Martha Ostenso

MILK ROUTE

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MILK ROUTE

Books by

Martha Ostenso

WILD GEESE

THE DARK DAWN

THE MAD CAREWS

YOUNG MAY MOON

THE WATERS UNDER THE EARTH

PROLOGUE TO LOVE

THERE'S ALWAYS ANOTHER YEAR

THE WHITE REEF

THE STONE FIELD

THE MANDRAKE ROOT

LOVE PASSED THIS WAY

O RIVER, REMEMBER

Martha Ostenso

MILK ROUTE

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MILK ROUTE

Chapter One

1 Sunrise

When Ben Start first began working for the Mayflower Dairy in the suburban village of Wahwahnissa Creek, he had made haste, morning and afternoon, to escape the mingled, smothering smells of the place. But that had been in 1930, fifteen years ago, when he was forced to leave college in his final year because of his father's sudden and untimely death, and Ben had been left to take care of his invalid mother. The only work he could find during that first black year of the depression was driving a milk truck, and he had been snobbish enough to think that the job was beneath him, a mere makeshift until something better came along. But he had to make a living, after all, and forty-five dollars a week, in addition to commissions that frequently amounted to more than his wages, provided a rather comfortable bulwark against the demands of his creditors. Without knowing it, he had begun to like the work, and before long the characteristic aroma of the dairy came to have a homely friendliness, soothing and amiable to the senses.

This morning, when he had loaded his truck at daybreak, the blended fragrance was especially heartening. The scoured, moist-wood smells of the churns drifted in from the butter-making room to mix with the redolence of milk, steam, metal, and washed concrete in the pasteurizing plant. For a while he was able to forget the scene with his mother last night when he had announced his intention of spending his two weeks' vacation on Lost Moon Lake. That, in itself, would have caused no commotion, Ben knew. He was thirty-seven, after all—quite old enough to plan his vacation as he pleased. But he had let it be known that Inga Nelson, who worked in the corner drug store, was going with him. They would spend the two weeks with Inga's widowed aunt, Kari Bakken, who still lived in the log cabin on the old Bakken farm.

Even so, there might have been no "scene" had it not been for Maggie Fraghurst, the companion-housekeeper who had become a necessary adjunct to the Start household. Ben's mother, Hortense, had suffered from arthritis ever since the death of her husband. It was Doctor Knutson's opinion that Hortense Start was the victim of a curious psychosis, the basis of which was an arthritic condition genuine enough in itself, but aggravated by grief over the loss of her husband. For years now she had watched with an avid interest the advance of her disease, had been disappointed at its temporary abatement, and almost gratified when it progressed as far as her hands and knees. She would not permit it to reach her pretty ankles. That she would not tolerate. Any treatment, Doctor Knutson declared, was wasted money, because Hortense was determined to be a semi-invalid for the rest of her days.

For the rest of her days, too, Hortense would have Maggie Fraghurst beside her to care for her, humor her, attend to her every need. Ben had long since reconciled himself to the arrangement. He had to have somebody to look after things. It might have been somebody more bearable, but there Maggie was—and there she had been for ten years—and Hortense was used to her. Damn it, if the woman would only find herself a man—but then, what would Hortense do? You couldn't hire anybody nowadays for love or money. If she didn't have an "off" eye that winked dewily whenever she became excited, if she didn't persist in calling his mother Honey, the pet name Ben's father had used, if she didn't call him Gooben whenever she felt maternal toward him, though she was almost exactly a year younger than he! Sometimes her use of the nickname infuriated him, even though he was known by nothing else in the village of Wahwahnissa Creek, where he had lived all his life. His mother had created the cognomen for him when he was a child. Benjamin—Good Benjamin—Good Ben—and so, Gooben. Maggie had as much right as anyone else to use the name, he realized. But it was just another of those trifles that, added up, irritated him beyond all reason.

Yes, it had been an unpleasant half hour or so last night. Ben had been angry, but one glance at his mother and his anger had left him at mid-surge, as it always did. She was a pitiable figure, and seriously quarreling with her was as unthinkable as it was futile. Their differences so far had never come to that.

After all, perhaps he was luckier than a lot of fellows he had known. They were coming back from Europe and the Pacific now, many of them maimed in body and soul, all of them thrown out of gear with the lives they had begun before the war. Some were not coming back at all. Ben had had

his hour of bitterness when he saw his best friends leaving for the training camps, but he had known from the first that he would never be taken. His left leg had never fully recovered from the effect of an attack of infantile paralysis when he was nine years old.

All in all, he thought, as he drove away from the dairy in his neat butter-colored and sky-blue truck that had MAYFLOWER DAIRY painted in bold grass-green on either side of it, he had every reason to feel happy this morning. One more round of the village, and he would be free to do as he liked for two whole weeks. He and Inga would leave in the early afternoon and arrive at Kari Bakken's place on Lost Moon Lake in time for dinner.

The day promised to be fine. Only a few flecks of cloud floated high against a clear end-of-August sky. In early summer, you would have heard orioles throwing liquid silver drops of sound into the sunrise—"Pretty birdie! Pretty birdie! I'm a good boy, yes?"—and red-winged blackbirds from their reed tenements in the swamp, and robins and bluebirds from their lofty apartments answering the query with their own warbled laughter. As if any bird was a good boy just before mating time!

But now, only the occasional sparrow chain-stitched his humble notes across the air, or a mourning dove reiterated his monotonous complaint. It was an all but silent world. As he drove down Sunway Boulevard and turned south, away from the village center, and entered the residential district, Ben watched the sun lift its ruddy bulk up between the towers of the city to the east. In a few minutes it would shed its warmth upon the windows of the room in which Inga lay sleeping, upon the long rows of windows in the Panker Factory beside the creek, across the little park whose carefully tended four acres adjoined the factory grounds on the north—and upon all the roofs of the blessed and the needy, the humble and the proud, the just and the unjust, who made their homes in the suburban village of Wahwahnissa Creek.

2 Back-doors

Ben stopped his truck in the lane behind the home of Rupe Prile, clerk of the Wahwahnissa Creek Water Works. Carrying crate in hand, he paused—as he always did—before opening the gate. Rupert Prile was the meanest man in the village.

Ben was careful, in walking up the path through the vegetable garden, not to step on a single stray leaf of beet or cabbage plant. Children, delivery men, peddlers, and dogs had been known barely to escape with their lives after such accidental trespassing on the sacred plot.

Though the Prile back yard was still in shadow, Mary Prile was already out scouring the cement steps on her hands and knees. Her sweater sleeves were rolled up, and before she noticed Ben he saw that her bony arms were mottled blue with cold. Now, aware of his approach, she turned her weak eyes toward him over one shoulder, flushed with embarrassment and jerked her sleeves down to her wrists as she fled into the house.

Ben picked up the two empty milk bottles from beside the steps and replaced them with two full ones from his crate. No order for cream this morning—nor had there been for more than two weeks now. The cream from the top of the milk bottles would do for Rupe, of course. Mary could get along with what was left. The damned skinflint, with his pious pose every Sunday morning in the community church!

Ben felt a muscle in his jaw work nastily. Some day, he promised himself, he would take a swing at Rupe Prile, just for the satisfaction it would give him . . .

The end of the lane brought him to the back of the Panker mansion. The blinds were still drawn, but old man Bratruud, the gardener, was already at work among the rows of vegetables. Years ago, Ole Bratruud had been skipper of a fishing boat on Lake Superior. Ben strode through the broadening flush of light to give the old Norwegian the greeting that never failed to flatter him.

"*Goddag*, Captain!" he hailed him with a brisk salute. "*Hvordan staar det til?*"

"*Bare bra!*" Ole grinned, and came toward him.

"I'm off north this afternoon for two weeks fishing," Ben told him. "Better come along."

The old man chuckled. "Yah—I vish it might be so. But my fishing days, dey are ended, except for on de creek here." His face puckered pathetically as he looked up across the saddle of gilt and red the sun had thrown across the late summer brilliance of the tree tops. "Might be I go back to Sogn some day, if I live so long. Ah, yah! Till den—here I stay!"

He turned away to his work among the vegetables and Ben hurried off, the bottles rattling in his crate.

He slammed on his brakes just as he was about to pass Doctor Knutson's house. The doctor's car was gone from the garage. Somewhere another young stranger was probably protesting his entry into this grotesque world, Ben supposed. Through the screen of the sleeping porch upstairs a child's voice trebled a greeting to him.

"Hi, Gooben!"

It was Doctor Knutson's ten-year-old Jimmie, standing in his pajamas with his face pressed to the screen.

"Hi, old timer! What gets you up so early?"

"Nothin'! I just *woke* up. I ate watermelon last night and got a stomach-ache."

"Your dad fixed that up, I bet you," Ben said and grinned up at him.

"He didn't, either! He ain't got time for us, Mom says. We're goin' out to the farm next week."

"Good! And I'm going fishing up north."

"Oh, gee, you are? Dad says there ain't a damn fish left in our lake. He says all the damn people from Kansas came up and cleaned out—"

Ben heard Jimmie's mother call sternly from somewhere within the house. He smothered a laugh with one hand and hurried around to the back porch . . .

At his next stop, he halted at the sight of four empty bottles, from one of which protruded a scribbled order for a gallon of milk. He scratched his head and read the note again. Yes, a *gallon*. He whistled softly. What in Sam Hill could a man living alone want with four quarts of milk?

"Brother Pinwinder," he said to himself, "there's more in this than meets the eye."

A glance at the windows revealed no sign of Brother Pinwinder, although frequently he would be peering out as if he suspected the presence of burglars. Ben's eyes followed a narrow footpath that ran diagonally across an adjacent vacant lot to the rear of Widow Gates' snug little cottage. Brother Pinwinder was in his seventies, Widow Gates was a lively fifty and some.

Ben placed the four bottles side by side and turned away with a soft chuckle. After all, there was room in the world for old fools as well as young, and perhaps a lesser havoc lay in the wake of their peccadillos. No one seemed to know much about the widow except that she had come to live in the village shortly after Gilbert Pinwinder, having fathered a dozen children, resolved henceforth to shun the world, the flesh, and the devil. He had immediately shunned his long-suffering wife as well, who had gone to live with one of her married sons. At the same time, he had retired from his position as clerk in the city post office, and had turned carpenter, emulating the humble Carpenter of old. With his own hands he had built himself a small cottage in Wahwahnissa Creek, where he composed religious pamphlets on an ancient typewriter for free distribution among the villagers.

As he made his way back to his truck, Ben smoothed out the bit of paper upon which the old zealot had written his order for milk. The decrepit typewriter with its faded ribbon had done its poor best to shed eternal light upon the dark places of the world:

> *Awake! Awake! Nation has risen against nation. The sword has been unsheathed. Armageddon is at hand. The wicked shall be cast into everlasting darkness and the righteous shall inherit the earth. Seek ye the Lord—today! Call ye upon Him—now! For the hour of His vengeance is upon us.*

Ben pressed the paper into a tight ball and flung it away. Omens and portents! He shook himself as if to free his mind of something he could not name, some sense of confusion and futility that bore more heavily than the knowledge of Gilbert Pinwinder's mawkish love affairs.

The sun had cleared the roof-tops across the street, and in the gutters last night's rain lay like fragments of gold-foil crumpling fragilely under the slight fingers of a breeze. A yellow leaf or two shalloped down the air, early tokens of the season's wane.

It was a beautiful morning . . .

Herman Shatts, the plumber, had ordered his milk delivered on the front porch, so that the bottles might not be confused with those of his sister, Mrs. Bill Clifford, who lived in the basement while her husband was with the Navy in the South Pacific. Two deliveries, then, fore and aft. Ben stood for a moment outside the house and looked up at the sunlight that glistened along the wet eaves like little fangs of pale flame. Down there in the basement,

Bill's wife Molly was probably still asleep and dreaming of her hero husband.

Through an open upstairs window came the exquisite notes of a violin, young and pure as the dawning boyhood of the lad who held the bow. Twelve-year-old Frederick Shatts, the plumber's son, who had been hailed as a genius by the foremost teachers of the city, who had won the Phillips Gold Medal at the Institute of Music a year ago—what did a world all but stripped of beauty hold in store for him?

The narrow tongues of sun-fire darted along the eaves of the house as Ben drove away. The frail music seemed like a shimmering radiance made audible . . .

The green flounce of the hill above Miles Hopewell's mink ranch was plumed with goldenrod and buttoned with wild white asters. Ben stopped his truck at the top of the steep sandy road and sat for a minute looking down across the creek valley to the mysteriously webbed islands of marsh beyond. The islands were mere cones of silt into which a man might sink to his waist, but which gave support to the reaching roots of willows. Only in broad, blank daylight, Inga had once said, could you look at this region without a sense of primordial fear. And she was right. By moon or starlight the fibrous haunches of the marsh seemed to set themselves in motion for a spring toward the innocent creek threading its indolently resolute way to the Mississippi and eventually to the Gulf and the wide seas. By dawn, and for an hour or more afterwards, the black and red and gold of the swamp's waters, with muskrat heads arrowing darkly before a wake of liquid, metallic gloom, struck into the seeing heart an emotion mixed of chill resentment and reverent awe for the preoccupation of Nature apart from the small concerns of man.

But the swamp was never really the same in any two hours of light. It seemed to Ben now that the bosky islets were pinnacled up by some invisible support from the water, or were floating on banners of pink-gold mist that held them suspended.

Miles Hopewell, the mink farmer, was a middle-aged bachelor whose regard for womankind was something less than tolerant. He was stooping over one of his precious mink pens when Ben saw him.

"Can I sell you some horse-meat this morning?" Ben called to him as he set his wire crate down on the back steps of the cottage.

Miles looked over his shoulder and grinned, then beckoned to him. Ben walked over to glance down into the screen-topped pen where a sleek, onyx-eyed creature curveted about in his costly raiment.

"That's a Koh-i-nur," Miles said, "—a rare Black-cross. You saw him when he was a kit."

"How much will you take for him?"

Miles shook his head. "Well, the pelt will go better than a hundred dollars in another couple months. Worth it, too, any way you look at it. Horse-meat comes high these days, what with a few million starving Europeans yammering for it. Over there it's a delicacy, they tell me. Over here, it keeps our fancy ladies warm in the winter. I see 'em strutting in a full-length coat of pelts like that, and I say to myself—horse-meat!"

He unlocked and slid back the cover of the pen, and with a quick maneuver of his welder's leather-mittened hands captured the squirming occupant within. The mink was the utter embodiment of furred grace, a curious product of mutation, but more than that a triumph of patience in man's search for a beautiful result that Nature herself would promptly eliminate as a freak. His fur was ivory except for a silvery black stripe down his back and a dark bar crossing the stripe at his shoulders.

"A coat of those pelts would cost about—" Ben said.

"About twelve thousand dollars," Miles told him as he thrust the little animal back into its tidy pen and closed the cover. "But you haven't seen my Silverblu. A coat of that would come to twenty thousand. Show me any slut in the country that's worth it—and kids starving to death all over the goddam world! It makes me sick."

"You're in a fine mood this morning, Miles," Ben laughed.

"I get that way sometimes," Miles admitted. "I get that way, just looking at 'em—and thinking. Makes me sick!"

Ben hurried away. It was getting late and most of his work was still to be done. Near by was Colin Trale, the preacher in the Community Church; and Della Prince, the mother of Josie Stone, whose young husband had been killed in the Pacific; and the hide-bound Wilsons, with their grandniece Adelberta, and a score of others in the immediate neighborhood. After that there was Red Willow Terrace, the home-site acreage that had grown up steadily along the north bank of the creek in the five or six years immediately preceding the war. The tract had been part of the original Panker estate, and had developed noticeably even during the war years,

thanks to the enterprise of George Panker, whose object in fostering the project was to provide neat and inexpensive homes for the men and women who had come to help produce war materials in his factory.

The Red Willow Terrace names ran in fair parallel through Ben's mind with what he knew about each of them. He had come to know them, for the most part, through their back doors, where they unwittingly betrayed themselves as much in their petty quibbling as in their open-hearted charity. Meanness and generosity stood cheek by jowl on the Terrace. In one house a woman would declare that she had been cheated out of due credit on empty bottles. In the next, a housewife who had to count her pennies would order an extra quart of milk for the neighborhood's stray cats.

It was almost eleven o'clock when he finally drew up in front of The American Flagg Market, Sam Flagg's neighborhood grocery that stood a stone's throw away from the railway trestle over the creek. As Ben got down from his truck, Sam's dog Midget, a Great Dane, came forth like an animated bronze statue to greet him with friendly dignity and a lolling tongue.

"Anything rotten in Denmark today, old fellow?" Ben said as he stooped to rub the dog's satiny ears.

Almost as he spoke, the South-State and Freling Short Line freight came thundering across the trestle, and Midget lifted his massive head in a doleful complaint that might have been an answer to Ben's question.

Sam was alone in the store. He looked up from the morning paper spread on the counter before him, and pushed his glasses back on his forehead as Ben lugged his bottle-filled crates in at the door.

"Hi, Sam! What's new?"

Sam jerked his glasses off. "Don't you young whipper-snappers ever get tired of askin' what's new?"

"You've been reading the morning paper, haven't you?" Ben said, with a nod toward the counter as he made his way to the cooler in the back of the store.

"Yup! Tryin' to." The old man's crisp New England accent persisted still, in spite of his forty years in the Middle West. "Can't see a thing since I started usin' these pesky bifocals. Got along better without glasses at all."

Ben chuckled as he opened the cooler and began stowing away the bottles of milk. "I suppose that's why you balled up your figures last week,

and tried to gyp the Mayflower out of three bucks on that butter deal."

Sam grinned. "Got to make a livin', don't I?"

"Living, my eye! If I had half the money you've gouged out of the poor devils around here in the last—"

"Gouged, eh?" Sam muttered, half to himself. "There's one thing you don't know about that, young feller. I'm a poorer man today than I was when I came here."

It was probably true, Ben thought as he closed the cooler. Sam Flagg and his wife Sadie had been serving the community one way or another for as long as he could remember. The old man had never turned away anyone who was in actual want, and Sadie had been frequently spoken of as the community mother. Down through the years they had ministered to the sick and the needy in the neighborhood, so that people often wondered how the old couple managed to pay their own bills.

"How's Sadie?" Ben asked abruptly.

"All right, I guess. But women are notional. Complain when there's nothin' wrong with 'em, an' not a word other times when they might be dyin'. Says now she's feelin' old all of a sudden. I don't like that. Been plannin' to have a talk with Doc Knutson, but I don't know. Seems like somethin's wrong wherever you look these days."

"Take your time, Sam. We've been fighting a war. You can't expect to get over that in a day."

"We're not even tryin' to get over it, Gooben," Sam replied morosely. "Read the papers and see what I mean. You don't have to take my word for it. There's a blight on the country. You can see it right in your own town, if you look around you. All you got to do is stand behind this counter for a couple o' days an' listen to the women talk. Sometimes it scares me just to think about it."

Ben assembled the empty bottles and piled them into his crates. "Well, I've got my job to look after," he observed as Sam turned away to attend to a customer who had just come in. "I'm going up north this afternoon for a couple of weeks' fishing. See you when I get back."

Only another hour on the route, he thought to himself as he left the store. Then a hurried lunch with his mother and Maggie Fraghurst before he got into some decent clothes, packed his bag, and drove his old Chevvy around to pick up Inga. He had told her to be ready at two.

For fourteen days there would be no Mayflower Dairy, so far as he was concerned, no smell of milk, no rattle of bottles, no getting out of bed before dawn, no back doors, and no silent sharing of the misfortunes of people he rarely saw and rarely thought of except when he filled the orders they left on their doorsteps. For fourteen days there would only be Inga and the tall pines under the sun or the stars on Lost Moon Lake.

It was Inga herself who had first suggested the plan—as serenely, as happily, as though it were the simplest, most natural thing in the world. Never, in the months during which their friendship had grown into love, had they really been alone together. Inga lived with her married sister, Selma Thole, whose houseful of children afforded no more privacy than did Ben's home, crowded by that lynx-eyed pair, Hortense and Maggie. Thus far, they had had to content themselves with the commonplace occasions of movies and brief drives into the countryside.

There had been other, casual girls in his life, some of whom had been importunate, wanting to marry him in spite of an invalid mother, to say nothing of all the other obstacles that stood in the way of his marrying any of them. Inga knew all about those obstacles. She knew his mother, and his mother's formidable companion, Maggie Fraghurst. But Inga had demanded nothing. That very fact, indeed, had worked its strange effect upon him. For the first time in his life he had become aware of a sense of frustration. A man had a right to a home of his own, a wife and a family—and he had allowed himself to be thwarted by mere circumstances. Had Inga been demanding, as the others had been, he would have instinctively fallen back upon the defensive. But little Inga, of the dove-gray eyes, the softly curling cocoa-brown hair, who was in charge of the Book Nook at Higgins' drug store, and who managed to write poetry in her tiny bedroom in her sister's noisy household—little Inga had done what none of the others had been able to do. From the moment he had first set eyes on her, in fact—that day when he stopped by to pick up another murder mystery for his mother—he had sensed the difference. He had suspected that she was the *one*. And ever since, when he paused to think about it, he had felt an unease within him that was both harsh and sweet. Even now, after months of being circumspectly in love with her, the thought of their two weeks together in the north woods stirred in him a vague sense of apprehension. Why should a girl like Inga, talented, vivacious and pretty—to say nothing of her being nine years younger than he—bother her head over a big lunk like himself? Why should she fall seriously for his lazy good nature, his blue eyes, his rather foolish blond hair, when he had so little to offer that would make her future secure? It didn't seem quite credible.

3 Houses

It seemed even less credible when, their vacation over, they drove back home through a misty rain that shrouded the countryside. Where had the two weeks gone, with their warm and slumbrous autumn days, their cool nights burdened with stars above the mirroring lake? It was unbelievable that it had all been his, even for two short weeks, with Inga's love to make it forever unforgettable.

It was nearing eleven o'clock when they finally arrived in Wahwahnissa Creek, drove past the El Rancho Cafe, on Sunway Boulevard, and came upon the orderly rows of houses that stood muffled to the roof-tops in the blanket of small-town sleep.

Inga's head had been resting against Ben's shoulder, while she was lost in a dream that could be shaped to no words. But tomorrow would dawn with its callous indifference to her and her love. There would begin again the routine of work in the Book Nook, and the nerve-racking bedlam of her sister Selma's child-ridden household from which her small upstairs room provided scanty refuge. Selma would slop around all day in a greasy housecoat or in slacks, crooning over the baby—or the next-to-the-baby—and pitying Inga's unmarried state. She would be none the less on the alert, however, for the fifteen dollars that Inga paid her every week for her board and room.

Inga turned her head slowly and stole a look past Ben's shoulder. What was he thinking of now as he drove his car through the gentle rain? Was he merely lulled by the rhythm of the windshield wipers, half dreaming of something that set him apart from her by the width of a world? Would she ever come to know his man-thoughts, even when his blond head lay on a pillow close to her own?

They had left Sunway Boulevard at the corner of Mellow Avenue, where lived Selma and Julius Thole and their stridulous brood. The car slowed down.

"I suppose you've got to go in now," Ben said gloomily.

She gave him a covert glance and saw his boyishly blunt profile twist in a rebellious grimace. "No—not yet!" she pleaded, and twined her fingers tightly through his on the steering wheel.

"What, then?" he asked, and brought the car to a halt beside the curb.

"I don't know. I just don't want to go in. I don't want it to end—just yet." She pressed her cheek against his shoulder again. "I want to keep you and me for a while—like this—before we give ourselves up to—to all the others. Tomorrow—"

"Looks like I've got a sentimental woman on my hands," he remarked, and leaned over to kiss her.

She sat up suddenly. "Would you do something for me—if I coaxed you a little bit?"

"How should I know? I won't promise anything, but I'm willing to listen."

"For a long time I've wanted to go with you on your rounds and—"

"Drag you out of bed before dawn and drive you—"

"No, no. But we could drive around now for a little while and let me look at the houses."

"Houses again!"

Last spring she had artlessly confided to him her relish in gazing at people's darkened abodes at night. At first he had only been mildly amused, but when she mentioned it a second time he had experienced a sense of uneasiness. Although his imagination was less supple and unfettered than hers, the years he had spent on his route had given him a feeling of something incorruptible in the sanctity of houses. His intimacy with gardens, porches and doorways had imbued him with a kind of reverence for these externals even when—and perhaps because—they were so often and so heartlessly betrayed by the human lives they enclosed.

"Listen, small one," he protested, "you know the old gag about inviting the postman to go for a walk, don't you? It would take half the night to make the rounds, and I have to start out again by six in the morning."

"We don't have to go all the way," Inga replied. "And I have a special reason for asking. When I'm back at work tomorrow, I can follow you—I can be with you when Adelberta Wilson calls up to ask if Sheila Panker has brought back *Cass Timberlane* yet."

Ben heaved a great sigh and immediately put the car about and started back toward Sunway Boulevard. "Okay—we'll call on old George Panker for a start."

“We don’t have to *call* on them, silly!”

“We can slow down enough to give you a chance to feel psychic,” he retorted.

They were on Thorpe Avenue at last. Presently the car drifted slowly by a white-pillared colonial residence that was the show place of Wahwahnissa Creek. With its terraced lawns, its sculptured shrubbery, and its twin copper beeches on either side of a handsome wrought-iron gate, the property occupied half a block. All the shades were drawn, but there were fissures of light in the upstairs windows.

In the wet glow from a street lamp, Inga saw a glistening red leaf loiter down from one of the beeches.

“Did you see that red leaf, Gooben?” she asked. “It looked like a small hand with blood on it.”

“Put it in a poem, kid,” he answered cheerfully.

But he had seen the leaf, and he drove quickly on.

