

MARTHA OSTENSO

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THE *MANDRAKE ROOT*  
MANDRAKE ROOT

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THE  
MANDRAKE  
ROOT



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MARTHA OSTENSO

WILD GEESE

THE DARK DAWN

THE MAD CAREWS

PROLOGUE TO LOVE

THE YOUNG MAY MOON

THE WATERS UNDER THE EARTH

THERE'S ALWAYS ANOTHER YEAR

THE WHITE REEF

THE STONE FIELD

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MARTHA OSTENSO

*The*  
MANDRAKE  
ROOT



1938  
NEW YORK  
DODD, MEAD & COMPANY

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*Part One*  
LATE AUTUMN



## Chapter One

### 1

There was no lonelier smell in all the world, Lydie Clarence thought, than that of old, matted straw on a rainy November afternoon. She pitched the last forkful down from the truck into the wheelbarrow, and then pushed the barrow alongside the last row of the two-acre peony bed, where the stake bore the name *Christine Cardle*. Over each plant an armful of straw had to be snugly tamped down, beneath which—throughout the blind, white sleep of winter—the precious magic of life would be working in a little brown bulb, the slow upward toiling toward summer loveliness.

Lydie lifted the handles of the empty barrow, but did not at once start back to the truck beside the willow trees. Her gaze drifted broodingly over the straw-dotted field, where the rain was a silvery swaying curtain now. She shivered a little, for the collar of her leather jacket was wet and her khaki overalls were clammy about her legs. But she was scarcely conscious of any discomfort, so absorbed was she in the odd notion that had just come to her. Was it possible for a person to be jealous in a way out of the common, jealous of the farm animals, the orchard, the fields, these flowers the cultivation of which was her own small enterprise—all of these sure and unfrustrated things, forever renewing themselves in the mystery of birth? She believed that it was possible. Secretly veined through her tenderness for them was a bitter resentment that they should be so freely given the wonder she herself was denied.

Looking to the east, she saw her husband, Andrew, walking upward from the low-lying field where alfalfa had been this year and where wheat would be next. The yellow collie, Shag, was at his heels. Andrew had been repairing the fence that enclosed the field, and while she had been spreading straw here the sound of his sledge hammer driving in the posts had come to her through the still and rain-burdened air. It had been sweet, the rhythmic thud of his heavy man-work blending with the light, patient whisper of her own. So she had told herself, knowing the while that the sweetness was empty—empty as a weasel-

plundered nest.

She watched Andrew moving upward from the low land to the crest of the hill where the farmstead stood within its rainy, somber grove. It occurred to her that a man could look small in a valley and yet large when he stood on a height with the sky behind him. That was how Andrew should stand always, she thought with an odd, limping throb of her heart; for he had greatness in him, and was not meant to be folded anonymous as a seed into the palm of this earth.

Earth, moreover, that did not belong to him, but to a landlord who possessed it through the effortless grace of inheritance—one, Eric Stene, whom neither Lydie nor Andrew had ever met, since the rental had been negotiated through an agent. Photographs of this Eric Stene had come to light, however, in the Stene family effects Lydie had consigned to the attic of the big house five years ago when she and Andrew had assumed the tenancy. The latest of those photographs—bearing a self-conscious inscription, “To Granduncle Johannes Stene”—presented a handsome blond youth in cap and gown, direct and faintly disapproving of eye, stern of jaw, and rather too sensuous of mouth. A hypocritical young prig, Lydie had decided then and there, recalling from her own public school days the newspaper stories she had read about Eric Stene, the model college student. Not only had he been crowned with athletic honors, but as president of his class he had been unanimously elected to the title of “leading moral spirit of the school.” The earlier photographs, of a snub-nosed, rather wistful little boy, had caused Lydie to linger, for they had promised a man with likable faults and virtues that had somehow not survived to appear in that last picture of smug self-esteem. The subject, she had reflected in all fairness, might have become more human since that graduation photograph had been taken. He had certainly left them alone in their tenancy and in that respect, at least, had proven himself an ideal landlord. Even so, she had no desire to meet Eric Stene. Such righteousness, such self-complacency would take one a lifetime to eradicate.

Her thoughts of Andrew blazed up defensively above those of the man whose land he tilled. In vain had Andrew tried to come to some arrangement by which he could purchase, through modest payments, even a half of this quarter section which had once belonged to Doctor Edvard Stene, the grandfather of the handsome young Eric. But the agent had quoted pompously from the letter he had received. “For reasons of sentiment, and for such reasons only, the land is not for sale. . . .” That had been two years ago, when Lydie and Andrew had already begun to feel that this, by some natural and immutable law, was their *place*.

Andrew had not permitted his disappointment to dampen in any way the devotion he gave to his work. Only sometimes, if he sat before the fire of an evening, Lydie resting on a hassock beside him with her head against his knees, he would run his gentle, roughened fingers thoughtfully through her hair and say, “Maybe the place will be ours yet. We’re still young, Lydie—we can wait.”

It always brought an ache for him into her throat, a sore mutinousness not only against this matter of the land, but against all the treachery life had dealt him. She would draw his hand down quickly to her lips then, and although she might be unable to speak a word of what she felt she could sense the revitalized hope in his tensed body. At such times her protective love for him would flow over her in a bright, strong tide of warmth that drowned the crying voices of the dark cave within her deepest being.

Andrew had passed from sight now into the grove, the great hemlocks and pines at the entrance gate taking him into themselves as into an island night upon the filmy blue sea of evening. Lydie stood waiting for him to reappear beneath the naked elms closer to the house, and found herself seized with an irrational urgency to see him emerge and come again into full view. But the elms stood there unchanged by any figure moving under them—as they had stood unchanged for half a century, save for their own secret change with the seasons. Now, in their time, they were the gray and rain-shrouded bones of autumn striking their gaunt tableau against the cold sky.

Lydie pressed the back of her hand desperately to her mouth. She had been whispering, without sense or reason, “Andrew, Andrew—come out of that darkness!”

A sound on the roadway beyond the willows restored her to her long-practiced, unrevealing calm.

There were two women in the automobile that had come to a halt there, and one of them was calling to Lydie in a shrill, almost fretful voice. Lydie pushed the wheelbarrow over to the truck and left it standing under a clump of brush. Then she stepped out into the roadway and smiled a greeting to the women in the car.

“Hello, Esther! And—Guri! Is it really you? I can’t believe it. I haven’t seen you in a dog’s age!”

The old woman who sat beside Esther Larch in the car had a face so stitched with wrinkles that her features seemed to be merely a brown, perplexing ruching. But when she was pleased, her little nose always twitched comically and gave one a clue to the puzzle. As Andrew had said once, “Old

Guri Kvam's nose is a weather vane."

At her younger brother's farm, on every third of June, there was always a celebration of old Guri's birthday; this because in the beginning she had been the youngest woman in the district and she was now the oldest. She was in her eighty-seventh year, and a widow for the past decade. Her sons and daughters, to her immense scorn, had gone off to towns and cities where, she vowed, not a dratted one of 'em would ever live to see threescore and ten. Although she had come to America when she was twenty, she still spoke with the broad, humorous accent that had followed her from Sognfjord. For a long time the pioneers had been isolated from all but their mother tongue. Sometimes Guri remembered the "th" she had spent arduous hours in mastering; and the altogether unnecessary distinction between a "v" and a "w," a "j" and a "y." Oftener she didn't.

She nodded radiantly beneath the black knitted scarf that covered her head. "Ya, I come for coffee, so you iss not too bissy! Esther, she say I got to come wit', when she stop by our place. So I come."

Esther Larch, leaning forward across the old woman's knees, said with petulant haste, "I have to talk to Andrew about the meeting Thursday, Lydie. I didn't want to phone, with half the county listening in on every word a person says. Is Andrew up at the house?"

Lydie compassionately observed the results of Esther's effort to make herself attractive for this visit with Andrew. The girl was in her mid-twenties, only a year or so older than Lydie, but her clay-colored hair, coquettishly frizzled by curling tongs and yet already limp about her long, tallow-dull cheeks, and her pale blue, nervously bulging eyes, gave her the desperate look of a woman whose youth was on the wane and the objective of her sex still unreachd. Poor Andrew, Lydie thought, and berated herself for the cruel, secret amusement she felt at the spectacle of this fatuous, unhappy girl and her hopeless enslavement. Andrew himself had been amused, at first—until he had become bored and finally annoyed.

"You'll probably find him up there, Esther," Lydie replied in her kindest manner. "I saw him, a little while ago, up by the elms. You drive on to the house and I'll come up right away."

Guri Kvam sat by the kitchen table while Lydie made coffee. Andrew and Esther Larch were in the living room, discussing the forthcoming meeting of the Beacon Light Society, of which Andrew was president.

“I haven’t an egg for the coffee, Guri,” Lydie said apologetically. “The hens haven’t been laying very well.”

“Egg! Salt and cold water—just so good.” The old woman hobbled over to the stove and jerked her head significantly toward the other room. “Her in there! Making out so she means about the meeting T’ursday night! Phuff! That Esther—she’s so crazy to see Andrew she make up excuses to come. I don’t have to look in any coffee cup for to see so. And you, Lydie—well, you go on make supper for your man. Give me a cup coffee, just.”

“I have some fresh jelly roll,” said Lydie. “You must sample it. There’s no hurry about supper. We’re going to have hash tonight, and that won’t take long to fix. Sit down, now, and rest yourself.”

From the pantry, Lydie brought the cake in its cheesecloth wrapping, cut off a couple of generous portions, then poured two cups of coffee from the white enamel pot.

“A wisitor you have here soon,” Guri said finally, when she looked into the cup that Lydie had drained and set aside. She was sipping her own coffee slowly, expertly dipping her lump of sugar and sucking it with a little whistling noise between her toothless gums.

“A visitor, Guri?” Lydie said absently. The old woman was forever telling fortunes and Lydie had long since ceased to pay more than passing heed to them.

At the moment, Lydie’s attention was elsewhere. From the inner room Esther Larch’s voice was rising in giddy rapture in response to some wise and slow suggestion that had come from Andrew. She really ought to go to his rescue, Lydie thought, but on other occasions when she had done so Esther had let it be known in the neighborhood that Lydie Clarence was green with jealousy of her and Andrew. It was generally believed, indeed, that Lydie watched her husband with the eye of a hawk.

“Yah, a wisitor,” old Guri was prattling on. “You hass here a sadness, too. You go some place, soon now. But the wisitor, he come here. A big storm, maybe. No—it iss not’ing. Not’ing big no more, Lydie. Peoples come—peoples go. Make no difference.”

Lydie smiled. “No, Guri—it makes no difference, does it? People come and people go. Let me fill your cup again.”

“Yah! One time here it vass different. When Doctor Edvard Stene he settle here—that was the great time! I am too old to tell about that time. The days pass wit’ the men and women and the animels som went wit’ them. And the coffee grounds—pht! You tells a fortune from in your head, or your heart—or your belly, might be. But the coffee iss good, Lydie. Home, Egbert’s wife she say it ain’t good for me. Vell, I tell her I still live, no matter what. So I had it to do over again, Lydie, I would take all I could get, coffee and everyt’ing else! What use iss it to save yourself—yust for the grave?”

Lydie responded with a preoccupied laugh, then went to the doorway of the living room. “Wouldn’t you like a cup of coffee, Esther?” she asked graciously. “Andrew?”

“Oh—no, thanks!” Esther replied, goggling. “Doctor Blane says I mustn’t have it except for breakfast. I’m too tense and high-strung, he says.”

“I agree with Doctor Blane,” Andrew grinned. “As long as Esther is secretary of the club, she’ll have to be careful of her health.”

Lydie caught his sly wink as she withdrew. Esther wouldn’t want to be secretary of the Beacon Light, she thought to herself, if Andrew weren’t president. She went back and sat down at the kitchen table.

“Why don’t you wear your new store teeth, Guri?” she asked the old woman, irrelevantly.

“Oh—them! They’re no good to chew wit’. Yust for show. I been getting along twenty year now on my gooms. So my grandsons want to give me a present, they could’ve made it somet’ing useful. But, no! They got to give me *teet*!”

The old woman settled back comfortably in her chair and looked admiringly about the big, immaculate kitchen with its shiny linoleum, its nickel-trimmed range, its crisp red and white curtains, its old oak cupboard, and above all its electric light in a fine white bowl in the center of the ceiling.

“Goodness me!” she exclaimed. “It iss a palace you have here, Lydie! When I t’ink of the sod house Edvard and Johannes had first they come here—and so the log house later on—it iss too much to t’ink about. Then wit’ candles for light, and now you wit’—”

“We wouldn’t have electricity, of course, if we weren’t so close to town,” Lydie reminded her. “But it is a nice place. I only wish we could buy it.” She drew a quick, impatient breath and gathered up the cups and saucers. “But this Eric Stene won’t sell.”

Old Guri chuckled to herself. “That boy—I guess he iss a Stene, yust so!”

“What is he like, Guri?” Lydie asked. “He was here about five years ago, wasn’t he, when his granduncle died?”

“Yah, he wass to the funeral. Big, good-looking feller. Teaching in a college, he iss.”

“Yes, I know. It’s funny that he has never been back here since his uncle died.”

“Them Stenes wass always funny,” Guri said. “So I told you before, I wass here in diss house the night Eric wass born and his mother died. A Dutch girl she wass. I knowed him till he wass a big feller and went away to school. His fahder died before, and so it wass only his granduncle Johannes so wass left. Eric say to me when he come to Johannes’ funeral, he say, ‘Somet’ing iss finished, Guri. Might be I never come back. But I keep diss place anyhow, so long I can.’ Funny, them Stenes.”

“He probably fancies himself being landed gentry some day when he makes enough money to settle down here and lord it over the county!” Lydie observed with a hint of acrimony. “After Andrew has broken his back keeping the place productive. Oh, I know I’m unreasonable. Andrew always tells me I am. And of course we *could* go somewhere else and buy a few acres. But we came here when we were first married, and no other place will ever seem the same to me. No other place will be *Solbakken!*”

“Yah, yah, yust so—I understand. I wass lucky my brother he take over our farm so I live on it till I die. But might be Eric he give in after a while. Might be Andrew should go and talk to him.”

“Andrew?” Lydie stood at the sink, cutting up onions for the hash. Tears came into her eyes and she laughed as she rubbed the back of her hand roughly across her cheeks. “Me, perhaps—but never Andrew. It was *my* idea in the beginning, you know, Guri—it was *my* idea to buy this land. I’m afraid I’m the possessive one. I’ve talked to Andrew about it until he thinks it’s *his* idea now. But he’s far too sensitive to go and force himself on a person like Eric Stene. But when this place is worth twice what it is now, your beautiful Eric won’t wait long before he forces himself on us. He’ll kick us off without—”

The door to the inner room opened and Esther Larch came into the kitchen, Andrew following her. Lydie gave her husband a glance of veiled and humorous commiseration while he paused near the doorway, smoking his pipe in the patient way he had of showing her that he wished the two women would take themselves off without delay. When they had gone at last, after effusive

good-bys, Andrew walked quietly over to the stove and knocked the ashes from his pipe. His thin, dark face bore a dry and weary smile.

“Even the pipe tastes moldy,” he said with a lugubrious laugh.

Lydie wiped her hands and came to him. She threw her arms about his high, narrow shoulders. For a moment she studied him, his twisted, enduring smile, his steep forehead beneath the dark, somehow helpless-looking, gray-threaded hair, his eyes, deep-set, more dark and constantly burning with that strange, mystical zeal of his mind which she had never been able to comprehend, and which had always made her feel grossly physical and unworthy of him.

“Isn’t it too much for you, Andrew?” she asked him. “Why can’t somebody else be president of that darned old club? You started it—and you’ve kept it going. It’s time somebody took it off your hands.”

He grinned down at her. “Are you trying to tell me I’m getting too old to \_\_\_”

“They depend on you too much, Andy,” she interrupted. “And that Esther Larch—I felt like going in and stuffing her mouth with a dish-rag!”

Andrew laughed suddenly as if a weight had been lifted from his thoughts. He gathered Lydie into his arms and kissed her with an intense fervor that left her almost breathless.

“If I didn’t have you,” he muttered, “nothing would be worth a damn!” He thrust back her hair and stared into her eyes in a way that sent a running tremor through her body. “You’re like a flower, Lydie.” She could feel him trembling as he held her closer and closer. “And yet—you’re so strong, too—sometimes you scare me.” He laughed again and released her. “Now, don’t go worrying about Esther Larch. She means well—and she’s really working hard for the Beacon. She has a batch of new members all lined up for the next meeting—people from Axford. We’ll just have to put up with Esther. Anyhow, she doesn’t bother us much. This is the first time she has been here in two weeks.”

Lydie moved away and abstractedly stirred the hash in the deep pan over the fire, then set it to one side at the back of the stove, beside the stewed tomatoes.

“You’d better call Bob and Lucky,” she said quickly. “Supper will be on by the time they get washed up. And you go and change those wet shoes. With two men being paid to do the work around here, I don’t see why you have to go tramping through the wet grass all afternoon.”



Lydie had walked through the thickened darkness beyond the barns to where the hill sloped down to the sheep pasture. She sat down on the stone rim of the old well which Andrew meant to repair as soon as he got time. It deserved to be kept in style, he said, just as much as the old log house that stood back there in the orchard. It was here the Stenes had lived in the days that only old Guri Kvam could recall. Soon even she would pass, and all that she remembered now would pass with her. The day would come, Lydie thought to herself, when everything the Stenes had ever known would crumble and cease to be—everything except the dark land and the bright sky, and the eternal, secret and inscrutable forces that worked between.

Meanwhile, living would go on. Andrew would patch the roof on the old Stene cabin, he would trim the trees in the old Stene orchard. Just yesterday he had said something about building some sort of cupola above this well head and Lydie could train wild grapes to grow over it. It would be a pretty spot, and the well was useful even now, since it was closer to the vegetable garden than the pump beneath the windmill.

Andrew's plans were so sturdy, so hopeful and clear, in the face of all his disappointments and difficulties. They were a strong, clean house built over himself and her, Lydie, his wife.

She trailed her hand over the wet stone ledge of the well. She stared down across the pasture, through the almost impenetrable iron-colored night, and lifted her face to the slanting rain. The rain would be falling on the little river down there under the hill; it would be falling on the swamp, east of the river, where the brown velvet cat-tails always withstood so long the quiet-calling death of summer. But their stout courage would be for naught. Only a few days now, and river and marsh would be frozen and silent.

Lydie got up from the stone ledge. There was nothing to do but go back and set the table for morning breakfast, before going to bed. It meant less haste when the men were getting ready for the day's work on the farm.

## Chapter Two

### 1

While they walked in the November starlight, Eric Stene glanced down at the blurred shape of his friend, Professor Sibert Mueller. It had been on Eric's suggestion that they had taken this road skirting the edge of town instead of the paved avenue that led from the hospital steps down through the business center of Anders.

There must be a moon rising somewhere, Eric thought indifferently. He had rather lost track of the phases during his recent illness. Mueller would want to be home before the moon rose. That happened to be *his* peculiar complex, or phobia, or fixation—or whatever newer word they had for it this year. Eric recalled the evening, two years ago, when the professor had painfully confessed his abiding dread, had explained it through the fact that boyhood companions had whooped with mirth at his silhouette against a full moon, because his deformed upper spine was comically suggestive of a bag of stolen chickens. And Mueller was as afraid of moonlight now, at forty-five, as he had been when he was a boy of ten. A good thing, Eric thought, to have something definite, something nameable, to be afraid of, instead of this opaque ambiguity which was life itself.

“For one thing,” Sibert was rumbling carefully down into the collar of his overcoat, “you make too much *uff* it, Eric. You should take it as a kick upstairs. How else would you ever have got away from our little den of bigotry and intolerance? Look at me! I shall be in Anders College for the rest of my days. If someone had kicked me out fifteen years ago—when I was as young as you, Eric—”

“Thanks, Sibert,” Eric broke in. “I know you’re trying to be helpful, but it’s no good, old man. I don’t see why you should object so strongly when I tell you that I’m through with teaching. As a profession, it’s—it’s immoral. When a teacher of English Literature has to weigh every word he speaks in the classroom, for fear of offending the powers that be, I don’t understand how you’ve managed all these years in Philosophy.”

“It requires what you call a saving sense of humor, of course,” Mueller observed drily.

“Oh, hell!” Eric’s mouth tugged across his large, good teeth. “I suppose Dempster has kept his job all these years because of his saving sense of humor.”

“It might be—it might be,” Mueller replied. “On the other hand—ah—I have already explained President Dempster, eh? He is a man of no intellect. But he is not altogether a fool, either. Look, now! It is very simple, Eric. A tall, good-looking young man comes down from the state university where he was a hero on the football field—he comes down to teach English at Anders. He has blue eyes and light hair, he has what they call personality. He has original methods in the classroom. He is *human*, and the students like him—too much, eh? The older professors are not pleased. Hunh! They wait for him to make a mistake—to say something, do something they do not like. Well, it is unfortunate. Nature takes a hand. One day when our young professor is at work at his desk, the young girl with the red hair comes in and throws her arms around him. Anywhere else, perhaps, there would be no harm done, no offense. But one of the older professors sees what happens and the next day President Dempster calls our young professor into his office. The young man does the foolishness to resign. Then—more foolishness—he goes to another town to deliver a lecture that has been arranged and he comes back sick. For six weeks he is in the hospital. After that, he does me the honor to stay at my house—and then tells me he is through with teaching forever. This young man, who is one of the few I have met with the genius for teaching. Hunh! It is all very funny, no?”

Eric’s laugh was bitter. “Genius for teaching! Education is a waste of time, Sibert—especially here in America. Drove of students—year in and year out—turned in and turned out—without selection when they enter, and without any claim to distinction when they leave. The average human brain is little more than a lump of paleozoic ooze.”

“Hunh! You are not yet fully recovered from your illness, Eric,” Mueller said hurriedly. “You must rest—in body and mind. A sickness distorts—”

“On the contrary, it defines margins, crystallizes the shape of things.”

“What, then, are you going to do?” Mueller asked helplessly.

“I don’t know yet. I’ve been thinking about it. I have a little money left in the bank—and I have the rent from the farm—about four hundred a year, after the taxes are paid. Barker wants me to keep on with the articles in *The Horizon*—if it doesn’t fold up soon. I’ve thought—”

“Well, we shall take time to think, Eric—and time to talk, too. And you will stay with me until you have decided. Let us go in. Natalie will be here any moment.”

They had come to Sibert Mueller’s gate.

## 2

Natalie Monroe had telephoned immediately after dinner that she would drop in to see Eric later in the evening—probably not before ten-thirty. Eric had taken advantage of the interval to visit Barney Olson, a patient he had come to know during his last week of convalescence at the hospital. He had invited Mueller to go along.

It was quite significant, Eric reflected as he entered Mueller’s bachelor home, that the professor had not spoken a word concerning Olson since they had left the hospital. It was perhaps the first time that gentle soul’s clouded innocence had been pierced by any direct contact with human violence. The case of Olson was downright pitiful. He had undertaken to drive a truck during a strike and had been overpowered by a band of strikers who had beaten him without mercy and left him lying in a ditch at the side of the road a mile or so north of town. He had been out of work for months and had accepted the hazard of a night’s trip from a neighboring town for a paltry ten dollars—ten dollars, he explained to Mueller, that he had not yet received and probably never would receive. And the professor had promptly written a check for five times the amount and left it on the small table beside Olson’s bed.

Deep in his red leather chair, however, before his own fireplace where the logs were crumbling to a downy ash of pink and silver, Sibert Mueller had talked at greater length and with more gusto than he had ever talked before, in Eric’s presence at least. For the moment, his never-too-sure English had slipped back across the banks of the Rhine.

“So you think I was rash, yah, to giff him the money?” he demanded, wagging a thick finger, and holding his glass of mulled wine before him where he could see the light upon it. “Yah—four small children he hass—”

“Damn it, Sibert, is that *your* responsibility?” Eric interrupted.

Mueller blinked through his glasses in dismal bewilderment. “When you zwear, Eric, you scare me.” He drained his glass and set it aside. “I think it begins to feel cold here, no?” He got up patiently and tossed a couple of logs

on the fire, then poured more wine into the two glasses.

“I don’t mean to scare you, Sibert,” Eric apologized. “I’m just trying to tell you that the whole scheme of things is cock-eyed. Our friend Olson—busy for a decade, propagating the race—takes a job that might have cost him his life—for the sake of ten dollars to feed his four kids!”

He flipped his cigarette into the fire. He had not intended to sound quite so sententious; the whole insane business wasn’t worth it.

“You forget somesing,” said Mueller, agitated and oddly shy. “You ask me if it was my responsibility. Maybe not. But the good Olson—neither iss he responsible. It iss the—” He hesitated, blushed, nursed his glass unhappily in his two hands. “Iss it not somesing else, maybe? Somesing primordial—some impulse in Nature that drives us without our own choosing. It resides in the female—it was in the first woman—as it will be in the last. She it is who carries on the work that Nature has planned. Und zo—”

Eric glanced at him skeptically. “I didn’t know there was so much kick in this grog, Sibert.”

Mueller laughed. “No, no—I am very serious. It iss for that impulse that we have what we call beauty in the world. It is for that we have pride and strength—the arts of peace and the glories of war.”

There was something so bashful, so apologetic in Mueller’s vehemence, that Eric ironed out his involuntary smile and chuckled softly instead.

“It is for that we have girls with red hair, I suppose?”

“Ya, ya! Why not? Such things are at the heart of life. You will find out for yourself, my young friend.”

“Don’t make too much of my innocence, Sibert. I’m a little sensitive on that point. After all, I’m no longer an adolescent. A man of thirty-one, even an English professor at Anders, might be expected to know some of the answers. But let me put you straight on one point. The Stene line in America comes to an end with me. Blood of my blood—bone of my bone—not on your life, Sibert! Not to be used as fertilizer for the bean-rows of some smiling and hypothetical Utopia of the future. If Nature insists on carrying out her fell design to keep the world populated, she can count me out. Not that she won’t get along very handsomely without any help from me, but—”

The hall clock chimed, and at the same moment a sharp summons came from the front doorbell.

“It is eleven,” said Mueller superfluously. “That can be no one but Natalie

Monroe.”

Eric got up. “The living denial of your theory, Sibert. I’ll let her in.”

Mueller rose quickly from his chair. “You will tender my regrets? It is already too late for me.”

### 3

In the snuff-brown quiet of Professor Mueller’s hall, Natalie Monroe had the fluid improbableness of a golden unicorn. This, in a less marked degree, she had everywhere, but the amiable dust of Sibert’s oaken staircase, his faded velvet portières and dun-toned walls, accentuated it to something almost bizarre. Eric, his hands in the pockets of his flannel jacket, stood surveying her with his careless, diagonal smile while she posed before him—posed knowingly, mockingly.

Between them there were no mysteries. Not even mystery, the wider thing. There never had been; they had from the first experienced a mutual recognition with the harsh candor of children, the one seeing in the mirror of the other a being of peculiar brittle arrogance, tempered scorn and disenchantment. The amused fondness they bore each other was merely a projection of a negative endurance; Natalie felt it toward herself, Eric felt it toward himself, and there was nothing to be done fundamentally to alter it.

“Well, do you like it, or don’t you?” she demanded lightly, slapping her black riding boot with her quirt.

Eric looked the new habit judicially up and down. “It looks pretty expensive. Saffron doeskin, or—”

“Expensive? What has that to do with it? It was costly, of course—costly as sin! So you don’t like it?”

“Come in and sit down,” Eric invited. “Sibert has gone to bed.” He put his arm across her hard, slender shoulders as he drew her into the library, and found that the material of her molded jacket was pleasantly soft as human flesh under his hand.

“I do like it,” he admitted as soon as they were seated. “It just happens to be an odd moment for you to be parading it.”

Her eyes, more gold than hazel under their straight, artfully darkened

lashes, came back from their restless prowling about the room. She threw her black suède hat to the floor and ran her china white fingers through hair that was the noxious color of certain bright fungi on oak trees. The color was natural, moreover, though few believed that.

“Don’t be mysterious, darling,” she said. “Don’t I often ride at night?”

“Of course. I wasn’t referring to that. Sibert and I have just come back from visiting Barney Olson—the truck driver, you remember?”

“Yes, I remember, but—”

“Barney risked his life for ten dollars that he had to have for food—for his four kids—and then you come sailing in with an outfit that must have cost a couple of hundred.”

Natalie smiled, an arrowed, lovely smile of relief. “I was afraid there was something really serious in your mood. I was really afraid you were ill again.”

She lighted a cigarette and stretched her long, jet-booted legs toward the fire.

“Well,” Eric prompted her, “what’s *your* mysterious mood all about? Don’t you know I’m supposed to be an invalid and should have been in bed an hour ago?”

“Yes, darling. But, look—I came over about something really important, Eric. You know that poky little private school that Uncle Will is a trustee of? Well, the old dear came across this afternoon in a really handsome manner. He promised me he’d get you on the staff there by mid-year, if he had to endow a chair. They need a new wing, or a lab. or something, and Unco’s money talks.”

“You’re comforting, Nat.” Eric smiled to cover the hateful flush that was creeping up over his temples. “You’re the only one I know who isn’t trying to spare my feelings with a lot of soft soap.”

“Oh, tripe! Now I suppose your pride is hurt. But I’m not trying to spare your feelings. I haven’t thought twice about that Daisy Fuller affair since it happened. As far as that goes, nobody in his right mind could have blamed you if you had—”

“For God’s sake!”

“I’m not suggesting that you *did*, darling. I confess I should have been rather tickled if you had, but I know you too well to suspect anything of that sort. You’re a high-minded, cynical prig, Eric Stene. Just the same—the paradoxes in your make-up would fill a book.” She looked at the pink, stiff-

glazed petal of her thumb-nail. Her eyes were moody, resentful. “It’s rather a shame I didn’t meet you ten years ago, Eric. Tomorrow I’ll be twenty-nine.”

Eric glanced at his watch. “In fifteen minutes, you mean. Didn’t you tell me three years ago that you were born just after midnight?”

“It’s kind of sweet of you to remember that,” she said.

“Sibert has a couple of bottles of extra dry left from what his brother sent him at Thanksgiving. I know he’d be pleased if we opened one to celebrate the occasion. Shall I go and chill it?”

She angled one shoulder indifferently. “A bottle of beer would do just as well. But whatever you like.”

The clock was striking twelve when Eric, seated opposite Natalie, finally opened the bottle. She was eating some stale peanut brittle she had found in a desk drawer.

“Well, what about the job?” she asked presently, after Eric had drunk to her health and happiness and she had responded with a cheerful, careless grin.

“It’s out, Nat,” he told her simply. “I’m not going to teach any more.”

Her long, red mouth formed a mocking O. “Little boy sulking in a corner, is he?”

“Not at all. I really mean it. That little fracas at Anders has nothing to do with it, either—except that it brought the decision on a little sooner. All my ravings to you about the big things I was doing and was planning to do were just so much poppycock. I don’t fit into pedagogy, and I can’t expect pedagogy to rearrange itself to suit me. The simplest way out is to *get out!*”

Natalie looked pleased. “I can’t believe my ears, Eric! You’re actually seeing the light at last.”

Significantly, she did not ask him what he was going to do. Nor was that because of any delicacy on her part. Natalie Monroe would see no reason for anyone having a plan beyond tomorrow. She was not frivolously irresponsible, but she refused, with fine contempt, to pit herself against the whims of destiny. She had been desperately hurt once by a glad faith in the future—she would never put herself in the way of being hurt again, let come what might. It was strange how the thought of Kim Wallace could inject itself irrelevantly into any conversation between Eric and Natalie—as if he had known the fellow intimately for years, instead of from a slightly unsavory hearsay.

Although he had no real reason to be grateful to Natalie for not betraying



any curiosity concerning his future, Eric was nevertheless deeply grateful. "You may call it 'seeing the light' if you wish," he said. "I could be sentimental and declare that I had seen the darkness. I don't know where things are heading for, nor whether they'll be worth a damn when they get there."

She leaned toward him impulsively. She was vivid rather than beautiful, burning rather than warm; burning on the surface, with the tiredness of ash underneath. And yet at times like this a young dew seemed to fall upon her, and one saw her as she must have been before Kim Wallace, who had been her husband, made of her life a quite different thing.

"Eric," she said, "this is the time to break away. Let's really do what we've talked about so often. Just get up and go. I have money, you have brains and energy. Let's go to Russia or to Spain or to China—to dangerous places—wherever they'll let us in!"

Eric knew that she meant it. He had only to look at her to know. She had nearly a half million dollars in her own name, and there was more to come. But he smiled at her and shook his head.

"That isn't the way the game is played, Nat. And besides, it wouldn't solve anything. I'd fail you miserably. In a crisis I'd turn yellow."

"Of course you would—since you say so. But until then we'd amuse each other." She came over to him, light and hard, and sat on the arm of his chair. He was not surprised when she kissed him as she did; he had known that when it happened he would receive from her a sterile, naked and destroying passion, without tenderness, without any masking hypocrisy of romance, without any deluded, sentimental assumption that would lead to regrets. She desired at this moment to possess her own fierce and delicious senses; herself, not him.

His arms tightened about her. He laughed, a little unevenly. "Tiger, tiger, burning bright . . ."

"I don't love you, of course," she said. "Remember that, no matter what happens between us. Not that I have to warn you, darling."

An empty lassitude came over him all at once, the suddenly spent feeling he had experienced every now and then since his illness. And with it, like a chilling nausea, came resentment toward Natalie for her power to stir him with that barren sensualism which reflected his own.

"Of course I understand you, Nat. You're a—a good sport."

He closed his eyes and ran his hand across them, but even as he did so he perceived a tremor and a tension in Natalie that made him wonder how he

could with any gallantry release himself from her embrace.

“That was a very tactless remark, Eric,” she said, drawing away from him. She laughed, inconsequentially enough, but through that sound and through his own weariness Eric detected a fine red vein of anger.

She was standing free before him on the hearthrug, a graceful instrument formed, it seemed to him, of some still undiscovered metal. He leaned forward, clasped his hands loosely, wearily, over his knees.

“You’re beautiful, Nat,” he said. “Is that apology enough?”

She picked up her gloves, hat and riding whip. When she faced him to say good-by, she had a desolate wrung-out look, and she did not try to smile.

“It isn’t,” she said, “but I’ll accept it for what it’s worth. I should have remembered that you aren’t entirely well yet. I must be going.”

An insane desire to laugh rode over him; he stepped to the fireplace and mechanically lifted the screen and adjusted it. Then he turned back and gave her his hand. “Good night, Natalie,” he said. “You’re a good scout!” he grinned.

“I’ll accept that,” she said, her sparkling, invulnerable self again. “Let me know when you decide to do something silly, won’t you? I’ll aid and abet, darling—regardless!”

## 4

Natalie was gone. Eric sat down and stared through the screen at the dying fire.

He was a fool, certainly, he told himself. The scruples of pride which he entertained did not belong in the realm of the liberated intelligence; in being governed by them, he remained hopelessly fixed upon those peasant lowlands which extended in a reversal of eternity back through the toilsome mists of his heritage. His commentaries in *The Horizon* paid him approximately a hundred dollars each, but at any moment that heroic little periodical might give up the ghost; the tenants on his farm might quite reasonably default this year; he was without a position and had no immediate prospect of finding one in which he could be even moderately happy. The position Natalie’s uncle had offered to make for him was a little too much for his sense of the ignominiously comic, even if he had wanted to go on teaching after his humiliating experience at

Anders. And yet, he had rejected the advances of the only woman he knew who had ever stimulated him both mentally and physically, and who had with graceful carelessness offered him the freedom of the earth! Many a man would have jumped at the opportunity. Perhaps he would have done so himself if he had had any real sense of humor. But he was shackled still by those stubborn and irrational ideals that had drawn his ancestors into the harder way, that had made them fanatically reverence the plowshare and abominate the parlor.

His grandfather and his father had both been uncommon men, each uncommonly needed by his time, each great in the way of those countless and unrecorded souls whose names are too bright for history but are written dimly in the long, dark furrow, the ribboned steel of railways triumphantly overtaking the sun, the pluming smoke of city sky-lines where once the prairie dreamt its age-long, vacant dream. His grandfather, Doctor Edvard, and his father, Edward, had each been needed by his time. That was the difference—Eric was not needed by *his* time. Nothing was needed now but robots who would respond to the pull of a lever or the push of a button. Even in higher education, the robot inscribed the diplomas with an expert hand.

Eric turned out the lights, went up to his room, undressed, and lay sleepless on his bed listening to the slow rain that had just begun to fall. Barney Olson's underfed, agonized face kept floating before him in the darkness—then, in its wake, the face of Sibert Mueller, ecstatic with a new idea—and Natalie Monroe's, wasteful, burnt pure, ribald and shameless. He forced his thoughts into himself.

He was unencumbered by any personal possessions outside his books. It would be a simple matter to get into his car—tomorrow would be as good a time as any—and strike out at random in any direction that promised plenty of space ahead. He wanted to put behind him every reminder of his conscientious, devoted industry at Anders and the infuriated chagrin that had been virtually his only reward. Even good old Mueller was a link between him and that immediate, incredible past, but Mueller would understand. He would not charge him with an ungrateful breach of friendship if he awoke some morning to find that Eric Stene had gone.

His thoughts, out of their plunging chaos, settled again upon his grandfather as if there alone they could find any firm ground.

Edvard Stene had come to America as a boy, not long after steam had proven itself something more than a hazardous experiment. The immigrant lad from the fjords had somehow won his diploma in medicine, had even been with the Army of the Potomac at the close of the Civil War, and then had journeyed westward with his brother Johannes, beyond the Mississippi to the *Röd Elv* the newcomers from Norway were so excitedly talking about—that Red River of the North whose valley soil had already become a wild and fantastic promise, pure earth-gold to be turned over by the plow. Edvard and Johannes had traveled by ox-cart up to the border trading post of Pembina, and on the journey the young doctor had taken shrewd and ample notes. But it was to the undulating stretch of prairie somewhat east of the fabulous waterway that they returned, before 1870, to settle on land near the trail of the Red River carts. The brothers called their farm *Solbakken*—slope in the sun—and Johannes worked the land while Edvard made his professional rounds of the countryside, in every kind of weather, over roads and in vehicles that must surely have dismayed a lesser man. It was Doctor Edvard Stene who was one of the founders of the village of Inglebrook.

When Eric tried to reconstruct the character of his grandfather, it was upon his childhood memories of him that he drew, rather than upon the wealth of written testimony the old doctor had left behind him. He had been a lean, ruddy-cheeked, knotty man, never old, who smelled tangily of winesap apples and burning autumn leaves, and who never tired of thinking up new games to amuse a small boy. Eric was five when his grandfather, then seventy-six, rescued three children from drowning in the icy swollen waters of Pistol River, that spring of 1912. Eric could recall the hushed, solemn talk in the house on that day soon afterward when his grandfather had died of pneumonia. For the simple country people were awed by what they looked upon as something more than a coincidence: a great ship called the *Titanic* had gone down at sea on the very day that Doctor Edvard Stene had closed his eyes forever.

The family strain, being devoutly, biblically accustomed to propagation in the old country, must have felt thwarted in America. The begetting had not, Eric reflected, gone on as it should have done. In his middle thirties, the doctor had married a pioneer woman much older than himself, who had with some difficulty given him one son. The son was named, appropriately, Edward, and in later years married a pretty young Dutch girl from the settlement near Inglebrook, who died giving birth to Eric. And that had been the sum and substance of it. Johannes, with some mysterious, ill-starred romance in his past, despised all women.

Eric could recall Johannes declaring that if Edward's pretty wife had been

attended by old Doctor Edvard instead of by a young numskull who didn't know a leg from an arm, all would have gone fair enough and Eric's advent into this world would not have brought tragedy in its wake. But Doctor Edvard was seventy-one at the time and had retired from medicine gracefully, if perhaps with some wistful regret, to make way for a more "modern" practitioner. At the moment of Eric's birth, the old doctor was probably reading Ingersoll in his little tobacco-colored upstairs study that smelled of camphor and nameless horse remedies and gun barrels newly cleaned.

Since the village was only two miles from *Solbakken*, the aging doctor had, during the latter years of his practice, spent as much time at the farm, where he could be summoned by telephone, as he had in his Inglebrook office overlooking Main Street. Eric believed that the old man had made his ready availability an excuse for long hours of solitude and mulling over the past, adorning his already lustrous chronicle with those vivid happenings forgotten in youth and remembered in age, like kernels of grain sprouting to greenness after a long and dark-sealed slumber.

With Granduncle Johannes, Eric's father had run the farm. The sod house had long since disappeared and had been replaced by a proper shelter of snug log, oak and tamarac, chinked with dried earth and grass. Later, in 1882, a frame dwelling of four rooms—which was to grow with innocent disregard for architectural design during the next thirty years—was reared proudly within its circle of evergreens and elms, a trim sight and a prediction of times to come for any chance traveler on the road hard by. Eric's father was a man of tremendous, impatient energy, brusquely scornful of any display of sentiment, as only the oversentimental can be. The death of his young wife must have been a staggering blow to him. When he rallied from it he blankly ignored the infant who had been the cause of his bitter trial. His acknowledgment of his son had been limited to a perfunctory kindness, a duteous, almost grim heed to his physical well-being which never overstepped the line into the realm of the emotional or spiritual. Eric had been obliged, after the death of his beloved grandfather, to content himself at home with the companionship of his taciturn but well-meaning granduncle and the half-deaf housekeeper, Libby Kerr. When Edward Stene died in the influenza epidemic of 1918, it was Libby Kerr who felt herself bereft; the eleven year old Eric felt nothing in particular, unless it was a vague, unhappy sense of incompleteness, of being deprived even of the reality of grief, a sense which would be with him always. He hated any justifying self-analysis, but it was obvious enough that the home life of his boyhood had left its ungentle mark upon him.

He wondered now about *Solbakken*. Since his granduncle's funeral he had

not returned to the place—partly because he shrank from the melancholy feeling it stirred in him that something strong and essentially noble had come to an end, for he himself who was the last of his line had already started upon his academic career. But partly also because his vacations had been crowded with post-graduate work or with travel which he had in his fatuous earnestness hoped would the better fit him for his profession. He laughed acidly now as he thought of that.

The farm, he mused, must have weathered the depression, if the payment of the yearly rental through the agent was any conclusive evidence. The fellow who ran the place, Andrew Clarence, even appeared to have ambitions toward buying it. But this was a poor time to sell, even if Eric had not been possessed of an inscrutable reluctance to sever in such a way all contact with his own past, his own kinship with a piece of earth that reached from its rich surface where the winds roved, down to the unknown, gloomy fury of its core.

The years had not blurred his memory of any detail of the place. Clearly he saw the springhouse, where the moss had been fine as fairies' hair in his young thinking; the ungainly, gingerbread trimmed structure of the main dwelling which had grown haphazardly through long time, the barns and the implement sheds—and farther back, beyond the orchard, the old sod house and the log cabin that succeeded it. What kind of tenants were the Clarences? he wondered. Was the old well back of the barns still there, with its stone top, and the echo that used to bay so weirdly up at him from far down within it?

And how were those young cousins of his, the Sadlers, getting along in Inglebrook?

It seemed to come to him with a suddenness, his desire to go back there, westward toward that rounded sunset, toward that river. But even as he thought of it he knew that it had been with him for a long time. He would pack, and in the morning he would bid Sibert good-by and head his cheap little roadster north and westward through the state. Natalie—well, it didn't matter about her. She had her own prismatic destiny, unhampered by any need, material or spiritual. She might possibly drive to Inglebrook and seek him out, if she cared to. He doubted it. Natalie could find diversion without going out of her way to get it.

## Chapter Three

### 1

The distance he had traveled today could not be computed in miles, nor the time in hours. The lidless, wintry eye of the sun had gone down. Over this strong land of black plowed fields or grass-pale stubble, the bleak, greenish November twilight belonged to the marginless, tranced region of his boyhood, to a lost and gold-dark time. It was to this age, this luminous space strangely droning with faint, forlorn winds, that he had become transported, it seemed without his own volition. He had struggled against a sentimental surrender to this nostalgia of the past, yet had found himself overwhelmed.

The land was a slow tumult of gentle, overlapping hills, small, reedy, secret lakes, and wood-deep watercourses. The groves that sheltered the once opulent farmsteads dotted the rich prairie sea like brooding islands. He had a few miles still to go—across the broad flank of Seward Larch’s cornfield, then over the bridge of Pistol River where he had swum and skated in his boyhood, and fished through long, somnolent hours for perch and bullheads. The firm and defiant contours of *Solbakken* would rise out of the west, its shaggy hemlocks and pines fringing the imposing elms that would be spectral now in this season against the sky, and he would see the high-shouldered, ugly house with its absurd “observation platform” which his grandfather had built and from which the old doctor used to gaze at the stars when he was wont to be alone with his humors. The barns would appear, the granaries and the implement sheds, the silo and the windmill, and the log cabin beyond the orchard. Perhaps even the grassy ruin of the old sod house would still be there, crouching against the earth from which it had come, as if in a desire to return to it. If it should be gone—no, it would be harder still if any sign of it remained.

The light was softening to smoky violet when Eric came near enough to distinguish the features of the place where he was born. The agent, Vernon Adams, had spoken of the present tenant as somewhat hare-brained, with his schemes for raising blooded cattle and his experimenting with corn that was

sound enough to start with. That had been five years ago, however, and Andrew Clarence had not once been tardy in paying the rent.

The gate was open to the driveway between the two tall pines he remembered so well. The mail box stood as valiantly as ever on its post. There was blurred light toward the rear of the house, and a sad rustle in the few remaining leaves of the Virginia creeper on the side porch. Everything was the same except that old Uncle Johannes did not come forth to greet him in his bluff, disapproving way, a way that fooled nobody but himself.

Eric stopped his car and got out. A yellow collie barked and came bristling toward him, but Eric quieted him with a reassuring pat on the head. Two men were at work in the yard. One, bandy-legged in knee-boots, came away from the gasoline engine that was attached to the pump, and spat out of one corner of his mouth as he approached Eric.

“How do?” he greeted Eric and halted at a respectable distance.

“Are you Mr. Clarence?” Eric asked.

