mimi’s room before, but it had been a long time, and the room had been changed quite a bit. She looked around casually as she put her coat down. Then she saw the picture and stood thunderstruck.

She ran to the guest room. Paul was just coming out, and no one else was there. “You’ve got to see him. It’s the man.”

It was a photograph of the man sitting on a broad, sunny beach with his wife, and it stood on Mimi’s dresser.

“Can you imagine the nerve!” Alice whispered. “Right under Freddie’s nose!”

“Well—” Paul spluttered.

“And look,” Alice said rather sadly, pointing to another photograph on the opposite side of the dresser. “Our picture, too.”

The picture had been taken on their vacation four years before. Alice had almost forgotten it.

“Just the two pictures,” Alice noted. “I’m not sure I like the company we’re in.”

Paul made no comment. Alice returned to the man. “Do you know who he is?”

Paul studied the picture again and slowly shook head. “Uh-uh,” he grunted, but something about the way he answered struck Alice as unconvincing.

Another woman entered the room to put down her coat. She greeted them with, “Hi.”

“Hi,” Paul said. “Excuse me.”

Alice introduced herself after Paul left. She exchanged enough small talk to avoid being rude, then left the woman fussing with her hair and went downstairs to find Paul. On the way down, she glanced through the hole that overlooked the secluded place behind the screen in the hall below.

What she saw stopped her dead. Two people stood behind the screen, just as before, and the woman with her back to Alice was Mimi. Facing her, and facing Alice, too, stood Paul, his eyes blazing at Mimi, his face contorted by an anger that Alice had never seen in him, and as she watched, he burst out with “What about us?” He seemed to be throwing the words into Mimi’s face.

If Mimi answered, Alice did not hear.

Then Paul screamed, “Bitch!” at Mimi, and “You filthy bitch!”

Alice fell back into a sitting position on the steps, and she said, “Oh!” aloud. After a short time, she heard the woman walking toward the head of the stairs from the master bedroom. Alice stood up and walked solemnly down the stairs to join the party.

MISCELLANEOUS AIRCRAFT

TWO ROWS OF UNIFORMLY DRAB HUTS lined the side of the airfield. The first hut was a good five-minute walk from the hanger, through the kind of mud that was always found around new army construction. Nailed flat against the front wall of each hut was a small rectangular sign. Plain black letters on a background indicated the type of aircraft maintained by the crew inside.

Only the last hut on the left broke this monotony. A large sign, shaped like a shield, hung from a wooden arm that pointed to the airplanes on the spacious field. Men would search from one hut to another to locate the office they sought unless they happened to be looking for Miscellaneous Aircraft, for the clear, bright letters on the shield could be read from the far end of the line of huts.

It was apparent that great pains had been taken on this sign, in both its design, and its execution. Lt. Pekoc had even gone to Lena, the major's secretary, to be sure that he had spelled *miscellaneous* correctly. He was not good at spelling. In fact, an examination of his personnel record showed that the lieutenant

was not very well educated, having left school after the eighth grade. His paper route had helped support his foreign-born parents, and he had finally been forced to take a full time job at the grocery store because his father had been unable to find steady work. When he learned that the army needed men and would train him to be a mechanic, he had enlisted eagerly, leaving the grocery delivery truck at the age of twenty-six to work in the trade he had always wanted. His meager allotment provided his family with more money than he had been able to spare them in civilian life.

Maybe that is why he worked so hard and advanced so rapidly. The army needed officers desperately in 1942, and they commissioned some men, who showed ability and promise like Pekoc, directly from the ranks. With the commission came responsibility, to which he was painfully sensitive. When he was Assistant Engineering Officer in the Heavy Bomber Section, he had spent every night poring over Technical Orders, while his fellow engineering officers passed their time at the Officers Club bar. They let him work as hard as he pleased, but he was not admitted to their intimate circle. When they would all sit around in Major Blake's office at the end of the day, the talk would turn to college, or some other subject about which he knew nothing. He was the only one who was left out of the group; even Morrison, the rich kid who was making such a mess of Technical Supply, was admitted to the clique, although he seldom understood the conversation either.

When the field was reorganized in the winter, they had put Pekoc in charge of one of the new sections. Miscellaneous Aircraft was the orphan of the engineering department, consisting mostly of light liaison and training planes, but it was a separate section, and he was in full charge. Now he was his own boss; he could do what he wanted, and his accomplishments would show as his own.

By early spring his section was running smoothly and he applied for a leave of absence. His mechanics, who came to him

fresh from school, were so well trained that the other sections often prevailed upon the major to transfer them into more important sections. The line of small airplanes along the far edge of the apron were the neatest on the field, and they were always in top operating condition.

The lieutenant was told to report to the major on the day of his return. He knew that something was wrong, and was not surprised to learn that there had been another reorganization during his absence. The field was not to have so many planes, and they would, therefore, consolidate their maintenance sections. There would be no Miscellaneous Aircraft. All the huts were to be used for storage now, so the major suggested that Pekoc remove his belongings from his old office.

“Take your time,” the major said, “you can wait ’til tomorrow to report to Morrison. You’ll be his assistant in Tech Supply. We need a steady hand there, you know. Did you hear that Morrison’s promotion came through?”

Lt. Pekoc walked slowly away from the hangar to the double line of huts. The day was bright and warm, but the heavy rains of the past week had left the ground muddier than ever. Debris from the exodus caused by the new organizational plans littered the ground, which he seemed to be studying as he went. He looked up as he approached the last hut on the left. A skeleton arm reached out from the desolate building; someone had torn off the sign and dropped it in the mud below. It was smeared over so that he could hardly read the legend, “Miscellaneous Aircraft.”

He stared vacantly at the sign a minute. Then, at the top of his voice he screamed, “God damn it!” and kicked the heavy board as hard as he could kick.

CHARLIE WILMAN'S FORTUNE

WHEN CHARLIE WILMAN entered the Beekman Building for the fourth time within the hour, the elevator starter sauntered with forced nonchalance to the nearest operator, who stood waiting before his elevator.

"Something wrong with that guy," the starter whispered, motioning with his head toward Charlie.

"What do you mean?" the operator asked, staring blankly at the thin old man with straggly white hair, who was studying the list of occupants of the building.

"Been in and out a dozen times today," the starter explained, inadequately, "He's up to no good."

He hoped that the operator would suggest calling the police, because he didn't quite have the courage to do it on his own authority. The elevator operator just grunted and changed the subject.

Charlie Wilman had no trouble finding the name "Morris Evans" and the office number. He knew the name and number

by heart. But after staring a few minutes, he walked slowly toward the door, like a man who was unable to decide a very weighty question.

If the starter had called the police, they would have found a shy, elderly man, Charles Drew Wilman by name, who resided alone in a rooming house at 2636 Cast Road, and who was employed as a machine hand by the Blodgett Tool Company. They would have asked Charlie, gruffly, what he meant by hanging around the Beekman Building, and he would have replied that he wanted to see Mr. Evans, the patent attorney. If they had argued further, he might have even drawn from the large pocket inside his coat the papers; the invaluable papers that had become as important to him as life itself—that had, in fact, *become* life itself. Then, thoroughly embarrassed, Charlie might have fled into an elevator and actually visited Morris Evans' office.

But the elevator starter did *not* call the police, and Charlie did *not* enter the elevator. Instead he pushed through the revolving door and stared at the crowd of people rushing by. They were mostly women, this being Thursday, and the male citizens hard at work. There were a few men, hurrying as though they were bent on accomplishing important missions. Charlie turned right, and let himself be carried along by the crowd. He stopped at the corner of Fourth Street and stood against the grey stone wall of the Central Federal Bank for some time, gazing at the tall department store across the street. They sold all sorts of electrical appliances in that store, and the women swarmed into the wide doors.

Almost every appliance had an electric motor. You could figure that at least eighty percent had motors. They must sell about a hundred appliances a day, so that would be eighty motors. At least fifty percent of the motor manufacturers would be using the Wilman starting circuit within a year, at, let's say, five cents

each, or two dollars a day, just from that one store. There were at least five other stores as large in town, so you could figure twelve dollars a day. If you added two more towns of the same size, you would have as much income in a day as Charlie now made in a week. And, of course, three towns would only be scratching the surface.

There must be ten thousand motors made every day, Charlie calculated as the traffic light changed and the crowd on the far side of the street surged toward him unnoticed, so that five cents on half of them would be \$250 a day. That must be a lot more than Mr. Blodgett himself made, and that was what made the whole thing so dangerous. There are a lot of people who would stop at nothing to get an income of \$250 a day. Even Mr. Morris Evans, although everybody knew that he was a wealthy patent lawyer, probably made much less and might jump at the chance to steal the circuit invention, patent it, and sell it as his own.

You had to be cagey about things like this. It was like carrying a diamond around in your pocket. If you took it out of your pocket to try to sell it, you couldn't tell who might be dazzled by its brilliance and steal it from you. If there were only some way of patenting the invention without anyone ever seeing it until after the patent was issued.

Charlie started back to the Beekman Building entrance. He would risk it; he would face right up to this Morris Evans and tell him that he had better not try any funny stuff, because Charlie was wise to that kind of stuff. And maybe he wouldn't even let Evans in on the idea until after he had felt him out.

Someone bumped into Charlie Wilman and almost knocked him down. He turned to see Mr. Blodgett straightening his clean grey hat.

"I'm sorry," Mr. Blodgett said, oblivious to the individuality of the obstacle.

"Oh, excuse me, Mr. Blodgett," Charlie apologized, but Mr. Blodgett had already disappeared into the Beekman Building.

Charlie's determination melted; the presence of Mr. Blodgett in the building made a personal interview with Morris Evans impossible.

Mr. Blodgett walked to the nearest elevator, which whisked him quickly to the fifth floor, where he stepped out briskly, turned right twelve paces, right again to the end of the hall, and entered, without knocking, the office of Hatfield, Evans, Hartley, and Schrom.

"Mr. Evans is expecting you, sir," the receptionist announced, "won't you go right in."

"Thank you, ma'am," Mr. Blodgett replied, removing his hat, but never breaking his nervous, rapid stride. At the end of the carpeted hallway he entered the corner office.

Morris Evans sat behind a gigantic desk that was turned diagonally across the corner of the room. A picture of his son in an infantry captain's uniform hung on one wall behind him, and on the other a picture of Abraham Lincoln. On the far walls were pictures of hunting trophies, from bygone days, before arthritis had permanently closed the hunting season.

He put his stubby pipe on the desk and rose.

"Good morning, Will."

"Hi, Moe."

The two men shook hands, then sat down. Evans removed and wiped his glasses while Blodgett threw a briefcase on the desk.

"Brought all our copyright papers," he said.

"It won't take long, Will. I just want to go over them and explain your position under the new copyright law. It changes things a little, you know."

Morris Evans was just about to look through the papers

when the phone rang. "Excuse me, Will," he said, putting down his pipe and taking up the telephone.

"Morris Evans speaking."

"Uh, Mr. Evans," a voice said, "I, uh, I have an invention."

"Yes," Evans sat back in his chair, "what is it?"

"Well," the voice paused, "well—can I trust you?"

Evans sat up in his chair. "Who is this?" he demanded.

"I'll tell you later on, Mr. Evans, when I'm sure I can trust you."

"Well, what do you expect me to do for you if you won't tell me who you are?"

"Now, Mr. Evans, this is *important*. It's . . . it's *very Important*. That's why I've got to be sure I can trust you."

"Well, you *can't* trust me, and you can't trust any patent attorney," Evans blurted testily, "We're all a pack of thieves. If you show any one of us your invention, we'll steal it from you and make a million dollars."

A click told Evans that he was free to go back to the business at hand.

"What in the world was that?" Blodgett asked.

"Oh, just some crackpot who thinks he's got an invention. Whatever it was, it was patented in 1865. I get calls like that all the time. Sometimes they come up to the office, but they won't let you see what they've got; they want you to get 'em a patent on something they won't even tell you about. They think they've got one that'll make a million dollars."

"I'll be damned," Will Blodgett said, and the two men turned back to their papers.



"Home kinda early, aren't yuh?" Mrs. Minstrum, the andlady,

called from the kitchen as Charlie Wilman entered the door of his rooming house. She was not surprised to hear his slow pounding on the stairs in place of a reply.

The foreman had given Charlie the day off for "personal business." It was still morning, with nothing to do the rest of the day. Charlie pushed the thin, warped door open and threw his coat and hat on the solitary chair in his room. He had a hot plate and decided to brew some coffee. First he shut the door carefully, then pulled back the loose board on the molding behind the dresser and slipped the precious papers into his secret hiding place.

He put the coffee on the hot plate and stretched out on the brass bed.

Maybe there were twenty thousand motors built a day. That sounded about right. You could easily get ten cents apiece. Of course only about seventy-five percent of the motors would have the Wilman circuit at first, making about fifteen thousand motors. That would be, let's see, fifteen hundred dollars a day.

The faint aroma of coffee filled the room. Charlie looked up at the patch of brown wallpaper that hung from the ceiling.

"Gee," he mused, mouthing each word slowly to suck the full flavor from it, "fifteen hundred bucks a day!"

A WHOLE NOTHER BALL GAME

EDDIE, MILLIE, AND JOHNNIE.
I'm Johnnie.

"So here we are," Eddie said.

So where do you think we were? Sitting in Eddie's convertible Jag under the porte-cochere of The Breakers Hotel in the middle of the afternoon on May 22 with the sun shining and the birds twittering.

You've heard of The Breakers Hotel in Palm Beach? Well, this wasn't it. We were in the middle of Tennessee with the nearest, honest-to-God breakers five hundred miles away. Some wise-guy speculator, when he decided to build a luxury resort hotel, figured he'd get more mileage out of it if he called it The Breakers. He even copied the pseudo-Spanish architecture, which did not look quite the same against the rolling green hills of Tennessee. But we had all vacationed there before and knew the place was posh and had all the trimmings.

When we went inside, we found the huge lobby jam-packed with luggage. Eddie asked the porter, "What's up?"

“Convention. Connecticut General Life Insurance salesmen.”

I went to the registration desk with Eddie. “You a Connecticut General?” the dour little clerk asked.

“No,” Eddie replied, “but I’m a Kentucky Colonel.”

I thought that was pretty funny, but the deadpan clerk just pushed the registration card over to Eddie. Of course the funniest part is that Eddie really is a Kentucky Colonel. He buys most of his equipment from a company in Louisville, and they finagled some kind of honorary commission in the militia for him. It never hurts to flatter a customer.

Speaking of customers, I figured some of these insurance agents must be from home. I’m a printer, and I figured they must all need some printing some time. I always carry some business cards with me, and I figured if I kept my eyes and ears open maybe I could pick up a customer or two. It never hurts to try.

So anyway, we had these big, luxurious rooms. “Let’s meet at six,” Eddie said. “That’ll give us time to clean up and take a rest.”

My room was next to theirs. I could look out the big windows, out across the golf course, to the mountains in the distance. Beautiful.

It was nice of Eddie to bring me along and even nicer to insist on footing the bill. Not that I couldn’t pay my own way, but Eddie was stinking rich, and he enjoyed spending it, so what the hell. That was one way he got his kicks. I’d separated from Leonore in January, and we were fighting our way through a nasty divorce, so Eddie decided that a week of golf would be good for me. Eddie and Millie were my oldest friends—and I needed friends.

I unpacked, and then I lay down on the bed and read for a while—Graham Greene’s *The Heart of the Matter*. I’d read it before, years ago. I think what fascinates me about the book is that it is

so easy to see how Scobie could have avoided messing up his life—his problems with his wife, and his futile attempt to escape into adultery. But when you think about it, other people's problems are always easier to handle than your own. I'd never figured out how to handle my problems with Leonore. And my escapes into adultery made even less sense than Scobie's. At least he loved the girl. I could never say that about Ida

But all that's beside the point. The three of us ate too much dinner, and then we sat in rocking chairs on the veranda and stared at clouds bloodied by the sun which had set behind the mountains. There was only a slight breeze, but it kept shifting. When it blew east and Eddie puffed on his cigar, Millie and I tried not to breathe. When it blew west, we would inhale deeply to make up for the loss of oxygen.

"Let's go to the Hot Spot," Millie said.

"Okay by me," I said. The Hot Spot was a sort of nightclub at the far end of the west wing of the hotel.

The place was jammed with insurance salesmen, but we found a table and had a few drinks. Eddie and I took turns dancing with Millie. I always like to hold Millie tight when we dance. I'm crazy about the two of them: Eddie and Millie—my best friends. Millie's soft and curvy, and I like the way she feels. It has nothing to do with illicit longings. I just like the way she feels. I slipped my hand down to her butt.

"Gee," I said, looking around as though I was admiring the room, "this is a fantastic joint!"

She laughed—only about two-point-five on the Richter scale, but enough to show that she appreciated the pun.

We always kid around like that. Like on the way down, the three of us in Eddie's car, Millie said when my divorce was final she'd find me a nice girl.

“Big deal,” I said, sort of sarcastic like. “You find me the nice girls, but I’ve got to find the not-nice girls myself.”

So anyway, I moved my hand back up on her back where it belonged.

“You know how they describe this kind of dancing?” she asked.

I had my face buried in her lovely blonde hair, and I didn’t care how anybody described it, but I said, “No, how?”

“A naval engagement without loss of seamen.

I thought that was pretty funny, and I gave her a solid five-point-0. But it was a relaxed laugh. Millie didn’t mean anything more than a joke. She understood as well as I that her marriage to Eddie was sacred to me. I’d do anything to keep them together. That’s why I didn’t mind getting banged on the bean—but I’m getting ahead of myself.

What I mean is, sure I was holding her close, and I liked the feel of her, but I’d never think of really making a pass. My friendship with Millie and Eddie is one of the great pleasures in my life, and I wouldn’t mess that up for anything. It’s not as exciting as an illicit love affair, but it’s more profound. More lasting. Besides, all the hassle over my divorce, turning what had once been a loving relationship with Leonore into a fight over property, had taken the lead out of my pencil.

Well, maybe I’d *think* about making a pass at Millie, but I’d never do it. Honest to God, I never would.

The next morning opened on one of the most beautiful days God ever invented. Eddie and I loafed around while Millie took a golf lesson from Ben Neville, the pro. Eddie and Millie took their golf a lot more seriously than I did. I played every Saturday morning in a foursome that included Eddie, but Eddie played at least two or three times during the week and must have taken a couple of lessons a month for years.

We teed off at two o'clock. Ben Neville filled out our foursome—but not from the goodness of his heart. We were all friends, and he was particularly friendly with the Swaynes (that's Eddie and Millie), but he was paid for his time, which suggests that a warm heart is not incompatible with cold cash.

Eddie and Millie rode in one golf cart; Ben and I in the other. Ben was awfully friendly. He'd never been very friendly before, so I couldn't figure it out. What he got paid for was helping us improve our game as we played, so he would stop and give one of us advice or show how a shot should be played. He worked mostly with me, so I should have been grateful, I suppose, but the fact is I was too puzzled to be grateful. He spent a little time working with Eddie, but almost none with Millie. Strange, wasn't it?