Chapter Two

1 780 Thorpe Avenue

Before George Panker brought Sheila Lord home as his bride last June, he had had the old house he inherited from his father completely renovated and newly decorated. He had even engaged a professional landscape gardener to add a modern touch or two to the grounds that his own gardener and handy-man, Ole Bratruud, had permitted to become a bit too casual.

Looking at him, you would never suspect George Panker of any extravagant fancy. He was of medium height, rather pursily built, with vague, gentle blue eyes untroubled by frequent change of expression. Thin, sandy hair was made to cover his scalp by a low part on the left side and a careful cross-sweep that brought it over to the fringe on the right. His mouth held a babyish pout that had been fixed in infancy and had remained for forty-five years.

His outward appearance, however, belied his true character. George Panker was not smug. It was because of his sensitivity to the inbeing of others that he had created for Sheila a home that was airy, new, and bright. He wanted to do everything in his power to open a fresh life for her, to lock the somber door of the past forever.

Downstairs, the high-priced interior decorator had contrived a spacious serenity with harmoniously blended fabrics and rugs heightening the dim old luster of paneled walls and shining floors. But, perhaps because the man had sensed George's anxiety for its perfection, it was upon the master bedroom that he had concentrated all his oblique skill. It was not bedroomy, and yet it was a chamber that breathed of sweetness and repose, with a predominant decor of ivory, claret, and the pale green-gold of young willow leaves. The six-foot-wide bed of polished cherrywood had been built flush with the wall, and above its satin-upholstered head board were two shelf niches for books

and reading lamps. The designer of the room had given a sigh of sensuous satisfaction upon the completion of his handiwork.

It was in this room that George and Sheila Panker were now preparing to retire. Though it was only eleven o'clock, George felt spent after a day of wrestling with the problems of reconverting his factory from war production back to its wonted peacetime industry of making mattresses. Sheila, pleasantly wearied from working all day in her autumn garden, was concerned about George. Already, only a few weeks after V-J day, as if her pretty ears had been clairaudient, she could hear the growing murmurs of animosity among the factory workers. She couldn't help wondering if her recent and somewhat sudden marriage to George wasn't somehow mixed up in that animosity. There was a personal bitterness in it that didn't belong to normal disputes between management and labor. When she had come to Wahwahnissa Creek, she had not expected any immediate, warm reception from the tight little community, as self-contained as an egg, that owed so much of its prosperity to the enterprise George Panker had brought to it. Her own personal history, she knew, would make her the object of suspicion for a long time to come. On the other hand, she had not guessed that her advent would alter the friendly relationships that had always existed between him and the men and women who had worked with him for years.

Most of George's troubles, of course, were common enough in industry, after the abrupt termination of war. Workers would brook no decline in wages. But just today, Brother Pinwinder, that neighborhood Elijah who had never come within leagues of being ordained in any church, had let fall a hint while Sheila was at work in her garden.

"The wages of sin is death, Sister Panker," he had reminded her, quite without relevancy, as he handed her one of his pamphlets and strode off down the avenue.

As she watched him go, the small, unsympathetic voices of the village seemed to steal into her consciousness and had hung like a lowering cloud over her spirit ever since.

She sat now before the triple-mirrored dressing table in her alcove boudoir, brushing her long hair with a slow rhythm. Her face did not possess the symmetry of quickly observed beauty. The cheekbones were too high for the angular, concave, and almost colorless cheeks. The slender nose had a pinched and nervous look even though six months had passed since Sheila Lord, after a trial that had lasted for weeks, had finally been acquitted of murder and given her freedom again. Her long, sensitive mouth was even

yet, from moment to moment, either too tremulous or too rigidly controlled. But her heavy-lidded, gray-green eyes and extraordinary hair created together something that was beyond conventional beauty. Sheila was only thirty-four, and until less than a year ago her hair had been a silky, soot-black cloud. Now it was startlingly veined with white, like an erratic pattern in black marble. Though she was at least an inch shorter than George, her reedy slenderness made her seem taller than he.

George had donned a purple brocade dressing gown over his pajamas, and had seated himself in a deep chair before the cheerily burning birch logs in the fireplace. He had built the fire because, although it was not really cold in the room, rain always depressed Sheila. It had rained almost without let-up throughout the weeks of her trial. Before that, she had told him once, she had loved the sound of rain, especially at night. George stared up with a certain sense of unreality, still, at the chaste and expensive Adam mantel with which he had replaced the soured red brick one of his father's day. The pure ivory mantel had been the suggestion of the interior decorator, and George had been grateful for it. And from it Sheila seemed to derive an even greater quietude and joy than from the beautiful furnishings downstairs. He hoped that the several fires he had kindled there on cool nights since their marriage—while Sheila sat on a hassock beside his chair, her marbled hair streaming over her shoulders—had not perhaps given him a falsely warm conviction of her happiness with him.

He could not be sure. There were so many things in his factory and in the clouded politics of his own community that arose to confuse him even in regard to this, his first real love, after the chilling blunder he had made years ago that had ended in divorce.

George Panker had never been so sure of anything, in fact, as he was of his humble adoration of Sheila Lord. From his father he had inherited a factory, a stately home, and a considerable amount of money. Just after graduation from college, he had married a doll-faced cashier in the cafeteria on the university campus. Two months later she was the winner in a beauty contest and was lured to Hollywood. From that fabulous realm she had written him that in justice to herself she could not permit marriage to interfere with the career that was opening before her. It was such a stale story that he had felt like a fool when he had to tell it to Sheila. A sharp Hollywood lawyer had written that letter, of course, and a short time later George Panker and the starry-eyed blonde were divorced. What became of her afterwards George never knew, and his desultory, rather far-spaced affairs with women in the ensuing years amounted to little until his meeting

with Sheila Lord, upon the conclusion of her trial, at which he had served on the jury.

With his eyes still turned up to the mantel and its sole ornament of a crystal bowl containing several great shaggy dahlias of a dusky red, George thought again as he had so many times of that raw March day when he had rescued Sheila Lord from a jostling squad of news reporters and cameramen outside the courtroom. She was accompanied only by the dour Scotch cleaning-woman whose unshakable testimony had brought Sheila's acquittal after the jury had deliberated less than two hours. But even that stern Calvinist countenance had not deterred the vultures of the press, as George Panker angrily thought of them. During the long, grueling days of the trial, Sheila's face had been indelibly stamped upon George's mind and heart. Hour after hour it had seemed to him that she was growing more frail and shadowy as she sat there, so unutterably alone in her lonely chair, in that crowded arena of the law.

While he had awaited his turn for selection on the jury, he had heard the mutterings of the sensation-greedy housewives who filled the chairs directly behind him.

". . . might have the decency to wear black, if she was so much in love with the man she shot!"

". . . bleached her hair in those white streaks, just to get sympathy . . ."

". . . ruined in the rain, and I paid ten-ninety-five for it at the Emporium —such prices they ask!"

". . . the poor thing! To be taken in by a brute of a man like that!"

Some days Sheila had worn a navy blue, and some days a dove-gray tailored suit, with delicately colored blouses, and her hair had been combed back in gentle waves to a knot low on her neck.

She was in her dove-gray on that last afternoon when George stalked forth and pulled Sheila and the Scotswoman free of the mob. He escorted them out of the building and to a taxicab, where he received their thanks and where he himself hastily mumbled something about wishing them both good luck. Two days later he received Sheila's grave little note of gratitude, and immediately, throwing all discretion to the winds, he asked her to dine with him at the El Rancho Cafe, in his own village of Wahwahnissa Creek, on the fringe of the city. He could remember still the breathlessness of her voice over the telephone, when in a hesitant and unbelieving way she accepted his invitation.

In June they were married at the parsonage of the Community Church, on the corner of Roberts Avenue and Pine Street, only a few blocks from George's home. Colin Trale, the young minister, performed the ceremony, with his wife Irene and Sam Flagg, the grocer, as witnesses. When they emerged from the parsonage as man and wife into the sunny fragrance of the June day, several groups of villagers were standing as if in innocent conversation on the street. But when George, with Sheila's arm tucked in his, glanced defiantly back, he saw that every eye was staring avidly after him and his bride.

He felt a momentary stricture in his throat, but he pressed her arm tighter against his side, sensing her discomfort but not daring to look at her face.

"Let them look, honey," he said with a ponderous laugh. "It isn't every day they see old George Panker taking a bride."

"Maybe we should have gone in the car, dear, as you wished," Sheila said just audibly. "But it was such a beautiful day, and I wanted to walk to our wedding. I wanted them to see us—just like this."

"Sure!" George replied. "It'll be good for both of us. Anyhow, wives are supposed to get their own way, and you're starting right in."

"George!"

"What's more, you're going to get your own way from now on."

His face was red, the band of his hat clammily moist above his brow. But now the reassuring haven of his own home was in sight, set back on its smooth green lawn behind the great copper beeches his father had planted years ago. As they entered the gate, he looked up at the beeches, richly glossy, great cowls of trees in the afternoon sun, and all his disquietude of the moment before left him. He wondered if Karl, the old Danish cook who had ruled the house since his father's time, had remembered to polish the silver ice bucket for the champagne. They had planned no convivial gathering of any sort after their wedding. They wanted none. Just a quiet supper together, after which they would drive north to George's lodge beside Lake Itasca for a week-end's fishing. Even for a honeymoon he could spare no more time from his factory. Germany had gone down to defeat over a month ago, but there was still Japan . . .

He emerged from his abstraction at the softly frivolous sound of Sheila's green velvet mules back of him on the deep carpet. She switched off the floor lamp, and, without turning, he stretched his hand out at his side. She slipped her thin fingers into it and glided down beside him on the hassock.

The folds of her emerald velvet robe rippled in the firelight as if with some vivid, breathing life of their own. It had seemed to him from the first that it was so with everything that came into close contact with his Sheila—as if the delicate radiance of her body imparted to inanimate things an indefinable vitality.

For a little while they sat without speaking, as had become their habit, her head resting against his knees, his blunt fingers stroking her long hair. She always braided it before she went to bed. He had often wanted to braid it for her, but he feared his own clumsiness and was too timid to suggest it.

"Does old Bratruud think any special covering will be needed for those new peony bulbs this fall?" he inquired at last, the garden being at the moment the farthest thing from his mind.

It was of Sheila's loneliness in this big house that he had really wanted to speak, but he could not—unless she spoke of it first. At dinner, she had told him that Doctor Knutson's little boy Jimmie had come to see her during the afternoon and that she had given him a package of bubble gum she had bought and kept on hand in the hope that he might some day get down from his bicycle and come to look at her garden.

"Bratruud?" Sheila had not answered at once, and when she did it seemed to be with a start. "Oh—oh, no. He said straw or burlap would be all right. He was complaining of his rheumatism more than usual today. But I can take care of the garden myself from now on, George, except for the heavier work. I love it!"

Yes, George thought, because she had little else to do. And she had a way with plants and flowers. She had the "green thumb," all right. Yet she had not been invited to membership in the Wahwahnissa Garden Club. Or if she had, he hadn't heard of it.

Silence fell between them again, and Sheila reflected unhappily that she had not told George the whole truth at dinner tonight when he asked her about what had happened during the afternoon. She had told him about little Jimmie Knutson, of course. That had been easy. But she had not told him about Brother Pinwinder's visit. She had said nothing a few days ago, either, after four or five youngsters, led by a boy who must have been fourteen, paraded down the avenue, past the copper beeches, along the full length of the Panker lawn, chanting incredibly at the top of their voices:

Get your gun, Mrs. Panker,
Get your gun, get your gun—
Get your gun, Mrs. Panker—
Bang—bang!

Sheila had been on her hands and knees behind a bed of dahlias at the time and had not seen them at first. She had not paid any attention to what they were saying, in fact, until she realized that Ole Bratruud had appeared out of nowhere, a leaf rake in his hands, and was chasing them down the street as fast as his rheumatic joints could carry him. She had lifted her head then—and had understood. When Bratruud came back, muttering broken imprecations under his breath, she was hiding again behind the dahlias.

Well, she had said nothing to George about it—not so much on her own account as on his. Her love for him was no mere escape to security. It was real, even though she still wondered sometimes how it had come about. At any rate, she would rather lose her power of speech forever than sadden him with an account of the fantastic Brother Pinwinder, or of the bleatings of half a dozen misguided children.

But suddenly, now, she felt that some release was due her. She pressed her forehead against George's knees.

"You're troubled tonight," she said.

"Me? Troubled?" His hand fell away from her hair. "Well, yes—I'm kind of stymied, I guess."

"Maybe—maybe I'm not good for you here," she said slowly.

"Bunk!" he exclaimed loudly, and as if startled, a log burst into sparks in the fireplace. "I couldn't stand up to it for a day if I didn't have you. Don't know now how I got along all the years I didn't know you."

"You know how I got along without you," she replied. "I just didn't. I—it isn't that, darling. But sometimes—"

"I know. I've been thinking about it. You're lonely, that's it. Damn it, you ought to have people around you! I mean, you ought to have some friends dropping in on you once in a while. Lots of them. And you will, too. You'll see. They'll start coming around as soon as they get used to the idea. They're just bashful, that's what. Why don't you throw a party—a tea, or something? Invite them in—invite the whole darned village. The women, I mean."

She turned her face up to him and smiled. “Oh, darling, it isn’t done that way. I mean—even if I did—even if they came—”

“Well, something—anything! There ought to be some way of getting to them. Why, hell, I grew up here! I know them all, and they know me. Call each other by our first names and all that. They’re a good, friendly bunch, once you get to know them, and they get to know you.”

“Of course they are, dear.”

“Look, honey, I’m going to do something about it myself. Damned if I don’t! I’m going to have a talk with Colin Trale. He married us—and he’s their preacher here. They’ll listen to him. I’m going to get him and Irene to go to work on this for us. He—why, hell, he’d preach a sermon on it if I told him to—all about going out into the highways and the by-ways and—*you* know!”

“Please, dear, don’t do that!” Sheila cried. “I—oh, I’m just being silly! I guess I’m tired, Georgie.” She laughed, and the sound was gaily rueful as she got to her feet. “Let’s go to bed!”

He yawned and stretched his arms. “Yeah, tomorrow is another day.”

In George’s arms, that night, Sheila dreamed again, as she had done scores of times before, the dream she had come to think of as a brightly pleated accordion, rapidly expanding and contracting in violent scenes, or spasms of scenes. Two people were always in that dream—Martin Jones, the wholesale hat salesman, and his childless wife Irma, who had refused to divorce him through ten long years. There was Sheila’s office, too, in the wholesale hat establishment where Martin and she had first discovered their love for each other. And there was her small apartment where they had spent long evenings together when Martin was in the city.

Again there came that small increeping of bitter, debasing suspicions—Martin’s evasiveness about prolonged business trips, and his too-elaborate explanations—during those final months of his wife’s illness. The dream squeezed itself together—and suddenly Martin’s wife was dead. There followed the long time of waiting, a time of hoping and fearing and growing doubts. The bizarre accordion spread its brilliant pleats once more on a brittle-bright winter afternoon when the Scotch cleaning-woman, Esther MacPherson, had worked later than usual and was finishing her chores in the kitchen. When Martin came in, Sheila knew at once that her fears were realized. He did not even sit down.

"Sheila," he said bluntly, "I'd better tell you straight and get it over with."

"Tell what straight?" her strangled voice asked again in the dream, while she knew all too well.

She had known for weeks that Martin was seeing too much of Ruby Stringer. He had come to tell her the truth now. He was going to marry Ruby.

Sheila was standing with her back to the sideboard. In an tipper drawer lay the vicious little automatic Martin had given her early in the winter, during an epidemic of house-breaking by a gang of young delinquents most of whom were still in their teens. She had never touched the gun since the evening he had placed it there. She had long since decided that, rather than use it, she would stand by and see her little apartment stripped of everything she owned.

She was swaying backward against the sideboard, clutching at the edge of it with her outstretched hands to keep from falling, when Martin, in wild misunderstanding of her intent, thrust her aside and seized the weapon from the drawer. She fell senseless against him, and heard as if from far away the shattering report of the gun and Esther MacPherson's scream.

But it was her own scream she heard now as she woke to feel George Panker's arms about her tightly, tightly, and his lips on her wet eyes.

"Sheila, honey—wake up, wake up! It's all right—you're here with me!"

"Yes, yes—I'm all right. I was having a horrible dream. I woke you up, didn't I? Forgive me, dear."

"That's okay. I'll get back to sleep. Shift over on your side now, or you'll be dreaming again."

Lying awake afterwards for nearly half the night, George decided he would talk to Colin Trale, no matter how much Sheila protested. He'd have to do something, and for the time being it was the only thing he could think of—unless he called to see Doc Knutson. No, he'd have a talk with Colin first anyhow . . .

2 104 Pine Street

Irene Trale stood in the doorway of her husband's upstairs study and wound a strand of her red hair about a metal curler. For a moment she regarded Colin with a silent and angry love.

"For heaven's sake!" she burst out then. "Will you stop weaving back and forth like a caged hyena?"

He gave her a twisted smile. "You might at least make it a lion or a tiger," he observed.

"Lions and tigers have dignity," Irene declared, "and there's nothing dignified in the way you're carrying on." She gathered her flannel dressing gown about her trimly sturdy figure and sped across the room. "If you've got to do it, you might at least pull down the blind!"

The jerk she gave the window shade shot it up to the lintel with a small explosion. Colin clapped his hands to his ears and fell back into his easy chair with a derisive snort of laughter.

"You can fix the damn thing yourself this time!" he told her.

"You don't have to swear—and you don't have to shout, which is worse," she cautioned him.

"I wasn't shouting. I said you could fix it yourself this time, and I meant what I said—and the way I said it." He looked over his shoulder at the shade that had billowed down all the way and hung from its exposed roller. "Now you've gone and broken the spring. Will you never learn that easy does it?"

"*You* should talk!" cried Irene, viewing the shade with an instant's contempt before she scurried back across the room and flung herself into Colin's lap. He was so thin, she had once told him, that all he did was go up from down. But he could gather her close to him with a fervid hunger, and kiss her milk-white throat—as he did now.

"Oh, Colin!" she said. "You've tried so hard—and you've done so well!"

"I haven't done well," he replied, "and I often wonder if I've even tried very hard. After four years in a place, there ought to be something to show for it. But there isn't—not a confounded thing!"

"Colin—don't talk like that."

"It doesn't matter much how I talk," he replied. "There's something wrong somewhere. After ten years in the ministry, I can't see a thing that's come out of it. I've failed. Tonight, in fact, I feel licked!"

She got up from his knees and perched herself on the corner of his paper-strewn desk. For a moment she looked down at him and felt like crying. She knew what he was going through. She had seen him through it a hundred times in the past ten years. It always came after a period of overwork, or after a meeting with his church board where they discussed finances. Poor Colin could never interest himself in money matters. She usually left him to work his way out of it alone. But tonight he seemed to have reached a depth of depression she had never seen in him before. It wasn't right, it wasn't fair. He had worked hard, he had prayed hard, he had clung to his faith in God and man, but he *had* failed. Failed, that is, in terms of worldly achievement.

Perhaps she had not given him the kind of help he needed in his work. She knew she hadn't, in fact. Their marriage, in 1935, had come as a sudden, almost headlong consummation of a brief courtship during Colin Trale's final year at Randall College. Her own family had done everything in their power to prevent their one daughter from becoming the wife of a Methodist minister. For that matter, Colin's father, himself a saintly herald of the gospel, had frowned upon his son's allying himself with the rebellious Irene Starr. But what could they know about it? How could they know that the turbulent Irene became docile to the point of meekness at a word, a mere look, from the brilliant young Colin? With so much to oppose them, they had taken the only course possible. Twenty-four hours after Colin's graduation, they had stolen away together and had been married by a justice of the peace in a neighboring village.

For three years she had tended a tiny flame of hope in the bottom of her heart—a hope that Colin might come to the conviction that he should never have entered the ministry. Certainly she had never been a "preacher's wife." She did none of the things that were expected of her. She dressed as she pleased. She flatly refused to attend the Wednesday night prayer-meetings. She would *not* teach a class in the Sunday School. She sang in the little choir because she loved to sing, even though her voice wasn't very good and she had difficulty in carrying a tune. She chose her friends because they were congenial, whether they were church members or not. Once she protested openly and in the presence of half a dozen of Colin's most zealous adherents that the visiting evangelist's pictures of hell-fire and eternal damnation were just so much poppycock to which no sane human being, Christian or otherwise, should give a moment's credence.

During those first three years, in fact, they had been recklessly, almost dangerously young, as Colin so often warned her. Notwithstanding which,

his work had progressed, whatever he may have thought of his efforts. His first step upward had been a call to a church in a small Iowa city. When he showed her the letter from the board, she sat down and talked it over with him, reviewing the past, looking into the future, searching her own heart for guidance. The talk ended at last, and Colin got up and started for his study.

"I have set my hand to the plow, Irene," he said obstinately, and she knew there was nothing more for her to say.

Besides, she herself had changed. She was carrying her first baby at the time—the first of three, all of whom had come still-born into the world—and her every thought had been of the wonder and mystery of motherhood. Gratitude and devotion for the man who was her husband filled every corner of her heart, and Colin was left to work out his destiny—as she of necessity was left to work out her own.

Well, perhaps she had failed—failed amid pain and tears and a growing sense of having been cheated of the one thing that might have made her life most worth while. Only her love for Colin had restored her after each failure and saved her from the bitterness she might have known, had he not walked beside her through every testing of her courage. Though she was thirty-two now and had been Colin's wife for ten years, her passion was as demanding as it had been during those first three vivid years of their life together.

The thing that bore most heavily upon her now, as she sat on the edge of his desk and looked down at him, was the knowledge that Colin himself had finally come to the place where he was ready to admit defeat. Eight or nine years ago, she might have hailed it as a sign that she had won the victory. Now she could only feel that she had in some way contributed to his failure—if, indeed, he had really failed at all. To herself she would not admit that he had failed. If, for the moment, he seemed ready to give up the fight, she would fight in his stead. She would throw herself with all the vehemence of her nature against the apathy, the ignorance, the ingratitude of the yokel-minded men and women whom Colin had struggled with for the past four years. She could not bear his pacing the floor. She could not bear his sitting there, as he sat now, his head bowed between his hands, the picture of despair.

"I wish you'd tell me, Colin," she began, "just what has done this to you tonight."

He jerked his head from his hands and looked up at her.

“Tonight? I’ve felt this way for months—for years. What’s more, you’ve known it.”

“Let’s talk about it quietly, darling,” she begged. “I’ve seen you coming to this for a long time. But something has happened tonight.”

He sat back in his chair and reached for the pipe he never smoked except in his study. “I walked home with Josie Stone. I—that is—I *took* her home.”

“Drunk, I suppose?”

“She was—a little, but not so bad this time. Her father called me a couple of hours ago and asked me if I’d go down to the El Rancho and get her away. When I found her, she refused to come with me at first. But some drunken loon she was with offered to buy me a drink, and Josie very quietly took my arm and said, ‘Let’s go! This is no place for you.’ That’s all there was to it, except that when I got her home she refused to go into the house.”

“Afraid of her mother, probably.”

“Maybe she was more afraid of hurting her father. The old man really loves that girl. He has been worrying his heart out over her ever since they got the news about Frank.”

“Well, we had a war, dear,” Irene sighed, “and young men were killed, and some of them—a lot of them—were married to girls like Josie. That’s something we have to accept. For a while all the Josies in the world will be trying to forget—each in her own way. A few of them will drink too much —”

“Well, it doesn’t do them any good to preach to them. And I didn’t preach to Josie. One of these days she’ll probably find out it isn’t getting her anywhere. She’ll grow up all of a sudden. The trouble is, anything can happen in the meantime. That fellow she was with tonight, for example. When I tried to get her to go into the house, she wouldn’t go. Said she had a date. I can’t ask a girl like Josie about her dates. It’s none of my business. And I couldn’t very well come home here and phone her father. I’m not running a private detective agency. I really don’t know what I should have done.”

“Nothing, dear. I used to have dates with you, remember?”

“You weren’t drunk.”

“I might as well have been. There were times when I didn’t know what I was doing—and didn’t care much. You didn’t know the half of it, darling.”

"I'm glad I didn't."

Irene smiled to herself. Colin always responded to teasing. "Maybe I should keep an eye on you," she went on. "You walk home with a pretty young widow—and suddenly decide you've missed your calling."

But Colin was serious. "Josie's isn't the only case. There's Adelberta Wilson—there's Sheila Panker—there's—"

"What's wrong with Adelberta? I should think a heavy date would do her good. Sheila Panker, of course, is different, but—"

"Do you realize how we've let her down? They came here to be married, and that's practically the last we've seen of them. And if it weren't for George Panker's support, the church would be on the rocks. Not that I give a damn about the money he subscribes. He's just keeping up the old Panker tradition his father established years ago. He hasn't been inside the church three times in the four years I've been here. Not that I blame him. And I don't mean that it matters, either. It's the people who do come to church that get me down. It's the—"

"Colin, darling," Irene interrupted, "the bulk of the people who make up your congregation are just—just *people*."

"And there are only two ways of dealing with *just people*, Rene. Either give them a sawdust trail evangelist who will bring them to Jesus at once, or call the whole thing off and do something about educating them to become decent citizens. I don't like sawdust. And I'm not going to start out with a Bible under one arm, making pastoral calls and getting them to kneel in prayer while somebody feeds the baby in the kitchen."

"Or changes the diapers in the living room," Irene suggested.

"And as for educating them," Colin said, without so much as a smile to acknowledge her quip, "—that's a long process. But it may be the only answer, just the same. At least a man can keep his self-respect while he's working at it. I know one thing—I'm getting completely fed up with what I'm doing."

"Don't you think it's rather late to be saying that now, dear, after ten years?"