“*Him?*” The man opened a cleft of mouth and laughed incredulously. He turned and called over his shoulder to his companion, who was dragging a sack of feed out of a Ford pick-up. “Hey, Lucky—come over here!”

The one called Lucky shuffled forward, his burly shoulders rising against the narrow space of blue dusk between the trees so that he himself looked like an enormous, mysteriously animate sack of feed.

The first man lowered his voice, glanced cautiously toward the house. “Listen, Lucky, he wants to know if I’m Mr. Clarence. Ain’t *that* something!” He snorted again, but more discreetly. “If I was Mr. Clarence, I wouldn’t be workin’ for him, would I?” he went on, his eyes upon Eric. “I’d be runnin’ some swell church racket or something, that’s what. I’d be rollin’ in dough, instead of slavin’ my guts out for twenty a month and found. And that goes for Lucky, here, except he ain’t good for much the way he is. Lucky’s got an implement in his speech, but he thinks like I do. Don’t you, Lucky?” The burly one nodded solemnly. “Sorry, mister, but we got orders not to let anybody see the boss till half-past six, this bein’ Thursday. Ain’t that right, Lucky?”

All this, Eric reflected, belonged to the shapeless dreams of his recent illness; and yet he had certainly been in his right mind when he had driven in through the gates of *Solbakken* only a moment ago.

“Would you mind explaining a little,” Eric ventured. “Or perhaps I ought to do a little explaining. My name happens to be Stene. I’d like to see Mr. Clarence, if—”



Both men gaped, but the one with the bandy legs took on an attitude of composure and self-importance as he hastened to reply. "I—I'm the foreman here. Gifford's *my* name. And this is Lucky Best. He plows and hauls and helps around."

"I'd like to know about Mr. Clarence," Eric said.

"I'm comin' to that. You see, it's like this. There's a preacher down here to the church at the corners only twice a month. On the other Sundays—and every Thursday night except durin' the harvest—Mr. Clarence runs the show down there. Not only Bible preachin', either, though he's a sight better'n the regular sky pilot, at that. He really rares 'em up! Say, he can read you a psalm that would make you look out the windows expectin' to see the hills singin'. And he reads 'em poetry and the like—stuff you an' me wouldn't understand the half of it! Poetry, by cripes—an' the milk of human kindness. That's what he calls it himself. You see, it's mostly his voice—that's how I've got it figgered. He's got a voice like honey in a comb, an' when he talks at 'em, they all drip like honey. That's the God's truth, mister! An' when he gets them right down to real singin'—boy, they really go to town! Don't think they don't. He could make money if he just stepped out and went up an' down the country with what he's got. Like I sez to him, he's wastin' his time on a farm, blooded stock or no blooded stock. But he don't give a damn for money, an' that's a shame, because the boss has got *ideas*. An' that's why I had to laugh when you ast me if I was him!"

Gifford chuckled modestly at his own joke and the silent one grinned as if to make it clear that he saw the point just as well as the next one.

Eric glanced at his watch. "So—I have to wait for another fifteen minutes, do I!"

"Well, now, gosh-almighty—I don't know what to think." He rolled his tobacco from one jaw to the other and scratched his head. "If he knew it was you—you, see, he's workin' on his talk before the meetin' tonight. But I'll tell you what you *can* do. You can go set in the kitchen. He might just come out to see who's hangin' around—and there you'd be. He's likely to look in on the kitchen anytime. He's got a mess of pork an' beans in the oven, an' baked potatoes. I figger we'll all eat as soon as he gets through with his meditatatin'."

"I thought he was married," Eric said.

Gifford's eyebrows rose almost to meet his hay-colored hair beyond the narrow isthmus of forehead. "Sure, he's married. To as fine a woman as you'll meet I don't care where you look. He married her just before he took this place on. She's the quiet kind, don't mix much." He nodded southward. "Over there,

beyond them red willows is where she spends most of her time, except in winter. She raises peonies for the market. Bulbs with names, an' all that. She's a worker, she is. Can't stand seein' things just doin' nothin'. If it ain't producin', she makes it produce, by cripes, or she just knocks it off and the hell with it! Yes, sir."

Eric was puzzled. This man Gifford was likely to go on talking for hours. "Well, could I see Mrs. Clarence, then?"

"No, you can't, mister. She's down in Ioway just now. The mother took sick the other day. She's dead, p'rhaps, by this." He let fly a tidy jet of tobacco juice and added laconically, "Telegram—phoned to us at two in the mornin'. Mr. Clarence was dog tired, but he druv her to the depot in Inglebrook to catch the four o'clock, just the same. Wouldn't let I nor Lucky get up outa bed. That's the sorta fella he is. Always considerant."

While he talked, a ruminative change crept over Gifford, remarkably reducing the strutting self-esteem he had shown at first. Eric, looking forward to meeting Andrew Clarence, was prepared for almost anything.

## 2

It was not until after the two hired men had bolted their food and returned to their chores that Eric was able to get any clear impression of Andrew Clarence.

Their meeting had been confused, made faulty by the presence of the swaggering Gifford and the loutish Best, to both of whom Clarence had been deferential and courteous beyond all reason. At table, Andrew had addressed his sparing remarks as frequently to Lucky Best as to Eric, had been as quick to note that Lucky's plate lacked pork and beans as he had been to pass the butter to his landlord. Toward Gifford he had offered patient, solicitous and companionable queries concerning details of the work on the farm. Gifford, preening himself, had been brisk and plausible in his replies. Eric looked about the kitchen. Beneath the brown old beams there was, he observed, a modern sparkle that had not been there in his memory. On the other hand, the range and the oak cupboard with its touch-worn shelves were just as they used to be, and the simple-curtained windows looked out on nighttime just as they used to look.

It was not until the hired men had gone out that Andrew Clarence came

sharply into focus before Eric's eyes. It was a strange thing, Eric had seen, on that one visit he had paid to Europe, faces like the face of Andrew Clarence. He had seen them in dim, unrenowned chapels and in great museums, too, where the crude beginnings of sacred art were housed. This man, with his long, severely chiseled head, his burning, deep-set eyes, had upon him the look of early Christian martyrs. His face bore the dreadful stamp of saintliness. Saintliness—a word anachronistic and abhorrent to Eric, but in this unexpected case of Andrew Clarence, felicitous and disconcertingly stirring.

“You and I shall have our coffee in the living room, Mr. Stene,” Clarence said, getting up from the table. “I have a little while yet before I must go.”

In the living room the old simple bareness was gone. A woman's affectionate and imaginative care had touched these cretonnes, these hooked rugs, the cushions and the polished brass candlesticks. A low blue bowl of pearly-everlastings decorated the maple table back of the deep couch which faced the fireplace. And in the corner between the pleasantly draped windows there stood a modest upright piano. On the rack appeared Brahms and Chopin and Tchaikowsky. Eric found himself unsurprised. Andrew Clarence, he felt sure, would be quite capable of sitting down and rendering these masters at least gracefully, even if not altogether with distinction.

But Clarence, coming up behind him, said, “My wife plays—not badly. I am sorry she is not here. It's *her* piano.” His smile was one of tender indulgence, faintly lighted with humor. “She brought it up here from her mother's home when we were married. It's pretty old, of course, but it isn't bad, really. And Lydie gives me a good deal of pleasure from it.”

So his wife's name was Lydie. Lydia?

“Is Mrs. Clarence's name Lydia?” Eric asked.

“No. She was christened just Lydie. L-y-d-i-e.”

Each letter, as the man uttered it in his appealingly cadenced voice, was a caress. There could be no doubt that he worshiped his wife. She was, Eric reflected, probably a big-bosomed, generous person who would be dismayed at nothing, not even Chopin. He sat down and ran his fingers over the keys in a few bars of a currently popular melody. Andrew Clarence did not move, nor did he speak a word. But Eric paused midway in a phrase, acutely aware that the man's eyes were upon him in silent protest.

He turned slowly and bowed. “I beg your pardon,” he said rather stiffly. “I merely wanted to hear the tone.”

“It has rather a good tone, I think,” Andrew Clarence said, and went to

place a log on the fire. Eric observed how deft and slender his hands were, the brown wrists flexible as a woman's. The feeling of chagrin still lingered annoyingly and he made a determined effort to shake it off. He got up and went to the other side of the room, where his coat hung near the door. He reached into his pocket, then hesitated. "Do you mind if I smoke? I mean—would your wife mind?"

A reproachful smile passed lightly across Clarence's thin face, and Eric was nettled by the man's evident misunderstanding of his question. He had read sarcasm into it where none had been intended.

"Not at all, Mr. Stene," said Andrew Clarence. "We are rather civilized here, my wife and I. Lydie smokes occasionally herself, if only to make her guests feel more comfortable." As he spoke he opened a small cabinet on a table beside the couch and drew out a briar pipe.

At what precise moment he became freed of the sense of baffling restraint and discomfort in the company of Andrew Clarence, Eric could not subsequently have told. But since he talked with him there altogether for not more than half an hour, the man's effortless, intangible magnetism must have acted upon him almost at once. Eric found himself darting covert glances at Clarence while his host talked in a slow, desultory fashion, using phrases that would have been, in a voice less rich and winning, the tritest of platitudes. The man's charm was exasperating, unanalyzable. Was it in his voice, in the classic, ascetic modeling of his head with its skein of gray through the silky dark hair, in the sensitive, long line of mouth beneath the aristocratic, sharply flanged nose, in the brooding, almost animal-like softness of the deep-set brown eyes, or was it in the eloquent, controlled power of his hands—hands that spoke of a profound humanity in the spirit of the man, of mercy and a sublime tolerance? Andrew Clarence should have been an actor or a priest, Eric thought. What strange impulse had ever moved him to take up farming?

Their conversation touched upon matters commonplace enough: the economic outlook for the country, and for the farmer in particular. Clarence spoke briefly of his efforts to specialize, and the problem of carrying on the routine work of the farm at the same time. His own interest lay in Jersey cattle, while that of his wife was in peonies.

"The two are worlds apart," he admitted, "but we both feel that it is better to vary your hazards. It keeps you sufficiently occupied to insure your sanity in a world where sanity seems to be on the decline."

"Very interesting," Eric observed. "I can understand now your wanting to buy the place. If you were settled more permanently, at least that hazard would

disappear.”

“Just so,” Clarence replied eagerly. “I had hoped you would see it in that light.”

“I do. And I should like to think, for the sake of what you are doing, that the arrangement might be reached some day. But the fact is, I have decided to give up teaching and I have been toying with the idea of taking the place over myself and seeing what I could do with it.” Then, noticing Clarence’s anxious glance, he added, “Not for some time, of course. Certainly not for two or three years, anyhow.”

“I am glad to hear that,” Clarence said, and got up abruptly. “By the way, your grandfather’s books and journals are on the top floor, just as he left them. My wife keeps the place in order, you will find, and we have furnished the small adjoining room as a spare bedroom. I hope you will be comfortable there for as long as you wish to stay.”

Eric was astonished. “I haven’t really decided upon anything definite. But—thank you, just the same. You seem to take things very much for granted.”

Andrew Clarence smiled gently. “There is an old Arabic adage to the effect that when a camel sees an oasis his eyes close. I may be mistaken, of course, but—” he made a deprecatory gesture—“my feeling was that you would want to stop here a while. I have decided that you belong here, and it would be a great pleasure to me—to us, I should say—to have your company for a while.”

It was oddly disturbing. The pedantic striving for the correct turn of speech would have, in anyone else, either bored Eric or made him want to laugh. But the artless sincerity of Andrew Clarence reduced everything else about him to the negligible.

“Well,” Eric said haltingly, “that’s very kind of you. I don’t really deserve such cordiality. I might have written to you, but I—”

“We don’t stand on ceremony here,” Clarence smiled. “I am glad you have come. If I were a literary man myself, I should have been tempted long ago to assemble your grandfather’s memoirs up there and make something of them.”

He lifted his head and fixed Eric with his direct, glowing and challenging eyes. This was something you could not exactly dismiss as accidental guesswork. Was it possible that the man had read those few articles of his in an obscure magazine?

He was about to speak when Clarence said hurriedly, “I am very sorry, but I shall have to leave you now. Our meeting is at eight.” It was his first direct

reference to this evidently self-assumed obligation. He held out his hand and in his grip there was a vitality beyond mere physical strength, although that in itself was surprising in a man so slight. "Make yourself at home, Mr. Stene. I shall probably not be back until quite late."

### 3

Alone in the room, Eric pondered at length upon Andrew Clarence. He was only a little above medium height, but his erect carriage gave him the appearance of greater stature. In his presence, you did not see the exterior man at all—the shabby-neat dark clothes, the ill-fitting shirt collar about the long, sensitive neck, the limp and faded necktie that had plainly been laundered. You thought of these things only afterwards.

Clarence was certainly not unmasculine. His electric, buoyant force could come only from a well-balanced condition of mind and body. And yet, there was about him something unfamiliar and undeniably disquieting, a superior gentleness, a sober patience which one ordinarily associated with a compassionate and broad-hearted woman. It occurred to Eric that Clarence was not unlike Sibert Mueller. In some respects that likable and innocently charitable man had also been unfamiliar to him, always. Perhaps it was that both Clarence and Mueller shared in common an hallucination of a universal and ultimate Good, in the face of all evidence to the contrary.

Instead of going upstairs immediately, Eric stood looking at the bowl of everlastings, chaste and rigid, under the lamp on the maple table. His thoughts were in disorder, his feelings at odds. His grandfather had lived to see this house magically lighted from the power line out of Inglebrook. And long afterwards a woman had deftly arranged these demure flowers under a light, to last throughout a winter, throughout winters. Andrew Clarence's wife, whose name was Lydie. Either a tub or a lath of a woman, probably, who would play the organ in the country church on Sundays and on these frenzied Thursday nights when her husband charmed the moon-faced gathering into a blubbering, hysterical faith in existence by the simple device of being himself. Saint Paul had done it in any number of unlikely places on the Mediterranean, centuries ago, without the aid of a wife.

Eric stood for a moment before the table, then snapped off one of the prim, unscented flowers and drew it through the buttonhole of his lapel. He smiled as he saluted the room, but he was grave when he said, "*À vous*, Madame Lydie!

May your offspring flourish in this, the house of my birth!”

Then he turned slowly away and went upstairs.

## 4

But Eric did not go immediately to bed.

A leisurely inventory of his grandfather's stock in the attic room assured him that everything was there intact. The shelves still held the yellowed almanacs on which Doctor Edvard, with robust comments, had noted the superstitions of an era, bodings which embraced every sort of catastrophe from roup in chickens to earthquakes in Siam—the sere and lonely-odored almanacs published sixty years ago by a patent medicine company which offered a cure for all known diseases, including ear-boils and the seven year itch; his letters, his clippings, but above all his own journal beginning with a time when the state was timidly feeling its way to power.

After this excursion into the hallowed and redolent dust of the past, which tomorrow's Friday might easily blow to bits by the means of a single shell dropped on an American boat idling in foreign waters, Eric went back down to the kitchen and washed the supper dishes. It was with a glow of pleasure that he found Libby Kerr's copper sheet with its hooks for pots and pans still on the wall beside the stove. Libby—that conscientiously disapproving Scotch woman—what had become of her, at her sister's home in Chicago? He should have looked her up, he thought with contrition, the last time he visited that city. She had tanned his bottom for him many a time, twenty years ago, and the memory of her still roused within him a fondness not untinctured with awe. If he ever did see her again he would tell her that another woman was keeping her copper sheet as brightly polished as she herself had done.

When he went to bed at last he fell profoundly asleep with the old and well-remembered tuning of the wind under the eaves.

In the morning, Andrew Clarence had been up for two hours or more before Eric rose. A place for one had been set on the kitchen table, as neatly as though a woman had arranged it, and cereal and coffee were being kept hot at the back of the stove.

When he had eaten—with some feeling of embarrassment at having put Clarence to trouble on his behalf—Eric went out into the sunlight that cut a broad swath between the orchard and the farm buildings. At the peace and

orderliness of the scene he was filled with a sense of well-being and gratitude. Back to the land, and all that! Perfervid harangues by politicians who wouldn't recognize a cupful of top-soil if they saw it, he had thought not so long ago. But why not? Back to something that had air over it, anyhow! The very recollection of classrooms stifled him.

Andrew Clarence met him while he was on his way down to the old well. By daylight the man did not appear as strikingly miscast for his job as he had when Eric first met him. His blue overalls and rough shirt, and the sun on his strongly weathered aquiline face, were pleasantly reassuring.

"Good morning!" Clarence greeted him, with a slight bow in which there was deference but no want of dignity. "I hope you slept well?"

"Like a top!" Eric replied. "I didn't even hear you come in. I did well by myself at breakfast, too. You shouldn't have gone to so much bother—"

"Nothing at all! I suppose you'd like to see how things look around the place. If you'll just come along with me—we've done our best, I think, to keep up appearances, as they say—although sometimes it has been hard going."

The buildings, the farm equipment, were in respectable repair, although Clarence pointed out many desirable improvements that were wanting for lack of funds. Rigid economy, he declared, had been necessary in the conduct of the farm, but he had been fortunate enough so far to do a bit better than make ends meet. There was no smugness in his simple statement that during the good years, while other farmers were recklessly buying luxuries on credit, he had denied himself even modest comforts so that when ill times came he had had a little in the bank to see him through. He did not refer to his ambition to own *Solbakken*.

It was with what Eric perceived to be just pride that Clarence took him through the big blue-gray barn where his livestock was housed. These twelve glossy sleek Jerseys had been taken off pasture as soon as the grass became too dry, and they were being fed, Eric was given to understand, according to the most approved formulae. This was a dairying country and there was economy in feeding only the best. But of course everything was a gamble, and another year might prove that his ideas were not only expensive but unwise. On the other hand, he might find himself able to buy a new car, although so long as he could tinker his old one into running order it made little difference to him what it looked like.

Besides the cattle, Andrew kept sheep, some poultry, a dozen hogs and four work horses. He had had a secondhand tractor, but it had proven too expensive to run. Eric listened attentively to his talk and in a short time was



convinced that *Solbakken* was being handled with an efficiency, conscientiousness and devotion that would have delighted those proud Stenes who thought this land of theirs of some importance. In no other way could it have been made to pay the rent and the wages and keep of two men, with anything left to support Andrew Clarence and his wife. The help, Clarence explained, did not stay on through the winter. From the first of December on there was no more work than he and his wife could manage between them.

“If I could afford it,” he said regretfully, while they made their way across to the old farm site, “I’d keep the men over the winter. As it is, I’ve had them here a deal longer than necessary. I have an arrangement with a friend of mine who runs a box factory in the city. He takes them on when they leave here—as non-union labor, of course. Times are bitter for men like Bob Gifford and Lucky Best. They are transients, they go about the country picking up a precarious living—outcasts, you might say, because they are trained in no special line, and they are both over forty. But what are you going to do with men like them?”

Eric thought of the bumptious Gifford, and of Lucky Best who was one notch above a moron. To Andrew Clarence, with his simple concern, these men were merely two out of the millions of unfortunates whom fate had treated shabbily.

“It’s hard to know what to do with them,” Eric admitted. “In the present social order—”

“The present social *disorder!*” Clarence laughed. “The earth will become so worthless soon that it won’t mean anything for the meek like Lucky Best and Gifford to inherit it.”

Eric was astonished. It had been men like Andrew Clarence who had fomented the great rebellions of history. Simple, peace-loving dreamers whose eloquence had flamed at the exact moment to set the world on fire.

They had come to a tangle of dried blackberry briars and nettle and plantain, beneath which there was what seemed to be a stern hummock covered with bristles of stubborn yellow grass. Eric knew what it was, and nodded without speaking.

“You see what I mean,” said Clarence. “There is your grandfather’s sod house. It looks as if a thumb had pressed it down, doesn’t it? It will take a *hand* to raise it up!”

Eric turned and looked at him. “Do you believe there is such a hand anywhere in this country today?”

Clarence smiled, his head thoughtfully inclined. “Yes—I do. It’s the average hand—the hand that makes mistakes, like waving a flag and applauding a name and casting a vote for a bad senator. But it is a hand to fear, nevertheless—there are strong muscles in the arm above it!”

“Is that the way you talk to your—to the people at your meeting last night, for instance?” Eric asked, his curiosity mounting rapidly. His eyes were fixed upon a mossy slab which might have been the lintel of the sod-house doorway, he couldn’t be sure now; even when he had last seen it it was falling apart.

The intensity left Andrew Clarence’s voice suddenly and he spoke deprecatingly. “I—I don’t know, really. I do the best I can, but I never seem to be able to look back and tell what effect my words have had. Very little, I’m afraid. You see, a number of our people are on relief. If I can do something to raise their spirits and keep up their self-respect, I feel it is worth-while. And I believe the Beacon Thursday nights are helping them—the singing and the talking and—” He broke off abruptly. “Perhaps you’d like to visit with us some Thursday night, Mr. Stene. We’d like to have you come and—”

“I think I might enjoy it,” Eric said, his heart warming unaccountably toward this strange man. “But let’s drop the mister between us, eh? Our first names are handier.”

Andrew nodded shyly.

They went on to the log house tucked in among the fruit trees Uncle Johannes had planted in 1910. It was in fair condition: it had been used for storage, a window and a door would have to be replaced, but the two rooms could be made habitable without much outlay of time or money.

“Andrew,” said Eric, “this is where I’d like to put up for a while. I might try working a little, if I have any work left in me.”

“I had already thought of it,” Andrew replied simply. “It’s the very place for you. Lydie has never had time to keep it in the order it deserves. We call it the ‘orchard house.’ We can move all this junk over to that shed on the other side of the silo—or you can just put it out into the yard and the boys can tote it away.”

“I think I can handle it all very easily myself,” Eric told him. “If I need any help, I’ll call on you or one of the boys.”

He spent the rest of the day transferring the contents of the “orchard house” to the shed, washing the floors and the old white-washed walls, and cementing in the loose stones of the fireplace. The flue, to his surprise and satisfaction, drew as well as it had done while Uncle Johannes had been alive. The log

house had been a retreat for old Johannes, who had always looked with disfavor upon the frame building which had seemed to him a frivolous modern conceit.

The day had turned from unseasonable warmth to rain, a change of the wind chilling the air. But the dreary twilight did not dampen the exhilaration Eric had begun to feel the moment he had commenced this homely task of restoring the orchard house to habitability. If anything, it evoked only the more strongly the persistent spirit of these walls, which seemed to challenge him and his arid nihilism as well as it did the destructive forces of nature. The undiminished appeal of those courageous pioneers whose ghosts lurked here still was banal enough, he knew, and yet he found himself surrendering to that appeal with something not unlike elation. It had been so long since anything had really gripped him! What a laugh this would give Natalie Monroe, if she could see him standing, mop in hand, listening rhapsodically to autumn rain on a roof that had seen more than sixty years of disintegration in the human ideals over which it had been built!

Andrew stopped in once or twice during the day to see how he was progressing. He offered Eric a kerosene stove and suggested the installing of an inexpensive kerosene heater to keep an even warmth in the place. Tomorrow he would help Eric move whatever furniture he needed out of the big house, but he thought it better to wait until his wife returned before attempting any decorative frills like doilies or mats. Lydie had odds and ends stored away, and she had a knack of running things up on the sewing machine in the twinkling of an eye. The prideful manner in which Andrew spoke of his wife filled Eric with misgivings; the woman was no doubt one of those determined females who refused to be stumped by anything—from popovers to classical music. He could eliminate her nicely, however, from his life at *Solbakken*.

## 5

The mail, in the late afternoon, brought a letter from Natalie. Eric left it in his coat pocket while he shaved and changed his clothes before supper. A certain feeling of resentment toward it abode with him. He had wanted no intrusion on this fresh beginning, this experiment in which he hoped to derive from the old tired elements a new compound within himself. Natalie should have known as much. In all likelihood she *had* known, and had written purely in a mood of trivial mischief. He was too well acquainted with her to over-or

underestimate her sensibilities. If she were to seek him out here, for instance, it would be because of—rather than in spite of—the intuitive perspicacity which would warn her that he desired above all to be left alone.

While he buttoned up his light flannel shirt, he pondered upon what arrangement he should make about his laundry. Perhaps Mrs. Clarence would be glad to take care of it for the odd dollar or two every week—these country women had a frugal eye, even if they did prefer Chopin to *Turkey in the Straw*. His tweed suit, he observed, could stand sponging and pressing. Tomorrow, Saturday, he would go into town, get some supplies, and have the suit cleaned, if old Belden's shop was still there at the corner where the hitching post used to be. Even now he thought with a pang of that old hitching post, which had been removed when he was fourteen.

He studied himself briefly in the mirror. Pneumonia could certainly leave its mark! He still had something of a honed-down look, his cheekbones were still unnaturally prominent, but a brisk tinge of health was flowing satisfactorily through his somewhat too delicate skin.

He sat down and opened Natalie's letter. It contained nothing but an exclamation mark and a raggedly scrawled "N." Eric made a grimace and tossed the large square envelope and the note into the wastebasket. Then he laid a small bet with himself that Natalie would pay him a visit before Christmas.

Downstairs, Andrew Clarence was preparing supper. A savory-smelling stew was bubbling on the range. Eric leaned over the pot, sniffed appreciatively and said, "You're wasting your time farming, Andrew. You could get a job as chef."

With earnest precision Andrew had been laying knives and forks at each place on the table, and napkins neatly rolled within bone rings on each of which was a different floral design.

"Even a beef stew is worth doing well," he replied.

Such humorless solemnity in anyone else would have been trying. Yet here it came as a recovered truth, not at all absurd. To whatever Andrew did, he brought a devout, quiet zeal that gave dignity to the task.

"I want the recipe for this concoction," Eric said. "I can boil water and a few things like that, but—"

"My wife would be only too pleased to have you take your meals with us," Andrew interrupted.

“No, no!” Eric said hastily. “That would be an imposition. Thank you, just the same. But I’ll get along all right over there in the orchard house, just as soon as I get into the swing of things. Besides, my hours would be entirely too irregular for you.”

Andrew nodded. “Just as you wish, of course. By the way, I had a letter this afternoon. My wife’s mother has passed away. It was expected, and yet—you never know how you’ll feel until those things really happen. She—Mrs. Wheeler—disliked me from the beginning, for no reason that I was ever able to find out.” He cleared his throat as if in labored apology. “The point is, we shall be alone here probably for another three days. The—the arrangements had not been made when my wife wrote.”

Eric loathed being exposed to any confessed problem of a person he did not know. Once, in a dining car, a man opposite him had announced to Eric that he couldn’t endure artichokes because his wife always craved them when she was pregnant. By the time the artichoke on Eric’s order had arrived, he had had no further relish for it. But this spontaneous utterance of Andrew’s was not in the class of easy confidence.

“Those difficulties seem common in families,” Eric said.

“Yes.” Andrew smiled slightly. “Families require a great deal of toleration. Or would you say ‘tolerance’? You see—I have difficulty with words. I never got farther than the eighth grade—in a country school. Lydie had a year of college before she married me. I’ve learned a good deal from her.”

Eric would naturally have felt either pity or irritation at such unabashed modesty. What he did feel was an unprompted, trusting glow of affection for Andrew Clarence such as he had never before conceded to any but old and tried friends. This might be, he reasoned, because over a period of five years Andrew Clarence had diligently and faithfully sustained the ideals of honest labor in this house where Edvard and Johannes Stene had established them. But, no—it was more than that. If he had met Andrew in some sordidly conventional den of vice, or some equally sordid and conventional drawing room, the result would have been the same. The man’s appeal had nothing to do with this house; it lay rather in the fact that he was Eric’s direct opposite—he had in him the antique and hopeless fire of the poet, the wordless poet, the inarticulate and unthanked savior of a world that laughed at being saved.

## Chapter Four

### 1

On Sunday there was a light, moist snowfall, just enough to cover the furrows of the vegetable garden and leave the old stalks and vines on the ridges exposed, unmourned and uncouthly sad. The dreamy desolation of a vegetable garden in winter had always seemed to Eric to have something smug about it—its appeal to the imagination was too direct, and usually too successful. It spread itself out shamelessly for your pity, confident of getting it, and of flicking you on the raw. Sibert Mueller, Eric knew—and now Andrew Clarence—would object to that idea. What one *should* visualize here in these ugly root-excrecences was the strong, green splendor of a coming spring.

Eric spent the day indoors, making an arrangement of his grandfather's material that would be convenient for purposes of reference, and going carefully over the journal and the old maps of the Red River Valley which Edvard and Johannes Stene had made sixty-seven years ago.

It happened to be the Sunday on which the minister came out from the city to preach in the church three miles west of *Solbakken*, where Andrew led the weekly meetings of "The Beacon Light." Andrew had invited Eric to go along and hear the sermon, but Eric had declined. He would prefer, he said, to go some time when Clarence himself was in charge of the meeting. Andrew had responded with a gentle and gratified smile.

By Monday evening Eric had a feeling that he was "settled" in the orchard house. His books had not arrived yet, the shelves he had built on either side of the fireplace and beneath the two windows were empty, but the "cheerful blue and yellow" scrim curtains he had bought from the girl with the menacing teeth in the dry goods store in Inglebrook gave the place an air of alacrity, readiness. The oil heater had cost him thirty-nine dollars, but the winter would prove the money well-spent, as Andrew had assured him while he helped Eric install it. The kerosene cook stove that stood unobtrusively in a corner by the door was one that Andrew had brought from the summer kitchen of the big house. He had cleaned the wicks, installed new isinglass in the chimneys, and

filled the fuel jar with kerosene.

“That ought to serve you very well,” he said when he set the stove in the place Eric had chosen for it.

Andrew’s face radiated such satisfaction that Eric felt he must have been expecting him here for years.

The first supper Eric cooked in the orchard house was in the nature of a farewell party to Bob Gifford and Lucky Best, who had taken their wages and were leaving on the bus out of Inglebrook to go to the city and begin their season’s work in the box factory.

The supper went off very well, although Lucky dragged out of his pocket a bottle of something he called “mule,” and proceeded to weep into the first tumblerful he took of it. Gifford, to Eric’s surprise, was very quiet. After his second helping of steak, potatoes and lima beans, he pushed back his chair, rested himself on the end of his spine, and squinted sorrowfully across at Andrew.

“I guess I’m a damn’ fool, boss,” he said, “but I’ll be back here in the spring an’ workin’ for you at ten, all found, if you’ll have me. *That’s* what I think of you, Mr. Clarence. But chances are, come spring you’ll be doin’ a darn sight better’n hirin’ the likes of us!”

“Wh-what d’ya mean by th-that?” Lucky stuttered truculently. “Th-there ain’t nothin’ b-better’n wh-what he’s doin’, except you mean pushin’ up daisies.”

“Shut up, Lucky,” said Gifford. “I’m just tryin’ to thank the boss for what he’s done for us.”

“Sh-sure—”

“Well, that’s all right,” Andrew said. “I’ll be looking for you both next spring. Write and let me know how everything goes. And you’d better have that bad tooth of yours pulled, Lucky. It may start rheumatism.”

After the men had gone, Andrew and Eric talked late into the night. To Eric’s relief, Andrew dropped his stilted accuracy of speech and had recourse to his own simple and unpretentious language, fluent and effective. The change puzzled Eric, until Andrew suddenly and irrelevantly confessed that he had been taking a correspondence course in English and rhetoric.

“You see,” he explained, leaning forward and caressing the bowl of his pipe, “I am mainly self-educated. I wanted to go into the ministry, years ago, but there wasn’t any money for that. I had to go to work. Down in Iowa, I was

given some books on history and civics and literature by a Unitarian minister in the small town near our farm. He was a Mr. Fenwick, and he got me to work with him in the young people's club. We studied the Oxford Movement together, and although we didn't identify ourselves with it, we used it as a sort of basis for our own work. When I was twenty-eight, Mr. Fenwick died, very suddenly. I'll never forget that night." Andrew paused, looking down at his hands. "We were going to have a rally that night, and he had worked very hard preparing for it. I went into his study and found him—doubled up—on the couch. It was angina pectoris. How he ever summoned the strength I don't know, but he gasped out to me that I must go to the rally in his place and make the excuse that he was slightly ill. I got the doctor and went on to the meeting." Again he paused for a moment. "I could never have spoken as I did that night, except that I wanted to do his bidding. It was Mr. Fenwick's force working through me. Arthur Fenwick was a saint!"

Andrew Clarence's face had become transfixed in a luminousness that was not far from the supernatural.

"Was Fenwick married?" Eric asked.

"No." Andrew refilled his pipe and tamped it firmly down. "He had a purplish birthmark over almost the whole left side of his face. At first, you wanted to look away from it, but when you got to know him it was more like a—you know, a stigma, or something—as if—" After an awkward pause he went resolutely on—"as if someone had touched his cheek in a benediction he could never forget."

And that benediction, Andrew, has passed on to you, Eric thought, startled. But he said nothing, and presently Andrew continued in a more normal voice.

"The night I spoke in Mr. Fenwick's place, Lydie Wheeler was in the audience. She was attending the Agricultural College, and had played the piano once or twice at our meetings. She was only nineteen then. I had met her, and thought her very attractive, but beyond me, of course. Her mother had a little money, and Lydie was an only child. Well—" Andrew smiled in what seemed to Eric a bewildered reminiscence. "After that meeting, she came up to me, and her eyes were big—like lamps! I was still dazed with the way the evening had gone. Of course, you know it was Arthur Fenwick's spirit speaking *through* me. I could never have roused them to such a pitch of enthusiasm myself. But Lydie—well, it was summertime, and she did not go back to the college in the fall. We were married—and came up here and rented your farm. The furniture you see in the house there is mostly hers—wedding presents from her mother. But that has never mattered to us. We have been so happy that sometimes I—I can hardly believe it!"



For no conceivable reason, Natalie Monroe's face appeared before Eric, mockingly grave. Damn her! he thought, this was the very kind of thing she'd regard as comic! The solemn rustic aspiring to Higher Things, nobly sustained by the unflagging devotion and encouragement of the dear little woman who gazed at her hero with cow-eyes and open mouth, never quite daring to believe that she, so unworthy, had been chosen from among all women to *do* for this great, good man! Eric could hear Natalie's gentle, outrageous sing-song as clearly as though she were perpetrating it right now and here within these walls. Only last spring he had been convulsed with laughter at her guileless imitation of the Darby and Joan felicity of that irredeemable ass, Twiford—Romance Languages—and his wife, Ella-May-dear. Yet he now caught himself thinking that if Natalie flounced into *Solbakken* and tried any of her funny business on the Clarences he would wring her white and pampered neck!

"I have done my bit in county politics since I've been here," Andrew was saying, "but a man has to have a better grounding than I have if he is to get anywhere in that direction. But—I'm not thirty-four yet, and—well, I feel that it isn't too late to prepare myself. That's why I've been studying in every spare moment I can find."

A little later, Eric walked with Andrew up through the star-powdered night to the big house and got a fresh pail of water from the pump. Andrew stood for a minute or two, his head thrown back, his eyes searching the spangled, still, greenish-black vault above them. The hollow chuckle of a barn owl came forlornly once, twice, out of the silence, and after that the vacant, lonely dark struck like a pang across the heart.

And long after he was in bed Eric could see the light burning in an upper window of the big house, and once in a while Andrew's dark figure passing back and forth before it. Eric could imagine Andrew pacing there, pacing; fighting the wrong words, grappling prodigiously for the right, going back to glance hollow-eyed at the textbook.

## 2

The sky on this windless Tuesday afternoon was like a shell of thin blue porcelain. The smell from the damp fields was more like that of spring than late autumn.

Eric had come to Inglebrook to fetch his books from the express office, his tweed suit from old Belden, the tailor—who had recognized him at once last Saturday and had thumped him with delight—and to stock the larder of the orchard house with enough food to do him for several days. When his clothes and books were stowed in the rumble seat of his roadster, he looked up and down the bright, naked little Main Street of Inglebrook and remembered that in his first smart year at college he had called it the “yardstick of America.”

He smiled with an inward blush for that terribly knowing boy, who had been a little too clever for the Inglebrook high school. The school was down the avenue there, and to the left. The maples that bordered the gravelly playground must be much larger now—larger, even, than they had been five years ago. Maples were always school trees, somehow.

The streets and avenues in Inglebrook were all named, but people rarely used the names. One thoroughfare was where the Agnews lived, another was important because the Methodist Church graced it, and another because it skirted the pretty little park where band concerts were held on summer evenings. The avenues crossed Main Street with a sort of light-footed, uninvolved disdain, to fetch up at length with the lawns and hedges behind which dwelt Inglebrook’s “better people,” who numbered perhaps a hundred and fifty, since the town’s total population was under two thousand. But the avenues did not interest Eric. This little Main Street was what concerned him, because Doctor Edvard Stene had had his office facing it in the 1870’s, and Johannes Stene had hauled gravel to cover the mud in the street, sometime along 1885.

The barber’s pole was brave and fresh, a few doors eastward; the drug store’s ice cream arm stuck boldly out over the sidewalk, and in front of the pool hall three men hunched their shoulders in serious talk and spat occasionally toward the curb. Today not more than a dozen automobiles stood parallel with the sidewalks, although on Saturday it had been hard to find parking space. Mundy’s Dry Goods and Hardware Store, where Eric had made his purchases three days ago, was just across the street from his car. The Tip-Top Grocery, best in town according to Andrew, was next to that. He was about to cross the street toward it when an automobile drove up to the curb alongside his own car, and two women stepped out in what seemed to be heated argument.

“You’re crazy!” said one, a tall, box-faced person, clad in a mink coat and a modish sail of a hat. “I won’t let you walk back there alone!”

“Certainly I’m crazy, Aline!” the shorter one replied in a voice that was rough and sweet with laughter. “But you’ve known that for years, haven’t you?”

I'll leave my bag in the store till later. Run back home to Eddie, darling! And thanks for everything. Don't forget to write me as soon as you get back."

"But, child—"

"Child, nothing! I really mean it, Aline. Please!" The woman, whose back was to Eric now, spoke in a clipped, decisive way, the velvety fringe of her tone gone.

Eric squeezed between the back of his own car and the one next to his and crossed the street. It was a relief to find the store almost empty of customers. He would not have to brace himself against that quick and hitching blink which forewarned one of the surprised, outstretched hand. He gave his list to the young clerk to fill out, then turned to the windows where fresh fruit and vegetables were on display. There was one egg plant among the onions and radishes. He picked it up, put it on the counter, and went across to the shelves where he might see something he liked in the canned goods that he had not thought of before.

When he returned to the counter, the boy had his order in a neat pile, but the egg plant was not there. Eric glanced down the counter and saw it, lying beside a head of lettuce and a can of salmon. A woman stood before the counter and the proprietor of the Tip-Top was waiting on her.

"I beg your pardon," said Eric, craning politely forward to look at her, "but you must have taken my egg plant by mistake."

The woman's flat, straight back, in its cheap, fur-collared coat, was the same back he had seen a few minutes ago in the street. Now she turned without haste and looked up at Eric.

"Why—" she faltered, as if perplexed, "I don't see how I could have. I took the last one there was."

"Yes, but—" Eric began, then suddenly laughed.

This was ridiculous! And the more ridiculous, because he had for a moment actually felt annoyed. He liked egg plant—fried in deep butter. He looked down at the woman—girl, she seemed now—and reddened. Beneath a black sailor hat of felt, with a gold ornament on its brim, her eyes were the smoky dark blue of puppies' eyes, or of ripe grapes; they were very dark blue, and young as a rainy spring night, the black lashes long and straight. The rest of her face swept nicely toward her eyes.

"You are entirely welcome to it," he said, bowing. "It was my mistake."

"I don't want it for myself," she said, in that harshly musical, low voice he

had heard before. “But my husband likes egg plant done with cheese and tomato. Thank you.”

The impudence of the woman! As good as stealing, Eric thought. He chuckled to himself. Her husband liked them—thank you!

The boy had brought a box for his purchases, and Eric turned away to light a cigarette. A moment later he was walking out of the store with his supplies under his arm.

He spent another hour selecting a piece of linoleum at the hardware store and looking over a battery radio set for the orchard house. In the street, as he left the store, he met his cousin, Ben Sadler. He had meant to call on the Sadlers as soon as he was settled, and hoped now that Ben would not think his family had been purposely ignored. Ben, in his early twenties, was the son of Eric’s mother’s sister—earnestly, gravely Dutch on the distaff side, yet unpredictably impulsive, Eric recalled, on the other.

Ben shook hands self-consciously. He was a lumpy, red-wristed youth, with clear blue, Dutch eyes which even in his boyhood had always carried a look of hurt and puzzlement. Perhaps because he was too strong, Ben had never dared really defend himself at school for fear of hitting too hard.

“Heard you were at the farm, Eric,” he said. “Ma sort of expected you to come and see her.”

“I’ve been intending to, just as soon as I get things squared away,” Eric assured him. “Look—why not step in somewhere and sit down. I’ve been on the jump most of the day and I can’t quite take it yet. I’ve been under the weather for the past few weeks.” He glanced along the street. “How about a glass of beer, Ben?”

When they were seated in a musty booth, with two foaming glasses before them, Eric asked his cousin what he was working at now.

“I’m signal man in Agnew’s quarry,” Ben told him. “You remember—over southwest of town.” He thumbed across his shoulder and shifted awkwardly.

“Yes, of course. And how is Aunt Dora? She wasn’t so well the last I heard of her.”

“Oh, she keeps up, but she ain’t able to do much. Ada graduated from high school, but Minnie had to quit and stay home with the work in the house. Ada’s workin’ for the Agnews. She wanted to go through college—wanted to teach—but we couldn’t afford it, so she went to work. She makes three dollars a week and her keep, and she does all the washin’ and cookin’ over to the

Agnews', besides lookin' after their four brats." A whitish flame for an instant lighted Ben's placid blue eyes. Then he glanced away.

"Are you making good money in the quarry?"

"Sixteen a week. That's the way it's fixed, with the time divided up among all of us. We've been tryin' to get together and form a union—but I guess that's something out of your line, eh, Eric?"

He smiled a little belligerently, and Eric looked at him with sharpened eyes. Ben's stolidity masked something that had not been there before. Eric's thoughts went back to Barney Olson, the truck driver, lying in the hospital at Anders.

"That makes three of you—living on sixty-four dollars a month," he said slowly. "And your mother sick."

"We're not on relief yet," said Ben. His shoulders moved back just perceptibly. "And that's something these days."

"That is something," Eric replied.

They had another glass of beer and Ben seemed to acquire a little more self-assurance. Although circumstances appeared to weigh heavily upon him—and little wonder!—he had brightened considerably by the time he and Eric left the beer parlor.

"It's nice to see you again, Eric," he said when they came out upon the sidewalk. "Ada'll be glad you're in town, and—"

"It's been good to see you, boy!" Eric slapped him on the upper arm, a gesture he particularly detested. "Tell your mother I'll drop in the next time I'm in town, will you? Or if you could drive out—I'm putting up in the old log house out at the farm. I expect to stay around for a while."

"Well, we'll talk it over when you come in next," Ben said, and Eric got into his car.

### 3

He did not stop to go into the big house upon his return to the farm. Instead, he drove through the orchard, where a dull shine like that of wet slate stood on the bare trunks of the old apple trees after a brief shower. He stopped his car close to the door and hauled out his box of groceries.

On the stone slab in front of the door was an old mat, one of those hairy, brown affairs such as Libby Kerr had always forced Eric to wipe his feet on before he came into the house. Indoors, even as he set down his load, he saw changes. The stippled sunset light from the moist trees outside the window slanted across a handsome potted fuchsia, the perfect small explosions of its blossoms symmetrically spaced. A clean, though faded, blue and yellow braided mat, oval shaped, was on the floor, and on the walls there were two simply framed, pleasant rural prints, and a sampler Eric remembered very well. When he was perhaps four, in the last year of her life, Grandmother Stene had embroidered it with innumerable, painstaking stitches. She had spelled the words out for him: A LONG LIFE IS AS LONG AS IT IS GOOD. The letters went all around the sampler, and the design in the middle showed a woman seated and holding one red apple above the reaching hands of four children.

There were some linen-covered cushions, too, in the three old chairs and on the hair sofa. A white cloth with a bluebird motif had been spread upon the pine table.

Eric stood still and gave a low whistle. Mrs. Clarence must have returned home and acted without delay upon Andrew's suggestion that she put a finishing touch to the appointments in the orchard house. But Andrew had not expected her until tomorrow. Well, this was certainly decent of her; these homely little trimmings made all the difference! And Lydie Clarence had wasted no time in getting at it. He would have to go over immediately and thank her. She must be a hospitable and kindly soul, and yet—the feeling he had as he stepped from the house was not altogether one of ease.

In the yard, he looked down across the sheep pasture and saw Andrew lifting the gate of a runway. There would be nothing irregular, he supposed, in his simply going over to the big house and introducing himself to Mrs. Clarence.

The music he heard as he approached the door made him pause with a strangely disturbing sensation. It was one of the less difficult of Chopin's preludes, and its execution was oddly blended of faltering inexactitude and delicate purity of phrase. What would Sibert Mueller think of it—he who played Chopin with such reverent precision? Whether that imperfection made him angry or sad, Eric could not be sure. Anyone who played as well as that should play better!

He opened the door and went stilly through the kitchen to stand in the living room entrance. In time to come, thought of Lydie Clarence would evoke for him that bluish, curiously animate dusk which filled the old room like a company of invisible presences. Now he found himself stirred in a way that

was hauntingly familiar and yet unrecognizably new.

The woman at the piano, turned in half profile to him, wore a dress of some soft white woolen material, cut peasant fashion, with a full skirt and tight bodice. Her walnut-colored hair was swept back from her cheek into a tumbled mass of curls.

The big yellow collie, whom Eric had come to know as Shag, rose reluctantly from his place on the floor near the piano, stretched and came toward Eric with wagging plume. Lydie Clarence turned around on the bench.

The wide-spaced, powdery blue eyes surveyed him, and Eric entertained for an instant two wholly incompatible thoughts: one of egg plants, the other of the tender, flawed rhythm of a Chopin prelude. He went forward as Lydie Clarence got up.

“I hope you don’t mind my listening,” he said, and put his hand out toward her. “I’m Eric Stene.”

Within his hand hers was firm and rather small. She bit her underlip, smiled. It was an almost gamin smile!

“I’m Lydie Clarence,” she said, and after an infinitesimal doubt, added, “Welcome—home!”