Maybe you don't think so. I do, because I knew Ben didn't give a damn about me. Ordinarily, when he talked to me, he wouldn't even look at me. I'd seen him in the lobby, just after we arrived, and said hello, and he didn't even see me. Well, I couldn't get it. The closest I could figure, he was covering for something, and I was his cover.

"Yeah," I said to Ben as we were leaving the fifth green, "I play with Eddie every Saturday, and he always licks me."

"Hey, you want to fix that?" Ben asked in a kind of a sneaky tone of voice.

"I'd love to beat him just once."

"I'll tell you how you can do it. Golf is a psychological game. You know that."

Well, I didn't know that, but I said, "Yeah," anyway.

"So what you do is, when you're walking from the green back to the cart, you walk close like this—" and he kind of sidled up to me. "And you say, 'Gee, Eddie, that was a beautiful putt.'"

"Yeah."

“Well, he says, ‘Thank you,’ or something, and you say, ‘You have the most graceful putting swing I’ve ever seen.’ Lay it on: ‘You’re backswing, when you putt, is so smooth!’ He won’t be able to putt worth a damn after that.”

Well, to digress a little bit, I tried it after we got back home, and it worked. Every once in a while during the summer, Eddie would suggest a bet. He’d offer me a handicap to sweeten the deal. But I held out till one day he offered me ten to one odds. No handicap, but a hundred bucks to ten. I took it.

I waited till we came off the third green; then I gave him the business. It worked like magic. From that point on, he couldn’t sink a putt. He’d stand there, he’d address the ball, then he’d fidget and twiddle and twitch and shift his weight from one foot to the other until he’d tied himself up in knots.

In case you think I’m a heel for gypping my best friend out of a C-note, let me tell you Eddie wouldn’t have hesitated a second to do the same thing to me. Besides, I figured he owed me one for getting him away from The Breakers before he messed up his whole goddamn life—even if he never knew I did it.

Well, anyway, that’s beside the point. The point is that Ben was knocking himself out to be nice to me, and I couldn’t figure out why, except he was covering for something, and I didn’t know what it was. But I just figured what the hell, and I didn’t think any more about it. We were having a good game, and that was enough, as far as I was concerned. I didn’t think as much about it as I should have, as it turned out.

But I thought enough about it to ask Millie and Eddie at cocktails.

“Why was Ben so nice to me today?”

Eddie shrugged. “Cause you’re such a nice guy,” he said in a kind of off-hand way. I’m not even sure he heard what I said.

“He hardly paid any attention to Millie.”

“I was playing very well,” Millie said. “I had a wonderful game, and I really enjoyed it. Did you?”

You could take that for a genuine reply, or you could take it for a hint to change the subject. I couldn't figure out which it was, so I changed the subject. I didn't think it was all that important. Then.

Later in the evening, we went to the Hot Spot again. There weren't as many people as the night before, but it was still crowded. I was sitting alone at the table while the others danced, when who do I see on the dance floor but my old army buddy, Lefty Gordon.

Well, I said “buddy,” but that's not quite true. The fact of the matter is, Lefty was a bastard, and I hated his guts. He was a chickenshit lieutenant, and I was a tech sergeant in the Quartermaster Corps. Everything had to be done by the numbers, everything had to be GI. In the Quartermaster Corps, for Christ's sake! We spent the day handing out shoes and fatigues, and he wanted us to play soldier! If your salute wasn't smart enough he'd cuss you out, and every time he'd see you he'd check to see if all your buttons were buttoned, and I swear to God he had some way to measure the sharpness of the crease in your pants.

Sure, the army was fighting a war, but *we* weren't fighting the war in the Quartermaster Corps. We were handing out underwear. The only QM corpsman to die in line of duty was some joker who smothered under a pile of blankets.

But that was then, and now is now. Even if I did hate his guts, I jumped up with that “it's a small world” feeling and ran out on the dance floor.

He saw me coming. He got a big grin on his face and turned away from his partner to greet me, and we went through the old, “Why you old son-of-a-bitch,” routine, although I really meant it, and he was just giving with the tough-guy talk.

A Whole Nother Ball Game

With all that slobbering around, it took a little while before he introduced me to his partner. "Johnnie, I want you to meet my wife." Well, anyway, I suppose that's what he said, but I never heard him. I was just plain thunderstruck. And a good thing I was. If I'd been able to speak, I would have let the cat out of the bag for sure.

Talk about a picture worth a thousand words! The look on her face!

Ida Perko!

I'd known Ida for eight years. Well, seven and a half, I guess, because I met her at Christmas. I have this little printing shop, and I've got eleven guys working for me. They've all been there forever, and we get along fine. We work hard when we work, but we horse around a lot, too. And you know how it is, we get all kinds of girlie calendars every year from salesmen, and we get dirty pictures and dirty books and stuff like that. So one year Tim Lutz, the guy that runs the Multilith, he brings a bimbo to the Christmas party. We have a Christmas party every year, and before that all we did was drink too much and look at the girlie calendars and the dirty pictures and tell dirty jokes. That year, Tim brings this bimbo. Who? Ida Perko.

Ida was a good-time Charlie if ever there was one. She didn't drink much, just enough to get a buzz on. Screwing was her game, and she was the champ. I had a couch in my office, and it got a workout that day. Every guy in the place. Ida didn't want money or anything else; she just did it for fun, and believe me a good time was had by all.

Well, I have to confess, when things began falling apart with Leonore, it was pretty cold at home, and I found Ida a hell of a lot warmer. Believe it or not, I was pretty faithful to Leonore over the years, but when she began putting me off with headaches and whatnot, and I'd get hard up and wonder where I could find a quick lay, the only girl I could think of was Ida.

I saw her quite often. We'd have dinner at a little dive across town and then—well, all I can say is that she was *very* accommodating. This went on until—well, she broke up with me just about the same time Leonore and I broke up.

We were at a hot pillow joint called The Sailor's Rest, and believe me, we'd been sailing.

When we were getting dressed, Ida said, "How was it?"

"Huh?"

"You heard me: how was it?"

"It was great. It's always great. What do you want, a merit badge?"

She smiled in a funny way and said, "That's it."

"What do you mean, 'That's it'?"

"That's the last time. We're through."

"How come? Did I zig when I should have zagged?"

"I'm going respectable. I'm getting married."

"Married! Who's the lucky guy?"

"Nobody you'd know."

Well, you know by now it was somebody I *did* know. That bastard Lefty Gordon.

So when Lefty introduced us, and I finally get my voice back, I said, "Pleased to meet you, Mrs. Gordon."

She knew she was safe then. She smiled coyly and said, "Oh, Mr. Johnson, please call me 'Ida.'"

"Okay, if you'll call me 'Johnnie.'"

I dragged them back to our table, and when Eddie and Millie came off the floor, I introduced them. They sat with us, and everybody got along like thieves. I use that old expression because, to tell the truth, I felt like a thief. I'd stolen my old buddy's wife—although he wasn't my buddy, because I still hated his guts, and besides, she hadn't been married when I stole her, if that's what you want to call it.

Maybe I liked to think of it that way because it felt something like getting back at Lefty for all the grief he caused me in the service. Maybe that's why I enjoyed being with them—knowing what I knew and knowing that Lefty did not know. Anyway, I was glad to see that Eddie and Millie enjoyed being with them, too.

It was only polite for me to ask Ida for a dance. When we got out on the floor, away from the others, she said, "Thanks."

"Hey, old buddy, I'm not going to let you down."

"You gave me one hell of a scare, I can tell you that."

"Ida, we had a lot of fun together, you and me."

"We sure did." She looked right into my eyes when she said it, and she smiled the way she used to smile just before we—but hell!

"And now all that's over. For both of us."

She didn't answer. But she was pressing her pelvis into mine.

Up to this point, I'd felt like a big guy—behaving like a gentleman, not giving her away, and not even dreaming of making a pass at her. But now . . . "I'm getting mixed signals," I said.

"So?"

"I can't figure it out what you're up to."

"So figure it out."

"But Lefty's a friend of mine . . ."

She backed away enough to ease the pressure on my groin. When she got around to answering, she said, "That's very nice of you." Real sarcastic.

Well, the whole thing was dumb, and I knew it. What a screwed up piece of work is a man! I'm protecting the honor of a floozy I've slept with I don't know how many times, but I cheated on my wife. I'm treating Lefty like a decent human being by leaving his wife alone, even though I hate his guts, and I'm treating Ida like a—like a *thing*—just something that happened

to belong to Lefty, although I really had a soft spot for her, after all the good times we'd had together.

Part of it was simply that I didn't feel up to the hide-and-seek business that I would have to go through to lay Ida and conceal it from Lefty. I just didn't feel like it. The grinding process of the divorce had ground my sex life into neutral. As Eddie and Millie said, what I needed was a rest. If Ida wanted a little hanky-panky, she'd have to find someone else.

Anyway, I was glad that Eddie and Millie get on well with the Gordons. They became part of our group. The next day we spent the morning together at the swimming pool, where we all got so sunburned that we agreed we'd better not swim again as long as we were there.

We had lunch together—we already seemed to be a permanent fivesome. That was fine with me. I get a kick out of being with Ida under the circumstances, and I figured that Lefty would be the new customer I'd gain from the trip. And I might even get a few more customers through him.

A funny thing happened at lunch. We had a table reserved on what they call the Terrace, a big outdoor dining room shaded by a green and white striped awning. I don't remember what we were talking about, but I saw a middle aged woman at the next table turn around and drop an ice cube down the back of Lefty's shirt. Lefty jumped up and yelled, "Hey!"

The middle-aged woman twisted a little farther around to get a better look at Lefty, and said, "Oh, I thought you were someone else." Can you imagine that? She didn't even apologize!

Meanwhile Lefty was squirming around trying to extricate the ice cube, while the lady who did it looked as nonchalant as though she hadn't done anything out of the ordinary. Naturally we were all laughing our heads off. You could see that Lefty didn't think it was funny at all, with everybody on the Terrace staring

at him—in fact he was steaming—but with all of us laughing, what could he do? Finally he pulled his shirt out from under his belt and the ice cube fell out.

Lefty tried to laugh it off, but I knew Lefty from the old days, and I had a hunch that he wouldn't forget the way we'd laughed at him. I don't know if I felt some kind of guilt or what, but he seemed to single me out for his blackest looks. So what? So he glowered at me. What the hell.

Anyway, that's neither here nor there. After lunch Lefty took the place of Ben Neville in our foursome, and Ida excused herself, saying that she had brought some reading along. All I could think of when I thought of her reading was the dirty books back at the shop. In the evening we dined together then went off to the Hot Spot. Although neither Eddie nor Millie nor I was a big drinker, we always had cocktails before dinner. Ida didn't drink much, but Lefty made up for the whole gang, although he held it pretty well. But after dinner, when we were in the Hot Spot, he stood up with a kind of blank look on his face, and announced with drunken dignity: "I gotta go to the tinkletorium."

As soon as he left, Eddie asked Ida to dance, so I asked Millie. That was fine: what with my history with Ida and the way she danced the night before, I felt more comfortable with Millie. Besides, Ida wasn't as good a dancer as Millie—her skills lay elsewhere.

When Lefty reappeared, he seemed to be completely happy just working on the juice, so of course Eddie danced a lot with Ida, and I couldn't help wondering if she was giving him the pelvis treatment she gave me, and if she was, how he was responding.

Anyway, I was enjoying myself. I didn't realize till after, when I got to thinking about it, that I danced every dance with Millie, which meant that Eddie danced every dance with Ida—if they

really danced every dance—because it also occurred to me after it was all over—I guess I'm not very sharp about these things—that they just might have ducked out and found someplace to knock off a quickie.

But I didn't see anything then. I lay in bed that night thinking, gee, this is great. It *was* great, and I just wanted it to keep on being great. In my blissful ignorance, I just thought the following day would be the same as the day before—golf—with Ida off reading—dinner, and the Hot Spot. I had noticed that every time I mentioned Ben Neville to Millie when we were dancing, she would quickly change the subject, but even though I noticed it, I missed the point. I guess I didn't see what was going on because I was contented as a cow, so I thought every body else was, too. Dumb.

The five of us had breakfast together. All quiet on the Tennessee front. In spite of all Lefty'd put away the night before, he didn't have a hangover, although he seemed a little sullen. When we were drinking our coffee, I said, "Hey, Eddie, lend me your car to run into town. I want to get some stuff at the drug store."

"Sure. And while you're there, get me some shaving cream, will you? Gillette Foamy. Regular."

"Okay."

Then Millie had some stuff for me to get, and then Ida thought of some things.

"I'd better write out a list," I said. I had an envelope in my pocket, and I used that to write it on.

When we were breaking up, Lefty pulled me aside. "Hey can you get me something, too?"

"Of course."

"I need some blue ointment."

"Holy Christ! You got crabs?"

“I just discovered the little bastards yesterday.”

“What about Ida?”

“I’ve got to get rid of them before she finds out.”

“Yeah. You don’t want to give them to her.”

“That’s not easy. You wouldn’t think it to look at her, but that little lady’s hotter than a pistol. She needs it every night. I had a hell of a time getting out of it last night.”

“Just tell her you’ve got a headache,” I said, trying to be funny.

“I don’t know what to tell her tonight. I sure as hell can’t put her off much longer. With all the nooky I get from her, I sure as hell don’t want her to find out I’ve been getting more on the side.”

I could think of a lot of guys who’d be glad to give him an assist with Ida, but I figured it was best just to say, “Oh, it’ll work out,” and let it go at that.

Anyway, here’s the game plan as it stood after breakfast:

I was driving into town for the shopping. Eddie had brought some trade journals along, and he was going to his room to read them. Millie had a golf lesson with Ben Neville. Ida was going to her room to read her novel. She surprised me by saying that it was *The White Hotel*—not exactly hot off the press, but a first class book. I’d never talked about books with Ida, and I jumped to the conclusion that she picked it up because of the dirty opening chapters. I wondered how she’d take the later chapters, where the Nazis strip their victims, beat them up, and then machine-gun them. I don’t know. Anyway, that left Lefty, the Connecticut General. Lefty was going to attend one of the convention sessions.

The first change of plan occurred when I asked the bell captain how to get to the nearest drug store.

“Why don’t you go to the pharmacy here, Mr. Johnson?”

“Oh, that little—I thought that was just a news stand.”

“They enlarged it this year. It’s a full-scale drug store, Mr. Johnson, and the prices are competitive with the discount stores. Try it.”

So I tried it. Instead of spending the entire morning, I did all my shopping in fifteen minutes. It wasn’t even nine-thirty when I stashed my stuff in my room and knocked on Eddie’s door. I got no answer, which seemed strange, but then I figured maybe the maids had barged in to clean up, and Eddie had gone to the lobby to read for a while.

As I turned the corner into the hallway where Lefty’s room was I saw Lefty enter the door—or at least I saw a little of his back as he entered. Nevertheless, when I knocked, I got no answer. Naturally that made me curious, so I listened and could hear some scurrying around. Finally Ida cracked the door open.

“I brought your things.”

“I’ll take them,” she said, reaching out her hand. She was holding the door almost closed.

I gave her the bag with her stuff, but I said, “I want to see Lefty,” and practically pushing her aside, I went into the room to slip Lefty his ointment on the q.t.

She seemed a little put out. “Hey, what are you doing? Lefty’s not here.”

Before I could say anything, Lefty walked in from the hall.

“What the hell are you doing in here?” he demanded.

I must have looked surprised—because I was. I would have sworn I’d just seen him go into the room in front of me, and here he was behind me. He certainly didn’t sound friendly, and I realized later that my surprise must have looked like guilt to him, but at the time I couldn’t help thinking he was kidding, so I gave him the old Myron Cohen routine: “Everybody’s got to be someplace.”

But he wasn’t kidding. He looked mad as all hell, and I

realized there was another man in the bathroom, so it really was a Myron Cohen routine. I couldn't see what would be gained if Lefty found out who it was, and I could imagine a lot of unpleasant things if he did. Something had to be done and done fast.

"C'mere," I said, and I practically pulled him out of the room with me. I spoke in a conspiratorial tone—or at least what I consider a conspiratorial tone: "I got the blue ointment in my room."

He went along with me. I had the stuff in my pocket, but I managed to slip it out so it looked like I'd had it in my bureau drawer.

"Thanks," he said, trying to smooth over the rough way he'd talked before.

"Hey, you want to use my bathroom?"

I guess he felt it wouldn't be right, after being so huffy with me. "I'll use the john downstairs," he said. Or maybe he was actually suspicious of me. Anyway, he left, but I had the feeling that he was not completely satisfied with the way things looked.

I went back to Eddie's room and knocked again. Still no answer.

It was like a light finally came on. I'd been having such a good time, myself, that I'd thought everybody was having a good time just like me—playing golf and eating and dancing and, well, just being together. A dumb, happy existence, away from the hassles of business life. But Jesus, this was a whole nother ball game. Something had to be done and done fast. I got a little panicky at first, but then I calmed down.

Okay, so it took me a while to catch on; but now that it was beginning to get through to me, an instinct I never knew I had led me out to the pro shop. Remember?—Millie was supposed to be taking a lesson from Ben Neville. I asked to see Ben Neville.

The assistant pro said, "Today's Mr. Neville's day off. Can I do anything for you?"

I shook my head. "I'm afraid not."

I walked back to the hotel slowly, trying to put it all together. The best I could figure, my friends were screwing up. Millie's taking lessons—of some kind—from Neville, while Eddie's playing ping-pong with Ida. Whether they had made some kind of crazy open marriage agreement, or whether they thought they were each outsmarting the other was none of my business; my business was to get them untangled and home before they ruined their lives. But how?

I couldn't say anything, 'cause that might let the cat out of the bag and make matters worse. I walked back slowly, groping for an answer.

The hotel had a big conservatory filled with king-sized plants tucked off beyond a corner of the lobby. Nobody ever went there, so I decided to go there to think things over. I was cutting across the lobby, when I saw Ida at the far corner heading toward the alcove where they have a ladies' room. I made a beeline for her

"Hey, Ida!"

"Huh?"

"I want to talk to you a minute." She stopped. Her eyes narrowed

"Listen, take it easy with Eddie, will you? I mean about backing off?"

Instead of answering, she turned and continued her walk toward the ladies' room.

I followed. "I mean, Jesus Christ, Ida, we're all friends, aren't we?"

She turned as she was about to enter the ladies' room and said, "Are we?"

I was so wrapped up in my mission that I followed her in. "I mean, for Christ's sake, Ida, why louse things up?"

"Hey! Who are you to start preaching?"

“Look, I just want to keep things nice and friendly.”

There were only three stalls, and nobody else was there. Ida went into the first stall without answering.

“You don’t want to mess things up for Eddie and for Lefty.”

“How do you know what I want?” Her voice sounded a little hollow coming out of the stall.

“Sometimes I don’t know *what* you want.”

“I want to take a crap. Now get out of here!”

I was leaning against the wash basin, looking into the mirror, I guess, but without seeing anything. “For Christ’s sake, Ida, Eddie’s my best friend.”

“Hey, that’s the most exciting news I’ve heard since Steve Brody jumped off the Brooklyn bridge.”