"Maybe—and maybe not. I've been toying with the idea of looking around for a teaching job. Last time I was down at Randall, you remember, old man Chambers hinted—"

While he talked, a strange, new, almost frightening realization came upon Irene. Ten years ago, had he spoken as he did now, she would have thrown her arms about him and kissed him in sheer gratitude and relief. She might even have gone on her knees and thanked God for having answered her prayers. Now, as she looked at the man she loved, a trembling began somewhere deep within her. Her fingers gripped the edge of the desk on which she sat and she leaned toward Colin, her eyes searching his face.

"Are you leaving here because you're beaten?" she asked.

He was silent for a moment. Then he drew himself up and laid his pipe aside. "I haven't left yet," he reminded her. "I haven't even decided to leave. We have always made our decisions together, Rene—except, perhaps, when I first decided to go into the ministry. I knew you were opposed to it. I knew —"

"But, darling, did I ever—"

"Let me talk, Rene. You didn't have to tell me what you thought. You were against it. My own father was happy over my decision, but even he doubted the wisdom of it. He didn't think I'd make a success of the ministry. When I started out, I had only one thought, and that was to succeed. I went about it cautiously. I was careful not to offend. I held forth on the beauty, the poetry, of religion. When I got my first call to another church, I was convinced I was on my way. I was going to prove to you and all the rest of them that I could do it. I'd be a successful, maybe a famous, preacher. Instead of that, I've made an unmitigated ass of myself—in my own estimation, at least, and that's what really matters. Religion isn't beauty. It isn't poetry. It isn't the balderdash I've been preaching every Sunday. Religion is passionate, reckless, destructive, idol-smashing. Religion is a knout wielded in a temple. It's a martyr burning at the stake. It's a crown of thorns and a cross."

"Colin, darling!" Irene was on his knees again, running her fingers through his thinning dark hair.

"I'm not *quitting*," Colin went on. "Not in that sense, Rene. But after what has been going on in the world these last five or six years, we can't go back to sugar-coated pills and sedatives. I'm through being nursemaid to a bunch of self-satisfied pew-warmers."

"Oh, darling, I've never wanted you to be that! And you haven't been."

"I haven't told them the dirty truth about themselves—that we're a bunch of hypocrites, and I'm the worst of the lot! They've got some cock-

eyed idea about God's Son dying on a cross to save them from punishment for their sins, and they're damned well satisfied to let Him do the job as long as He doesn't bother *them*. What the church needs today is a prophet, not a pastor. That's where I've failed. I'm not made of the stuff of prophets, Rene. I haven't the martyr's courage."

She leaned and kissed his brow. "You don't know how much courage you have. You've never put it to the test. Maybe this is your testing time. I know how you feel, but—don't quit, darling. Don't quit. I'd far rather have them throw you out on your neck than see you walk out with your tail between your legs. When the time comes—*if* it ever comes—"

"It'll come," he interrupted her. "And when it does I'll thank God for a wife who's a better man than I am!"

He drew her hard against him and kissed her white throat. One fold of her dressing gown slipped from her shoulder, and she lifted herself so that her breast pressed against his mouth.

"You're also a hussy!" he said, after a moment.

"Has it taken you ten years to find that out?" she laughed, and brought her full lips down upon his.

She sprang from his knees then and fled to their room across the hall. Colin followed her with his eyes, then leaned over and began removing his shoes.

Presently he called out to her, "Josie tells me that Bill Clifford got home from the Pacific this afternoon."

The announcement was somewhat irrelevant, he knew, and apparently Irene thought so, too. At any rate, she made no reply.

3 802 Jason Avenue

Bill Clifford had got his discharge and now he was home—out of the war, out of naval aviation, out of heat and cold, out of rain and drought, out of hate and out of love. In short, as he himself summed it up, out of everything and out of this world!

He sat in the two-room and bath kitchenette apartment his brother-in-law Herman Shatts, the plumber, had contrived out of his basement as living

quarters for his sister Molly. Molly was Bill's wife. Bill had never seen the place before this afternoon, and Molly had certainly gone the limit to give it an air of gaiety for his homecoming. He should have felt grateful, coming into an apartment that was all tricked out with bright colors and a lot of gimcracks that were supposed to be amusing. After all, Molly had been working hard at the factory every day while he was in the Navy. He knew how he should have felt, all right, but he didn't feel grateful at all. He didn't feel grateful to anyone. Everything Molly had done to make his return an occasion never to be forgotten stirred in him only a perverse belligerence that made him feel ashamed of himself. The trouble was, he couldn't do anything about the way he felt. It was something he couldn't account for, even to himself. If Molly hadn't been "so grateful to Herman" at least a dozen times since he had walked into the place this afternoon, he might have felt a little more at ease in this burrow he'd have to think of now as *home*. Hell, of course he was grateful to Herman! And the place was all right—if he didn't die of claustrophobia before the end of a week. After all, if what he heard was true, a lot of the boys were coming back to no place at all.

And it wasn't so much the place—or Molly—or Herman—or anything in particular. He didn't know what it was. He had begun to notice it first when he stepped on board the train at Seattle. Even then he realized it had been working on him more or less ever since the news of Japan's surrender came over the air. He hadn't really noticed it then, that was all. There had been too much excitement everywhere around him at the time. And on the man-jammed tub that carried them back across the Pacific and into Puget Sound, there was always the horse-play on board and the grousing and the endless round of meaningless orders and inspections that gave you no time to think about anything. The few days they spent in Seattle amounted to something just short of a nightmare, a very little short. It was only when they were finally on board the train and began to move eastward toward the mountains that the thing really started to work. Bill Clifford was not the only one who felt it. He had an idea they all felt it, some more than others. But it was there just the same. They were all going home at last. This was the moment they had been looking forward to for months. They had been dreaming of it, day and night. And yet, somehow, it wasn't at all what they had dreamed it would be. It had lost its glamor, its illusion, its enchantment. It wasn't that they didn't want to get back home. God, no! They would have killed anybody who tried to stop them, now they were on their way. But the whole thing was a let-down. In two or three days they would see the faces and hear the voices whose very familiarity would hold a kind of strangeness for them now. There would be an hour or two of kissing and hand-shaking,

perhaps a few celebrations, a few drinks, and a home-cooked dinner, a few hours of talk about what you had been through and what the home-folks had been through, a little love-making for those who were lucky enough to find it, and then—nothing at all. It would be *finis* to the whole ghastly adventure.

Bill Clifford was glad, at least, that he had a job waiting for him. His old position as announcer at one of the local radio stations would be ready for him as soon as he could get ready for it. And, boy, would he get ready! It wouldn't take him long to get back into the swing of things. There would be a few days of answering silly questions about what it really felt like to have a Jap fighter on your tail, and how had he liked being marooned on an island for the better part of a year, and did he run across any good-looking dames among the natives, and how did it feel to get back to God's Country again? Well, he would take it all in stride, he supposed. After a while, they would stop pestering him.

And then he had Molly to come home to, of course. One thing, he had never had any doubts about Molly. Some of the fellows he had been with had gone through hell because of their women back home. Women couldn't be trusted. Even some of the married ones. In fact, he had just about made up his mind that the married ones were the worst. Or maybe it was because you heard more about them than you did about the others. When a girl stepped out, it didn't matter so much. A guy just ditched her and started looking round for somebody else. But when a man's wife went wrong, that was really something. Bill hadn't had that to worry about, at least. Molly wasn't that kind of a wife. She used to drink too much when he first married her, but he fixed that after the night she took off through the cemetery in their car and made a wreck of the place. When he had counted up the damage, he told her she'd have to lay off drinking or he wouldn't be around after the next time. There never was a next time during all the four years before the war came along and took Bill away. She had gone to work in the Panker Factory a few weeks after he left for training camp, and had done all right for herself. She had stayed strictly on the job and had made big money. She still had most of it in war bonds. In spite of all that, she had found time to write him two or three times a week. So it certainly wasn't Molly's fault that he felt the way he did on his first evening at home with her.

Perhaps if they hadn't gone upstairs for dinner with Herman and that mouse who was his wife, things might have been different. Molly knew he had never been able to stand the sight of Herman, especially after the way he had strutted during the days when the little Austrian paperhanger with the trick mustache was overpowering his weaker neighbors and openly boasting

of world conquest. Every victory for Adolf had warmed Herman's blood in those days and added another touch of arrogance to his pride in *Der Fuehrer* and the master race. He had become more cautious when it looked as if America would sooner or later throw her weight into the struggle, but Bill had not been deceived by Herman's change of face. He knew only too well what was in the man's heart.

That had been the way it was before Bill went away, and, as far as he was concerned, it hadn't changed much since. But a man can't be too hard on his wife's only brother, after all. On the other hand, it wasn't necessary to remind him that he should be "so grateful" to Herman for letting his own sister live in his damned basement. Bill had thanked him, nevertheless, though he had added that he and Molly would be packing up and getting out just as soon as they could find a place to live.

It was a good dinner that Herman's wife Freda had prepared for the occasion. Freda was a good cook, an obedient wife, and an affectionate mother to her twelve-year-old son Frederick. Bill had once told Molly that God must have dealt one off the bottom of the deck when he gave young Freddy to Freda. Maybe He was making it up to her for the bad deal that had left her holding Herman for the rest of her days. Freddy was an ace, in Bill's opinion. The boy had an uncanny way with a fiddle. All Bill knew about music could be put in the corner of one eye, but even three years ago Freddy had played *Humoresque* and something he called a minuet in a way that made Bill want to weep. He had asked the kid to play for him tonight before dinner, and right in the middle of it Molly had blurted out loudly, "No, thanks, Herman, you *know* I never drink beer!" Well, maybe it didn't matter, after all. Young Freddy would go places on his own. It mattered even less that Molly sat halfway through dinner with a particle of sweet corn sticking to her upper lip. Damn it, why should a little thing like that have annoyed him so? Why hadn't he mentioned it to her at once and got it over with? He didn't know. That was just the way this thing was working on him. Herman and his damned toothpicks was another. Herman not only used toothpicks incessantly—he must have had them stowed away in every pocket. They lay about on tables and books, on top of the radio and on the window-sills. They were even sticking out of the flowerpots that stood on the windowseat, like the bloodless shoots of some bastard cactus.

When Molly told about a young marine she had heard of who came back and stayed for two weeks by himself in a rooming house before he could muster the courage to go home to his mother and sister, who lived less than ten blocks away, Bill was just about ready to blow his top. But when she

asked him his opinion, he was able to tell her calmly that it wasn't so hard to understand.

"But, why, Bill? It sounds plain crazy to me," Molly said.

"Well, maybe it was plain crazy. And don't ask me why. I probably wouldn't be able to tell you—or if I could, you'd never be able to understand it anyhow."

The evening hadn't gone well.

Through the smoke of his cigarette, Bill watched Molly now as she turned down the blankets and plumped up the pillows on the double bed in the other room. She was thin below the knees, and shaped like a sausage all the way up from there. Very poorly assembled. In the old days, when she used to go on an occasional binge, she had at least been interesting in an unpredictable way. Now her brisk efficiency made him dully ill. He saw her open a slot of a window in the bedroom, flush with the ground outside. He got up and strode across the living room floor to where his zipper-bag lay against the wall. Opening it, he took out a flashlight. Then he glanced quickly over his shoulder, toward the bedroom, thrust his hand once more into the bag, and dug out a small square box which he put into the breast pocket of his shirt.

"I think I'll just stroll out for a few minutes, Molly," he said. "I feel—sort of restless. You won't mind, will you?"

Molly's high heels clicked into the room with a sound of pained surprise. A bit ahead of her round face, Bill thought to himself. Yet it was unkind of him to think that. She had pretty, round brown eyes, full round red lips, round brown hair—God, how *round* she was! Except for her legs.

"Why—why, of course, Bill," she was saying. "You do exactly like you feel like it." She smiled diffidently. "I mean, like you feel like doing. I'll have to watch my grammar, now that you're back. But the work over at the plant and all—the way they talked there! You have no idea. But—of course, Bill—go on out for a walk, if that's what you want. I've waited for you for three years, or just about. I guess another half hour won't matter much. You wouldn't like me to go with you?"

"Well, no—it's raining out, and I'll just mooch around a bit by myself. You hit the sack, and I'll be right back. I thought I'd kind of like to take a look at the creek. Or, as old Frank used to say, the crick." That was a mistake, he realized at once. He should never have mentioned Frank.

Tears filled Molly's prune-brown eyes. "Oh, of course—I should have known. You and Frank Stone—when you were kids!"

"See anything wrong in that?" he asked gruffly, then checked his rising irritation as he got his jacket and cap down from the rack by the door. "I didn't mean that—the way it sounded, Molly," he apologized gently. "You go to bed. I won't be out too long."

He shut the door behind him, flashed his light once, then groped his way up the narrow basement stairway into the rain. He stood there for a moment, his finely shaped head lifted to the darkness. *I should feel something*, he thought desperately. *The free and wonderful air of the land of my birth—free darkness, free rain, free hands and feet, free—bull! I don't feel a goddam thing!*

He moved through the rain-filled darkness to the back of the house. In the garage, he squeezed past his brother-in-law's Ford and flashed his light quickly along a narrow ledge on the wall in front of the car. One of Herman's old trowels had been lying there a few hours ago. It was still there. He snatched it up and went out again into the rain.

For only a second he paused and laid his hand over his breast pocket. A twinge of violent energy went through him. Not pain—memory of Frank Stone had gone beyond that. It was simply a reminder of something that had to be done for Frank, something that Bill had promised to do.

"You've got to be waiting for me, Josie," he breathed and strode across the backyard, out upon Pine Street, over to Ring Avenue, and then southward, to the elbow of the creek where it bordered the mink farm of Miles Hopewell.

He had been lucky to reach Josie Stone, Frank's widow, on the telephone this afternoon when he left Molly for a few minutes and went upstairs to say hello to Herman's wife. Josie's mother, the horrible Della Prince, had not been home, thank the Lord! Otherwise he could never have given Josie instructions about meeting him tonight, at the creek's wide bend, about half-past eleven. He had hinted, just to be discreet, that their rendezvous had to do with Frank. She had seemed to catch her breath, and then, quick and sure, "Yes, Bill, I'll be there."

She had been a gawky youngster, he remembered, only twenty when she married Frank Stone five years ago. Dark-haired and rather sallow of expression, with blue eyes that were too big for her face. But how she had

adored Frank! Too bad she hadn't had a kid to remember him by. On the other hand . . .

Josie Stone looked furtively back over her shoulder at 107 Cherry Street, where there were no lights showing through the tall lilac hedge, then began running along the street westward, against the rain. She halted suddenly as the headlights of a car picked her out, her tan coat and blue beret revealing her too clearly against the darkness. In a place like Wahwahnissa Creek, where everyone knew everyone else—she cowered back from the sudden fan of light, but not quickly enough.

"Josie!"

She hesitated a moment, then took a swift step toward the car that had drawn in to the curb. Her big eyes stared beseechingly up at the two who sat in the front seat.

"Inga! Gee, you scared me stiff! A person never knows who's cruising round these streets at night. Especially when it's raining."

"Jump in," Ben invited. "We'll take you wherever you're going."

"No, no—I'm not going any place in particular. That is—I—listen, don't tell anybody you saw me out tonight. Please—not anybody!"

"Don't worry," Ben said. "We haven't seen a thing."

The car started away slowly, and Josie watched it until it finally turned a corner and passed from sight. Then she started running again. It was a crazy idea, she knew, but every step in this direction seemed to bring her closer to Frank, who was not really forever dead, as they would have her believe, on some savage island in the Pacific, but idling still on the banks of Wahwahnissa Creek with a small boy's prodigal faith in the endlessness of time.

Things hadn't gone any too auspiciously for her tonight. She had left home early. If she hadn't, she would never have got out at all. And she had to get out. The frantic need to put distance between herself and 107 Cherry Street possessed her overwhelmingly every once in a while. The house at 107 Cherry Street looked like her mother; fat and spiteful, the house was. She had never thought of it as home since the morning the message had come about Frank and her mother had upbraided her for "taking on so," because it wasn't Christian. Christian! Her mother had never had a Christian thought for Frank—and only because he was no money-maker. He had

always been a dreamer. To Josie, 107 Cherry Street was simply the cruel house where her heart had died. If it hadn't been for her father, she would have turned her back on it and never seen it again as long as she lived.

She had strolled down to the El Rancho tonight to put in the time till she could go to meet Bill Clifford. She couldn't think of anywhere else to go. Besides, it had already begun to rain. It had been a mistake, of course, to let a man she had never seen before start buying drinks for her. She wouldn't have done it a year ago. She would have thought it cheap. But a lot can happen to a girl in a year. And then to have Reverend Trale walk in like that, right in the middle of it! She could have died. At first, she wanted to tell him that she was quite capable of looking after herself. Then, suddenly, she was glad he had come. She had already begun to wonder how she was going to shake herself free in time to meet Bill. The preacher had been so darn nice about it, too—hadn't lectured her on the way home, or anything like that. He hadn't said much of anything, in fact. He was a right guy, Reverend Trale. Some day she'd get up enough spunk to tell him she'd always thought so.

Meeting Inga Nelson and Ben Start like that had been an unlucky break, too. She could imagine what they must have thought of her running like mad down the street when everyone else was in bed. And it raining, besides. Well, they could think what they liked. She had begged them to say nothing about it, and she knew she could count on them. Still, this meeting with Bill Clifford had started out badly, however you looked at it.

That Bill should have asked her to meet him at the creek's bend, moreover, filled her with a superstitious awe. He could not possibly have known how often she had gone there during the past year, to sit under the big willow tree and feel Frank's arms close and warm about her and his lips on hers in all the living sweetness of his youth. Perhaps she could tell Bill about that—she could never tell anyone else, not even her poor, confused father. If Frank's parents had not moved away to Wisconsin, she might have been able to tell dear Mrs. Stone. But her own mother, never!

There Bill was now, a darker shape among the shadows, hunched over in the rain on the creek bank, a little away from the willow, as if he knew it was their place, hers and Frank's. The beam from his flashlight brushed over her for a second.

"Josie!"

"Yes, Bill, it's me."

He was on his feet when she reached toward him diffidently with both hands, and he caught her about the shoulders. “Glad you made it,” he told her. “I was beginning to think maybe you wouldn’t come out in all this rain.”

“I said I would, Bill.”

“Sure, sure! Still the old reliable, eh?” He tried to laugh, but the sound of it was strained. “Better sit down over here, under the willow. The ground is damp, but it isn’t so bad. Anyhow, you’re wet already.”

“I’m all right,” Josie assured him. “My raincoat will keep me dry—for a little while, at least.”

They sat together on the slope toward the creek, and under the rain the timeless chuckle of the little stream ran on eastward to join the Mississippi, as it had done for ages.

“Here—move over a little closer,” Bill suggested. “You don’t have to be scared of me.”

“I’m not.”

“Turn your face this way,” he ordered.

She did his bidding, and waited.

“You’ve been drinking,” Bill said quietly.

“So what?”

“You didn’t drink when I saw you last.”

“Well, so what, again?”

“So you’re going to cut that out. Don’t you know where it’ll get you—and fast?”

“I know all about it.”

“The hell you do! One of these days I’ll sit in and tell you a little of what you don’t know about it. Not tonight.”

“Thanks, Bill. I couldn’t take it tonight. Just tell me about yourself and __”

“That can wait, too. There isn’t time tonight. Not that I’ve got so much to tell, but I promised Molly I’d be back in a few minutes.”

“Sure, I understand. Well, you said something about Frank—on the phone this afternoon.”

"Yeah—I thought you'd want to know about him—besides what I wrote you, I mean."

He fumbled for a cigarette, leaned forward and lighted it between his cupped hands. In the brief glow from the match, Josie saw the trowel lying beside him.

"What's that for?" she asked tremulously.

He inhaled deeply, and cleared his throat. "We'll get to that. First—I tried to tell you in my letter how things went with us—after we cracked up on that little island off New Guinea."

"Yes, I still have the letter. It must have been hard for you to write what you did, but—thanks, Bill. You'll never know how much it helped."

"Not much, I guess. Nothing helps much in a thing like that. The hardest part of having to write you was knowing that you'd have to read it. But it had to be done. And—I'm sorry, kid—that's about all I can say." He tossed the wet cigarette into the rain.

"It's as much as anybody can say, isn't it? Words don't mean anything."

"That's right, but—just so you know how I feel, that's all."

"I guess I know. And—in a way—it hasn't been as hard to take as I thought it would be. Something like that happens to you, and for a while you're like dead. And then you start in living again—almost as if it didn't happen. Not quite like that, maybe, but—well, you just go on from there because you've got to. Besides—Frank's right here—he always has been, from the day he went away. I've been meeting him here nights. I wasn't going to say anything about that, but I thought you'd—"

He took her hand and pressed it affectionately. "That's okay, kid. You'll come out of it all right. It takes time. If it does you any good to come out here—and meet him nights—the way you say—you're not hurting anybody. You'll get over that, too, some day. One thing I thought you'd like to know—Frank didn't suffer, not to speak of, after we crashed. The natives were a friendly bunch, and one of them brought some kind of drug that made it easy for him. It put him to sleep, and when he woke up he seemed to be all right. I even thought for a while he was going to make it. But Frank knew better. There was something wrong—inside. He was quite conscious, and he talked to me right up to the last. He told me what he wanted me to do—something he'd read in a book somewhere that gave him the idea. In fact, we had talked about it on the way out, just after we left 'Frisco. We made a kind of a deal, the first night out. If one of us was left out there and the other came back

alive—some part of the one who was left would be buried here beside the creek. That's why I asked you to meet me like this, before I got myself all tied up with things. I had to do this first."

As he spoke, he took the small box from his pocket and lifted the flashlight. Josie did not cry out in horror—as Molly would have done, he reflected. She did not move. After a little silence, she asked, "What is it?"

"Well, Frank and I used to fish for perch here when we were kids. We used to sit and watch the muskrats building their houses across there in the swamp. He used to shut his eyes when he threaded an angleworm on his hook—left-handed, of course. That used to give me a laugh. He always looked so darned clumsy at it." Bill felt his voice going out queerly in a straight, taut line, down into the heart of the creek. "It just happened that his left hand was sheared off when we crashed. I didn't tell you that in the letter. I didn't think it would do you any good to know about it. Anyhow, one of the natives took the hand—and brought it back to me afterwards—like this. If you want to see it—it's nothing but ashes."

"No, no, Bill. Let's do what we have to do. I'll hold the flashlight."

Without another word, he lifted the trowel and drove it deep into the moist earth.

4 781 Ring Avenue

Maggie Fraghurst was listening to the radio, and knitting another sweater for Ben, although he hadn't worn out any of the previous five her industrious fingers had fashioned for him in rapid succession. She was also doing her best to remain alert to anything Ben's mother, Hortense Start, might say from time to time, her bright voice breaking through the tumult from the radio. Now that the mystery thrillers had run their devious courses for the evening, Hortense paid scant heed to the trumpets and saxophones and crooners who were waging a life and death struggle for control of the air waves.

And as if that weren't burden enough for anybody's senses, Maggie managed to keep one ear in waiting for the sound that was more to her heart than music. Twice already during the evening, she could have sworn she had heard the darling little slap-slap of a valve in Ben's car—she would know it

in a million! But no Ben, although they had been looking for him since eight o'clock, and now it was going on eleven-thirty.

Spending his whole vacation up there among the pines with that Inga! "Quite properly, of course, Maggie," Hortense had primly assured her the day after Ben left. "After all, Inga's aunt will be there, and she's old enough to have sense. Anyhow, it's almost impossible to get accommodations at any of the resorts these days—and you know how Gooben loves to fish."

Maggie had reefed in her thin mouth and said nothing to that. Why could Ben never, in all the years she had slaved for his pampered mother, have seen how she loved him, how good she was, how nearly matched with him in age—she was just a year younger than he—and how attractive she was in spite of the unfortunate muscle of her left eye? Had he never seen how brown and warm her eyes were, not fish-colored gray—like Inga Nelson's? Inga Nelson, indeed, whose breasts wouldn't crowd a pair of teacups!

She got up suddenly, laid her knitting aside, and switched off the radio.

"What are you fidgeting about?" Hortense asked irritably.

Maggie straightened a doily on the back of a chair and forced a yawn. "I didn't know I was fidgeting, as you call it. I *am* a little nervous, I guess. Waiting always makes me jumpy."

"I could tell that by the way your eye was acting up again," Hortense observed.

"I was sure I heard Gooben's car a little while ago," Maggie said.

"Nonsense!" cried Hortense. "My hearing is better than yours, for all I'm half as old again as you are, and more. And I didn't hear a thing."

"It sounded just like his car," Maggie persisted.

"If it was Gooben, he'd be in by this," Hortense pointed out. "Get us some tea, dear. It's raining worse. *That* I can hear."

Maggie scuttled with alacrity to the kitchen, whipped the kettle on, then hurried to the window where she stood listening and leaning sideways in a chancy equilibrium on one broad foot, the toe of the other conspiratorially poised, just touching the floor. Perhaps she had been mistaken, after all. These days, every second car on the streets was slapping or wheezing or shaking in the last stages of decrepitude.

Hortense, in her favorite chair, had been thinking of Ben, too. And her thoughts had been as troubled as Maggie's, even if she had not betrayed

them by any outward fidgeting. Hortense was proud of her self-control. She had been thinking back over the years since Ben's father had left them. And she had been thinking of how blessed she was to have such a son—a son who had done so much to bring comfort to her declining years. Of course, they had not been left quite without anything, even though Ben's wages had sometimes to be spread pretty thin to cover their expenses at the month's end. Ben's father had left them a house to live in, at least, a possession above price in these days when hundreds of people were scouring the city for a bed to sleep in.

The house, a pleasant-looking stucco half-masked by creeping ivy, stood opposite the northeast corner of the ground occupied by the Panker Factory. Although the factory was set back forty yards from the street, the noise from it during the war years, while it was frantically turning out army and navy equipment, had sorely frayed her nerves. It might not have disturbed the average woman, but Hortense's hearing, according to her own frequent prideful assertion, was abnormally acute.