“Thank you. I saw Andrew down in the pasture, but he seemed busy, so I just walked in. He and I have hit it off so well that I was sure you wouldn’t mind if I—”

“Oh, not in the least.”

“And—thanks, ever so much, for what you’ve done on my place over there. It was very nice of you.”

“It was nothing—it didn’t take ten minutes.” She sat down again on the piano bench and Eric took a chair near by.

“I wasn’t really sure that the egg plant belonged to somebody else,” she said abruptly, with an easy smile on her lips. “I just took a chance. And then—when I found it was yours—you looked as if you could do without it. I wondered for a second where I had seen you before. Although you *have* changed since that photograph in the attic was taken.”

What disarming directness! Or was it? Eric laughed and tried to get his bearings. “I hope Andrew will like the egg plant,” he said, grinning.

“We’ll have it tomorrow—and you must share it with us. I was going to get it ready tonight, but Andrew had some left-overs and I was hungry when I got

home, so we had our supper early. Have you had your supper yet—or your ‘dinner,’ I suppose you call it?”

“My folks called it ‘supper,’ naturally. I had a late lunch in town, thanks. And I’ll have a snack before I go to bed. But—why did you insist on walking home, by the way? I happened to overhear you and your friend arguing when you got out—” He checked himself, feeling all at once that he had made a blunder, then added, “If I had known, you could have come along with me.”

Lydie’s face had suddenly taken on a still, grave look. “I often walk to Inglebrook and back again. I think nothing of it. I wanted to arrive without any fuss. Andrew doesn’t like the idea of death. I thought, if I just walked home, it would seem a little more—well, natural, don’t you see? That was why I was playing the piano. I thought, if Andrew happened to be anywhere about—”

“Yes, of course. I’m sorry I mentioned it. You have come through a very trying experience, Mrs. Clarence. You are being very—very brave about it.”

“It isn’t being brave, exactly. You do just what you have to do.”

Eric looked at her. It seemed to him that he looked at her for the first time. He saw her face, shaped like a lilac leaf, the chin rather pointed, the hair going back from the broad forehead in a clear widow’s peak, the nose straight but not narrow, the mouth an irregular soft blur, like a wounded child’s mouth.

“Yes,” he said absently, “I suppose you do.”

“I put on this white dress, too, tonight, so that Andrew wouldn’t think too much about—other things. Besides, my mother would have wanted me to go on—cheerfully. She could never bear a negative feeling about anything.”

Well, Eric reflected, in ten minutes he had learned much—or perhaps he had learned nothing! He wished that Andrew would come in soon.

“I play terribly, don’t I?” Lydie asked suddenly, folding her hands.

“Well—yes, you do!” Eric got out a cigarette. “What did you expect me to say?”

“Just that, of course. I’ll never be any better, either. But Andrew thinks I’m good.”

Eric grinned. “I was just having a little joke at your expense,” he explained. “As a matter of fact, I think you do very well, considering. You *could* be very good, if you had good teaching and were willing to work hard enough at it. You have a surprisingly good touch—as far as it goes.”

“Yes, I have.” She looked down at her hands. The nails were short, clean



and artless. “But taking lessons—and practicing—that’s quite out of the question. There isn’t much place for luxuries in the kind of life we’re living here.”

She looked straight across at him, and Eric had an abnormally cool sensation in the pit of his stomach. He frankly disliked her, despite his resolution to feel kindly toward her for Andrew’s sake.

“Perhaps—after a while, you may be able to study,” he said doubtfully, then smiled to himself. “I don’t suppose Andrew told you of the boner I pulled the first night I was here? I sat down and started to play something popular—and felt at once that I was committing an outrage.”

Her laugh was throaty and liquid, much softer than her voice.

“If I could,” she said, “I’d play the popular things. But I can’t play by ear, and I just haven’t the knack of it. Probably it’s just as well, because Andrew doesn’t like most of the stuff he hears on the radio. When we have a party, he puts up with it—and he dances, and all that, but he really doesn’t care much for it.”

While she spoke, Andrew himself came into the kitchen. They could hear him set a pail down on the kitchen floor.

Lydie called to him without getting up, and Andrew put his head in at the door. “Well! You two have managed to get acquainted without my help, I see. Good!”

“Aren’t you coming in?” Lydie asked.

“Just as soon as I’ve washed up a little. That darned Betsy almost kicked me in the face!”

“He means ‘damn,’ ” Lydie said gently, leaning back on the bench with her square, brown hands spread out flat on either side of her. “Thoroughbreds can be so temperamental. Betsy was mean enough last year to abort just for spite—though she finally decided not to. And now Andrew is actually thinking of experimenting with Swiss! Or maybe he has told you?”

“He hasn’t mentioned it,” Eric replied.

“Swiss—you know, those violet-gray, boudoir cows? They *are* beautiful. Aren’t they beautiful, Andrew?”

He had come in from the kitchen and stood now, pulling down his sleeves, and smiling at his wife, his very heart in his eyes.

“Not half so beautiful as you are in that white dress, Lydie. Do you know,

Eric, she made that dress herself?”

“Really?” Eric felt he was under obligation to express surprise. But the dress was beautiful; he had thought so the moment he came into the room. It made Lydie’s waist look small, but perhaps that was because her breasts were full and high. In middle age she’d probably be chunky, Eric decided. She didn’t have the race-horse lines he admired in women, in Natalie Monroe particularly. He wondered why the Clarences were without children. They had been married five years. They weren’t exactly garden-variety farmers, of course. A family was probably just another of those luxuries Lydie was denying herself until such time as financial security would permit it.

Andrew had sat down and was lighting his pipe. “How about playing something, Lydie? That one—you know the one I like—that Beethoven thing. I’ve been telling Eric that you—”

Lydie was smiling. “Mr. Stene doesn’t think I play well, Andrew,” she interrupted. “I’d bore him.”

The startled, unbelieving glance Andrew darted at him brought a dull, embarrassed flush to Eric’s cheeks.

“She isn’t being quite fair when she says that, Andrew,” he remarked shortly. “She was playing when I came in—and very well, too—and she asked me what I thought of her playing.”

“And what did you say?” Lydie urged.

“I said I thought you’d be very good with more study and a lot of hard work. But of course, I’m no expert!”

There was Lydie’s brooding, soft laugh again. “You didn’t say that, Mr. Stene. You didn’t say you were no expert.”

“I’m saying so now.”

He felt like getting up and going. And that was strange, too, because in the rudely smart set he had known with Natalie this sort of badinage from a person one had just met was considered the *thing*; expected, and lightly returned. It had no place in his grandfather’s house.

But that, he admitted quickly, wasn’t why he felt annoyed. Lydie Clarence *meant* what she said. And Andrew was looking ill at ease because his wife and this man whom he had taken to so wholeheartedly from the first had got off apparently on the wrong foot. Eric was sorry, but he could see no way of helping it. He had entered with the best of intentions, determined to be civil, to extend himself in friendliness if only for Andrew’s sake, and Lydie had

rewarded him with a perverse and altogether incomprehensible rebuff. If she resented his coming to *Solbakken*—his coming *had* been a little precipitate and irregular, he admitted to himself, although he wasn't interfering with the Clarences by living to himself back there in the orchard house, and he intended to reduce Andrew's rent on that score—if she disliked his being here, he could go at once.

On the other hand, he could see no good reason for going. Andrew and he had struck up a friendship that was instinctive, guided by none of the conventional mile posts of years to prove its worth. The sensible thing was to ignore Lydie; to ignore, at any rate, this antagonism toward her which he vaguely felt was flattering to her at the same time that it was humiliating to himself.

She was eyeing him curiously.

“As a matter of fact, I'm no expert in anything,” he said with a laugh that was a little forced.

“I don't believe you,” she said simply. Her eyes were fixed steadily upon his face, and he had the maddening and inescapable sense of staring through a blue-black fog at something that he must, but could not, see.

Andrew reached toward the fireplace and tapped his pipe lightly on the corner of a stone. “Well, let's play a game of galloping devil,” he said conclusively. “You know the game, Eric? It's like—”

“I've played it often,” Eric told him. “And it can be a lot of fun.”

Andrew got up and went to a corner where a card table stood. “Lydie is faster than anyone I've ever seen,” he said brightly. “She'll probably beat us all to pieces.”

Lydie turned to the piano. “I'll play this for you first, Andy,” she said.

Then, with piquant accuracy, she went through the antique gleam and shadow of a Schubert minuet.

*Part Two*  
WINTER

# Chapter One

## 1

Ada Sadler drew up the collar of her tired old brown coat and stood for a moment on the porch of the Agnews' big fat brick house while she blinked out into the dreamlike fall of snow.

Straight down the snow came, in moist, sulky clusters, padding like white cat's paws on the red tile of the terrace. The Agnews' formally landscaped garden—to which Inglebrook always pointed with pride—seemed to whisper in soft reverie beneath it. The dark-hearted, shining laurel bushes, the rigidly shaven arbor vitae hedge, the chalky blue Colorado spruce, the crimson pellets of rose berries on the varnished rambler vine upon the rustic stone wall, even the stilled fountain and the carved granite sundial seemed to whisper, one to another and back again. And wasn't there something conspiratorial in their whispering, in this muffled secrecy of snow? Weren't they saying, "Ah, we'll be alone now, for six blissful weeks! This family we hate is going to Florida!"

A hard smile warped Ada's mobile, red-stung lips. "Bill is right," she muttered. "I must be crazy, always to be thinking such things. Imagination—what for? A lot of good it has ever done me! Damn the Agnews! Damn everything! If I'd only had half the chance Eric has had!"

But she could not dawdle here, snow-struck. Snow-struck! Would Eric like that word? She shrugged, not caring. Eric would be at the Sadler house now. He had telephoned her this afternoon that he would drop in for a while. Certainly, he had been awfully nice about calling on her mother since his return to the farm; whether it was manufactured or not, Ada did not know, but Eric Stene seemed to turn on a cheerfulness in the Sadler house that always left her mother feeling happy and hopeful.

Her feet were like sizzling lead as she began to walk toward the street. Since seven o'clock this morning, except for brief respites at breakfast and lunch, she had scarcely sat down. Mrs. Agnew had had to have the house in apple-pie order from attic to basement before the family's departure for the

south, because there was a *chance* that during their absence her sister-in-law might come out from the city for peace and quiet after the hectic holiday season. And she would, of course, stay in her brother's house. Mrs. Agnew might have thought of this a few days ago, but what could you expect of a woman to whom a floor mop was just so much Greek? And then—how generous Mrs. Agnew had been to let her go at half-past five instead of obliging her to stay and dress the children for the train! How she had glowed and patted herself on the back when she had given Ada that extra three dollars, in view of the fact that Ada would be six weeks without any pay while the Agnews were basking in the modish sun of Miami! And then how her dumpling face had radiated charity when she trotted out that ecru lace evening gown that was stained under the arms, and that would fit Ada about as well as a horse collar would fit a lamp post!

Ada hitched the bundle furiously now into the crook of her elbow, and raised her burning eyes to the soothing coolness of the snow. Beyond the white, reeling bloom of the nearer air, there was an impenetrable presence of livid, malignant darkness, promising as always a fierce, motionless cold on the morrow. The furnace in her mother's house, Ada thought grimly, had every reason for falling apart; it had been down to its last clinker three days ago, since when it had feebly digested the old apple tree in the back yard. What in God's name were they going to do, now that Ben also had been laid off for six weeks, at least, while the stone quarry was shut down?

Relief! A nice word, that. The Dalys had been chewing on it for three years, and had got so used to it that they didn't know it was slow poison. Clara and Phil Daly had done well enough with their little drug store until the chain store came to town. They blamed their failure on that. Phil wasn't rugged enough, of course, for day labor, even if he could get it—three ribs out of his side from empyema—yet for each one of those ribs they had a youngster. And they were on relief! The Dalys were the kind who got a lot out of Andrew Clarence's spirited talk at the Beacon Society meetings. They called Andrew a prophet. God help them! Not that there was anything wrong with Andrew—not that way. But where was it getting them, Phil and Clara and all the rest of them?

Ada looked up again through the snow-festooned gaunt branches of the elms on this, Inglebrook's best residential street. Her bony shoulders jerked with scorn. Relief! It rhymed with *belief*. And with *she-lief* and *he-lief*! That was for herself and Bill Forsythe, whom she could hardly look at sometimes without wanting to rip the shirt off his strong chest. She laughed roughly, out loud. Sure, Bill, we'll be married—as soon as we can get on relief—and we'll

have three nice little Forsythes with clean buck teeth like yours—and get free dental care for them at the dispensary at Axford. Yeah—like hell we will!

The lights of Main Street were already trembling confusedly through the blue-white murk. As she approached the corner where the filling station was, she looked up at the light and thought of it as a blank yellow eye with white snow-lashes softening its stare. The snow made you think such things, and caused you to feel rich and good inside, in spite of the furnace falling apart and the steel-clear cold of tomorrow, with no fuel, no money, no credit.

Two blocks of Main Street remained before she turned off into the dark stretch that led to the roundhouse and beyond to the river bank, where her father had built their cottage out of his twenty years' earnings in the brickyard—another Agnew enterprise. Poor Pa! He would have got at least his funeral expenses out of it if the boiler had burst during his working hours. But it was his misfortune that he went back to look at it that night, when it was another man's responsibility—a man her father liked, and who was lying dead drunk in the back room of a pool hall. Ada had always wondered if her father had felt anything whatever, scalded that way, while he was lying unconscious. The Agnew and Solen Brickyard had blamed him for tampering with machinery that wasn't any of his business; but the Agnews themselves had been generous. They had given the poor man's widow fifty dollars out of their own pockets, and had given Ben Sadler a job in their quarry at ten dollars a week, when he was just out of high school. What more could the Agnews do, considering the depression and all?

These two blocks of Main Street, across from the Palace Hotel, were really funny now. The picketing in front of the dime store and the Blue Badge chain grocery gave Inglebrook quite a metropolitan air, a claim to importance not much beneath Axford, the county seat, where garish labor disturbances in the past month had made headlines in the city papers. Young men and girls whom Ada had gone to school with stalked up and down in the patient weaving of the snow, their heads at a self-consciously oblivious angle, noses and mouths pinched, eyes unseeing, while like a warning of pestilence they carried their ridiculous placards fore and aft—This Firm Pays a Starvation Wage; and similar signs, crudely painted in red that had already begun to drip in the wet snow. The damn fools, Ada raged inwardly. Who would take them seriously? An addled egg like her cousin Eric, perhaps, who had been moved in such a nice intellectual way when he first saw picketing in this town his forebears had practically built! But people went in and bought at the dime store and at the Blue Badge just the same. Things were cheaper there because the human blood pumped into them was cheaper.

There was Mary Brale, the girl Ben took to the movies whenever he had anything to spare out of his weekly wage. Ada watched her as she came toward her, clad in a ratty fur coat, a strike placard hanging about her neck, her cheek bones like knobs of wet ivory.

Ada stepped up and touched the girl on the arm. “Mary,” she said under her breath, “you’re sopping wet—and you’ve got a cold anyhow. There’s no sense to this. Get on home and go to bed!”

The girl paused briefly and smiled. She was mousy, unattractive, until her eyes lighted up that way. “Scared I might get another dose of pneumonia, eh? That would be just too bad, wouldn’t it? Go on, Ada—you know I can’t stop and talk to you. I’m okay. I’ll go to bed early. Give my best to Ben. I haven’t seen much of him the last week. Tell him—oh, tell him nothing!”

She trudged off and Ada took a stronger grip on Mrs. Agnew’s parceled evening gown and continued down the street to where the last light marked the edge of town. Over there, across the tracks, were the lights of the roundhouse, seven of them, curdled and yellow through the snow, and alert for the engines that had to come in over the two trestles. It was wonderful, how people kept on doing things—even after they knew that the doing was an empty nut!

Those people who lived on the other side of the river, for example, in the reclaimed swamp that was called Two Trestles locally—Hungarians, Ruthenians, Poles, “foreigners,” growing beets and asparagus and cauliflower and celery on their little ten-acre plots—how did they keep on doing things? And what did it matter? What mattered their robust cheer, their devotion to their children, their pride in their few acres lying down there in the scooped out hollow which the high school teacher had said was once a glacial lake? Once a pure, august and frigid glacial lake was there, mirroring blood-red suns that dawned on geological history; now some half hundred specimens of humanity muttered in the protest of hunger and cold on the rich alluvial ghost of that glacial lake.

Ada hurried across the tracks and down the winding road past the roundhouse—and past the beer parlor that called itself a night club because it had a dance floor and a nickel phonograph—and a fifth rate orchestra on special occasions. It was always well lighted, and Ada could see people within, men for the most part, drinking beer and playing the pin-ball machines. A girl with a red hat was whirling around by herself, dancing. A girl with a red hat dancing where once an age-old glacier moved in its relentless way—grinding—grinding—

Ada shook a sense of dizziness from her head; she didn’t like thinking this



way. It was too much for her. She was too tired to stand it anyhow.

## 2

The Sadler house stood alone, on the outskirts of town, a quarter of a mile beyond the Jungle Tavern. The light from the front room window shone dimly now through the snow. The house was so pitiful and forlorn, its windows winking through the loose, engulfing, white-black night like something that had lost its way!

That was Eric's car standing beside the picket fence. Ada took off her overshoes in the dark pocket that was the entry, shook the snow off her hat and coat, and went inside. From the doorway she greeted Eric, a little breathlessly. And there was Lydie Clarence, too. That was a pleasant surprise.

"Regular old timers' picnic, eh?" she laughed as she hung her wet coat over the back of a chair that stood in front of the hot air register. She put out her hand; what came from the register was not heat so much as it was a damp, sour smell.

She straightened angrily, pushed back the reddish, springy hair that had curled loose from her temples. "How's mother?" she demanded. "This house is cold as a corpse!"

"I heated a flatiron on the stove and put it at her feet," Minnie said. "She's feeling better, I think. And they're bringing a ton of coal tonight."

"Coal?" Ada glared unbelievably at her sister. "Where from? Hell?"

"Oh, Ada!" Minnie twisted her delicate fingers and laughed tearfully. "If you only wouldn't be so bitter! A wonderful thing has happened." She glanced with shy radiance at Eric. "I told you that if we just held the right thought, Ada —"

"If you spring any more of that stuff on me I'll go nuts!" Ada interrupted.

"Eric gave mother a hundred dollars this afternoon—for a Christmas present!" Minnie breathed. "Wasn't that just too *marvelous* of him?"

Ada's moss agate eyes, with the tiny black threads through the green iris, fastened sharply on her cousin. He grinned uncomfortably and lighted a cigarette.

"So you sold your article to *The Horizon*?" Ada jeered. "Plutocrat!"

“Oh, Eric,” Minnie began tremulously, “she doesn’t mean—”

“Shut up!” said Ada. There was a lump of rage and gratitude big as an egg in her throat. “I’m going to see mother for a minute.” At the door she turned and said to Lydie, “Has Minnie given you a cup of tea or anything?”

“We had supper before we came to town,” Lydie told her. “Eric ate with us, and then I made him bring me along with him when I found out he was coming to see you. I don’t think he wanted me to come, though. He’s so hard at work on his book these days that he can’t be civil to anyone. Anyhow, he didn’t say six words all the way in—and I sat like a mummy.”

Lydie’s spring-night eyes rested in feigned solemnity upon Eric’s face. His smile was noncommittal.

“I’m glad you came, anyhow,” Ada said. “We haven’t seen a cheerful face since you were here last. I’ll be back as soon as I’ve looked in on mother.”

“Ada takes things even worse than I do,” Ben said heavily as his sister left the room. He got up and went to look out of the window. “That damn coal ought to be here by this time. The Agnews wouldn’t have to wait for it, that’s a cinch!”

“I understand they’re short-handed at the coal yard just now,” Eric said.

“They don’t have to be, with men walking the streets.” Ben came back and sat down.

Eric was on the point of offering him a cigarette when he remembered Ben’s saturnine pride in “rolling his own.” His blunt, work-coarsened fingers skillfully manipulated tobacco pouch and flimsy paper while Eric watched him.

“Make me one of those, will you, Ben?” Lydie asked him. “I like the smell of your tobacco.”

Eric glanced at her suspiciously; the soft defiance in her eyes as they met his was gone as quickly as it had come. She looked away from him and took the cigarette which Ben, without any comment but with a certain flourish, had made for her. Well, you put that over nicely, Eric thought with grudging admiration. He had become rather familiar with her deviousness since his return to *Solbakken*. There was certainly no malice in anything she had done, and it was absurd of him to dislike her for that subtle patronage which implied a conviction of rightness in everything she did. But, with such innocent single-mindedness, what might she not do? He was not ready to admit it quite, but there was a possibility that in regard to Lydie Clarence he was motivated

chiefly by fear.

“I’d better go and heat up the stew,” Minnie said. “It’s past six o’clock. Will you excuse me—Eric and Lydie?”

### 3

Ada sat down on the edge of her mother’s bed in the dim light of the squat, glass oil lamp. Mrs. Sadler’s face had been round and sunny as a crisp bun, but in the last few months its features seemed to have poured downwards, like melted tallow. Pain had so altered her expression that Ada had had to use every ounce of her will power to keep from crying aloud whenever she came to visit on her days off. But tonight she seemed brighter, there was a little color on her cheeks and her faded hair was looped softly back from her face.

“How are you feeling, mother?” Ada asked intently as she took the rope-dry hand into her own. “Are you warm enough? The coal is on the way, they said.”

“I’m all right, Ady. I’m warm enough. I passed another stone today, and it made me feel easier, like it always does. And then Eric and Lydie coming—they cheered me up. Wasn’t that nice of Eric—giving us the money? I wonder if he can afford it. I asked him and he said sure, he’s living so cheap now at the farm.”

Ada was looking at the kerosene that was left in the lamp. Minnie was good at almost everything except trimming wicks and polishing chimneys. But a kid of seventeen . . . anyhow, perhaps there wasn’t much coal oil left out there in the shed. What was going to become of Minnie? She was pretty, and so trusting and romantic, Ada hated to think of her going into service in some rich man’s house. But what else was there for it? She hadn’t even as much education as Ada had managed to grab for herself, and what had a mere high school course done for *her*? She couldn’t even get a job clerking in a store.

Her mother repeated her question about Eric.

“Oh, I suppose he can afford it,” Ada said. She knew better. “Eric must be pretty well fixed. He has the rent from the farm, and all. And nobody dependent—I mean he’s sort of foot-loose.”

“Yes—the way you’d like to be, Ada.” Mrs. Sadler smiled and held on tight to Ada’s hand. “Listen, Ady—why don’t you just get up and go? Make

Bill Forsythe go with you, if you think enough of him. You've got it in you to do things. It's awful for you to have to share your little bit with us when you might be starting up on your own."

Ada's eyes settled upon a mouse hole in the wall wardrobe her brother had built. She remembered that they had trapped the mice before they had made any nest, but her mother had enjoyed watching the little creatures burrowing through while she lay there in bed. She had actually wanted Ben to put a box in the closet, full of torn up paper, so that the mice might have a home. But Ben and Minnie had argued that the mouse-smell would get into the clothes. Ada had been there when her mother had said, "Clothes? I'll never wear those clothes again."

The doctor had said that her heart would never be able to stand the operation she needed, so even if they could get the money—

"Don't be silly, ma!" Ada said with fine impatience. "As if I'd want to go any place where I couldn't see you once in a while! Don't you worry about me. Listen." She cocked her head toward the door. "That sounds an awful lot like the arrival of anthracite!" She laughed and stood up.

"You was always so good with big words," her mother smiled admiringly. "I bet you could write just as good as Eric if you had a chance."

The nostrils of Ada's high-bridged nose sharpened. She stooped quickly and kissed her mother's forehead, concealing with a bluff laugh the embarrassment the unaccustomed act caused her. "Maybe I will, too, one of these days. There's a lot of things I'd like to say. Now—you just keep covered up. We'll have the house good and warm in a minute."

## 4

It was a fortunate thing, Minnie observed, that she had been able to escape to the kitchen with a *valid* excuse. Because the minute Ada came back from mamma's room, they'd start talking politics or labor or something. Or maybe she and Eric would talk about the kind of books they read, which didn't make sense at all to Minnie. And then, besides, Ada was so fierce and explosive about everything!

And what did all their arguments amount to, anyhow, when love was all that really mattered in the world? If people would only realize that! Even if she was nothing but a little kitchen *slavey*, Minnie thought, she had *instinctive*

*breeding*, and knew the correct thing to say, and always said it in a subdued, *genteel* voice. Ada was a regular *blacksmith* in the way she bawled things out; so lacking in *reticence*. Whenever the opportunity came—as it *must* come if you held the right thought—Minnie would be ready to step into that gracious *beau monde* where the wall paper wasn't a horrible medicine-green with cracks in it like the Mississippi and its tributaries, and where the furniture wasn't wicker that made dry, uncanny little snickers even when nobody was in the room.

She would put the leftover stew on to simmer, add a potato or so to it, draw up a chair and with her feet in the oven go on with that fascinating novel of Kathleen Norris's that she had got from the library yesterday. The heroine had pale gold hair like Minnie's own—and also, Minnie imagined, eyes like hers that dreamt of *far things* . . .

If she only dared close the door between herself and the other room. But that would be too *pointed*.

Resignedly, Minnie sat down and opened her book. There was a painful racket in the cellar—but things had to be worse before they got better! Ben was actually stoking the furnace.

The heroine was getting supper, too. But the Sadler house was warm now, for a change, whereas the heroine's house— The heroine's house didn't have all that political talk going on in the sitting room, however. They were hard at it—Ada, Eric, Lydie and Ben. The sudden warmth must have got into their brains, from the sound of their talk, Minnie decided with scorn. Politics and strikes, and wars in outlandish places—when there was love and romance and beauty, things that everybody really wanted! Oh, if she only had the nerve—no, *audacity!*—to close the door!

But if she closed the door, she wouldn't be able to see Eric and Lydie. And she wanted to see Eric, especially. He was wonderful—not really like a cousin at all—more like a rich and *well-bred* stranger who had come seeking for someone like herself. Lydie was nice, too, but of course Lydie was married. But Eric—

She wondered if they'd be talking like this at the party the Clarences were giving on Christmas Eve, next week. The party was really for the members of the Beacon Light Society—but it was possible that Minnie would meet a stranger there—a dark stranger, tall, with gloomy, disillusioned eyes. His eyes would look like Eric's, only Eric wasn't dark, of course. He would tell Minnie, with a world-weary sadness, that she had the haunting loveliness of Greta Garbo, and that it was his *dismal* lot not to be worthy of her, because of his

*obscene*—well, no, that wasn't quite the word—past. And Minnie would be generous, forgiving.

There was a fresh commotion now in the other room, and from the tail of her eye Minnie saw Bill Forsythe come in. How cool and *detached* Ada's reception of him was! Not that Minnie could find any fault with that. Bill Forsythe wasn't at all what she would look for in a man. Not because he was out of work, either, since the brickyard had closed down. But he had such a mouthful of long teeth. Nobody would ever guess that Ada was so terribly in love with him, but Minnie always thought her sister's hair got even a shade redder whenever he appeared. Not long ago Minnie had been shaken to the heart when she had overheard Ada in a cold burst of fury tell Bill that she would have to stop going with him if they couldn't look forward soon to something more definite—she cared for him too much! It was too great a strain on her *emotions*, Minnie had thought with troubled awe.

She fixed her eyes determinedly again on her book. In those pages, although there was struggle, there was also hope. In the other room . . .

Ada's voice, red as her hair: "There are too many of us ready to tuck in *Chawles Agnew's* shirt tail, and he knows it!"

And Eric's voice, as if it didn't quite belong out there: "This community wasn't built on the principle of fear."

"In your grandfather's time, it was a flourishing little place looking forward to a bright future, wasn't it, Eric?" Lydie's voice was sweet, lighter than usual.

Minnie impatiently glued her eyes to the page in front of her. She *would* get up and close the door! It would be another ten minutes, anyhow, before the potatoes would be done. Still, Lydie had sounded so queer when she spoke, as if she were intentionally *bating* Eric. Maybe she would miss something if she closed the door. . . .

"What's the difference, anyhow?" Ada flared. "We don't count for anything. In another year we may be all pitched into an infernal war again. And what would all your damned silly plans amount to then? What would we amount to? Just a pile of mince meat—and cheap mince meat, at that! We're nothing!"

The sound of Ada striking a newspaper with her open palm and then slamming it on the floor was really dramatic. Minnie recalled those menacing headlines; she had kept the paper away from her mother this afternoon.

Ben was drawling: "You don't think you're saying anything original, do

you? You ought to get a soap box, Ada—only soap boxes are out of style, except for kindling. They ain't good for anything else."

"For God's sake, do you have to say *ain't* just because you work in a quarry?" Ada burst forth.

"If I say *ain't* it's my own business," Ben said. "I don't claim to belong in your ritzy class."

Minnie sighed. They mustn't let mamma hear them quarreling like that.

"Listen, Ade!" Bill Forsythe was talking now. "It's all right for you to talk that way, but where does it get you? Where does it get any of us? And it's all right to tell me and Ben what we ought to do—go to night school and read books and all that. The point is, we're all just what we're going to be, if we're ever going to be anything. We're just running from one mouse hole to another, trying to keep away from the cat, and picking up a crumb or two on the way. We can't change the world we're living in. That's what the Reds think they *can* do. And you're talking like one of them."

"When did you ever hear me—"

"It's the way you're heading," Bill put in.

"Oh!"

Lydie was speaking again. "You shouldn't be so serious about it, Ada. Things have a way of working themselves out."

Ada's voice was frightening, but lowered now, to Minnie's relief. "Sure! Don't be serious about anything. That's right! Don't be serious about wanting to get married and having kids and a nice little place of your own. That isn't so much to expect out of living, is it? That's all Bill and I want. But try and get it! Even if we could get it, I wouldn't want to bring kids into the mess that we're in. But—*don't* be serious about it! Hell—no!"

Eric laughed, but he was the only one who did. And Lydie Clarence waited, her eyes upon Ada.

"You and Bill might have the one child—" Lydie's voice could be so winning—"the one child who would bring the world out of the mess you're talking about. Have you ever thought of that?"

"Yeah—the way Christ did!" Oh, Ada, how *dreadful*! "Then why don't you and Andrew try it. You've had time enough, God knows!"

Minnie got up to test the potatoes with a fork. She could see Lydie's face, and her eyes had a scary shine in them, like cat's eyes when the light happens

to strike through them in a certain oblique way.

“We *are* going to have a baby,” Lydie was saying earnestly, “within the next year or two. We didn’t think we could afford it just at first—and with mother so ill and worried about me all the time, away from her—” Her voice trailed off into silence.

So, that was the reason they had never had a baby, Minnie thought to herself, gladdened all at once. It was dreadful for people not to *want* any, no matter how rich they were. And Lydie and Andrew would have such a darling baby!

Ada called out, “That stew must be scorched, Minnie. Stir it, and shut the door. The smell will be all over the house.”

Minnie was glad enough to shut the door. There were five minutes yet before the potatoes would be done. She could easily finish the chapter.

## 5

It had stopped snowing, except for a few tardy flakes that came liling down with large separateness in the headlights of Eric’s car. The night had not yet opened into that polished void of bitter cold which usually followed a lush snowfall like this. The woods here in the river flats, though leafless now save for the occasional white-caped evergreen, seemed to close in on either hand. The upper air seemed to close down, making the sparkling white fluted ribbon of the road in the car lights look like a narrow avenue of escape. Escape, Eric thought—what a purely relative thing it was!

Lydie, in the seat beside him, had been pensively silent. Now she said, “You didn’t talk much, did you? Were you taking notes on what the rest of them had to say?”

Her voice was guileless. He refused to oblige her by reading into her words the taunt she undoubtedly meant should be there. That would be conceding to her just one more of the little triumphs she had achieved over him during the past weeks.

“Well, why shouldn’t I? Your little dig at me, by the way—when you hinted that I was shocked at conditions in the town my forebears built—was rather petty, and quite unworthy of you.” He had scored there! “What kind of a man would react in any other way? When you see picketing in a humble little



place like Inglebrook, there's something pretty rotten in—”

“*Don't* say ‘the state of Denmark’!”

“As a matter of fact, I see no point in my saying anything. Shall we both keep quiet? This road is beautiful now—not even a rabbit track on it.”

Lydie did not respond. While Eric was thinking of the talk back there at the Sadlers', especially Ada's and Lydie's share in it, the “beautiful road” suddenly assumed the aspect of anything but an avenue of escape. He recalled what Sibert Mueller had said about women. Perhaps there was no escape—no escape from the onward surge of a power that thought nothing of what it left in its wake.

The car slewed sideways across a rut, bounced and skidded to the very edge of a deep ditch. Eric brought it back into the road after a precarious minute of difficult maneuvering. Lydie did not even laugh at him. He turned on the lights on the instrument board to glance at the gasoline gauge. He had not thought of filling the tank before leaving town.

In the half-light, he was aware of Lydie's eyes upon him. “What I really meant,” she said, “is that you'll never do justice to your grandfather's memoirs as long as you go on feeling so bitterly about things as they *are*. You ought to concentrate on how they *were*—or even on how they may be again.”

Eric bit his lip. It was one thing to know how you should think and feel, and another to act upon that knowledge.

They were coming close to the farm gate now. Eric looked down at Lydie for an instant and saw her lips half-curved in the dim light. They had, even now, the full, directionless look of lips that had just been kissed. A cool and flat sensation struck him about the loins. For Lydie's mouth had an even more exact and frightening look than that—the look of a mouth that he himself might just have kissed.

He stared blankly ahead, his face reflecting nothing of the chaos he felt. In what crazy pigeonhole did this experience belong, anyhow? For he had not kissed Lydie Clarence and hadn't the ghost of a desire to do so. And yet, his skin burned hot and cold, as if that deed were already an accomplished fact.

He wondered if he might not be going just a bit rocky from isolating himself for days at a time with his work in the orchard house. A run up to the city—a day or two with the old crowd—a play—the symphony, with Natalie  
...

He would have to write Natalie and see if something couldn't be arranged.

Late the next afternoon, Eric heard Andrew's car drive out of the yard. He got up from his typewriter, threw some more logs into the fireplace, and stood blankly staring down at the flames. The golden phrase today simply refused to come. Perhaps a brisk walk through the woods might clear some of the cobwebs from his brain, and the thick distress from his heart.

He put on his sweater, suède jacket, muffler, cap and overshoes and wool mittens, and set out across the pink and ivory light upon the snow, toward the river. But before he had gone halfway to the old well, he heard Lydie's voice calling to him from the door of the big barn. His pulse quickened painfully as he crossed the yard toward her.

In the bright cold, her head was bare; she looked like a small ragamuffin in an old loose coat of Andrew's. Why, he wondered, must she wear Andrew's cast-off clothing when she worked about the place? Surely she must have old things of her own!

She was laughing, and yet looked serious.

"One of the cats has lost her kittens, Eric," she told him. "She's squalling her head off in here. Come on in and see if you can get at them."

He followed her through the big barn to the extreme end of it, where there were two or three stalls that had not latterly been used. One of the stalls was full of straw, and there, indeed, a white and yellow cat was yowling and weaving to and fro in maternal anguish. The cat looked up, not so much in hope as in indignant demand, and slithered herself against Eric's legs.

"There's a loose plank down there under the manger," Lydie explained. "The kittens must have crawled in—and there's a ledge of stone about a foot high. They've fallen on the other side of that and I can't quite reach them. Goldy has been trying to squeeze through, poor old thing. If she did, we'd have to tear down the manger to get her out. See if you can reach them."

Eric pulled away more of the straw and got down flat on his chest. He thrust an arm as far as he could through the small opening. His bare fingers encountered a squirming mass of fur and claws. Lydie had squatted close beside him.

"I've got one," he grunted. He drew the little creature forth. Its eyes were goggling in frantic terror. Lydie took it and placed it high up on the pile of straw.

“There ought to be six,” she said—quite placidly, Eric thought.

“I’ve already collected six slivers in my arm,” he told her.

Lydie giggled and Eric went to work again groping for the kittens.

When the last one—an ink-spot, this time, for variety—was being dragged out into the light, Eric was surprised by a sensation of scratching down his back, beneath his shirt.

“Hey! What the—”

“No—straw!” Lydie rocked back on her heels, laughing uncontrollably.

Eric tossed the kitten to its mother, then proceeded to pull the handful of straw away from the itching skin of his back.

“You can’t imagine—how funny you looked!” Lydie gasped. “With your rear up in the air like that! I just couldn’t resist the temptation, Eric!”

He grinned uncomfortably. “It’s all right—but there’s still some chaff down there that I can’t get at. It tickles like the deuce!”

“Here—let me get it!”

Her cool bare hand on his spine made his heart beat so that he thought she surely must hear it. The rich, warm smell of the barn—of sweet hay and softly breathing, softly stirring animals, of the old, rubbed wood of the stalls—the tangy, faint ammonia smell, the live, sleepy smell of a barn, suddenly overcame him. The dusky fragrance of Lydie . . . He was mad, staring into her eyes as he was now, and seeing in them a fixed slumbrousness, a smile that was deep and mocking and yet—wistful? No, no!

Her straight lashes fell. She had got to her feet and was brushing the chaff from her fingers. Eric rose clumsily, a tremor passing through his thighs. Lydie stooped and patted the mother cat.

“Thanks, ever so much,” she said slowly. “I’ll get Andrew to put a board over that hole so they can’t crawl back down again.”

Out of the barn again, Eric drew a long unsteady breath of the clean, frosty air.

## Chapter Two

### 1

In the failing light in the orchard house, Eric read from his grandfather's journal:

*“. . . and it was the grass, the days of grass under a sun much hotter and more high, and perhaps even more round in its molten terrible metal than the sun we have in the old country; and the nights of grass beneath a full moon, shining like a great ripe orange in the dew that falls warm and deep in this enormous land when darkness comes. I saw these billows of tall grass, emerald green by the common, and yet not common, light of day, and the utmost silver troughed with black beneath the moon I speak of, and I knew that here was a country to which men would come from the old shores of despair and defeat to find the happiness that is at most but a small while on this earth. And in the evening we set the oxen free to graze in that flowing plenty, and we made our camp fire and had a great supper of dried beef and dipped bread and coffee, from the supplies we purchased at Alexandria. Then we tethered the oxen, for though they are too sluggish to roam far they might smell bear or wolf and skittishly take off, never to return. Then, since my brother Johannes had mislaid the compass and we could not find it without a diligent search by torch, and I was afraid it might have been lost, we hoisted the wagon tongue upward by means of a stone, so that it would point to the north star. Thus, in the untelling light of gray dawn, even though the trail might be so fickle we could not tell east from west, we should still be aware of north. As it turned out, in the morning we did find the compass, and it eventuated that we arrived in the course of time at Fort Abercrombie. But the pleasure of that evening, under the moon that presently swung above us like a polished fruit, was in the way Johannes and I spoke of our coming safely through the war to this remarkable freedom. For it seemed a strange thing that we,*

who were immigrant boys, should have fought with Lincoln for the emancipation of the slaves—slavery being an unheard-of thing in Norway, except in a political or religious or economic sense!—and then should have blundered our way out here to an unsurpassed richness, as if it were a reward for our service to our adopted country. We spread our legs out on the buffalo robes and laughed at that, under the cover of the wagon, where we had our bed. We had hundred-weights of flour under our heads for pillows. My brother and I were together in the same company at Richmond, and we might both have been killed, but Johannes thought I had better not be, because I had had a start in medicine. Then we both fell silent, it coming over us that this vast country had rewarded us more than it knew. It had no reason to reward us, for that matter. We had come here of our own free will—at least, our parents had. It owed us nothing, this America. Johannes and I had fought in a noble war, and had written back proud accounts of it to our uncles and cousins who responded with gratifying bewilderment and fear. But I still say that America owes us nothing. In years to come, it may be that our children, and our children's children, will say, 'We deserve this and that, because our fathers pioneered here.' If it be my power to say it to these still unborn, in this future time, I shall say, 'No. You are beginners as we who went before you were. There is no heritage here except that of green earth to green earth. This is the new, not the old.' So, after four days of journeying through dense clouds of mosquitoes big as your thumb—I can imagine my father swiping at them and saying, 'Fan skjaere!' but in English it would mean only 'The devil cut!'—we arrived at Fort Abercrombie, a garrison of one hundred men, having ferried over at the Old Crossing. I write of this now in the shadow of our wagon, the sun anchoring toward rain in the west. There is forest about us. We met some of the Röd-elv Karene—Red River Men—and had a drink of schnapps with them, or something they called 'schnapps,' at least. On the Minnesota side of the river there is a good-sized steam-driven sawmill. Tomorrow we shall proceed on to the north, with supplies of dried meats and bread from the garrison, half a green ham my mother would smell a mile off, and a kind of syrup which is guaranteed to keep mosquitoes occupied until they stagger off your hide in a faint.

Georgetown. Here are two families, a German settler and a clerk of the Hudson's Bay Company. The company has a notable fur trading post at this point, to which, when the river is high with rains

*in the spring, the steamers come from Fort Garry. But now, in the summer season, one meets caravans of Red River carts, drawn by oxen and in charge of halfbreed drivers who are most picturesque in their coarse blue cloth garments, ornate with brass buttons, showy belts of red flannel and small jaunty caps. The carts are constructed entirely of wood, with two huge, unshod wheels. In one caravan there may be as many as fifty carts, and the patient thunder of their wheels can be heard many hours distant upon the trail. . . .”*

Eric sat back in his chair and clasped his hands behind his head. “The patient thunder of their wheels . . .” he said aloud, drawing the phrase out and repeating it in the darkening silence of the log house. There was a hypnotic nostalgia in the words that gave him the stirring impression of actually hearing, across the veiled brilliance of seventy years, the rumbling approach of a spectral caravan. Was it too fantastic to suppose that those rich and sullen echoes were still held fast within these walls?

He lit his pipe, got up and went to the window. Beyond the good brown fretwork of the naked orchard the Christmas Eve sun was dipping, wet-red, into the bowl of the smooth hills. It was going to be an open winter, Andrew Clarence had assured him three weeks ago. It was some inclination of the wind, or the careless bearing of the farm stock, perhaps, that had convinced Andrew of this, but whatever it was he had so far been right. The bitter spell of weather they had expected after last week’s snowfall had not come to pass. How grateful, Eric thought, the Sadlers must be for that!

Darkly pocked remnants of the snow still lay under the apple trees, and where the declining sun touched them they were like rosy, substanceless patches of gauze. Across the knotted tendrils of a grapevine that hammocked on both sides of the old zig-zag fence, a blue jay flashed obliquely against the sunset with the fierce metallic gleam of a spearhead. Chickadees and nuthatches circuited industriously the stations of suet that Eric had placed in convenient places on the trees, and on the open space where he had tossed a few handfuls of corn three gray squirrels crouched down, then abruptly sat up and nibbled toward the sky with the triumph of discovery.

Eric looked at his watch. Natalie should be here soon. He felt a sincere regret that Sibert Mueller, at the last minute, had found it impossible to make the trip for the party in the big house. Sibert, in a way, would have offset Natalie. As if offsetting were necessary! Eric made a grimace at his own dishonesty. It was a strange thing how the upper layer of your mind went on playing a pointless game of chess with your conscience, or whatever substitute you had for a conscience. Natalie Monroe had scarcely entered his thoughts

since that night a week ago when he had driven home through the snow with Lydie Clarence.

As a figure of speech, sweating blood fell somewhat short of adequacy, Eric had discovered during these intervening nights of sleeplessness on his couch in the cabin. The lilac-leaf shape of Lydie's face had swung maddeningly before his eyes while he stared hour after hour into the darkness, until at last in desperation he had got up, lighted the lamp, and sat down at his typewriter in a futile attempt to work.

It would have been easier if he had gone to the city for a few days, where he might have parceled himself out indiscriminately here and there. The burning weight of consciousness would have been to some extent dissipated. The consciousness of Lydie Clarence, Andrew's wife. He could even have tolerated the picture of himself skulking off, if there had been no one else to see the picture. But Lydie would have seen it, and would have known all too well its meaning. Eric had set his teeth and resolved that she should be denied the satisfaction of beholding him in any such obvious and humiliating attempt at escape. For there was no doubt in his mind that she was fully aware of her effect upon him, an effect compounded of psychic antagonism and stark physical need. The half-drowsy lowering of her eyelids when her glance drifted toward him; the unruly, yet strangely patient softness of her mouth; the indefinite, querying gestures of her small, square hands; the pollen-rough sweetness of her voice—these properties of hers, he knew, had taken on a more provocative stress for his notice during the past month.

It was as inexplicable as it was hateful to him. Even if he had not almost spontaneously formed a deep regard and admiration for Andrew before he had set eyes on Lydie, he would still have this feeling of unnaturalness in his relationship with her. He violently resented the thought, but the woman was in *control*. In control of precisely what, he had not been able to establish to his own satisfaction. She was not in love with him, that he knew. She worshiped Andrew, hung on his every word, whereas she had very often been deaf to Eric's most rounded periods. The baffling part of it all was that Andrew had apparently noticed nothing untoward in Lydie's conduct—and for that Eric was profoundly grateful. He would not be the cause of hurt to Andrew.

Well, he had not run off to the city. On the contrary, he had stayed here with the express purpose of proving to himself that there was nothing for him to run away from. And all that he had proven to himself was that he was afraid even to pass Lydie in the yard, or to call out with a false complacency to her if he happened to be pumping water when she returned from the chicken house with her apron full of eggs.

He had a sound enough excuse for begging off when Andrew invited him for supper or an evening's chat in the big house. Andrew, understanding that he had got into stride with his book, had not been insistent. But did Lydie suspect his real reason for staying away from the house during the past week, or did she really believe that he was devoting every waking hour to this saga of a country doctor?

When they had met for a moment anywhere about the grounds, she had been just as before, a little preoccupied, a little startled when she looked directly at him, as if she had not expected to see him there—and seeing him, did not immediately recognize him. It had covered him with a hot flush of confusion and anger, a sensation which had infuriated him still more by its alarming significance.

There was a sound outside the door, and then Andrew's knock came. He still announced himself in this polite, half-diffident way, although Eric had told him several times to walk in whenever he felt inclined.