“But, Jesus, Ida—”

“Buzz off, will you? This is a ladies’ room.”

“And what about Lefty? You told me you were going respectable. You don’t want to get Lefty down on you?”

For an answer, I got a resounding fart.

“Jesus, Ida,” I said, “think what you’re doing, for Christ sake! Think of Lefty. You’ve got a good, decent guy, and you’re cheating on him! I mean—” and I was going to say something else—I don’t remember what—when Lefty burst into the room like a tornado.

“So you’re the bastard that’s been chasing Ida!”

“Hey, Lefty—”

“Yeah, I saw you follow her in here from up on the mezzanine across the lobby. The ladies’ room, for God’s sake!”

“But—”

“You Goddamn pervert! You’re some kind of creep comin’ into a lady’s room.”

“Look, Lefty—”

“Lousy double-crosser!” he yelled, “Crap on your old army buddy, you bastard!” And he swung a haymaker at me. I saw it

coming and warded it off with my arm, but the floor was slippery. I lost my footing and fell over backwards.

An excruciating pain flashed through my head, and the next thing I knew, it was black as the inside of your pocket. I wasn't sure whether I was conscious or not. I knew I wasn't dead, but it took a minute before I really came to and remembered where I was—or at least where I had been. I must have banged my head on the sink when I fell—or maybe on the floor. I don't know how long I'd been unconscious. I couldn't see anything, but I knew the room was empty; Lefty and Ida had gone—turned out the light and left me there.

The floor was hard and cold and damp, and my head ached something awful. When I put my hand to the back of my head, I could feel an egg where I'd clunked it.

The first thought that entered my mind was, "Oh, hell, now I've lost my new customer!" What a dumb thing to think of at a time like that!

Anyway, I don't know how long I lay there. I just plain didn't feel like making the effort to get up. My head hurt like all hell, but that wasn't it; I just plain didn't feel like moving. It occurred to me that some innocent woman might walk in on me, but I just couldn't pull myself together for a long time.

I finally did, of course. I groped around for the light switch, straightened out my clothes, went up to my room, and took a couple aspirin. I lay down on the bed till lunch time. It felt good to relax after that bang on the head. While I was lying there looking up at the blank ceiling, trying not to feel anything, the clouds parted, and I saw the answer to my problem.

So simple! So very simple! It made me feel so good I almost forgot my aching head. I just lay there smiling and feeling smug till I felt sure Eddie and Millie would be sitting down at our table on the Terrace.

They had started their lunch by the time I arrived. I went through the buffet line and joined them. No sign of Lefty and Ida.

“My God!” Millie said, “what happened to you.”

You see, I’m getting a little thin on top, so there was no way I could conceal the egg on my bean even if I wanted to—and I did *not* want to. That was the plan. But I had to play it cool.

“Nothing serious,” I said, shrugging. “After I shaved this morning, I was putting toilet water on my face, and the seat fell.”

They laughed, but Millie sobered up pretty fast, as I knew she would. “It’s more serious than that, Johnnie.”

“Well if you must know, I slipped getting out of the shower. The hotel doc thinks I should go right home and have my own doctor look at it. X-rays and all that kind of stuff.” They both looked very sad, but they didn’t say anything.

Ordinarily, I would have expected them to jump up and say, “We’d better take you home at once,” but they didn’t.

“I hate to spoil the vacation,” I said, trying to sound humble.

“Yeah,” Millie said, “I think we’d better take you home.”

Trying not to sound reluctant, Eddie said, “Yeah, we better get going right away.”

“Gee,” I said putting on my saddest voice, “I hate to ruin your trip.”

“Ruin our trip!” Millie echoed. “Your health means more to us than any trip.”

I pretended to argue a little more, explaining that it wasn’t all that serious, but I had to be careful not to convince them.

What could Eddie do but agree with Millie? “Yeah, your health is more important . . .” He must have been thinking of the nooky he was going to miss, because he never finished the sentence.

When we were at the desk, and Eddie was paying the bill, I

made a weak pretense of offering to pay my part. Eddie wouldn't hear of it.

He did argue over the bill, though. It was the same deadpan clerk, and he just kept saying that it was the rule.

"But you charged us for lunch the first day, and we didn't get here till *after* lunch. I don't object to paying for everything we get, but we didn't *get* any lunch."

In vain. The clerk kept repeating, "I'm sorry, sir, but that's the rule," till I began to wonder what I should do if Eddie jumped over the counter to strangle him. Fortunately Eddie thought to ask for the manager.

In contrast to the deadpan clerk, the manager wore a perpetual, wholly insincere smile. And unlike the somberly dressed clerk, he wore a chic tan sport jacket with the corner of a red silk handkerchief peeping out of the breast pocket. He handed each of us his business card. "D. Horsley Dillinghite III." While Eddie explained his problem, I tried to think of a name beginning with "D" that was so awful it would drive a man to use the name "Horsley."

"Well, Mr. Swayne, I understand your problem. But you see, it costs us money to hold a room, even when the room's empty. And we have to have the food on hand for you when we know you're coming, even if it turns out that you don't arrive till after lunch. So you see, Mr. Swayne, we lose something in order to accommodate you, but we make it up by charging you for the lunch."

Before Eddie could think of anything to say, the permanent smile expanded, displaying a perfect set of sparkling teeth, and Mr. Dillinghite added, "You see, Mr. Swayne, what we lose on the peanuts, we make on the bananas."

Eddie looked like a man who had just discovered himself standing face to face with the missing link. He gave up. He

scribbled his name on the credit card slip, and we went home and told everybody at the club what a great vacation we had.

Eddie and Millie never had any trouble over their escapades—at least I never heard of any—and that's the last I ever heard of Lefty and Ida, so you might say everyone lived happily ever after.

So anyway, if you ever need a first-class printing job at a competitive price, give me a jingle. I'm in the yellow pages. I can send a kid around to pick up your copy, or if you want to bring it to the shop yourself, I'll show you the dirty pictures.

But that's a whole nother ball game.

THE SARASATE ARRANGEMENT

“CARMEN,” GWENDOLYN SAID, as Freddie reached across the table to light her cigarette.

“Yes,” he said, half laughing. “You couldn’t mistake that.” He put the lighter back in his jacket pocket. They had the back room to themselves. It was Monday night, so there had been only a few couples in the main dining room when they had passed through it.

“Wonderful music,” he said. “Piano and violin. I’ve never heard it that way before, but I like it.”

She blew a puff of smoke over his head. She was the only person he knew who used a cigarette holder. “It sounds like the Sarasate arrangement.”

They listened in silence. At one point the waiter looked in. Freddie motioned him to their table. “Hey, Roger,” he whispered, “ask Pete if that’s the Sarasate arrangement he’s playing.”

Sitting across from each other in the empty, dimly lighted room, they continued to listen till it was over, taking occasional sips of wine.

The Sarasate Arrangement

“Isn’t that too rousing an ending for a tragedy?” Freddie asked. “Too up-beat?”

“Tragedy? It’s thrilling.”

“I should have known: tragedy *would* be thrilling to you.”

Gwendolyn smiled, but made no attempt to reply.

The waiter came back to their table. “Pete says yeah, it’s the Sarasate arrangement.”

When the waiter had left, Freddie said, “I suppose it’s as appropriate as any other ending.”

Gwendolyn eyed him quizzically.

Looking down at his wine glass, he said, “For *our* tragedy.”

Gwendolyn opened her mouth as if to answer, but then seeming to change her mind, she drew on her cigarette. “The wonderful thing about the Sarasate arrangement is that it calls for the utmost technical skill, but when it’s played right, it’s pure passion.

“Isn’t that true of the opera, too?”

“Well, I don’t know about the technical difficulties, but it’s certainly passionate.”

“It was Nietzsche’s favorite opera,” Freddie said.

“Oh?”

“After he broke with Wagner, that is. He thought Wagner had become too Christian.”

In the dim light, the single candle on the table shone on the right side of Gwendolyn’s face, so that the other side looked shadowy and vague.

She seemed to be pondering his words. “*Parsifal. Lohengrin. Tannhäuser*. I suppose so.”

They sipped their wine in silence. Freddie found himself idly looking over Gwendolyn’s head at a picture on the far wall. It was a reproduction of Frans Hals’ *The Laughing Cavalier*, who

seemed to be looking down on them in amusement—the only person in the room besides themselves.

Gwendolyn seemed to be half dreaming. “I used to play ‘The Evening Star.’”

“Played it?”

“My teacher gave me a piano version. I liked it.”

Freddie started singing, quietly, almost to himself: “‘O thou sublime sweet evening star,’” but then he stumbled and hummed a bit. “‘One to whom my heart was given, an angel’—something, something—in heaven.”

“I never knew the words,” Gwendolyn said. “I’ve never heard it sung.” She smiled, almost laughed, and added, “Until now.”

The Laughing Cavalier seemed to think it was funny, too.

“Tannhäuser’d lost his girl friend because he’d behaved badly.” Freddie explained. Then, bitterly, “She had a reason for walking out on him.”

Gwendolyn reached across the table and patted Freddie’s hand. “There, there, Freddie. It’s not the end of the world.”

He seemed embarrassed and looked down at their hands. He took a sip of wine. “I don’t know anything about Sarasate. He wrote a Gypsy dance. That’s all I know.”

“Pablo de Sarasate. Spanish violinist. *Famous* Spanish violinist. The most famous violinist of his day—now forgotten even by music lovers like you.”

“I’m sorry,” Freddie said in a mocking voice.

“Oh, that’s all right,” Gwendolyn replied, joining in the mockery. “His day was done long ago.” Then, with pretended pedantry, “Lived from eighteen something-or-other to nineteen something-or-other.”

“Same dates as Nietzsche.”

That seemed to strike Gwendolyn funny. “What do you know!”

Picking up her light mood, Freddie said, "To the day!"

"They could have gone to school together."

"And played together."

"Did Nietzsche ever play?" Gwendolyn asked. "I can't imagine Nietzsche playing. He was too burned up at the world to play."

"Of course he played. When he was a kid."

"Wasn't he always burned up about something? I always think of him as being burned up about something."

"Sure, but when he was a kid—after all, he was human."

"I didn't know he was human, and I'm not sure I believe it. Pablo played, but not Friedrich." She laughed. "Pablo fiddled while Friedrich burned." She reached across the table and put her hand on his once again. Quieter, with less humor, she said, "Pablo fiddled while Freddie burned."

He did not laugh. Back when he first met her, and addressed her for the first time, he had called her "Gwen." She had ordered him always to call her "Gwendolyn." Then, when she called him "Freddie," he had protested that she should treat his name with the same respect she asked of hers. She had simply laughed and said, "But everyone calls you 'Freddie'."

Now she said, "I like that. Maybe I should call you Friedrich."

"Yeah. Maybe like Nietzsche. I'll lose my purchasing power, and end up in what our uncouth ancestors called the looney bin."

"Well, now look who's being dramatic." She had stopped laughing, and she puffed on her cigarette in silence. When it looked as though Freddie might remain silent all night, she said, "Speaking of Christianity—" but Freddie cut her off.

"Who's speaking of Christianity?"

"You were. You brought it up. About Nietzsche."

Freddie shrugged. "I suppose so."

“So, anyway: speaking of Christianity, do you suppose it would ever have got off the ground if Mary and Joe had named the baby Irving?”

Over Gwendolyn’s head, *The Laughing Cavalier* caught Freddie’s attention once again. At whom was he laughing? Freddie returned the Cavalier’s amused stare with a dour stare of his own. Finally he said, “I don’t feel like joking.”

Gwendolyn drew smoke into her mouth, then let it out slowly, sucking it into her nostrils. After blowing it out, she said, “Carmen was the first opera I ever saw.”

“Oh?”

“My grandmother took me to it when I was a little girl.”

“I didn’t think you were ever a little girl.”

“I was ten years old. It made a deep impression.”

“It’s very colorful.”

“It’s very romantic. Talk about identifying. I wanted to make cigars and have men fight over me.” She took a sip of her wine. “Do you suppose the cigars were supposed to be phallic symbols?”

“I don’t know.”

“But Freud smoked a cigar.”

“Do you know the story about that?”

She shook her head.

“Someone asked him if his cigar was a phallic symbol, and he said ‘Of course, but it’s also a damn good smoke.’”

She smiled her appreciation.

In a sarcastic tone of voice, he said, “I can just imagine you working in a factory.”

“I as well as Carmen.”

“Yes. They never show her at work.”

As though she hadn’t heard him, she said, “Defying everybody.”

Her long gold earring, glistening in the light of the lone

candle, caught his eye. It distracted him for a moment, but then he repeated her words: "Defying everybody." Almost muttering, he added: "And getting killed for it. In the end."

"Yes. Getting killed for love."

He watched her flick her cigarette ash into the ashtray. Still looking down at the ashtray he slowly quoted: "'Men *have* died from time to time, and worms have eaten them, but not for love."

He waited for her response.

She took her time, but finally she said, "He didn't know what he was talking about."

"Who? Shakespeare?"

She nodded.

"Shakespeare didn't know what he was talking about?"

"You can always tell when Shakespeare doesn't know what he's talking about: he becomes ungrammatical."

"What cockamamie book did you find *that* in?"

"It's *possible* to have ideas without getting them out of books, you know."

"So you're telling me Shakespeare couldn't write very good English."

"All right, what does 'not for love' refer to in that sentence?"

"Men."

"Well, maybe that's what Shakespeare *meant*, but that's not what he *said*. If you look at the sentence without being overawed by the great Swan syndrome, you can see that it refers to worms."

"Oh, come on!"

"That's what it says: 'Worms have not eaten men for love.'"

Freddie frowned and shook his head.

"Well, isn't that right? They eat men for food, not for love."

"That's nothing but a misguided attempt to justify your impossibly romantic notions."

"What would life be without romance? What difference

would there be between our lives and the lives of dogs or cats or—or goats—without romance?”

“And *with* romance? What difference between us and Lucrezia Borgia and Cleopatra and that empress in the east—I can’t think of her name—the one who killed everybody?”

“And Joan of Arc.”

“Joan of Arc?”

“Yes, Joan of Arc. She dreamed of doing the impossible, and because she dreamed it, she succeeded.”

“For a moment.”

“For a moment,” Gwendolyn agreed. “What else do we have but a moment?”

Freddie shrugged and sipped his wine.

Gwendolyn shrugged, too, as though in response. “A man’s reach should exceed his grasp, or what’s a heaven for?”

“I never did understand that line.”

“It’s simple enough,” she said.

“Then what does it mean?”

“If you set your goal high enough, it’s worth struggling for. It’s the struggle that counts.”

Freddie replied in a voice drenched with sarcasm, “I can just see you struggling—for anything.”

“All struggles don’t have to be like Sisyphus’—or Sisyphus’s. How are you supposed to say that? Sisyphus’ or Sisyphus’s?”

“In this context, I suggest you say ‘Sisyphus’s struggle.’ That way it sounds as silly as your romantic ideas.”

“Cowards die many times before their death; the valiant taste of death but once.”

“What’s that got to do with—Jesus Christ!—what’s that got to do with *anything*?”

“We were talking about men dying for love. Well, cowards die many times before their death; the valiant taste of death but once.”

The Sarasate Arrangement

“I can just imagine what Shakespeare would think about what you mean by ‘the valiant.’”

“I mean that some men—valiant men—under some circumstances die for love.”

“And worms eat them.”

“Well, isn’t that right? The men die for love, and the worms eat them for food.”

“And since ‘men’ in this context includes women, Carmen died for love. And that’s just peachy-keen.”

Instead of answering, Gwendolyn stubbed her cigarette in the ashtray. There was a little knob on the side of the holder which she slid forward, ejecting the butt.

Freddie added, “And that makes her barbaric behavior okay?” Smiling, Gwendolyn took another cigarette from her purse and inserted it into the holder. She continued to smile in silence. Freddie looked closely at her. The candlelight gleamed in her eye. “Throwing over the man who loved her?”

She made no attempt to reply.

“The man who had given up everything for her?”

She reached across the table, and patted his hand. “Yes.”

“You like that.”

Still smiling: “Yes.”

“You’d like to be killed for love.”

“Yes.”

He dropped his voice, and he sounded bitter: “You *should* be.”

She did not reply, but her continuing to smile suggested that she agreed.

“If you really meant that,” Freddie said, “you wouldn’t have picked on someone like me. You know I couldn’t hurt a flea.”

She had taken a lighter out of her purse, too, and this time she lit the cigarette herself. “You could if you felt strongly enough.”

“You make it sound easy.”

“It would be easy.”

“That’s easy to say.”

“It would be easy to do,” she said in a dreamy voice. “For my part, all I’d have to do is wait for it to happen.”

“That’s what people think till the time comes. Then they fight for life.”

“Do you think that’s *always* true?” she asked.

“It’s always true. They fight like hell.”

“Even if there’s nothing to live for?”

“You have nothing to live for?”

She laughed sarcastically.

“You’ll find another man within two weeks,” he said. “He may even be in the wings now.”

“Do you think that’s something to live for?”

“Isn’t it?”

“For a week or two. Then you suddenly discover there was never any love. Just sex. No passion. If you can divorce sex from passion.”

“A week or two! I’m flattered. It’s been almost six months.”

Still smiling, she drew on her cigarette. “You know I always exaggerate. I’ve told you that a million times.”

“What about Henry?”

“Same thing. I really thought I loved him. So I married him. It took almost a year to discover the truth, not two weeks. Not because Henry was so great. I was young and didn’t know any better.”

“What does Henry think about—all this?”

Her voice was tinged with contempt: “Don José he ain’t.”

They sat in silence for a while. When Freddie spoke he sounded angry. “What the hell do you want, Gwendolyn? I mean really: what the hell do you want?”

The Sarasate Arrangement

She looked genuinely puzzled, as though she were groping for the answer, struggling to find the Truth. Then her face cleared, and she relaxed. "Sarasate."

"Huh?"

"Sarasate."

"What does that mean?"

She laughed and blew a thick cloud of smoke over his head. "I guess what I really want only exists in music. In operas."

"I believe that," he said bitterly.

They lapsed into silence. Gwendolyn, smiling, with a faraway look in her eyes. Beyond her, the Cavalier looking down on them, laughing.

The waiter came back into the room with the check. Freddie counted out the money. "Keep the difference, Roger."

"Thank you, sir."

When the waiter disappeared, Freddie said, "You know I can't take you home tonight."

"You told me that when you phoned."

"I just wanted to be sure you remembered."

"I've made other arrangements." She laughed. "I make my own arrangements."

When he made no response, she asked, "Don't you like my arrangements?"

Before Freddie could think of a reply, he heard someone enter the room.

The newcomer was a tall man, not bad looking, who wore a hound's-tooth blazer and a sport shirt. A broad smile covered his face. "Hi, Gwendolyn," he said as he approached.

"Freddie, I'd like you to meet," Gwendolyn paused a moment and smiled—"Pablo."

The newcomer frowned. "Pablo?" But he quickly recovered his smile and extended his hand to Freddie.

RALPH MENDELSON

“Paul,” he said. “Paul Morgenstern.”

Freddie rose from the table and shook the man’s hand.
“Pleased to meet you,” he said.