She had permitted the dense mat of ivy to spread all over the western wall of the house, and part of the northern, because it was her conviction that it shut out most of the noise. On the other hand, as Doctor Knutson had pointed out with the tactful help of her son, it kept the house damp and had a tendency to aggravate her arthritis. But Hortense preferred to suffer a little more keenly, if need be, from an old and familiar affliction than become a martyr to the clatter incidental to the conduct of a war of which she had plaintively disapproved from its very beginning. Plaintively, and in a minor key. Never with the vulgar force of the avowed isolationist. Hortense Start did nothing with vulgar force. She didn't have to.

The interior of the house was, to a remarkable degree, a projection of Hortense Start's own interior. Mentally and spiritually, at least. It was tasseled, fringed, doilied, antimacassared, knickknacked, what-notted, wall-mottoed, and overstuffed to within an inch of its life; or, as Ben had once whimsically observed, to a point where an oxygen tent would be required for its survival. Only his room upstairs, austere with simple bookshelves, chair, table, reading lamp and bed, had escaped his mother's passion for cluttery. To her, an uncovered square foot of a room was nothing less than indecent nakedness.

Above the chenille portiered archway between the living room and the dining room, there hung a gilt-framed sampler, embroidered by Hortense herself, which admonished one to *Always Look Upward*. If one profited from the advice, he could not help seeing a canary that, at first glance,

seemed to be on the wing. Alas, it would never fly again! It was a poor stuffed thing of songless golden feathers that had once been Hortense's beloved Cheeree. Death had released it from its cage only to impale it upon a varnished slab of mahogany above the doorway, where faithfully every day it was dusted and guarded against moths and other corrupting vermin by Maggie Fraghurst—the Indispensable Maggie!

Hortense looked at the Swiss cuckoo clock on the wall. The clock had been dear Willie's last birthday gift to her before he died, and although it took a lot of time to dust and polish it—Maggie's time, of course—she loved it. However, it now said half past eleven, and Hortense frowned at it in gentle rebuke. Gooben had always been as considerate of her as his father had been. He had always got home when she expected him. But in the past year there had been two or three times . . . She checked the thought with sharp self-reprimand. Inga was a sweet, pure, sensible girl, who certainly knew better than to dream that she and Gooben could ever be married. Not for ages and ages, at least, the way things were.

Not that Hortense had put entirely from her mind the thought of Ben marrying some nice girl—sometime. It would only be natural and was to be expected. There was a time, in fact, when she had feared he might be thinking seriously of Maggie Fraghurst. They had gone out together a few times, to a movie or to a dance at the Legion Hall, and Hortense had actually contemplated dismissing Maggie and looking about for someone a few years older, and a degree or so less attractive. She had congratulated herself many times since on the good judgment she had shown in that crisis. Dismissing Maggie might have been the very thing that would have thrown them into each other's arms—young people were so unpredictable!—and it certainly would have deprived her of the services of a trustworthy companion, for Ben had long ago sworn he would never ask his mother and his wife to live under the same roof. He was being a little over-sensitive in holding to that, Hortense often thought, but he was being very sensible, too. The house was crowded as it was. She would dearly love to have a sweet young daughter-in-law in the house, if there had been half again as much room—or even if Gooben's room had been twice its size and poor Maggie's devotion to her son could have been reduced by at least half its present proportions. It was all a simple problem in arithmetic, but one for which Hortense had never been able to find a satisfactory solution.

Then there had been Adelberta Wilson for a while, though Hortense had never been really worried over her. The poor girl was *so* unprepossessing! Gooben had paid her little attentions of one kind or another, and had even

gone out with her occasionally, because the girl *was* intelligent. No one could deny that. And Gooben loved intelligent people. If Adelberta were only not so—well, if she were only a little more normal, so that people would not be tempted to laugh when they looked at her! It was the poor girl's nose, of course. Except for that unfortunate feature, she might have been really quite attractive. To Hortense, it had always been a mystery that Adelberta's father hadn't done something about it when she was a child. Such amazing things were being done in plastic surgery these days. And why didn't her Granduncle, Thaddeus Wilson, with whom Adelberta had been living ever since her parents died, do something about it even now? It wasn't as if Thaddeus couldn't afford it. It was a shame, and everybody said so. At any rate, Gooben had evidently given up thinking about Adelberta, if he had ever thought much about her, indeed, since she was so much younger than he . . .

But this little Inga Nelson, Hortense reflected, presented a very different problem. Inga was pretty. Smart, too, with a mind of her own. It would be too bad if Gooben became serious over her. She was such a child, for all her twenty-eight years, writing poetry and all. Still, they had been keeping company for months. Not that Hortense sensed anything unduly significant in that. Young people weren't the same as they had been in her day. She and Willie had been going together for less than a month when their friends were already taking it for granted that Hortense would soon change her name to Start. The bolder ones in her immediate circle, in fact, used to make her blush by asking her when she was going to *start*. Girls wouldn't think anything of that nowadays. Girls didn't blush nowadays. Hortense had never seen Inga blush. She had seen very little of her at all, in fact. Gooben rarely brought her to the house. That, in itself, wasn't a good sign. It looked almost as if the girl was trying to avoid her, and with Gooben's connivance. Besides it left Hortense completely at sea. She had no way of telling how much they meant to each other when she was seldom given the opportunity of seeing them together. Well, she would just have to wait. Gooben had always been a dutiful son. He had never been underhanded. He had never deceived her, and he wouldn't deceive her now.

"Maggie, dear!" she chimed out in that laughing, ever-young voice of hers. "Is that tea coming from China?"

"Coming right away!" caroled Maggie.

That daintily chiding voice always brought the sullen, guilty blood springing into Maggie's cheeks. For ten years it had been her fond delusion that Hortense Start had never suspected how violently she felt about Ben.

She quartered a lemon with precision, put one slice between her teeth and bit down hard on it. Rainy nights in autumn or spring could do this to her. For ten years she had never been anything more important in the world than companion to that "sweet Mrs. Start, the invalid in the house over by the factory." *Sweet, my neck!* Maggie said to herself as she prepared the maple tea tray, hand-painted by Hortense, and arranged the teapot, the plate of raisin cookies and the delicate china cups and saucers in a pleasing design. When it was ready, she lifted the laden tray in her capable hands and placed one strong foot firmly before the other as she started toward the living room. Her feet were always light when they were happy, but now they felt as heavy and cumbersome as sandbags.

As she entered the living room, Hortense was admiring her own slender feet clad in soft black kid slippers. The arthritis had not yet gone below her knees. Maggie saw her glance at her left hand, where her wedding ring had had to be filed off, then tuck the hand into the sleeve of her dressing gown.

"My, that looks nice, dear!" Hortense said brightly. "If you should ever break a leg or something, where would I *ever* be?"

Maggie set the tray down on a low table.

"Just where you are, I suppose," she retorted. "I don't count for as much around here as you try to make out sometimes. I notice you walk all right when you're going to the dinner table. And eat all right, too—arthritis or no arthritis. I often think you'd do fine without me, maybe better—except for your breakfast in bed every morning and your tea at night."

Hortense blinked upward. "Maggie—what *are* you saying?"

It must be the dark autumn rain, Maggie thought fumblingly as she grasped the teapot and began to pour the tea. "Oh, I—I don't know what I was saying. Whatever it was, I didn't mean anything anyhow. I just feel—well, kind of worried, I guess."

Hortense smiled thinly and accepted her cup of tea. "I know how you feel, dear. I've been a little worried myself, though I haven't said anything. It isn't like Gooben to keep us waiting till midnight. I hope nothing has happened to him."

"It's Inga—that's what has happened to him, if you ask me," Maggie blurted out, and was immediately ashamed of herself.

"Well, Maggie, I *do* declare! You don't think that Gooben—"

"Oh, I don't know what I think," Maggie put in. "I don't know what to think. The two of them up there alone together for the last two weeks—"

"Not alone, dear," Hortense reminded her. "Gooben wouldn't forget himself to that extent—and I'm sure Inga wouldn't either."

"Her!" said Maggie loftily. "Or Gooben, for that matter. Some things are too much for a human to deny. I may not know all I should know, but I know that much. Humans are weak—and with all that moonlight and a lake and—and the shadows under the trees—and—" Her voice fell away. She was already close to tears.

Hortense regarded her calmly. She herself was quite calm, outwardly at least, however disturbed she may have felt inwardly. She was always under control.

"Maggie, dear," she said finally, "you *are* upset. And it isn't good for you. I wish you could learn to take things more quietly. I'm just as concerned about Gooben as you are, but I don't allow myself to go to pieces when—"

"Do you want him to marry that Inga Nelson he has been with every day and night now for the past two weeks?" Maggie asked.

"I do not, indeed. Definitely not, my dear. Besides, I'm not afraid that he will, or is even thinking about it. I'm his mother, after all, and I deserve some consideration after—"

"Yes—and I'm just the servant he pays to look after you. He never thinks of me as a *woman*. You don't think of me as a woman. You've had what you wanted out of life. You've had a husband—and you've had a son. I haven't had anything. I'm still young enough—and I'm not ugly—and—oh, dear, what am I saying!"

"I'm glad you realize how you're carrying on, Maggie," Hortense observed coolly, and reached for another raisin cookie. "You think only of what I have *had*. You seem to forget what I have *lost*, my dear."

Her voice was trembling now, and Maggie got up to put an arm about the old woman's shoulders.

"I haven't forgotten—and I'm sorry for everything I said," she murmured, and laid a hand on the soft gray hair she herself had brushed and arranged neatly earlier that evening, with Ben's homecoming in mind. "It's just—sometimes I get to thinking and, before I know it, I'm all mixed up. Let's talk about something else."

"Pour me another cup of tea," Hortense said, and as Maggie took the cup to the low table that held the tray, added, "You said something this afternoon about going with Della Prince to call on Sheila Lord—I mean Mrs. Panker, of course."

"Well, Della asked me to go with her," Maggie said, "and I couldn't very well say no, could I?"

"No, of course not. Though, in my opinion, Della Prince would do better if she looked after her daughter Josie and spent less time going round to people's houses."

"I know. Josie has been going from bad to worse ever since she heard about Frank. It wouldn't be so bad, either, if Della knew how to keep her mouth shut about people. She's the meanest gossip in the village. I thought maybe I *ought* to go along with her, if only to check her when she gets out of hand."

"I think that's rather sweet of you, dear," Hortense agreed. "And I'm sure Sheila—I'll never break myself of the habit of calling that woman Sheila Lord! Reading so much about her trial and all—"

"You read too much for your own good," Maggie ventured to suggest. "If I filled my head with murders and killings the way you do, I'd be scared to close my eyes nights."

Hortense smiled reminiscently. "But her trial was so exciting, dear—something new in the paper every day. However, I'm sure Mrs. Panker will appreciate having you and Della call on her. The poor thing hasn't a friend in the whole village, as far as I've heard."

"And she was as innocent as a lamb," Maggie said stoutly. "She proved that to the jury."

"Well—" Hortense hesitated while she sipped her tea and nibbled a cookie. "She had a very clever lawyer, of course—and the jurors may have been prejudiced." She laughed lightly. "One of them certainly was. But I'm glad you're going to call on her. It's real human of you."

Hortense *was* glad. She was glad at the prospect of anything that would ease her boredom with life. Maggie's report of her visit would provide excellent conversation for at least a week. Hortense herself had never set eyes upon George Panker's wife, except once on a Sunday afternoon when Ben had taken her for a drive and they had passed the Panker garden, where Sheila was at work among her roses. She couldn't deny the woman was picturesque, but after all she had publicly confessed to having lived in sin

with a man for whose death she must forever be held responsible, jury or no jury . . . Hortense reached for another raisin cookie.

"Oh, dear!" she sighed. "I do wish Gooben would come. It *has* been lonely without him."

5 783 Roberts Avenue

But there was no one in the village of Wahwahnissa Creek that night who was more lonely than Adelberta Wilson.

The Wilson house was drawn close and blind into itself, a narrow-shouldered white structure that stood back in forbidding rectitude. Before her open window, Adelberta knelt and stared out into the softly weeping dark. The clusters of fruit on the dolgo crabapple tree glistened in the light from a street lamp as if they were varnished by a red rain. Even with her door closed she could barely hear the plaintive susurration of the rain, because of the vociferous snoring of her Granduncle Thaddeus across the hall. If she herself snored, she reflected with grim humor, what a trumpeting that would be! She pressed her nose against the screen until it tingled all the way up its prodigious bridge.

Adelberta was twenty, and would this fall enter her senior year at the university. She was a brilliant student. She had a tall, pliant figure, rich dark hair, and velvety brooding eyes. She might have been almost beautiful, she had often thought to herself, if God in His mercy had been a trifle more considerate when He fashioned her nose. Her parents had both died when she was a child, but even then the uninherited abnormality was marked. She was only five years old when the children whom she played with in the neighborhood made it the target of their thoughtless ridicule. Throughout her school and college years, it remained a burden that evoked from classmates either shocked pity or feelingless mirth.

Adelberta may have thought the Almighty inconsiderate, but Brother Pinwinder was disposed to look with satisfaction, even with gratitude, upon the Creator's handiwork. Adelberta's father had been known to play poker for formidable stakes and to drink "spiked" beer during the prohibition era in which his daughter was born. Brother Pinwinder had never gone so far as to declare openly that Adelberta was a child of Satan, but he had been heard to observe that there was excellent authority for the belief that the devil had

a long nose. He had, moreover, pointedly reminded Adelberta, once when they had ridden out from the city together in a bus, that the sins of an ungodly father are visited upon his children and upon his children's children—even unto the third and fourth generation.

But Adelberta's loneliness had no connection with the crack-brained opinions of Brother Pinwinder. Although she remembered little of her father except what had been told her, she had never thought of him as a sinful man. And although she professed scant knowledge of her Creator, she violently rejected the suggestion that a cruel vindictiveness was one of His attributes. If there was a God at all, He was a God of love, and all that Adelberta asked of life was a small share of that priceless gift to humankind. It was all very well, she told herself, to lay her heart at the feet of others, but the hunger she felt could not find appeasement in anything so simple. Her heart might be full to overflowing with love for somebody else—and it frequently was—but it would still be empty as a vacuum so long as it received no other's love in return. And tonight something like despair was filling the space she had reserved for love. Oh, girls of twenty were often lonely, she knew—lonely for an evening, or for a day or a week—but their loneliness was a tenderness that glorified their hopes and kept them alive. Adelberta Wilson had all but given up hope. At twenty, her mind dwelt upon the thought that one day she would be forty, without warmth, without fulness, without love. It was more than she could bear.

Perhaps it was the rain. Perhaps it was the fact that she had seen a car pause briefly under the street lamp in front of the house before it moved off along the shadowed avenue. She knew that car, and she knew that Ben Start was at the wheel, with Inga Nelson beside him. She had loved Ben for a while—without his knowing it—darn it, she had loved anybody who had ever been kind enough to speak to her without a smirk! She had even loved Professor Smale, who had already promised her a place as his assistant as soon as she won her degree next spring. But Professor Smale, of course, was already married.

Dimly, beyond the roofs of houses and the light on the corner of Walnut Street, she could see the red roof of Pete Bellingham's home. Pete had always been shy and awkward. She had walked home with him today, and he had jerked up his sleeve in a defiant, derisive way and shown her his new artificial arm, and how he could use it almost as well as the one he had lost in Sicily. Did he know what had come over her there as they walked together down the street? Could he guess how well she understood that gesture of defiance, a defiance she herself had felt so often during the past few years?

Had he known that for a moment she could scarcely resist the impulse to throw her arms about him and tell him what was in her heart? Certainly not! His family had money. Next to George Panker, Henry Bellingham was the wealthiest man in the village. He was also the mayor. Pete was twenty-seven, and before the war he had been on his way to becoming a good architect. Why should he care about what was going on in her mind? And yet—

There were no lights visible in the Bellingham house now. Pete was probably in bed. Where did he keep his arm while he slept? Did he sometimes reach out in the darkness of his room, forgetting for a moment what had happened to him? Would he mind it much if some night she should press her lips to the marred flesh close to his shoulder? Would he mind it much if some morning she stood behind him and watched him while he shaved? Or if she knelt before him to tie his shoe-laces? And that good arm of his—how strong it would become now!

Her Granduncle Thaddeus gave a violent snort in the room across the hall, and then there was silence. He must have awakened himself, for her Grandaunt Sophia was half deaf and never heard his snoring.

"Well, get to bed now," Adelberta whispered to herself, and got up off her knees. "Maybe you'll be able to sleep tonight, Mrs. Cyrano de Bergerac!"

6 772 Mellow Avenue

Ben finally brought his car to the curb in front of the Thole place, and left his engine running.

"Vacation's end, kid!" he announced, and reached across to open the door for Inga.

"The nicest vacation ever," she sighed. "And you're tired. Was it silly of me to want to drive around and look at nothing but houses?"

"Lord, don't ask me!" Ben replied with a laugh. "I get tired looking at them, but if it's what you want—that old psychic sense of yours, you know. It's pretty important."

She snuggled against his shoulder. "Oh, don't make fun of me, Gooben! I'm not psychic. And I didn't *see* anything. Nothing but rain on trees and

roofs and darkened windows. But I loved it, with you along. It was all so peaceful—and so untroubled—and *nice*! And I'm sleepy. And I want you to kiss me so I'll dream about it for the rest of the night."

"Well—" He drew his arms about her for only a moment, and set his lips to hers. "That's enough for tonight. You'd better beat it now, while the beating's good. Some day we'll have a roof of our own, but until we do—"

"Soon?" she murmured.

"Don't expect miracles these days. Of course, there's always that trailer hitched to a star."

"I'll settle for a trailer," Inga laughed and kissed him again as she added, "—a trailer in a vacant lot."

Chapter Three

1 Woman-talk

Maggie Fraghurst was loth to leave Hortense that afternoon to call on Sheila Panker, but Hortense spiritedly insisted she must go, and look her handsomest in her white-and-fuchsia print dress. So, shortly after three o'clock, Maggie telephoned Della Prince and the two met at the corner of Walnut and Thorpe, whence they proceeded to the Panker residence.

Della, Maggie observed, was unbecomingly garbed in a cross-stripe suit of gabardine, but after all, what *could* the woman wear with such a shape? They greeted each other warmly, and Maggie had to tell of Ben's return late the night before, a strangely silent Ben who had given no account of his two weeks' vacation beyond the fact that he had had a good time and the fishing was excellent. As if he had something weighing on his conscience, Maggie suggested uneasily, to which Della replied that he undoubtedly had, there was no way of accounting for young people nowadays. Her own Josie, who had been a model daughter until she married Frank Stone, was getting completely out of hand. Why, it had been nearly one o'clock before she got in last night, and where she had spent the time or what she was doing, heaven only knew! Not that she blamed Josie altogether, when her father had never lifted a finger to her. Especially since Frank Stone was killed in the Pacific. It just seemed as if Nigel Prince hadn't the gumption to check her with as much as a word.

Old Karl Berg, the Pankers' Danish cook, opened the door to them and ushered them into the living room. Mrs. Panker, he said, would be down in a few minutes, and wouldn't they please make themselves comfortable?

"Oh, we'll be quite comfortable," Della said jauntily as she made for the biggest chair in the room. "Tell her not to hurry."

“I guess we’re a little early,” Maggie worried as soon as the old man withdrew from the room. “You’re quite sure she’s expecting us?”

Della Prince sniffed. “Expecting us? Didn’t I talk to her myself—on the telephone? She’s expecting us, all right. And she knows we’re here.”

Sitting across from her, Maggie could actually *feel* what was going on in Della’s mind. Maybe it was the custom for a woman who had attained a certain status in her community to keep visitors in suspense while she prepared to make a grand entrance. But Della Prince was not going to be impressed. She was setting herself, tight-lipped and stiff-necked, against the moment of Sheila Panker’s coming. She was digging a sharp heel into the deep pile of the living room rug.

“This must be the Audubon carpet I heard about,” she whispered, “—the one George’s father got in France, years ago.”

Audubon—Audubon? Maggie’s thoughts raced furiously. Not Audubon! Audubon was the man who had written about birds—a large book filled with beautiful prints that she had found one day on a shelf in Ben’s room. She was sure of it. Audubon had nothing to do with rugs, surely! She would have to ask Gooben about that. Or maybe Hortense would know.

Della nodded toward a large vase filled with delphiniums and snapdragons that stood on the floor beside the grand piano.

“Flowers like that always make me think of a funeral,” said Della censoriously. “But the vase is cute. Looks like pearl, don’t it? What d’you s’pose it’s made of?”

“Search me,” Maggie said, staring earnestly at the vase.

“Cost a pretty penny, anyhow, I’ll bet!” Della concluded, then stiffened suddenly at the sound of footsteps.

From her vantage point, Maggie could see Sheila’s slim legs descending the broad hall stairs. Her feet were shod in red leather pumps. When she came into the living room, however, Maggie couldn’t help feeling a moment’s disappointment at the dress she wore. It was an ordinary red-and-white cotton print—a house dress, really, and much too simple to produce the effect against which Della Prince had so deliberately steeled herself. Maggie felt cheated—until Sheila Panker smiled. *Why, the woman is beautiful!* Maggie said to herself. *No wonder George Panker fell in love with her, in spite of everything!*

“How nice of you to come!” Sheila greeted them in a voice as soft as her footfall upon the rug as she came toward them with outstretched hands.

Before she bethought herself to rise, Maggie instinctively drew her own large feet beneath her chair. Then at a severe glance from Della, she bounced up.

“I’ve been wanting to visit you ever since you came here, Mrs. Panker!” Maggie said.

Della was not to be outdone in graciousness. “We’re neighbors, after all,” she laughed deprecatingly as she took Sheila’s hand. “And some of us have known George all our lives, just about.”

“Of course,” Sheila said. “He has told me a lot about his old friends here in Wahwahnissa Creek. I feel as if I really know you.”

Any ambiguity in that statement was probably lost on her guests, Sheila thought as she sat down in a straight little chair upholstered in petit-point, and reached for a cigarette in a swan-shaped glass dish on the table near her.

“I don’t know whether you ladies smoke, but—” She got up, the glass swan in her hands.

“No, thanks, not for me,” Della said with a slight recoiling motion.

Maggie smiled. She rarely indulged in a cigarette, but the temptation was too strong in Della’s presence. “Yes—I’d like one.”

Sheila went back to her chair. “I’ve been canning vegetables from the garden all afternoon,” she said, smoothing her hair lightly back from her temples, “and I’m still hot, even after a cool shower.”

“It’s hot work, all right,” Maggie agreed, “but I like it. I like the spices and the boiling. I never think it’s fall without the smell of pickling in the kitchen.”

“I’d think your cook would take all that off your hands,” Della said to Sheila.

“Oh, Karl helped,” Sheila hastened to say. “He helped a lot, really. But—well, I have some old recipes of my mother’s, and they’re rather tricky. Besides, it’s the first chance I’ve had to offer my husband a sample of my own preserving. It’ll be a sort of a—a test. He may take one taste and divorce me.”

“My husband eats what I give him,” Della declared proudly. “He doesn’t complain.”

No, Maggie thought to herself, Nigel Prince wouldn't complain about anything. "Maybe we could trade a few of our recipes," she ventured to Sheila. "I have some favorites of my own."

"That would be fun," Sheila said. "In fact, I'll trade you—jar for jar—in anything you have in your cellar."

Della took over, almost belligerently. "Maggie, I'd think you had enough of canning, and talk of canning, after the work we've been doing this year at the Community House. You have no idea how dumb young wives can be, Mrs. Panker! Maggie and I have had our fill of it."

"I can imagine," Sheila said. "But George tells me it's a wonderful organization."

"We do a pretty good job of it," Della admitted. "We try to keep trouble-makers out of it, but in spite of everything—well, the less said about that, the better, eh, Maggie?"

Sheila artfully led the conversation into a less hazardous field. "I'm sure it must be difficult at times. The men all say that women don't know how to get on together."

"The right women—and the good women—get along all right," Della pronounced. "It's the selfish women—"

"Yes, of course," Sheila put in, struggling to take control. "By the way, Karl has some little sandwiches made, and some awfully good Danish pastry. I asked him to shake up a cocktail, if you—"

Maggie and Della both spoke at once, but it was finally made clear that Maggie would have a cocktail, if you please—if Sheila was going to have one, of course—and that Della would not. Della would prefer coffee, if it wasn't too much trouble.

The cocktails turned out to be daiquiris. Maggie became flushed and sprightly after her second, and was tempted to laugh out loud at Della's glowering. She had never been given much to drinking. She had held firmly to the theory that it was a dangerous diversion. She had heard all sorts of explanations of why people drink to excess, and had discarded them all as so much poppycock. People drank because they liked it. They drank too much sometimes because they didn't have the sense to know when to stop. On the other hand, she reflected as she drained her glass, people like Della Prince didn't even know when to start. There was a thought—an original thought—an amusing thought! Della didn't know when to start! All she could do was talk—as she was talking now to Sheila. Nice name, Sheila. And appropriate,

somehow—like a shield against the world. There was another original thought. That made two in as many minutes. If Della would only stop talking for a while and give somebody else a chance. Sheila wasn't interested in all her palaver about the church and the Garden Club and the W.C.T.U. and how hard they had worked to elect a woman to the school board. Maggie herself wasn't interested in it. Right now, in fact, she was bored with it. She was bored with Della Prince and Hortense Start and the whole female population of Wahwahnissa Creek. With the exception of Sheila Panker, decidedly. She liked Sheila, she liked everything about her. She liked the house she lived in and the garden she worked in. It struck Maggie suddenly that she might have amounted to something herself if *she* had had the good fortune to shoot a man who deserved to be shot anyhow, and had been brought to live in a house like this instead of slaving all these years for Hortense. And *there* was another thought, only this one made her sad. She couldn't bear to think of it long. In another minute, she realized, she would be in tears. She set her empty glass on the table and lifted her eyebrows with a significant smile as she nodded toward the silver cocktail shaker, so cool and inviting in its film of dew.