"I'm not busting in on your work, am I?" he asked with his hesitant smile as he stepped across the threshold. The honest, faintly acrid barn smell, overlaid with the crisp, sunny cold, came from his clothes the moment the inner warmth of the cabin enveloped him.

"I was just about to call it a day," Eric told him. "Sit down and fill your pipe while I stow this junk of mine away. No sign of Natalie Monroe yet, I suppose?"

"Not yet. I've been watching for her."

"If she got a look at this stuff, she'd laugh at the first sentence she read."

"Is she that sort?" Andrew asked in surprise. "From what you've told me about her, I got the idea she was a little more—well, sensitive."

"She'd do that just because she *is* sensitive," Eric laughed. "Natalie is so damn sensitive she's perverse, if you know what I mean. One of these brittle modern females who go striding rough-shod over everybody else because their own feet hurt them!"

"Well, it was very nice of her to consent to coming—and on Christmas Eve, when she probably has a dozen other more entertaining—"

"Probably just another sample of her cussedness," said Eric.

Andrew had thrown his battered felt hat on the floor, and sat now before the fireplace, stretching out his leather-booted legs and unbuttoning his corduroy jacket. "Women are queer enough, no matter how normal they may



be.” He groped in one pocket and then another for his pipe.

There was something in that gesture of Andrew’s, Eric had observed many times before, that was peculiarly defenseless and uncertain, that gave one the impression that he was afraid, in small panic, of having lost what he sought. A moment’s insight came to Eric. A woman, he thought, would look upon Andrew’s fumbling performance as something *endearing*. Mawkish word. Or was it, really? Andrew’s groping for the elusive pipe was a signpost to Lydie’s love for him. He was a great soul, too diffused and golden with a universal anxiety to be concerned about petty problems like keeping track of his pipe. It was Lydie, Eric had discovered, who kept the farm books; Andrew arduously memorized the bolder figures, because he felt it to be his duty. He had thus been able to give Eric a fair account of the state of the farm in the early days of their acquaintance, and Eric had been surprised at his clear presentation of it.

Andrew was holding a lighted match to the bowl of his pipe. “You remember I told you last week that Blanchard stopped by on his way from Axford.”

Eric nodded. “He’s the fellow who raises poultry, isn’t he? He’d had some sort of run-in with the cold storage people.”

“Yes. He drove in again this afternoon, and I think there’s more on his mind than he dared to talk about. And Blanchard is mild mannered compared with some of the other poultry men south of here.”

“Do you think there’s trouble brewing?”

Andrew’s thin face had a warped, dark look. “Well, I can’t say, of course. But—in the first place, his reason for coming here at all today struck me as odd. He wanted to tell me that he and his family were driving to the city to spend Christmas with his wife’s brother, and wouldn’t be able to come to the party tonight. It isn’t like the Blanchards to go away from home at Christmas, with all those small children he has. Besides, when I saw him in town yesterday, he was looking forward, he said, to the party and wouldn’t miss it for anything. He must have changed his mind very suddenly. Then there’s another thing. He wasn’t satisfied with the price he got this fall for his birds. Today, he seemed to think the price was fair enough. He emphasized that. Everyone knows the produce houses and cold storage people have the growers where they want them. They’re organized—they offer a price that isn’t sufficient to pay the grower’s feed bill—and the growers take it, or nothing. It’s the growers’ fault, of course. They can’t agree among themselves toward any organization. They’re not able to protect themselves against the men who have the organization—and the money to back it. But that doesn’t mean that

they won't do something reckless, if a few of them get together. And Blanchard doesn't want to be anywhere near it when it happens. That's my guess."

"You mean—he's got wind of something?"

"That's just my guess, of course. Blanchard is cool-headed. He wouldn't mind sharing the advantages of direct action, if there are any, but he'd rather have no part in it. He's looking out for himself. You see, the whole thing is small—and desperate. These men will go under if they don't get protection. And since there's no protection in sight, they may take things into their own hands and try to get even." He paused for a moment, embarrassed. "Well, this isn't very interesting to you, I know. But I was just thinking how different it must be from what it was when your grandfather was here."

Eric turned away and looked at the fire. "God, what a mess we've made of this country!"

Had he put too much fervor into his voice? he wondered. A month ago it would have been sincere. It still was, he knew, but so buried beneath his personal concerns that his expression of it sounded to himself irrelevant and hollow. The irony of that struck him now so sharply that he felt like laughing aloud. He had come here in the hope of writing something that would honor his grandfather's memory, and within a month he had wound up by putting on a show of indignation against existing conditions—partly at least to hide what, less than ten minutes ago, he had been thinking about Andrew Clarence's wife!

When he glanced around, Andrew was smiling gently, picking up his hat from the floor.

"I've thought the same thing—many a time, Eric," he was saying. "And I'm glad to hear you express it. I may be just a—a hick—but I guess you and I think pretty much the same about things. I've felt that from the very first. Funny—how you know—the minute you meet people." He got suddenly to his feet. "That sounds like a car. It must be your Miss Monroe, Eric."

Eric had heard nothing, but when he stepped outside with Andrew he saw Natalie's coupé coming to a stop in the ocher-barred shadows at the edge of the orchard. He wondered if she had met Lydie, or had come directly past the big house in search of the place he had described to her in his letter. And if she *had* met Lydie . . . between women there was a sweet system of communication which must have been invented in hell!

Natalie ran toward him with outstretched hands. She was dressed in a rakish little green hat and a deceptively simple dark gray tweed suit, with a

silver fox scarf carelessly slung across one shoulder.

She embraced Eric with deliberate silence, then stood back and looked him speculatively up and down. Eric laughed, a bit self-consciously, and turned to Andrew.

“Well—this is the wild woman of Borneo, Andrew,” he said. “Miss Monroe—Mr. Clarence.”

Natalie smiled prettily as they shook hands. The artless admiration reflected in Andrew’s face she characteristically accepted, Eric observed with an inward satirical grin, as her just due.

“And Mrs. Clarence? I’m so anxious to meet her!” she exclaimed eagerly. “Eric wrote me about how good you have both been to him. He shows it, too.” She put her arm about Eric. “You look your old husky self again, darling!”

“You’re not exactly wasting away yourself, Nat,” Eric said. “Well—shall we go into the cabin, or would you rather meet Lydie first?”

Natalie gazed at the cabin and clasped her hands. “So—this is the orchard house! How utterly quaint and *eloquent*! Oh, I must see the inside of it, Eric. How sweet and lopsided and saggy it is! Is there anything in the world so lonesome as that gray wood color? Oh, it’s simply *too*!”

“You brought an overnight bag or something, I suppose?” Eric asked a little uneasily. She was quite capable of having determined on an indefinite stay, although he thought it unlikely.

“Yes—in the back of the car.”

“Let me drive your car into the shed for you, Miss Monroe,” Andrew said. “I can take your bag to the house.”

“Oh—thank you.” Natalie gave an oblique, fluttery glance toward the cabin, then looked at Eric with a mischievous twinkle. She turned again to Andrew. “I hope my visit isn’t going to inconvenience you in any way, Mr. Clarence.”

“Not at all,” said Andrew gallantly. “We have plenty of room—and you’ll find my wife the soul of hospitality.”

His shy and stilted correctness brought a wicked little gleam to Natalie’s eyes which Eric promptly resented. But Andrew had apparently interpreted Natalie’s shining look as simple gratitude.

“Let’s go inside, then,” Eric said, a trifle shortly. “We’ll come up to the house in a few minutes, Andrew.”

“Right-o! Lydie will be looking for you, Miss Monroe.”

## 2

“‘Right-o’!” Natalie giggled under her breath while they walked to the cabin door as Andrew started the car. “Does he ride to hounds by any chance—and hold revival meetings in the parish church in his spare time? A saint and a squire—”

“Listen, Nat,” Eric said between his teeth, “you keep in mind what I told you in my letter, or get out of here in the next ten minutes.” He opened the door.

“Very well, I’ll be good. But he *is* too captivating!” She stood in the sitting room of the cabin and looked greedily about her, her tawny eyes possessing, rejecting, possessing, as they teetered with butterfly flippancy over one humble object after another. But then she said soberly, her hand at her throat, “*You* are here, Eric. You really are. You *belong*. I—it almost hurts, somehow. The past is too powerful. Isn’t it?”

“No. The past isn’t here—not any more. It hasn’t a leg left to stand on. Don’t be fooled by a little atmosphere, Nat.”

He admitted himself warmed by the change in Natalie’s mood, however. If she could only forget once in a while the cynical mistrust which she flew like an insolent flag. . . . He remembered now, with an abrupt, mild shock, that something of the same sort had until lately been his own vaunted stock in trade, if not precisely a flowing banner.

“I wonder,” she was saying now while she sat down with a sigh and crossed her beautiful legs. She was still looking about her in the golden dusk of the room. “It’s hard to think of the present—here. That spinning wheel belonged to your grandmother, I suppose?” It stood before the window, where the sunset reached in and laid three fingers of wistfully fading radiance on the upper spokes of the wheel.

“Yes. Lydie got it out of the attic and I worked on it till I got it to stand up, at least.” Eric had taken the chimney off the lamp on the clawfoot table, and was striking a match.

“*Lydie?*” Natalie said thoughtfully. “I suppose you have to light the lamp—but I’d love to sit here just the way it is. You didn’t say much about Lydie in

your letter when you told me I might come.”

He had set the chimney back on the lamp, but the wick had been too high, so that the flame sprang up in ragged, smoky teeth. He turned it down quickly.

“There wasn’t much to say,” he remarked indifferently. “She’s pleasant—earthy, I suppose you’d say. But she isn’t crude, by any means, and she’s no fool. She’s been to college and has read a bit, and even plays the piano very well, considering. She’ll probably surprise you—for a farmer’s wife. And Andrew is no fool either, incidentally. So don’t go into their house with the idea of kindly patronizing them and being secretly amused.”

“You talk as though I had no manners at all,” Natalie complained.

“You have. That’s just the trouble. If Andrew doesn’t see through them, Lydie will.”

“So! Then there *is* something to be said about Lydie!” Natalie laughed. “I can hardly wait to meet her.”

“I’ll take you over to the house now, and come back here and get cleaned up a bit. We’re to have dinner with the Clarences—supper, I mean—before the party. By the way—are you planning on the week-end, or do you *expect* to go back tomorrow?”

Natalie threw back her head in a peal of laughter. “Isn’t he the tactful precious! I’m here ten minutes and he wants to know when I’m leaving.”

“I want to—”

“There’s nothing I’d adore more, darling, than driving alone a hundred miles or so on Christmas Day. I’d do it in something over an hour—and kill two calves and three farmers coming home from church. You know how *crazy* I am to get back home to Aunt Maude’s Christmas tree and her friends playing bridge among the pine needles—and my own friends drinking champagne cocktails and groaning over Christmas dinners and the new income taxes! Oh, I’d simply love it. Like hell!”

“I thought as much,” Eric said.

“Don’t be silly, darling. I’m really taken with this place, Eric. I’ll stay until the day after tomorrow, if that isn’t too long. I’d stay longer, except that I’ve got to get ready for the ice boat races on New Year’s Day. *Excalibur* is going to win this year, Eric. My love, my own, my boat!”

“You’ll kill yourself on that contraption one of these days.”

“A swift, white, clean death! No, I won’t. I don’t deserve so much.” She

got up. “So now we go to meet Lydie? Is my lipstick on straight, Eric?”

She smiled hardily, but did not offer to kiss him. He felt oddly about that, somehow. He wondered if he only imagined the half-frightened, defensive look in her eyes.

### 3

Lydie and Andrew were alone in the living room after supper, pushing the furniture back against the walls, taking up the mats to arrange a clear space for dancing. Eric and Natalie had both offered to help, but Lydie had been firm in her insistence that they go back to the orchard house until the guests began to arrive. Old friends such as they were, she had said with understanding, must have a great deal to talk about.

Lydie stood with a finger tapping her teeth as Andrew rolled up the large oval mat where the maple table had been.

“Perhaps if we put the table back over there on the other side of the Christmas tree, they won’t be so likely to set glasses or cigarettes on it, Andy,” she said. “You know how some of them are—Christmas Eve, especially. The Fuller boys will have had plenty to drink before they get here—and they’ll think our punch is champagne and—I’d hate to have them mark up the table.”

Andrew winced, and berated himself for wincing. He had always disliked the table, because it was one of the precious heirlooms Lydie had received from her mother upon their marriage. He had never been able to buy her anything to equal it, but that was not his chief reason for wishing the table had never been brought to the house. It reminded him constantly of the mysterious and suspicious chill in Mrs. Wheeler’s attitude toward him.

But Lydie’s smallest concern always immediately thrust away any disturbed thought he might have for himself.

He said now, “Why don’t we move it into the back parlor, away from everything? We can lock the door so they won’t go in there—”

“Yes—but the table is so beautiful, Andrew. Mrs. Galloway has never seen it. This will be the first time she has ever been here.”

“Mrs. Galloway?”

“Oh, darling!” Lydie shook her head at him affectionately. “She’s that new

woman in Axford—the one with the money—who came to your last meeting and was so enthusiastic about what you were doing. They say she has the loveliest things in—”

“I remember her now,” Andrew said with an understanding grin. “So little Lydie would like to show off to Mrs. Galloway!”

He came and put his arms about her, gathered her close to him with the tremulous joy that had never grown less during the years of their marriage, an emotion made only the more poignant because of his half-doubt that such happiness could have come to him.

“Andy,” Lydie murmured against his shoulder, “I love you. You know that, don’t you?”

“I want to know it—over and over again! I’ve never got over the idea that you’re too good for me. And—you are!”

“No, no!” She struck his chest with her knuckles. “Stop saying that—once and for all, Andy!” She raised herself and kissed him quickly, then more lingeringly, searching his eyes with her own wide open. “You know it isn’t true. It’s you who are too good for me.”

“Well, let’s not fight about it,” he laughed. “Do you think Eric and Natalie will be anything like us?”

“They couldn’t be!” Then, releasing herself, she said more seriously, “But they’re well matched, don’t you think? She’s mad about him, and she isn’t nearly so—well, so hard-boiled as she pretends to be. Do you know what I think?” She looked up at Andrew with a grave little frown. “I think she was terribly hurt once, and she has never got over it. She’s wearing a coat of armor. But she’s so beautiful—it’s a shame!”

“She doesn’t hold a candle to you,” Andrew declared.

“Andy . . . we’ve got to get this place ready. They’ll be here in no time! And listen—I’m not going to tell Mrs. Galloway that the table was a—a wedding present, either.”

He held her again for a moment so that she could not see his face. “We’ll have things—we’ll get things—all our own, before long. Tell Mrs. Galloway anything you like!”

She reached up and ruffled his hair with both hands. “Do you know what she said to me the other night, after the meeting? She said, ‘Aren’t you lucky your husband isn’t a minister?’” Lydie chuckled. “She said that if you were, the female congregation would be so crazy about you that I wouldn’t have a

minute's peace. She's right, too. And that reminds me—Esther Larch called up this afternoon and said she'd come early because she had something special she wanted to ask you about.”

Andrew groaned. “Good Lord! I suppose I'll have her following me around all night. Of all the fools—”

Lydie laughed. “Come on. It's half past seven. I think I hear a car coming along the road right now.”

## 4

Under the moonlight, the river was a mottled blade of snow and ice, and the bare trees on the opposite bank seemed to be full of a dark, upward-crawling activity, a tentacled commotion, although the air was still and windless as a mirror. Ada Sadler shivered and hunched forward from the tree against which she had been leaning.

“You're cold,” Bill Forsythe said. “We'd better go back in.”

“No, I'm not cold—and I don't want to go in. It's all so idiotic—all of us pretending we're having fun. That fool Andrew, and his Christmas carols! Pulling ourselves up by the boot straps. Dancing to the radio. Music from the Waldorf in New York. Do you know what they pay that orchestra, Bill? I read about it in—”

“Shut up.”

“If you kiss me again, I'll bite your lip off.”

“Okay!”

She struggled briefly in his arms, Bill's roughened laugh running along her brightly moonlit hair, her smooth throat. Then she collapsed against him, and while he held her he had to steady himself with his other hand against the firm cold trunk of the elm that had stood here long before they were born.

“Let's get married anyhow, Ade—and take a chance. We'll get along somehow. It can't be worse than this, no matter what happens.”

But even as he spoke he could sense the change in her. Bill felt suddenly lost and humble with the vague fear he had had at other times—that Ada Sadler was far, far beyond him, and that in some way she would escape from the mean, sorry little net of circumstances that entangled them all, and spread



her valorous wings into a blue of which he dared not even dream. Fury raced through him at the thought; for why shouldn't he, who had at least gone to business school, be earning enough to hold the only girl he had ever loved? He clung stubbornly to her cold hands, but she wrenched herself free.

"We'd better go back to the house," she said.

## 5

Minnie Sadler, in her own studied phraseology, was having a *colossally delicious* time. So she had told Lydie, who was moving here and there among her guests like a beautiful gray and violet moth in the long chiffon dress she had made for herself for less than five dollars. They had exchanged confidences about their dresses, she and Lydie. Minnie had been so pleased when Lydie had admired *her* gown, which she had made over from a lace affair that Mrs. Agnew had given to Ada, and which Ada had seriously thought of making into a table runner!

Just now, Minnie was really glad to be sitting alone for a minute in shadow near the dining room door. The Fuller boys and the Larch boys and Ernie Petersen had practically danced her off her feet! Perhaps a half size larger would have been better in shoes of such a cheap make as these. Yet you could never be sure whether they would stretch too much or not at all. What could you expect for a dollar ninety-five, anyhow?

The punch bowl—a ponderous old heirloom, Lydie called it, but cut glass just the same—stood at an angle with Minnie's right eye. The punch was made of homemade grape wine, slices of canned pineapple, orange and lemon, and a dash of something else that Eric Stene had contributed. Minnie had had two small glass cups of it, thinking the while of the stories she had read of college girls and proms. She would never go to a prom. A sadness came over her. Suppose she got up casually and helped herself to another little cup, and then took off this right shoe that had become real agony? After all, she would be eighteen, soon.

Cup in hand, shoe removed, and herself blessedly concealed by the Christmas tree! There must be thirty people here tonight, most of them dancing now under the festoons of red and green crepe paper swinging from the ceiling corners to meet at the light fixture in the middle of the room, beneath which a naughty sprig of mistletoe hung. Lydie had refused to have these modern blue and silver decorations! But never had the Clarences' living room looked so

pretty, with the holly wreaths, red-bowed, on the window curtains, and on the mantel red and green candles in brass sconces. At first, to her horror, Minnie had found herself thinking of them as *conches*.

This was a *democratic* party, Minnie sighed with happiness. Everybody was here, from Mr. Paul Kellog, the school principal, and his wife, to Maisie Fletcher, waitress in the “Eating House” beside the depot, and the Dvoraks and Carlsons from the Two Trestles. And they were all talking or dancing or singing together around the piano in the most *natural* way! The Clarences just *could* do things like this, in the same way royalty could. Or maybe, Minnie thought, bewildered at the idea—maybe it was this *house* that was doing it!

Anyway, Lydie had certainly prepared everything beautifully. Games for the children in the kitchen—beds for them upstairs when they began to nod. And the refreshments, served *buffet style* half an hour ago, had been simple but *perfect*!

But where was Ada, anyhow? She had been dancing with Bill some time back, and then had suddenly stopped and looked frighteningly into space. You couldn’t depend on Ada—it was rather *embarrassing* to be related to her. She wasn’t at all like good, solid Ben. Tonight, for instance, somebody had to stay with mother, and Ben had insisted the girls must go to the party because he wanted to read a book called *The Origin of the Next War*. He was simply being generous and didn’t want to admit it. Sweet, stupid Ben.

She promptly forgot about Ada and Ben, for here came her cousin Eric and Lydie Clarence dancing together, and how graceful they looked—only Eric *might* hold her a little closer! Minnie was disappointed in him. He had turned out to be rather a stick, in spite of his looks. The radio orchestra stopped, Lydie laughed and waved her hand at Eric, then floated across the room to talk to somebody else. Beside Eric there was suddenly that beautiful Miss Monroe, dressed in a tweed skirt and a handmade tailored black silk blouse, with a green *cravat* held in place by a severely simple pin in the design of a silver leaping hound.

Natalie glided down into a chair, cigarette in hand, and looked toward the piano where Lydie was playing now and all the rest of them singing at the top of their lungs while Andrew stood smiling and waving his arms like a band leader. The song was, “I want a girl, Just like the girl, That married dear old dad!” Minnie’s eyes filled in remembrance of her father.

Eric had squatted on the floor beside Miss Monroe, his arms clasped about his knees. They looked at each other, without any expression at all, and then both began to sing with the others, smiling, their eyes half closed, their heads

thrown back.

Now they were all coming away from the piano again, and Esther Larch was hanging on Andrew's arm. She had been sticking to him like a burr all evening, her watery blue eyes growing more watery, her sandy limp hair out of curl, her pale pink organdie dress slack about her knees.

They were beginning to do parlor tricks. Minnie could forgo them and rest her foot until the dancing started once more. There were all the old familiar ones—threading a needle while sitting on a milk bottle, the match and chair trick, handkerchief tricks. And Esther Larch, having assured herself of an audience, proceeded to show off in a way that made Minnie's lip curl. Esther, as almost everybody knew, was "doubled jointed." She did weird things with her arms, her legs and her head. She actually had full bloomers on, Minnie observed, as though she had come prepared to give an exhibition. She finally stood up and with her back a short distance from the wall, bent backwards and touched the wall with the curve of her throat.

Andrew cried out, "Be careful, Esther! You'll hurt yourself!"

But she flashed up straight as a jack-in-the-box, smiling and bowing at Andrew in a way that made Minnie positively *sick*. Everybody clapped, though, and when the radio was turned on again Esther made an oily twist toward Andrew and he couldn't get away.

Lydie, Eric and Miss Monroe were standing together near Minnie. It was impossible not to hear what they were saying.

"That girl is certainly smitten on your husband, Mrs. Clarence," said Miss Monroe.

"You'd almost think so, wouldn't you?" Lydie laughed softly.

Miss Monroe gave Lydie a quick, narrowly studying look. Then, in a moment, when she was alone with Eric again, she said just loudly enough for Minnie to hear, "Your Lydie is a lovely little creature, Eric."

Eric shrugged. "In her way, I suppose. I wouldn't call her exactly *little*."

Miss Monroe swept up an eyebrow at him. "Full armor, eh, darling?"

"No. Guess again, Nat. Do you want to dance?"

It was puzzling, vaguely troubling, to Minnie. But just then Ernie Petersen, from Two Trestles, came up to her and she hastily slipped her foot back into her shoe. Ernie was certainly the most romantic-looking man in the room. About his hips he had the slim, starved look of a professional dancer.

They had not gone more than halfway around the floor when Minnie came out of her rapturous trance to the knowledge of a rude distraction in the room. From somewhere there had come a sound like a muffled clap of thunder. The radio was turned off and everybody was talking at once.

“What was that?”

“Earthquake!”

“Explosion!”

There was a general movement toward the door, but Andrew Clarence calmly held up a hand.

“Wait, now. Don’t get excited. This house isn’t going to fall down. If you want to go out, put your coats on so you won’t catch cold.”

What wonderful control he had over people, Minnie thought with a thrill, and how Lydie must adore him! When most of them had gone outside and could be heard exclaiming with excitement, Andrew tried to telephone Inglebrook for information, but the line was dead.

From the little platform almost level with the roof, where old Doctor Stene used to go to study the stars, Minnie stood at last with Andrew and Lydie, Eric and Miss Monroe. Here you could see the dark westward spill of the horizon away from the moon, across five rolling miles of field and woodland deep in the slow dream of winter. And in the center of the murky gold nebula which was the lights of the town of Axford, there were lurid, coruscating spires of flame engulfed at brief intervals by billows of smoke.

“What do you think it is, Andrew?” Eric asked.

“It looks like the produce house—it’s just about where—” He hesitated. “It’s on the east side of town, but there seems to be more than that.”

You could hear cars starting in the yard below.

“We’d better go down, Lydie,” said Andrew.

Downstairs, women were putting their hats on askew, hastily collecting their children, and talking incoherently about what might have happened.

“Not one of them is thinking of what it really means,” Eric said to Miss Monroe in a low, ironical voice. “The herd is—running to cover!”

He glanced down with distaste at a sleepily crying little boy who clung to his mother’s skirts while she struggled with her hat.

Lydie came smoothly and took the child in her arms.

“There, there, pet! You’ll soon be home, in your own snug little bed. Don’t cry, Jimmie!”

The mother went in search of the little boy’s mittens, and while Jimmie gazed at Lydie with large, wet eyes, Eric leaned toward her and said, “He’s a depression dividend, I suppose?”

“Do you know of any better one it paid?” asked Lydie.

Miss Monroe’s eyes glittered with amusement at Eric, but his expression was stony. He turned away to the kitchen, from which Andrew’s voice was coming now. Minnie followed Eric and Miss Monroe, because she felt caught up suddenly in a wave of inscrutable fright that had nothing whatever to do with the explosion in Axford. She could not tell what it was, but it had something to do with the velvety, warm blur in the upward glance that Lydie had given Eric.

“I think I ought to go to Axford,” Andrew said. “I’d like to find out what’s happened. I wish you’d just stay here, Eric, and wait till I come back, if you don’t mind.”

Lydie had come to the door of the kitchen and stood listening, her dark eyes upon Andrew in shining faith and pride.

“Andrew—you’ll be careful, won’t you?”

He smiled at her. “Of course, Lydie. There’s nothing to worry about, and I’ll probably be back in a few minutes.”

“Go ahead, Andrew,” Eric said.

It was just then that Ada and Bill Forsythe came in. Minnie saw her sister’s white face as she looked up at Eric and said, in a measured, queerly different way, “Ben is at home with mother. He wouldn’t leave her tonight. He’s at home, reading—a book about the next war. He’s at *home!*”

Minnie saw Eric take hold of Ada’s arm. She could barely hear him say, “Be quiet, Ada. There are still some people in the other room.”

Bill Forsythe was on the other side of Ada. He looked foolish, as if he were trying not to cry, with his big teeth down hard over his under lip.

“Sit down at the table, here—all of you,” Lydie said, her eyes laughing out like dark flowers, as if this were nothing at all. “I’ll get these people away and then we’ll have a cup of tea.”

Ada, Bill, Miss Monroe, Eric and Minnie sat down at the kitchen table. Minnie saw Ada press her fingers against her eyes, and Bill fumble his arm

about her distractedly. She saw Miss Monroe and Eric light cigarettes and stare fixedly at the red and white oilcloth that covered the table. Nobody said a word. Minnie couldn't bear it another second. She got up, catching her lace dress on a nail under the chair.

"If you don't mind, I'll get a ride home with somebody. The Fullers are going now."

Ada stared at her, but Minnie had the sinking feeling that she did not even see her. "Make Ben a snack when you get home," Ada said, "if he isn't already in bed. He didn't eat much supper." At the margin of her lively hair a faint rash of perspiration had sprung out.

## 6

In the Fullers' car, Minnie sat stiff with a terror that had no name. She could find no phrase, out of any book she had ever read, that seemed in any sense appropriate. Ada was afraid that Ben would not be at home, that was it. Ada was afraid—and Minnie was afraid. Viciously bright little fragments of things she had heard in the past few weeks, and had only half understood, came fluttering now through her mind. Meetings somewhere—in the old boathouse on Pistol River—in the abandoned loft of the old lumber yard. Meetings to which men threaded their way circuitously, after dark, to sit at last in a tight glove of darkness, to whisper briefly and then slide away like shadows. Little Eddie Bursill, who brought the milk from the Bursill's place on the river, had said something one morning, but she had paid no attention to him. And old Guri Kvam, who used to be a midwife—she had been present at Eric Stene's birth, Minnie knew—had come one night to sit with mother and had rocked back and forth while she made knowing but vague references to something that was going on in the county.

This, Minnie realized suddenly, must mean a *crisis* in her life, because she had forgotten all about Ernie Petersen, who certainly had intended to take her home.

It seemed an age before the Fullers' car stopped in front of the Sadler house, another age before Minnie got into the house. And there was Ben, sitting in *her* favorite place, his feet in the oven, a bowl of popcorn on the floor beside his chair, and his book open on his knees!

"Oh, Benny!" Tears of relief welled up in her eyes.

“What’s the matter with *you*?” Ben demanded, staring over his shoulder at her.

“Didn’t you hear the explosion?”

“Oh, that!” He shrugged and turned back to his book.

“Did mother hear it?”

“Yes—it woke her up, I guess. But I gave her one of the powders. She’s all right now.”

“But—” While Minnie still stood looking at him, nonplused and speechless, he glanced around again in testy irritation.

“Well, what’s eating you?” Then his expression changed. “Where’s Ada?”

“I left her at the Clarences’. I just—I wanted to come home. Didn’t you go outdoors and look, or anything, when the explosion—”

“Say, are you tight, or just dizzier than usual? Sure, I went and looked. What of it? There wasn’t so much to see.”

Minnie sat down weakly on the edge of a chair. “But—you don’t seem to be a bit shocked or—”

“Shocked? My God!” He swung about toward her and gave a prodigious snort of amusement. “What is there to be shocked about? You might as well be shocked because grass grows, or because it rains!”

Minnie was impressed, and somehow a little easier in spirit. “You mean—”

“A matter of cause and effect,” said Ben with a spacious gesture.

“You don’t sound like yourself, Ben. You must have been reading something.”

“It must’ve been something I *et*!” he replied sarcastically.

“Ben.” Minnie gulped and leaned forward. “You—you didn’t have anything to do with it, did you?”

“With *what*?” His patience was nearing an end.

“The—the—” Her voice dropped to a cautious whisper. She glanced furtively to the limp blue curtain of the window, the curtain she herself had dipped in a wash dye only last week in the hope that it might look new. “—the explosion.”

“Say, listen, kid!” Ben closed his book and tapped it with a stubby finger. But he did not sound angry now. “I’ve got troubles enough of my own without

going out and settling other people's. I don't know where you get your loony ideas, anyhow!"

"Isn't there a—a secret society—or something?"

"If there is," Ben assured her, his face closing forbiddingly, "I'm not a member of it—not yet, anyhow."

He put his feet back into the oven and opened his book. "Have some popcorn, kid. Then look in on ma—and go to bed, will you?"

"Ada told me to make you a snack—"

"I had some sardines and crackers a while ago."

"Oh. All right, then. Good night, Ben."

She trailed off with sad though relaxed dignity, and tripped on the torn lace hem of the gown that had belonged to Mrs. Charles Agnew.

"Mamma, dear." She whispered softly into the dark of her mother's room. There was a labored stir, and Minnie went in. "Are you all right?"

"I'm all right. Isn't Ady home?"

"Lydie wanted her and Bill to stay a little longer, after the rest left. The Fullers brought me home. I simply danced my feet off! And Lydie had the best sandwiches and potato salad and cake you ever saw. And that idiot, Esther Larch! Honestly, you should have seen her. She hung around Andrew just like—as—she did last summer at the church picnic. And she did some of those awful stunts of hers, and it was a good thing she had heavy bloomers on, not just pants, as I *fully* expected! Really, she is *revolting*, mamma. I don't see how the Clarences stand her."

"They're always nice to everybody," her mother replied, laughing a little. "Wasn't that a terrible explosion—or whatever it was?"

"Did it upset you *dreadfully*?"

"Some. But not so much. You get to expect things, laying here like this. Was there any fire or anything? Could you see? Ben didn't want to leave and go and find out in town, but he said he couldn't see anything from here. He thought maybe it was a boiler."

"I hope nobody was hurt," Minnie said glibly. "Can I get you anything, mamma? A glass of hot milk—"

"Thanks, no, honey. I'm just glad you're all safe. I feel drowsy. You go to bed, now. I'm so glad you had such a good time."



## Chapter Three

### 1

*D*uring the cold snap in January, Eric had occasion to wonder what this cabin must have been like in the winters his grandfather had known, without benefit of an oil heater. He observed that when he got from his bed of a morning a draught like a string of frozen mice hurtled across his bare feet, and his breath made a ghostly whisker in front of his face.

Toward the close of one of these days, Eric sat wool-socked beside his typewriter, fireplace and heater going full blast. Andrew had enquired with some concern whether he would not be more comfortable in the big house, but Eric had assured him that he was getting along very well where he was. It might be cooler around the feet, he could have added, but also cooler around the heart! Since the Christmas Eve party, when he had danced twice with Lydie—almost at arm's length!—he had entered the Clarences' house only when Andrew's invitations had been so pressing that he could not decently refuse them.

What a wind-up there had been to that party! Strangely enough, only one had been injured in the explosion at Axford. The origin of the blast was still a mystery and would probably remain so. The owners of the cold storage plant seemed inclined to let it go unsolved. It was Andrew's opinion that it might be to the owners' interest to keep the truth suppressed and treat the whole affair as if it had been an accident. Now, a month later, nothing more was being said about it.

Eric brought his attention to bear upon his grandfather's hair-fine script. Why should he be thinking of the way Lydie Clarence had walked across the yard this afternoon, her hair whipped back by the wind, her hands dug into the pockets of her husband's gray sweater?

The ink Edvard Stene had used in his journal must have been purple, but now it was silver gray. Eric bent forward and read it carefully again.

*We have our sod house built into the slope of a knoll, and Johannes has dug to a depth of fine water with a pure taste to it. I have assisted him somewhat in the work, but much of my time has been taken up in driving about the countryside to visit the sick, as there is only one doctor in the town of Axford, five miles from here. It now seems as if a town might spring up at the crossroads, two miles from our farm, in the opposite direction from Axford. A trader by the name of Aldous Thom, of Scotch-English descent, wants the corner to be called Inglebrook, but I have suggested Inglebrook, since the brook running through the land indicates the compromise. To this Thom has agreed, and I believe in due course we shall have a village here by that name.*

On another page:

*Today I drove seventeen miles through a blizzard so fierce with bitter cold that I was obliged to get out of the sled every ten minutes to place my bare hand against the mare's nostrils, in order to melt the ice from them so that the animal might breathe. And then, to keep my hands from freezing, I placed them in the warm recess between the mare's thigh and her udder. It gave me an uncommon feeling of reciprocity, this, of interdependence between man and beast. Upon our arrival at the Schlenner farm, I put Dora straightway into the barn where feed and water awaited her. The Schlenners' first son was born five hours later, a breech delivery that might have cost the mother's life, had it not been for Dora's loyal struggle to get me there so that I might do what I could.*

*I am waiting over here now until tomorrow, when, God willing, the weather will permit our return. They have put me up on a sofa in the kitchen, which is the only other room besides the bedroom. A few minutes ago I looked about me for reading matter on a shelf and found, besides a few old newspapers, a greasy small Bible. Although I am not a true-believer, I have never found a lack of interest in the book. It is curious how frequently, if one opens it at random, he will be confronted by a chapter or a verse which will have for him an arresting meaning at the time. In this instance I chanced upon the thirtieth chapter in Genesis, where Rachel and Leah are concerned with that forked and shrieking vegetable, the mandrake. And recalling how diligently the Schlenners had striven for a child—for in this land children are the future even as they were in biblical times—it made me chuckle to think that perhaps Freda Schlenner—a*

*comely enough wench—had found a mandrake root in the corner of a field and had become fertile by eating of it. But then I fell serious, and began to ponder upon how even in our enlightened times valiant women will eat of the mandrake in order to conceive—symbolical mandrake, I mean. Hardships and discomforts and revulsions in this new country. Perhaps that is far-fetched, but I could not help see a likeness between Rachel and Freda Schlenner. It appears that, no matter what the obstacle, a woman who is determined to have a child will have one if it is physically possible, even though it bring about her death. Thus, perhaps, the race goes on. It seems to me that the strutting male of the species has very little to do with it, apart from serving as the means to the end. Wiser men than I have said the same thing, of course, and yet whole nations continue in the belief that woman is the weaker vessel. What I say is, women give us proudly our sons and then shackle us forever with our pride in those sons. Women—wars sleep in their eyes, behind the milky veil of peace! I should like to be alive a few centuries hence, when science will have given the sword into the hands of the female. For this must come to pass, once chemistry takes its stride. And, mark my words, women will not be remiss then in the knowledge that works for war or for peace! They will bear their children—it may be that they will bring them through the gestation period outside their natural bodies, in some strange glass globe, and then only if they choose to do so. Yet, in that distant day, whether for war or for peace, I do believe they will bear them with the same ferocious vanity that they bore them in the time of Rachel, in Padan-aram!*

Eric thought of Sibert Mueller, and then, with chilling reflection, of Lydie Clarence. Had she lived in biblical times, she would certainly have been one of those who partook of the mandrake, all else failing! He meditated again over the Clarences' childlessness, and in recalling Lydie's casual statement to Ada that before long she and Andrew intended to have a family, he was struck by the over-simplicity there had been in her manner. Something too airy about it, too plausible. . . .

He filled the teakettle and set it on top of the kerosene heater. The tin wash tub he had bought had been standing in the corner of the fireplace for a half hour and the water was warm enough now for a bath. It was an awkward process, but in the past few weeks he had become increasingly loth to use the facilities of the big house; the excuse he gave for preferring the primitive conveniences of the cabin was that he liked to bathe at night just before going

to bed. He suspected that Lydie saw through the evasion, because she had favored him with that innocently contemplative look so familiar to him now, a look composed of secret amusement and understanding tolerance.

This evening he had promised to drive with Andrew to the Coulee Church, where donations of clothing, canned stuff and fresh meats were to be distributed among the needy of two townships. Saul Pennock, head of the local relief bureau, whom Andrew had been helping occasionally since autumn, had been ill for two weeks, and Andrew, acquainted with the routine, had volunteered to substitute for him—without pay, of course. Lydie had lent her services as well, in the capacity of investigator, driving about the countryside in Saul Pennock's car.

The assumption of this responsibility meant not only that Andrew had to crowd his working day to include an hour or so at the shabby little office in Inglebrook, where Saul Pennock's harassed woman assistant was almost on the verge of a nervous breakdown, but that he had to bear the brunt of the unjust criticism, hysterical abuse and disgruntlement incidental to the conduct of the work, and also carry home with him the indelible picture of humiliation and despair on the faces of those who had been reduced almost to beggary.

It was the emotional strain that was telling on Andrew. Physically, the man seemed to be inexhaustible. He could rise before daylight, do the chores of three men, attend to the emergencies which appeared in the course of events at the farm every day, then devote himself to Saul Pennock's dreary tasks in the afternoon, and return at dusk to begin his own work all over again. It seemed to Eric that somebody else in Inglebrook or near it might have taken on this obligation, somebody less vulnerable to human woe than Andrew Clarence, and somebody with more leisure than he. But it was understandable that everybody except a selfless man like Andrew would dodge the nightmarish coil of such a job.

Eric had bathed, put on his underclothes and trousers, and was pouring water from the kettle to shave when a light tap came at the door. It was not Andrew's knock. It occurred to him, too, that Lydie had never before knocked on this door. She had come in once or twice, but always with Eric or Andrew. She had not once, since that first time when he had found improvements in the place on his return from Inglebrook, come here alone. He should at least be thankful for that, he reflected devoutly, and called, "Come in!"

"Oh," Lydie said, hesitating as she closed the door behind her. "You aren't dressed yet."

"Is this the first time you've ever seen a man's undershirt?" Eric asked

briefly. He proceeded to lather his face, looking into the little square of mirror above the washstand. The pupils of his eyes had dilated.

“No, not exactly. But I suppose I ought to be thrilled at the color of yours. Apple-green, isn’t it? You’d be better off if you wore long woolens, sitting here all day. That wasn’t what I meant, though, when I said you weren’t dressed. It wouldn’t matter to me if you didn’t have anything on, as you probably know.” She sat down and helped herself to a cigarette from Eric’s work table. “What I came to tell you is that Andrew wants to leave early. He had a run-in with Aarons today, and he thinks we ought to get to the church and have things parceled out before the Two Trestle people arrive. They’re in another ugly mood.”

“What about, this time?”

“They have an idea,” said Lydie calmly, “that since Saul Pennock has been sick Andrew has been helping himself to funds that rightly belong to them. And provisions.”

“H’m!” Eric steadied the razor on his lower lip.

“Yes. They won’t believe that the county appropriation was reduced so much before New Year’s. They won’t believe anything. And who can blame them? They’re cold and hungry—and most of them are honest enough. But I’m not going to let them take it out on Andrew.”

“What are you going to do about it?”

“That’s what I came over about. You’ve got to help me, Eric. Persuade him to quit the job. Talk to him. Show him how foolish and thankless it is. Please, Eric!”

With his back still turned half toward her, Eric put on his shirt. “You flatter me, Lydie,” he said. “I doubt that anything I can say to Andrew—”

“He thinks more of you than any man he has ever met!” she interrupted ardently. “He’s too reserved to tell you so, but he *has* told me.”

Eric listened to the dull throbbing in his ears. He adjusted his tie with fingers that felt clammy. Then he strode across the room and stood glowering down at her, his hands thrust deep into his pockets. But her eyes met his in unflinching, dark tranquillity, and the words died unuttered on his tongue. He had been about to tell her that because of circumstances which they both understood perfectly, he had decided to go back to the city at once—tomorrow. Instead, he was standing transfixed and helpless, the blood drumming in his temples, while through the corridors of his brain ran the fantastic thought that

between Lydie Clarence and the inscrutable spirit of these old walls there was an intrigue to keep him here.

“You *will* talk to him, Eric?”

Her voice startled him, brought him back to reality from a wildly spangled chaos. Immediately he was convinced that she had exercised her smooth power with premeditated strategy, holding him suspended and liberating him only when she chose. A premonitory pang, bright and exquisite as a knife through the core of his body, smote him suddenly. (*I had my chance to escape. I didn't speak when I should have spoken, and now it's too late. This house and this woman have got me. Even in the very moment that we were talking about Andrew, whom we both love, I was trapped. This woman has the rich ruthlessness of the earth itself, of this very earth from which I came. I've gone back to it—I'm already buried in it, and the night winds of seventy years—the night winds of Lydie's eyes—are whispering over me. . . .*)

“Yes, I'll talk to him,” he said thickly, and turned away to get his coat and hat from the peg on the log wall. “But you know as well as I do that it won't do any good. Andrew isn't like—”

“Us,” Lydie said. She rose and was at the door before him, had it open. The twilight sparkled through the trees with a green wash of emerald, and from somewhere across the pellucid winter distances came the long-drawn whistle of a locomotive. “Still—if there's any trouble tonight, you might be able to persuade him to quit. If you can't, nobody can, Eric.”

She stood for a moment in front of him on the stone slab of the door step, and her bare head was so close beneath his face that he imagined a clean, chilly fragrance rose to him from her hair. He found himself wondering what that hair would be like, spread out fanwise on a dark, sultry earth under misted stars, some night in deep summer. But her hair wasn't long enough for him to strangle her with it, as Browning's poor fool had strangled Porphyria.

## 2

The two truck loads of provisions had arrived at the church soon after Eric and Andrew had got the swinging lamps lighted and the wood fire going in the cast iron stove. The drivers had helped them pile the crates and bundles, the sides of beef and pork, into the vestry, where Andrew and Lydie had sorted them out into lots for convenient distribution. To each lot they attached a tag

with the name of a family. Altogether, there were eleven.

As soon as people began to arrive, Lydie went into the church and seated herself at the asthmatic organ in the corner beneath the pulpit.

With an uncomfortable sense of falseness and hypocrisy, Eric helped the women with their swarms of children to get settled in the harsh old pine pews, from which the brown paint was flaking like blisters from a burn. Several of the women, their sorry clothing giving off the indescribable, bleak smell of poverty, were loudly pregnant and carried infants in arms as well. To these Eric was especially courteous, because of his fear that they would perceive the impatience and repugnance that almost overwhelmed him. At the faces of the men, Eric preferred not to look; they were not the faces they had set out with on this curious journey called life. They were distorted by shame, timidity, or panic, by sullen resignation or a swaggering bravado that was more pitiful still. One or two, to Eric's mirthless amusement, hung behind their wives as if they did not wish to acknowledge the clamoring progeny already here, and considerably less the imminent arrival of others.

The members of the Beacon Light Society sat in the front pews, for they were to lead in the singing. Eric was surprised to see his cousin Ada there, because after the wrecking of the produce plant in Axford, she had been more than ever bitter in her opinion that Andrew Clarence's effort at maintaining a buoyant, wholesome spirit in the community was a laughable farce. But despite her pessimism, Ada loved to sing, and it appeared that she was not yet ready to give up her place in the Beacon mixed quartette, where Bill Forsythe sang baritone and she herself sang alto.

Minnie sat with Bill and Ada, glancing now and then with demure self-consciousness across the aisle at young Ernie Petersen, who was stiffly resplendent in a cheap new blue suit and a yellow and black striped tie. Ernie seemed sternly oblivious of Minnie, but the tips of his ears glistened like red wax. Here, in Ernie and Minnie, Eric thought, was the beginning of another futile cycle of propagation and blundering and pain and death, relieved only by niggardly moments of joy, by an occasional shaft of light like the beam of a beacon swinging across a dark plain. And over the wheeling, indifferent earth their name was legion.

Eric had chosen a place a few rows back on the side opposite the organ. When he leaned forward he could see Lydie's blurred profile, the indistinct features elfin and run together under the swaying locks of her hair. She was playing some sweet old ballad now that was only vaguely familiar to him, playing it in her disarming, imperfect, tender way. The plaintive air skewered relentlessly at his heart, brought a stinging sensation to his eyes. He tried to

drag his attention away, and hoped that Andrew would soon appear and get on with the meeting.

Ben Sadler, Eric noticed, was not one of the small assembly. Ben's inarticulate devotion to his ailing mother was touching. The boy would not permit her to be alone in the house for a minute, and if his sisters wished to go out, he stayed with her until their return. He had been scornfully detached in his attitude toward the Axford incident, and Eric knew that he was in no way involved in it. But a thing like that had a way of sending out destructive spores into unstable, incoherent and rebellious emotions like Ben Sadler's. It was from just such soil, patiently, humbly slow to begin with, that the most violent growth might spring. And latterly Ben had had a darkly waiting look in his face.