A WORLD OF GOOD

SHE CRIED WHENEVER SHE TALKED about their last night on the *Titanic*, the last night of their honeymoon.

“It’s all right, Claire,” Mother would say. “It’s all in the past—now. Just don’t think about it.”

“But I can’t *stop* thinking about it.” It was like pushing against a heavy spring; the harder she tried to suppress the memory, the stronger it became.

She had been so utterly ashamed that she had sworn to herself never to tell anyone. But the strain had become too great, and she had told Mother.

“It was when they told the women and children to get into lifeboats, and they told the men to wait. If you could have seen his face, Mother!”

She would never forget that moment. She had read in Wilbur’s eyes what was going to happen. She had seen it in the expression on his face. She knew that he was about to die, and she knew that she would live, and her heart had leapt with joy.

“But darling,” Mother said, “you couldn’t help it.”

Claire stared at her Mother through teary eyes. “But Mother, what kind of person *am* I?”

“You’re a fine, normal young lady.”

Claire shook her head. “To want my husband to die?”

“It was a crazy, irrational thought, and it lasted only a moment.”

“But it was *my* thought, Mother. It lasted only a moment, but it came from *me*.”

They were sitting side by side on the sofa, Claire’s head resting on her mother’s shoulder. Mother ran her hand softly over Claire’s head. “Everyone has thoughts like that sometimes, Claire. Everyone. They’re not nice thoughts, but everyone has them.”

“But Mother, not when you see your husband going to his death.” Claire raised her head and looked into her mother’s eyes. “Why should I be alive and not him?”

Mother pressed Claire’s head gently down till it rested once more on her shoulder. “There, there, darling. It’s all right.”

“How could I have felt happy? It’s so awful! And now he’s dead, Mother. He’s dead. Oh, dear God, he’s dead!”

Claire had never before realized what death meant. She had been an infant when Father died. Now she knew: death meant waking up in an empty bed crying, knowing she had wronged the man who had shared the bed with her. They had been married less than eight weeks, but waking up alone, knowing that he had as much right to be there as she had—she began each day wondering if she could find the strength to go on.

Telling Mother, talking with her about it, helped relieve the pressure. Mother was one of only two bright spots in the night of her despondency. The other was her certainty of her love for Wilbur. However evil the thought that had crossed her mind, she knew that she loved him with a pure and intense love.

That love had passed through the ordeal of Wilbur's lust and remained as bright and pure as ever. She knew he could not help having the animal passions that drove him to it. In a way, she felt sorry for him. Perhaps she felt a kind of superiority because of her freedom from the baser passions. But, be that as it may, she knew he had the right, and she knew that she had the duty to accord him his right.

That night, the very night of the disaster, he had left the lights on. "So I can see how beautiful you are."

That was his right as her husband. He was a kind and gentle man; if animal passion sometimes overpowered him, it was only right that she submit. But she closed her eyes. She did not want to see his flushed face. She closed her eyes to see in her mind the Wilbur she loved and had married.

Afterwards, as he lay beside her, breathing heavily in his sleep, she wondered . . .

She lay on her back staring at the ceiling. She felt numb all over. She kept seeing Wilbur—standing beside her in the church, his hair slicked back, his face radiant, looking handsome as only Wilbur could, in his cutaway with the gray ascot held in place by his pearl stickpin—walking down the aisle together, the church filled with their friends. She saw him sitting erect, handsomely correct, on his horse as they rode out together to the hunt—so handsome in his pinks and glistening black top hat—she, sitting side-saddle, half facing him. She fell off—in her reverie, half asleep, she felt a bump, and she could even hear it, and she saw Wilbur running to help her, his face flushed with his effort to save her, his eyes blazing with fear that she may have been hurt.

She was awake now. She must have fallen asleep, and the dream-fall had awakened her. She was wondering how long she had lain there when she heard a rapping on the stateroom door. She sat up quickly.

Yes, someone was rapping on the door. "Who is it?"

"Steward, ma'am. May I come in?"

"But we're in bed."

To her amazement, the steward opened the door and walked right in. "Sorry to disturb you, ma'am, but the captain's ordered everyone on deck with lifebelts on."

"Is something wrong?"

"I'm afraid there is."

Wilbur was up, now. "But what's wrong?" he asked. "What could be wrong?"

"I don't exactly know, sir. The ship—I think the ship's in trouble."

"But lifebelts? That's ridiculous," Wilbur said. "The ship can't sink."

"I'm sorry, sir. Captain's orders. And you'd better wear the warmest clothes you have. It's bitter cold out there." The man left, closing the door behind him.

They dressed quickly but carefully. Claire wore a heavy woolen dress and her leopard coat; Wilbur wore a sweater under his suit coat and put his chesterfield over that.

The people on deck seemed more bewildered than frightened. On such a clear, still night, it was hard to believe that the ship could be sinking. The deck felt no less solid than before. Besides, the ship could not sink. Everyone in the world knew that the ship could not sink. And the lights were on. It seemed important that the lights were on, because as long as the lights were on, everything was all right, and if everything was all right, the ship could not sink.

Some uniformed men were ordering people about. "Over here! Women and children over here!" She recognized some as ship's officers and guessed that others were members of the crew.

She was holding Wilbur's hand when an officer ran up to

them and pushed Wilbur aside. "Men over there. Here, lady, you get in that one." He took her arm and led her toward a group of women who were being helped into a lifeboat.

When she glanced back at Wilbur she realized for the first time what it meant. She knew that he was about to die, and she knew that she would live. She knew that she was free—and that was when the unforgettable feeling of joy had flashed through her mind.

Mother was away when Claire read in the paper the story of Mrs. Straus, who had gone down with the ship. Mrs. Straus had refused to get into a life boat because they were only letting women and children into the boats. She said she preferred to die with her husband than to live without him.

When Mother came home that afternoon, she found Claire lying on the sofa. Claire complained of sharp pains through her chest, and she could hardly breath. The doctor ordered her to bed, where she stayed for five days.

At the end of that time, Mother induced her to take a walk. The spring air felt good. Mother walked vigorously, and Claire, weak from her days in bed, had a hard time keeping up.

"I've written Cousin Hepzibah to see if you couldn't spend the summer with them."

"Fine," Claire replied with no feeling whatever.

"They say it's beautiful in Montana."

A dull, "Yes."

They continued walking in silence. Claire felt dwarfed by her mother, who carried herself erect, as she always did. Claire's friends had always told her that her posture was just like her mother's, but now she felt slumped and small and worthless next to her mother's imposing figure.

"Let's walk over to Schrafft's and have something wicked to eat," Mother suggested.

Claire already had something wicked in the pit of her stomach, and she could never get it out. Never.

When she tried to think of something else, the vision of the sinking ship filled her mind. From the life boat they could see the ship's stern high in the air, the bow already buried in the water. It seemed poised there forever, like a huge, erect penis, but finally it slid forward and disappeared into the deep. It was an ugly vision.



Two weeks later, when Claire came down to dinner, Mother said, "I have a letter from Hepzibah. She says she'd be glad to have you visit. You can stay all summer."

Claire paused a while before she weakly answered, "I don't think I've got the strength for the trip."

"Of course you have, Claire. You love to ride. A summer in the west will do you a world of good."

"I'm sure it would, Mother."

"Think what it did for Teddy Roosevelt."

Claire felt too weak to reply.

"You're a Hargrove, Claire. Hargroves are strong."

Mother really believed that. Mother was a Hargrove. A Hargrove came ashore at Plymouth rock, endured that first, disastrous winter, and lived to subdue the land. Hargroves drove back the Indians and drove out the British. Hargroves sailed the high seas all over the globe and amassed a huge fortune. Hargroves could do anything.



Claire found the long train ride from New York to Billings depressing. But at least she had a drawing room, with its private

lavatory and its solid, steel door, so that she did not have to talk with boring fellow passengers, and she was safe from mashers. It was cool enough to keep the windows closed, but even then, black soot made its way into the compartment and covered everything, so that she always felt dirty.

She arrived in Billings on a cheerful June day and was met by Cousin Hepzibah and her husband, Hartley Winfield, neither of whom she had ever met before. Hepzibah wore a beige shirt and a voluminous brown skirt that was enough shorter than the skirts in vogue in New York to show quite a bit of her boots above the ankle. Hepzibah and Hartley both had sparkly eyes that belied their gray hair. Hartley sported a neatly trimmed, gray mustache. Before he greeted Claire, he removed the short-stemmed pipe from his mouth.

After their greetings, Hepzibah said, "Your mother tells me you're quite a rider."

"I hope to ride quite a bit while I'm out here."

"You'll need riding clothes."

"Oh, I brought them with me."

Hepzibah laughed. "We don't ride sidesaddle here. You'll need a skirt like this." And she stood with her feet apart to show the skirt was divided so that she could ride cross-saddle.

"Oh." Claire blushed at her ignorance.

"I don't ride any more because of my back, but I wear a skirt like this all the time. You'll find it more comfortable than your hobble skirt. Out here, we think freedom of movement is more important than fashion. You won't find us very stylish."

Hepzibah said it in such a friendly way that Claire was able to laugh at herself.

"We'd better get you something while we're in town. There isn't much you can buy out near us."

When they had completed their shopping, they drove the

sixty-three miles to the Winfields' ranch in Hartley's big Cadillac touring car with the top down. They laughed a lot, holding on to their broad-brimmed hats while Hartley joked about the dangers of being attacked by red Indians. Mother had been right: the breezy informality of these strange, new, Wild West cousins lightened the burden that had been weighing her down.

When they topped the last ridge, Claire got her first sight of the ranch—a great sprawling place in the fertile valley below them. It was easy to identify the neat white ranch house and the barns, but there were several smaller buildings Claire did not recognize. She saw hundreds of cattle, and she marveled to see cowboys wearing the very clothes they always wore in the Wild West shows at home. Claire had always thought of those clothes as costumes—like the costumes any other performers might wear. But here were real, honest-to-goodness cowboys dressed up like stage cowboys.

Hartley had the stable boy saddle up an old horse named Warrior, so that Claire could get used to western style riding. Although she had not ridden astride since she was a young girl and had never before even seen a western saddle or bridle, in two days she graduated to friskier horses

“This is wonderful,” she said to Hepzibah. “I want to ride every day.”

“It's up to you, Claire. You have the run of the place. You can do whatever you want.”

“It's so inviting. All this open space, and the wonderful, new—I don't know what to say. It's all so strange and beautiful and wonderful. And wonderful horses.”

Her back injury prevented Hepzibah from riding, and Hartley was usually too busy to join Claire, but he rode with her the first few days to familiarize her with the country.

“I was joking about the Indians, of course,” he said. “They're

all friendly. Lots of folks think it brings good luck to see them on the trail. If you ever see any, just wave.”

After Claire learned where she could go without danger of getting lost, she usually went out by herself. She could handle her horse easily, now, and she rode hard; the harder she rode, the freer she felt from the guilt, which, though milder than before, still haunted her.

She always felt exhilarated after a long, hard ride. She would stable the horse herself, and help the stable boy put the tack away. Then she would walk with confident strides to the ranch house and join Hepzibah and Hartley in a drink before dinner.

Returning to the ranch after a ride one day in early August, Claire knew, as she entered the room, that something had changed, something that would change her life. A tall man, wearing blue jeans and boots and a checked shirt, stood with his back to the empty fireplace, a glass in his hand, smiling at her with clear blue eyes that bespoke honesty and openness. A thrill ran down her spine.

“This is Craig Nordstrom,” Hepzibah said. “Craig, this is cousin Claire, whom I was telling you about.”

Craig bowed ever so slightly. “Pleased to meet you, ma’am.”

When Claire took her glass and sat down, Craig sat down, too.

“Do you live near here, Mr. Nordstrom?” Claire asked.

He smiled. “Home is where I hang my hat.”

Hartley put his pipe down and explained: “Craig’s staying with the Murdocks.” Then he turned to Craig. “How long you figure you’ll be here this time, Craig?”

Still looking at Claire, Craig said, “I’ll be here a long time.”

Hepzibah had told him about Claire’s daily rides. “I’d like to join you some time,” he said to Claire. “Maybe I can show you parts of the country you’ve never seen.”

“Join me tomorrow.”

He did, and they rode for hours through the wild countryside. Claire liked the way he dressed. He wore the informal clothes of the cowboy, a Stetson hat, his shirt open at the throat, and a colorful bandanna tied loosely around his neck. She liked the tan, weather-beaten look of his skin, and she liked his straight, blonde hair. So different from Wilbur. Both sat their horses well, but somehow she remembered Wilbur as stiffly formal, while Craig, who sat just as erect as Wilbur, seemed relaxed. And Wilbur's clothes had been formal, too—his clean, well-pressed pinks and well-shined boots. Craig's clothes looked clean enough, but—well used.

“That was fun,” Claire said when they got back.

“I'd like to do it again.”

“Any time. I ride almost every day.”

He reappeared two days later and three times during the following week. On Monday of the third week, she encountered him along the trail not far from the Winfield ranch.

“Mind if I join you?” he asked.

“I'd love it.”

“I thought we might cause less gossip if I just met you out here sometimes instead of at Hartley's.”

Claire smiled at the thought, but it did have merit. There were not many neighbors to gossip, but there were a few, so why risk it? And she did not know what the Winfields would think of her riding with Craig more than two or three times a week.

He led her into wild country of breathtaking beauty. They often took a picnic lunch along and ate beside a stream or under the shade of a clump of trees in a world in which they seemed to be the only inhabitants.

Claire grew more curious about Craig as time went on. They

had been riding together for more than a month when she asked again, where he lived.

“Wherever I can find someone to take me.”

“But what do you do?”

“Whatever I can to help.” He smiled to indicate that he understood her question better than his laconic answer suggested. “I’m a blacksmith, among other things. I had my own shop for a while, but that was too confining. I’m a pretty good carpenter, too—and tinker. There’s always something I can do to help out.”

She was afraid to look at him when she asked, “Don’t you ever think of settling down?”

“Of course I do.” Then, with a twinkle in his blue eyes, “Specially when I get caught in a blizzard a thousand miles from civilization.” More seriously, and more quietly, he added, “If I ever found the right woman, I’d settle down.”

Claire tried to get more information from Hepzibah and Hartley.

“Has he ever stayed here? With you?”

“Of course,” Hartley replied. “Four or five times.”

“He’s out riding with me so often—how can he do enough work to pay for his keep?”

“Well,” Hartley said, tamping the tobacco in his pipe, “it isn’t just a matter of pay. Everybody likes Craig. We just like having him around. He does what he can, and he can be a big help, but the real thing is just—well, I guess you’d say it’s the pleasure of his company.”

“He said he’s a blacksmith.”

“That’s right,” Hepzibah put in.

Hartley grinned. “Works with iron. There’s stories around that he sometimes works with his shooting irons.”

“Oh,” Hepzibah scoffed, “I don’t believe that.”

“Well I don’t say I believe it. But I don’t say I disbelieve it, either.”

Craig had worn a gun belt only two or three times when he had been with Claire. She did not know what to think.

Before she could pull her thoughts together, Hartley, obviously changing the subject, said, “It’s just pleasant being with somebody who enjoys life for what it is, not for what he can get out of it.”

“But isn’t that the same thing?” Claire asked.

“Well,” Hartley said, poking into the bowl of his pipe with the blunt end of a match, “maybe I should have said, ‘what he can get out of *you*.’”

“He gets a place to stay,” Claire said.

“Yeah, but he’s not after money. He gets a place to stay, and he gets three squares, but he’s not after money, the way most people are. It doesn’t seem to mean anything to him.”

“But he must get money somewhere. He’s got to buy clothes, if nothing else.”

“I suppose he picks up paying jobs here and there. But whenever he stops here, he never asks for anything.”

“That’s right,” Hepzibah put in, “but you always give him something.”

Hartley shrugged. “I guess you’re right.”



Claire had been reluctant to take the trip west, and her mother had worked hard to convince her to stay in Montana till September. But now, feeling freer every day from the incubus that had soured her life, she wanted to stay longer. Her rides with Craig may have influenced her, too. Hartley had been right about “the pleasure of his company.”

“We’d love to have you stay longer,” Hepzibah said, when Claire broached the subject. “We like having you here. We’d like to have you stay forever.”

“Thank you, Hepzibah.”

“It’s a lonely life without children. That’s my one regret in life. You’re a little older than our children would have been, if we’d ever been lucky enough to have children, but . . .”

After an exchange of telegrams with New York, Claire and her mother agreed that she could stay till late November. She promised to be home for Thanksgiving.

When Claire showed her the telegram, Hepzibah studied it a time—longer, it seemed, than necessary. “I’m a little concerned,” she said at last.

Claire raised her eyebrows.

“You’re a grown woman, but somehow I feel some responsibility.”

“What is it, Hepzibah?”

“Craig.”

“Craig? What about Craig?”

“He comes here a couple of times a week to ride with you.”

“He’s a good riding companion.”

“Well, I don’t know how to say this, Claire, and I don’t mean to snoop into things that aren’t any of my business, and I don’t want to tell you what to do, but—well, he meets you other days, too. The two of you are together every day.”

Claire blushed. “Not *every* day, Hepzibah.”

“More than the two of you let on.”

Claire nodded. “I guess.”

“I trust you, Claire, and even if I didn’t, it isn’t any of my business, but don’t you think it’s odd? The secrecy, I mean?”

“We were—well, we thought maybe it would look better if people didn’t know we were together so much.”

“People don’t care. At least I don’t, and Hartley doesn’t. In fact, we’d feel better if it was all out in the open.”

“Thanks, Hepzibah. I’ll see that it is from now on.”

“There’s one more thing.”

“What?”

“You remember the other day, Hartley said that Craig doesn’t care about money?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I think Hartley’s right. But we don’t know Craig so very well, and, well, Craig doesn’t have two nickels to rub together as far as anyone knows.”

“But what’s that got to do with me?”

“Sophie Murdock told me the other day that Craig said something about you—I don’t remember just what—but something that made it clear that he knows you’ve got money.”

“Oh, Hepzibah, you needn’t worry about that.”

“But if he really doesn’t care about money, why did he mention it?”

“Well, I—I’m not in love with Craig, Hepzibah, and I’m not going to fall in love with him.”

“I didn’t mean to overstep.”

“I understand. But—well, I like riding with Craig. He’s good company, and he’s a marvelous rider. But that’s all there is to our—what would you say?—friendship?”

“I think . . .”

Claire smiled. “Believe me, Hepzibah, I can take care of myself.”

“I’m sure you can, Claire, but—you know—you’re a widow—and young and attractive and rich. And Craig’s the only single man around here the right age for you. And he *is* a handsome man, something of a romantic man, with his roaming about and no one knowing very much about him.”

They had been standing, facing each other. Hepzibah threw

her arms around Claire and hugged her. “I just don’t want anything to happen—that you’d regret later.”

Claire returned the hug. “It won’t.”

“It’s so easy to make a mistake.”

“Thanks, Hepzibah.”

They did not speak about it again, but Claire suggested to Craig that it was foolish for them to conceal the amount of time they spent together. “Nobody cares what you and I do. And it’s becoming a big, fat bore.”