"Why, of course," Sheila said and began filling the glass. "Won't you change your mind, Mrs. Prince?" she invited before she set the shaker down.

"No, indeed!" Della replied emphatically. "And it's my candid opinion *she* shouldn't have any more. She's not used to it, and Hortense wouldn't—"

"You and Hortense!" Maggie flared, then checked herself immediately, remembering that she was Sheila's guest, after all. "I don't get out often, and I'm going to enjoy these few minutes while I've got them." She settled back in her chair and began sipping her cocktail, her warm brown eyes smiling at Sheila across her glass.

"Don't you feel lost in a house this size?" Della asked, determined to regain Sheila's attention.

"I did at first," Sheila confessed. "After living so long in a small apartment—"

"I never *was* used to that, of course," said Della comfortably.

"We get used to anything when we have to," Sheila replied lightly. "And now that I'm getting used to a big house, I wonder how I existed in a couple of rooms." She looked around the room as if she were seeing it for the first time. "It is big—for just two people, isn't it?"

“You and George ought to be able to fix that between you,” Maggie giggled.

“Well, I do declare!” Della burst out. “What kind of talk is that, first time we’re here? I think we ought to be going!”

But Sheila laughed. “Oh, please don’t go. Maggie is quite right. I like that name—Maggie. One of my dearest playmates when I was a child was called Maggie. Last time I heard from her she was married and had four children. I think it would be wonderful to have even one child!”

“Well—” Della’s voice balanced judicially, “if everything was just right, I suppose. But it’s an awful responsibility, and a woman ought to think twice.”

“Thinking twice—or a hundred times—doesn’t bring children into the world,” Maggie observed in a doleful tone. “It’s not having them at all that leaves a woman something to think about—to the end of her days.”

“Do you mean, Mrs. Prince,” asked Sheila mildly, “that I shouldn’t have a child of my own?”

Della’s cheeks flushed, and she plucked at her striped skirt. “I didn’t mean anything of the kind. You’re young enough, and you’re healthy, and if it’s God’s will—”

There came a sudden explosion of laughter from Maggie. “God’s will? Jeepers!”

Della looked at her with alarm. “We must be going, Mrs. Panker. Thank you so much for a nice visit. Come along, Maggie. We’re leaving.” She stood up, and Maggie launched herself with careful dignity from her chair.

“I’m sorry you have to go so soon,” Sheila said and smiled hospitably as she went with them to the door.

“You’re not as sorry as I am,” Maggie declared. “I’d like to come again sometime when I—”

“Do, by all means,” Sheila urged. “Any time. I’m usually right here, or puttering about in my garden.”

She stood in the doorway and watched the women go down the walk and out through the wrought-iron gate, under the flaming copper beeches. Then she closed the door gently and went back into the living room.

For a moment she felt oddly faint. She lay down on the couch and looked across the room at the vase of flowers beside the piano. She had

prepared herself thoughtfully for the visit of the two women, hoping it might prove an overture of friendliness on the part of her neighbors. They had arrived a half hour earlier than she expected them, but she had hurried into the simple house dress she had decided to wear and had gone down to greet them as naturally as if they were old friends. She had done it, she knew, largely for George's sake, because they were certainly not the kind of people she had known before her life splintered about her. But she had done it for herself as well. This place belonged to her and George together. She was determined to become a part of it. Perhaps it had been a mistake to offer them cocktails. Perhaps she shouldn't have mentioned children at all. Della Prince was probably of the opinion that Sheila's bearing a child now would amount to nothing less than flaunting before the community the sin that had been her undoing.

She had been a fool to speak of it at all! She knew that now. After all, it was nobody's concern but hers and George's. She sat up quickly. There was dinner to see about. And there was that nausea again! Well, that was to be expected. With a child of her own, she wouldn't give a damn for all the Della Princes in Wahwahnissa Creek!

Outside, Della Prince was tramping up the avenue as if she was determined to settle the sidewalk once and for all. Maggie Fraghurst flanked her militantly. Her militancy, however, was only an exercise of defense against her redoubtable companion who hadn't spoken to her since they had turned their backs upon the Panker doorway. Maggie's militancy was sheer bravado. She scarcely knew how she felt. Somewhere out of the back of her mind came an expression she had heard or read—where was it? In a book? No, in a magazine! In a story, it was—she remembered it now. It fitted her mood exactly. She halted suddenly and waited until Della looked back at her.

"Whoosh!" Maggie let forth, and her laugh caused a house painter to pause in his work almost a block away and look down from the top of his ladder. "Whoosh!" Maggie repeated gaily, and was tempted to wave a hand at the workman.

Della stamped her foot. "You're a disgrace! You've been behaving like an idiot all afternoon!"

Maggie's feet had never been so light. She stepped toward Della and laid a hand on her arm so affectionately that Della lurched back in awkward

embarrassment. “I’ve never had such a good time in my life!” Maggie sang out to the world at large.

“Shush, for goodness’ sake!” Della rasped and glanced up and down the street. “You’d better get home as fast as you know how. What *will* Hortense think?”

“There you go,” said Maggie, “—what will Hortense think? Think—think! Who cares what she thinks? I got an idea this afternoon—a brand new idea. Listen to this, Della. From now on I—”

“Here’s your corner,” Della announced abruptly. “*I’ve got* to hurry home.”

She shook herself loose from Maggie’s grasp and strode off down the street, refusing to look back or concern herself with Maggie. Never again, she decided, would she invite Maggie Fraghurst to go anywhere with her. It was trial enough, surely, to call on the Panker woman in obedience to what she felt was her Christian duty, but to be shamed by Hortense Start’s housekeeper was too much.

Della’s lot, indeed, was not a happy one. If she had not had her faith to sustain her through the years she might easily have broken long ago under the strain of merely living. To be married to a man like Nigel Prince was burden enough in itself. If he had at least given her a daughter with some Christian fortitude, she might have garnered some small comfort from that. She had had hopes for Josie at first, but the way she had been carrying on during the past year had left Della at her wits’ end. And to think that Sheila Lord, that Jezebel, could step into a mansion and look down her nose at her God-fearing neighbors! Imagine her thinking of bringing innocent children into the world with the brand of sin, upon them before they drew breath! Della’s faith was near the breaking point by the time she reached her own front door.

She found her husband in the kitchen, fumbling over a can of beans.

“Where’s Josie?” she demanded.

Nigel Prince looked up. “Josie? How should I know? She went out a little while after I came in.”

Della was exasperated. “And you didn’t ask her where she was going or when she was coming back, I suppose? I declare, if I turn my back a minute —”

"I'm only a chartered accountant, my dear," Nigel observed temperately, "not a truant officer." He turned away and renewed his struggle with the can-opener.

"I thought she'd have the spareribs in the oven by this," Della snapped. "But I ought to know better than expect anything from either of you. Give me that!" She thrust him aside with a swing of her hip and seized the can-opener. "Where did you dig up this thing? We haven't used it for years."

"Well, you're in a fine twist after visiting Mrs. Panker, I must say!" Nigel remarked.

"Get out of my way!" Della ordered. "And don't talk to me about Mrs. Panker. Go and find Josie, if you haven't anything better to do. Go anywhere, just so you're out of the kitchen."

Nigel was glad to go—anywhere away from the sound of her voice. He shuffled off along the hall and into the cubby-hole he called his den, and sat down to a game of solitaire while he waited for dinner.

He hadn't told Della the whole truth about Josie, but his conscience didn't trouble him on that score. It was a long time, in fact, since his conscience last bothered him concerning his wife. There had been moments, not so many years ago, when he had dreamed of escapades so outrageous that any man's conscience would have revolted at the mere thought of carrying them out. He had never had the courage to embark upon them.

His only real concern in life these days was for his daughter Josie. She had been the consolation prize of his marriage, the one gift the gods had vouchsafed to soothe him in defeat. He adored her. He had tried to share her anguish over the loss of her husband, Frank Stone, but the girl had grown more and more remote from him. For months now she had been living in some sort of spirit world that baffled him and roused her mother to impotent rage. Della had frequently forbidden her to leave the house, especially at night, but Nigel was convinced the girl would lose her reason unless she got out where she could do something besides sit and brood. He had known that often, late at night, after her mother had gone to bed, Josie had slipped out alone in any kind of weather, and although he had lain sleepless and alert with anxiety, listening for her return, he never asked where she had been.

This afternoon, when he came home from his office, there was a strange, other-world light in the girl's eyes that had truly frightened him. She was in the kitchen, standing before the table, twisting the wedding ring on her finger and looking down at the slab of spareribs in waxed paper that she had

taken from the refrigerator. He paused in the doorway from the hall, and she turned and looked at him. It was then that he noticed the startling shine of her eyes. He went and stood beside her.

"What's the matter, Josie?" he asked her.

She pointed at the ribs that showed skeleton-like through the waxed paper. "She's going to have these for supper tonight."

"Well, there isn't much choice these days. I thought you liked spareribs, Josie."

She jerked away from the table and pressed her hands over her eyes. "I can't touch them. I can't bear the sight of them. Take them away. Throw them out—do anything you like with them! I won't touch them, I tell you! They look like—like fingers—"

He put an arm about her shoulders. "Never you mind, baby. I'll look after things. You go and lie down if you don't feel well."

Josie wheeled and went into the hall. "I'm going out. I won't be back for supper, so you don't have to wait. Maybe I'll have a sandwich at the drug store."

"But, Josie—"

"Don't worry about me. Maybe I'll go to a movie."

"Ah, now, Josie," he implored hoarsely. "What's the matter, little girl? Can't you tell your old dad?"

"Sometime, maybe. Not now. I'm all right really. I've been happier today than I have been for a long time. Believe that, dad, because it's true."

Her big blue eyes held steady as she looked at him for a brief moment before she took her beret and jacket from the rack beside the door and went out.

It was the memory of those blue eyes that still remained with Nigel Prince as he sat before the small table in his den and slowly turned his cards. He wondered idly what it would be like if he took his daughter away to some secret hide-out—Cody, Wyoming, for example—where they would be free forever from the stifling air of the house at 107 Cherry Street. How often at night, even during the day when he was supposed to be busy in his office, had his accountant's brain juggled the figures that stood above the door of his home, adding, subtracting, rearranging them as if they were magic symbols that held some great good fortune if he could only find the

key! There was no escape. None for him, at least—and none for Josie. Even if they tried it, the rough-shod Della would track them down inexorably and bring them back.

Della's clatter in the kitchen broke rudely across his idle dreaming. He leaned over his table and successfully turned up the ace of hearts.

Ben Start stopped his truck in front of his own house and stared incredulously at the familiar and yet strangely unfamiliar figure coming toward him along the sidewalk. It was clad, certainly, in Maggie Fraghurst's gallant fuchsia dress and wore Maggie's modishly towering black felt hat, but the dress seemed to have a slight list to leeward while the hat was tilted rakishly in the opposite direction.

"Well—looks like you've been having yourself quite a whirl!" Ben laughed as she stood before him and began warbling a sprightly though unidentifiable tune.

"Swell!" Maggie took his arm as they mounted the two steps to the Starts' walk. "Sheila's swell! Sheila's an angel, that's what she is!"

"Where's Della? I thought the two of you—"

Maggie waved her hand vaguely toward the street. "She's gone—gone home." She halted abruptly and tightened her grip on Ben's arm. "Tell me something. You know that big rug on the living room floor—the one they say old man Panker brought back from France—"

"You mean—wait a minute. You mean that Aubusson George's father —"

Maggie chortled. "*Aubusson!* You know what Della called it?"

"I wouldn't have any idea," Ben said, "but look, woman—you'd better get your mind off rugs and everything else and pull yourself together. You don't know it, but you're slightly lit. If you go into the house like this—"

"I know, Gooben. Hortense'll be mad. Just a minute." She made an effort to straighten her hat, then laid her hand again upon Gooben's arm. "I'll be all right."

He opened the door and deposited Maggie safely in the hall. Then he tossed off his green-piped white duck jacket, that symbol of his lowly occupation which had never ceased to embarrass his mother, and went at once to his mother's bathroom to wash his hands and face. He had got into

the habit of cleaning up there when he came home for dinner, instead of going to the bathroom upstairs.

The air in the room was cloyingly sweet with the scents of various soaps and toilet waters. Hortense had an abiding fear of getting what she called "an *old* smell." Lord, Ben wondered, would Inga ever have such fears? He wondered, too, what was going on between Maggie and his mother in the living room. A slightly tipsy Maggie would be horrifying to Hortense. He had decided, moreover, to give them the news about himself and Inga. Well, damn it, he felt sorry for his mother, but after all this was *his* life. He was going to live it his way, and the sooner she knew about it the better.

Before going into the living room, he hurried upstairs to change into his tweed suit, for tonight he and Inga were going to the El Rancho to listen to the music and perhaps dance a little. Inga was sweet about declaring that he danced well. He knew better. But Inga was sweet about everything.

Halfway up the stairs, Ben was halted by his mother's quivering voice. He called back reassuringly: he would be down in ten minutes. But it took him a little longer than that to select the right tie—a maroon with a small star design—for Inga.

He entered the living room and his mother's presence, feeling even larger than usual as Hortense gazed up at him with a swiftly changing expression. His first glimpse of her face had revealed her feeling of outrage at the condition in which Maggie had come back from her visit to Sheila Panker. Ben had already set himself to meet the situation. But instantly his mother surveyed him from head to foot, with blank astonishment.

"Why, Gooben!" she exclaimed. "You're all dressed up! You're not going out tonight again?"

Ben saw Maggie trotting in from the kitchen with steaming dishes which she set on the dining room table.

"I had everything ready just to heat up for supper," she caroled gaily.

"What have you got there?" Ben asked and walked into the dining room. "Smells awfully good." He leaned over the table. "Stew, eh? Let's eat."

"We can sit in now, if you're both ready," Maggie said.

"I am *not* ready!" Hortense's cane struck the floor. "Benjamin, you haven't answered my question. I shall not leave this chair until you tell me where you're going tonight."

Ben laughed as he strode back to her chair, lifted her bodily, and set her gently upon her cushioned chair at the table. “I’ll tell you all about it, Mother,” he said as he went to his accustomed place, and waited until Maggie stilled the clatter she was making with spoons and dishes and finally seated herself carefully.

“I’m going out with Inga tonight,” he said as he reached for a slice of bread.

“Again—after being out till all hours with her last night?” his mother protested.

“This is sort of special, Mother,” he told her. “Inga and I have to talk over getting some place to live.”

“What—what did you say, Gooben?” The question came thinly through Hortense’s fine nostrils.

“We’re going to be married,” Ben said.

“You must be joking!”

But Maggie knew better. Her right eye was feverishly bright, dry, her left one dewed as if the fever in it had broken.

“He’s not joking,” she said. “He means it.”

“And when is this to be?” quavered Hortense.

“Well—right away,” Ben said. “Just as soon as we can find a place to live in. Any sort of a dump will do. We’re not going to be fussy.”

He had tried to sound casual, but he winced as his mother lifted her pitifully warped fingers to her eyes and with her other hand pushed her plate away from her.

“How can you think of leaving me alone in this house?” she asked forlornly. “You promised your poor father—”

It was all so trite, so in keeping with the old-fashioned pattern of the doting, semi-invalid mother, that Ben found himself looking vainly for some kind of sympathetic reply.

“Now, look here, Mother,” he said finally. “I’m not forgetting you, and I’m not forgetting my promises. You’re not going to be left alone in the house. After all, you’ll have Maggie. And it isn’t as if I was going to move to the other side of the world. I’ll be right here in—”

"I'll have Maggie!" Hortense's eyes drooped sadly as if at half-mast. "You'd leave me with her, after seeing how she came back from that Jezebel's house this afternoon! You want to put an end to me?"

"You know better than that, Mother," Ben argued. "I—it's just that I've got to start soon to make a life of my own—or give up the idea altogether. Do you want me to do that?"

Hortense drew a long sigh. "Ah, Gooben, I'm such a burden to you! It would be better for all of us if I was in my grave. I hope—I have prayed—it won't be long. But I thought you'd wait—till—" Her voice broke helplessly.

Ben ground his teeth on a piece of meat he hadn't tasted. The Swiss clock on the wall was striking the half hour. He got up abruptly from the table. Such anger as he felt now was foreign to his nature, and he curbed it by stepping over behind his mother's chair and patting her shoulder.

"You'll love Inga, Mother, when you really get to know her," he said. "Anyhow, that's the way it is between her and me." He turned away. "I won't be late tonight."

When he was gone, the two women gazed at the very male blankness of the closed door.

"Well, that's that!" Maggie remarked. "He's going to leave us."

"He's going to leave *me*," Hortense whimpered. "After all these years." She sank back in her chair, white and limp.

"What did you expect?" Maggie retorted. "I knew it was going to happen when they went up to that lake together. Maybe they even slept together. It isn't as if I didn't warn you, so don't try to look surprised and shocked, and all that."

Hortense looked wanly across the table at the younger woman. "Maggie," she said feebly, "sometimes I wonder if you have any heart."

"Heart! It would be better for me if I hadn't. All it ever did was make a fool of me." She got up heavily to clear the table.

"I'm as sorry for you as I am for myself, dear," Hortense commiserated, and believed she meant it. "I can't see what he is thinking of—marrying a delicate—"

"Don't go feeling sorry for me!" Maggie said with rising anger. "I haven't got time for it. Besides, I've got my work to do. I didn't think of

spraying your dead bastard of a canary before I left the house today and I've —"

"Maggie!" Hortense exclaimed. "My *what* of a canary? Are *you* turning against me now?"

It was of no use, Maggie realized. The years had inured her to forbearance with Hortense Start—and her wonderful afternoon with Sheila Panker was over.

"You know I'm not turning against you, honey," she said, and stroked the older woman's forehead. "We'll go on living here together, just the two of us."

Hortense lifted herself halfway in her chair. "He's deserting us, Maggie! He's no longer a son of mine. From this day on, this house—and everything in it—is *ours*. Yours and mine, Maggie."

"That'll do now," Maggie remonstrated. "Have your salad, at least, and I'll perk some coffee. Doctor Knutson is coming to give you your injection tonight, remember. I'll fix you up with a little rouge and powder before he gets here. He thinks you're so pretty, Honey."

Hortense sighed and nibbled at a leaf of endive.

2 Man-talk

George Panker was alone in his office.

For the past ten minutes he had been standing before his window, his back turned upon his paper-strewn desk. Time and again during those ten minutes his gaze swept the marshes to the southward, where the reeds were brittle rust under the afternoon sun, followed the course of the creek where it wound past the gentle slope set with the snug cottages of Red Willow Terrace, then reached eastward over the rambling village he had known so long to the city's white towers that thrust themselves upward into the haze of distance.

Some years ago, he had stood at that same window, looking out at the same marshes, the same creek, the same village, and the same white towers. His father had been standing beside him that day, an arm resting heavily across George's shoulders. The old man must have had some intimation

even then that his days were numbered. His words had been those of a man who was already preparing for the end.

"George," he said, "there's been something I've been wanting to say to you. I've been thinking a lot about it, in fact, just lately." He paused briefly, then waved a hand toward the window. "Look down there, George, and measure the distance from here to the city limits. Measure it with your eyes, take it all in—and tell me what you think of it."

Not quite understanding his father's meaning, George replied that it was a pleasant little village, it was home to him, and he had always loved it.

"Just so," his father went on. "It's a nice little spot. It's very different from the place your mother and I came to thirty-five years ago. There's a neat little park now—four acres of it—that I gave the town—with a bandstand right where old Tom Gillis used to have his cow barn. That old barn was my first factory after I took over the Gillis farm. Tom wanted to move out before the city moved in and started pushing him around. Those first years weren't all roses, by any means, but—I made a little money. I started out with the idea that the only thing worth doing was making money—and more money. And there are people down there today who think I've made more money than is good for me. That's all in the point of view, I suppose. Anyhow, we've got this factory. We have the—the Panker Mansion, they call it—where there once was a field of alfalfa. We've got streets where there used to be cow-paths. In a sense—I did it! That isn't bragging. All over the country men have done the same thing. The only real difference is that they can point to cities where I point to a village. Those fellows and I were born at a time when all we had to do was swim with the current."

He paused long enough to light a cigar.

"Well, George," he went on, "I'm leaving this to you. Not today—of course, and not next week, but sooner or later. You're going to take over where I leave off. You've been trained for it, and I know you'll handle it. There's just one thing that worries me. You can't take a harvest from the soil, year after year, unless you put its equivalent back into the soil you took it from. I look down there at the village and I say *I did it*! The truth is—*they* did it—we did it together. That's what they're thinking about today, and they're right. That's what they're talking about. And some day, my boy, that's what they're going to say to you. The devil of it is, I don't know how you're going to answer them. I'm afraid I can't say a thing that will help you

face it when the time comes. It'll be your egg, young fellow, and you'll have to hatch it!"

Three months later, George Panker's father was found sitting in the chair before his desk, dead of a stroke . . .

George was thinking of his father's words now, as he stood alone at his office window. He had been thinking of them for days, torturing his brain in an effort to find some solution, even temporary, to the problems that confronted him at every turn. He had hoped for speedy reconversion to peacetime production during the months following cessation of hostilities in Europe and the recent collapse of Japan. He had been as impatient as anyone else over the delays and arbitrary controls that had to be hurdled before he could develop any plans for the future. He had damned government and cursed bureaucracy, at the same time admitting that the country's leaders must be having their own time of it trying to get the nation's giant economy back into gear. In the end, he had found himself thwarted without being able to form any clear opinion as to who was to blame or where a remedy might be found. The daily press, the comment that came over the radio, the bickerings of politicians, served only to deepen the confusion, until he began to wish for some retreat where the voices of the outer world would not reach him for at least a year.

The first few weeks following the canceling of war contracts had been almost serene. Of the six hundred men and women he had employed during the war, George Panker had kept only a handful of department heads on the factory pay roll. There had been no protest. The nation was taking a holiday. No voice was raised either when he began calling his workers back as he needed them, in greatly reduced numbers, and at wages that bore scant resemblance to what they had received during the war. It was only lately that the virus of discontent had begun to infect the plant. He had talked with other men in industry, he had discussed it with his own executives, and he had found no solution. For days now he had been aware that the two hundred men and women working for him were getting ready to quit. If something weren't done at once, there wouldn't be a wheel turning in the factory by the end of another week.

George was waiting now for the three men who were to be in his office for a conference at four o'clock. It was a conference that would in all probability decide the issue. He had not told Sheila about it last night, but he was sure she had already guessed the truth. She had enough to think about, as he realized only too well. He had been wondering about her all day. How had she got along with Della Prince? He felt no misgivings so far as Maggie

Fraghurst was concerned. There was something so essentially healthy and forthright about Maggie! But Della was something else again. George didn't like her.

And that reminded him again of his decision last night to have a talk with Colin Trale. Several times during the day, he had been on the point of calling him but had put it off. He glanced at his watch, stepped quickly to his desk and in a moment had Colin Trale on the telephone.

"This is George Panker, Trale. I want you to put on your hat and come over here—I'm in my office at the factory. Four-thirty? That'll be fine. I have a conference, but I'll be glad of an excuse to chase them out before then. Besides, this is important. I meant to call you earlier, but . . . Good! I'll look for you at four-thirty, then!"

He cradled the receiver and looked up to see his secretary, Miss Carle, in the doorway.

"The men are here, Mr. Panker," she announced.

He stood up to receive his visitors. "Have them come in, Miss Carle. By the way, I'm expecting the Reverend Trale at four-thirty. Let me know when he gets here, please." He moved a little away from his desk. "Come in, gentlemen!"

He waved them to the chairs he had placed for them, then stepped over and closed the door. When he was seated again at his desk, he glanced from one to another until his eyes came to rest on Andy Burgess. He knew all three, of course. Tom Larson was a man in his late thirties who might have won advancement in the factory if he had ever shown any spark of ambition. But he was a good workman, whose father had been a factory hand under the elder Panker. Chuck Harrigan was smart enough to have won himself a place as group supervisor in the plant during the war, but had shown dissatisfaction ever since he was called back to a routine job on a small assembly line.

It was to Andy Burgess, however, that George looked to carry the burden of the interview. Dark, spare, unkempt, nervous, Burgess had been the factory workers' storm center on many an occasion when there was no real cause for complaint. He had never held the men's full confidence, George knew, but his driving energy and his quick wit in an argument had made him their ready spokesman.

"Well, boys," George Panker began, his attention focused upon Burgess, "you asked to see me and present a statement on behalf of the workers in the

factory. I thought we might meet and talk it over informally first—before I called anyone else in to offer advice. You have something in writing, I suppose?"

There was an uneasy shuffling of feet, and Andy Burgess got up from his chair and took a paper from an inside pocket.

"It's all here," he said, unfolding the paper and laying it on the desk. "It was voted on at the meeting night before last."

George picked up the document, separated the three pages, glanced hastily over the contents, then laid it aside. "I'll need a little time to study it, but—"

"Ten days," Burgess spoke up, and nodded toward the paper lying on the desk.

The man's bearing was arrogant, his voice irritating. George picked up the document and found the clause calling for a conference within ten days to consider the issues involved. He set it aside and leaned back in his chair.