Andrew Clarence came down the aisle finally and stood, straight and quiet, behind the altar railing. He raised his hand, smiled, and instantly there was attentive quiet. Under one arm he held a book; a sheet of white paper rustled in his hand, and Eric thought, "Something's wrong! He's nervous, trembling! He has heard something, had some altercation in the vestry, is fearful of something! Why wouldn't he listen to me when I tried to urge him to let the meeting go for tonight, distribute the supplies and go home? That would be cowardly, he said. Well, I told Lydie he wouldn't listen to me. . . ."

"Folks," Andrew began in that voice of his that was like a warm arm about the huddled shoulder of humanity, "we'll not hold the regular meeting of the Beacon Light this evening. Many of you have miles to go before you get back home, and the going is heavy. We're going to turn this meeting over to you. This is *your* night, folks. I'm not trying to sneak out of it, you understand. No, *sir!* I had a great speech all prepared, a brilliant speech, folks—all about Jonah in the belly of the whale—"

The mirth went from venturesome stepping-stones to a merry stride of laughter and Andrew waited with a modest smile for it to die down.

"We're all going to sing!" he announced suddenly. "We're going to sing as we've never sung before. *Everybody's* going to sing. If your voice sounds like a buzz-saw, let 'er buzz! Open your mouths, folks—and open your hearts—and let's sing! We're going to start off with an old-timer that you all know. How about *Pack Up Your Troubles?* We've all got our troubles, folks. Let's forget them! Let's pack them up—and *sing!*"

He waved his hand and the audience got to its feet as Lydie played a few introductory measures of the old song. The voices rose, uncertainly at first, then more confidently under Andrew's kindly urging. Eric was at a loss to



understand the effect the song was working upon him as he stood for a moment and listened. He felt a suspicious tightening sensation in his throat that had nothing whatever to do with the words or the music of the song that had echoed drunkenly in bleak billets where khaki-clad men had huddled behind the fighting lines in France. His eyes misted, and he began suddenly to sing with the others as the only way in which he could check the emotions that struggled within him.

“That wasn’t bad, folks—not at all bad!” Andrew encouraged them as they settled noisily back into their seats when the singing was done. “In fact, it was mighty good—for an opener. We’ll try it again—after a little rest.” He began turning the pages of the book he held in his hands. “Now—I’m going to let you listen while I read something. It’s a little story—a story in verse—a poem. It was written by a man whose name should be far more widely known than it is. The man’s name is Newbolt—Sir Henry Newbolt—and the poem is called ‘He Fell Among Thieves.’ After I have let you hear it, the Beacon Light singers will sing ‘Love’s Old Sweet Song.’ And then—Mrs. Clarence will play any song you name—and we’ll all sing again! How’s that, folks!”

Andrew began to read. While Eric listened to the beautiful lines so sensitively cadenced by Andrew’s voice, he thought, “It’s a strange thing that I have no feeling of jealousy now toward this man—that all I feel is a puzzled dislike for myself, respect for him. Lydie doesn’t in any way enter our relationship, except as a potential threat toward its ending. So far, all she has done is to make it less convenient for me to have talks with Andrew. But what . . .”

Andrew’s voice was rising in controlled, tragic intensity:

*He flung his empty revolver down the slope;  
He climbed alone to the eastward edge of the trees;  
All night long, in a dream untroubled of hope . . .*

That, thought Eric, is what you’re doing, Andrew—climbing to the eastward edge of the trees—and dreaming . . .

*“O glorious life, who dwellest in earth and sun,  
I have lived, I praise and adore thee!”  
A sword swept—  
Over the pass the voices one by one  
Faded, and the hills slept.*

An awed silence lay over the men and women in the pews, although not

more than one out of five had grasped the meaning of the words as they rang in power or became muted to the forlorn and vacant peace of death in a savage land. Eric wondered if even Andrew Clarence saw the possible symbolism of what he had read—the struggle of man to escape the brutal wilderness of the here and now. . . . Well, perhaps even Sir Henry Newbolt himself had not meant . . .

All at once there came a rough outcry as the front door of the church was thrown open. Eric turned to see the lurching forms of half a dozen men who scrambled and clattered up the aisle toward the altar. They were shouting deprecations and senselessly flailing about with their arms. The audience rose as one body, women cried out in terror, men cursed and tried to make their way out of the pews and over the tangled barriers of frightened, whimpering children.

Eric sprang into the aisle, but a little boy turning to run back fell against his legs and he had to pick the child up from the floor.

He heard the bellowing of the ringleader, the voice coming thick and drunken, but purposeful enough and viciously unclouded in its import.

“Come down outa there, Clarence, an’ give us what’s rightly ourn! We don’t want your God-damn hymn singin’ an’ preachin’! We want what you’ve been stealin’ from us for weeks, an’ by the livin’ cripes we’re goin’ to take it, or—”

“That’s tellin’ him, Joopy!” one of his cohorts yelled. “Bring him out!”

Eric saw Andrew standing behind the altar railing, his face drawn and white as he tried to speak: “Listen, Broud—I’ve done all I can—I’ve given everything there is—you’ve—”

Bill Forsythe and Eric almost collided as they threw themselves at the huge, raw-boned shape of Joopy Broud. But Broud, in a final frenzied plunge, had reached the railing, his heavy, hairy fist pumping, piston-like, under Andrew Clarence’s face.

Andrew went reeling backward to crash against a text rack which bore, in simple black type, the legend, *I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help.*

In the threshing confusion, the roar of grotesquely colloquial oaths that followed, Eric struck out right and left with a half blind yet brilliantly illumined, merciless pleasure. There was no sense to it, but it was something that had to be done. Ernie Petersen, joining Eric and Bill, was in it too, now, and in an instant’s clarity Eric saw him give a man who must be his Two

Trestle neighbor a clean blow under the chin that brought the fellow's jaws together with a precise click and set him to pawing the air in harmless bewilderment. Four or five other men had leaped up to the platform, and two of them were dragging Joopy Broud out bodily.

With Broud's departure, his companions seemed to lose heart. The man called Aarons gibbered out a half-intelligible command, and the others staggered uncertainly down the aisle after him and out of the door.

Eric swayed forward a little, watching them go. He had been struck violently in the pit of the stomach, but that was not why he felt sick, and he was clear-minded enough to know it. Poor devils, poor, licked, starving devils! A sob tore out of his throat, and he passed it off frantically as a coughing spell while he supported himself with one hand against the fluted pine side of the pulpit. Within the range of his lowered eyes, everything was a shambles—the altar railing kindling wood, the pathetic straw carpet torn to shreds.

People were milling about down below, somebody—Ada, it was—trying to restore order.

Lydie was bending over Andrew, on the other side of the raddled carpet. Andrew was getting up now, and there was a swinging spittle of blood from his mouth. Lydie wiped it off with her handkerchief, and he leaned his head down for a moment against her hair. Lydie's hair, Eric thought dizzily, the hair that was the color of deep, impenetrable woods in early spring twilight, before there were any leaves. But—just plain hair, after all. He wanted to laugh; no, he *thought* he wanted to laugh.

Andrew straightened, said something to her, and moved toward the vestry door. He was smiling.

“Eric,” Lydie said. “Eric. We're going to distribute the supplies now. Come and help us.”

### 3

Andrew Clarence was not dismayed by what had happened. He would muddle along with the job, he said, and he felt sure that now Broud and Aarons and their crowd were satisfied they had been in error.

But two days later the town council decided that in the interests of peace it would be better to appoint Willis Jolley in Saul Pennock's place, at a nominal

salary. Willis had some sort of official standing, he conducted a real estate office, was a notary public, was partly supported by a rich, half-paralyzed mother, and held poker parties in his back room every Saturday night. He would not work for nothing, as Andrew Clarence had done. A man working for nothing was always suspect.

While the members of the Beacon Light Society were, on the whole, loudly indignant in their defense of Andrew, the incident at the Coulee Church wrought a subtle change in their estimate of him. They had witnessed their leading spirit shorn of that power over men which had invested him with a special glamor; they had discovered him to be made of no super-mundane stuff, after all, and now a tendency asserted itself among them to belittle his aims and regard him skeptically as an impractical visionary. Those who had been jealous of his prestige began a campaign to shake whatever faith the others still held in his ideas.

There was at first nothing really tangible, but Andrew, sensitive and on the alert, felt it, and Eric knew what he felt, after the two meetings he had attended with him. Andrew went alone to the third meeting, and although he did not speak of it the next day, Eric was aware of what was going on in his mind.

That evening Lydie went early to the Fullers' to work on costumes for a high school play, and Eric helped Andrew with the milking. He found himself pleasantly exhilarated in discovering that after a few clumsy minutes the knack of it returned to his hands. He was enjoying the good barn smell, while the milk steamed and spun with a thin wail into the bucket between his feet, when Andrew came and placed a hand on his shoulder.

"Eric," he said, "I've got a cold settling in my chest. I think I have a fever. Would you mind hauling the milk up to the house, and I'll separate it in the morning. Or Lydie will do it when she gets home. It's a kind of stabbing pain, or I wouldn't think anything of it. I'm not subject to colds."

He ran his hand across his forehead and grinned apologetically. Eric stood up and looked at him.

In less than ten minutes, Andrew was lying flat on his back in bed, and Eric was rubbing his chest with the aromatic oil he had found in the medicine cupboard and heated on the stove. During those few intimate moments, Eric struggled in vain against the thoughts that trooped through his mind. The blade-clean perfection of the man's body—familiar and dear to Lydie, his wife! Here, over his heart, she had slept, and wakened, and slept again. Shame for his feelings burned into him, and the fear that he might somehow betray to Andrew the baseness of his thoughts came upon him like a clammy pall. He

put more force into his rubbing, until at last Andrew gave a protesting, humorous groan.

“We’ll stick on a mustard plaster, too,” said Eric, jovially. “Then I’ll run over to my place and get some whiskey and aspirin. We may as well do you up brown, my lad! If one thing doesn’t work, the other will.”

When he had at last covered Andrew with a mountain of blankets, he sat down beside him and waited for his dosing to take effect. After almost an hour, Andrew stirred out of a heavy sleep and complained cheerfully of being drenched with perspiration. Eric found that his temperature had gone down to within a half a degree of normal. He got out fresh linen from the hall cupboard, changed the bed, and helped Andrew into dry pajamas.

Stretched out gratefully beneath the covers, Andrew said a little weakly, “I haven’t eaten much since yesterday. Lydie has some soup in a jar in the ice box. I think it would go sort o’ good right now.”

While he prepared the soup and toasted a slice of bread on the stove downstairs, Eric pondered wretchedly upon this new and unflattering character he had discovered within himself. How could jealousy, contempt, admiration and pity toward a fellow human being all occupy the heart at the same time? Especially a heart like his own, over which he had always prided himself upon keeping an effortless and arrogant control! His knowledge of himself must have been very shallow, indeed.

Lydie would be home soon, he supposed. With grim resignation, he carried the food upstairs to Andrew and sat down while the other man ate.

“I’ve been thinking it over all day, Eric,” Andrew said after a while. “I’ve decided to resign from the Beacon.”

Eric shot a cautious glance at him. Beneath the deep set, brilliant eyes the face was drawn in sad failure.

“Rot!” Eric scoffed. “Where’ll they be without you? You’re the guts of the whole thing!”

Andrew smiled ironically. “They don’t all think as highly of me as you do, Eric,” he said, closing his eyes wearily. “Perhaps if I’d known you five years ago, I’d have more confidence in myself.”

What, Eric wondered uneasily, does he mean by that?

“I’m not good at making close friends,” Andrew went on. “Since Arthur Fenwick died—” he paused, and a dull half-flush tinged his cheeks—“I haven’t met any man I’ve felt—er—as congenial toward as I have toward you.

Perhaps that's because you've never reminded me of what a poor ignorant fool I am."

Eric's deprecating grin was stiff as plaster about his mouth. Under any circumstances he hated to see a stripping of emotions, but it was particularly trying now. He cast about him for something to say that would not sound fatuous or insincere.

"You're no ignorant fool, Andrew," he said finally, "and you know that as well as I do. If you had been, you'd probably have got along with that crowd better than you did. Superiority is a hard thing for most people to take."

Andrew was silent. But the lines of his face seemed to have become smoothed out suddenly, as though from some inward acceptance of what could not be changed. His sensitive hand moved absently across the bedclothes over his chest.

"I think I'll try to get some sleep now," he said. "I'll be all right tomorrow. Thanks for all you've done for me."

"You'd better stay right where you are for a couple of days," said Eric in a matter-of-fact tone, standing beside the bed. "Lydie and I can look after things."

Andrew nodded and closed his eyes again. Eric turned out the light and left the room.

He had attended to the fires downstairs when he heard the Clarences' old car entering the yard. Lydie came swiftly through the kitchen, into the living room where Eric sat smoking. He did not turn.

"Darling!" she cried breathlessly. "I didn't mean to be so late, but we sewed yards of—"

She stopped abruptly in front of Eric, staring at him and dropping the coat that was already half off her shoulders. Her eyes narrowed above her suddenly pale cheeks.

"What's the matter?" she demanded sharply. "Where's Andrew?"

Eric rose unhurriedly and tossed away his cigarette.

"He's in bed," he replied tersely, and began walking toward the door. "He had a cold coming on, so I dosed him up. He had a good sweat. He feels better already, and I think he's asleep now."

"Oh—I should have stayed home!" Lydie cried, and darted past Eric. But he caught her wrist and drew her roughly back.

“Let him sleep!” he said in a harsh voice.

Her arm went curiously limp in his grasp. She gave him a slow sidelong and upward glance in which amazement grew, and something else which was not so much anger as annoyance. It was not in his experience to feel withered. He flushed and stepped back from her.

“Andrew is *my* business,” she said coldly.

“Go ahead!” Eric rapped out. “I told him I’d look after his work tomorrow.” He turned stolidly and walked out of the house.

## Chapter Four

### 1

Minnie felt so happy she could scarcely bear it. Now it was late February, and on the twenty-first of March it would be Spring! Not only that, it would be her eighteenth birthday—a solemn, auspicious, and practically *fatal* time! For hadn't old Guri Kvam, who had been the midwife at Eric Stene's birth, seen the whole thing in her coffee cup last week, when she was here visiting mamma? Minnie watered the geraniums on the sitting room window sill with a zeal that suggested they had been parching in the Desert of Gobi for a hundred years.

Everything was the *acme* of perfection. The Agnews had come back, nice and fresh and brown, from Florida, and the brickyard and quarry had started up again, and although they weren't operating full time, Ben was making his sixteen dollars a week, while some of the men who had been promised their jobs back had not been taken on at all. Ada was working in the Agnew house once more, at four dollars a week now with Thursdays and every other Sunday off. She did not seem to be so discontented with it as she had been, but wore a gay, hard, defiant air whenever she was with any of her friends. She laughed more than she used to, especially in the company of Bill Forsythe, who often did not seem to be very happy at her merriment.

Perhaps, Minnie reflected, she should be a little uneasy about this change in Ada, but then Ada had always been so *temperamental* it would be silly to attach any importance to her moods.

Anyhow, Minnie was too much in love with Ernest Petersen to concentrate long on the vagaries of her older sister. She had decided never to call him "Ernie." It smacked of *rustics*, *drummers*, pool room loafers and the like. Her own name had always been an affront to her dignity, and now that she was looking forward to having it engraved solemnly and for aye upon a marriage certificate, she was casting about in her mind for a not-too-radical substitute. *Minerva* was slightly pretentious, although she *had* toyed with it. *Minetta*—well, yes. The more she fondled that name on her tongue, the more lissomly it



seemed to suit her personality. “. . . Do you, Minetta, take this man, Ernest, for your wedded husband?” Or how did the words go, anyhow? A blush warmed her cheeks and she went hurriedly across the room to the mirror to observe it.

Of course, Ernest hadn't actually proposed yet, but he had talked a lot about his job with the WPA—bridge construction over in Axford—the question of its permanence, and whether there was likely to be any cut in his seventeen-fifty a week. But the memory of the first time he had kissed her, after the Elks' dance, made her so giddy that the practical things he had said floated away in a golden mist.

Another thing that contributed to Minnie's joy was that her mother had felt so much better lately that she was able to sit up in the sunlight at the window for a few hours every afternoon, and read or crochet. She had made blue and white edgings for a pair of pillowcases, and she had said, smiling, that whichever of the girls got married first should have them.

Minnie went upstairs now to do Ben's room. The early morning sunlight fingered the green calcimined walls, the rack where hung Ben's limp, shabby ties, the narrow, high chiffonier of slivery pine which Ben had painted a neat gray, and the tumbled bed with the empty nest in the pillow. The sunlight was strangely active, as if it were searching for something.

“How you do rile up your bedclothes, my darling brother!” Minnie intoned to herself with impatient love, and proceeded to toss the mended sheets and blankets to the floor.

Ben had looked so pink and white and defenseless when she had come up to wake him this morning. His blond hair looked like a dish of scrambled eggs, she had told him, and then he had stretched deliciously, given a prodigious yawn, and grinned at her as if he were really awake.

“It's a good feeling,” he had said while she watched him pull on his socks, “to be getting up to go to work. Even for what I get a week. There's nothing so hellish as loafin'. You get to thinkin' when you loaf. The gover'ment—”

“Government, Ben.”

“Okay—the government, then. It ought to realize that it's a bad idea to let people have a chance to think. I've got to remember to mention that to Eric next time I see him. He's a swell guy, Eric.” He stretched his arms above his head. “But in a way it was all right for me to be laid off awhile. I really got down and figgered things out.”

“*Figured*, Ben.”

“Aw, hell! What I mean, I can be hoistman at the darn quarry if I play the game right with Agnew. I hate his guts, but the thing for me to do is flatter him. Act as if I think that red granite’s made of gold. Which it is—for Agnew. Finally, he’ll make me foreman, and I’ll be getting forty a week, maybe.”

“Come on down and eat. It’s a quarter past seven.”

While he ate, Minnie filled his dinner pail with headcheese sandwiches, a slab of apple pie and a vacuum bottle of hot coffee.

“I haven’t wanted to say anything about it, Minnie,” Ben remarked, frowning at a spoonful of oatmeal, “but there is one thing that bothers me. I mean about gettin’ the hoist job when Rodewald quits to go to Milwaukee. He’s goin’ next week and he wants me to take it over. I know that, because he told me he did. He says he’s spoke to Agnew about it.”

“Spoken, Benny!”

“Aw, jeepers! You want me to teach school or something? Quit buttin’ in. Listen, I’m payin’ you a compliment just lettin’ you in on this. This is good oatmeal, *as it were!*” His grin melted Minnie’s heart. “Anyhow, get this. There’s something funny in the set-up. Herb Flagg, the nasty little bastard—”

“Ben—such language!” Minnie poured him another cup of coffee.

“—he’s on the skip, and he don’t like it. He wants to be hoist, and he told me yesterday that’s what he’s *goin’* to be, when Rody leaves. Herb’s got a nose like a weenie, and he stuck it up in the air and said Agnew had better give him the hoist job—*or else!*”

“Or else? What did he mean?”

“He’s got something on Charlie Agnew, and any half-wit could guess what it is. Agnew’s been playin’ around with Herb’s sister.”

Minnie gasped. “You mean—Evelyn? Why, she went to school with me!”

“What’s that got to do with it? She’s plenty grown up now—with two nice round ones in front.”

“Ben!”

“Well, that’s what caught Charlie Agnew’s eye. His wife spreads out like the Big Dipper. Anyhow, Herb’ll blackmail Agnew into handing him the job I’m after. The boss is a fool if he gives it to Herb, and he’ll find that out when Herb drops a few ton of rock on somebody’s head. Maybe he’ll put me on then. The thing for me to do—I’ve been thinking it out, see!—the thing for me to do is go on with my work the best I know how, and wait for my chance.”

“Your chance will come, Benny. I *know* it will.”

“Nothing else I can do, the way I look at it. I’ve got to stick it out, anyhow, no matter what—for ma’s sake.”

Minnie’s eyes filled with prideful, tender tears.

“Oh, Ben—that’s swell! You—you’ll be a great man some day. Nothing can stop you. I just *feel* it. You’ll be a captain of industry—”

“Aw, shut up! Gosh, it’s a quarter to eight. Pa used to have to make it before seven. S’long, kid. Wash out that other shirt of mine, will you? Even if I don’t get Rody’s job today, I’m takin’ Mary Brale to the movies tonight. Mary hasn’t been any place since she lost her job in the strike.”

Mary Brale? During the Christmas holidays she had been walking up and down in the slush on Main Street, a strike placard on her, fore and aft. She was rather homely, except for her eyes. Ben was doing this out of kindness, Minnie thought. Still . . .

“I’ll have your shirt washed and ironed when you get home,” said Minnie.

And then, off he’d gone, whistling! There was something so cozy and nice about getting a man off to his work in the clear sparkle of a new day, with hoarfrost lying like white chiffon on the dry grass and twigs of the winter garden, and on the sturdy nubbins of the lilac bushes that promised green and purple beauty just over the edge of Spring. And soon, soon, it would be her own man Minnie would be sending off that way. She wondered once more how there could be so much talk about war and unemployment and labor troubles, when people fell in love all the time all over the world, and when a plain little dried-up weed dressed itself in fairy clothes of a winter morning, even while it knew that it would never feel again the rains of April.

## 2

The pure winter sunlight seemed to splinter into shafts of red and silver as it struck down into the “big hole.” Eric stood with Ben Sadler on the ledge above the stern splendor of the quarry pit, watched the drilling, and then listened to the detonation that sprang violently into space, ricocheted in gloomy echoes, and faintly died. The great block of granite, ruddily veined still with the earth’s long frozen violence, ashen with solid death between the veinings, was grappled by the giant claw of the derrick, was swung far aloft

and out like a quenched and captive meteor and then, with an almost dainty accuracy, set down on the opposite brink of the hole to take its place with other blocks which would shortly be transformed into decorous tombstones above handfuls of dust, or into façades for handsome office buildings where men strove senselessly toward a common end, toward oblivion.

Eric glanced down at the small lake of noxious-looking green water and ice on the quarry floor. It was pardonable, he thought, to observe a symbol in what was going on here in the experience of this ancient stone. The stone was no more secure than the men who blew it to bits for memorial pieces and park archways. Wherever you looked, the work of destruction was in progress, the hollowing out, the hewing down, the erosion, the washing away, the furious carousal of the earth's demolishment. This austere and timeless granite, pried from its stubborn blind socket to be chiseled and polished into wasteful, capricious shapes, if it could speak—what would it say to man, its violator? “. . . Come with me, but you will not go so far, poor fool! Before I am atoms sifted through the wind, you will have devoured yourself, as you have devoured me.”

He came back with a start from his musing when Ben, after giving a signal, asked him for a match.

“I'd better get along home, Ben,” said Eric, watching his cousin light a cigarette. “All I can do is wish you luck. Let me know right away how you come out with Agnew, won't you?”

Ben nodded expressionlessly and Eric gave his forearm a brief grip, feeling once more that the gesture was spuriously hearty, although he meant it as he rarely had meant anything.

### 3

Minnie brought in her mother's supper tray. There was beef stew, crackers, and a small piece of butter, and the little dime-store pot of weak tea, with a cup and saucer of imitation “willow pattern.” Sunset flamed through the ash-colored apple tree outside the window—the tree that had not been cut down for fuel—and cast a broad, fine bar of gold across her mother's bed.

“Ben came home, didn't he?” her mother asked.

“Yes,” Minnie replied. She bit down on her lower lip. “He was awfully hungry. He'll come in to see you before he goes to the movie. He's going to

take Mary Brale. It's Kay Francis in something."

"That's nice," her mother said. "Mary is a good girl. I have wondered how she made out in that strike. I forgot to ask Ada last time."

"Oh, Mary got her job back all right," Minnie lied.

"And Ben? Did Agnew make him hoistman today?"

"Well—not exactly. You have to wait for that kind of thing, I guess. He's likely to get it in a couple of weeks, though. There's some hitch about Ben's age." Minnie got up and adjusted the pillows more comfortably behind her mother's head. "Ben won't be twenty-four until May, and Agnew thinks he's a little too young to be put on the job, but Ben thinks he can talk him into it in a week or two."

"Yes, Ben ought to know all about it. He's been there a long time. He knows how everything goes."

"He certainly does. Ben's smart. And Mr. Agnew thinks a lot of him. I wouldn't be surprised if Ben was a partner in the quarry some day."

"Wouldn't that be nice"—her mother smiled contentedly—"after pa gave up his life for the Agnews, you might say, in the brickyard! Things work out, some way."

"You eat this now, Mamma," Minnie said, "before it gets cold. Then I'll come in and read that second installment to you. Ben brought the magazine home."

Minnie went upstairs to her room and sat down on the bed, on the patchwork quilt her mother had made out of all the little calico and gingham pieces she had saved since Minnie and Ada were children. The colors danced before her eyes when she looked down at them. But, no—she hadn't betrayed her anxiety about Ben in the least. It would have been so easy to burst into tears, because this day that had begun in such bright firmness had fallen apart sickeningly upon Ben's return home. Her mother had not guessed, though; of that Minnie was sure.

If there were only some way of knowing what had really happened, of knowing whether Ben had lost his temper and was in any sense to blame! All he had said when he slumped down to the table to eat was that he had had another "run in" with Herb Flagg, and the boss had happened along just then and Herb had lied and made it look as if Ben had threatened to hit him. It had all happened an hour or two after it became known that Herb was to be the new hoistman. It was easy enough for Herb to make out that Ben was a sorehead

and was likely to cause trouble in the quarry. The boss had warned Ben that if he wanted to pick fights with the men he had better look somewhere else for a job. Minnie knew that Ben would swallow anything rather than risk the loss of his job, but it seemed clear that Herb Flagg was bent upon having him ousted. What Flagg wanted was to get his wife's brother into Ben's place as signal man.

It was all so miserable and small, Minnie cried in rebellious indignation. Here they were, the Sadlers, just trying to get along honestly, without demanding anything of anyone, without asking for more than was their due. Minnie had, it was true, dreamed of marrying wealth in return for her beauty, but that had been before she fell in love with Ernest Petersen. Charles Agnew—Minnie shuddered at the thought of his liverish jowls—was having *assignations* with Evelyn Flagg, where and how was too bewildering to contemplate, and as a result of that sordid and *clandestine* relationship, poor Ben was likely one of these days to lose his job. And where would he get another, nowadays? The CCC camps and the WPA were laying off men. Even Ernest had been worried lately. Minnie and Ben could struggle along somehow, of course; they could go hungry if need be, but how was their mother to get the nourishing food and care that she needed? If they were forced to sell the little house that meant so much to her—the taxes on which they had been barely able to meet each year—what would become of mamma? All that was left of pa—a memory of gentleness and kindly humor and patience—was here in this small house he had built, and in the little vegetable garden where he had spent his free hours during the growing seasons.

If Ben only had some definite evidence against Charles Agnew, he might confront him with it and use it to his own advantage as Herb Flagg was doing. But all he had to go on was hearsay and suspicion. Still, Ben was so darn proud, Minnie reflected. He had declared that he would not stoop to any such cheap means of keeping his job, even if the opportunity did present itself. Minnie herself would not hesitate for a second, she thought furiously, and wondered at the same time how it was that men could do really violent things without compunction and yet recoil in disgust from things that had to do with what they called honor. It was all so silly! Herb Flagg certainly didn't care about what was honorable. Well, Minnie had to admit that she was glad her brother was not in Herb's class, even if it did make things harder for him.

She heard Ben come tramping up the stairs now, and remembered with a pang how blithely he had gone off this morning, before hope had been crushed in him.

"I used that cleaning fluid on your blue tie, Ben," she called out to him,

making her voice light, “and it turned out fine!”

“Thanks, kid,” he said, but really as if he hadn’t heard her.

The evening sky above the narrowing rosy band of sunset was stretched smooth as a pure, indigo-colored silk. The lonely star stood there, brief and lovely, and then rose in a multiple blur on Minnie’s tears.

*Part Three*  
SPRING



# Chapter One

## 1

Eric and Ada Sadler sat together on the river bank.

It was the middle of March. A rain so fine that it seemed to hover in the darkly glistening woods like a silvery gauze, never quite falling, made of the twilight a spectral enchantment, a mood to enshroud the heart and the mind from the glare of outer reality. It would be strange, Eric thought, if it were after all the sun, the life-giver, that was the principal agent of destruction upon the earth. For one could imagine an inhabited planet wreathed in an eternal mist, a dream of slow-falling, wonderful dews shadowed and pearl-tinted by the immense luminosity of outer-stellar space, where creatures were too happily purblind and rapturously bemused to take note of their neighbors and consider killing them.

Ada stared out over the shifting, porous rafts of ice on the broken river with eyes that were stormy and unseeing. Ben had been laid off again a week ago when the quarry had shut down because of a surplus of production, and although it was to reopen shortly he had a suspicion that he would not be among those who would be notified to report for work.

“Agnew hasn’t got the guts of a caterpillar!” Ada raged bitterly. “Sneaking around with that little moron Evelyn, and then letting her pimp of a brother tell him what to do! It’s enough to turn your stomach. And you can’t get at him. It wouldn’t do the Sadlers any good if I went to him and threatened to tell his wife that he had Evelyn in the house that night Mrs. Agnew and the children were in the city. I’d just lose my job. Anyhow, it would be an empty threat, because I *couldn’t* do anything to hurt those little kids of his. But what Ben will do if he isn’t put back on the pay roll is something I hate to think about!”

“Damn it, I wish I could help you!” Eric said. “But since the little magazine curled up, I’ve been looking forward to going broke myself almost any minute.”

She gave an embarrassed shrug. “You’ve done too much for us already. If

we can't make a go of it somehow, we may as well die."

"Don't talk like that, kid. You'll come out all right. You've got fighting stuff in you. I know how you feel about wanting to be near your mother, and Bill Forsythe—but it seems to me you ought to consider Natalie's suggestion again."

She laced her long fingers agitatedly about her crossed knees. Natalie Monroe had written last week that she had established a needy college friend of hers in a dress shop, and that if Eric's cousin wanted it there would be a job for her in the place.

"I can't do it, Eric," Ada said miserably. "Mother depends on me so! I wouldn't have left her this afternoon, except that she felt like sleeping after I brushed her hair. Minnie's so scatterbrained, now that she's going to be married, and Ben goes around the house like a sleepwalker half the time! Our mother went through a lot for us, Eric. She used to wash clothes for people when pa wasn't working. And I don't think she can live much longer. The doctor says her heart is just going along on its own spirit. She's been forcing herself to get up and sit in a chair for a while every day, but that's just so Minnie won't worry about her. She doesn't want to spoil Minnie's happiness. I'd go and take that job, even if it is a sort of a charity proposition, but I can't leave mother. I *could* leave Bill, because perhaps I ought to, the way things are. We can't be married for ages, and I'm not going to do any fooling around. It might result in something we can't afford. So that's how it is."

The light had deepened to an eerily wavering dark blue under the dripping, naked branches of the black walnut trees, the maples and the great old oaks that thronged densely down to the margins of the river. The smell of last year's sodden leaves lying in ragged drifts in the hollows and somber gullies pierced the air with an acrid, sad sweetness. Where the bend of the river vanished eastward upon the dim gray reef of a sandbar, a crane swept down out of the mist to the heaving islands of ice in the black water, then soared away up again, an insubstantial angular ghost with legs trailing, to dissolve back into the blue, imponderable upper gloom as fabulously as it had first come. In the open water on the opposite shore the blunt, reconnoitering head of a muskrat appeared, its wake a smooth, widening blade in the shadowed gleam of the river, then flicked beneath the surface again as if in sudden alarm.

"I'd better get back home," Ada said. "Mother will be waiting for me to have supper with her."

They emerged from the woods on a path that led south to the farmyard. The barn and sheds seemed to huddle, lonely and bereft, under the trooping

wraiths of fog; half a dozen cows stood in the overhanging, mushroom-like shelter of the huge straw stack, staring and chewing in trance-like obliviousness. Sheep moved, slow and gray and unreal, on the sloping pasture of the east hill. The horizon, the rolling, wooded distances, were lost in a blue-white dream.

Ben came toward them from the granary, pushing a wheelbarrow full of mash. He had been at the farm since morning, doing the chores in the absence of Andrew, who had driven to an auction of pure bred Swiss cattle in the eastern part of the state. Andrew would not be back until tomorrow evening, and Ben was only too glad to earn a dollar or two by looking after things until his return.

He grinned at Eric and Ada. "You missed something, you two. Esther Larch was here half an hour ago."

Ada snorted. "Looking for Andrew, I suppose! She's making a laughingstock of herself. I don't see how Lydie can stand having her around!"

"What was her excuse this time?" Eric smiled drily.

"She's givin' a talk to her book club, and she wanted Andrew's opinion on something or other. She was awful let down when she found he wasn't here. I told her she ought to wait till you got back, Eric, but she just gave me a dirty look."

Eric laughed. The last time Esther had been here he had been a little broad in his compliments to her physical and intellectual charms, and unexpectedly seeing through them she had gone in outrage to seek out Andrew where he was spreading fertilizer in the south forty. The girl's conduct was really tiresome, and Eric himself found it hard to understand Lydie's and Andrew's tolerance.

"What time will you be home, Ben?" Ada asked. "Mother is nervous in the house alone with Minnie, you know. And I'll have to go back to the Agnews' later tonight."

"Oh, I'll be along about seven."

"I'm driving Ada home now, Ben," Eric said. "I'll be right back and help you with the rest of the work."

Ben thanked him in his awkward way, and then while Ada went to the house to say good-by to Lydie, Eric got his car out of the shed.

It was getting colder, he noticed, and although it had begun to rain in earnest, the headlights shone on an occasional needle-like gleam, and there were sharp scratchings on the windshield. Sleet. Eric thought of Andrew, and

was glad that by this time he must have arrived safely at his destination.

By an uncommon effort of the will he was able to thrust out of his mind the too vivid and tormenting image of Lydie, who would be alone in the big house tonight. He felt a certain pride in being able to substitute for that image the touching one of Andrew, driving alone, with his obscure burden of hope and fear.

## 2

If Lydie had invited him to join her at supper tonight, he would not now be suffering from this probably groundless feeling of uneasiness. Ben had stayed for the meal, after which Eric had taken him home in his car, and although he had met Lydie in the yard after his return from Inglebrook, she had merely waved at him with her white apron, in the light from the kitchen. Women had plenty of excuses for not asking an extra man to supper, but she had offered none.

Yes, he told himself, he was being unreasonable. Time and again he had declined Andrew's invitations. The thought was not pleasant, but he was forced to admit that his reason for having wanted Lydie to ask him tonight was that he had wished his cousin Ben to note how cheerfully normal was the relationship between himself and Lydie Clarence. Already, in less than four months, although there had not been a reprehensible word spoken between them, he was becoming cautious lest some third person might sense that there were forces at work within him which he hated with every decent impulse of his being. "Decent," he thought bleakly. How much of the really deep territory did that cover?

A wind had risen, and the rainy sleet had turned to granules of ice that beat a sharp, monotonous rhythm on the window pane at Eric's side. A draught from somewhere made the lamp flare up. He leaned across the typewriter and turned the wick down a little lower.

But just yet he was not in the mood to go at his grandfather's records. He took from his brief case the last letters from his friends whom he thought of drily as belonging to "that other life." Burton expected him to come out of hiding and join him at his lodge in the north woods this summer. Grant, of his fraternity, had written a pretty horrible humorous poem on office paper with "Ballinger & Son, Plumbing" topping it. Alice and Frank Durwood had found him out, through Natalie, and had composed to him an earnest encouragement

that had made him laugh aloud when he read it. There was also a letter from Mueller, timidly affectionate, and one from Natalie, affectionate but not timid. She laughed at him without reserve. "Let me know," she concluded, "when you want me to come out and rescue you!"

To these letters he wrote what he considered fitting and adequate replies.

Then, taking up his manuscript again, he continued to expand in his own words a dramatic incident which Grandfather Edvard Stene had touched upon only lightly in his journal, but which Eric could remember him talking about in the company of older people. And after the old doctor had gone, Uncle Johannes and Eric's father had refreshed the tale sometimes, if they were sitting over a hot toddy with their wool-socked feet in front of the fire of a winter's evening, when they thought the boy was dozing on the mat with his head buried in the shaggy fur of the old shepherd dog.

He went carefully over what he had transcribed during the earlier part of the day: *Within a radius of twenty miles, perhaps less, five settlers froze to death during this blizzard. The gale out of a white and frigid hell lifted off and carried away the roofs of the sod and tar paper shanties as if they had been so many teakettle lids. Greaves staggered into the Judkin farmhouse, after his own shanty had come down in splinters on his head. But Judkin wasn't listening to the storm; he wasn't paying any attention to the frenzied bawling of his cattle in the stable-wing of his house. He was sitting with a rifle across his knees, waiting for Greaves to come—as he knew he must come. And once in a while he would glance with a patient smile at his wife Tanis, who crouched white-faced in the corner by the stove. She was shapeless now with child, although her face was still delicately pretty despite the dark rings about her too large eyes. And when Greaves fell sobbing with the agony of bursting lungs into the warmth of the kitchen, Judkin shot him dead. Whereupon Judkin rose, dragged his wife shrieking out into the blizzard, left her there, returned indoors and entered the stable through the connecting door from the kitchen. He soothed the terrified cows and the two horses, and brought blankets from the bed he had shared with his wife and put them over the animals. The snow was driving fiercely in through the chinks of the stable wall, and every animal was bearded with icicles fore and aft. In the force of the sixty mile wind the stable reeled and groaned crazily, threatening any minute to collapse and crush to death the man and his beasts. Judkin covered his ears with a rag of gunny sack so that he might not so plainly hear the lessening screams of his wife outside. But presently, at the very moment when one of his best cows showed signs of increasingly hard labor, the roof of the stable began to cave in. Judkin hurried into the kitchen, dragged the body of the dead man into an*

adjoining room, then led his animals one by one into the security of his house and closed the door to the falling stable. He got the wild-eyed cow Belinda down on the floor, reached in and turned her calf about. The delivery was completed in approximately fifteen minutes. The exhausted cow licked her little black bull calf, who gazed up with dark rolling eyes at the fluttering lamp on the table. Judkin stared, and what his thoughts were no man can ever tell. But he went and opened the outer door, and the unconscious form of his wife fell inward. The nether part of her body was in turmoil. He laid her on the hair sofa and moved it near the stove. He was too modest to undress her quite, but he brought forth her son without her knowledge, while the four cows and the two horses looked on, no doubt, in wonderment. And the sweat ran cold off Judkin when he thought of other animals looking upon a scene a little like this, in a town called Bethlehem, nearly two thousand years ago.

Judkin's wife died that night without knowing that she had given birth to a child. (Note added to margin years later—A child who was to become one of our most brilliant state senators.) Judkin himself, as he told me later in his harrowing confession, would have surely gone mad during those two nights and days alone with the dead, but for the newly living that needed his care. Distracted with remorse, he nonetheless had to feed and water the cattle and horses and shovel manure out of his house while the storm raged, and tend the infant son whom he had swaddled in a clothes basket near the stove. He was able to crawl under the debris of the stable to fetch hay and grain for the animals, and luckily there was a cistern under the floor of the kitchen, so there was no shortage of water. But whenever he was obliged to go thirty yards from the house for fuel from the wood pile, he had to place a lamp in the window to guide himself back. His chief fear, however, was that he might, in his overwrought state, have tied the navel cord of the infant too close to the umbilicus. When I examined the baby later I found everything quite normal and as it should be.

Judkin did not sleep a moment during those forty-eight hours. He could not recall eating, he told me, but he drank much black coffee. He had laid out the bodies of his young wife Tanis and the handsome Greaves side by side on the bed, had spread a sheet over them, and kept the door closed so that the animals would not wander in.

We are a law unto ourselves out here in the new land. Judkin was the soul of generosity, he was liked by everyone—and still is. We hated to think that he was being deceived by his wife and Greaves, and so when the storm let up and the neighbor came to his place—he could not leave the baby alone and come to town to tell his story—the neighbor was shattered by the look of the man,

*and by the tragedy he revealed. The neighbor, Ed White it was, stayed with the child while Judkin came and gave his report to the sheriff and to me. As coroner, I went out with Boerum to look things over. There was a lighted candle and a bucket full of dried but still bright autumn leaves on the table beside the bed where the two bodies lay.*

*The trial was short. During it, Judkin kept repeating in a monotone, "I want to bring up the boy. Nobody else can do it like I can. I brought the boy into the world, even if he wasn't my own son. I'm sorry for that other I done, but I want to be a father to the boy!"*

*Judkin was acquitted yesterday, by what they call the unwritten law. If his wife and her lover had gone to him fairly and told him the truth, he would have been broken-hearted, but I am certain he would have done them no violence. But neither Greaves nor Tanis Judkin had the spirit Judkin himself had, and he was left to find out the truth in shabby, humiliating ways. Many of the women of Inglebrook have offered to tend the little one until it is of an age when it will not require constant care, but Judkin will not relinquish custody of the little boy. It looks now as if young Guri Rudd, sister to Olaf, who has a good farm near here, will be chosen by Judkin as nursemaid and housekeeper. Guri has a bright eye, but I fear that she will be disappointed if she expects Judkin to see it. He will never again see any woman's eyes, except those of his faithless wife, in some anguished dream.*

There was more, about Guri Rudd who later became Guri Kvam, and her unrequited love for Judkin, and Judkin's devotion to the boy and to the rich farm he willed to him upon his death. The episode would make a novel in itself, Eric thought. He had left off typing the elaborated version of his grandfather's work, and was making by pencil an outline of the Judkin story on a ruled yellow pad, when the door behind him opened softly and as softly closed again.

It was a ridiculous reaction, he thought with grim humor, but his scalp had jerked perceptibly forward at the sound. Prickles of heat rode up and down his body as he turned in his chair and faced Lydie.

She walked across the room and stood looking at him and thoughtfully blinking the sleet from her lashes. Her eyes, he observed with mechanical detachment, were exactly the color of the wet, dark blue rain-cape she was wearing.

"If you want to write some more," she said, glancing at his table, "go ahead. I'll go back to the house."

"That's very considerate of you." Then he added with mock resignation,

“But now that you’re here, I may as well put up with you for a while.”

She hung her cape over the back of a chair.

“Andrew telephoned me a little while ago. I wanted him to let me know that he got there safely, and it costs only sixty cents this time of night. He’s so absent-minded about his driving—I was a little worried.”

The two separate surges of relief that Eric felt were fantastically incompatible, and yet the one could be denied no more than the other: Andrew had completed his journey without mishap; Andrew could not possibly walk into this cabin tonight. The two thoughts whirled through Eric’s brain simultaneously but in orbits infinitely remote from each other.

“I’m glad he got there all right,” he said in a wooden voice. “I was a little uneasy myself—those tires on his car aren’t any too reliable.”

Lydie had seated herself on a low stool before the fireplace and was calmly taking off her shoes.

“I stepped in a puddle when I came through the orchard,” she explained simply. “If you don’t mind, I’ll hang up my stockings to dry.”

Eric came and sat down on the opposite side of the hearth and watched her peel the coarse cotton stockings from her rather childish legs. Her feet, with a cold damp blush on them, were too short, proportionately, for conventional beauty—although whether there was such a thing as a beautiful human foot Eric had always doubted—but the instep was high and arched, the toes perfectly shaped and free.

“Feet are ridiculous things, aren’t they?” he floundered, while she hung her stockings on the screen which stood at an angle before the fire. He was thinking malignantly, and with no inclination toward self-applause, that she had deliberately sought out the “puddle” she had mentioned, or perhaps dipped her feet in the horse trough before she started through the orchard at all. He resisted an impulse to confront her with the charge.

“My feet are, anyway,” she replied, twisting them actively toward the fire. “At school our gym teacher told me I had the feet of a dancer. They aren’t beautiful, but they’re natural and healthy—and very useful! What are yours like?”

“Mine are long and bony, with a tendency toward fallen arches. And ever since college I’ve been afraid of athlete’s foot, which I had a good dose of then. Although I must say it’s fun to scratch the itch.”

He stopped suddenly, taken aback by a far-fetched and coarse simile that



occurred to him. A normal brain, he saw with distaste, was capable of the most disgusting gymnastics. But Lydie was gazing with rapt heedlessness into the busy red flames consuming the great logs. The wind herded the sleet shrewdly against the window panes, the log walls, and the tin-patched roof. The lacerating sound of this outer force made the interior of the cabin all the more snug and embracing—and also all the more treacherous, possessing as it did now a slumbrous warmth that must be withstood. It must be withstood, Eric repeated to himself, pinning his thought on Andrew Clarence, and keeping his eyes off the shaggy dark curl of Lydie’s hair.

Lydie suddenly began to laugh. She threw herself backward on the low stool and touched the floor with her hands. Eric could see the firm alignment of her strong molars against the pink inner curve of her lips. When her smooth legs tipped upward, he saw that she wore the least beautiful of all garments—a gray, woolen petticoat. Her shoes and stockings, drying before the fire, were as substantial and prosaic as they could well be; her dress was of some faded flannel material. And yet on occasion she could turn herself out with a floating daintiness. She was just perverse enough, he guessed, to come here alone to him looking her least attractive!

“What are you laughing at?” he asked her, imposing upon his voice a lightness he was far from feeling.

She sat up and rubbed her eyes.

“Oh—it just struck me as funny—that we should be talking seriously about feet, I mean. When we haven’t talked alone together for so long. Feet have always struck me as such queer, sad things. Think of how patiently they carry people about—and often get them nowhere!”

“The sands of time, and all that,” Eric observed, carefully lighting his pipe. “I’ve always thought that a rather inept idea.”

Lydie laughed again. “We used to make parodies on that poem in school. Another favorite was ‘The Village Blacksmith’—and ‘Hiawatha,’ of course. It all seems so silly now, but how we used to ache trying to keep from laughing out loud! When you grow up, you scarcely ever have to smother a laugh. Maybe that’s what’s wrong with the world.”

Eric glanced at her through his pipe smoke. Her face was rosy and guileless, and for a moment he breathed more comfortably.

“Church used to be even a better place for that sort of thing,” he said. “Three of us boys used to hunch down in the pew during those endless sermons and thumb our way through the Bible for passages the minister was

too proper to utter in church—or anywhere else, for that matter.”

“Do you remember some of the lines from the Songs of Solomon? We used to howl over them.”