Craig smiled his charming smile and doffed his hat. “I was only trying to protect the lady’s honor.”

Secrecy had been fun at first; now Claire found their new freedom even more fun. Craig appeared every day that he had not promised to do some job for Fred Murdock, and after their ride, he always joined Claire and the Winfields for their late afternoon drink.

One fine September day Craig led Claire up a hill in the midst of a broad valley. She had never been in that part of the valley before, and had never seen the hill. Although it was not very high, it gave them a breathtaking view of the mountains.

Awed by the beauty of the place, it was all Claire could do to whisper, “This is gorgeous.”

“The hill’s called ‘Craig’s Claim.’”

“After you?”

He laughed softly. “No. No one seems to know who it was named after. But that’s what they call it.”

“Let’s picnic here,” she said.

Craig tethered the horses while Claire found a grassy spot shaded by a copse of stunted trees to lay out the picnic.

Before they sat down to lunch, Craig called her.

“Look,” he said, pointing to a spot far away. “Down by the river.”

She peered down the long valley, searching along the winding river. There, she saw them, six horsemen riding single file away from them.

“Indians,” Craig said. “Sioux.”

She stared at them in silence. It wasn't just that the Indians were in the far distance and were riding away from them, or the memory of Hartley's telling her that they were all friendly, and that seeing them on the trail would bring good luck that gave her the assurance of safety; it was Craig's body against hers, as they stood side by side on the hill. He had put his arm around her—for the first time.

“Is the picnic ready?” he asked.

She did not want it to end. “How far away do you suppose they are?”

“I know that bend in the river. It's over three miles.”

“It's true what they say about the wide open spaces in the west,”

“They're wide all right.”

“Enormous,” she said.

“Huge.”

“Vast.”

“Immense.”

She was enjoying the game. “Gigantic.”

Craig smiled. “Tremendous.”

“Colossal.”

“Titanic.”

The sky crashed down and the earth dissolved and a heavy pain crunched through her chest. She threw her arms around Craig and clutched him tightly to save herself, and she clamped her eyes shut to close out the horrifying vision. She heard him ask, “What's wrong?” and she shook her head to say that nothing was wrong—but everything was wrong, everything in the world

was wrong except his strong arms holding her and squeezing out the ugliness, and that was right

He kissed the top of her head, and he held her so hard against him that it hurt. She did not care. That kind of hurt would save her. She needed his strength.

His hands were groping her body, but she did not care.

She did not care what he did, because whatever he did was right. It was right, it was right, and she dissolved into an ecstasy she had never dreamed of.

She clung to him as they lay near the forgotten picnic. The mists slowly parted, and she drifted gently back to earth. She felt renewed—restored to life—as though his strength had passed into her and made her whole.

“You told me you love me,” she said, separating from him far enough to look into his face.

“I don’t say things unless I mean them.”

“But what did you mean?”

“That I love you.”

“Forever?”

“Forever’s a long time. Could you put up with a worthless, shiftless fellow like me forever?”

“Yes. Forever.”

“I’ll love you as long as you’ll have me. And I hope that’s forever.”

“Does that mean marriage?” she asked.

“If you’ll have me.”

“I want to live out here. With you.”

“There’s a place for sale just a few miles down the road from Hartley’s.”

She laughed. “So the rolling stone has finally come to rest.”

“It’s about time, don’t you think?”

“Yes, dear.”

"I always said I'd settle down when I found the right woman."

After a while, Claire said, "I wonder what Hepzibah will think."

"You know she'll be pleased."

"We'll go back and tell her together."

"Good. Let's eat our lunch and then go back."

When they stood up, Claire said, "What in the world happened to your shirt?"

Craig looked down. In their passion, he had caught something in the front of his shirt and torn it down the entire front. A large, triangular piece of the shirt hung down over his belt, exposing a large triangle of bare chest.

He laughed. "That would be easier to explain to Hepzibah if I hadn't torn your skirt."

Claire held her skirt out to survey the damage. Claire laughed, too. "We can't go back looking like this."

"I'm sorry. I didn't notice."

"What'll we do?"

They discussed it over their lunch. Craig came up with the best suggestion. "Let's not go back together. I'll go back to Murdock's, and we'll put off the announcement till Hepzibah's party. You can tell her you tore it on some old oak branch."

"Tomorrow's a long time to wait, but I'll try. It won't be easy."

"I promised Murdock I'd help him fix his rig tomorrow. I'll come over with him and Sophie. With all those people there it'll be a grand announcement. More—official, you might say."

"I hope I can keep the secret that long."

After they separated, Claire worked on her story.

"Good lord, what happened to you?" Hepzibah asked when Claire walked into the room.

“We had some excitement. Craig shot a coyote. It took me and Tasker by surprise, so Tasker got spooked. He ran through a clump of oaks. I must have snagged my skirt on a branch. But I didn’t get hurt, thank fortune.”

The next day she rode out early to kill time till Craig would appear, and she stayed out long enough for him to arrive before her. She wanted to walk into the ranch house and see him standing with his back to the fireplace, a glass in his hand, his blue eyes sparkling, just as she had seen him on that very first day.

But he was not there.

All the other guests were there—ten of them, including the Murdocks.

“Where’s Craig?”

“He left this morning,” Fred Murdock replied.

“Left?”

“He does that kind of thing,” Hartley explained. “He sent his regrets. We got buffalo steak just for him, so he sends his regrets.”

“But—is he coming later?”

Fred Murdock laughed. “Hell, he’s half way to Arizona by now.”

One of the other men said, “That’s the way Craig is. You never know when he’ll show up, and you never know when he’ll disappear.”

“But—when will he come back?”

“Next year, maybe,” Hartley said, striking a match to light his pipe. “Maybe never.”

Hepzibah jumped up in alarm. “What’s wrong?”

Claire had sunk into a chair and bent forward, clutching her chest. “I don’t know. I—I can’t breath.”

“You’d better lie down a while. We’ll get the doctor.”

Hepzibah helped her to her room. Hartley telephoned for the doctor, but it would be hours before he could get there. When he did, he could only prescribe rest.

Claire lay in bed three days and three nights, reliving that hour on Craig's Claim over and over and over and over. She could remember clearly every word they had spoken, but she saw their actions only confusedly, as though they had occurred in a dream. As she remembered them now, Craig's words seemed guarded, evasive; as she remembered their actions, it slowly dawned on her that Craig himself may have torn their clothes to provide an excuse for not going directly to Hepzibah. But had he? Knowing that she would never know intensified her anguish.

After three days in bed, Claire appeared in the dining room when Hepzibah and Hartley were eating breakfast. They both rose and helped her to a seat.

Hepzibah felt her forehead. "You don't feel feverish, but you sure look pale."

"I'm all right," Claire said feebly.

Hartley assumed a hale-fellow manner. "When you can get out on that horse, you'll be fine. Why don't you take old Warrior till you feel sure of yourself again?"

Claire smiled. She seemed to be regaining her strength as they watched. "You've both been so kind to me. I hate to leave, I promised Mother I'd be home for Thanksgiving."

"Hey," Hartley said, "what are you talking about? That's over a month away."

"We don't want you to leave," Hepzibah said, "even then."

"I have one request before I leave. I've learned a lot about living on a ranch. I've learned to ride western style, and I've learned that cowboys do more than just gallop around shooting at bad guys and Indians. I want to learn one more thing."

“What’s that?”

She turned to Hartley. “To shoot a revolver.”

“That’s easy.” He puffed on his pipe. “Just takes a little practice if you want to be good.”

The pistol range that Hartley had built years ago behind the barn had been neglected, but he found some old paper targets and a couple pieces of lumber for a backboard.

He showed her how to break the revolver open and load it. “Now the important thing is not to pull the trigger, just squeeze it.”

She sighted down the barrel and squeezed the trigger very slowly, holding her breath to maintain her aim. The shot sounded far louder than she had expected and the gun kicked her hand up and back, but when they looked at the target, she had put the bullet right through the bull’s-eye.

She braced herself for the shock of the report and the kick of the gun, and the next five shots went wild.

Hartley took the pipe out of his mouth. “That’s the way it always goes. First, beginner’s luck, then everything goes wrong.”

She laughed.

“But don’t worry. With practice, you can hit the bull’s-eye every time.”

She developed a new routine: Every morning she practiced shooting for a half hour. Later she would ride. At first she took old Warrior and loped slowly through the hills, but soon she was riding Tasker more furiously than ever. She would come back earlier than she had before so she could practice shooting a while before dinner.

When she got so that she hit the bull’s-eye most of the time, Hartley showed her how to practice a quick draw. She would stand with the revolver in its holster; Hartley stood nearby, his pipe in his hand. She would never know when he would call, “Now!” but the instant he did, she would draw and fire as quickly as she could.

Three weeks after Craig had disappeared, her period began.

The general malaise she always felt at that time, together with the sheer relief of knowing that she had not ruined her life, brought on a feeling of utter exhaustion, and she slept the whole day through. She spent the next few days practicing shooting without ever riding away from the ranch. It happened that Hartley was not busy, and he worked with her.

“I found an old target that Craig made several years ago. Let’s use that.”

Craig had made the target from two boards nailed together with slats. He had carved the boards to form the silhouette of a man. It was crude, but recognizable, and it was almost exactly Craig’s height. The boards had silvered with age and weather, but Craig had painted a red heart in the appropriate place.

“Here’s what we’ll do: You turn your back, and I’ll move the target to a new place. You won’t know where it is till I call ‘Now!’ and you turn.”

She would spin around, her face a study in concentration, and fire at the target.

Hartley would laugh. “You’re going to shoot that poor devil’s heart out.”



Two days before Claire left to return home, Hartley gave her a thirty-eight caliber revolver for a going-away present.

“What kind of a gift is that?” Hepzibah asked. “For a New Yorker!”

“It’s a perfect gift,” Hartley replied. “It means she’s got to come back here to use it.”

Claire smiled at the dull black lethal machine resting in her hand.

Hartley held a burning match to his pipe. "A forty-five's too big for a woman. And those nickel plated guns aren't practical. You don't want the sun reflecting off your gun when you're trying to aim."

Despite Hepzibah's mock objection, it turned out that she had bought Claire a gun belt and holster. Claire wore it the next day when she rode out on Tasker for the last time.

She rode to Craig's Claim and climbed to the top. She tethered her horse to the scrubby tree that Craig had used. Standing at the top of the hill, on the same spot where they had stood together, she looked out over the vast wilderness.

Vast, yes, but barren. She saw it now for what it was: a desert. A titanic waste.

She drew her revolver from its holster and fired six rounds into the goddamned, smug, indifferent sky.



During the long train ride from New York to Billings, Claire had been engrossed in a book. She had hoped to finish it on her return trip, but her mind wandered, and she spent much of her time simply staring out the window of her drawing room.

On the last morning of her journey home, Claire woke up to a world transformed. Bright light filtered around the edges of the opaque window shade, and when she raised the shade, the white magic of snow covered everything but the broad, gray expanse of the Hudson River. This was home country. Her heart leapt with joy.

The gloomy, cavernous station with its railroad-station smell felt homey to Claire as she stepped off the train. Looking far down the platform, she saw Mother walking rapidly toward her. Even in her haste, Mother walked with the upright, dignified carriage that set her apart. Claire ran to meet her.

RALPH MENDELSON

They threw their arms around each other, and Claire closed her eyes to blot out everything in the world but her mother's embrace.

"Oh, Claire! It's so good to have you back!"

"It's good to be back."

"Let me have a look at you," Mother said. She held Claire at arm's length, and looked her up and down. "You look wonderful."

"I feel wonderful."

"Oh, Claire! Claire! I haven't seen you smile like that for—it seems like years."

Claire made no attempt to reply.

"I just *knew* the trip would do you a world of good."

"Yes, Mother," Claire said. "It did me a world of good."

PRELUDE IN FRANCE, JUNE 6, 1918

GENERAL PERSHING KNEW THE WAR could not be won in the trenches. For over a year he had withstood continuous pressure from the Allies to send his men into the trenches to replace exhausted French and British troops. He held firm; the Americans marched into training camps, where they underwent thorough training in open warfare. They would fight under their own officers, in American Divisions. Only they, unwearied from years in the trenches, could break through to final victory. The French, who had welcomed the first American troops enthusiastically, became dejected. They drew little solace from the token Americans sent to the front lines for combat experience, then withdrawn for further training.

Then, in the spring of 1918, Ludendorff launched his spring offensive, shattering the Allied lines in three places, bulging into French territory that had not seen war since the dark days of 1914. The Germans reached the Marne, less than a hundred miles from Paris. They would cross the river at the ancient town of Chateau-Thierry, a few miles from the battlefield of Chalons-

sur-Marne, where, in 451, the allied armies of the Romans and Visigoths had stopped the westward thrust of Attila's Huns. But Pershing changed his plans with the changed circumstances; he offered his troops to be used anywhere, and in any way, that the French thought best. An American machine-gun battalion was rushed by motor truck to Chateau-Thierry and stopped the German advance. The Germans had outrun their supplies; they had lost many men. Ludendorff, having surveyed his position, concluded that he had a month to bring up supplies and to strengthen his lines with fresh troops before resuming his "peace offensive" that was to win the war. But he had underestimated his new foe. Pershing, without authority to order an attack himself, prevailed upon the French General Degoutte to order the American offensive. The American First Division attacked successfully at Cantigny. The Second Division, which included the Marine Brigade, went into the line northwest of Chateau-Thierry.

And so George Eybler found himself walking through a field of wheat flecked with blood—red poppies still glistening with the morning dew. A noise, something like distant thunder, caused him to glance up at the sky to his left. He saw the newly-risen sun shining big; it would be a hot day. The clear morning air felt good to breathe; he breathed deeply, till he could feel his ribs stretch. A few hundred yards before him lay the peaceful shade of a little wood. He peered wonderingly into the shadows, as he walked forward at a steady, determined pace.

It felt good to be alive in the sunshine of a spring day in France. How would it feel to be dead, lying in the wheat, or in the dark woods beyond? Sweat—dirty from the dirt of the woods where he had lived for the past two days—covered his pale face. He didn't want to be there. He didn't want to go into the woods ahead. But he continued his determined pace.

—This is it! he thought. Christ! This is it! They'll get us sure. Jesus! They can't help getting us!

The long wave of Marines continued its inexorable march toward the woods. A thousand fixed bayonets gleamed in the morning sun. The dress was right; George glanced at Trent, marching beside him. Anxiety forced him to keep even with Trent. He felt a tightening at his throat. He thought of the old joke from boot camp, a hundred years ago on the other side of the world.

—What can happen? If I get killed, I won't know a thing. If I live, there's nothing to worry about.

The Marines advanced in four successive waves, as their French instructors had taught them. The French had developed this technique from the experience of four years of trench warfare, where they had only had short distances to go, and where the chances of getting there were slim in any case. Four waves of men advancing in a line that presented an easy mark for the machine-gunners hidden in the woods—if the gunners missed enough of them, or ran out of ammunition, or had trouble with their gun, one of the waves would break over the machine-gun nest, then advance to the next one in the same way. Within the day, the Marines learned that this method of attack did not suit open warfare, and they developed other, more suitable, techniques. But they had to learn. And George marched in the first wave.

—Nothing to worry about—unless you're crippled—like Gramps at Shiloh.



Gramps had talked to the three of them. The Three Musketeers, they called themselves: George, Terry Hendershot,

and Paul Deventer. He had talked to them all their lives. Ever since the first grade, they had gathered at the Eybler home to hear Gramps' stories about The War. Their eyes goggled as he described a glorious cavalry charge that he had never seen, or told of feats of bravery unmatched by anything he had ever heard of. As they grew older—and Gramps grew older, too—he told them about the lesser, truer, more important things: the friendships he had formed under the stress of war with men he had never heard from since; the terror of the retreat from Belmont; the cold and the wet and the hunger of the campaign against Donelson; the panic of that Sunday morning near Shiloh Church. But they liked best his stories about Grant, the little, slouchy general in the private's uniform—fighting on, unperturbed whether things were going well or ill. *They* would ride, three gallant generals together, unperturbed through the smoke and fire of battle.

When the war came, Gramps encouraged them to sign up. “Join up now. What they need is men like you; men that know what the war's all about.” They had often discussed politics and the war in Europe with him. “If you want the world made safe for democracy, then you help make it safe!” They didn't have much to say. War seemed different, now that they might actually be in one themselves. “Don't wait for someone else to do the job. It won't get done if everybody waits for everybody else.” Their parents didn't like their talking with Gramps. They saw the crippled old man as an evil influence, tearing their children away from home to send them to their death. “You've talked about it; now put up or shut up!” Gramps drew them to him with the fascination of horror. “Join the Marines. That's a real fighting outfit. Get in where you can do the most good.”

Long before they reached Parris Island, they had stopped calling themselves The Three Musketeers. They didn't talk about

dropping the name, they just dropped it. And they didn't talk about saving the world for democracy. Nobody talked that way. Instead they sang:

“Goodby Ma, goodbye Pa,
Goodby mule with yer old hee-haw,
I may not know what the war's about
But you bet, by gosh, I'll soon find out. . . .”

At first George and Paul tried to help Terry, but they couldn't do any good. Then they tried to avoid him. They felt personally disgraced when Terry was sent home. They tried all the harder to be the good soldiers that Gramps had told them about. They did everything the other men did except gripe about doing it. Beefing seemed to be part of the ritual, part of being a soldier, but they thought of Terry, and listened in silent shame to the other men's complaints.

Then the long trip in the transport with nothing to do except think: think about how helpless they were against the submarine that might send a torpedo against them without any warning; think of the homes, the families they had left behind; think about the future—but more about the past. George would lie in his bunk, reviewing his past in a vain attempt to find the answer to the puzzles of life that floated nebulously through his mind. First came Mom. At nineteen, George had not fully grown away from Mom.

—Emily. Funny name for a mother. And why does she always cry? Mom. That sounds more like her. I should always do the right thing. Then why cry when I leave for the Marines? If that isn't the right thing, what is? Emily-mom didn't raise her boy to be a soldier. Maybe that's why I joined the toughest service of them all.

He thought of school, his teachers, his companions,

graduation, and the job at the factory with Dad. Dad was a brick. Would he get back with Dad and learn to be a machinist—maybe an engineer? Then he thought of Terry, and he turned away from the men around him as he felt the hot flush of embarrassment rise over his face.

France. George and Paul had talked about traveling ever since they could remember. They tried to see something of this strange country, but they saw mostly mud and dirty billets. They couldn't speak with the natives, but they listened with an awe they tried hard to conceal to the old Leathernecks tell of Haiti and the Philippines and other exotic lands that conjured up the feelings of Gramps' bugle calls and cavalry charges. They crowded into railroad cars that everyone noticed were marked to hold either forty men or eight horses, and they joined their companions in cursing the fate that had made them men instead of horses. They rode in trucks to training camps where they worked hard at learning to be soldiers. Finally, after almost a year, they filed into the quiet trenches at Verdun. They stood up bravely against the little shelling and the great filth. Then they marched north with their regiment to take part in what came to be known as the Second Battle of the Marne.