"That should be time enough," he observed and swung slowly about to face the window. "There are a few things I'd like you to think about in the meantime. We're a small outfit here, and we've managed to get along together with very little friction. What differences we've had in the past were settled by negotiation. We have settled everything without any help from outside. It's my hope that we can still do so. There is one respect, however, in which the dispute—if it is to be a dispute—may differ from any we have had in the past. I'd like to take a minute or two to make it clear. We have just come out of a dreadful war that has cost us untold losses in men and materials. The only hope we have for the future lies in our ability to use to the best advantage what we have left in man-power and resources. We made sacrifices to win the war—we are going to make sacrifices almost as great if we are to win the peace. These may sound like empty words to you, gentlemen, but the plain truth is that we shall lose everything we fought for if we now start fighting among ourselves. I'll go just as far as I can to meet the demands of my workers. But there is a point beyond which management cannot go if production is to continue. It is true that goods are useless if the people haven't money to pay for them. It is just as true that money is useless unless there are goods it can buy. It's the balance between the two that makes for a decent living standard, and unless we can strike that balance, we'll go down. I'd like to have that understood—and I'd like to make it the basis of any further negotiations we may enter into. If our conference, ten days from now, begins and ends with a list of demands and a corresponding

list of refusals, we may as well shut up shop and go home. I don't want to do that, and I don't think you want to. Let's meet together, as we always have, on a basis of complete and friendly understanding."

George Panker stopped talking with a feeling that he hadn't spoken a word that meant anything to the three men who sat in his office. Everything he had said amounted to little more than a confession of weakness on his own part. He wondered if his father would have talked in such a manner to the men of his day. He looked about, from one to another of his visitors, hoping for a look or a word that would help him restore confidence in himself and in what he was trying to do.

Tom Larson was the first to speak. "Sure, Mr. Panker—I guess we all want it the way you say."

"Except that we've heard it all before," Andy Burgess objected. "The newspapers are full of it. But it don't settle anything."

"It might help, Andy," George suggested, "if we could get a little closer together in the way we think about these things."

"It'd help more," Burgess retorted, "if we could get a little closer together in the way we live!"

I brought this on myself, George thought. *I should have known better than to try talking to a man like Andy Burgess.* He got to his feet and plucked the paper from his desk. "You'll hear from me promptly, men," he said, "—just as soon as we've had time to go over it thoroughly. There's nothing more to say just now, I think."

"All we've got to say is right there in black and white," Burgess replied as he got up and started for the door, the others following him.

"Good afternoon, gentlemen!"

When they had gone, George sat down again at his desk. He tossed the paper aside. He didn't want to look at it now. He didn't want to think of it. He couldn't think of anything, in fact, except the pitiable show he had made of himself in the presence of the three men who had just left his office. There had been a night—God, that he should think of it now!—when he had talked face to face for the last time with his first wife, the starry-eyed blonde who had deserted him for a career in Hollywood. He had known, even as he talked to her, that she was already lost to him. But he had pleaded with her, begged her to stay with him for another month, another week, and give their marriage one more chance. Perhaps a man in love with a beautiful woman is always weak. Perhaps he was essentially weak—in every respect. He had

certainly been weak that night. He had been a fool. He should have turned her out of the house and locked the door on her when she sneered at all his appeals for decency and understanding. Perhaps he should have shown Andy Burgess the door after his first sneering remark about having heard it all before. Was there no decency left in the world? Had all the eternal verities suffered eclipse? Would we never again rest upon the precepts that it had taken centuries to establish as the basis of our civilization? Or had it all been a pleasant myth that had finally been exploded in chaos?

He lifted his head to discover Colin Trale standing in the doorway.

"Deep in thought, I see," Trale said. "I didn't think business men ever had to do any thinking."

George laughed as he got up and extended his hand. "You're talking of successful business men—the kind who hire others to do their thinking for them. Sit down—I'm glad to see you."

He felt a strange comfort in the presence of Colin Trale. Not that the spare, slightly stoop-shouldered, studious-looking preacher was a man to inspire one with a God's-in-His-heaven-all's-right-with-the-world feeling. He was too self-effacing, too ascetic, and almost too fragile for that. It was rather that he came as the living agent of an institution that had survived the world's upheavals for two thousand years.

"I was just thinking last night," Colin said, "we ought to see more of each other. We haven't seen much of you since the day you came to get married."

"Are pastoral visits a thing of the past?" George Panker asked.

Colin Trale colored a little. "I really don't know. Personally, I don't think they amount to much. I'd go to see you if you were sick—and if I thought it would do either of us any good. But to ring the doorbell where somebody is perfectly healthy, and probably too busy to waste the time—"

"Man, that's rank heresy!" George grinned. "Don't you think people need praying over today just as much as they did fifty years ago?"

"Far more," Colin replied. "I need it myself. I need it more every year I live. But I'm beginning to wonder if the time might not be put to better use. I'm beginning to wonder about a lot of things I used to take for granted. Most of all, I'm beginning to wonder if the ten years I've spent preaching might not have been better spent building bridges or even putting heads on pins."

George Panker folded his hands across his vest and tilted back in his chair. “It’s funny you should come out with a speech like that just now. I’ve spent twice ten years on my job. I’ve kept my factory running. I’ve paid my workers what I thought they were worth—some of them more. But somewhere along the line I’ve missed out. You think you should have built bridges. And I’m beginning to think maybe I should have been a plumber. What’s the matter with us, Trale?”

Colin ran a hand over his brow. “I wish I could tell you. I’m not an economist. Even if it were a case of spiritual breakdown—and it may well be—I’d still have to confess I have no answer. And yet, that’s supposed to be my business. A few years ago I might have invited you to a brief session of prayer, right here in your office. I’d do it now, if I had the conviction and the faith I’m supposed to have.”

George stared into space for a moment. Then he leaned forward over his desk. “Are our jobs too big for us—for any of us, and all of us, I mean? Isn’t it possible that the thing has got out of control, and there’s nobody big enough to stop it before it wrecks itself and all of us with it? It’s high time the better elements of the community were getting together, Trale, and presenting a solid front before it’s too late. That’s my opinion. Maybe that’s where you come into the picture.”

“That would be all right,” Colin argued, “if we knew where to find the ‘better elements’ of the community.”

George Panker looked surprised, then flung a hand out in a gesture of impatience. “Well, I didn’t call you over here to solve the world’s problems, after all. We’ll get together some evening soon and talk about it.”

“Irene and I were discussing that very thing last night,” Colin said. “As a matter of fact I had it in mind, when I came over here, to ask you when we might pay you a visit. And I don’t mean a ‘pastoral’ call.”

“Good. I’ll speak to Sheila and have her arrange something with your wife. I don’t mind telling you, I’m worried about that little woman I brought out here to live in the village. You probably know what I’m talking about.”

“Yes, I do. I’ve thought about it myself,” Colin admitted.

“I didn’t expect the villagers to open their arms to my wife the day after she got here. I was willing to wait—and so was Sheila. But a woman needs friends around her. She’s got to have other women she can talk to. She’s got to have neighbors—real neighbors. She can’t go on living to herself in a big house, listening to the sound of her own voice. Why, damn it, man, these

people used to be friends of mine. I grew up with them. A lot of them live in houses I built for them. And today they look at me as if I was an escaped convict. Why? Because I married a woman they read about in the papers. I don't give a damn about how they treat me, but when they treat my wife as if she was the dirt under their feet, by the living Harry, I'll find some way to take it out on them! That's why I asked you to come over and see me, Trale. I want you to see if you can't do something about it before it goes too far. We can wait a few years to cure the sins of the world, but this is something right here, in our own town, and we can't wait much longer. I mean that. One of these days Sheila is going to crack up under it, if we don't do something. I want your help."

"You have every right to expect it," Colin admitted. "I think perhaps I've been waiting for—I scarcely know what. I've been hoping for a change. As you say, we can wait a few years for the world to show signs of changing for the better. But we can't afford to wait for the change in our own town. We ought to be at work on it now." He got up from his chair. "Let's do no more talking now—for the time being, at least."

"There's just one thing," George cautioned, "—I don't want Sheila to know I sent for you. It wouldn't do her any good."

"I understand—naturally," Colin said.

George was on his feet. "If you'll wait ten or fifteen minutes, I'll drive you home. Or did you come in your own car?"

"No, Irene took the car into the city this afternoon to do some shopping. If you don't mind, I think I'd like to walk back. It's a wonderful afternoon. The air will do me good."

"After my gassing," George Panker laughed as the two shook hands.

There was an old path along the creek that Colin Trale had discovered during his first few days in Wahwahnissa. The mid-September air was crisp, brown oak leaves freckled the greensward in front of the factory, the trees on the gently rolling slopes to the south were gaudy with color. The parsonage stood less then six blocks away, through the village, but he had a good hour and a half left before dinner. He was in no hurry to get home.

He started off briskly along Ring Avenue, past the hilly land that bordered the Sunway Golf Course, past Miles Hopewell's mink farm beside the marshland, and came at last to the street's end beside the slow-flowing creek. For a moment he stood and watched the pale leaves, rudderless craft

that drove a fickle course before every passing breeze. The narrow footpath led eastward through the willows.

Great men, he reflected, were wont to seek out just such lonely spots when they wished to commune with God or seek a solace for their troubled souls. He was not a great man. He never would be. He was well aware of that. But surely communion with the Almighty was not to be denied even to the humblest of God's creatures. Why, then, had he never known it? Oh, he had had his moments of exaltation, moments when he felt he needed only to reach out a little farther to touch the fringe of something divine. But he had never known the transport of the spirit that makes man one with his Creator. He had never lighted his own torch, much less borne the gift of fire to others.

Halfway along the path, he halted abruptly and peered through a clump of willows that overhung the creek's edge. A man was sitting, his shoulders slumped forward to his updrawn knees, his head uncovered, his gaze fixed upon the water. For a moment, Colin Trale stood motionless behind the screening willows. As if startled, the man jerked his head sideways and sat up.

"Hi, fellah!" he called, and then knit his brows for a closer look. "Oh, pardon me! You're the padre, aren't you?"

Colin moved toward him, around the willows. "Good afternoon. Aren't you Bill Clifford?"

"Yes, sir."

Colin was beside him, looking down at the shock of rumpled hair, the broad shoulders smoothly arched under the stout jacket, the long legs doubled close, the feet planted none too securely on the moist ground that sloped toward the creek.

"I wouldn't have guessed your name," Colin said, "except that Josie Stone told me you were home again. I saw you only once, I think, before you left for the Pacific. I've heard a lot about you, of course, and I'm glad you're back safely."

"Sit down," Bill Clifford invited, and dug a package of cigarettes from a pocket. "Smoke?"

"I smoke a pipe—at home," Colin said, "but I've never taken to cigarettes. You go ahead. I'll sit and look on."

Bill shook a cigarette loose from the pack, lit it, and folded his arms about his knees. “Just to clear the air and get it over with,” he said brusquely, “yes, it’s good to get back to God’s Country—and yes, I saw a bit of action and was lucky to come out of it in one piece—and probably I killed a few Japs, though I wouldn’t know—and the native women on the islands are a sleazy lot, though you wouldn’t be interested in that. I think that just about takes care of everything.”

Colin looked away with a smile. “We’re starting rather badly, aren’t we?” he observed patiently.

Bill flicked the ash from his cigarette. “That’s right! But I’ve been walking around town all day—answering the same questions for just about everyone I met. That’s why I’m here.”

“I’m here myself largely because of questions that were asked me,” Colin said. “There is this difference, though—you have the answers to the questions people ask you.”

“I think I know what you mean,” Bill said. “As long as people go on believing they have souls to save, they’ll go on asking questions nobody can answer.”

“You’d simplify everything, then, by getting rid of men’s souls?” Colin inquired.

Bill shook his head and laughed. “Look, now—this is getting a little over my head. But I’ll tell you something about that. There’s been a lot of talk about how guys like me went for religion when the going got too tough for them. Maybe some of them did. I wouldn’t know about that. Maybe I wasn’t looking for it. But I’ll tell you this, sir—what those guys went for wasn’t the system of bunk we call religion in the world today. They weren’t thinking of churches and cathedrals and robes and stained glass windows—and a lot of ballyhoo. What they went for was something as simple as—as simple as a four-petaled flower.”

“I don’t think religion was ever meant to be anything else,” Colin Trale observed.

“Do you preach that?” Bill Clifford asked bluntly.

“What I preach—” Colin began.

But Bill interrupted him. “No, don’t answer that. It wasn’t a fair question. Besides, I know what you preach. I was brought up in a religious home. My father died when I was a kid. My mother died just before Pearl

Harbor. My only brother was killed in Germany. As if that wasn't enough, my best friend died after a crash in the South Pacific. That was Frank Stone—you've probably heard all about it. I lived for months with a tribe of savages who had never been taught all the nice things about the cross and Jesus, God's son who died to save men from eternal damnation. *I* was the one who had been taught all that. I was above them, a superior specimen of *homo sapiens*. And after two thousand years, the best my world had to show them was an organized, all-out attempt to slaughter ourselves by millions. Organized hate, organized lies, organized destruction! One night I wrapped all my beliefs up in a small bundle and threw them out."

"And now you believe nothing?" Colin remarked when the young man's voice ceased abruptly.

Bill grinned and flung his cigarette into the creek. "I believe we are living in a world that doesn't give a damn for anything outside the schemes of a few men who are using the rest of us to further their own purposes. I believe the best thing that could happen to the world might be to wipe it out and start all over again from what we used to call the primordial ooze. Another combination of cells, another chemistry, might evolve and take hold after an eon or two, and produce something a little less ghastly than what we've got. What I'm saying, you understand, is what I *feel* about it. The thing is past thinking about any more."

Colin Trale got slowly to his feet and stood looking down into the water where a few brown weeds were in indolent motion, lifting to feather the surface, sinking to grope darkly alongside a boulder that was covered with slime.

"Bill," he said at last, "I've been tempted to feel as you say you feel—many times. With your experience behind me, I would probably have your feelings exactly. But I realize, too, that feelings can't always be trusted. You haven't asked me for advice, I know, but—you can't go on feeling like this indefinitely. You have a job?"

"Waiting for me."

"And you have a wife who has been waiting for you," Colin added. "A lot of the boys coming back haven't either. Devotion to a good job and a good wife have done more for men than all the sermons that were ever preached."

"You're right, of course," Bill admitted. "The fact is—I've been thinking a lot about that today. I don't think you need to make any special prayers for

me, sir. I'll snap out of it."

"I'm sure of that. The larger problem—well, we have a long way to go. It's probably more than any one mind can grasp in a single lifetime. But—right or wrong—the centuries—the eons—have set up a pattern. We have been born within that pattern, and we have to live within it and work within it."

"Or smash the pattern," Bill suggested, and lifted his eyes with a look of sudden alarm. "Would you mind moving a step or so from where you're standing? You couldn't know, but—" His hand swept roughly over his eyes. "Just move a little to one side, please, sir!" he pleaded.

Mystified, Colin stepped away. "I'm sorry," he said. "Have I been—"

"I wasn't going to tell anyone about it," Bill said, "but I don't mind telling you. Last night—in the rain—just where you were standing—I buried the ashes of Frank Stone's hand."

Colin Trale made his way along the footpath and came at last to Roberts Avenue, a mere two blocks from home. He had left Bill Clifford sitting beside the creek, his great shoulders hunched down close to his knees, just as he had found him. But he had not come away before Bill told him the whole story of Frank Stone, including last night's meeting with Josie. This, then, was the rendezvous Josie had kept after she refused to go into the house. Colin hurried up the avenue with the feeling that he had unwittingly blundered into something so intimate, so unutterably close to the human heart that his own knowledge of it was a kind of sacrilege.

He was crossing Cherry Street when Brother Pinwinder, his lanky form clad in a greenish-black frock coat, his ears all but hidden beneath his black broad-brimmed hat, his scuffed satchel swinging at his side, hailed him cheerily and came toward him with a pamphlet in his outstretched hand.

"Good afternoon, Brother Trale! A beautiful day to scatter the living seeds of God's truth!"

Colin glanced at the pamphlet and read the heading: *The Trumpet Soundeth*! It was all he could do to control his voice.

"Pinwinder," he said, "don't you 'brother' me! There are limits even to the patience of a saint. And I'm no saint!"

He tore the pamphlet to shreds and flung them away as he strode angrily down the avenue toward the corner of Pine. Half a block away, he slackened

his pace. What had come over him? Gilbert Pinwinder warranted no such undignified outburst on the part of anybody in his right mind. He glanced behind him to see if anybody else had possibly been witness to the unfortunate encounter. It was painfully embarrassing.

As he turned in from the street and came to his own door, he wondered uneasily if, while his chief concern was supposed to be the souls of others, he might not be perilously close to losing his own.

3 Child-talk

Three little girls played together under the railroad bridge where the weeds had been cut away by the section gang because they were a fire hazard, especially in autumn. The little girls were Lorraine Thole, Selma Thole's eleven-year-old, and Lulu Tait and Tootsie Warren, who lived in Red Willow Terrace and had just turned ten. On their way home from school, they had followed the creek from Mellow Avenue, loitered past the Flagg place, and paused rather aimlessly among the upright timbers of the bridge.

It was Lulu Tait who first spied the old skiff that was moored to a stake at the edge of the creek, all but its stern hidden in the rank growth that fringed the water.

"There's old Bratruud's boat!"

"You leave it alone!" Lorraine ordered.

Lorraine's small conscience was troubling her. She should have gone straight home, as her mother had repeatedly admonished her. She should never have left Mellow Avenue. One thing always led to another—that was something else her mother had told her too often to bear forgetting. It was bad enough to have gone a few blocks out of her way to be with Lulu and Tootsie, who often took the path along the creek as a short cut home. But if anything happened to old Bratruud's boat—if anything should happen to Lulu or Tootsie!—Lorraine would never hear the end of it. Only last spring, when the creek was in flood, young Jerry Dahl had been drowned and the police had to search all day before they found the body.

"She don't either have to leave it alone!" Tootsie Warren piped up. "You're not her boss."

That was open rebellion. Lorraine knew she wasn't Lulu's boss, but she was a year older. Besides, she had five brothers and sisters, while Lulu was an only child and Tootsie could boast of nothing better than a baby brother. Lorraine's courage rose to the crisis.

"You shut up, Tootsie Warren! And you leave that boat alone too."

Tootsie cowered. Lorraine was half a head taller than she, despite their scant difference in age. "I wasn't going to touch the old thing," she retorted, and turned away to whisper something to Lulu.

It took only a moment to agree upon the strategy best designed to discomfit the haughty Lorraine. Their thin trebles began chanting the refrain familiar to school children the country over. The words, however, were of their own devising:

Lorraine loves Bud Humphrey,
Lorraine loves Bud Humphrey . . .

Lorraine stood off in mute disdain. Of course she loved Bud Humphrey, even though he was three years her senior and had never shown her anything but contempt. At fourteen, Bud was contemptuous of all womankind. But Lorraine loved him proudly, unblushingly, with a devotion that was a hero's due. Hadn't he boldly led the parade past the Panker place when old Bratruud had chased them with his rake? Lorraine herself had been in that parade, although she had never mentioned it at home. She had maintained a discreet silence even that night at the supper table, when her brother David, who was a month older than Bud and his inseparable companion, told the whole story—prudently keeping Lorraine's name out of it—and added that it was lucky for old Bratruud that he had been unable to catch up with Bud there in the street, because Bud's mother declared it would be a sorry day for that old fool when he laid a hand on a child of hers.

Lorraine loves Bud Humphrey,
Lorraine loves . . .

The sing-song taunt halted abruptly in the middle of a line as the girls caught the rumble of an approaching freight train. All three covered their ears with their hands, and as the ground under their feet began to tremble, their voices lifted in shrill competition with the pounding of the wheels overhead. In a kind of exquisite terror which they enjoyed only because they knew they were safe, they squealed without ceasing until the last car crossed the bridge and the thunder of the train was fading in the distance. Then they

took their hands from their ears and began to shriek with laughter, their dissension of the moment before utterly forgotten. It didn't even seem important to Lorraine when, their laughter finally at an end, Lulu and Tootsie began perilously to clamber up the timbers and cross-stays that supported the bridge. She herself was ready to start homeward and leave the younger girls to their own devices.

"Goodby, kids!" she called back to them as she set out reluctantly to mount the slope that would take her past the Flagg house and across the vacant space that lay toward Mellow Avenue. "I've got to go home."

But even as she announced her intentions, fate in its most compelling guise was there to baffle her. Standing at the top of the railroad grade, close to the end of the bridge, and staring down at her, were Bud Humphrey and her brother David. From where she stood, on inferior ground, Lorraine sensed that some dire misfortune had befallen the two. Hands thrust deep in their pockets, shoulders drooping, they slouched disconsolately, scuffing the gravel with the toes of their shoes.

They did not deign to call a greeting, but that trifling discourtesy was their inalienable right. The boys, however, were not exercising their rights arbitrarily. Together with two other young huskies of their own age, one of whom was the proud possessor of a new football, they had kicked and passed their way from school, down one street after another, until the hazards of traffic drove them into the lanes that ran back of the houses. But they had not foreseen the especial hazard that awaited them there. A misdirected punt carried the ball high over a white-picketed fence and into a cabbage patch where Rupert Prile happened to be grubbing while his wife prepared dinner. Bud Humphrey raced to the gate to recover the ball before he saw the figure humped over his cabbages. Doubtfully, he asked Rupe if he would throw the ball out—and was surprised when the man assured him he would be very glad to throw it out! Then, before the astonished gaze of all four boys, Rupe Prile whipped out his knife, slit the ball from end to end, and tossed the deflated carcass over the fence.

Lorraine hailed them with becoming restraint. "Hi!"

Her brother challenged her. "What're you doin' down there? You better get home!"

Lorraine would have obeyed at once, since obedience was in line with her own decision anyhow, if David and Bud hadn't suddenly come hurtling down the embankment, their arms wind-milling, their feet churning the gravel in a cloud of dust. Without a word, they strode beneath the bridge,

turned their critical gaze upward in an appraising inspection of the timbers, then ambled down to the edge of the creek where they squatted and dipped their hands in the water.

Lulu and Tootsie hopped down from their perilous perches and were joined immediately by Lorraine, whose conscience rested easier now in the reassuring presence of her elder brother and her shaggy-haired hero. They stood in a tight little group while the two boys muttered almost inaudibly and with frequent backward glances at the girls.

"They're talking dirty!" Tootsie Warren said, alert and apprehensive. "Come on home, Lulu."

But at that moment David sprang to his feet and confronted his best friend. "Nothin' doin'!"

Bud laughed. It wasn't a mirthful laugh, nor was it as defiant as he tried to make it. He had never put his prowess to a test with David. He didn't want to do it now. But his own valor, to say nothing of the presence of three young ladies, called for an appropriate retort.

"You're scared! You're scared!"

David wasn't scared. "She's my sister," he said, and stood his ground long enough to satisfy himself that Bud Humphrey wasn't going to make any more of it. Then he walked off without looking back until he was halfway up the slope to the Flagg place. There he turned and saw that Lorraine was hurrying after him. They trudged along without words until they were on Mellow Avenue, four blocks from home. By that time Lorraine's curiosity was more than she could bear.

"Are you mad at Bud, Dave?" she asked.

"Who cares?"

Lorraine thought that over. "I do," she said at last.

"So what? You lay off Bud Humphrey."

"What did he do?"

"Nothin'! But he wanted to." David drove his toe through a heap of brown leaves beside the walk, then turned and faced his sister. "He wanted to take you down to the creek and wash your back."

Lorraine bridled. "My back ain't dirty!"

“So what? My gosh, you’re a nit-wit! Look—don’t you tell Mom or Pop, but some of the kids were over to Widow Gates’ place the other night, and peeked in the window. The shade was up a little bit, and they saw old Pinwinder washing her back with a bottle of milk.”

“David Thole, they never did! You’re just making it up!”

“They did, too! And you better keep your trap shut about it if you don’t want a sock on the jaw. I only told you because Bud wanted to wash your back, and I wouldn’t let him. He’d get socked plenty if he ever tried it. You stay away from Bud Humphrey, that’s all I got to say.”

That was all he did say just then, because Pete Bellingham was coming down the street—Pete Bellingham, who had lost an arm in Sicily and was now one of the town’s heroes. Bill Clifford was the other, but he was married. There was a girl walking alongside Pete, but David gave her scant attention. She was only Adelberta Wilson.

The boy lifted his head and squared his shoulders. His feet no longer scuffed among the drifts of brown leaves but took to the sidewalk, with measured pace and a sharp clicking of his heels on the hard concrete. Lorraine shuffled along behind him, meek under her brother’s disdain.

David snapped his hand up in a brisk salute that brought Pete to an abrupt halt.

“Hi, fella!”

“Hi, Pete!”

David took a furtive look at the steel appendage that protruded from the soldier’s sleeve. The other arm was burdened with books—Adelberta’s books, no doubt.

“What’s the idea walking out with your best girl when you could be playing football on an afternoon like this?” Pete grinned.

David squirmed uncomfortably. “She’s just my sister. Besides old man Prile stuck a knife into our football when it happened to drop in his cabbage patch.”

“He did? Well, I’ll be a—Berty, did you hear that?” He moved on to where Adelberta was talking to Lorraine. “Rupe Prile pulled a knife—”

His voice faded as David and Lorraine stood and watched the couple saunter slowly down the street.

Lorraine was the first to speak. “Adelberta Wilson has a beau!”

David's lips twisted to a sneer. "Don't be a nit-wit all your life! All girls think of is boys. Can't a guy walk down the street with somebody—but Jeez, did you see that arm he has with the hooks and everything? I bet he could kill a guy with that!"

"Maybe," Lorraine conceded, "but you don't have to go swearing about it."

"Okay, but I bet he could. And I didn't swear. I said 'Jeez.' "

Not another word passed between them until they reached their own gate. David was thinking—he had talked to Pete Bellingham. He had called him Pete, and Pete didn't seem to mind. From now on they were friends! Lorraine's imagination was afire with what David had told her about Pinwinder and the widow. It was a secret, of course, and she would rather die than betray a confidence.

With his hand on the gate, David paused briefly. "Don't you forget, now. If you say anything about old Pinwinder and—"

"Cross my heart!" Lorraine vowed, and followed her brother into the house.