“I can remember at least a dozen of them,” Eric said, and laughed as he recalled some of the lines. “We nearly exploded, for instance, when we read, ‘The voice of my beloved! Behold, he cometh, *leaping* upon the mountains, *skipping* upon the hills!’ And then, ‘Thy hair is like a flock of goats.’ ”

“And, ‘Thy teeth are like a flock of ewes that are newly shorn’—do you remember that?”

“‘Thy neck is like the tower of David builded for an *armory!*’ The beautiful symbolism was just something to make us double up in agony. But it was the idea of two breasts like fawns that did for one of us, I remember—Cecil Brown, it was—and he had to go out in a spasm of coughing. But Dick Hardy and I read on, and—”

“Dick Hardy?” Lydie giggled. “Why, he’s a deacon in the Methodist Church now, and if his kids skip Sunday school, he takes the hide off ’em!”

“Dick was even lewder than I was, in those days. When we came upon ‘Thou art all fair, my love; and there is no spot in thee,’ he pointed to the word ‘spot’ and snickered so that a woman in front of us looked back with a glare that should have killed us. The trouble was, though, that she had a nervous tic in one eye, and it looked like a knowing wink! I remember when we came on that line, ‘I went down into the garden of nuts,’ we could hardly stand it. When we struck ‘Thy belly is like a heap of wheat,’ and ‘Thy nose is like the tower of Lebanon,’ we had to get up and go out. My Uncle Johannes beat the tar out of me when we got home that day.”

Lydie clasped her hands about her knees with a peal of laughter. Then all at once she became quiet and asked, “How old were you then, Eric?”

“About fourteen. It was the first year I went to high school in Inglebrook, I think.”

“What an adorable little boy you must have been!” she said softly, as if more to herself than to him. “I can see you—tow-headed and with eyes the color of gentians—like my young brother who died. You know, you do resemble my mother’s family a lot. Andrew has remarked upon it. He talked about it that night—remember—one of the first times you had supper with us?”

“Yes, I remember.” He had not thought of it since, but now it returned to

him with a strange and unsettling significance. “Your mother’s people came originally from the Dutch settlement over in Blue Hill, where my mother came from. Wasn’t that it?”

“Of course. And wouldn’t it be odd if we were distantly related! I was at the Ladies’ Aid at Mrs. Fuller’s last week—I scarcely ever go to those things, but she wanted me to play that awful old piano of theirs, and I went just to please her. And when I happened to mention that you and I were probably distant cousins, several of the old women who knew Blue Hill years ago began to think back and check up, and they were quite sure it was so. And then Mrs. Fuller said she could actually see a family resemblance between us! I told Andrew about it, and he laughed and said that maybe that’s why you and I haven’t hit it off so very well.”

She looked at him with meditative simplicity, but the firelight, casting a diagonal radiance across her eyes, illumined for an instant an expression so unequivocal that Eric felt his heart shake in his breast. There was in it more than the sultry, half-mocking invitation he had heretofore strenuously tried not to acknowledge, and at what cost to himself in private torment! At the same time, Eric had the baffling feeling that Lydie’s look of stripped, elemental hunger had, intrinsically, nothing to do with him. He felt crazily for a few seconds that he was in the grip of a ruthless yet somehow tragic determination which might just as well, except for capricious chance, have chosen anyone else for its victim. It was the same feeling he had had that evening before the attack upon Andrew in the Coulee Church, when Lydie had come to the cabin to ask Eric to persuade Andrew against going on with the work. But now the feeling was intensified and defined in its essence.

He sought for some noncommittal remark, but his tongue clove drily to the roof of his mouth. He fancied that he could see the lamp flicker, and grateful for the pretext it offered, he got up to tend it. But Lydie was there before him. She blew the lamp out, her face a brief, quivering mask above it as the flame leaped and died.

The soot-red and gold of the great fireplace twisted among the shadows back of her in a goblin ballet. Eric was conscious of this, and of the vague smoldering of Lydie’s face and hair in the agitated warm gloom.

He put out his hands, closed them about her forearms, moved them up to the firm flesh of her shoulders; she bent her head back, and her hair slid under his touch as if it were living silk.

She came into his arms like some confessed and liberated part of his own being, and her mouth given up to his was an undreamt rapture. While he

gathered her up and carried her into the other room, his only thought was one of simple wonderment: “How light she is!”

## Chapter Two

### 1

When he wakened the second time, a thin, slate-blue bar of morning showed under the window blind level with his eyes. He was still saturated with sleep—such a restoring and lush oblivion as he could not remember having had since his boyhood here on the farm. But even as his body expanded luxuriously in this sense of renewal, in this fresh, unspoiled beginning that went far back and erased all those later, misshapen beginnings, his mind began pursuing its regular, logical and narrow way as his will—or was it his conscience, soul, or ego?—had taught it to do.

Eric turned his head to the right side, although he had already sensed that Lydie was no longer there. He felt a little ridiculous in the knowledge that she had probably stood looking at him for a moment with that enigmatic slight smile of hers, and then stolen noiselessly away.

But he must rouse up now to think clearly of what had happened, and formulate a drastic plan of action. He put on the heavy monk's robe that Natalie had given him as a joke the Christmas before last, and went into the outer room. It was warm, the kerosene heater going full blast. He lighted the oil cookstove, put the teakettle on, and sat down while he peeled and sliced an orange.

While he ate the orange, he tried to reassemble the events of last night in coherent sequence. But nothing would come into clear focus. He might as well have been deaf and blind, so far as any new understanding of Lydie was concerned—for her immediate, unbridled physical response to him was a vindication only of what he had known the first time her beautiful, carelessly exploring eyes had met his.

He was sure of one thing, that she had not uttered an articulate word until he had wakened after that first profound and mindless sleep. Her head had been resting awkwardly on his elbow, and she had said then, in a soft, marveling whisper, "That's the first time I've ever been carried, Eric!"

For a moment he had been too confused to know what she meant. And then, yes—of course, he had carried her into this room. Her simple, ingenuous statement had had upon him an extraordinary effect. He felt strong, tender, masterfully protecting, and above all singularly free from any sense of iniquity. And when she came into his arms this time it was with an abandonment beyond his wildest imaginings.

These matters he remembered now, but with no conviction that they involved himself; it was rather as if they composed an egregiously florid narrative recounted by someone with whom he had only a superficial acquaintance, an acquaintance that did not justify the telling of any such intimate experience. If he had been drunk last night he would have felt inclined now to attribute those happenings to the fantasies of delirium he had heard men speak of. It was less flattering to reflect that he had been the willing subject for some mischievous power in the realm of the occult.

If he could feel any remorse, this thing that had finally overtaken him might assume the tangible shape of reality. But he felt nothing except an exigent need to face the issue—and at once. He stared out of the window at a dawn that had the color and rigidity of wet stone.

## 2

A pebbly film of ice covered the depressions in the orchard and lay in a treacherous sheet over the ground between the house and the barns. A surly, gray-masked sun was struggling up beyond the hill fields in the east, and a sharp wind knifed through the grove that embraced the house. A robin strutted undismayed in the stiff glittering grass under an oak tree beside the root cellar, and among the frozen black clumps of the potato patch across the yard a slim, alert kildeer ran nimbly, paused to listen with dainty, lifted head, skimmed the air on bladed wings, and came daringly to earth again. Down by the barns, Eric could see his cousin Ben already on the job. He was carrying a bucket in each hand, going into the old stable that housed the pigs during the winter. Skim milk for the pigs, probably. Ben must have done the milking. When had he come here? But of course—Lydie would have been back in her own house long before that.

At the door, Eric caught himself in the act of knocking. What kind of psychology, he wondered, lay behind that impulse? He pushed the door open impatiently and entered.

Lydie, in a crisp blue and white apron, stood at the table vigorously twirling an egg beater in a large earthenware bowl. The Clarences were too frugal to use the electric light, Eric thought with unreasonable asperity, if they could possibly see their hands in front of them. The porcelain gray-blue reflection from out of doors was like something left over, eked out and mean. The open grate of the cookstove showed its teeth, red and grinning. There was a yellow fluff of egg on Lydie's bare forearm.

"Did I hear you knock on the door?" she asked, her eyes wide and incredulous. "I was just going to go and—"

"Yes," he admitted, "I did start to knock. If you can tell me why, you're smarter than I am." He sat down and with tightened lips and narrowed eyes peered about the room. "You must be saving at least a nickel by not having the light on until you can see."

If she could be so casual after last night, he would be casual too, though it cost him the last grain of his will power.

She went on serenely and dexterously turning the egg beater. It hummed with cozy monotony through the room, and another yellow fleck of foam beached on her wrist. Lydie licked it off unconcernedly.

"It's by saving nickels that we save dollars," she said. "Andrew and I, at least. Of course you haven't had to think in such miserable terms."

"Oh—haven't I? At least, I'm getting there fast enough." This was all nonsense. But Lydie had that power, he knew by now, of turning nonsense on like a tap at her own convenience, in order to introduce a serious situation or to stop it from gaining headway.

While she poured sour milk into the beaten eggs, then sifted some floury mixture into the bowl, Eric said, "Your attitude is very strange, Lydie. Or don't you realize we've got to see this thing through together somehow?"

"What thing?" With a steady hand she measured out two tablespoons of melted butter and beat them into the other ingredients in the bowl.

"For God's sake, I don't see how you can even ask a question like that!"

Lydie carried the bowl of batter to the icebox under the east window. The bleak, expanding shaft of light struck across her glossy head as she knelt and put the bowl away.

"Do you want to stay and have wheatcakes with Ben and me, or are you going to go on talking like that?" she asked amiably as she came back to the table.

Eric looked at her, his mind reeling. Not only her body, but her smile, her eyes, her shadowed hair, seemed to lilt as she moved about the room. He disliked her more than he ever had before.

“No, I don’t want any wheatcakes.”

She sat down, clasped her hands, and solemnly raised her chin. “Very well, then.”

“Do you think for one holy moment,” he demanded in a black rage, “that I’m taken in by this pose of yours? Are you in the habit”—his lips drew back to a contorted grimace—“of taking advantage of Andrew’s absence—”

She came across the room straight and vibrant as an arrow and struck him smartly in the face with her open palm. Then, while he pressed the back of his hand dazedly to his lips, she stood looking at him quietly, arms akimbo.

“All right—I insulted you,” he said. “But I had to say something, didn’t I? Do you expect me to go on now as if nothing has happened?”

“Why not?” Her face softened into a compassionate smile—but for that matter it had at no moment been hard, Eric admitted grudgingly. “Aren’t we being rather melodramatic over something that isn’t important? I’m sorry I slapped you, Eric. For a second I thought you really meant what you said. Well, no—I didn’t think that, really. I was just showing off. But—I didn’t think you would take last night so seriously. I like you—really I do—although you don’t like me. But why should we let that come into it? You see—I love Andrew, which is something quite different. What happened last night has nothing to do with that. I’ve been planning for some time—”

“You—” Lydie had gone back and started setting the table. Eric got up from his chair and took a step toward her. “What in hell are you talking about?”

She smiled humorously. “I thought you were too—too sophisticated to go into heroics about it, but if you insist on knowing what I’m talking about, I’ll tell you. I want a child.”

Her eyes held his for an instant in lovely, unapologetic candor. Eric’s brain swam. He stared down at his shoes and saw a little sand-bur tangled in the laces. He looked up at her again, aware that his face must be distraught and dull. Her meaning began to dawn upon him.

“You mean—you deliberately—”

“Listen, Eric,” she interrupted. She sat down again and her voice was gentle. “I’ve known for some time that my marriage would never give me a



child. Two years ago I consulted a doctor who was a friend of my mother's. He told me a lot of things that I didn't know. I don't need to tell you all that he said. But during the past year it has become an obsession with me—I have thought of nothing else, Eric. I *know* I can bear a child—and for two years I've hated women who've had children of their own—I've hated them because they had something that I knew I could never have—unless I—” She leaned toward him. “Oh, Eric, you know what I mean. I don't have to say it, do I? It wouldn't be fair to—to Andrew to talk about it. I want a child. If I have one now—and if it's yours—what could be more natural? It will be born here, where you were born. And maybe the boy—and it *will* be a boy—will grow up on the land your grandfather—”

Her voice broke and Eric went and stood beside her.

“No, Eric—I'm all right. But—I want Andrew to think—believe that the child is his. He has never known that he was—the way he is. He has never guessed. And I would have died rather than tell him. Surely you understand.”

She bent forward now with her face in her hands. Eric knelt beside her and tried with stumbling words and awkward caresses to quiet her shaking body. A thought came clear, in no way sparing him: he and Lydie Clarence were meshed inextricably together now in a design over which they had no control, the slow, relentless weaving of time to come, the dim and brilliant weaving of years they would know, and of other long, shrouded ages they would never know.

“All right, Lydie, I'll do my best to understand,” he muttered desperately. “After all, you may not—”

“Don't say that, Eric!” she pleaded.

She wiped her eyes on her apron. Gray-blue, wet moths, he thought even now; he must be mad. She pushed him gently away from her.

“Me—crying! Please—finish setting the table for me, and I'll make Ben's cakes. He'll be in pretty soon now.”

She went to the stove, greased two griddles lightly with a strip of bacon, then got the bowl of batter out of the icebox.

“Put the plates on the back of the stove to heat, will you, Eric?” she asked briskly. “And you might open up that jar of blackberry jam I set out on the cupboard. I don't think Ben had more than bread and coffee before he left home.”

Eric moved about, mechanically doing her bidding, while a kind of numb

lassitude came over him in reaction to the confused emotions of a few minutes ago.

“I think I’ll go back to the cabin now,” he said at last. “I’ll come back—when Ben is out working again, if you like.”

“Well—if you’d rather.” She came and put her hand with friendly, impersonal warmth on his arm. “Eric—don’t worry about me, will you?” she pleaded earnestly, sympathetically, as if she were in no way concerned in his trouble. “Everything is going to be all right!”

Through the fog of thoughts that wrapped him about, one question came out insistent and clear. “If it’s going to be the way you hope,” he blurted forth, steeling himself to the sound of his own monstrous words, “how are you going to make Andrew believe that he’s—”

“I’m not a fool, Eric, whatever you may think of me,” she answered. “There won’t be any question about—about that.”

When he got back into his own quarters, he could not remember having seen stick or stone, ground or sky, on the way. He knew that he had not looked at Lydie’s face after that last reassurance she had given him. She had had every move calculated to a successful and irreproachable end. Andrew, poor, unknowing wretch, had unwittingly lent himself to her devices! Before Christmas, at the Sadler house, she had let fall the remark that she and Andrew intended to have a child in a year or two. And then her deviousness at the gathering of neighbor women last week, when she had—he could picture her artless wonderment—brought about the conclusion on the part of her friends that she and Eric Stene actually bore a family resemblance to each other! It was too fantastic to assimilate all at once.

The unwilling, biological role he would be forced to play in this murky, shameful drama of deceit was something he refused to consider for the moment. It was enough to try to determine his immediate course of action, without taking into account a future possibility the very thought of which made his entrails crawl. To bring a child into a world like this—a helpless creature through whose veins his own bitterly sensitive, sardonic blood must run! Well, where had his scruples been last night when Lydie came to him? Scruples don’t troop faithfully to your defense at such a time—and that was that! It wasn’t as though Lydie, by the simple means of being her tenderly ruthless self, had not given him fair warning. There had been a pulse-beat of understanding between them from the first, running strongly beneath the mutual—and he insisted that it was mutual—antagonism they had all but acknowledged at the very beginning. Lydie had been honest. There was no

loophole of mystery about it, after all. He had simply not been proof against her physical honesty—nor, for that matter, against his own. He disliked the sniveling word “predetermined,” with its plea for exculpation, and he would not be guilty of sentimentally endowing the simple relationship between himself and Lydie Clarence with anything mystic. Those few minutes in the house when she had wept had shaken him in an unnatural way. Looking back upon those emotions now, he could not recognize anything of himself in them. Lydie had recovered her composure more quickly than he. There would be no recurrence of a mawkish scene like that, no matter what the provocation.

Aside from the moral aspects of the situation, he was confronted by the practical problem of where he would go when he left *Solbakken*—as leave he must, within the next few days. He would have to pay rent wherever he went. He would have to explain his departure plausibly to Andrew, but he felt there would be no difficulty in that. Andrew would be genuinely sorry to have him go, he thought with an ironic, miserable twinge. But just how was he going to get along on the ninety dollars which was all he had left to his name? Sibert Mueller, Natalie, or any of his half dozen close friends would welcome him eagerly, and there was no shade of conceit in his confidence in that regard. But they would all be curious as to his sudden desertion of the ancestral acres he had written them about with such enthusiasm. And Natalie would be sure to detect in him a condition of mind that was far from serene.

The maddening part of it was that less than two months more here would have probably seen his work on the book completed. His classmate, Bailey, who was associated now with a publishing house in New York, had wanted to see the first half of the book, and had promised a hospitable reception of it. But Eric had preferred to deliver the finished script so that there might be no uncertainty about the publisher’s reaction to it. What a vainglorious ass he had been! Why hadn’t he let Bailey see the first half of it? The book was good—he was confident of that—but he might have thought ahead a little to a time when even a small advance on royalties would be useful to him. Well, he could still write to Bailey, or he might borrow something from Mueller if he found himself pressed.

He sat down at the table, read over a few pages of the manuscript, sharpened pencils and oiled his typewriter. He glanced at the outline he had made for the next chapter, and read again the section from his grandfather’s journal with which the chapter was to deal. But all these preliminaries were useless. Instead of seeing vividly before him the characters that glowed through Doctor Edvard’s pages, he saw the white, thin face of Andrew Clarence on that evening in the church a moment before Joopy Broud’s brutal

fist struck it.

He got up from the table, went over to the bumpy sofa and threw himself face down upon it.

“God damn it!” he groaned. “I won’t let her fool you, Andrew! I’ll take her away with me.”

The raucous blare of his own voice brought him to himself with a shock of horror. He flung his arms about the cushion under his face and lay rigid. After many minutes his exhausted muscles fell lax and a quiet descended upon him that was half sleep.

### 3

The sullen soot-fringe of the early spring woods appeared to shrink down from that brittle and colorless sky where a drained-looking sun made feebly toward the lower west. The chuckle of the darkly polished river water under the slabs of ice nudging and sidling downstream, the crackle of ice-varnished branches underfoot, and the occasional scolding note of a nuthatch or the bullying, irascible scream of a blue jay were the only sounds that assailed Eric’s hearing. He was grateful, at least, for that. This gaunt day, void of any green and opulent promise, went arms linked with his own mood.

He started up the slope from the marsh now, and drew his coat collar more snugly about his neck. It had grown much colder, and the horizon was lipped with ashen cloud-rack. The paste-colored turf where sheep had cropped was glazed with ice and walking was difficult. When he reached the old cupola-covered well at the edge of the barnyard, he sat down for a moment to rest and consider again how he should approach Lydie. He should have talked to her again before he went out this afternoon, he supposed, because Andrew might arrive very soon now. But he had been too distraught to face her.

Andrew’s dog Shag came running over to him from the barns, his golden plume affable in greeting. He rested his long, gentle muzzle on Eric’s knee and looked up at him with trustfully considering eyes while Eric absently stroked his head.

“Hello, old timer,” Eric said, then smiled to himself. “You’ve got dignity and loyalty and honor, you old cuss! Fine things to have, eh? You bet. Come along—I may as well get this over with.”

He started toward the house, the dog trotting companionably beside him. But he knew in his heart that his argument with Lydie would be futile. She had laid the foundation for her scheme too well to permit of its being shaken by any buffeting from him. She had, with cool deliberateness, set her stage for a convincing and satisfying play. She had thought of everything.

But there was one thing, he discovered a few seconds later, that she had not foreseen.

Ben Sadler came running from the house, his face blanched.

“Andrew’s been hurt!” he cried. “He skidded off the road just the other side of town. Somebody just phoned. They’ve taken him to the hospital in Axford. Come on—get your car out. Lydie’s dressing. You’ve got to take her to the hospital!”

## Chapter Three

### 1

He stood with his arms folded tightly across his chest and stared out of the cabin window. The morning was torn wide with sunlight, the ground between the apple trees had a murkily soft and bursting look. “Yes,” Eric thought in flat acceptance, “you can go now, Winter. You’ve done your work.” He did not turn when Lydie spoke again from her chair behind him.

“If you won’t write and ask her to come,” she said firmly, “I’ll do it. I can get her address from Ada, if you refuse to give it to me. It’s absolutely out of the question for you to stay here alone with me, even though Andrew has asked you to stay.”

Wearily, Eric faced her.

“Is there any reason why you can’t have that friend of yours from Iowa up here until Andrew gets out of the hospital? Why are you so bent on having Natalie? You think she’ll be a smoke screen, I suppose. Well, she might be, but the trouble is—Natalie is even more subtle than you are, Lydie.”

Her wincing flush did not bring to him any twinge of regret for his words. The two days of anguish and remorse during which Andrew had hovered between life and death had stamped out of Eric any vapid tendency he might have had to treat Lydie Clarence with a consideration he did not feel.

“All right,” she said, “I admit that. I want her here for Andrew’s sake, not for my own. Can’t you do that much for him?”

“God, how you do manage to get your own way in everything!” he burst out. “Very well, I’ll go and telephone her. I’ll ask her to come. But don’t think for one damn’ minute that she won’t unearth the truth somehow! She amuses herself by discovering just such pretty messes as this.”

“She won’t discover it through me,” said Lydie, and added with equanimity, raising one of her hands to the light and studying it, “I like Natalie. I don’t see why you don’t marry her. She’s crazy about you—and you

like her well enough, if I'm any judge."

Eric reddened in exasperation. Lydie had been home from the hospital less than an hour, but only the blue shadowing beneath her eyes showed that she had been through a fearful two days' vigil at her husband's side. How could she sit there and talk as if recently heaven and earth had not come crashing together? He thought of the trusting, grateful look Andrew had turned upon him this afternoon during his brief visit to the hospital, and writhed with self-loathing. Andrew had wrung from him the promise that he would stay and assume charge of the farm until he himself was fit again. Eric had agreed to write at once to Bob Gifford and Lucky Best and ask them to return to work at *Solbakken*. Under the circumstances—the hospital bill would sorely deplete his savings—Andrew would not be able to pay them their full wages until the fall, but he felt hopeful of their accepting the arrangement. That Andrew was unaware of the probable length of time needed for the healing of his fractured hip, had made their conversation no easier for Eric. Yet here was Lydie, serenely adjusting herself to an indeterminate period of unescapable association with him in which they would both have to feign an amity in doing together a work that was dear to Andrew; not only adjusting herself, but being trivially irrelevant in her talk!

"If you've said all you want to say," he remarked coldly, "I'll go to the house and phone Natalie. Do you want to help me with the milking tonight, or shall I go and get Ben again?"

She stood up, and Eric glanced quickly away, for he had seen that she was for an instant not quite steady on her legs. "Of course I'll help you," she said, a little sharply, and passed before him out of the door.

"As soon as Lucky and Bob get here, we'll have to organize the work a little," she went on, her pointed chin held high and light. "You and I had better feed the stock and look after the cows when they start freshening. Some of the ewes are going to lamb early this year, too. Andrew will feel better knowing we're taking care of them ourselves. Bob Gifford is all thumbs if a ewe has trouble, and I've seen Lucky burst into tears. You wouldn't be squeamish in a job like that, would you?"

Her tone was not taunting, simply matter-of-fact.

"I was born and brought up here, if you recall," Eric said shortly.

"That's right, too," she replied in an absent way, as though she had forgotten him, and paused to run a hand over a scar in the trunk of one of the old apple trees. "Andrew is awfully good at tree surgery. Better than I am. He knows when a thing is worth saving, and when it is better to let it die, or cut it

down.”

Eric glanced involuntarily down at her, but her face was merely tenderly musing, as if with the thought of Andrew.

## 2

The three weeks had been too relentlessly full of work to permit of any lugubrious reflection on Eric’s part as to his own wry existence during them. Since Bob Gifford had returned to the farm alone—Lucky Best having succumbed during the winter to a homesickness for certain Oklahoma hills nobody had ever before heard him mention—a greater share of the chores had fallen upon Eric than he had expected. In his evenings and spare hours of the day he doggedly plied himself to his grandfather’s journal, with the result that except at mealtimes—he ate now at the big house—he had no leisure in which to remind himself of his anomalous position or to give much subjective thought to Lydie Clarence. He was, moreover, generally too physically and mentally spent at the end of his long day to do so.

There had, of course, been one or two occasions—such as the night when the yearling ewe that had been accidentally bred had died giving birth to living twins, when he and Lydie had been forced together in a desperate and forlornly earthy struggle in the dim light of the lambing pen—occasions that he would have preferred to avoid. But for the most part the farm work had gone on without untoward event, without any direct reminder of what lay between himself and Lydie Clarence.

The presence of Natalie Monroe had, strangely enough, eased the situation instead of aggravating it as Eric had expected. Natalie had even insisted on paying board—so sensibly that Lydie accepted the plan. Whether Natalie was being uncommonly deft in simulating a blithe eagerness to be of use to himself and the Clarences, or whether her generosity was really sincere, Eric could not be sure. But so far, at least, he had not detected a motive in her with which he could find fault.

As for his dread of the consequences of that delirious night in March, although it sprang upon him intermittently, he stubbornly repulsed it with the argument that things did not necessarily happen so simply, and that Lydie’s outrageous scheme was more than likely to meet with failure.

Now that Andrew was convalescing satisfactorily—his doctor had assured



him that he would be discharged from the hospital before the first of May—Eric went to visit him only twice a week, and never with Lydie. As it was, Andrew's protest that he should not take so much time from his work on the book caused Eric a sharp discomfort for his own masquerading in virtue.

It was Natalie Monroe who was Andrew's most frequent visitor. She had had her horse brought from her aunt's country place, and had found the ride through the woods and along the river a pleasantly circuitous route to Axford. Her spirited and half ribald sallies put the grave Andrew remarkably at his ease, made him laugh and lightened the hours of his monotony. She brought him books and fruit, and once a bottle of choice cognac which she gaily sampled with him.

On a Sunday afternoon almost a month after Andrew's misfortune, an incident occurred which shattered Eric's artificially constructed emotional wall.

### 3

It was Lydie's birthday, her twenty-fifth, and Natalie had determined upon a picnic celebration at *Solbakken*. Andrew, she reported, had been delighted with the plan: Lydie deserved a good time after the worry and anxiety he had caused her. And he would be there in spirit, every moment.

Natalie provided the refreshments, even to the making of dozens of sandwiches and two freezers full of ice cream. She refused to let Lydie have a hand in anything except keeping her guests busy enjoying themselves.

The soft April day was vividly blue, perfect for horseshoe pitching in the open space at the edge of the orchard. The trees were preparing their pink-white flurry now, the air already sweetly disturbed by a pervasive and delicate perfume. Natalie had put up a croquet set on the pasture slope east of the house, instead of on level ground, so that the game would offer more difficulty as well as more fun. Useless and nonsensical prizes were given to the winners of the horseshoe and croquet tournaments—a cook book with a hole cut through the middle of it, and an ant hill which the winner must claim by walking the length of the vegetable garden.

At six o'clock, almost everybody had wished Lydie many happy returns for the third or fourth time, and had driven off home. Guri Kvam had remained for a last cup of coffee with Lydie, and upon Natalie's vivacious urging the old

woman had consented to read fortunes. Ada Sadler and Bill Forsythe, who were to take Guri home, were the only others seated with Lydie, Natalie and Eric before the fire in the living room.

While Eric talked with Bill, his awareness of Lydie ran like an underground stream through his consciousness. She looked unusually pretty today, he admitted grudgingly, in that dark blue wool dress that showed to such frank advantage the round buoyancy of her figure. She was flushed and radiant as she moved about, pouring the coffee from the silver pot she rarely used; the coffee pot, Eric had learned, was another heirloom gift from her mother.

In a low and troubled tone, Bill was confiding to him that he had heard that Ben Sadler would be out of a job when the quarry reopened in a week or so, because Agnew looked upon Ben as a “trouble maker, and suspected that he was mixed up with the boathouse gang.” Eric’s perturbed interest in this news was suddenly broken by a sharply ringing sound behind him. He swung about and saw Guri Kvam lift her spoon from the silver coffee pot in front of Lydie. The old woman had just struck it a resounding blow.

“He comes here in a year, Lydie, but he iss not a stranger to this place. Home, he comes!” And old Guri, her face unreadable in its brown smile, rapped the coffee pot again with her spoon.

They were all looking at Lydie now.

“I think you ought to tell me who he is, Guri,” said Lydie with a reproachful little frown. “You told Natalie and Ada far more than you have told me.”

Guri shook her head. “That I cannot tell, Lydie. Like Doctor Edvard—yess, might be so. Light and big and sharp blue in the eye—so the doctor wass when he wass young. But he comes here, new and strong like a rock, not scared like everybody now iss. So it must be. And no more can I say, Lydie.”

The old woman sank back in her chair and serenely dipped a sugar lump into her third cup of coffee. At the same moment, Eric’s eyes met Lydie’s and saw in them a deep and pleading communication that was meant for him alone. But Natalie, who was seated between himself and Lydie, somehow split the exchange of glances and Eric froze down to his innermost being with the sudden knowledge that now, at last, the thing that Natalie had been searching for had been revealed to her.

“Oh, you’re getting too mysterious, Guri!” Ada laughed, to Eric’s relief. “Perhaps she means Eric is going to take the farm over and run it himself,

Lydie. And what a swell mess he'll make of it!"

Guri shook her head cryptically.

"Oh, I don't think Eric has done so badly," Natalie remarked brightly, "—pinch-hitting for Andrew. It seems to me he has really a delicate touch with the cows. But I can't quite picture him devoting the rest of his life to them."

Eric felt the blood drain from his face at this brazen innuendo, and with a courageous effort of his will joined in the laughter of the others. Had any of them, he wondered distractedly—Ada, perhaps, who was not stupid—perceived Natalie's meaning? But that was impossible, of course!

"I'll probably be asking Andrew to give me a job here in another month or two, Nat," he said carelessly, "unless you can think up a better way for me to make a living."

"Oh, your book is going to sell like wildfire, Eric!" Lydie said with warm conviction. "Guri—close your eyes and *feel out!* Tell Eric—"

The old woman looked straight at Eric and said, "He will die where he was born." Then, snapping her lips together, she reached for her fringed shawl. "The sight iss gone now. I am tired. So what I say to you, Eric, iss—'When it rains on the parson, it drips on the sexton.' You take me home now, eh, you young folks?"

## 4

A few days after Lydie's birthday party, Natalie came quietly into the orchard house while Eric was at work on the last chapter of his book.

"Well?" he asked, when from the tail of his eye he could see that she had taken a chair and was lighting a cigarette.

"The pompous author already, darling?" she twitted him. But there was an unnaturally reedy note in her voice, so he turned about, crossed his knees and looked at her. Natalie was pale and large-eyed. The disconcerting feeling smote him that she was about to burst into tears.

"Now what?" he demanded uneasily.

There had never been a time when he had not liked Natalie Monroe, he reminded himself. And he owed her a great deal.

"Andrew will be in the hospital another week or so, won't he?" she asked

in a breathless kind of way that took him aback.

“About that. Why?”

“I said I’d stay until he came home, Eric, and I’ll stick to my promise. But I’d like you to know that it’s costing me something.”

“Costing you something?”

“Stop being so damned detached!” Her gold-hazel eyes blazed wide open. “Don’t you suppose it’s costing me something to discover that I’m just plain *human*? Eric, you’re in love with Lydie Clarence!”

With a convulsive jerk of her shoulders she got up and stood before the empty fireplace, her arms folded on the mantel and her face pressed down upon them. Eric stared at her back while the heavy flush crept up over his temples. It had been put into words at last—Natalie’s words, which somehow made it more cruelly true! He could no longer skulk away now from the knowledge that had been pursuing him day and night. With an effort he summoned a scoffing laugh.

“Well, that’s news to me, Nat! Did she tell you, or was it a little bird?”

For a moment Natalie did not answer. Then she flung herself about, facing him with trembling lips.

“Eric—Lydie is going to have a baby, and I can’t stand it. That’s just how superior and liberated *I* am! The minute Andrew Clarence gets back into the house over there, I’m going. I’ve done my funny bit for the sake of propriety, and the laugh’s on me! I’m so jealous of her I could die!”

“You might make yourself a little clearer, Nat,” Eric said thickly.

She turned upon him. “You know what I mean. She has Andrew, and now—his child. And she has you! She has everything, because she opens her hands and her soul and her body not only to take, but to give! And a smart, sophisticated female like me shuts up like a clam and shines bravely on the outside. Oh, my God!”

The idea of hysterics in Natalie was so shocking to Eric that for a moment it blotted out even the fact that she had confirmed his worst fears. He got up, went over to her and grasped her shoulders.

“Look here, Nat! Let’s settle down and talk sense. How about a drink? I’ve got some fresh mint—”

“By all means, give *me* a drink!”

“Not that way, Nat.”

“Your way, then. I won’t argue. Oh, Eric, why was I ever born? I thought you were just an amusing possibility until I saw how mad you are about Lydie Clarence! Now, I’m without shame. I can even torment myself with the notion that Lydie’s child may be yours. That’s how far I’ve gone. Oh, I’m frightful!”

As if from a distance, Eric heard himself say, “Yes—quite! You ought to know by this time what I think of producing offspring. When—just when did Lydie divulge this charming news to you? I hadn’t heard of it. I suppose Andrew knows all about it, but he hasn’t said anything to me.”

He had walked over to the little icebox and was taking lemons and mint out of it when Natalie replied.

“She told me just before I came over from the house. All she said was that she was ‘pretty sure.’” Natalie sat down again, leaned back in the chair and closed her eyes. “Yes, she told Andrew about it—just this morning. Have you noticed that her eyes are like cloudy moonlight, Eric?”

“Steady, Nat,” Eric cautioned her. “You don’t take sugar in your drink, do you?”

“Forgive me, darling. No sugar, thanks. I can see how you might be crazy about the girl. She’s really like the texture of your book—rich and deep. And like this land of yours. Aren’t we all sad—really, Eric? Funny part of it is, she’d take you seriously, too, if it weren’t for her pure love of Andrew. I like Andrew, because he makes me feel utterly damned. Which I am. Oh, Eric!”

“Natalie.”

This time he took her hands and made her meet his eyes. Her lashes were wet.

“We’re friends, aren’t we?” His voice shook.

She brought her mouth into a smile, leaned forward and kissed his cheek.

“The old question—can a man and a woman really be friends? I used to think so, didn’t I? I used to be smart and nasty. I used to be clever as all hell!”

“Nat!”

“Well, I won’t be clever any more, Eric. I promise you. But—you will let me go as soon as Andrew comes back home, won’t you? And I *have* been useful here, haven’t I?”

“You’ve been a peach, Nat.”

“I’ve even dropped hints to everybody in the county that you and I may

charter a ship and go off to Tierra del Fuego to study the tides—just as soon as your book is finished.”

Eric laughed unevenly. “Yes—I’ve heard about that, Nat.” He went back to the icebox. “I wish you’d read over that last paragraph in the typewriter there, will you, and tell me what’s wrong with it. There’s something cock-eyed about it. As it stands it looks like teeth in a brace.”

## Chapter Four

### 1

It was strange, Lydie thought while she raked the winter bedding of straw from the breaking earth where the little rosy cones of peony shoots had begun to show, that now, when she might expect to feel a secret, inward centering upon herself, a withdrawn and shy thoughtfulness of the mystery she held, she should instead have this bewildered but joyous sense of sharing in and being shared by all the acute excitements of Nature that surrounded her.

Her way was not the fumbling, anxiously poetic way of Andrew, nor the violent way of Ada Sadler; nor was it the hard and bright, resistantly poetic way of Eric Stene who, poor fellow, suspected a thorn in the very heart of a rose, and hated the things he most loved. She had never, until now, thought of what her way might be; but yesterday, when Bob Gifford was planting corn in the west forty, she had watched him from the rise at the orchard's edge, and she had felt oddly that it was into herself that the seed was falling. While she stood quiet here, now, it seemed to her that she was nonetheless drifting with the sweet, sure wind of spring that moved through the red willows over yonder. The willows were sharp with tiny new leaves like the ears of baby field mice, transparent and infinitely frail.

The brash tumult of woods and pasture and marshland kept up all day long now. The liquid whistle of the red-winged blackbird in the tall reeds of the swamp below the barn and the boastful vernal churr of the bullfrog lording it over his watery domain from an elf-throne of moss—these were enough to turn the heart over.

There was perhaps nothing out of the ordinary, therefore, in her being notional at a time like this. Her mother had been notional, she knew, from the talk she had overheard among the grown women when she was a little girl. But her mother's altering had gone to humors in food, sudden bursts of anger, and melancholy yearnings for sorrowful music with drawn shades. None of these strictly "female" phenomena—she laughed as she thought of them—had overtaken Lydie. And since they had not during the anxious weeks while

Andrew was in the hospital, she felt safe from them now.

She walked with a slow and light, pleurably swaying motion, between the long rows of sprouting plants, and looked up at the great blue anemone of the sky cupping the fresh, willful rounding of the earth as if to keep it from soaring away into the unknown with a reckless and goatish shout of laughter. For the earth, pale and green and dainty as a tree frog now, in places, and darkly ruffled, richly surly in others, did not care. The earth did not care, Lydie knew, from the years of drought when the parched grasses had whistled as cheerfully as ever through the long hot darknesses while dismayed stars reeled above them, or through days while a strangled sun madly lighted the dust storms across their whirling hell. The earth laughed and did not care, for it knew that it had survived glaciers and that it would survive man and his brutally spurred heel. But the sky, forever new and pure above the earth's desolate freight, must shudder in its immensity and feel a sort of luminous compassion for the poor creatures upon this lost sphere.

Lydie enjoyed thinking so, and in the thinking loved the careless earth not a whit less. She was of it, and what was to be of her would be of it. Even now as she walked she felt that she was trailing roots deep under ground.

It was warm walking back up the hill from the peony field. In the orchard she sat down on the edge of the granite bird-bath one of the Stenes had put there years ago, and watched the bright rusty flash of a pair of thrushes through the pale spindrift of the trees.

Andrew, walking slowly with crutches, was coming away from Eric's place. He would not be able to walk without support for another week or so, the doctor said, but at that it was remarkable how quickly the broken bone had healed. Lydie believed in her heart, with pride, that it was Andrew's scorn of weakness and his strength of will that had hastened his recovery. And yet, far down below that thought lurked one that was obscure and hateful to her. Were not those crutches, in a way, a symbol of something in Andrew that no power of his spirit could ever cure? Since his return home she had been appalled at finding herself making physical comparisons between him and Eric, and always with frightened misgivings and a quick flying to the defense of Andrew against her own spontaneous and certainly false conclusion. Eric, she reminded herself indignantly, was coarse-framed, almost brutish, in contrast to the fine-drawn strength of Andrew. Anyhow, the physical had nothing to do with it! It was probably only because she herself was a web of animal processes just now that such odious thoughts could come into her mind.

She put on a glad smile for Andrew and came toward him with hands outstretched.



“Have you been down there in that hot sun all this time?” he wanted to know anxiously. He searched her face and leaned on one crutch while he put out a hand and wiped moisture from her forehead. “My dear, you shouldn’t do that!”

“Don’t be silly, Andrew!” she laughed, and put her arm through his as they proceeded toward the big house. “Doctor Hampton says I’m to go my own merry way as long as I feel like it. I’m a good little old peasant, darling, that’s what I am.”

“D’you know, Lydie,” he said shyly, “—I’ll bet you’ve thought of this too—it seems almost as if Nature meant us to go on, doesn’t it? I mean—for this to have happened just a few days before I was hurt. If I had died, we should have gone on anyhow, you and I.”

Lydie’s hand tightened spasmodically on his forearm. A queer burning rose in her throat. There were so many little things, so many you could not foresee, that you had to be on your guard against.

“Yes,” she said softly, molding her voice, “I’ve thought of it too, Andy. But we’re all alive—you and I, and—and him.”

Andrew leaned awkwardly sideways and kissed the top of her head.

“I’ll be darned!” he exclaimed suddenly. “I was so glad to see you just now that I clean forgot to tell you Eric’s good news. You’d better go back there and congratulate him. He got a telegram a little while ago saying they’ve accepted his book. I thought he’d stand on his head and yell, but he’s as cool as a cucumber.”

Lydie paused for an instant, then laughed.

“Just like him! But isn’t that great, Andy? Of course we knew it’d go over. Natalie said she wouldn’t marry him if it didn’t, although that’s only the way she talks. All right—I’ll go and pat him on the back.”

“I think he wants to leave us right away,” said Andrew, frowning. “Though when I mentioned it he said he’d stay another week and see me off my crutches. He’s been a friend if we ever had one, Lydie. I hate to see him go, but he’s probably bored to death with us, now that Natalie has gone. I can do the milking now, and—”

“Oh, piffle!” Lydie interrupted. “It won’t hurt him to stay another few days. He’ll likely get so conceited if his book sells that we’ll never see him again.”

She darted off through the trees, and Andrew looked after her, his eyes misty with emotions no correspondence course could ever help him to express.

## 2

When Lydie knocked, Eric was seated at his table trying to write letters. The words dropped like so many pieces of lead out of his mind. Only one living thing inhabited his consciousness, and that thing was intolerable.

“Yes—come in!” he called.

She drew up in the low stool, sat down in front of him, and placed her sun-browned hand on his knee.

“Eric—I’m so glad for you,” she said simply. “Andrew has just told me.”

“You’re glad?” He knitted his brows and shoved back the sheets of paper alongside his typewriter.

“Aren’t you thrilled about it?” she asked wonderingly.

“Thrilled? Good God!” He stood up so abruptly that he almost knocked the chair over. “What in hell does that book mean to me now? It’s a farce—I’m a farce—my whole cock-eyed life is a farce! And I should be thrilled!”

He sent the chair spinning out of his way and went to the open window where he leaned out and took two or three deep, steadying breaths. He felt as if his eyes were scalding in their sockets.

“Aren’t you being a little ridiculous?” she asked him coolly.

He did not turn and face her. “If being in love with you is ridiculous—you’re right. I am. I suppose,” he added tidily, his teeth set, “you’ll say ‘but this is so sudden!’ ”

“No,” said Lydie in a very low voice. “I’m not quite that dumb, Eric. I’ve been a little afraid of—of that happening.”

“Oh, you have? That’s singular, because I hadn’t—until just lately.”

“I’m sorry,” she said. She spoke in that softly charged, meditative voice that was capable now of wringing his heart with its tranquil acceptance of the inevitable.

He went over to her and sat down. In his haggard wretchedness he gleaned a little warmth from the unhappy flush that disturbed her smooth cheeks, and

from her uneasy avoidance of his eyes. Perhaps, he thought in sudden shameless hope, perhaps he had got under her callous dismissal of him at last! Perhaps he was beginning to count for something more than a convenience to her purpose!

“Lydie—” He pressed toward her, uncaring now of those scruples that had been tormenting him night and day since Natalie Monroe had left with him the truth about himself. “You can’t be what you’re trying to make me think you are. You can’t be so completely heartless! Listen—” He wanted to seize her hands, force her to look directly at him, but the abiding pain of uncertainty restrained him. “I didn’t know it was going to be like this, Lydie. Even after—that night—I thought I could put you away from me—leave you to live out your own life in whatever way you wanted to live it. But I didn’t know—I didn’t realize then what it means to a man to know that a woman carries with her a life that is half his. Lydie—that child belongs to me—to *us*! The whole thing is hellishly wrong!”

A cold sweat was standing upon him, it seemed, from head to foot. Lydie was looking at him now, consideringly, with none of that warming compassion her face had shown a little while ago.

“Even so, Eric—what can you do—what can I do to make it right?”

Her eyes meeting his were cool and sweet, as though she were asking a reasonable question of a child whose behavior was troubling her.

“There’s only one decent thing to do,” Eric told her. “We’ve got to tell Andrew the truth. It’s only fair to him—and to all of us—to let him—”

She smiled her little inward smile of exasperating complacency. “And break Andrew’s heart? I don’t think you know what you’re saying, Eric.”

“I know what I’m saying,” he said vehemently. “You belong to me. When I saw you walking up through the orchard a little while ago—the way you always walk—as if you were about to take wings—”

She laughed. “In another couple of months, I won’t look as if I were about to take wings, my dear.”

He took her hands brusquely and pressed them against his harrowed face.

“It won’t matter to me how you look. You’ll be even more beautiful, Lydie—to me. I can’t tell you what’s happened to me. I don’t really know, myself. But I want you—and I want our—”

“Don’t, please, Eric!” she whispered, struggling to withdraw her hands. “It can’t be—it simply can’t be!”

“Why not?” He sprang angrily to his feet. “I have as much right to him as you have! What chance will he have here, grubbing along on a farm?”

She laughed in sheer astonishment, her eyes widely shining. “This can’t be you talking, Eric! I’ve heard you say that you think it’s positively immoral to bring a child into a world like this. Have you changed your opinion over night?”

“I haven’t,” he maintained stubbornly. “I tell you I don’t know what has happened to me. You turned a trick on me, because I was fool enough to let you. I’m not blaming you any more than I am myself. But now that the mischief is done, the responsibility is mine as much as it is yours. How can I go on through life knowing that another man—”

“Your feelings are ninety per cent pride, Eric!” she broke in chillingly. “Andrew and I are different in that—”

“Andrew and you!” Eric raged. “Always—Andrew and you! What do you know about my feelings, anyhow? And what do you care about them? You have a single-track, female brain that always winds up where it started for. You want your cake, and you eat it—and somebody else’s, too. You’ve had your way, and now you don’t give a damn about Andrew—and you don’t give a damn about me. I don’t care much about myself, but I’m damned if I’m going to let you turn any shabby tricks on Andrew. You can do what you like about me, but you’re not going to make a fool of him!”

Lydie had walked over to a shelf and was running a fingertip down the back of one of the books.

“And yet you talk of loving me—and loving the child,” she said slowly. “What you do love is your own priggish honor—the honor of the male. It’s rather late in the day to talk about that, don’t you think? You’re all mixed up and—and sick, and futile, Eric! What Andrew lacked was through no fault of his. But you—” She paused for a brief moment, then swung around and faced him. “I am not going to make a fool of Andrew—and I’m not going to let you do it. Andrew believes me, and he will believe me—no matter what!”