The long wave of Marines continued its grim march toward the woods. ("I weep for the families and sweethearts of these Americans," the French General Daugan remarked. "See how they go into battle—as we did in 1914.") George strained to see his enemy; he saw only peaceful-looking woods with the morning sun breaking through the trees here and there. He wondered at the small amount of shelling; less than on a busy day at Verdun. He did not know that the German advance had outrun its guns

and that only a few fieldpieces had been able to catch up. Nor had the American artillery arrived in force. The comparative silence lent a hopeful note. Maybe the Boche had fled! Surely they must have seen the attackers if they were still in the woods! Or were they holding their fire until the Marines came closer?

—If they *are* there, they'll murder us!

Then the Germans opened up. Machine-guns, carefully hidden in the innocent woods, coughed blood into the rigid, advancing ranks. The very first blast cut George's legs out from under him. He pitched forward onto his face. His arms shot out instinctively to break the fall, throwing his rifle ahead. He lay silent, motionless.

The second wave of Marines sprang forward to reinforce the decimated first. The third wave, then the fourth, advanced over the bodies of their comrades, seemingly oblivious of them. George vaguely heard the line of battle move slowly forward. Tall wheat circumscribed his world, but bullets, keening close over his head, drove terror into that little world.

"First aid! Over here! First aid!" But he knew they would not come now. The fighting had not moved far enough on. He buried his head in his arms, closing his eyes to shut out the horror. It didn't hurt much; he felt mostly numb. If he could only move away! If he could get away from the bullets and the shells!

He might have lost consciousness—anyway, the day seemed more advanced, and the sun felt hotter. The heat made him sick and dizzy. He began to notice waves of pain coursing over him, light at first, but each wave a little stronger than the last. As they grew worse, he wondered how long he could hold out against them. He didn't cry out for a long time, even when the pain first seemed unbearable. He forgot the fear of the bullets and the shells. He forgot everything except that they should come and get him and stop the pain!

—It can't stay this way! You pass out before it gets this bad!

The Germans saved what artillery they had for its most important use. They fought off the advancing enemy with small arms, and shelled the reinforcements that their machine-guns couldn't reach. This cut back the reinforcements before they got into striking position. So, as the morning wore on, the shelling in the wheat field increased. George heard the tramp of a column somewhere very close. So he called to them. He heard the rumbling whine of an approaching shell. He heard the men, cursing, throw themselves to the ground. The shell exploded in their midst with a deafening blast, scattering jagged chunks of steel in every direction. The hot, twisted fragments tore easily through human flesh. When the depleted ranks rose to move on, George Eybler lay still, motionless. Only his voice, shrilly, hopelessly crying for help, showed him to be alive.

By early afternoon the Marines had reached their first objective: They had rectified their line in the direction of a little town named Torcy. General Harbord read his dispatches eagerly, then ordered the advance to resume at five o'clock. Until then the Marines rested at the far edge of another wood, gazing across another wheat field into still another wood—their next objective—a black tangle of trees and underbrush covering a rocky hill slashed by deep ravines, that had been maintained in its wild state by wealthy French gentlemen for their hunting preserve. The Germans had fortified it with every fiendish device that four years of bitter war had taught them. It was called Belleau Wood; but after it had been cleared of Germans—it took almost a month of hard fighting and cost 1,811 American lives, although the entire wood covered only three hundred acres—General Degoutte ordered the name changed to Bois de la Brigade de Marine.

As the tide of battle moved slowly forward, the medical

corpsmen followed, salvaging what they could from the wreckage. Two corpsmen laid a stretcher beside George. They quickly, silently, bound his legs to prevent further loss of blood. They turned him over.

“Jeez, Hank, look at that face!”

“Christ!” Hank said, “must have got him twice.”

The other man looked at Hank; Hank read the question in his eyes.

A shell exploded near enough to make the two corpsmen flinch.

“Let’s go,” Hank said, bending over the wounded man.

They lifted him gently onto the stretcher and carried him back, saving thereby what life was left in the mangled body of George Eybler.

AN ACCIDENT

GROWN-UPS KEEP TELLING US we shouldn't fight, but we found out that grown-ups fight all the time. They do it in the house, where they think no one can see them, but our club sees them. We've got these field glasses, and we found two places in the woods behind the houses where we can see into the Ogdens' house and into the Fishers' house, and they can't see us. We found a place where we can see into the Hopewells' house, too, but they don't fight.

Kent Andrews keeps the field glasses, 'cause he's the president of the club. Kent Andrews is my best friend. The first day we moved into our new house, and Mom sent me out into the yard to play, Kent came over. He said, "My name's Kent. What's yours?"

"Joe."

"Let's have a club."

"What's a club?"

"It's when we play in the clubhouse."

"What's a clubhouse?"

“There’s a clubhouse right back there in the woods,”

Kent led me down a path that starts where the grass ends and the woods begin in back of our house. Pretty soon we came to this little wooden building. It was white, and it had a little porch. Kent went inside, and I followed him. There was a window on each side of the house.

“This is cool,” I said.

“Let’s ask your mother if we can have our club here,” Kent said.

Before we went back, Kent showed me how the path kept going in back of the clubhouse, and he showed me another path that crossed it right in front. But they aren’t really paths.

“They’re Indian trails,” Kent said.

“Are there Indians here?”

“Naw,” Kent said, “but there used to be. Lots of them.”

When we asked Mom if we could use the clubhouse for our club, she said, “If you’ll promise me one thing.”

“What?”

“That you don’t wander back into the woods. I don’t want you to get lost.”

“We never go past the creek,” Kent said. “The woods go way back about a thousand miles, and my father said he thinks there’s wild animals on the other side of the creek, so we don’t go across the creek.”

Mom smiled and hugged me against her, the way she does when she’s ‘specially happy about something, and she hugged Kent the same way. “That’s fine, Kent. As long as you don’t go past the creek, you can use the clubhouse for your club.”

When Dad came home, I showed him the clubhouse.

“How would you like a padlock on the door?”

I said, “Sure,” but I didn’t know what a padlock was. I knew I’d find out when Dad put it on the door. He put it on the next

day. He nailed a hasp onto the door jamb, and he told me the names of everything when he did it, and then he gave me two keys: one for me and one for Kent.

Mom collects for the Heart Fund, so she met all our new neighbors. There aren't very many because where we live is a cul-de-sac. Mom said that's what you call it when the street doesn't go anyplace. There's only five houses on each side and one at the end, and there's this real big woods behind the houses on our side of the street.

There's five kids my age on the block: me and Kent and Jenny and Sally and Fatso, but Kent and I were the only members of the club when we were all in first grade. Kent and I had a lot of fun. But the next summer, Mom made us change the rules.

"What are the rules for being in the club?" Mom asked.

"You have to be going into second grade in the fall."

"Jenny and Sally are going into second grade."

I didn't say anything, 'cause I didn't know what to say.

"Why don't you invite them to join your club?"

"But Mom: they're girls!"

"They're very nice girls, and I'm sure you'll have a lot of fun with them."

I didn't say anything, so Mom said, "Why don't you talk it over with Kent. Tell him I'd like to see them in the club."

I know why she wanted the girls in our club. Mom knows everyone on the block, now, and she wants us to be nice to the girls because their mothers are friends of hers. She's always telling Dad what nice people all our neighbors are. At least that's what she says when I'm there. Sometimes, when she thinks I'm not there, I hear her tell Dad some other things, like what a crude man Mr. Ogden is. My brother, Ed, he's in high school, and he told me what "crude" means, and Mom is right. Mr. Ogden is Terry's father, and he's mean to us, just the way Terry is. Terry is crude, too.

And Mom tells Dad about poor Mr. Fisher. That's Fatso's father, and Mom feels sorry for Mr. Fisher and for Fatso. I don't know why. Fatso gives me a pain where a pill can't reach. (I heard my brother Ed say that once, and I know what it means.)

When I told Kent that Mom wanted us to let Jenny and Sally into the club, he said, "Oh, my God!" That's the favorite thing he says when he doesn't like something. Mom told me never to say that. She told me never to take the Lord's name in vain. I asked my brother, Ed, what "vain" means. He said something I couldn't understand, and I think he doesn't know what it means, either. But Kent's my best friend, so I don't care if he says "God," and I won't tell on him, either.

"What should we do?" I asked.

"We've got to let them in. If we don't your mother won't let us use the clubhouse."

That didn't seem fair to me.

"But it's okay," Kent said. "Jenny can beat up any of the boys in our class."

"Yeah."

"And remember when Sally didn't tell on us? When we used to call her 'Red-panties'?"

I remembered. One day after Sunday school, when we were all dressed up, Kent pulled up Sally's skirt, and she was wearing red panties, so we called her "Red-panties." That made her mad, but she never told on us, so we decided to let them in the club.

Maybe it was a good thing we did. One day just after we had a club meeting, we came out and locked the door, and we started to go home, when Terry came up and started bullying us the way he always does. He's two years older than us, and he's a big bully.

"What have you sissies got in your clubhouse?"

Kent said, "It's none of your business," and Terry pushed him so hard he fell down.

Before we could do anything, Terry banged against the door so hard he busted the hasp off.

I yelled, "Get out of there!"

Terry came out. "There's nothing in there anyway but an old cot," he sneered.

Kent was standing up, now, so Terry smacked him in the face and pushed him down again, and called him a sissy.

We were all scared except Jenny Miller. "You leave Kent alone, and you get out of here!" Jenny hollered, and she punched him in the face.

Then we really got scared, 'cause Terry's nose was bleeding.

Terry didn't know what to do, but Jenny didn't care. She's strong, and she wasn't afraid of Terry. "You get this door fixed," she yelled, "or I'll tell my Daddy to call the police."

Terry just stood there. He's strong, but he's dumb, and he didn't know what to do.

"You'll go to reform school for destroying property," Jenny said.

Terry just turned around and went away. That night after supper I was playing with Jenny in her yard when Terry came over.

Terry had the field glasses in his hand, and he gave them to Jenny. "You can have these if you don't tell about the door," he said.

Jenny took the glasses, and she said, "Okay, but leave us alone from now on. I won't tell now, but if you go into our clubhouse again, I will."

Terry grumbled and went away. "I'll bet Terry stole those," I said.

"Of course he did."

"Won't we get in trouble if we keep them?"

"It's better for us to have them than for him," Jenny said.

An Accident

That's how we got the field glasses.

None of the grown-ups know that we have the field glasses. We can't keep them in the clubhouse because the lock's busted, so Kent keeps them in a secret hiding place in his house. After dinner we meet at the clubhouse, and then we spy on the grownups.

Mr. Ogden and Mrs. Ogden fight all the time. They have air conditioning, so they keep the windows closed, but we can see them hollering at each other. Then Mr. Ogden gets red in the face and slaps Mrs. Ogden real hard. Sometimes he knocks her down, and sometimes she just sits down on their big easy chair and cries. She never tries to hit him back or throw something at him the way they do in the funny papers. She just sits and cries. It makes you feel funny to see it. We don't like Mrs. Ogden, mostly because Terry is such a big bully, and we hate Mr. Ogden because he's mean and chases us out of his yard and tells our parents lies about us. I wish Mrs. Ogden would hit him back, like on the top of his head when he's not looking.

Once Mr. Ogden hit Mrs. Ogden so hard they had to take her to the hospital. We didn't see it, but I heard Mom and Dad talking about it. After I went to bed, I heard them talking, and I could tell it was something important they didn't want me to hear, so I sneaked down to the landing where I could listen.

"I feel so sorry for Marie," Mother said. Marie is Mrs. Ogden.

"But there's nothing we can do about it," Dad said.

"But Henry, some day he's going to kill her!"

"Well," Dad said, "you tell me what I can do, and I'll do it."

Mom didn't say anything right away, but then she said, kind of softly, "She doesn't deserve it. I know that what she's doing isn't right, but she doesn't deserve it."

"I don't know why they don't get a divorce," Dad said.

"Why *don't* they! God! How could anyone live with that man!"

Mom must have been awfully upset to take the Lord's name in vain. The next day, I told the club what Mom had said about Mr. and Mrs. Ogden. Nobody knew what Mrs. Ogden was doing that wasn't right, so we decided to watch the Ogdens more carefully to see if we could figure it out.

There's a place at the other end of the block where we can see Mr. and Mrs. Fisher fight, but they just yell at each other. Mrs. Fisher does most of the yelling. They make us laugh. Mr. Fisher sits in front of the fireplace and puffs on his pipe and pretends he can't hear Mrs. Fisher, but they don't have air conditioning, so we can hear her yelling from way back in the woods. It's fun to watch them, 'cause nobody gets hurt, but she sure gets mad.

The grown-ups don't think it's funny, though. Whenever anyone mentions the Fishers, Mom and Dad always look sad. Whenever they talk about the Fishers and I'm listening from the landing, Mom always says, "Poor Ted!" Ted is Mr. Fisher.

The funniest one that we can see is Mrs. Hopewell. Mom and Dad are always talking about how Mrs. Hopewell never smokes or drinks. When anybody has a party, she never smokes or drinks—"Not even wine," Mom always says. But when Mr. Hopewell isn't home, and she thinks nobody can see her, Mrs. Hopewell draws the curtains in the front rooms, and then goes into the kitchen. She never thinks to close the blinds in the kitchen, 'cause they're in the back of the house, and we can see her take her cigarettes and her wine out from the broom closet, and she sits there watching TV and drinks and smokes. That's why it's more fun to watch her than to watch the Ogdens or the Fishers.

We've seen other things, too. We've seen Mr. Ogden give Terry a hiding many times. "Hiding" is what Dad calls it when a father takes his belt off and uses it to whip his kids. Dad never

does that, and he talks as if it's a joke. He doesn't know that Mr. Ogden does it to Terry. It's scary to see Mr. Ogden do it, but Terry deserves it. He's two years older than the rest of us, and he likes to bully us. We all hate Terry. I don't like to tattle, but sometimes I tell Mom some of the bad things Terry does, but not the real bad things, 'cause that would be tattling. I tell her things like how he calls us bad names.

When I told her that, she smiled at me. "Don't you ever call anybody a bad name?"

I didn't know what to say. I don't call people bad names.

"What about 'Fatso'?"

"But that's his name."

"Now Joe, you know better than that. His name's 'Marty.'"

"But that's his nickname. Everybody calls him 'Fatso.'"

"Well, they shouldn't. You shouldn't."

"But Mom . . ."

Mom was still smiling, but she said, "You've got to stop calling Marty 'Fatso.'"

"Okay," I said.

"I mean that, Joe. I don't know why you kids pick on him."

"We don't pick on him."

"But you do. You call him 'Fatso,' and he doesn't like that. That's picking on him."

"But he *is* fat."

"He's a little heavy, but—anyway, you're not to call him that any more."

"Okay."

"And you ought to let him into your club. Why don't you want him in your club?"

I decided it was about time for her to know. "Cause you never know when he's going to have an accident."

"An accident?"

“Yes. He poops in his pants.”

“Marty Fisher?”

“Yes.”

“But he’s six years old.”

“That’s right, Mother. Six year old boys shouldn’t have accidents.”

I don’t know why, but Mother looked like she was going to cry. She put her hand on my shoulder, and she said, “Joe, please let Marty into your club.”

“Aw, Mom!”

“Do it for me. A favor for me.”

So that’s how Marty got into our club. Mom was spoiling the fun ‘cause now we wouldn’t be able to watch Mr. and Mrs. Fisher yelling at each other with Fats—I mean Marty—in the club.

We had a lot of fun that summer. Kent knows how to start a car, so twice we got into his mother’s car, and he started it. We had to be sure no one was home on the block so no one would see us. That was important because we had to leave the garage doors open. Kent told us that if you start a car with the garage doors shut it’ll kill everybody. You start the car and bang!—everybody gets killed. So we opened the garage doors, and Kent started the car, and we all sat in it with the engine running and pretended Kent was driving us all over the place.

We had spitting contests, and that was fun, too, until Fatso—I mean Marty—got into the club, ‘cause he spit something he called oysters. They weren’t like regular spit, and they went farther than anybody else could spit. He could spit twice as far as anybody else. He tried to explain where the oysters came from, but we couldn’t figure it out, so it wasn’t much fun.

We had peeing contests, too. The girls couldn’t pee very far, and we found out it’s because they don’t have piddlers. So we all

went back to the clubhouse to see if there were any other differences, but we couldn't find any except that girls have longer hair and sometimes they have to wear dresses. The most exciting thing that summer was the fight between Mrs. Ogden and Mr. Fisher. Boy, were we lucky Marty wasn't with us that day, because his father was terrible to Mrs. Ogden! He just beat her and beat her something awful. It was scary just to see them.

Marty'd gone to his grandmother's cottage at Lake Michigan for a couple of weeks. Well, the rest of us came home early from day camp because Mr. Orcutt got sick, and they had to call off camp for the rest of the day. Mrs. Gardner drove us home the way she always did, except we got home right after lunch.

We started to walk to our houses, but as soon as the bus disappeared around the corner, Kent said, "Hey, you guys, lets go back to the clubhouse."

We all stopped and looked at him. He seemed pretty excited. "If we take the old Indian trail back, nobody'll know we're there. They'll think we're still at camp, and we can do whatever we want, and nobody'll ever know."

Sally got excited, too. "If we go home at five o'clock, our parents will think we were at camp all day."

We walked Indian file through the woods. When we got to the clubhouse, we heard some funny noises. The hasp was still busted, and it sounded like someone was in the clubhouse. Kent gave us the signal to sneak around to the side without making a sound, so we followed him and peeked in the window.

Boy, what we saw! Mr. Fisher had jumped on Mrs. Ogden, and he was pounding her something awful with his whole body. Their clothes were half off from fighting, and they were on the cot, and they looked like the wrestlers Dad watches on TV. Poor Mrs. Ogden was groaning something fierce.

Boy, we were scared! Even Jenny was scared. We turned and

ran away through the woods, and we kept running all the way to the creek. We finally stopped at the secret camping place and tried to figure out what to do.

Kent said, "Maybe we better call the police."

I was too scared to even say that I was too scared to call the police, but Jenny said, "I don't want to call the police."

Then I said, "I don't want to either."

Sally said, "Maybe we should tell our parents."

But Jenny said, "We might get in trouble. I think maybe we'd better not say anything about it to anyone."

We all decided that was the best thing to do. It was safest, and it gave us another club secret.

Sally said, "We'd better not tell Marty, either." So we all promised not to tell Marty, and we gave each other the secret handshake that meant we would never break our promise, even if we were tortured.

We sat there for a while because we didn't know what to do, but then Kent said, "Let's skip stones," and we went to the big smooth part of the creek and skipped stones till it was time to go home.

Two nights later, when Kent and I were playing after supper, we went into the Ogden's back yard. It was kind of cool, so they had the windows open instead of having the air conditioning on, and we could hear Mr. and Mrs. Ogden yelling at each other. They used words we didn't know, so I asked my brother, Ed, what they meant. "Bitch" means a female dog—that's another way of saying lady dog. He wouldn't tell me what "slut" means, and I think that's because he doesn't know and doesn't want to admit it.