Chapter Four

1 A Prelude

Maybe this idea of his was the craziest anybody ever thought up, Ben mused as he turned his car westward into Sunway Boulevard, with Inga in the seat beside him.

For the past month he had been looking for a house, any kind of house, so that he and Inga could be married. And then—only yesterday—it had come to him, that plan that had seemed insane even as he thought of it. For more than five years he had been delivering milk to Mike Mitchell, who ran a hamburger stand beside the boulevard, two miles west of the village. The place had once been a railway coach of the late nineties, and still retained much of its former rococo splendor, in spite of the modern practical changes it had undergone to become a wayside lunch room. When Mike informed him that he was getting out as soon as he could find someone to take the business off his hands, Ben spent half an hour looking the place over—and finally made the old man an offer. He drove then to Miles Hopewell's and talked about a plot of ground on a knoll that rose above the creek at the eastward extremity of the two-acre mink farm. It took only a few minutes to come to terms with Miles—there was more ground than the mink farmer could use anyhow, and Ben wanted only enough room for the old coach and a little breathing space around it—and then he had called at the drug store for Inga and revealed his plans as he drove her home.

Now, on this bright October Sunday afternoon, they were on their way to inspect what Ben hoped might become their future home. It would take a little work to put it in shape, but—

"Listen, small one," he said as he strove to keep his mind on the task of driving safely through the Sunday afternoon traffic, "maybe I'm just plain nuts. If you think so when you've seen it, all you've got to do is tell me. I have ideas about what we can do with it, but I won't give you any sales talk,

and I'm not going to try to argue you into anything. If you don't like it, that's all there is to it. We'll wait till we can dig up something decent."

"I'm not going to wait forever, Ben Start," Inga declared. "I've seen the coach from the outside. I'll let you know what I think of the inside—don't worry."

That's what I'm afraid of, Ben thought, but he said nothing.

Something in his set profile, however, moved Inga in a way that she could not immediately define. Pity, that was it! She smiled to herself. Pity for this great hulk of a man who could crush every bone in her body if he had a mind to? Ridiculous! He would make the world over to suit her, if he could. She knew that. All he was thinking of now was how he could make over an old railway coach to please her. And he was apologizing for that. Did he think she was all shooting stars and pine shadows as she had been during their two weeks together on the shore of Lost Moon Lake? Perhaps her pity was deeper than that. Perhaps it was as much for herself as for him —and for people the world over who found themselves caught up in the subtle treachery of love. Marriage wasn't a song that never faltered. She knew that. But it was the nearest thing to happiness that heaven had to offer in this life. Love was the sweet prelude that grew into the deeper symphony of the years.

"Well, kid, here we are!" Ben announced and brought the car to a halt in an open space at the side of the highway.

Inga lowered the window and looked out. Her recollection of the coach from the casual glances she had given it in driving past several times with Ben had not set her hopes high. She hadn't needed Ben's ample warning when he first sketched his idea last night. But nothing could really have prepared her for the sight which she now beheld as something personal to her—the structure Ben dreamed of turning into their first home. The front was all windows except for the wide door that faced the boulevard, an architecture commonly found in railway coaches converted to hamburger stands. But Inga had not before been shocked by the hideous design in white, red and green that decorated the coach from end to end. For a moment she sat helpless in the struggle between laughter and tears.

"Darling," she confessed at last, "it's worse even than I thought."

He opened the car door and stepped out. "Wait a minute, kid. Don't say anything just yet. Come and have a look at the inside."

He had Mike's key and unlocked the garish door while Inga peered in at a window.

The interior, to Inga's swiftly appraising glance after she had entered the place, was an almost soothing contrast to the exterior. Mike Mitchell had had the good sense to retain the quaint scroll work of the walls, and three old kerosene lamps in their brass holders still hung from the curved ceiling.

Ben was talking in a large way about his remodeling plans, flinging a hand out here and another there, but Inga was not listening to him. Her eye had already swept out all the lunch-room equipment, and was visualizing with growing excitement the possibilities of the venerable coach. Ben stood abashed when she suddenly left him in mid-speech and made her way to the end of the aisle where two modestly small signs bore the words "Ladies" and "Gents." He saw her look sharply first into one cubicle and then into the other.

"What are you doing, taking your pick?" he called down to her.

"The two can be put into one," Inga answered. "They'll make a fair-sized bathroom. We can get a tin tub or something, and, of course, we'll have to have a septic tank. No running water, but you can haul that up from Miles Hopewell's. The kitchen will be alongside the bathroom, and the rest of the coach will be a living room and bedroom combined. We'll have chintz curtains and braided mats—"

"Hold on a minute!" Ben almost shouted.

"And with the furniture from your room and mine," Inga drifted on, "my studio couch and burgundy-painted bookshelves, and that big chair of yours and—" She put a musing finger to her lips and glanced around the coach. "Mike will sell us this oil heater, I hope. And he'll have to let us have those old lamps—we won't have electricity on the creek. You'll have to panel up some of the windows—old ivory paint on the wood, if you can get it. And then you'll have to paint the outside, too—"

"I know where I can get some paint," Ben said brusquely. The coach had been his idea, now she had made it hers! "It won't look so much like a camouflaged hut in Iwo Jima when I get through with it."

"I'll leave that to you. But it's going to be fun to do the inside. We'll have window boxes, of course—geraniums and such. Aunt Kari promised me that lovely old Paisley couch cover of hers. And we'll have to buy a kerosene stove to cook on. Oh, Gooben!"

Her gay laughter rippled toward him, and suddenly she burst small and vibrant into his arms.

"What a let-down!" he grumbled. "I was all set for an argument."

Inga clung to him for a blissful moment, her eyes closed. In her little room under the meager slant of the eaves in her brother-in-law's house, her favorite novels, volumes of poetry, history, biography and philosophy had been forced into an undignified huddle. But her room had been chaste—there had been no fripperies, no limp-legged dolls, no herds of miniature elephants in glass or porcelain. Except for the muted voices of her books, the room she lived in had a reticence she would probably never know again. But in this new room of the coach, her books would have space and air—and they would be as happy as she would be!

2 An Intermezzo

Except Saturday and Sunday nights, Bill Clifford's work at WLR was not completed until nine o'clock. After that he usually stepped across the street to the Hole in the Wall for a drink or two before going home. The place had a more dignified name that was never used by the men from the studio and from a near-by newspaper office who made up the bulk of its clientele. Even Joe, the Greek who was sole proprietor and usually the only man behind the bar, would have laughed at anyone who insisted on calling it Ye Olde English Tavern. But Joe was not without a sense of humor. When he discovered that his real name—which wasn't Joe at all, but Hippocrates—was the name of the Father of Medicine, he rejoiced in the fact that although he had been denied the privilege of healing men's bodies he had been granted the honor of bringing balm to their souls.

Tonight, however, Bill Clifford had decided to go straight home from work. A visit to Joe's bar frequently left him depressed afterwards, because he seemed no longer to have anything in common with the boys he used to meet there. He was sick of talk. Wednesday night brought the Literary Round Table, a weekly half hour on WLR, in which various club women from the city purveyed second-hand opinions on current best sellers and apprised the listening public of the literary trends of the times—all with vast intellectual aplomb. The effect was ghastly, and Bill had done everything in his power to have the program turned over to someone else.

"The thing is driving me nuts!" he had declared that afternoon to Merton Lane, the studio's production manager. "One of these days I'm going to go berserk and take a sock at the mike."

Lane had smiled understandingly. "You have all my sympathy, Bill. But take it easy, take it easy. Your life doesn't depend on it. Let the old gals talk."

"Talk! My God! Did you ever stop to think of what talk—just *talk*—can do to a guy?"

"Sure, I have. But slow down, Bill. You've been under a strain since you got home. Slow down and get back into step with the rest of us."

Well, Merton Lane had been right, he supposed. He had felt out of step ever since the day he came back to work. He had been out of step with the whole cock-eyed world. That was why he had gone nightly to Joe's bar for an hour's forgetfulness.

Most of all he was out of step at home. Maybe everything would have been different if he and Molly had been able to find some place to live where they would not have to show eternal gratitude to her brother Herman. Or was he only rationalizing there? Maybe the fault lay entirely with himself. He hadn't shown Molly the affection he had dreamed of during all the nights and days he had spent away from her. He knew that. He admitted it, even if he refused to talk about it. But, damn it, what could he do? A man was what he was, even if he was crazy.

Well, he was going to do something about it. He was going to start tonight. He had taken the car to work, and Molly would be waiting for him when he got home. He'd pass up Joe's tonight. He'd get home early and spend the evening with Molly. He'd try to show her—maybe he'd even *tell* her—that he was having trouble with himself, that the road back home was a long, long road, after what he'd been through, but that he had finally arrived. He would take Merton Lane's advice. He would take Colin Trale's advice. He would get back into step, and he would start at home. The hell with Herman! What did he amount to, anyhow? The hell with everything except himself and Molly, his wife!

He drove away from the parking lot with a feeling he had not enjoyed in —how long? Why hadn't he felt like this every day since he had put the war behind him? It was very simple, after all. There was nothing to it, really. All a man had to do was sit back and let it happen. It was as easy as that.

Through the city streets, up the crowded thoroughfares, past a lake and along a parkway—then out upon Sunway Boulevard at last. Ten minutes more and he would be home. Ahead of him, presently, glittered the neon lights above the entrance to the El Rancho. *The* El Rancho—people called it that. One drink—only one—would take no more than five minutes. There would be nobody to talk to, nothing to delay him. A drink would quiet his jumpy nerves, rid him of the damnable inhibition he had suffered during the past few weeks, every time he found himself alone with Molly.

He drove into the El Rancho parking area and stepped out of the car. Where a shaft of light fell from a side window across the concrete walk that led to the bar doorway, half a dozen youths squatted in a close circle. Bill stepped from the walk and hesitated for a moment to glance over the shoulder of the boy nearest him. One of the group lifted a closed hand to his lips, blew upon it, muttered a few words of tested magic power, then sent a pair of dice skidding over the polished concrete. "Seven—*seven*!"

Bill grinned to himself and turned away. He remembered the last crap game he himself had been in, on board the ship that brought him home from the South Pacific. Did they take him that night! With his hand on the door leading to the bar, he paused abruptly and tried to remember something else. There was one boy back there on the concrete walk, years younger than the others . . . he'd just go and have another look.

It was strange, he thought, how much courage it took to handle a thing like this. "Hey, you!" he called after a moment of watching closely. "Haven't I seen you before?"

All heads came up, but the young boy saw Bill's eyes singling him out. "What's it *to* you?"

There were some clichés that could irritate Bill beyond all reason. The boy had used one of them. Bill went and stood beside him. "Stand up, kid. I want to talk to you." The youngster got to his feet sulkily. "Look, fella," Bill said, "I asked you a decent question. Don't you know how to talk to people? What's your name?"

"What's it to you?" the boy repeated, and an uneasy snicker came from the others, who had stood up and were leaning against the wall, all but hidden in the shadows.

Bill waited until he brought his quickened temper under control. Then he reached out and caught the youngster by the coat collar. "Aren't you Steve

Humphrey's kid? You're—you're Bud, that's it! I was talking to you in Sam Flagg's store the other day."

"You lay off me!"

Bud squirmed and twisted, but Bill tightened his grip. He looked over his shoulder at the others. "Break it up, you guys, and get going. Or would you rather talk it over with a cop?" He waited while they slunk away. "Okay, Bud, you're heading for home. Come on, I've got my car over here."

Bud made a show of resistance, but it was short-lived. Deserted by his erstwhile companions, he was alone now with the man whom everyone in the village looked upon as a hero. He was helpless.

Bill Clifford, turning his car into Roberts Avenue, felt himself anything but a hero. Why should a fourteen-year-old like Bud Humphrey so enrage him that he could hardly keep from shaking the teeth out of the kid? There was something wrong when a man of his size had to admit to such unbridled emotions. It wasn't Bud's fault, after all. What were his parents doing to let their only son run wild at all hours of the night? Bill couldn't understand it. Steve Humphrey was a foreman in George Panker's factory, a conscientious, hard-working, solid kind of citizen, highly esteemed in his community. His wife, of course, was of a different stripe. Vicious-tongued, jealous, critical of everybody except herself and her own family, Hannah Humphrey was never so happy as when she was peddling tales about some neighbor who had unwittingly gained her disfavor. There were few women in Wahwahnissa Creek who had not, at one time or another, been the victims of her loose tongue. She and Della Prince ran neck and neck on that miry course.

By the time Bill reached Red Willow Terrace, his fury had subsided. It had become diffused, rather, spreading out and away from the boy in the seat beside him until it embraced the whole structure of the society in which he lived. Futility again, he thought, and turned his anger in upon himself.

There were lights in the Humphrey house. Through a front window with an updrawn shade, Bill saw Steve Humphrey reading his paper, the light from a floor lamp gleaming on his sparsely thatched pate. Bill reached across and opened the door beside young Bud.

"Okay, pal," he said wearily, "take my advice and steer clear of that gang I found you with. They're heading for trouble."

Bud got out without speaking and dragged his feet up the narrow walk that led to the front door. Bill sat in his car and waited. Maybe he should have gone in with the kid. But no—even a fourteen-year-old has his dignity

to uphold. What would he do, on the other hand, if Bud took it into his head suddenly to bolt instead of going into the house? He kept his eye on the boy until he opened the door, a pathetic little shadow against the light from within. Then he eased in the clutch and drove away.

There was no light in the basement apartment on Jason Avenue when Bill put his car into the driveway and let it drift toward the garage at the back. Lights were shining upstairs, however, where Herman Shatts lived. Molly was probably up there spending the evening with her sister-in-law, Freda.

On his way from the garage to the house he caught the sound of Freddy's violin, muted and distant, but with an almost eerie melancholy that forced Bill to stand for a moment and listen. He glanced down to assure himself that his apartment was in darkness, then mounted the three steps to Herman Shatt's back porch. He knocked lightly before he turned the kitchen door knob and walked in.

In the living room, he found Freda alone with Freddy, who set his violin aside as soon as he saw Bill.

"All alone?" Bill asked.

Freda got up from her chair and smiled a greeting. "Come in and sit down, Bill. Herman is out at some lodge meeting or something. He ought to be in any minute now."

"I thought I might find Molly here," Bill said.

"No—she hasn't been up since before dinner. She stayed only a minute."

"Wonder where she went?" Bill mused aloud and sat down. "She didn't say anything about going out."

"Oh, she probably stepped out somewhere, expecting to be back by the time you got home from work. You're home early, aren't you?"

"A little—an hour, maybe."

"Well, she won't stay out, I'm sure. Would you like a bottle of beer? Herman put some on the ice before he left."

That's right, Bill thought, *I was going to have a drink on the way home. If it hadn't been for that Humphrey kid—*

"I don't think so, Freda. Thanks, just the same. Sit down and quit your fussing over me." He turned to look at the boy Freddy. "Well, how's the young virtuoso? What was that you were playing before I barged in?"

“Oh, just practicing,” Freddy said.

“It sounded pretty good to me. Do you realize you haven’t played anything especially for me since I came home?”

“You haven’t asked me,” the boy reminded him.

“I’m asking you now. This seems as good a time as any, with only the three of us here, don’t you think? Kind of chummy. Go ahead and play something—anything.”

Freddy tucked his violin under his chin, plucked the strings once or twice, then looked over at Bill, his dark young eyes grave. “This is called *Intermezzo*,” he said and lifted his bow.

He began to play a slow, haunting melody, and Bill lay back in his chair. It was a simple air, with low, rich notes here and there that sent their vibrations deep into Bill Clifford’s heart and soothed his spirit. There were no words here to weave their grotesque pattern on his frayed senses, no babble to strangle thought.

“What’s an intermezzo, Freddy?” he asked when the boy came to the end of the last fading note of the melody.

“Well, in a big composition, it’s something that comes between the two main movements,” he explained sagely. “It sort of gives a hint of what’s to come later. But this—well, it’s just a little thing all by itself.”

Bill nodded and sat in silence, his eyes closed. A car drove up and stopped in front of the house, but he was only vaguely aware of the loud voices and the laughter that came from the street before the car moved away with an urgent grinding of gears as it gathered speed. He was only vaguely aware of it because he was thinking that perhaps music was the answer to all the questions he had been asking himself since that day he and Frank Stone had gone down together on an island that was now thousands of miles away from this peaceful room in which he sat. Music, not to dull the senses and lull them into some dream that had no substance, but music that would take the place of words void of substance and meaning, music that would banish fear and hate and vicious ambition. That was it—let the people sing. Let the *nations* sing!

Someone was moving about in the basement apartment below. That would be Molly at last. He got up from his chair and put an arm about Freddy’s shoulders.

"Thanks, old man!" he said simply and bade good night to Freda as he went to the door.

Molly was sitting in her favorite chair when he entered the apartment. She looked up from the magazine that lay open across her knees.

"Well, you're home a little earlier tonight," she said. "I didn't hear you drive in."

Bill hung his hat and coat on the rack beside the door. "I would have been here even earlier, if—"

"If it hadn't been for Joe's place, you mean," Molly interrupted, too equably.

"No; as a matter of fact, I started home as soon as I left the studio. I passed up Joe's, for a change. And I haven't had a drink, if that's good news to you." He was making a bad start, he knew, but the mood with which he had set out for home nearly an hour ago had somehow faded.

"It's news, at any rate," Molly said coolly.

"Yeah, I guess so. Joe's place is getting to be a habit, and a damned bad one. I've been upstairs for the past half hour, listening to Freddy play on his fiddle. I heard the car drive up in front. I came down as soon as I heard you moving around."

"Oh."

"Where did you go?" Bill asked.

She dog-eared the page in her magazine, deliberately brought its covers together and stood up. "I don't ask you where you've been when you come home, do I?" She started toward the bedroom.

Bill dropped into a chair. "Just a minute, Molly," he said, and she jerked about to face him. "I know you don't ask me. Ordinarily I wouldn't ask you. We're not running a private detective agency here. When I asked you that just now, I—hell, I didn't mean anything by it. I'm not snooping. But when you refuse to tell me, that's different. If you asked me and I refused—"

Molly flared suddenly. "You walked out on me the first night you were home—or don't you remember?"

"Yes, I remember."

"Did I ask you about *that*? And would you have told me?"

“That’s right, you didn’t ask. I don’t know whether I could have told you that night, even if you had asked me. Anyhow, I seem to remember you were asleep when I came back.”

“I wasn’t asleep—nor the night after that, when you sat up for hours by yourself, hoping I’d be asleep before you came to bed. What do you think I’m made of, anyhow? If you’ve got another woman somewhere—”

“I haven’t,” Bill interrupted dully.

“What’s Josie Stone hanging around for then?”

Bill was startled. “Josie Stone? Hanging around where—when?”

“She was beating it out of the driveway a few minutes ago when I came home. And that’s the third time I’ve seen her at it. But of course you wouldn’t know about that, I s’pose.”

“I wouldn’t!” Bill swore. “I don’t know what the hell you’re g-getting at!” Damn that stutter! It had come a few times before. “If you th-think—” His throat muscles gave up, cold.

Molly’s smile was silkily contemptuous. “I’ll think what I want to think. That’s one thing you can’t stop me doing, thank God!”

He looked at her, his mind ironically toying with the plan that had seemed so clear, so simple a short while ago. There was nothing he could do about it now. He wouldn’t know how to begin. And yet, the jealousy, the mingled hatred and scorn that blazed in her prune-brown eyes held a kind of excitement for him. He felt an urge her nearness had not roused in him since his return from the Pacific. To go to her now, to hold her helpless while she struggled against him, to subdue her by sheer brute force, then to mold her will and her every desire to his own—there would be something of the ultimate in that!

But even as he thought of it, Molly turned away and closed the bedroom door behind her. How long he sat alone in his chair, listening to the sounds beyond the closed door that told him his wife was going to bed, he did not know. Once or twice he glanced up at the windows that were on a level with the ground outside. If Josie Stone should wander past—What the hell was he thinking! Josie was Frank Stone’s wife. Sure, Frank was dead now, and Josie was alone in the world. But she was still his wife, wasn’t she? Molly Clifford might have nothing but contempt for her husband, but he wasn’t that kind of a heel—not yet!

He found himself a pillow and a couple of blankets and made his bed on the couch against the wall.

At least one other villager had listened to Freddy Shatt's playing that night. Adelberta Wilson had worked late in Professor Smale's office, where she had been marking mid-term papers in Psychology I. Her task completed, she had caught a bus only two blocks from the office and had sat peering out at the clean October sky. Old habit had inured her to turning her face away from anyone who might be sitting beside her, and fixing her attention upon the confused scene that passed the window as the bus sped through the streets.

Tonight, however, there had been more to it than that. The sky was beautiful above the city. When she came out of Professor Smale's office, she regretted that only two short blocks lay between her and the bus stop. The air was so crisp, so fresh, and she had been sitting for hours over the muddled outpourings of students who had less interest in psychology than she had in flying a kite.

That was why she got off the bus at Mellow Avenue instead of going straight home. She would walk down and take a look at the creek, follow the path to Roberts Avenue, and walk the three and a half blocks before going in. She glanced aside at the Thole house where, even at this hour, there were sounds as of bedlam let loose within the four walls that failed to contain the uproar. What a shame, she thought, that Inga Nelson, who was so sensitive and wrote poetry, should have to live in that house with her vegetable of a sister, Selma Thole! It was even worse, Adelberta had to admit, than her own home, and felt a little guiltily cheered. At the corner of Cherry Street, she left the paved walk and made her way toward the grassy slope that held the house where Sam and Sadie Flagg lived. As she passed the corner of the grocery store, she saw the windows festooned with Hallowe'en decorations against the soft glow of the night light at the back of the store.

Hallowe'en this year, she hoped, was going to mean something special to her. That very afternoon—and for the first time in her life—she had received an invitation to a party from one of her fellow students. It had come from Ricky Ross, moreover—scion of the well-to-do and socially prominent Rosses and glamor boy of the varsity football team. Ricky had approached her with a somewhat exaggerated diffidence in the hall and asked her if she wouldn't go with him to the dance his fraternity was sponsoring for Hallowe'en. Adelberta had been suspicious at once. She had glanced warily

about her, then calmly looked him up and down while he went on to explain that he had been counting on a cousin of his—one of those family obligations, you know—but had just learned that she was going to be out of town. He had seemed actually flustered in admitting that Adelberta was a second choice and a fill-in, but he hoped she would understand. She had relented at that, warming to the thought that perhaps the invitation was sincere after all. Ricky would call for her in his car at eight-thirty—the party was being held at the Rendezvous Night Club twenty miles or so from the city—and pick up another couple on the way out. Even now, her slender feet were all but lilting as she came to the path beside the creek. She would wear her wine-red wool suit that made the most of her beautiful figure—and it *was* beautiful, darn it!—and buy herself a small corsage of yellow button chrysanthemums for the lapel of her jacket. Ricky might have a corsage for her, but—well, just in case!

She left the creek by way of a narrow footpath that led up through the willows to the dead end of Jason Avenue. It was getting late, she realized, and her grandaunt and granduncle would soon begin wondering what was keeping her. She had telephoned them only to let them know she wouldn't be home for supper. With the solid pavement under her now, after the cushioned earth of the creekside path, she swung into her long-legged stride that brought her quickly to Pine Street, where she would have turned eastward had she not been halted suddenly by strains of music coming from the front room of Herman Shaft's house on the corner. She stood in the street and listened. She was not familiar with the melody, but that didn't matter. Music of any kind these days turned her thoughts invariably to Pete Bellingham. She had talked with him twice since his return, once when he had shown her his new arm and proudly demonstrated its ingenious mechanism, and again, on the very next day, when they had ridden home together on the bus from the city. She had seen him occasionally since then—drinking a coke in the drug store or talking to Inga Nelson, and one evening coming out of the Sunway Theater just as she was going in. He had been alone, she observed with a secret satisfaction, but always somehow cheerful in his aloneness, as if he were merely strolling about to recover his bearings in the world he had come back to. He was not at all like Bill Clifford, whom Adelberta had met on the street a couple of times and had barely nodded to. Bill was big and handsome, not maimed—at least physically—but his eyes had held a kind of haggard despondency that was almost frightening. Pete Bellingham was freckled, anything but handsome except for his wonderful smile above perfect teeth, and he had lost an arm, yet he seemed to be gaily saluting the world.

Footsteps sounded on the cement walk behind her and Adelberta glanced once over her shoulder, then hurried away. There was something familiar about the figure of the young woman who had broken so suddenly upon her reverie—why, of course, it was Josie Stone! Adelberta looked back once more, but the girl had vanished. Poor Josie, she thought, walking the streets alone now, seeking through the darkness for what she would never find again! Yet Josie was only a few years older than herself.

The thought bore Adelberta down from the elation she had felt a little while ago. Was she ever likely to seek through darkness for some love she had lost? Before she was aware of it, she was at the corner of Walnut Street. Perhaps it was the lingering memory of the music, perhaps it was thinking about Josie Stone, but here she was—and there were the lighted windows of the Bellingham house. It was a beautiful, rose-brick house, in a beautiful setting of flower garden and shrubbery, and Pete's parents and two sisters who lived in it were beautiful, kindly people. They were happy people, not like her own, not like Josie Stone's people, not even like the Pankers, whose house and grounds were grander by far, but whose hearts were still hungry for the peace that had been denied them.

The front door opened, and suddenly Pete Bellingham stood, a stocky silhouette against the light. Adelberta fled in panic down the street.

3 A Dance for Witches

The site prepared, and the old railway coach in place a safe distance up from the bank of the creek, Ben Start had only to look it over once to realize that he would never be able to make the place habitable before cold weather set in unless he found someone to help him. His regular work left him with only a few hours each afternoon, and the days were growing shorter. He made a hasty accounting of his meager resources in savings and war bonds, spent a half hour talking with one of the vice-presidents of his bank, then called on Gilbert Pinwinder.