A strangled sound came from Eric’s throat. “Even if the kid grows up to have my hair and eyes, I suppose! All that rubbish you planted about our relationship—oh, good Lord!”

She shrugged her shoulders negligently, and Eric was maddened afresh by the grace of the gesture.

“Well, what can you do about it, anyhow?” she asked.

“I can do what any man would do in the same situation—as I should have done last March. I can go to Andrew and tell him the truth.”

“If you do, I’ll deny it. I’ll tell him you’re out of your mind because you think you’re in love with me. He’ll believe me, too, because he has already said he thinks you’re on the verge of a nervous breakdown from overwork.”

“You’re lying!”

“No, indeed. Andrew did say that, and he feels himself partly to blame for it. That’s why he thinks you ought to go away now when you really want to, instead of staying on because of him. He’s grateful for all you’ve done, and he’ll miss you terribly, but for your own sake he thinks you ought to go. He and Bob Gifford can take care of things now. And I can help, as I always have. So you see, you wouldn’t gain anything by making Andrew worry about you!”

Suddenly he wanted to laugh. There was something to be admired in the neat twistings of Lydie’s brain, after all. The devilish part of it was that he found it hard to persuade himself that Andrew would not cordially swallow anything she told him. In the first place, Andrew would *want* to swallow it.

He said, evenly, not looking at her but out of the window where the shell-flush lay so delicately upon the old trees, “All right, you win. I won’t go to Andrew.”

Lydie drifted back to sit on the edge of his table. “I think that’s the better way,” she said. “And you know by now, Eric, that I—I like you very much. But you know, too, that that has nothing to do with my real life, the life that I must go on living. But you and I can differ on that, surely. We differ on so much that is essential. For example, you’d like it if everyone in the world died tomorrow and missed the fun of fighting to live.”

The effort he made to smile was, he knew, pathetic. The fiber of Lydie Clarence was something harder than the stuff of that quarry his cousin Ben Sadler was hoping to work in again next Tuesday. He picked up a letter from the table.

“This,” he said, “is from Natalie. Would you mind reading it out loud to me?”

Lydie glanced at the letter first, then began to read slowly: “‘Eric, my dear: I am sorry now that my departure was what you would call so *precipitate*. It was, perhaps, a sense of failure that drove me away—a failure in myself, and in you too. We have both been so pitifully sure of the virtue of our own negative view of things. We have, for instance, been very sophomoric in admiring the bleak laughter in the latest novels by the most *advanced* writers.

We have cackled with ghoulish superiority over the prospect of another world war, wherein the small, earnest people who have been going on doing their duty—earning their daily bread, bringing up their daily children—would be smacked forever, because it served them right to be smacked. We admitted that we would also be smacked, but with what a poetic difference! Now, because I love you—and because you love the root of things, which you have found in Lydie—I see how pathetically silly all our laughter was. My comment on all that is simply—unprintable, as you may well guess. Yours, as you know, Natalie.’ ”

She laid the letter carefully upon the table and stood up. Her quiet pallor made hope leap within him again, but its life was brief.

“You and Natalie talk in words,” she said indifferently. “And words can’t change anything, Eric. You’ll see—some day—that I’m right.”

He would not believe, for a moment, that she had passed out of the room, into the open sunlight. Even when, with distraught and burning eyes, he watched her from the window moving in a cadence of shadow and gleam through the trees, he could not quite believe that she had left him here alone with his unspeakable misery. Her lithe motion as she disappeared from his view separated him from her as no feelingless parting word could have done.

*Part Four*  
LATE SPRING

## Chapter One

### 1

Mrs. Sadler's bed had been moved to the window so that, propped up by pillows, she might look out upon the tiny lawn and watch Minnie drying her hair in the sun while she worked at sewing her trousseau. How kind it had been of Eric to give her that twenty-five dollars when his book had been accepted! And that nice, stylish and beautiful Miss Monroe, who had been staying with Lydie while Andrew was in the hospital, had sent her a veil which, she said, had been her own mother's wedding veil. It was of real lace, and trailed yards along the floor like foaming water. You would have thought that Miss Monroe would want to keep it for her own marriage some day, now, wouldn't you? But how lovely it must be to have enough money to indulge your own generous impulses!

Minnie was going to have a real wedding, with two bridesmaids—her sister and Mary Brale—and a minister and all, right out here under the catalpa tree, which would be flowering then, at the end of June. And Minnie and Ernest were going on a wedding trip, by 'bus, to Minneapolis, where Ernest's cousin Ray, who had a good job as a floorwalker in a big department store, had invited them to spend Ernest's vacation week with him and his wife at their lake cottage. Mrs. Sadler's eyes filled with happiness, her thin and knotted fingers shook as she thought of how perfect everything was going to be for little Minnie. Of course, she and Ernest would not have much money, but where there was love the sharing of very little seemed luxury. Ah, couldn't she remember when she and Benjamin had started out in life, twenty-five years ago, full of courage and high hope, with nothing but each other and the forty dollars a month he was earning in the Yard? Perhaps they had never got much farther than that, but oh, their lives had been full, just the same. She thought of when each of the children had come, and of how glad Ben had been to hear their first little outraged cries, and of how tender and anxious he had been! Somehow they had got along, had worried through, although many times the going had been lean and desperate. If you had the right one with you in the struggle, somehow when you came to the end and looked back there was a veil



of sunlight over everything, a dearness and coziness over all.

Mrs. Sadler drew out of her reverie and glanced again from the window at Minnie. She looked so pretty there, her fingers flying nimbly over her sewing, the filigree shadows of the willow tree spraying over her young, bright hair.

But now Minnie did a strange and puzzling thing. Her sewing fell to the ground suddenly, and her eyes became fixed as if in trouble upon something or someone at the gate, beyond Mrs. Sadler's range of vision. Then her glance darted apprehensively toward her mother's window as she got up and hurried across the little lawn.

"What can have upset the child?" Mrs. Sadler wondered. "If I can get to the other window—yes, I'm sure I can!"

She made her way tremblingly to the opposite window and leaned against the frame to look out. Minnie was running back to the porch, and in a moment Mrs. Sadler could hear her fussing with something in the kitchen. A man's form was all but concealed by the lilac hedge. Mrs. Sadler stared. It could not be, at this time of day, when he should be at work in the quarry! But it *was* Ben. It was his light gray coat sleeve, his hand with the gold signet ring on it that she had given him for his fifteenth birthday. The ring winked briefly in the sun as he raised his hand.

Minnie came out of the house again, carrying a large, thick sandwich and a glass of milk!

Mrs. Sadler fumbled blindly back to her bed. It could mean only one thing, this! All of them—Ada, Minnie, and Ben—had been shielding her from the truth. For more than a week, now. Eric, too, had been in the deception to spare her from anxiety. It was from him, of course, that they had got the money to pay the grocery bill. A loan, Ben would call it, but still, a loan! The fruit, the tasty little things they had brought her, when most food seemed like clay in her mouth—these had been part of the pretense so that she would believe another slim time was past. But how sweet of them all to protect her so! Especially when it was she who should be out of the way, in order that they might all be free to chance a broader life with no drag upon them.

"Minnie!" she called, when again she heard footsteps going through to the kitchen.

Minnie came in, quick and bright.

"I was just going to bring my sewing in, mamma," she said. "The sun is getting low, and—"

“Why was Ben here just now, Minnie?” Mrs. Sadler asked, her hands folding and unfolding over the white spread.

“Ben?” Minnie caught her lower lip between her teeth.

“I saw him from the front window, Minnie. Ben hasn’t been working, has he—like you all said he was—since the week before last? Is that it?”

Minnie glanced sideways at a chair and sat down upon it.

“Just today, he isn’t, mamma, because—well, something went wrong with the—hoist, or something, in the quarry. He didn’t want to worry you, so he just came to the gate for a snack and went down town again. Tomorrow he’ll be back at—”

She paused when she saw her mother shake her head and close her eyes. “When you was a little girl, Minnie,” Mrs. Sadler said, “I could always tell when you was fibbing, by the way your voice got kind of high. You was like that all the time, especially after you had the measles and we were afraid you’d lost your voice for good. So—Ben hasn’t been working at all since the quarry opened up again?”

Minnie strove bravely for a few seconds, then she flung herself on her mother’s bed, tears flying from her lashes.

“It’s all on account of that Herb Flagg, mamma!” she cried frantically, while she rubbed her mother’s forearm up and down. “He’s got Mr. Agnew so he gives jobs just where *he* wants them. Because Herb knows something simply awful about Mr. Agnew.” A furious blush sprang into Minnie’s cheeks. “Mr. Agnew has been giving presents to Evelyn Flagg, mamma. And he’s scared of Herb. That’s all it is, honest.”

“Yes, Minnie, you’re telling me the truth now,” her mother said, smiling a little. “So I guess it’s Eric that’s been giving us money enough to get along on this past while.”

“He won’t need what we’ve borrowed from him—not for a long time, anyhow. And Ben’s getting a job over in Axford, right away, almost. Oh, mamma, don’t look so pale and worried! Let me bring in my nightgown and show you. I could wear it for an evening gown, it’s so pretty. And it only cost a dollar sixty-five!”

Mrs. Sadler patted Minnie’s hand, raised herself against the pillows and brought her eyes into a twinkling smile.

“Try it on for me, Minnie. It’s all right to put it on, so long as it isn’t quite finished. I mean—that won’t be bad luck.”

“No—I haven’t got the piping all around the neck yet. But you can tell how it’s going to look. The medallions are awfully sweet against the blue chiffon. I’ll run out and get it.”

“Minnie.”

“Yes, mamma dear.” Minnie paused on the threshold.

“In case I forget when you come in again. Tell Ben—if I’m asleep when he comes home tonight—tell him I’m not worrying about him. I know he’ll get something else to do—away from here. Something better than with Agnew.”

“Yes, mamma, I’ll tell him,” Minnie said, with happy relief.

It had been silly, anyhow, for them to try to keep the truth from their mother. That had been Ben’s idea, and he had been sneaking around like a ghost ever since, out at the right time in the morning, back at the right time at night—looking high and low for a job, between times, and popping out to the house for a bite to eat when he couldn’t stand hunger any longer. It just wasn’t necessary. You could always depend on mamma to see the whole thing cheerfully. Minnie went out upon the lawn to pick up her nightgown, which was of a blue chiffon that had been on sale at forty-nine cents a yard.

## 2

The swamp below the barns on the north was a dovetailed turquoise and crimson only a little less brilliant than the sky above it. The frogs were triumphant and eternal, spending wide upon the pure air the brittle, thin and musical threat of their continuance.

That wearying and altogether too pantomimic sound had got on Eric’s frayed nerves while he helped Andrew cement in the last of the stones that went into the rebuilding of the old well head.

“There,” said Andrew, standing back a pace, trowel in hand, to survey the work. “That looks like a good job, Eric. When Lydie’s vine gets going over that cupola, we’ll have a pretty nice little spot here. She’s talking about building a rock garden over on that side—” he pointed across the well—“so the whole thing will look sort of picturesque. It’s always been bare here, and that’s one thing Lydie hates. Bareness. She’ll probably start in at it right off, no matter what I say to her about working too hard.”

There was pride in Andrew’s voice. Eric stooped down and lifted the pail

of cement into the wheelbarrow.

“What do you think about it, Eric?” Andrew asked shyly. “Don’t you think she’s overdoing it—letting on there’s nothing different about her? The doctor says leave her alone, and of course she isn’t very far along yet—but she’s such an independent little cuss.” He chuckled fondly, then continued with a sober face, “I’ve heard that the first few months is the dangerous time for a woman. If anything happened to Lydie, I guess I’d just—well, I’d almost cash in. It seems as if nobody thinks I’m important any more, or any use—nobody is important now but her.” He laughed. “I suppose that’s what it amounts to when a woman is about to bear a child. Everything centers around her. We don’t count.”

On other occasions, before this, Andrew had expressed his happiness, in a humble, exalted way, over the event to which he and Lydie looked forward. But this was the first time he had revealed to Eric the qualms that were—Eric supposed with grim irony—only natural in an expectant father. Especially when he was head over heels in love with his wife.

“I don’t think you have anything to worry about,” Eric replied in a matter-of-fact tone as he could command. “And I think you’re being a little hard on your friends, aren’t you, when you say you don’t count for anything, that no one thinks you’re of any use? I hope that Beacon Light business isn’t still rankling.”

They had been walking toward the house, Andrew still limping a little. Dark brush strokes of swallows flashed through the vividly painted air. An owl hooted its hollow query in the woods down by the river, and farther away another answered—and answered again.

“I was beginning to get over that,” Andrew said slowly, “but now that this has happened—” He stammered in a discomfited search for words. “I can’t help wonder just how strong an influence I’ll have on a new young life, when the very people I thought were my best friends showed me that they didn’t have any confidence in me, after all.” Then, before Eric could reply, he hastily added, “But I shouldn’t have made such a sweeping statement, Eric. So long as Lydie—and you—and I suppose Natalie—”

“You’ll come out of it, Andrew,” Eric interrupted.

He glanced over at the north field, where Bob Gifford was seated on the cultivator—horses, machine, and man an eloquent unit in this magnifying light. It gave him no slight thrill to contemplate that field, which he himself had helped seed while Andrew was in the hospital. “And there’s Bob,” he went on. “He’s a friend of yours, if you ever had one!”

“You’re right,” Andrew replied, with a short, apologetic laugh. “I guess the trouble is with me. I’m not quite clear in the head yet, from that crack I got. But if I make out anywhere near a profit this year, I’m going to give Bob a bonus when the crop is off. He deserves it!”

Eric set the wheelbarrow down and lugged the cement pail into the implement shed while Andrew went into the house. In the shed, he sat down on the work bench and lighted a cigarette. The place, shadowed curiously red and blue from the lowering sun that angled through the doorway, was full of odds and ends of implements which Andrew had been tinkering with while he was still on his crutches. Andrew’s absorbed and affectionate touch seemed to linger about them even now, Eric thought with dull pain. He glanced across at the two guns standing in a corner; a .30-.30 rifle and a twelve gauge shotgun, metallic blue light trickling down their barrels from the west window. In a moment he would have to get up and go into the house for supper, and now he wished that he had not come in here at all. It had been no respite, no postponement of the harrowing hour he would have to spend indoors with Lydie and Andrew.

Well, his departure from *Solbakken* had been set in false leisureliness for next Thursday. And this was Monday. Perhaps it had been unnecessary to concoct, for Andrew’s benefit, that lie about Natalie’s driving to New York, and his own decision to go with her and see his publishers. But Eric had felt more comfortable because he had told Andrew that. He took little heart in the thought that only a short interval of this misery now remained. Once away from Lydie, he might possibly have a chance of recovering from what he still believed was a morbid and destructive passion within himself; he had given up any hope of acquitting himself honorably with Andrew—Lydie had conclusively shown herself able to prevent that.

He had come out into the yard when the kitchen door opened and Lydie walked quickly forward to meet him.

“Ada just phoned,” she said quietly, but with a deeply touched look in her eyes and about her tremulous mouth. “You’ll have to go to the Sadlers’, Eric. Their mother died—about an hour ago.”

“Aunt Dora—is dead?”

The question sounded flat and cold to him as he uttered it. But let Lydie think what she chose about the sound of it; she would do so, anyhow, and not trouble to look behind the words at the suddenly twisted feeling he had for the death of this woman who was his kin, and whom life had rewarded so meanly for her essential goodness, her selflessness.

“Ada says Ben went absolutely to pieces,” Lydie went on. “He left the house and she doesn’t know where he has gone. She’s terrified that he’ll do something dreadful. Their mother found out that Ben wasn’t working—and why. Ada couldn’t say more over the phone, but I knew what she meant. She asked us both to come down. I’ll change my dress and you eat a little supper. We may be gone for a while.”

Eric nodded. He was thinking about Ben and his pitiful, balked desire to give his mother some of the modest comforts of life after all that she had done for him. Ben had large and simple violences beneath that placid exterior of his. What might he not have done, in this last hour, toward setting right to his own satisfaction a wrong that had overwhelmed him?

### 3

Eric received an answer to that question when he had been in Inglebrook less than thirty minutes.

The Sadler house, when he and Lydie arrived there, had over it the gray and decorous stillness of finality he had expected, except for the muffled sobbing of Minnie in her room upstairs. Ernest Petersen was with her, Ada said. Ada, pale and in stony control of herself, sat with Bill Forsythe in the small living room outside the closed door. Yes, the doctor had been here, and had summoned the undertaker. Everything had been done, but the door would nevertheless remain closed. The room, Ada said, would seem less empty that way, less as if someone had just gone out of it. Eric glanced at her sharply and saw Bill’s hand tighten over hers where it lay stiffly on his knee.

And then Lydie Clarence walked across the room and knelt beside her. She spoke softly, and a wave of tender, releasing grief seemed to pour out of her, over the desolate little room, over the hard fixedness of Ada Sadler. Ada leaned her head down upon Lydie’s shoulder and wept.

Eric and Bill Forsythe had gone then to search for Ben. It had grown almost dark, the Main Street lights were on, and at a drug store corner a knot of men, boys, and two or three women stood in the attitude of excited talk, sensational exchange of conjecture. Eric’s heart sank in his breast.

Fate, it appeared, had provided Ben Sadler immediately and with an open hand an outlet for his pent-up rage and bitter sorrow. He had been familiar with Charles Agnew’s custom of surveying each evening the work that had

been done in the quarry during the day. On the headlong impulse of vengeance—it was easy enough for Eric to reconstruct his cousin’s mood and his actions—Ben had run a mile through the woods from his own home, on the chance of encountering Agnew at the “big hole” or near it.

Ben had—so the corner loungers informed Eric—actually met Agnew while he was climbing up the steep path from the bottom of the granite pit. Kenneth Osborn, Agnew’s friend, who owned the Axford Monument Works, and Herb Flagg, the hoistman, had been coming along behind Agnew. Ben Sadler had said nothing at all. He had simply thrown himself at Agnew and struck with such force that Herb Flagg swore he could hear Agnew’s jaw break. Osborn had fallen sideways, but Agnew had been hurled down the stony incline and had stopped only when his shoulders had lodged at the base of an outjutting rock. In the confusion, Herb had been too aghast to notice what direction Ben Sadler took when he fled. Herb was nevertheless the hero of the incident. He had carried his unconscious employer upon his back out of the quarry, had telephoned for a doctor to be on hand at the Agnews’ house at once, and had then driven into town at full speed. If Agnew recovered, it was unanimously agreed, he would owe his life to Herb Flagg’s strength of body and quickness of wit. The sheriff and ten men were out combing the woods and searching along the river for Ben Sadler.

Eric went first to Agnew’s house and found two doctors in attendance upon the injured man. Doctor Hampton, with whom he spoke, was reluctant to make any statement as to Agnew’s condition, beyond the curt summary which included facial contusions, a broken collar bone, and a possible fracture of the skull. Mrs. Agnew, rather surprisingly collected, had refused to have her husband removed to the hospital at Axford. She came out of the bedroom, her face round and greenish pale as a melon, and seeing Eric, spoke in a casual tone that startled both him and the doctor.

“Your cousin did this, didn’t he? I fancy he had good reason!”

Eric did not linger. He went straightway to the sheriff’s office, where Bill Forsythe had been getting what information he could. He had received little more than a corroboration of what he and Eric already knew. A warrant had been issued for Ben’s arrest.

Eric left the office with Bill, fervently thankful that there were no bloodhounds in the community. The two drove to the Sadlers’ house to break the crushing news as gently as they could to Ada and Minnie.

## Chapter Two

### 1

On the following afternoon, Eric returned from Inglebrook emotionally stripped, at odds with himself, the world, and the monstrous joke that made it go round.

First of all, he had ascertained that although Charles Agnew had regained consciousness, he was by no means yet out of danger.

Then he had spent an hour with Ada, helping her to complete arrangements for the funeral of her mother, which was to be held Thursday, she insisted, whether her brother Ben “turned up” or not. Her attitude had at first struck Eric as unnatural and feelingless, until it dawned upon him that without this rigid dismissal of Ben, Ada could not have continued at all with what had to be done, and her sister Minnie would undoubtedly have gone into utter collapse. For although Ernie Petersen’s people were humble, they were severely law abiding and no blot had ever sullied their modern escutcheon. Should Charles Agnew die, Minnie would not be altogether welcome in their family circle.

When he had left Ada at home, Eric had gone to the office of the sheriff to enquire whether anything new had developed in the search for Ben. He was sympathetically received there, since he had already assured the representatives of the law in Inglebrook of his willingness to co-operate with them as far as he was able in the apprehension of his cousin.

Steve Littleton, the sheriff, was a perplexed and ruddily genial man who confessed that he “didn’t like this job at all, because it smelled worse than a dead skunk, and no matter what came of it, there’d be hell to pay somewhere.” Just before Agnew “came to” this morning, Steve went on in disgust, he had been talking in a colorful way about a woman who was not his wife. Eric left the sheriff’s office with a sick feeling spreading out in all directions from the pit of his stomach.

He drove to the farm, put his car in the shed, and walked through the orchard to the cabin without seeing either Lydie or Andrew. Bob Gifford had



been anxiously examining the hoof of one of his horses while the team stood at the trough under the windmill. Otherwise there had been nothing unusual in the appearance of things. So Eric was scarcely prepared for the scene that awaited him when he entered the cabin.

Ben Sadler was stretched out on the sofa, face down, his shoulders heaving in the terrible gust of his sobs. Beside him sat Lydie in pale silence, gently stroking his hair. She shook her head at Eric and motioned him away when, after a startled pause, he took a step forward from the door.

“I couldn’t even—get her a decent—bed!” Ben raved in a strangled voice. “God damn Agnew! I hope he dies. Let them come and get me. Damn them all to hell! What do I care? What does anybody care? Nothing matters now! She’s gone! And I couldn’t even get her a comfortable bed to lay in. The way she smiled, just before she—” His hoarse sounds trailed off in an inarticulate groan.

Eric sat down a few feet away, his mouth drawn hard across his teeth. After what seemed an endless interval, Ben appeared to become aware of him, jerked his body about and glared with red and tortured eyes.

“Oh—it’s you!” he said. “I thought it might be the cops.”

“Where have you been since last night, Ben?” Eric asked him.

But Ben had hidden his face again, and did not reply.

“He slept—or at least stayed—in a culvert on the old wood road to Axford,” said Lydie softly. “I saw him come in here a little while ago, and I brought him something to eat. Ben, if we go away now, do you think you can sleep a little while?” She bent and kissed the boyish nape of his neck. Eric found himself wondering inconsequentially when Ben had last had a haircut.

“I don’t care,” Ben muttered. “I don’t ever expect to sleep again. It don’t matter.”

Lydie slipped into the bedroom, got a blanket and placed it with an infinitely tender look over Ben’s sprawled body. Then she pulled down the window shades, came and drew Eric with her to the door.

Neither spoke a word on the way to the big house. In the living room, Lydie sat down at the piano and ran her fingers absently over the keys. Eric walked back and forth across the room behind her, his hands closing, opening, and closing in his pockets.

He stopped abruptly and looked at Lydie. “Where’s Andrew?” he demanded.

“He went to Axford this afternoon.”

He spoke then in a voice that sounded loud and hollow. “We can’t do this, you know! Did you ever hear of that nice word, ‘harboring’?”

With no haste, Lydie turned from the piano. She looked him carefully up and down for at least ten seconds. He felt his face going stiff and red.

“The word sounds familiar,” said Lydie in a dangerously agreeable way. “It goes with two other words—‘a criminal.’ I don’t quite see why you should be using it, just now.”

Eric sat down and found in his pocket a limp cigarette. It took two matches to light it.

“Ben’s my cousin, Lydie,” he said finally. “I feel just as miserable about this as you do—perhaps more. But that has nothing to do with it. The point is that pretty soon we’ve got to telephone Littleton and let him know that Ben is here.”

Lydie’s brown, square hands grasped the edge of the piano bench. Eric saw, with an inexpressible mixture of curious sensuous pleasure and mental chill, that her breasts beneath the gingham dress she wore showed already a subtly rich change. Or perhaps he was imagining that. Everything, in this past while, seemed to have taken on a bizarre and abnormal look.

“Oh, I see,” Lydie said slowly. “You’re going to turn him over to the so-called ‘law,’ are you?”

“Turn him over?” Eric objected angrily. “I don’t know that you have any right to use that phrase in this connection. You think I’m being deliberately heartless, don’t you? What do you want me to do—keep him here until they come and grab all of us for conspiring against justice? You talk like a woman!”

“I am a woman, I hope!” she retorted coolly. “And as for your ‘justice’—that makes me laugh! What justice will there be for Ben, if Agnew dies? Even if he lives? If we don’t get Ben away from here right away, he hasn’t a chance!”

This was a little more than Eric felt able to take in at once. He stared at her incredulously.

“Do you expect me to spirit him away and make him a fugitive for the rest of his life?”

As she rose and went across to sit on the couch, Lydie drew a long, tremulous breath. Her eyes had grown flamingly hostile.

“He’s a fugitive now—he’ll be a fugitive no matter where he is,” she said with an obvious struggle to keep her composure. “Ben Sadler was born a fugitive. That’s the difference between him and you. But he’ll at least have a *chance* if he loses himself—away from all this. You can spare fifty dollars, can’t you? He can get a long way off on that. If I had it, I’d have seen him on his way and you would never even have known he had been here!”

Eric threw out a harsh laugh. “And have him dodging the police for days—or perhaps months or years—until they finally catch up with him? That’s what you consider kindness. Well, I wouldn’t hand out anything like that to a dog!”

Lydie stood up, trembling and colorless, and Eric, alarmed for her with some separate and instinctively protective part of his being, got to his feet also and put out his hand with the hope of quieting her. But she scornfully brushed off his touch on her arm and gazed at him with a slow and concentrated contempt which, he felt sharply, was not lacking in perverse enjoyment.

“It’s too bad Andrew isn’t here,” she said, the corners of her mouth working furiously. “There’s no doubt in my mind what *he* would do! He knows there’s a justice beyond your petty little courts. What’s more, he wouldn’t be trying to protect his own skin. All your high and moral grounds don’t fool me for a minute! You’re simply looking out for yourself. I might have known what to expect!”

Thick red flooded up to Eric’s eyes. A dull, hot weight seemed to swing loosely inside him, and suddenly his self-control vanished. He seized Lydie by the shoulders, jerked her up to him almost off her feet, and kissed her with force upon the mouth. He could not have told why he did it, but the moment the violent impulse was satisfied, he let her go with a barely restrained imprecation and stepped back from her, breathing as if he had been running hard.

Lydie stood up motionless and white, surveying him, her expression one of pitying dislike.

“You meant that for an insult, I suppose,” she said.

“I’m sorry—” Eric began stiffly, but Lydie was walking away from him toward the kitchen door.

Suddenly he saw her halt in a startled attitude. Standing smirking in the doorway was Esther Larch, her round straw hat on the back of her head, yellow ribbons demurely tied under her chin. Eric went cold. How much of this diverting scene had the girl witnessed? In a flash he saw to what use she could put even the last and most innocuous bit of it.

“Why—hello, Esther!” To his relief, there was nothing disconcerted in the sound of Lydie’s voice. “How pretty you look today! Did you walk over?”

“No,” said Esther. “The Fullers were driving to the city, and they let me off at your gate. My car is in town being repaired.”

Too bad she couldn’t have come over in that rattletrap of hers, Eric thought. They would have heard her half a mile away. But even at that, perhaps, he had been too carried out of himself in the last few minutes to have noticed any sound from outdoors. He sat down again, got his pipe from his pocket, and shot a fugitive glance at Esther while her high-pitched treble ran on in talk that didn’t seem to make sense. The girl was clumsily trying to conceal the fact that she was all in a dither over some knowledge she had just blundered upon.

“. . . and so I thought maybe if Andrew and you would just come, accidental-like, to our place on Saturday night, they’d all be so glad to see him again, and everything would be patched up. The society will simply go to pieces, Lydie, without Andrew in it!”

Nobody, Eric had long since decided, could laugh with such liquid mockery as Lydie Clarence. But Esther Larch was still too flustered to heed that ominous tone, and so rushed on.

“You’ll both come, then, won’t you? I don’t suppose Eric will be here, or I’d ask him too—though I suppose he wouldn’t come anyhow, on account of the Sadlers.” She interrupted herself to incline her head graciously toward Eric. “I’m going to serve refreshments at eleven, Lydie. I’m planning to have petty foresh—you know those cute little cakes you can get at Brown’s Bakery in Axford—and sandwiches and salad and coffee, of course. Don’t you think that ought to be enough, Lydie. Just a simple little supper, a get-together, sort of, not a regular meeting at all, because it’s getting kind of warm for it. Of course, we’ll dance, and things like that. And I’ll have a chance to sit and talk with Andrew.” She giggled archly across her prominent teeth. “But I thought this would just be informal and nice, so Andrew can sort of make it up with the rest of them. Not that he’ll have any trouble in doing that. They all miss him terribly, Lydie, honest!”

Eric got up and started toward the front door. He heard Lydie say, “I can’t answer for Andrew, Esther. But I won’t be able to go, thanks. The Beacon Light is out, so far as I’m concerned. I have an idea Andrew feels the same way about it, but of course you can ask him. He won’t be home till around supper time, so perhaps you had better telephone.”

Lydie was not asking her to stay for a cup of tea and wait for Andrew to

come home. It was a pretty cool snub. Eric's reluctant admiration rose to it, yet he realized at once that Lydie had laid herself open now to any malicious retaliation that might come into Esther's head. There was no need for him to glance back; in his mind's eye he could see the sudden and unpleasant pink of Esther Larch's face, the glowing spite of her protuberant eyes. Lydie, inconsistently scornful now of compromise, had heaped fuel upon Esther's glowing pile of hysterical frustration.

Eric returned to the orchard house with his earlier convictions of right and wrong tied inextricably into knots. That Lydie had caused this confusion within him he admitted without any qualifying struggle, and he was too distraught to examine why. He had a half-formed decision to leave his cousin Ben's fate entirely up to himself—to make it clear to him that he did not wish to influence him in any way, but that if he wanted a little money for any purpose whatsoever, Eric would supply it. That was, he acknowledged, a pretty weak stand to take, a sneaking out from under, but it seemed that no matter what he did now it would be glaringly wrong. He wondered if Esther Larch had heard them speaking of Ben. He thought not. Her reference to the Sadlers had been made too unmindfully. He could treat Ben without concern in that direction.

The moment he entered the cabin, however, he discovered himself relieved of the necessity of taking any initiative. A note in Ben's artless handwriting, with an ink bottle on top of it, lay on the table.

"Dear Eric," he wrote, "I shouldn't have come here, because maybe now I've put you in Dutch. I didn't know just what I was doing. But I'm going back now and report to Littleton. It doesn't matter much what happens to me, but I'm not grouching. I want you to know how thankful I am for all you have done for us folks. Good luck to your book. Yours, Ben."

Eric sat down at the table, pulled open the drawer and placed the letter, folded, within it. He hated himself for the thought that slunk forward from the back of his mind: if Lydie wants to read this, it will be here for her. The self-respecting, the proud thing to do would be to destroy it; for even though he had desired such extenuation in Lydie's eyes, this letter would not obtain it for him. His changed intentions could never be made known to her now. Anyhow, he was not sure that they had been changed for the better.

His eyes fell upon an odd sheet of manuscript from his first draft of Doctor Edvard's story.

*Already the tall grass is going, and the starry nights are no longer so abundant with the whispering peace of the grass. It is a*

*question, perhaps, if we are not plowing under more than we shall ever reap; for today a man killed his brother ten miles north of here in a quarrel over the ownership of a plowshare.*

## 2

Eric went at once to town, learned first that Agnew was gaining strength, then visited the jail and talked briefly with Ben. He found him resigned and dull, but with an inclination to take heart when Eric told him of the improvement in Agnew's condition.

"I never meant to . . . oh, I don't know, maybe I did!" Ben stammered miserably. "I don't know what I did last night. I was crazy! You better stay out of it, Eric. It's dirty, all round."

"Don't worry about me, Ben. Has Ada been here?"

Ben's mouth twisted in a sardonic grin. "Yeah—she came and took a look at me. She left me a package of cigarettes. She didn't say much. Guess she's sort of knocked cold by everything. She gave notice to the Agnews, of course. I've sure smeared the whole works!"

"Well, we've got to get you a lawyer, Ben. I'll go and see Phil Durand, over in Axford. He and I went to school together. I hear he's doing pretty well. Do you know him?"

"I know who he is," said Ben. "He's smart. But, what the hell—he can't do me any good. Nobody can. Agnew's got this county by the tail."

"Well, we'll see about that," said Eric, and wrung Ben's hand in a sympathy and encouragement he could not make vocal.

As he walked down the musty corridor of the old building, Steve Littleton met him. The sheriff's face was a study in satirical amusement. He had just received from Agnew, who was now quite rational, a voluntary, sworn statement, coherent and complete, to the effect that he, Charles Agnew, and Ben Sadler, had had a difference about the matter of Ben's re-employment in the quarry, a difference in which Agnew now admitted himself to have been absolutely at fault. He had, furthermore, insulted Ben Sadler and unjustly charged him in the hearing of others with fomenting labor disturbances, thereby injuring his chances of getting work elsewhere. He, Charles Agnew, unreservedly assumed the blame for all that had happened, and herewith

retracted any slurs he may have made against the character of the said Ben Sadler. Finally, the said Ben Sadler was fully justified in his attack upon him, and he, Charles Agnew, would not prefer any charges whatsoever against Ben Sadler. The florid and magnanimous document ended with the request that Ben be released at once from the custody of the law.

“In a way,” was Littleton’s cynical comment, “it’s rather too bad that Ben won’t have to stand trial.”

## Chapter Three

### 1

On Friday night, a day after Aunt Dora Sadler's funeral, Eric packed his books in the orchard house. He was going to ship them to Sibert Mueller in the morning. He packed them methodically, stretching the job out and glancing into a passage from some favorite author occasionally, because the stuff of his own thoughts was not comforting.

His will was helpless against the memory of yesterday afternoon in the Sadler house, when the gauche and defeated-looking little Methodist minister had given what was probably—Eric thought with his distrust of the cloth—an accidentally poetic tribute to the woman who lay at peace with peacefully tired and curiously smoothed-out hands in the flower-blanketed casket. Very odd, how a great many people had sent floral offerings to the Sadler home, after Ben's release—but not so odd that the finest of them all should have come from Charles Agnew. Eric was not thinking so much of the flowers just now, however. He was trying to erase from his memory the look in Lydie Clarence's eyes, when they had met his own during the Reverend Trimble's oration.

"A woman, true and good, lies here," the pale little man had said, "a woman who was, above all else, a mother. To the blood of her blood, bone of her bone, she gave the ardent pain and joy of her life. She bore three children, who with their heritage of honor and their steadfast faith in their daily task, however humble, will make of our country a better place in which to live, even though their share of the work may never shine in the high places. We give thanks, then, from our hearts, to Dora Sadler, who is not gone from us, but who lives on in the young and courageous spirits of her children."

Lydie had looked across the room then at Eric, and the unguarded expression of her eyes had torn open the stiff defense he had built up against her two days before, when he and she had clashed so bitterly in the living room of the big house. If she had cried aloud, she could not have told him more certainly that her true feeling for him was not what she had been all this time pretending it to be. That piteous unmasking of her eyes had shaken him all



through.

It had begun to rain during the service—providentially. For Andrew, tendering his apologies to the young Sadlers, had said that he had better take Lydie home instead of driving with the others out to the cemetery. He did not want to run the risk of her catching cold. . . . And again, when Andrew said that, Eric's and Lydie's eyes had locked in a fleet moment of stark and despairing surrender, wherein their antagonism fled.

Eric had spent the evening with Ada, Ben and Minnie, doing his best to help them over those first desolate hours by making practical suggestions as to how each of them should proceed from now on. Minnie—with an eye, no doubt, to propriety—had thought it would be dreadful for her to be married next month in accordance with the original plan. But Eric, fortunately, had changed her mind about that. Mrs. Agnew had spoken to Ada, when the two had met on the street, and had urged her to come back to work for her, but Ada had told her regretfully that Natalie Monroe had offered her a position in a dress shop in the city and that she felt she would better herself by accepting it. Ben had been the real problem in that difficult talk at the Sadlers'. Leave him out of it, he had said repeatedly. It was all right for Charles Agnew to exonerate him, with all those grand words of his, but the fact remained that he wouldn't be able to find work in Inglebrook or in Axford or in the whole county. Agnew wouldn't dare to take him back into the quarry, with Herb Flagg there still. Not only that—Ben wouldn't want to be anywhere within sight or sound of either Agnew or Herb Flagg again. He'd hit the road and take his chance somewhere else!

It was Ada who had introduced the suggestion of selling their small property, the old house and its modest half acre. And in spite of Minnie's tears, it had finally been decided that they would visit a real estate office in Axford on the following day and find out at once what could be done. Eric and Ben would go together and talk to the agent.

And so, this morning, they had received an offer that was not quite so disappointing as they had feared it might be. The house and lot, situated as it was on the highway, the agent pointed out with a noble lack of delicacy, would make a good location for a filling station and a beer garden in connection with it. He had a client who was looking for just such a spot. He would have the papers drawn up on Monday, since tomorrow was Saturday, when everybody went fishing. After debts had been paid, Minnie, Ben and Ada would share equally in a sum of almost two thousand dollars. Altogether, Eric thought, they had not done badly under the circumstances.

It was while Eric was still at the Sadlers' that a boy had brought a message

from Charles Agnew.

“He wants to see me on *business*,” Ben sneered, when he had read the note. “The hell he does!”

But Eric prevailed upon him to go and hear what Agnew had to say. Within an hour Ben was back, looking bewildered and sheepishly smiling. Over the telephone, Agnew had actually found a place for him on a friend’s ranch in Wyoming. It was almost as if Agnew had known that Wyoming was the one place Ben had always wanted to go to!

“There must be a good streak in the skunk somewhere,” Ben had observed.

But Eric met Ada’s bleakly amused eyes. “The streak isn’t white, brother-mine!” she commented acidly.

## 2

Standing now among his books, Eric wished that his own problems were as simple of solution as those of his cousins had been.

Upon his return from the Sadlers’ three hours ago, he had seen Lydie at work in the peony field, a wide straw hat on her head, her yellow smock a vividly moving patch of color in the rich green of the budding plants. She had not glanced toward the road as he drove by, but he was quite sure she had noticed his car approaching a few moments before. He had driven directly to the shed and put his car away.

It was just as he stepped out of the shed that he caught sight of Esther Larch hurrying—scuttling was the word, rather—toward her own car that stood near a clump of oak east of the barns. She was leaving by way of the old road under the hill—little more than a cow path now—and Eric stood in the doorway of the shed and watched her go. With depressing intuition, he glanced toward the barns and saw precisely what he had expected to see. Andrew Clarence was standing in an uncertain attitude just at the edge of the oak thicket, his hands hanging at his sides, his eyes following the rusty and complaining vehicle which was carrying Esther Larch off over the weed-choked trail.

Esther had come, of course, to urge Andrew to attend the party she was giving for the Beacon Light Society tomorrow night. But—for what else? Esther Larch had got in her mischief, he was convinced, just as surely as two

and two made four.

As he walked rapidly across the yard, through the orchard and into his own place, a stark loneliness hemmed him about, a feeling of high-and-dry isolation such as he had never before known.

He had once argued—to an attentive, impressed class of adolescents, God save the mark!—that loneliness was a condition which could not be considered in degree; a poet was lonely, a madman was lonely, a prisoner condemned to death was lonely—each in his own supreme way, and there was no method of comparing these ways. What empty, discreditable talk he had been capable of during that time while the wide-eyed young had been entrusted to him! He had complacently regarded himself as something of a poet then, with a loneliness impregnable and forlorn. Could he only talk to those students now, he would be better fit to acquaint them with the real stuff of loneliness!

If he could only talk to someone—anyone at all! If he could talk to Andrew in the faintly embarrassing but simple way he had talked to him at their first meeting! Even if Andrew came in now and confronted him with whatever Esther Larch had said, it would be better than this.

For three hours he had been packing his books away, writing letters to Sibert Mueller and Natalie—trivial letters, too cheerful, that would probably leave Natalie, at least, suspicious that he had omitted something of importance. All right, let her be suspicious! There was not a soul on this earth to whom he could unburden himself now, not one!

He glanced from his window and saw Bob Gifford puttering about the pump under the windmill. He hurried out at once for a pail of fresh water and invited Bob to come in for a game of cribbage.

“Can’t do it, nohow,” Bob said. “The boss went off half an hour ago—had a telephone call from a fella with a pure bred bull to sell. Left all in a hurry—an’ he’ll be gone most of the night, like as not. That leaves me short-handed, with the missus gettin’ ready to have the Sadlers up tomorrow night. She’s a cute one, by cripes! That Larch bitch is throwin’ a party tomorrow night for the Beacons, an’ what does the missus do but throw one of her own for the Sadlers—all of a sudden—so she an’ the boss can’t get down to the Larchs’. I call that cute, don’t you? No beatin’ her! Not that it’s any o’ my business. I got a little party of my own for tonight.” He winked lewdly. “Takin’ the good-lookin’ waitress—that dark one that works at Smokey’s—I’m takin’ her to the Friday night dance at the Jungle. An’ that means *I* won’t be home much ahead o’ the boss—if *any!*”

So Andrew had gone! And without having said a word to him! Had he said

anything to Lydie about Esther Larch's visit? Surely, if he had, Lydie would have come here to the orchard house as soon as she was alone, and told him about it. A faint hope rose within him that he might have been mistaken about Andrew's peculiar attitude as he stood there alone by the barn and watched Esther Larch drive away.

The last box of books had been tied up and labeled. Eric went now to the window from which he could see the new moon, the merest filament of silver in the silvery violet of the west. Had Lydie, alone back there in the big house, looked out and seen that moon? Suddenly, in the bleakness of his solitude, he was overwhelmed by a desire to have her near him. Yet his need of her now was strangely not physical—beyond the yearning to feel the light and quiet touch of her hands, to have her fragrant, soft hair brush his cheek, to close his eyes against the lovely, important richness of her breast.

The trend of his thoughts became all at once singular and distressing. He was envious—jealous, even—of that other being who was as yet not much more than a patient and amorphous dream in the deep night of Lydie's body! That fantastic unknown whom she was already shielding with her fierce love from the share of bitterness and folly and defeat which life would impartially bestow upon it! That sluggishly building, and probably eventually mediocre, Unknown, was all that mattered to her. Eric would be a fool to think that those eloquently deep and bewildered glances of hers yesterday at the Sadlers' really meant anything. He was simply and unutterably alone!

He went back gloomily and sat down to read a magazine, but the words refused to become more than mere spiritless words. In less than an hour he flung the thing down and stalked out of the house.

It was almost dark, the thin blade of a moon had set, and stars were trembling forth above the smooth and rumorously shine of the river, the still, green-black foam of the trees.

### 3

The place where he chose to sit on the river bank was on the stone ledge below the birch and hazel copse two hundred yards or so from the orchard house, westward. He had sat there with Ada Sadler on that fateful night of the early spring, and it seemed to him painfully appropriate that he should return to the place now. There was in the air the tenderly sad smell of trailing arbutus, and in the lush grass back of him the large white blossoms of trillium boldly

flecked the deepening dusk. His white polo shirt would reveal him clearly to Lydie, should she by any wild chance come looking for him along the river.

Birds made drowsy, sweetly troubled sounds among the trees. The plaintive song of a hermit thrush, like an echo within a liquid echo, came from somewhere along the traceless lanes of the air.

It seemed to Eric that he had been sitting a long time with his empty pipe in his hands before the voice he had waited for spoke just audibly behind him.

“Eric!” He turned with a quaking at his heart. She must have come silently as an Indian over the mossy path. Her face was a pale blur above him. He could see her hands against the dim blue flannel of her jacket move agitatedly. “You weren’t at home—so I thought perhaps I’d find you down here some place. Do you mind if I stay for a minute?”

“Mind?” His laugh sounded tinny. He had got to his feet and was helping her down now to the flat rock. At a cautious distance from her he seated himself again. “I guess I’ve been pitying myself, Lydie. But absolute loneliness—that’s something you’ve probably never experienced.”

He could just see her suddenly bent head, her hands clasped to her cheeks. “Haven’t I? Why do you suppose I came out here? Andrew has gone to a sale. Bob told you, didn’t he?”

“Yes, he did.”

“Eric—I’m not as deliberate as I thought I was. I thought I could work things out—all my own way—but something has gone wrong somewhere. Back there in the house—I felt as if there wasn’t anybody else in the world but myself. I suppose a woman gets that way. But—I had to come and find you, Eric!”

He swallowed across the stiffness of his throat. “Esther Larch talked with Andrew this afternoon. Has that anything to do with it?”

Lydie nodded. “I saw her drive in while I was working in the peonies. And then, when he came out and told me he had had a phone call and was leaving right away to meet this man—I felt something strange in him. I was frightened. So I asked him about Esther—I *had* to ask him! I tried to laugh when I asked him—and he laughed too, and said she’d almost cried when he told her that we couldn’t go to her party tomorrow night. But when he’d gone away—I *knew* there was something different about him, Eric. I was sure of it. And now—I’m afraid!” Her voice fell to a whisper, and there was trembling in it. “I’m afraid—and alone!”

“You’re not alone, Lydie,” he said with sudden tenderness, and moved closer to her, taking her hands in his.

“There’s something more, Eric,” she said, and he drew back from her a little. “I didn’t want to tell you, but—yesterday—when I looked at you—at the funeral—I began to feel that I was really alone in this—this thing I’ve started. That’s what I mean when I say that a woman feels that way—when she’s like this. It’s hard to explain, Eric. But I—I wanted you with me. I wanted everything to be—the way it *should* be!”

He lifted her cool palms and pressed them against his face. “We can make everything the way it should be, Lydie,” he said softly. “Look at me!”

She had bent her head back, and in the starry gloom he could see a spasm of pain cross her closed eyes.

“It’s true that you care for me,” he stumbled on, “—more than just—”

Her hands, always so surprisingly strong, drew away from his and clenched into small fists on her knees.