Then one night after dark there was a big commotion in the neighborhood. Mom and Dad and I were watching TV, and we heard these sirens, and you could hear a car racing down the

An Accident

street. We looked out the window, and it was an emergency truck with the lights flashing and everything, and it pulled into the Fisher's driveway. Dad went out to see what was happening, but Mother stayed home with me. Ed was out at a Boy Scout meeting.

When Dad came back, he looked very serious, but at first I thought he was joking. Sometimes he tells jokes and looks serious at the same time. He does that to tease.

He looked at Mother, and he said, "It's Ted and Marie." That's Mr. Fisher and Mrs. Ogden, and I thought maybe they'd been fighting again and Mr. Fisher had really hurt Mrs. Ogden bad so she'd have to go to the hospital again like when Mr. Ogden hurt her.

Mother looked scared. "What happened?"

Dad looked at me with that funny look he gets when he says something he doesn't want me to know about.

"They—they had an accident."

Mr. Fisher and Mrs. Ogden! For a second I almost laughed to think that grown-ups pooped in their pants, but they sounded serious so I didn't dare, and I knew they wouldn't have an emergency truck there for that kind of accident. They could have cleaned that up themselves and nobody would have known.

"What do you mean, Henry?" Mother asked.

"They were in Ted's car in the garage with the doors closed, and Ted ran the engine."

Mother said, "Oh, my God!" and put her hands over her face and sat down on the sofa.

"Gosh," I said, "Kent Andrews knows better than that, and he's only six years old."

But nobody pays any attention to what kids say. Sometimes even your own father and mother don't pay any attention.

THE MIRACLE

PFC. CHARLIE MURDOCH was the only American soldier during the entire Viet Nam war whose life was saved by William Shakespeare. That's right—the William Shakespeare that lived a million years ago and wrote all those plays.

It all started when Charlie was a student at Zebulon Community College. At an entertainment for freshmen, he heard a humorous song that advised young men that if they would only brush up their Shakespeare, the women they would wow. He knew it was intended as a joke, but he also knew that it encapsulated an important truth. Had he been a great athlete or the son of a millionaire, he would not need Shakespeare. But he could think of only a few ways that men in his position could make themselves irresistible to women. Music was good—rock music especially. Religion seemed to work—astrology, the *I Ching*, Scientology, that sort of thing. Or Shakespeare.

Charlie had a tin ear, so music was out. His parents were religious squares. That took the bloom off religion. So he chose Shakespeare.

It was during that freshman year at ZCC that Charlie found the Bible that his father had carried in his breast pocket during World War II. It was, of course, a little Bible, and it had a hardened steel cover. Just in case.

“You didn’t really carry that thing over your heart?” he asked, trying to sound incredulous.

“Of course I did,” his father replied aggressively, “and it saved my life.”

“It saved your life? When? Were you ever hit?”

“No.”

“Then when did it save your life?”

“It kept me from being hit. I was never hit. Why wasn’t I ever hit?”

“Why weren’t you ever hit?” Charlie echoed, really incredulous, now.

“My buddies were hit. At Salerno, the men on both sides of me were hit. They were killed. I wasn’t touched. Why not? Eh, wise guy? Why not?”



After basic training, when Charlie had some free time, he told his buddies about the Old Man’s Bible. He told them he’d do the Old Man one better. He went to a paperback bookstore and bought the smallest copy they had of *Julius Caesar*. He picked *Julius Caesar* for many reasons. It was his favorite of the four Shakespeare plays he had read—two in high school, two at ZCC. He kind of liked Caesar and Brutus. Caesar reminded him a little of his father, and Brutus reminded him a little of his high school chemistry teacher who also coached the basketball team. And finally, *Julius Caesar* did not sound as sissyish as most of the other plays. It had a kind of martial ring to it.



Charlie went to an automobile garage, where a mechanic gave him an old piece of hardened steel. The mechanic let him grind down the edges and trim the piece to fit the book. Then Charlie got some Elmer's glue and glued the steel to the front cover of the book. It just fit into the shirt pocket over Charlie's heart, and he carried it there every day he was in Viet Nam.



One day, at the height of a confused skirmish about sixty miles north of Saigon, a bullet hit Charlie right smack in the middle of the book. Charlie didn't know what hit him. It felt like a tremendous blow from a fist. It knocked him over on his back and into the mud. The fall knocked the breath clean out of him. For several minutes he lay gasping for air, wondering what had happened.

And what *had* happened? On impact, the bullet pierced the hardened steel cover, which slowed its velocity, but did not quite stop it. It retained enough momentum to tear through the introduction and into Act I, Scene 1: "Rome. A street." It passed quickly through the brief first scene with its crowd of clownish commoners and its sour tribunes. At almost the same velocity, diminished rather by the steel cover than by the first scene, it passed through Act I, Scene 2. Here it found Caesar, recently returned triumphant from the civil wars, being offered the crown by Mark Antony at the very moment that his enemies were plotting against his life. Then rapidly through Scene 3, the stormy night before the Ides of March, to the great opening scene of Act II, where Brutus, torn between love and duty, finally throws

The Miracle

in his lot with the conspirators. Then—but surely you must know the story well enough. No need to retell it.

The bullet finally stopped in the middle of Mark Antony's funeral oration, Act III, Scene 2.

When Charlie recovered his wind, realized what had happened, and took the book out of his pocket with the bullet sticking in it, he opened it with amazement, hardly able to believe his eyes. The tip of the bullet had dented the final page that had stopped it. Lying on his back in the Viet Nam mud, Charlie read the lines the bullet pointed to:

My heart is in the coffin there with Caesar,
And I must pause till it come back to me.



Late in the afternoon, after the shooting had stopped and the wounded sent back, the men had time for a rest, and Charlie told his buddies what had happened to him. He passed the book around. Every man in the platoon examined it with wonder. The last man to look at it was Gunner McGurk, the sergeant who had commanded the platoon since the death of Lieutenant Bird earlier in the week.

The men watched McGurk make his examination. First he looked at both sides, keeping the book closed. Then he examined the bullet, which was still sticking out of the front. Finally, he carefully opened the book to the page where the point of the bullet had stopped and merely dented the paper. The men watched as McGurk's lips silently formed the words of the lines that the bullet pointed to.

RALPH MENDELSON

My heart is in the coffin there with Caesar,
And I must pause till it come back to me.

McGurk looked up at the troops. “We was supposed to read one of them Shakespeare plays in high school,” he said, opening the book again and examining the dented page, “and I say it’s a miracle the bullet got as far as Act III.”

CAPTAIN McCLANCEY'S ICE CREAM CONE

I WAS TOO BUSY lapping up my own ice cream cone to notice how it started, but here's what happened as best I can remember:

There were three of us in the office at the time—that is, three of us and Tom. McClancy and I, the only officers in the section, sat at our desks on opposite sides of the large room. Shasta Brackett, the WAG Pfc, stood at the counter, working at some papers—probably passenger manifests for the night plane. The two civilian typists were at the PX. Sgt. Wilmer must have been downstairs with the other enlisted men, and T/Sgt Kuchnic had the day off.

From my desk I looked out over the airfield, blistering in Florida's July sun. Airplane engines droned monotonously in the distance. I can't tell you what I was thinking about at the time: when the war would end, whether we would have any more planes to load the rest of the day, whether we needed more or

fewer men, what to do that evening—any would have been likely thoughts.

“Hey, Tom!” Captain McClancey yelled. I had never heard him yell before, but I didn’t notice whether he sounded angry. I just turned and looked. Brackett was leaning against the counter, lazily marking a sheet of paper with one hand and eating her ice cream cone with the other. She also turned to see what had made McClancey holler. He sat at his desk, ice cream cone in one hand, beckoning Tom with the other.

“C’mere,” he said, quieter now that Tom had stopped and turned back toward him.

Tom had just given us the ice cream cones and was on his way to the door when McClancey called him. You see, we didn’t have a great deal to do, so every day about three o’clock we sent Tom to the PX for ice cream cones. That, I am convinced (as I explained to Captain Olds afterwards), was at the base of the thing. We just didn’t have enough to do.

The war with Germany had ended in the spring, so almost all military freight was now going to the Pacific, but not from Florida. Where we had formerly loaded as many as twenty planes a day, we now had only one or two a week.

We kept our section neat and tried to keep out of trouble. The enlisted men hung around the freight house. They would play checkers with each other or with the colored civilian freight handlers. At one time we had seventeen colored men. We were now down to three including Tom, who, in addition to wrestling freight, acted as errand boy and janitor

It had been worse in the spring, just after they broke up the Central African Wing. The men they brought back from Africa were temporarily assigned to stations in Florida. Before that, Captain Munson and I had found it easy enough to run the office between us. Then they moved in seven officers from Africa.

That's when they shipped Munson out and brought McClancey in to take charge.

That made nine officers to do the work of two. We would sit around trying to think of things to do. Somebody would have a newspaper, which we would all read and discuss at length. The funnies made up the major topic of conversation. *Li'l Abner* got a lot of attention. *Smilin' Jack* stood higher there than anywhere else I know of. We split into two camps over *Little Orphan Annie*.

Starting about nine-thirty, we sauntered in two's and three's to the PX for breakfast. They had a huge restaurant with a little room off to one side for officers. Later in the day we killed time at the tennis courts and the swimming pool.

Not all the reading and talk were trivia. I read Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma* that summer. I had never lived in the South before. Ted Munson had been born and raised in central Alabama. "You don't know niggers," he told me the day I first reported to him for duty. "They're all liars."

Maybe I looked incredulous. Maybe he knew intuitively that I didn't believe him.

"You just watch and see for yourself. Don't take my word for it. But till you get used to handling 'em, just treat 'em the same way I treat 'em." He smiled at me, leaned forward in his chair, and patted my knee. "Take a little friendly advice from your Uncle Ted."

Munson usually had from twelve to seventeen Negroes working for him. Most of them stayed only a short time, which, he said, proved that they were all shiftless. He had an arrangement with a black man to recruit more civilian freight handlers from the colored part of town. We called him "Parson Eli" because he was supposed to be some kind of minister.

Of course the people I worked with made every conceivable kind of comment about the Myrdal book, which I always had

with me—in the office, the PX, the tennis courts, and even at the swimming pool. One of the officers, a tall, pimply-faced man, tried to kid me out of believing there could be anything to the book. He came from New Jersey—I don't remember his name. One day he asked me if I'd hire a colored man in civilian life to work alongside me. I said, "Sure."

He laughed and told me I wouldn't. Then, to prove his point, he asked some of the other officers. He picked Janowsky first. "I dunno," Janowsky said, "I suppose I would if it wouldn't hurt the business."

Rather noncommittal, we agreed. Janowsky seemed interested, though, and followed us to the next man, a fellow named Green. Green had been a fighter pilot. He had flown all his missions in North Africa and then been permanently grounded for medical reasons. The man from New Jersey asked him the question. Green squinted suspiciously at him, then at me. He acted as though we were trying to pull his leg. New Jersey asked him again.

"Look, doc," Green parried, "I ain't tryin' to kid nobody. In the army I'm a first lieutenant; I'm an officer and a gentleman. In civilian life I manage an A & P. If the boss hires colored guys to work with me, that's his business. I just work there."

Then New Jersey asked McClancey. Mac looked up from the papers on his desk, his bright eyes piercing through his glasses and his interrogator. "If he's a good man, what difference does it make?"



When McClancey hollered at him, Tom walked back to the desk. "Yes, suh?"

McClancey pointed to some coins on the desk. "Where's my change?"

Captain McClancey's Ice Cream Cone

“It’s right there, suh,” Tom replied, pointing to the same coins. He walked up to the desk and repeated, “There it is, suh. Right there.” He appeared relieved that the coins had not vanished.

To look at him you would never think that Tom Thomson had been born only a few years after the close of the Civil War. That made him a pretty old man in 1945, but I’ve seen him throw freight around in a way that would have done any of our enlisted men proud.

While the other civilians and enlisted men sat around playing checkers or listening to the radio, Tom grabbed a broom and swept out the office or the freight shed. When one of the enlisted men would invite him to play checkers, he would smile, roll his head around aimlessly, paw the ground with his foot, and make some lame excuse. Maybe he didn’t know how to play and was too proud to admit it. He couldn’t read or write. Slaves, of course, had not been permitted to learn those dangerous arts, and Negro illiteracy was endemic when Tom was a boy. So he never touched the comic books that lay around the freight house, except to stack them neatly. When we had a plane to load, Tom took the lion’s share of the work. He had taken upon himself the job of porter, janitor, and general errand boy. We always asked him to run our errands because he was always at hand, ready.

His going for ice cream cones became a ritual. Pfc Brackett—Tom called her “Miss Brackett”—would take our orders, collect the money, and turn it over to him with complete instructions. She knew he couldn’t read, but she wrote out the orders in detail. I never knew for sure what he did with the list, but he always brought it back. He would deliver the cones, give each of us his change, then give the list back to Brackett. I suppose he just turned the list and the money over to the soda jerks and trusted them to make up the right cones and give him the correct change.

Janowsky thought Tom memorized the entire list as Brackett read it to him, and that he just carried the paper along because she had given it to him to carry.

Brackett hailed from a small town in Georgia, which seemed to make her feel particularly qualified to deal with Tom. I must admit she got on beautifully with him. She would go over the list with him very carefully before he left and then check it again when he came back. She would always kid him about something either before or after he got the cones and, for that matter, almost every time he came into the office. He would go, "He! he! he!"—which was pretty common response to something a white person said. It might have sounded like laughter, but it could hide a person's real feelings.

When Tom wanted something, we usually got the request through Brackett.

Everyone assigned to our office had an informal briefing on Tom. First he would learn Tom's age. Then he would be told how Tom got recruited.

Tom had come from Tennessee. No one knew when or how or why, but we all believed it. His home, we understood, was still there. He had a farm there, but he also had a farm in Florida not far from the airfield. We never could figure that out. One day Captain Munson asked him point blank about the two farms, but could get no coherent answer. We just accepted the two farms as fact.

Parson Eli, so the story went, had gone out to Tom's farm one evening. He had reminded Tom about his three grandchildren who were in the army, and he had reproved Tom for not contributing to the war effort. So Tom had taken a civilian job with the Air Corps and did his part by loading heavy freight into giant airplanes. He said he couldn't leave his farm (no one pointed out that the farm also contributed to the war effort), so he continued to work it evenings and on his days off. He was

about the only civilian I ran into during the war who had given up his peacetime way of life solely to answer the call of duty, and who worked two jobs, not for the extra pay, but to help his country.



Tom stood looking at the coins. Neither he nor McClancey said anything for a moment. Tom's hand, which had pointed them out to the captain, gradually fell to his side. Then Mac pointed to the money. "Look! I'm short fifteen cents."

Tom's six-foot-two towered over McClancey, who still sat behind his desk, taking swipes at his ice cream cone. Tom scratched his head. He gasped slightly before he replied. "But Ah gave you all the change Ah had."

"How could you? Look, all I got is thirty cents."

I sat dumbfounded through this, trying to make some kind of sense out of it. Brackett had been listening closely, too. She had received her ice cream cone first, as usual. Now she gulped down the last mouthful of ice cream, threw the remains of the cone into the wastebasket, and walked determinedly toward the captain's desk.

I've never been able to decide whether Shasta Brackett was beautiful or not. Her features were far from perfect. She was tall and thin—not too thin, however, to have a figure. Her bright blue eyes and pale complexion contrasted sharply with her jet-black hair. She carried herself erect and walked with the same slow grace that marked her every motion.

We all kidded Shasta. Her name, for one thing. We would call her The Shasta Daisy, which she would feign to dislike. Then the town she came from: West Armitage. We called it West Armpit. It's hard to understand now why we thought that was

so funny. Maybe because of the way she'd get mad. She'd throw something—whatever she happened to have in her hand at the time, usually a pencil—on the desk, stamp her foot, purse her lips, and walk stiffly away. Her frown would gradually melt into a smile when she found the sour mood too difficult to sustain.

She went through this performance the day Janowsky refereed one of our many arguments about Myrdal's book. "After all," she said, "you talk about Southerners being prejudiced, but remember: everyone's got their prejudices. Northerners are prejudiced about Southerners. So it isn't possible for a Northerner to write about Nigras without being just as prejudiced in his own way as a Southerner."

"You're right," I agreed. "and the people who had the study made also think you're right. That's why they didn't have a Northerner write the book."

"It was written by a Southerner?" She smiled an incredulous smile, her eyebrows arched.

"No. They picked a man from Sweden."

"From Sweden!" She threw back her head, dramatically, and laughed. "A Swede! What would a Swede know about Nigras!"

"That's just it: he didn't know anything when he started. That's why they picked him. He had no set ideas. No prejudices."

"But what could he learn? Did he study them a week? A year? Five years? Why, you have to live with them to know them."

"But he's a trained man, a sociologist. He knows how to go into a community and find out what the problems are and what people are trying to do to solve them."

I could feel myself slipping. The laughter remaining in her eyes showed clearly enough that my argument couldn't convince her. But Janowsky was standing at the counter with us; if I could get him to agree with me, that would carry more weight with

Shasta than all the arguments I could use. I believe she was arguing to the same purpose, having already given me up as a total loss.

Brackett had taught school before entering the army, so I quoted something about how the apparently inferior intelligence of Negroes resulted merely from their inferior education.

"That's true—to a certain extent," she admitted with a flourish of generosity, "but they can get a pretty good education if they really want it. The trouble is, most of them don't want it."

I avoided that swamp by shifting to a stronger offensive.

"Now look: you teach school in the South. You know damn well they can't have a decent education 'cause their teachers aren't paid enough. How can you have good teachers if you don't pay them?"

"The pay isn't very good . . ."

"Isn't very good! It's lousy! It's bad enough for white teachers, but they pay the colored teachers even less."

"Well, after all, we're not so rich in the South any more. We don't have money to pay the white teachers enough. How *could* we pay the Nigra teachers more than they're getting?"

"That's wonderful!" I shouted ecstatically. "Wonderful! Five minutes ago you said Myrdal doesn't know anything about Southerners, and now you're quoting him! You just said exactly what he said you'd say!" (I think I was carried away by what seemed at the moment to be a victory.) "I just read it the other day. 'If you ask a white Southerner why they don't pay their colored school teachers more,'" I quoted as best I could from memory, "'they reply, 'How can we pay them more when we don't have money enough to pay our white teachers?'" The guy didn't know enough about the South to write a book, but he could tell what you were going to say before you said it!"

Shasta deserved credit for keeping herself under control in the face of my foolishly overblown tirade. She spoke calmly and contemptuously: "The only trouble with you is that you get all that stuff from books. Books are all right, but you can't learn about life from books. You learn about life from living."

"I suppose only dead people write books."

Janowsky must have thought that was terribly funny, because he burst out laughing.

"Ach!" Shasta exclaimed. "You're impossible!" She threw her pencil down hard on the counter, stamped her foot, turned, and walked stiffly to her desk. As she fumbled through some papers, she looked up, catching Janowsky's eye. He leaned against the counter smiling warmly at her. Her frown melted. Finally she smiled.

Now that I think back on it, she *was* beautiful. At least when she smiled.



But she frowned at McClancey and at the money on his desk. "You got your change!"

"No I didn't! I'm fifteen cents short."

Shasta threw a slip of paper on the desk. It landed alongside the coins. "There's the list. Check it."

McClancey took the list and studied it for a moment. Then he thrust it at Tom. "Look," he ordered, "here it is. You still owe me fifteen cents."

Tom obediently took the paper. He held it right side up and stared at it, scratching his head and muttering hoarsely, "Ah gave back all the money. Honest Ah did."

"Don't be silly," Shasta shouted at Mac, grabbing the paper out of Tom's hand. I got up and walked toward the captain's

desk. I had merely been puzzled until McClancey gave Tom the list. That angered and baffled me. He knew as well as any of us that Tom couldn't read.



You would have liked McClancey. Everybody did. He was a big, fat, homely, jolly Irishman. His blue eyes sparkled over rimless glasses perched on his big nose. He never talked much about himself or his life in Africa or before the war, except to tell odd stories, usually on himself. He had sold shoes in civilian life, been drafted, gone through OCS, then spent two years in the oblivion of El Fasher, in the Sudan. Although everyone liked him, he was so unassuming that no one thought much about him. He didn't look like the capable type. So he sweat out his tour of duty at Fasher with no prospect of anything better or worse till the war would end. He plodded on from day to day, diligently doing every job that came his way without ever seeming to exert himself. Then the freight warehouse at Accra got fouled up. We had freight backed up as far as the states—had to fly ships across the Atlantic empty to take the stuff out of Accra. Nobody knew why Colonel Briggs put Mac in charge of the Accra warehouse. Somehow he must have known that Mac could handle the job without getting flustered. In a month everything had returned to normal and Mac soon had his captain's bars. But even during that time, they told me, Mac never seemed to be working very hard.

He was an odd duck. Sometimes, when there was nothing much doing, he would suddenly get up from his desk and break into a song, dancing to his own music. I'll never forget how graceful the fat man could be, dancing across the office, his beautiful tenor reverberating through the room, while the rest of us looked on, amazed.

“Gonna take a sentimental journey
Gonna put my heart at ease”



It was boredom, as I told Captain Olds later. I realized it as I stood looking from Mac to Tom, then from Shasta to the coins on the desk.

Tom trembled so violently that you could see it. His blue work shirt had soaked up streaks of perspiration so that it seemed to have wide, irregular stripes of black running down it. Sweat ran from his high, bald forehead.

He even trembled talking about it afterwards, when we had one of our few, brief conversations. McClancey had already shipped out by that time, but just the memory of that day frightened Tom. I don't remember how we happened to be talking about it. "But don't worry about it," I told Tom. "He didn't mean anything by it."

"Ah don't wants no trouble with the white folks, suh. Ah don't never cheat the white folks. No, suh! Ah don't wants no trouble with them!"

"He was only kidding, Tom. Forget it. It was only a joke."

"Yes, suh. He! he! he! Ah sure will, suh. Ah sure don't wants no trouble."

It was boredom, but it wasn't just boredom, because boredom can make you mean, and Mac was never mean. He never intended to hurt anyone—especially not Tom. He liked Tom as well as the rest of us did. What, then, had gone wrong? I felt that I had groped my way to an answer by the time I told the story to Olds a few months later.



Captain Warner Olds took command when McClancey left. They broke up the Miami operation about then, and they transferred a large part of the old Miami operation to us, along with a good part of their personnel. Olds had been stationed at Miami for almost three years. I didn't get to know him very well at first, even though I worked closely with him, being the only officer left from our original staff. During those first few weeks we were terribly busy getting organized. We clashed a few times. Our former operations had been entirely different—ours small, his tremendous—so that we both had to revise our thinking, since our new organization consisted of a sort of midway point. I didn't realize at first that it was the white civilians from Miami I disliked, not Olds. I actually worked closer to them than to Olds, although, as we again had more officers, I was not in charge of them. They were a different type from anything I had run into before in the army. There were about a dozen of them, all young, vigorous men, all white. They stood a notch or two above the colored freight handlers on our table of organization. Your first glance at them made you wonder why they weren't in the army. They knew all the angles. Although I had no occasion to give them orders, our work often brought us into close contact, and we often disagreed over the best way to work out our conflicts. Olds usually backed them up. Perhaps he was right. They did know more than I about their work in our new operation.

Olds and his wife invited me to dinner a few times at their apartment in town. The first time, they could only have done it to be polite, but we found ourselves in agreement about politics, in which we were all three interested. Warner had played around with local politics in civilian life, and his stories fascinated me. He enjoyed my attention and appreciation. We spent more and more time together and had less friction at work.

I arranged to meet him one afternoon at the PX. We had sodas in a booth in the officers' section.

"What I wanted to ask you about," I said, after we had chatted a while, "was these new civilians. They get pretty rough with the colored men."

"What do you mean?" He knew how I felt about the Miami civilians. We had discussed them many times before in a less friendly way.

"Well, we lost another colored man today. Parson Eli hasn't been able to replace a man for weeks. That makes us four men short."

Olds didn't say anything. He looked into his soda and stirred it a little with the straws.

"That's how we lost Tom," I added.

Olds looked up at me. "I've wanted to talk to you about Tom. You know, you're sort of funny about the colored men yourself."

"What do you mean?" We each knew the other to be liberal on most matters and specifically on this one.

"You're quite patronizing. A little bit like the old Southern aristocrat. Right?"

I must have looked puzzled.

"Well," he continued, "just what we're talking about: the way you behaved toward Tom."

I had to stop and ponder that. "Yes," I replied. "I think maybe you're right. Now that I think about it, I guess I *was* patronizing toward Tom. Maybe I am toward all of them."

We both sat back in our seats. A troop of ants made their methodical way across the windowsill at our side. They were sure to find an open sugar bowl. Perhaps they had found it already. When you looked at a particular ant closely, he seemed a completely self-contained individual, oblivious of the endless

line of ants stretching before and behind him, intent only on his own job. But each fit into the orderly, disciplined formation.

“But maybe I’m right, too,” I said.

“What do you mean?”

“Did I ever tell you the story about Captain McClancey’s ice cream cone?”

“No.”

“Let me tell it. It might seem irrelevant, but it isn’t. Let me tell it.”

Warner Olds sat back, relaxed. “Go ahead.”



Shasta Brackett walked to her desk, took a small coin purse from the drawer, and took some change out of it. Then she returned, silently, to McClancey’s desk. “Here’s your fifteen cents!” She threw the coins on the desk, pounded her foot on the floor, turned, and walked away. She sat behind her desk and glowered. No smile this time.

“That’s not your fifteen cents, Mac,” I said. “You got your change.”

“Ah didn’t take nothing. Honest, Captain, suh!”

“That’s all right, Tom,” I said. “He was only kidding.” I picked up the fifteen cents, then took Tom by the arm and started to turn him around so I could get him out of the office.

McClancey made no attempt to stop me. He just mumbled, “Well, maybe I made a mistake.”

I pushed Tom gently toward the door. “It’s O.K., Tom. It’s a joke.”

“That’s a great joke!” Brackett grumbled, as she began fussing angrily through some papers. I tossed the fifteen cents onto her desk.

McClancey put the last piece of the ice cream cone into his mouth, pulled a handkerchief from his pocket, and wiped his lips. He wasn't smiling, but he looked like he wanted to. Tom hesitated.

"Go ahead, Tom," I repeated. "It was only a joke."

"Yes, suh." Tom turned and shuffled toward the door. "He! he! he!"

The back of his shirt was wet—black from sweat.



Captain Warner Olds listened attentively. After I finished, he made no attempt to speak.

"You see," I went on, "it isn't like talking to a colored man back home."

"Why not?"

"Well, when a man grows up expecting to be treated as an inferior, you can't just pretend he doesn't feel that way. His feeling is a fact, regardless of how he *should* feel. You can't treat him like an equal, because he doesn't expect it. He wouldn't know how to act."

"Don't you believe that all men are created equal?"

"Sure I do—in the sense that Jefferson meant it."

"And how did Jefferson mean it?"

"Well, you don't suppose Jefferson thought everyone was as tall as he was, do you?"

Olds said, "No," very slowly.

"He didn't claim that men were equal in every respect, or that everyone has the same abilities. That would be nonsense. But you can treat every man with equal respect without treating everybody alike."

"But if you treat people differently, what makes you think you're treating them with equal respect?"

“Well,” I hesitated, casting about for an appropriate example. “Should I have talked to Tom about Jefferson’s concept of equality? I’d have been treating him the same way I’m treating you. Should I have?”

Now it was Olds’ turn to hesitate. “I don’t know.”

“Christ, Warner, he wouldn’t have known what I was talking about, and he’d have thought I was trying to make an ass out of him.”

“I guess that’s right.”

“But I can still respect him as much as I respect you, and I can treat him as your equal and mine—only in a different way.”

“It’s that ‘different way’ that bothers me.”

After I thought about it, I smiled. “In a way, yes. You think I should have invited him over for cocktails and married his daughter?”

Olds chuckled an appreciation. “No. I don’t suppose so.”

We had finished our sodas. I sucked on my straw and got that burbling, end-of-the-soda noise.

“That’s what went wrong with McClancey,” I said.

“What?”

“He acted as though everybody is alike, not just equal, but alike. It just never occurred to him that he couldn’t treat a man like Tom the way he could treat you or me. Not even in fun.”

“If it was a joke, it wasn’t a very good joke.”

“He kidded Tom just the same way he would have kidded you or me. You can’t do that.”



Tom had already gone home to Tennessee by then, but I’ll always remember his leaving.

I had been standing on the apron in front of the Customs Office, watching some men coming in from an overseas flight.

Their plane stood off some two hundred feet, its door open. The men straggled toward the Customs Office in a long, ragged line. Each man carried a big duffel bag on his shoulder. They looked hot and impatient, each man intent on his own task, oblivious of the others. But each was part of a huge, highly disciplined military organization that stretched around the world.

I didn't notice Tom until he stood at my side.

"Mistuh Lieutenant, suh?"

"Oh, hi, Tom."

"Mistuh Lieutenant, Ah wants to talk to you."

"Sure, Tom." I tried to sound friendly to the old man, to put him at his ease. He stood there nervously pawing the ground with his left foot like a schoolboy talking to his best girl.

"Well, Mistuh Lieutenant, suh, Missus Thomson, she's . . . We been married forty years."

"That's a long time," I said. I had just turned twenty-six.

"Yes, suh. That's a long time. It sure is. He! he! he!"

I muttered "Yup," and waited for Tom to continue. I had looked straight at him at first, while he glanced about, now at his foot scraping the pavement, now at a plane revving up at the end of the distant runway. I looked away.

"It ain't like it used to be, suh. Not now. Them new men. They ain't like Sahgent Wilmer an' Sahgent Kuchnic."

Tom paused so long between every sentence that I had a hard time following him.

"Ah sure liked Sahgent Wilmer, suh. An' Ah liked Sahgent Kuchnic. too."

"They were good men."

"They went home, suh, didn't they."

"Yes. They'd been overseas. They had enough points to be discharged."

“Well, Mistuh Lieutenant, Ah likes to go home, too. Ah likes
... Well ...”

“What’s wrong, Tom? Something bothering you?”

“Well, suh, it’s them new men.”

“The new men from Miami?”

“Yes, suh.”

“What about them?”

Tom had to struggle to get it out. “They say things, suh.”

“What do you mean, Tom? What do they say?” I couldn’t help squinting hard at him, trying to squeeze the story out of him. He wouldn’t let his eyes meet mine. His foot stopped scraping. He stood straight up, tilting his head back slightly, as though about to address a multitude, but when he spoke, his voice was softer than before.

“They call me names, suh. Ah works hard, suh. Ah allus try to do what’s right with the white folks. But Ah can’t work good, suh, when people call me names.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, Tom. You’ve always done a good job here.” What else could I say? I couldn’t do anything about it. He wouldn’t have told me if he thought I’d reprimand the men from Miami. That could only make matters worse.

“Missus Thomson sick,” Tom continued. “She home in Tennessee. She write a letter, ax Ah come home. Ah wants to die home with Missus Thomson, suh. She been a good wife to me, suh.”

“Sure, Tom. If you want to leave, you can go right ahead. It’s all right. I’ll have Private Brackett take care of the paperwork for you.”

“Parson Eli, he tol’ me Ah should work for the army account the war. Ah tel’ him Ah’d do what Ah should do. Ah don’t want to break mah promise. Ah promise Parson Eli Ah wouldn’t do no such thing like that.”

RALPH MENDELSON

“It’s all right, Tom. The war’s over now. We’ll miss you, Tom, because we like you.” I felt painfully aware that I was talking down to the old man. “But you’ve got to go back home. That’s where you belong now.”

That was the longest conversation I ever had with Tom in the year and a half that I knew him.



Tom stopped in at my office the day he left. “Ah come to say goodbye, suh.”

I rose and stepped around the desk. We shook hands. Tom pawed the floor once or twice, but then he stopped, and he looked me straight in the eye.

“Tom,” I said, “it’s been nice working with you. I’ll miss you.”

“Thank you, suh. Thank you.”

No nervous, “He! he! he!” followed. I felt vindicated.

He turned to leave. I walked a few steps toward the door with him. “Maybe we’ll see each other again some time.”

I stood there watching as he walked out of the office. I don’t know why I lied to him—why the very last thing I ever said to him was a lie. I knew perfectly well that I’d never see him again.

But I knew I’d never forget him, either. Maybe that’s what I meant.

TWO SCOUNDRELS

WHO IS THIS FINE French gentleman? the innkeeper wondered. An émigré, obviously; the innkeeper had met many émigrés since the start of the revolution. A difficult lot, most of them. All princes and dukes, to hear them talk, but more generous with their titles than with their money. It was not the innkeeper's business to know more about his guests than they cared to tell. If they paid their bills, that was enough.

This man gave his name as the Marquis de Talleyrand, which the innkeeper only partially believed. But the man paid in hard money. That was why the innkeeper wanted to help him. He was a handsome man. He dressed in elegant taste and carried himself majestically despite his limp. He paid in gold, and he was not haughty like the rest of them; he smiled and spoke courteously even to the innkeeper, even to the servants.

(Many years later, Napoleon described Talleyrand as a silk stocking filled with excrement.)

Why was he going to America? The innkeeper had seen many émigrés seeking homes in England, but none fleeing to

the wilds of America. He rather admired this man for seeking his fortune in a new country rather than sponging on Englishmen like the rest of them. The innkeeper had no way of knowing, of course, that the English government suspected Talleyrand of being in the pay of Robespierre; that they saw him as a French spy and had ordered him out of the country; although the truth was that Robespierre had denounced him to the Committee of Public Safety—the Reign of Terror was at its height

Neither the English—nor Robespierre, for that matter—stood alone in their low opinion of Talleyrand. Chateaubriand said, “When Talleyrand is not conspiring, he is making corrupt bargains”; and Mirabeau said, “For money he would sell his soul—and he would be right: he would be trading muck for gold.”

And Napoleon—years later, Napoleon, in his last interview with Talleyrand, by then, Minister of State, screamed at him, “You are a coward, a traitor, a thief! You have betrayed and deceived everybody: You would sell even your own father!”

(As soon as he was out of the Emperor’s hearing, Talleyrand turned to those who had heard Napoleon’s outburst, and remarked, “What a pity that so great a man should have been so badly brought up.”)

The innkeeper liked the Frenchman. He liked the man’s open, plain dealing. He felt sorry for him, too. The Frenchman’s ship had almost foundered in a storm, and that was why he had had to land at Falmouth to wait for the next ship going to America. The innkeeper learned that the Frenchman knew no one in America. It would be hard to make his way in a new country, a wild country, with no friends.

That was why the innkeeper offered to introduce the Frenchman to the General.

He told the Frenchman about the General. The General had come from America, although no one knew exactly when.

He had been an officer in the Continental Army. No one knew exactly what rank he had held. They never called him “General” to his face, of course—or anything else, for that matter, because no one knew his name. They simply called him “sir.” The General was now engaged in trade. (The Marquis de Talleyrand smiled.) Trade with the Indies, everyone thought. “But perhaps your grace would enjoy his company, since you are about to depart for his native land.”

The Marquis de Talleyrand looked forward to the interview with pleasure. Waiting for the ship was boring. He might learn something of value even from a merchant. At the least, a bogus general might be amusing, might help pass the time.

The Marquis de Talleyrand recognized a scoundrel the moment he laid eyes on the General. Past his prime, no doubt, and perhaps he had settled down to honest ways, but to the experienced eye of a man who had survived one revolution by his wits and would survive two more, the General had a look—a hunted look, a look tinged with guilt, which the ordinary observer would most likely not see. What had the man been? A smuggler? An embezzler? A pirate? No, probably nothing so violent as a pirate—but—perhaps. Perhaps. Talleyrand thought he could detect a trace of glory about the General.

From the hint of shabbiness about his clothing, the man was obviously not a success. A middle aged scoundrel going to seed. The Marquis de Talleyrand’s smile could not be seen; it was an inward smile, a satirical smile that no one knew of but himself.

(An observant witness might have said the smile of recognition of familiars.)

They exchanged polite greetings. Talleyrand observed at once that in addition to being a scoundrel, the General was lame.

(Years later, Victor Hugo wrote about Talleyrand: It might

be averred that everything in him was lame like himself; the nobility which he had placed at the service of the Republic, the priesthood which he had dragged through the parade-ground then cast into the gutter, the marriage which he had broken off through a score of exposures and a voluntary separation, the brilliant mind which he disgraced by acts of baseness.)

The Marquis de Talleyrand felt a bond with this crippled American merchant "General." Both were scoundrels; both were lame. He enjoyed the fellow-feeling of the bond. Such a feeling was a luxury that Talleyrand enjoyed, but it never prevented him from keeping an eye out for the main chance.

They conversed. The General appeared to have a modesty which Talleyrand recognized was not modesty at all, but concealment. Talleyrand had made a career of seeing through men like the General—seeing through them, then taking advantage of what he saw. But he never revealed the General's secret. He discovered the secret, of course, because that was his great talent. But for once in his life he made no use of his advantage over another man. Perhaps he never found any use for his knowledge. But perhaps other motives contributed to his keeping the General's secret. In his journal, which Talleyrand kept confidential throughout his life, permitting it to be published only after his death, he wrote:

... I must confess that I felt much pity for him, for which puritans will perhaps blame me, but with which I do not reproach myself, for I witnessed his agony.

What was the General's agony? That night Talleyrand wrote the story in his journal in a rhetoric surprisingly dramatic for a work that only posterity would have the opportunity to read:

I put several questions to the General concerning his country, but, from the first, it

Two Scoundrals

seemed to me that my inquiries annoyed him. Having several times vainly endeavored to renew the conversation, which he always allowed to drop, I ventured to request from him some letters of introduction to his friends in America. . . .

“No!” he replied, and after a few moments of silence, noticing my surprise, he explained, “I am the only American who cannot give you letters to friends in his own country.” Then he turned away, and in a voice choked with emotion he added, “I have no friends in America. None.”

He dared not tell me his name. It was Benedict Arnold.