“I didn’t want it to be that way!” she cried, as if the words were twisted out of her throat. “But it is—and I had to tell you, Eric. You’ve thought me selfish and determined to have my own way. And I was. But now—I don’t know—I just don’t know anything. After you go away, everything may be different. Maybe everything will be the same again, with only me and Andrew. I’ll *make* it the same, but—”

“You can’t make it the same, Lydie!” Eric broke out. “It never will be the same, for either of us. You belong to me now as much as I belong to you. I didn’t want to fall in love with you any more than you did with me. But there are some things we can’t control. We’re both facing something that’s bigger than either of us—and you know it!” His voice had something of triumph in it now. “Don’t pull away from me, Lydie! I’ve been longing just to touch you—to sit close to you. It’s been hell—wondering and waiting—”

Her face, close down against his throat, was wet with tears. But only for an instant did she seem to cling to him, and even then he was not sure that the embrace was not all of his own making. Above her dark head, in the limitless night-green, the stars were as dense as though a vast ethereal mirror had shattered to billions of fragments. During that ineffable moment he found himself imagining wildly that the stars’ glitter was making a stealthy, crackling noise.

Lydie stiffened suddenly, broke away from him, and sat in a terrified, listening attitude.

“I heard something,” she whispered.

“No,” said Eric. But even as he spoke he knew that some unnatural sound had thrust itself into his confused consciousness.

Lydie was standing up now, staring motionless into the trees above the flat rock.

“I shouldn’t have come here,” she breathed rapidly. “I—somebody has been watching us—and listening! I know it!”

He had risen too and had taken a step upward to peer through the underbrush. “Nonsense!” he said, disclaiming the uneasy beating of his own heart.

It was too dark now to distinguish one shadow from another. For all he could tell there might be a dozen eavesdroppers lurking back there in the tangle of fern and briar. And all of a sudden he was filled with baffled anger at this grotesque interruption which had driven them both into hole-and-corner fear. He was abruptly so revolted that physical action seemed to be the only relief. Springing forward, he began flailing about in the underbrush. He would have called out had not Lydie grasped his arm and whispered to him imploringly to be quiet.

“If there’s anyone sneaking around, spying—” he began, but Lydie interrupted him.

“Hush, please! I have a dreadful feeling, Eric. It was—” She choked up and put her hands to her throat.

He could see her face only dimly, but there was nothing incomprehensible in the quality of her strangled whisper. Shocked horror left him dumb.

“Stay here a while, Eric,” she said, almost beneath her breath. “I’ll go back to the house—through the orchard. I—I—perhaps I’m just imagining things.”

Before he could reply, she had slipped away from him, and he was left alone in a dark silence that was awful with its burden of unuttered sounds.

## 4

Lying tensely awake, every nerve a listening ear, Eric was cramped in a rigid and alert expectation of he knew not what.

The whole fantastic episode appeared to him now as so incredibly

ridiculous that he was close to laughter. What was that old saw about a guilty conscience building ogres? But he had no guilty conscience, that was the devil of it! He had a balked and harrowed and rebellious one, but its season of guilt was long gone by. There was only one question in his mind now. How was he going to break down that obstinate and really *immoral* conception of loyalty which she clung to with such stolid unreasonableness? There was something primitive and blunt about her which he had not yet been able to fathom. That blind and misled simplicity of hers was likely to bring havoc into the lives of three people—no, four, he amended with chilling reflection.

The more he pondered, the more deeply enmeshed he became in the puzzle of Lydie's adroit and yet so innocently candid ways. Was it not quite possible that she had so influenced him tonight—his emotions had been plastic enough for anything!—that he would believe he had actually *heard* somebody stirring in the underbrush? She was quite capable of any ruse to get herself out of a corner, if a fresh impulse had seized her which was at variance with the one that had brought her out of the house in the first place.

The notion that Andrew had been prowling about within earshot and even within sight of them was too morbid to be tenable. Dismiss it! A night's sleep would put a more wholesome color on what looked now sick to death.

It was well past midnight before the familiar wheeze of Andrew's car sounded in the driveway. Then Eric's anxiety for Lydie, who had no doubt been waiting for that sound with a suspense equal to his own, drifted off into monstrous dreams that chained through his sleep all night long. Natalie Monroe was playing some instrument that looked like a misbegotten bagpipe, over the prone shape of Andrew's dog Shag. Andrew himself, stripped, was seated on the ground throwing wild rice over the dog's body. An aura of vile and secret ritual hung over the dream, as well as over those that followed distortedly upon its heels.

Morning broke pink and humid. Eric, clad in bathrobe and slippers, went down to the river, scrubbed himself, then walked out to the middle of the reddish amber stream, where the water was deep enough for a swim. When presently he came back up across the narrow strip of bright sand, his bare feet enjoyably tingling upon it, he discovered to his surprise that he had recaptured something of the free and spaceless delight he had known in his boyhood here on this river. How that could be so, in view of all that had crowded upon him since his return to *Solbakken*, was a matter for wonderment!

Back in the orchard house, he made himself a breakfast of half a grapefruit, a fried egg, toast and coffee. And he enjoyed it. In fiction, he recalled, people of his stamp did not enjoy eating when they thought themselves on the brink of



catastrophe. He was grateful for his unconventional reactions in this instance. They were a merciful respite from the hammering that had been going on in his brain endlessly now, it seemed. He washed the few dishes and set them away with a brisk and wholesome feeling that this was after all a new morning, a fine morning spreading into summer, and that where there was life, as he had once told a despondent student of his—there was *life!*

He vividly remembered that student now, the son of a wealthy grain broker in Minneapolis who had shot himself because of certain speculations through which he had hoped to save himself and his clients. The boy to whom Eric had talked all of an afternoon and late into an exhausting night, had at length gone furiously to work and got himself a scholarship, a part time job in a filling station supplying the while his temporal needs. That same boy, a civil engineer, was now somewhere in South America doing extremely well by himself. He had written Eric twice in the past year, thanking him with awkward warmth for what “my favorite prof” had done for him.

Eric went that morning to Inglebrook. Crossing the yard on the way to the shed where he kept his car, he saw no one. In the field to the east, Bob Gifford was at work, distant and bright in the sun, on the cultivator. South of him, Andrew was walking about, examining the pale stand of grain.

In Inglebrook, he shipped off his cases of books to Sibert Mueller, posted his letters, then looked in on the Sadlers. Except for the beds, the stove, the kitchen table, and such pots and pans and dishes as they would need for a day or so, their furniture was neatly congregated in the living room and the tiny hall, whence it would be removed early Monday morning for disposal at the bi-monthly street auction in Axford.

A heartening fortitude prevailed in the Sadler house. Ada spoke calmly, with determined cheer and grateful appreciation, of the chance she would have to “get somewhere” in Natalie Monroe’s dress shop. She did not mention Bill Forsythe. Ben, who was going to drive to Wyoming with a salesman in Axford, had a road map spread out on the kitchen table, and looked up now and then to report with grave surprise that this historic point or that was one he had always wanted to see. Sure enough! it was right on their route. Minnie’s chin began to quiver then, but she raised it stiffly when she said, “Pa and mamma always wanted to visit Custer’s Last Stand. Maybe they’re—maybe they’re there right now—together.” And Ben said off-handedly, “I’ll send you a post card from there. Then—up here’s the Devil’s Tower. I’ve seen pictures of it. I wonder if anybody’s ever climbed to the top of it. It’s right near Sundance—on the map, anyhow. It’s made of some kind of salt—”

Ada laughed. “*Basalt*, Ben. It has nothing to do with salt.”

When he was leaving, Ada told him that she and Minnie, Bill Forsythe and Ernest Petersen would be out at the Clarences' after supper tonight. Ben wouldn't go—the salesman at Axford was having him at his house for the evening.

At the post office there was a letter from Natalie. It was brief, barbish, clipped—but understanding Natalie, he was at least gently warmed by it.

“At the risk of making myself tedious,” she wrote, “I am reminding you that I am still alive, although you have not answered my letter of congratulations on *The Grass Grew Tall*. I like the title, by the way, and I know it will be at the top of the list of best sellers. You should have a little free time now, or am I wrong again? Do your plans for the immediate future include a trip to New York? I am thinking of going to Spitzbergen toward the end of June—I hear there's a coal-mining community up there of six thousand men and three women. Maybe I'd make a good fourth at bridge. I had thought of flying to New York, but I'd just as soon drive if you'll come along. Not throwing myself at your head, either, darling. We were good friends before I made the tactical error of falling in love with you, and we can be friends again, I think. Of course, if you have solved your problem out there in a way that will give you the real happiness you want—and I have no way of knowing, from our voluminous correspondence—then my suggestion is out. However, out of respect for our longish and not too-stormy friendship, will you let me know? I love driving—even better than flying—but not alone. By the way, I'm so happy that Ada is coming into our dress shop. The girl has great possibilities, and I think it would be a mistake for her to throw herself away on Bill Forsythe, honest and likeable though he may be. When she wrote me about her mother's death, I felt sympathetic, naturally, but if the result will be her breaking away and getting something out of life, I think it has probably been for the best. Of course, I shall not express this feeling to her when she comes to the city next week. I'm going to the city myself to be on hand when she gets there. Do you mind answering this letter before it gets mildewed?”

Well, Eric thought as he drove back to the farm, Natalie was a thoroughbred. No sniveling about her. To that extent, she and Lydie Clarence were alike. But why could he not have fallen in love with Natalie? Why didn't rain go up, instead of down? Human beings, it appeared, were nothing but tubes of white hot glass in the control of a mad glass blower, and the shapes they took depended entirely upon his intemperate idea of novelty.

To be unsentimental, callous enough to take Natalie up on her offer! He knew plenty of men who would be—who would not even consider such action unsentimental or callous. Well, he was not of their fortunate company, and that

was that! He would write Natalie without delay and tell her thanks, but no, all things considered . . .

He hated himself for the apprehension he felt on entering Andrew Clarence's yard—for some reason he had latterly ceased to think of the place by its time-honored name, *Solbakken*, had even ceased to regard it as his own property—hated the relief he felt upon seeing no one about in that complacent broad sunlight, where the only creatures his arrival disturbed were the white leghorns imperiously scratching in the dust.

Not until he had closed the door behind him in the orchard house, and satisfied himself that Andrew was not there solemnly waiting for him, did he draw an easy breath. But this was only another false reprieve, as his sense of clean freedom after his swim this morning had been. Within an hour, the conviction that in some manner or other Andrew had learned the truth, assailed him so strongly that when he looked at his palms they were wet. If he had only done the rational thing in the beginning—in the beginning of the wrong, that was to say—and told Andrew the truth as soon as he was out of the hospital, it would surely not have been any worse for the man than if he had been informed that his wife was dead. He remembered an automobile accident of two or three years ago in which a friend of his had been killed. Upon Eric had fallen the unhappy task of breaking the news to Ray Sargent's wife. Della—that was her name—had been, as the newspapers said, prostrated, but within a month or two she had seemed eager enough to take up life again where she had left it. A clean, swift blow was better than a compassionate lopping off of a man's ears and nose, hands and feet, so that he might bleed to death at his leisure, and with greater pain. Either method, of course, was murder, and in the case of Andrew Clarence—

In the chair beside him, where he had dropped it a moment ago, was the book he had kept out for re-reading. It was George Santayana's *Platonism and the Spiritual Life*. He picked it up again, looked at it with eyes that took in none of the excellence that was there. He stared ahead of him at the black and grinning maw of the empty fireplace.

Somebody, he thought, should write a dissertation on a fireplace on a hot day. Perhaps somebody already had, though. It wouldn't be like him to think up anything new—except getting into a mess like this! God, was that Andrew last night? No, it couldn't have been! Lydie would have managed to come over and tell him—somehow! She would know, by this time. Perhaps she wouldn't, though. Perhaps she wouldn't come and tell him, even if she did know. Hell, what did he know about her, after all? There had been that accidental look in her eyes—eyes like blue water under stars—damn! If Sibert Mueller would

only walk in, or Natalie, or one of the old crowd! Lydie was so deceptive—she looked all of a piece, at first, but try to assemble her, and she was like mercury spilled on the floor. What was that again—the mandrake root? Doctor Stene, the real author of *The Grass Grew Tall*, had a word for it—the mandrake root.

“She ate me—nice idea, isn’t it?” he said aloud. “She liked the taste, but she has to stick to the diet she’s sworn to by the sacrament called marriage. And she’ll stick to it! It won’t be easy at first, because she’ll think of me whether she wants to or not. But as soon as she has her child, she won’t think of me—nor of Andrew!”

But why in the name of common kindness hadn’t she come over and told him how Andrew had acted last night, after he got home—or this morning, if she didn’t see him last night? Was she staying in the house just because she was afraid to do anything else? Maybe that was it. That was it! But sooner or later, he would have to face Andrew himself. Then—he would know.

He rose and got himself a scotch and soda, returned and sat down again to pick up his book. He felt slightly comforted by the drink and by the fine prose, but rather—he observed in oblique parenthesis while he read and drank—as a man might who was being feasted on the eve of his execution.

Why, he asked himself, had he come back here at all today? He might better have spent the time at a motion picture in Axford, or even in Inglebrook. For that matter, why should he not drive to the city immediately—it was a trip of less than three hours—and lose himself and his agonized confusion in a resumption of companionships that had once been happy?

His watch, he found when he glanced at it, had been taking a rest for an hour. It was a costly watch—a somewhat embarrassing gift from Natalie Monroe Christmas before last—but because he had neglected to wind it, it had not kept pace with the homely alarm clock on the mantel, the clock which Lydie had put there. Well, he hadn’t wound the alarm clock, either. Lydie had laughed when she set the clock on the mantel, a few weeks after his settling in, and had said, “I know you won’t need anything like this, but if you ever do—it’s here.” He had, as it turned out, used it to rouse himself to go to work all those mornings during Andrew’s convalescence.

So here he was, sitting thinking about Natalie’s expensive watch and Lydie’s cheap alarm clock! It was time—time, indeed: ten minutes to five by the clock on the mantel—that he got up and went to Inglebrook for something to eat. There had been nothing left after his breakfast this morning. There was that little party in the big house this evening, but he would not go to it. He would drive to the city after supper, and return Monday morning to help Ben

and Ada with the contract for the sale of their house and half acre.

He took a last look around the room. He was really leaving it now, he thought, though he might be back for a few minutes Monday, just to say a final good-bye. A feeling bleak as homesickness assailed him as he closed the door.

## 5

The west was a flat, threatening indigo again. More rain! And there was Andrew driving up from his wheat field, entering the yard, turning the horses over to Bob Gifford. Eric met him at the windmill, where Andrew had paused for a drink of water. His face had a closed and curiously still look, or was it just this heavy blue light that made it seem so? The somber color appeared to have got beneath his skin, giving it a livid cast.

“Are you really leaving us on Monday, Eric?” Andrew asked him in his gently regretful tone, a faint and oddly preoccupied smile playing about his eyes. It induced in Eric an appalling physical qualm. He knows, he thought, his mind reeling. God, there’s no doubt of it now! He *knows*.

“Either Monday or Tuesday, I guess. I have to be on hand to see about the deed for the Sadler place on Monday. I’ll be sorry to go, Andrew. You’ve both been so damned decent to me! I can’t tell you what it has meant—the chance to pull myself together—and to work on the book. Whether it’s any good or not—”

His words came stumblingly and stopped dead at the other’s queer, unattentive laugh.

“Will you come over to the old well with me?” Andrew asked with timid eagerness. “We haven’t had a talk for a good while, and perhaps I won’t see you again for years. There won’t be anybody like you around here for a long time again, Eric.”

They sat down on the well head, each leaning back against one of the vine-decked posts that supported the cupola. A faint, pleasant and haunting smell came up from the cool dark water far below. The wooden bucket, fastened to its heavy rope, stood behind Eric on the stone ledge. Distant thunder rumbled, surly and guttural. Andrew pulled a leaf off the creeper and milled it absently between his fingers.

“This is as good a time as any,” Eric began in desperation, seeing that

Andrew was evidently going to say nothing, “to talk about an adjustment on your rent, Andrew. I’ve been thinking of making it half of what it was last year. You’ve saved me more than that and—”

Andrew’s thin, absent chuckle broke out again, a horribly happy sound, if such a thing could be! Eric felt his blood freeze.

“No, no!” Andrew deprecated mildly. “It is I who owe everything to you. All the work you did here when I was laid up. I can’t ever pay you for that, can I?”

Can I? Is this how he was leading up to it, then? Come out with it, for God’s sake, Eric thought wildly, and have the abominable thing over with! Another minute of this and he would go mad.

“I didn’t do anything more than any man would do for another—in similar circumstances,” he protested in a loud and cheerful voice. “I really insist on the cut, Andrew. I’ll take only half the rent for this year. I wouldn’t feel right about any other arrangement. I mean that—absolutely!”

He became aware then of something that lifted the hair on his scalp. Andrew was clenching and unclenching his fingers on his knees, leaning toward him and peering at him with a studying, ineffably sweet and hideous smile.

“There’s a flat stone—on the river bank,” he whispered. “A flat stone—where two can sit.”

Eric sat electrified with nameless dread, something more profound and all-embracing than fear. He was unable to move a muscle. Andrew’s look had changed in a trice to one of narrow, pitiless cunning. With a spontaneous, feline motion, he leaped at Eric, who had swung about so that his back was no longer braced against the post. The swift stages of his deadly intent culminated in his grasping of Eric’s shoulders with hands that were claws of steel.

But before Eric could rouse himself from what was a veritable paralysis of horror, Andrew’s expression had altered again. The blood seemed to drain from his face, and there was left upon it a ghastly shine like wet tin. He fell back from Eric, a sob rattling out of his throat, then lurched sideways and started off with a blind and zig-zagging gait toward the house.

Eric bent forward and rested his head in his hands. His temples had started to throb as if life were being violently pumped back into them, and down his spine there was a frigid trickle of sweat. It was minutes before he was able to get up and leave the brink of the well. When he did so, it was with the wild notion that the well was skulking at his heels, yawning darkly up at him with

its sweetly sinister depth of forty feet. What positive irony in such an end, for him!

He went back to the orchard house, stretched himself out on the hair sofa, and lay for a long time staring at the rough-beamed ceiling. He could not carry out his plan of going to the city now. He would have to stay here, lying despicably low within these doors.

Tonight, Ada and the rest of them would be seated in the living room of the big house. Lydie would play for them, he supposed. But he would not be there. If any of them came for him, he would have to make some excuse. Time was what he needed now—time to think!

## Chapter Four

### 1

Minnie sat on the plush hassock beside Ernest Petersen's chair, her hand clasped in his with such a dear feeling of security, of being protected and adored, and gazed up at Lydie Clarence while she played that beautiful and *poignant* piece, *Liebstraum*. That music just *was* Lydie, Minnie thought, startled and pleased that such a true and delicate idea should have entered her mind. When Lydie stopped playing, she must remember to tell her that. Ada, sitting so still and straight over there on the couch with Bill Forsythe, might actually be impressed by the observation, although anything Ada hadn't thought of herself scarcely ever impressed her. Still, that wasn't fair to Ada! Poor dear, having to give Bill up, because he had to take care of his family, and being so brave and *casual* about it! Pretending that she wasn't *really* giving him up—that she was going to work in Natalie's dress shop only until—until—Oh, that music! What would it be like, actually married to Ernie—Ernest? He squeezed her hand just then, and fearful, pleasurable ripples crept up Minnie's arm.

But wasn't Lydie Clarence *just* the loveliest thing, in that soft, gentian-blue silk dress she had made herself, especially for . . . Minnie was suddenly suffused with an intimate and blushful feeling represented by no word in her vocabulary. And to think that she herself might before long be looking forward to that extreme and sweet happiness that glowed like a dark flame in Lydie's eyes! Lydie wasn't yet *showing*—oh, inelegant word! but the one they all used—except for a sort of bloomy roundness all about her body. Like one of her own peonies, that was what she was! And Minnie tucked that idea away, too, to mention to Lydie.

If some day she and Ernest could have a living room like this! Oh, but they would! With cozy lamplight on a rainy evening, a piano and nice deep chairs, flowers arranged about in low bowls the way Lydie arranged them—trailing arbutus and violets and pert lady's slipper . . . The music was coming to an end, and Minnie glanced across the room to where Andrew Clarence was



sitting, smoking his pipe. His eyes followed the drifting smoke to the window in an interested way that Minnie thought was plain silly. He had not been listening to Lydie's playing! The light from the floor lamp struck his cheekbones so that they stood out like polished shelves. Was he sick, Minnie wondered, and not saying anything about it because they were all here? The rain whispered, sudden and loud, against the screen of the window beside her. And why hadn't Eric come in from that place of his? Ada had gone over to fetch him, but he had said he had letters to write. Letters! When he was going away Monday, or Tuesday at the latest! It was downright rude of him, and Ada had thought as much too. Lydie had simply laughed. She wouldn't let anything upset her, now. But perhaps that was why—Eric's not coming over—perhaps that was why Andrew was looking so strange and white. Andrew was so *sensitive*!

"Thank you, Lydie," Andrew said in a sudden way when Lydie turned around from the piano. "That was beautiful!"

And then he did so strange a thing—for him—that Minnie completely forgot the poetic fancies she had stored up to tell Lydie about herself. He came slowly across the room—she would always remember afterwards how he had walked, fascinatingly, with a lingering of his limp still, as though his feet "drawled"—and twining his thin brown fingers in Lydie's hair, stooped and kissed her.

Lydie smiled up at him with her eyes searching and queer. Minnie was thrilled right down to her toes by that look, and resolved that she would herself some day gaze at Ernest in just such a profound and *heart-probing* manner! Perhaps he would think there was something wrong with her, though, she reflected ruefully; he wasn't exactly *subtle*, darling Ernest! She gave his hand a warm squeeze in apology for her thought.

"My hands aren't in shape even for the kind of playing I do," Lydie laughed. "Shall we turn on the radio, or would you just rather sit and talk?"

"I wish you'd play that Brahms Lullaby, first," said Ada, in a very light way, as if she were just making an ordinary and polite request. But it was *too* light—Minnie felt it was, and a shadow fell upon the coziness of the evening. "I've never heard anybody play that as—as just *right* as you do, Lydie!"

Lydie shook her head. "I've never played anything right in my life, but if you really want to hear it . . ."

They were all silent again for a little while, and when Lydie's hands came once more to a rest upon the keys—brown and dreaming hands, Minnie thought with a sweet, sad fullness in her throat—nobody said a word. Then

after a minute, Ada thanked her shortly, not saying it was beautiful or anything! Of course Ada meant well, and yet—

“Now, let’s see what’s on the radio!” said Lydie, sparkling up. “Where’s the paper?”

She walked across the room to the old-fashioned paper rack beside the kitchen door. Minnie remembered that she had kept it there when she moved out most of the old Stenes’ furniture, because she thought it was *quaint*. Minnie decided that she would have something “quaint” like that too, when she and Ernest had a real living room of their own. Of course at first they would have only those two little cubby-holes of rooms above Stumpfl’s Bakery, but didn’t they have a whole lifetime ahead of them?

“It’s stopped raining,” Andrew said, rising. “I think I’ll go out and see if there are any more owls hanging around the chicken house. We won’t have a chicken left on the place if I don’t get after those robbers!”

Minnie had come over and was standing with her arm slipped in tremulous gratitude through Lydie’s, on the pretext of helping her read the radio program. She was only half aware of what Andrew had said, because she had remembered suddenly the things she had wanted to tell Lydie—about her actually *being* that music and all—but later, oh, later, how clearly she recollected what his last words had been! He had just meant to go out and look for owls that were taking his chickens.

There was violin music on the air—a concert from New York—when the shot brawled out, a shattering roar that seemed close by and yet, afterward, seemed to have been too far away to have happened at all. For the violin had gone on playing, sweet and thin.

## 2

It was past two o’clock in the morning. The prosaic and orderly processes whereby society through its ably functioning minions establishes the verdict of “accidental death” had been duly employed. Andrew Clarence was a problem now only for the none-too-skillful, final architect in his dull little brick building in Inglebrook.

These were Eric’s thoughts as he sat, or occasionally got up to stride aimlessly about the room, in the orchard house. All that subsequent business of the doctor’s coming, and the matter-of-course appearance of Sheriff Littleton

and the coroner, skimmed his mind with a dour touch, but it was quite another thing that stabbed into it—and would, he believed gauntly, as long as he lived. The very loud and reverberating sound of that shot, while he sat here trying to read, was something that would echo through his brain forever. Even Ernest Petersen’s bursting open his door to tell him that Andrew was shot through the head—that he had gone out to look for owls and must have gone for his gun and tripped over something in the dark—even Ernest’s explosive, white-faced entrance would never stick in his memory as would that single implicitly expert report of Andrew’s gun.

How perfectly Andrew had timed it all! Bob Gifford had been asleep upstairs in the big house; Ada, Bill Forsythe, Minnie, Ernest Petersen, and Lydie had been listening to the radio in the living room. Eric, himself, to all intents and purposes, had been writing letters in the orchard house. Andrew had seen to it that no one should fall under the slightest shadow of suspicion, for it would have been impossible for Eric—had any motive existed—to have shot him and got back to his own place, there to be sitting calmly reading when Ernest came to tell him of the tragedy. Andrew had arranged it so that there would be plenty of witnesses to the fact that he had merely gone out to look for owls. He had stumbled over something in the dark tool shed—his leg was not too sure even yet—and the loaded weapon had done what so many of its kind had done before. The shed was not electric lighted, Andrew had used his flashlight to find his way through the place to that corner—Eric remembered the rosy sunset-shaft across it a certain day not long ago—where he kept his guns. Bill Forsythe, rushing out to the shed ahead of the others, had seen what was there—saw the innocent roll of roofing material upon which Andrew must have caught his foot. Then, at Ada’s behest, Ernest Petersen had come running to the orchard house to inform Eric of what had happened. Ernest—or anyone else, for that matter—would never know what stark panic Eric had experienced during that interval between the sound of the shot and Ernest’s arrival at the door.

His first thought had been—Lydie! Andrew had decided to take Lydie. And with frozen clearness, he had seen the end of the Stene line in America. How odd it was—he hadn’t thought of it before!—the letters of his first name stood in the center of the name *America*. Amerigo Vespucci, the sailor, had got the credit, historically, for giving his name to a new continent. How strange that Eric the Red, in the eleventh century, should have had a son who discovered a new land beyond dragon-infested seas! But how much stranger still, that the present Eric Stene’s mind could encompass such irrelevant matters. Lydie dead, perhaps—her child and his dead. His own proud and futile self, gone into oblivion with the end of the Stene line, with the end of

this farm his forebears had thought good! He had been unable to get up from his chair at the sound of that shot, and if Ernest Petersen had not flung open the door within two minutes afterward, he might have remained rooted there.

Yes, he had acted rationally alarmed, for Ernest's benefit, when the youth came pell-mell through the door. Of course he had heard the shot, he said—but it might have been someone on the road in a gay mood, firing at nothing. That had happened often enough! Ernest and everybody else had believed him when he gave that as his reason for not running out of the cabin at once to see what had occurred.

Then—well, he had seen it all—and he had had one glimpse of Lydie's grief-shattered eyes as they met his own.

But all of that, now that it was over, did not seem immediate. What touched him more closely than anything else was the grueling idea that Andrew must have gone to elaborate lengths to succeed in what he meant to do! He had set the stage for his final act of renunciation so that there should be no fumbling of the drama. Eric could imagine him in rehearsal before it grew dark this evening; measuring off nice distances between the roll of roofing material and his own feet, his arms, his head, and the smooth length of the gun. It must have taken absolute accuracy, the whimsical accuracy that would look like accident. Andrew must have kept his flashlight on until the instant before he risked missing his mark!

Ada and Bill were staying overnight in the big house with Lydie. Ernest Petersen had taken Minnie home in hysterics to his mother's farm, and poor Bob Gifford, after his terror at Littleton's questioning of everyone in the living room, had wept like a girl.

Eric went again to the window and saw this time only one light burning upstairs in the big house. The doctor had given Lydie an opiate—perhaps she was sleeping now. If she had only broken down, gone completely to pieces as almost any other woman must have done! Her mute, white rigidity, while Eric could do nothing, could say nothing, had been well-nigh intolerable. He wondered if it would have made any difference if they had been alone together for a little while, and winced as he reflected that it probably would not. Lydie would never let him into her proud and icy grief, or admit that he had any right to share it!

It was daylight before he slept. In the middle of the morning he went across to the house and found Ada at work in the kitchen.

“Bill and Bob Gifford have gone to town to—tend to things,” she told him. “I made Lydie stay in bed. Oh, Eric! It’s so dreadful!” Tears began streaming down her cheeks. She wiped them away angrily with the dish towel in her hands. “If we could just get her to cry! But she’s so quiet and—and stiff, as if she might snap in two. It’s awful! She has hardly said a word except to ask Bill and me to come here and live with her. She wants Bill to run the farm and I think he’s going to do it! So I think we’ll get married, after all. With the little money I have, we might do worse—and it won’t mean our staying here forever, of course. He can still help his family along on what he’ll earn. We won’t need much—” She dabbed again at her eyes. “What do you think of the idea? Bill was raised on a farm, you know. I think I’d like it for a while.”

Eric stared at her. “Lydie actually means to stay on here?”

“Why, of course! Why shouldn’t she? Unless you sell the place. But you hadn’t thought of doing that, had you?”

“No.” He looked unseeingly out of the window.

“I know it’s kind of sudden to be making plans like this, but Lydie is the one who is making them, Eric. I wish you’d go up and try to talk to her. She’s in that small bedroom at the end of the hall. She wouldn’t sleep in the—the big room. Have you had breakfast, by the way? You look sort of green, Eric.” He evaded her suddenly sharp glance and turned toward the staircase.

“I’ve had coffee. You can fix me some toast or something, if you like.”

It wouldn’t do to let Ada suspect that his stomach turned over at the thought of food! More than once he had feared—or perhaps had hoped!—that his cousin’s clear and unbemused eyes had seen through all the miserable pretense of these past months.

Lydie, with a flowered blue dressing gown about her shoulders, was propped up in a narrow bed in the little room that overlooked the orchard. On a tray beside her was half a tumbler of milk and a glass which had held fruit juice. Her heavy lids lifted toward him as if the shadows upon them were physical weights, but a faint smile touched her mouth.

He sat down and looked at her, trying to swallow across the dry tautness of his throat.

“Don’t look so unhappy, Eric,” she murmured. “It just was going to happen, that’s all.”

Her head turned slightly toward the window where the shade was half raised, and the leafy light from a maple just outside dappled the smooth, still pallor of her cheeks and flickered across the wet dark blue of her eyes. It made her look elfin, unreal and scarily remote. He must keep hold of his nerves, he thought. He must not yield to this mad impulse that possessed him now to cry out to her, to beg her not to slip away from him like something unhuman and leave him alone with his feeling of massive guilt! This was no time to think of himself and his own suffering, no matter how aloof and strange her mood might be! In a few days, when the first stunning effect of this blow would have lessened, he could perhaps talk to her as he felt he had a moral right to talk, and hope for a bond of deeper understanding and sympathy to be struck between them. But now—he would be a poor sort of specimen if he thought of anything but her!

“Lydie,” he said in a strained voice, “you know I’d do anything on God’s earth to make this easier for you. Ada wanted me to come up, but if you’d rather I went away now, I’ll go.”

She smiled with faint irony. “She’d think it odd if you left me so soon. Although—I’m not so sure, either. But if you really want to do something for me—” her eyes dwelt with a glimmer of that soft, willful directness upon him—“persuade them—Ada and Bill—to get married and come here to help me run the place. Bill was too surprised when I asked him this morning to answer right away. But—” her voice faltered wearily—“I think a word from you would do it.”

How could he reply to that request now, how make any such promise, when his hope was that within a discreet length of time, he might take her away from here where her memories must always be laced with tragedy? But her eyes were fixed searchingly upon his, and there was something beneath their liquid softness as inflexible as granite. He felt appalled, but at the same time an unwilling admiration wrenched at his heart. In that instant he had a vision of her as she would be at fifty, seventy, and beyond into a proud and indomitable old age. Had the Stene strain vanished from this land? No, for Lydie was carrying the future—it was shining like a blue torch from her eyes!

“I’ll talk to them,” he said heavily. There was nothing else he could say at this moment. “It might be a good idea—Ada mentioned it downstairs. Bill knows enough about this sort of work to make a go of it, I suppose.”

His brain was kindled with questions of moment to both of them. How had Andrew conducted himself with her after his return home last night, and all day today? Had anything in his actions or talk convinced her that he had been spying upon them in the woods when they thought he was far away? Was she

as certain as Eric himself was that Andrew had taken his own life? But these questions that drilled at his mind would simply have to keep on drilling until such a time as he felt that it would not be too brutal to discuss them with Lydie. It would be a long time before he could tell her of his shocking experience with Andrew yesterday afternoon at the old well. More likely, he would never tell her.

“Thank you, Eric,” she said slowly after a moment. “I’m so tired. I shouldn’t have taken that medicine—but the doctor insisted. I’m not that kind —” She turned her head away again, her eyes growing heavy.

Eric got up, almost timidly touched the hand lying outside the coverlet, and stepped softly from the room. While he was on his way to the kitchen, he heard a car enter the driveway. He wondered grotesquely if it might not be Esther Larch!

But it wasn’t Esther. It was a rural peddler of patent medicines, whose creaking van doughtily proclaimed in letters a foot high, “Sully’s Salve, the Farmer’s Friend; Buy a Box, Your Aches Will End!”

Had the fellow, Eric wondered, a license to peddle on Sunday?

## Chapter Five

### 1

There had been an almost tyrannical tidiness about the way things had settled themselves after the simple services for Andrew Clarence in Inglebrook that Monday morning.

For three days Eric had watched the process with what detachment he could muster—since there was nothing else left for him to do!—and now it was late Thursday afternoon. He walked out of the orchard house and slowly between the apple trees to the brow of the hill where he could look down across the road and see Lydie’s peony field coming into a curded pallor of bloom, dark spaces between the rows of lightish flecks showing where the deep red flowers would be. A good year was promised, Lydie had observed last night at supper.

Ada was installed in the house, to help Lydie with her work indoors and out, and the two women were looking forward to next week when Bill Forsythe would join Gifford in the heavier responsibilities of the farm. Over everything was a calm, smooth and purposeful, as if a violent death had not recently occurred here.

Separating himself and his own racked uncertainty from it all, Eric was able to perceive that behind this serene activity was Andrew Clarence. Behind him, again, there might conceivably be the forces that had motivated the old Stenes, an idea romantically pleasing to Eric even now when he doubted that there could be anything pleasing in either emotion or thought. But it was immediately, at least, Andrew who led and beckoned, Lydie coolly instructing the others in what his desires would have been.

These three days of waiting for another sign or word from her had been to Eric an eon. On Monday afternoon, during a tormentingly brief moment alone with her, she had asked him simply, with that thorough, imploring look of her eyes, to stay at the farm for a few days, “so as to make things look natural.” “Natural!” As if he had had any intention of rushing off without coming to



some definite understanding with her! But since then he had not found her alone anywhere for a minute, and of course she had not come to the orchard house to see him.

It was this smoothness, this detestably even keel he hated—he who had always loathed anything that was *not* even keel. During these three days he had felt left out of the whole business—out of the shock, the sorrow, the natural easement of grief, the stoic and determined adjustment to life-going-on that followed. Ada, Bill, Bob Gifford, had been permitted to share these with Lydie. But not Eric!

He pondered upon what his father, his granduncle, or his grandfather would have done under these circumstances. His father would have snorted and walked out. His granduncle would have hidden himself away somewhere to bite his nails and sit in confused, woman-hating misery forever. But Doctor Edvard Stene, that wiry, long, smiling man . . . He would have stayed. The point was, Eric thought queerly, that Doctor Edvard Stene *was* staying, no matter what came of this.

He turned back to the orchard house and saw Lydie in a vividly green cotton smock walking toward him. Any sober color for her? No! His blood raced. Perhaps she smiled a bit with her lips, he could not be sure, but her hands lifted forward a little, and her eyes were full of a soft entreaty.

“I want to tell you something, Eric,” she said. “Let’s go into your house.”

He fell into step beside her.

“Is this the first chance you’ve had to come?” He could not help it if his voice was curt. How could she expect anything else?

“I’m sorry. I’ve had to have time, Eric. It hasn’t been easy.”

“No—of course. I didn’t mean it just that way. But for me it’s been as close to hell as a man could get!”

He thought he heard her sigh. Then they were sitting in the orchard house, Lydie on the sofa, himself on a straight chair by the table. He noticed that in the pink ray of light from the window the dust motes had the powdery glitter of down on a ripe peach.

“I have just had a letter from Natalie Monroe,” said Lydie, upright with her hands calmly folded in her lap. “Ada wrote her about Andrew and everything on Sunday, and told her she wouldn’t take the job in the dress shop because she intended to stay here with me. You know that, of course.” From a pocket she removed a letter. “She says such kind things to me—” her eyes drifted

pensively across the unfolded sheet in her hands, “—but I want you to hear what she says about you.”

Eric frowned, reddened darkly, but Lydie went on without glancing up:

“‘Tell Eric I’ve definitely decided to leave for New York on Saturday, and from there as I told him before, I’m going to Spitzbergen. I’m not going to beg him again to escort me, but I wish you would tell him I think a trip to Spitzbergen would do him and his work a world of good just now. He can go back to the farm sometime, because it will always be there, but Spitzbergen may not be!’ ”

She folded the letter and replaced it in her pocket.

“Eric, you *must* go with her!”

Anger mounted in him and then toppled, leaving him spiritless and cold.

“Lydie, just exactly what do you think I am? I’ve been waiting for days now to talk to you seriously about things, and you come here with some nonsense from Natalie about Spitzbergen! I don’t give a damn about Natalie’s letter. I want to know where you and I stand! Why should I even have to *ask* you to tell me?”

Lydie drew her feet under her on the sofa. The posture made her look childlike and defenseless, and yet her eyes were guarded and unreadable.

“How do you mean—‘where we stand’?”

So this was what it was going to be! Eric cleared his throat in grim exasperation.

“You know as well as I do!” Then, abashed at the harshness of his own voice, he went on more gently, leaning toward her with a look at once contrite and beseeching. “It isn’t too soon, is it, to face things together, Lydie? I know what you’ve been through. God, haven’t I been through it, too? Don’t you want to discuss it with me—just yet?”

She looked straight at him and folded her arms across her breast, and that simple act seemed to him abruptly and chillingly significant: it was as though, by placing her brown young arms just that way, she was withholding from him herself and her peculiar, future significance to him!

“We can discuss anything you like now, Eric. At first, I couldn’t have, and I was ashamed at being so weak. But I was afraid of being upset and—hurting myself.” She paused with a kind of shy reserve, and Eric’s feelings churned indistinguishably within him. “That was why I consented to take that medicine.

I wouldn't have taken it for any other reason." She moved slightly on the sofa, and traced the hem of her smock with a short, clean fingernail. "Don't think I'm not grateful to you, Eric."

The ironical ambiguity of that!

"I don't want you to be grateful to me," he said, "except in the way I am to you. People like us will always owe each other something—something rather important, don't you think?"

Her eyes came across to his again, sweet and direct. "That must be so," she said almost in a whisper, and Eric felt somewhat fortified.

"Well, then," he went on, knuckling one hand earnestly into the palm of the other, "I'm glad of that, Lydie! I was afraid—well, we can talk about that later. There are other things, just now—"

"You mean," she interrupted carefully, "that you've been lying awake nights thinking that Andrew shot himself deliberately? He did, of course."

The blood tingled in his ears. While he had been leading delicately up to this stark point, those clear words were already on the tip of her tongue! But he need not lag behind Lydie now in being outspoken. The air had been instantly rid of his own tangled doubts. Rid, that was, of all except one. He wanted to go across the room and sit beside her, hold her firm hands while he talked to her, but he was still not sufficiently sure of himself to do that! He was like a dog that had long been chained, and then, set free, looked back mistrustingly from where he still crouched, along the radius to the post that had lately been the center of his circle.

"Yes," he said. "That's what I've been thinking. He must have been there—down in the woods, that night. I've wondered how he acted when he came home. He didn't go on that trip at all, of course."

The calm resignation in her attitude while she laced her fingers idly together baffled Eric.

"No," she said, "he must have planned it all, after what Esther Larch told him. He must have planned to—find out for sure, I mean. But when he came home around midnight, he just spoke to me quietly, to let me know he had got back all right. The next day he wasn't different, in any way at all, until I played the piano that evening—when Ada and all of them were there. He came and kissed me in an odd way. After that, I was afraid again. But there wasn't anything I could do about it. Whatever was going to happen, had to be—that was all! But somehow I knew—I can't tell you how—but I knew that he wouldn't hurt you, Eric. He took the only way out—for him. He's free now. I

think he always wanted to be free.”

Her tranquil, effortless dignity stirred Eric so that he found it almost impossible to speak. She was so young, and yet as mature as this earth she was resolved to cling to!

“It’s the only way to think of it, Lydie,” he replied after a moment. “He was too good for—most things in life. To me, he’ll always be one of the finest men I ever met.” He hesitated, then labored the words out, “Have you thought about Esther Larch? Will she go around hinting at something—”

“What if she does?” Lydie asked with a small shrug. “People will laugh at her—as they have before. Everybody knows she was silly about Andrew. And I’ll be here, going on as Andrew would want me to. There’s nothing to be afraid of in Esther Larch, poor thing!”

That was sound enough reasoning, Eric thought. But it was Lydie’s “And I’ll be here” that echoed in his mind.

“I hope you’re right. Nobody knows the truth but ourselves. For his sake we must keep it that way.”

“Yes,” she murmured. “We must.”

“I’ve thought about what we are going to do,” he continued hardily, forcing down the suspicion that had risen like some palpable, stony thing in his breast, “almost every minute of these past three days. I’ve scarcely slept for trying to figure out the best solution—best for both of us, I mean, and—and for the future.” He hurried his voice now, to get it all said before he should be defeated by that frightening fixity of expression and posture that she was assuming. “You will want to stay here—I know—for a while.”

He risked an instant’s silence, and when she did not speak, he hastened on.

“I don’t have to tell you that if I had my way, I’d stay with you, or at least here in the cabin, and let people think what they damned well pleased! But that’s selfish—it wouldn’t be fair to you, or—” He flushed, struggled over the words, for her withdrawn and faintly pitying look was not helping him. “—but you know what I mean, Lydie! If you’ll just tell me in so many words how long I’ll have to wait—when I can hope to come back here and take you away with me! I’m not being crude in asking that, am I, Lydie?”

He was not down on his knees to her, he thought desperately, but his voice was so charged with emotion as he leaned forward buckling his fingers together, that he might just as well be!

“No, you aren’t being crude, Eric,” she replied slowly. “But the answer is

—‘never.’ ”

“Never?” He uttered a gaunt and shaking laugh that conveyed none of the startled disbelief he had meant it to. In his heart he wasn’t startled at all, but merely justified in his worst fears. “Don’t say what you don’t mean, Lydie, now after we’ve faced everything that’s true! A year from now—or from next fall if you think—”

“Please, Eric!”

She got up suddenly, and in an instant he was standing beside her, holding her in his arms and feeling the rapid beat of her heart against the wild stride of his own pulses.

For a few transporting seconds she seemed to be as intensely a part of himself as she had been on that unforgettable night of the early spring, here in this room. But then in helpless panic he could sense the inexorable, renewed grip of her will, and the ardent body he held seemed to change to unresponsive wood.

“Let me go, Eric,” she said steadily. “It’s no use—at all!”

Haggard-eyed, he stood back and stared down at her.

“I told you,” she went on patiently, “that you *must* go with Natalie. She is your sort—I’m not.”

“‘Sort’!” he echoed bitterly. “So that’s it! You’ve got me classified so that whatever I do or say won’t make any difference to you!”

“No, that isn’t really it.” She walked not hurriedly over to the table and idly stacked several magazines strewn upon it. “You know what it is. You have enough imagination to know, at least. I am still married to Andrew—*the way I am now!*”

Eric drew a sharp breath. He stood with his hands grasping the back of a chair, his teeth worrying at his lower lip.

“Perhaps if Andrew hadn’t died—the way he did—I might have had the courage some day to tell him the truth—I don’t know. It wasn’t all as simple as I thought it would be. But even now”—her chin rose just perceptibly in firm pride—“I’m not sorry. And I know in my heart that years from now I’m going to be terribly glad!”

“You’re absolutely ruthless!”

“No. If I were I wouldn’t be thinking about Andrew. Now that he isn’t here to defend himself, I wouldn’t for anything betray his memory—I wouldn’t

make a fool of him to everybody who knew and respected him! Perhaps I was always only spiritually married to Andrew. Well—I still am, and I intend to keep on being.”

She spoke with no vehemence, only a deadly casualness that was far worse. All at once Eric realized that there was no influencing her by either force or passionate appeal, and life seemed to ebb out of his body. He moved to the sofa and with elbows on knees rested his throbbing head in his hands.

In passing him, she touched him once lightly on the shoulder.

“It’s best this way, Eric,” she said softly. “Good-by, my dear. Good luck!”

He heard the soft closing of the screen door, and saw from the corners of his lowered eyes the bright fillip of her green smock moving in the evening breeze through the orchard.

After a while, when he became aware that sunset was spreading a purple and amber mosaic under the trees, he got up and went to the shed to look at his car. One tire, he observed, was flat. His dull laugh came some minutes afterward.

## 2

There was still a ripe apricot glow in the sky above the shaggy margins of the dark trees when he looked back at the people on the hill. He could see them all standing there on the grassy open reach of the east slope—the women, Lydie, Ada and Minnie, plain in their light-colored dresses; the men, Bill Forsythe and Gifford, vague blurs only. Were they waving? He paused. Yes, there was a flutter of white—the women were waving him good-by, again. He gave three staccato blasts of his horn, then turned his eyes once more to the road.

A meadow lark sent up a fountain of notes from a fence post at the corner of Larch’s field. The light seemed to tremble in the sound, and afterward was even more clear and still.

He remembered now that he had not gone to bid old Guri Kvam good-by. He would write her, send her a copy of his book in the autumn. Good old soul—what was that she had said, telling his fortune? “You will die where you were born. . . .”

# THE END

## TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *The Mandrake Root* by Martha Ostenso]