" 'All things work together for good to them that love the Lord,' " Brother Pinwinder quoted, rubbing his hands. "I have just finished a job on the Terrace. I have had a call from—but no. Youth must be served! I'll be on hand tomorrow. And you're getting a very nice girl, my boy—very nice, indeed. I congratulate you!"

His pale eyes gloated, slid around in their sockets as if in oil. *You lecherous old fraud!* Ben thought, but arranged to meet the carpenter at the appointed hour.

They were hard at work the next afternoon when Pete Bellingham strolled over and stepped through the open doorway of the coach.

"Heard what you were doing and thought I'd pop in and see if I could be of any help," he said.

Ben laughed and carefully avoided as much as a glance at the mechanical substitute for a hand that protruded from Pete's right sleeve. "Well, thanks, Pete, but, damn it—the fact is I can't afford to take on—"

"I didn't say anything about pay. Hell, did you think I was out looking for a job? To tell you the truth, I'd like to try out this contraption of mine and see how much I can do with it. They give you a sort of a course in the use of it, but you feel self-conscious. At least I did, a little. But don't get any funny ideas about it, guy! I might surprise you. It'll get by just about as well as that game leg of yours, with a little practice."

"I wasn't thinking of that, specially," Ben temporized.

"And I'm not picking on your game leg," Pete grinned, offering his pack of cigarettes. "No, the fact is—I'm getting a mite fed up with sitting around on my rear at home."

"Let's sit down a minute now, anyway," Ben invited, and perched himself on the end of a heap of boards he and Gilbert Pinwinder had torn from the interior of the coach and piled outside the door. "This is the first time-out I've taken since I tackled this job."

Swinging his legs from the board pile, Pete glanced about him appraisingly. "You've got a swell idea here, guy. I'd never have thought of it. Damn if I wouldn't go for a place like this myself—if I could find me a woman to share it."

"That's a laugh," Ben said. "Pete Bellingham looking for a woman!"

"Okay—laugh! Maybe I'm fussy—or maybe the women are, I wouldn't know. A lot of them seem to have called their shots wrong, at that."

"If you're thinking of my woman when you say that, smile," Ben retorted amiably.

"I wasn't thinking of anybody in particular," Pete said. "Or maybe I was. I got to thinking of poor old Mary Prile last night. I used to call her Aunt

Mary when I was a kid. She sent me a couple of boxes of her own cookies while I was overseas. The kind she used to hand out to us kids when we sneaked up to her back door—when Rupe wasn't in sight. Anyhow, last night I got the crazy idea I'd like to go round and say hello and thank her for the cookies, and maybe have a talk."

"You had nerve. Rupe's worse than ever. Was he there?"

"Was he *there*! It was only a little after eight, but Mary was in bed already, or so he said. She wasn't seeing anybody. I told him I wanted to thank her for the cookies, that was all, and before I knew it, the old bugger was ordering me out of the house. I damn near lost my head. Maybe you wouldn't understand it, Gooben, but when a man has been ordered around for two or three years—half the time without any reason for it—he gets kind of riled by that stuff. When there's a good reason behind it, okay. But that other bolony—just because a squirt wears stripes—the hell with it! You get so you're alert for someone to bark at you and give you a chance to slap him down. Sure, Rupe had a right to order me out of his house, if he felt like it. Only—I wouldn't order him out of mine—and I'm a damned sight better man than he ever hoped to be. I don't know what came over me, but I caught myself in time. The one thing I wanted to do was club him over the head with this gadget I've got up my right sleeve. He'd never have known what hit him."

"I'm glad you didn't," Ben said. "I've been counting on doing something about Rupe myself, and I wouldn't like to be cheated out of it."

They talked about other things, about the village and the war's effect upon it, about the strike notice that had been served on George Panker after the preliminary negotiations had failed, about Bill Clifford and Sheila Panker and Ben's mother, even about Colin Trale and the talk that had been going around since his sermon of last Sunday morning. The preacher had turned loose a diatribe based upon the memorable words of the Nazarene—*Let him who is without sin among you cast the first stone*. Rupert Prile had got up in the middle of the sermon and stalked out of the church. The man's show of outraged dignity might have awakened no more than passing interest, but Bill Clifford, who had slipped into a back pew, began to clap his hands before Rupe reached the door, almost as if he were attending a political meeting instead of a Sunday morning service.

When they had talked and laughed for a good half hour, Ben finally called Brother Pinwinder from his work to tell him that Pete would be on hand the next morning to help speed up the remodeling of the railway coach.

It was on a Friday afternoon, when the work was nearing completion, that young David Thole and Bud Humphrey ambled up from a foray along the creek and inspected the coach with eyes that held the glint of purpose behind them—a purpose that was certainly alien to the mind of Gilbert Pinwinder, whose thoughts had inlaid every turn of his handicraft with salacious imaginings peculiarly his own.

"Gee, what a place for a club!" Bud said, and stood back meditating the possibilities—the solitude, the creek, the eerie farther reaches of the marsh, and the heaven-sent addition of an old railway coach.

"Ain't that too bad!" David sneered. "I told you that's where Gooben and Inga are going to live after they're married."

"They're not going to live there forever," Bud argued.

Pete Bellingham, wielding a jack-plane at an improvised bench only a few feet away, straightened up and looked at the boys.

"Maybe you've got something there," he said to Bud, and laid his plane aside. "Let's talk it over, eh?" He had just remembered what Bill Clifford had said the other day, when he ran into that embittered fellow at the El Rancho on Sunway Boulevard. Bill had seemed almost resentful at Pete's loss of an arm, and had remarked acidly that it would be a good thing if some of the kids in this neighborhood would lose both arms. Upon mild inquiry, Pete had learned about young Bud Humphrey and the dice game. Well, he had agreed with Bill, that wasn't so good . . . Perhaps he was taking something upon himself, but at least he could ask Ben.

There were problems to face, of course, with Ben called into conclave, but before the two boys had to rush off to supper, the Coach Club was born. The next day being a Saturday, Ben had five more willing helpers recruited from friends of David and Bud, whose eagerness to assist almost made up for the time they lost debating the conditions under which the place could be made the rendezvous of boys between the ages of twelve and fifteen whose homes were within the limits of Wahwahnissa Creek. Friday night of each week, weather permitting, Ben and Inga would turn the coach over between the hours of seven and ten o'clock to Pete Bellingham and his young initiates—and no women allowed. Not even Inga. She could hide in the kitchen, of course, with a book. Ben might be on hand or not, as he pleased. He was a man and this was to be a man's affair and run in a man's way. The regulations would be man-made, and members would abide by the rules, or else! It was Pete Bellingham's idea that there should be no president, no vice-president, no secretary and no treasurer. Instead there would be an

engineer, a fireman, and a couple of brakemen, and section gangs to do the work of committees.

At their first meeting, after Ben had excused himself from playing any active role in the organization, since he and Inga would be out most Friday nights—at his mother's, he thought, or at a movie—the boys agreed that Pete Bellingham should be chosen to fill the purely supervisory position of "conductor." An outline of "civic duties" was made: the collection of old newspapers and magazines, tin cans, fats that some housewives still forgot meant money, cast-off clothing and shoes to be shipped off to the needy in the war-torn countries—and the sorting and parceling up of the latter to take to the post office with a declaration of contents, really a job in itself! Besides, the "Rake-up, Clean-up" community drive was on—oh, there was no end to the things the Coach Club could do!

Ben was more than happy to have his Friday nights free. Already, the humble beginnings he had planned for himself and Inga had got out of hand. Before he knew what was happening, his modest wedding in Colin Trale's parsonage had been attended by news photographers, the Coach Club had been written up in the city papers and the converted hamburger stand was a feature in the Sunday rotogravure section that showed both interior and exterior views, with descriptive paragraphs duly appended.

And then, suddenly, it was Hallowe'en. Ben and Inga had been married less than two weeks. In lieu of a real honeymoon, they had spent a week-end and two extra days that Corbett of the Mayflower Dairy had given them as a wedding present, along with a crystal punch bowl, at Aunt Kari Bakken's on Lost Moon Lake.

But when they were back at work again, Ben on his milk route and Inga in her Book Nook at the corner drug store, their life together in the funny house that might have been filched from the pages of Mother Goose or discovered by Alice in Wonderland had closed about them in a kind of dream.

On this Hallowe'en night Inga would have preferred staying home, but she and Ben had promised to be present at a children's party Colin Trale was giving in the basement of the church. She had, however, made preparations for the visit of youngsters who were sure to knock on the Coach door in the traditional fashion soon after dusk. She had bought fruit and candy and small Hallowe'en favors and had heaped them about a candle-lit Jack-o'-lantern on a table in the center of the room. Above it, a single kerosene lamp

gleamed brightly in its polished brass holder, while shadows crowded the farther ends of the room where the lamps had not been lighted.

There came a stealthy tapping at the door, and the whispers and half-restrained giggling of a dozen young prowlers waiting without.

While Ben hoisted himself from the couch, Inga opened the door to the smothered mouse squeaks and squirrel chatterings, and then the high, fine laughter that could no longer be stemmed. She looked out upon fearsome masks and pillow-cases drawn over heads, and small bodies swathed in old lace curtains, tattered nightgowns, gunny sacks, and improvised novelties of newspaper.

"Treats or tricks! Treats or tricks!" a couple of the bolder ones piped up immediately.

Ben presented himself in the doorway and assumed his most menacing guise. "Tricks, eh? What kind of tricks?"

The tallest boy pushed toward him out of the darkness, his face concealed behind what purported to be a wolf's head with grinning mouth exposing huge fangs. "We'll huff and we'll puff and we'll blow your house in!" he announced.

"Come on in, then!" Inga laughed, pulling Ben back to give a clear view of the table set for the occasion.

There was a moment of noisy scrambling as the youngsters swarmed into the room, and then a breath-held pause while they stood about the table.

"Masks off!" Ben ordered. "We're not going to feed a bunch of wild animals!"

"You got to guess who we are first," said the wolf, and while Ben hesitated, doing his best to appear completely mystified, Inga's quick sense detected the voice of Tommy Durant, a ten-year-old from the Terrace. But she said nothing.

"You all look to me like a bunch of minnows out of the creek, and for two cents I'd throw you back in," Ben declared.

There were howls of laughter, and Inga approached the table, beckoning to the wolf. "Come on, Tommy, you lead the way." As she spoke, she felt an angry impatience with herself at the sudden misting over of her eyes. What a time to have a sentimental rush of nostalgia for a lost childhood—now, when she was beginning a new life with the man she loved! Of course, the lost wonder could never be found again, except vicariously, perhaps, through

children of her own and Ben's. At that thought her heart-beat quickened and she glanced at Ben with a very definite excitement. Then, recovering herself, she hastily doled out the carameled apples and the honey-popcorn balls and fruit until the supply was all but exhausted.

In a few minutes the little troop clattered out of the house, Ben herding them with his flashlight as far as Ring Avenue. They were all in a panic to get home and be properly dressed for the party in the church basement.

Inga quickly set the room in order, blew out the Jack-o'-lantern candle, and turned the ceiling lamp down to a mere shaving of light. Then she stretched out on the couch and waited for Ben's return.

He opened the door finally, stepped into the room, and looked across at her in the dim light.

"What gives?" he demanded, and closed the door softly behind him.

"This is our first Hallowe'en together," Inga reminded him, and lifted her arms toward him. "Come over here. I have things to say to my husband."

He set his flashlight aside. "We've got to get moving, kid, if we're going to make the party before it's half over."

She smiled up at him. "I refuse to be hurried. Besides, it's fashionable to be late. Are you coming over here, or aren't you?"

He went and sat beside her. "Okay, Mrs. Start! What have you to say to your husband?" When she did not answer immediately, he leaned over and kissed her. "You're a bit of a witch," he grinned at her. "You could make a rhyme out of that, maybe."

She drew him down to her again. "I want to have children—gay ones like the kids who were in here just now."

Ben drew back quickly. "Hey, not so fast! There must have been at least a dozen of 'em!"

"I'll settle for one at a time," Inga laughed.

He eyed her soberly. "In this old covered wagon, small one?"

"They had kids in covered wagons a hundred years ago. And I imagine most of them turned out all right when they grew up."

"*If* they grew up," Gooben said.

But her arms were about him and a deep urgency was in her voice as she pressed her warm cheek against his. "Love me!"

The church basement was just what it was expected to be for a children's party on Hallowe'en: an enclosure of autumn leaves, pumpkins, yellowed corn-stalks, grinning papier-mâché cats, and black pasteboard witches riding brooms along the walls. At one end of the long room, tables stood loaded with homemade cookies, homemade taffy, homemade fudge and butterscotch, and buckets of the inevitable lemonade.

By eight-thirty, the activities were almost more than Pete Bellingham and the army veteran friends he had recruited from the city could control. Why had he let himself in for it? It was years since he had been in any church—chapel in the army scarcely counted—but this man Colin Trale was apparently building up to something. There had been a lot of talk in the village recently. The situation promised diversion.

"Why, sure—I'll give you a hand!" Pete had consented when Colin met him on the street one afternoon and asked him to help with the Hallowe'en party. "I'm not a church-goer, exactly, but I'll pick up a couple of guys like myself and we'll take over the whole circus, if you like. You can look after the grown-ups."

And a circus it was, Colin Trale reflected as he looked down the length of the room where the youngsters were busy with Hallowe'en games—bobbing for apples, pinning the tail on the mule, threading a needle while sitting on a milk bottle, Going to Jerusalem, and Musical Chairs, with Irene Trale at the piano. Even the grown-ups seemed to be having the time of their lives. A few church members were pointedly absent, Colin realized. Della Prince had stayed away, proudly conscious, no doubt, of the hiatus she was creating in a clique that had long looked upon her as its ruling spirit. A number of Della's closest friends, too, had failed to show up. On the other hand, Colin counted more than a score of people he had never seen before—or having seen them, had never thought of them as "church people." What a sorry epithet! What a commentary upon his ten years of so-called service to humanity! Once again he stood convicted and humiliated before the bar of his own judgment. But even that self-incrimination brought him a step closer to the truth he was seeking. In the sight of heaven no man was a stranger. The church of the Lord was the church of the people. Open the doors and let them come in!

They had come in tonight, he thought with wry humor, though not to one of his sermons. Sam and Sarah Flagg, who were usually too tired on Sunday to leave their home except for an Easter service; Dr. Knutson and his wife, though the doctor had been unable to stay for more than half an hour; Sheila

Panker, who had come with the Knutsons on an urgent invitation from Irene Trale; and a whole horde of factory workers from Red Willow Terrace, though the strike at the Panker plant had already split the little community into two opposing camps. Even here, Colin realized, there was division. The Terrace people kept to one end of the room and cast furtive glances at Sheila Panker and the doctor's wife who were part of a small coterie that had formed about the piano. It would take more than the laughter of children to bridge that gap, Colin knew. A sudden catastrophe, perhaps, a common fear, a shared suffering—he didn't know.

He looked toward the door where Ben Start and Inga had just come in with Maggie Fraghurst. Waving a greeting, he went to meet them, but Maggie full-sailed it through the crowd, holding before her a pan of fudge she had spent most of the evening making.

"I'd have been here an hour ago if those two galoots hadn't kept me waiting," she apologized importantly as she thrust the pan into Colin's hands and looked about her at the mob of youngsters. "Jeepers, what a racket!"

"You've got half the town packed in here," Ben observed as he came up with Inga.

"It sounds like it, I admit," Colin replied.

"Oh, there's Sheila Panker—and Mrs. Knutson!" Inga said, and darted away.

Even *you*, Colin thought as he watched her go to join the close little group about the piano. If he, Colin Trale, were really a forceful, persuasive individual, he would effect an amity between these two disparate social entities. But it seemed that he was not such an individual—he had not been granted knowledge of the obscure instincts at work in human hearts. He thrust the pan of fudge back into Maggie's hands and seized Ben by the arm.

"Would you mind taking the candy over to the tables, Miss Fraghurst?" he said quickly. "I think you know most of the women over there. I'm going to throw Gooben to the lions."

He led the way to the noisiest corner of the room, where Pete Bellingham was doing his best to bring a semblance of order to the chaos that prevailed about a tub of water on the surface of which a half dozen red apples bobbed under the attacks of six boys who were on their knees about the tub.

"God Almighty!" Pete muttered helplessly as his glance fell upon Ben. "Give me a hand with this mess, will you? We've got to get it out of here.

Okay, you guys—you're soaking wet. Pick 'em up with your hands. And that's all there is!"

"You shouldn't swear in a church," a small girl's voice chided, and Ben turned to find Lorraine Thole watching the game, with Bud Humphrey and Tommy Durant on either side of her.

Pete was too busy getting the dripping boys away from the tub to pay any attention to Lorraine's reprimand. Ben stooped and grasped a couple of the irate contestants by the scruff of the neck. "Lay off, kids!" He lifted one side of the tub while Pete took hold of the other. "What half-wit ever thought this up?"

Pete grinned. "I did. Heck, you can't have a Hallowe'en party without it!" He glanced over his shoulder. "Hey, Bud, stick around and look after things till I get back."

"We got some sidings to clear first," Tommy Durant called out.

"Sidings to clear?" Ben said as they lugged the tub toward the sink at the other end of the room. "What kind of double-talk is that?"

"Coach Club jargon," Pete replied.

Nobody, it seemed, saw Hannah Humphrey come down the short flight of stairs that led to the basement. Nobody, at any rate, paid her any heed as she stood in the doorway and searched narrow-eyed from one side of the room to the other. In the corner where Irene Trale sat at the piano, Sheila Panker had just explained to Inga that George had stayed at home for the evening to enjoy a game of chess with the druggist, Clarence Higgins—the first of a series, she supposed, since the two had been chess cronies for years. She was making a remark on the unhappy lot of a chess-widow, when she saw that she was being confronted by a little girl who had two older boys in tow.

"Sheila, this is my little niece, Lorraine Thole," Inga said.

"Yes," said Lorraine, angling her knees together and giggling. "We've come over to clear a siding—that's what Bud calls it."

"Clear a siding, dear?" Sheila asked with proper wonder.

"That's Coach Club," Bud Humphrey spoke up stoutly. "Tommy's a brakeman. Lorraine don't count—she's just an emergency. We don't have any girls in the club."

Sheila laughed. “Let them have their old club, Lorraine. One of these days we’ll have a club and keep the boys out. But the business of clearing the siding—is that a game?”

“Kind of,” Bud said. “And I guess Lorraine—she wants to help. Pete made a rule—if a guy passes up any cars he should’ve picked up along the way, he’s got to go back and get ’em. If he don’t, he can’t be anything but a passenger. He can’t be an engineer, or a fireman, or—”

“Bud’s an engineer,” said Lorraine proudly.

“Fine!”

“Only there’s something I got to do,” Bud went on, chewing at his lip, “—Tommy’s got to do it, too. We—we’ve got to come to you and say we were a couple of rats for marching past your place and singing that song the day old Bratruud ran after us with a rake.”

“And I was just back of them with some other girls,” Lorraine admitted plaintively.

Sheila was close to tears. She drew Lorraine to her, then reached out and held the boys’ hands for a moment. “Thank you,” she whispered. “You’ve all done the bravest, and the hardest—thing—”

It was at that moment that Hannah Humphrey came stalking down the crowded room, her eyes glaring angrily until they flicked like a black whip from Sheila to young Bud.

“There you are! What are you doing here, and me looking the town over for you? Come right home with me!”

A heavy silence fell upon the room, but Sheila managed to smile, “Bud was just trying to tell me about his Coach Club.”

Hannah Humphrey’s voice lashed out so that the children who stood near her cowered back in fright. “He was telling you? Has he forgotten what I—”

“Mrs. Humphrey!” Irene Trale pleaded.

“And you!” the woman went on wildly, turning upon Irene. “You ought to be proud of yourself, I must say, exposing a young boy to the shame of a woman who disgraced herself before the whole world—you that ought to be an example to the rest of us!” Her eyes flashed at her son. “Are you coming, Bud!”

The boy stood as if frozen, and Sheila spoke gently to him. “You’d better go with your mother, Bud.”

There was scarcely a sound in the room until after the hasty exit of Hannah Humphrey and the crestfallen boy. Then, through a buzz of voices, Colin Trale urged his guests to come to the tables, called upon them to form a line along one side of the room, ordered Pete Bellingham and his aids to help “direct the traffic”—did everything he could think of to dissipate the shocking effect of Mrs. Humphrey’s untimely visit.

Beside the piano, Inga was doing her best to quiet Lorraine’s sobbing. “Stop it, Lorraine! You’re too big a girl now to cry over a thing like that, dear. It isn’t worth thinking about.”

“That woman is insane,” Mrs. Knutson observed, her eyes still upon the doorway through which Hannah Humphrey had disappeared.

“I shouldn’t have come,” Sheila Panker said, her face white.

Irene Trale got up from her chair, eyes flaming. “I asked you to come. What that woman needs is a darned good beating!”

There was a sudden rush across the room, and Maggie Fraghurst stood flat-footed before them, her arms akimbo as she eyed them with obvious contempt. “Jeepers-creepers, what a fine bunch you are! Letting that scum tell you off, and never a word from any of you! Wasn’t there one of you big enough to slap her down?”

They laughed in spite of themselves, but Sheila turned to Mrs. Knutson. “I think I’d better go home, if you don’t mind. I feel—I’d rather. George is expecting you all later, of course. And that includes you and your husband, Inga, if you care to come.”

“We’d love to,” Inga said. “We’ll have to look in on Gooben’s mother for a minute. We didn’t have time to talk to her on the way here. We’ll be over as soon as we can.”

It was nearly an hour before Inga and Ben were able to tear themselves free of Hortense Start. Maggie, of course, had to tell all about Hannah Humphrey, while Hortense listened avidly and begged for more and more details whenever Maggie faltered in her story. She had been waiting up for them, not in her favorite chair as was her custom, but stretched out on the sofa, and clad in a pink satin bed jacket, a multi-colored afghan drawn close up to her waist.

“You look pretty tonight,” Maggie told her with a kind of guilty loyalty, thinking of Sheila Panker, who would always remain for her the unattainable dream of beauty.

Hortense smiled wistfully and reached a thin hand toward Ben. “Only to those who love me,” she sighed.

Though her bitter resentment toward Ben’s marriage had softened, at least outwardly, as soon as she realized it no longer served any real purpose, she still persisted in speaking to Ben as if Inga were not there. She never failed to feign astonishment—pleased astonishment, of course—at the sight of Inga in her son’s company. It was her oblique way of pretending that the marriage had never taken place. What satisfaction she derived from her silly pretense was obscure, but Inga had quickly recovered from her first feeling of hurt.

“We’d like to have you and Maggie over to dinner at our place Sunday night,” Inga said brightly. “The meat market has promised me a loin of pork.”

Hortense shook her head regretfully. “I’m afraid, my dear—my stomach won’t tolerate pork in any form.”

“I can broil up a couple of lamp chops and take ’em along,” Maggie suggested at once.

Hortense was still doubtful. “I wouldn’t want anybody to go to extra trouble on my account. And I don’t see how you can cook anything on that wretched oil stove you have told me about, Gooben.”

“It’s a good little oil stove,” said Ben defensively. “And Inga can turn out a dinner fit for a queen.”

“Well, thank you, dear.” Hortense patiently folded her brittle hands and smiled up at Ben.

“Sleep well, Mother,” he said, and stooped to kiss her cheek. “We’ve got to get going. The Pankers are expecting us.”

“I always sleep well after you’ve been here, son, even if you can’t spend more than a minute with me.”

There was a delicate and unforgiving thrust in that, too, Inga thought as they left the house. But it was good to be out in the clear air, and she dismissed the old lady from her mind. Indian Summer had lingered this year, and like a tangible presence the dreaming warmth of it flowed up from the

dark earth under their feet and loomed above them to the star-broken darkness of the sky.

She took Ben's arm and snuggled close to him as they walked down the street. "I like you," she said, and brushed his shoulder with her cheek.

He laid his hand warmly over hers. "Thanks, kid. I kind of like you. But I'm not forgetting—you were naughty tonight."

"Are you sorry?"

"We were late for the party, and Maggie was having fits by the time we got there."

"The world can't stop turning because your precious Maggie has fits," Inga said lightly.

At the Pankers', they found Colin and Irene Trale already seated in the softly lighted living room, listening to some new recordings George had brought home from the city. Clarence Higgins was there, too, lounging back in a big chair beside a low table on which a chess-board lay covered with tumbled pieces. Mrs. Knutson, the doctor's wife, sat on the deep couch against the wall, with Pete Bellingham and one of his friends on either side of her.

Sheila came into the hall to meet them, walking with her unstudied grace, and clad in a sapphire-blue housecoat, with flame-colored slippers on her feet. The slippers were like red leaves—red leaves from the copper beech, Inga recalled suddenly, and then forced the thought from her mind. With her "skunk-striped" hair, as Sheila herself called it, and eyes that veered between green and aquamarine, she was a vision too dramatic for the modest village setting to which she had come. And as if to sharpen the effect, the phonograph leafed over to Debussy's *The Sirens*.

"We're awfully late," Inga apologized, "but we wanted to come anyhow."

"It isn't late—only a little after eleven. I'm so glad you came. Give me your coats and go on in. George is playing some new records."

When Sheila returned to the living room she sat down on a large golden velvet cushion on the floor and leaned her head against George's knee. His hand went out to her shoulder and rested there until the music ended. He got up then and stepped into the dining room, where a tray of bottles and glasses and a silver bucket of cracked ice stood on the table.

“Come on, you candidates for Alcoholics Anonymous, pour your own,” he invited.

It was quite evident that he had been drinking, but Sheila embraced her guests with a disarming smile. “Poor old Karl begged off tonight. He has a horrible tooth that must come out as soon as the swelling goes down.”

In a moment the men were all in the dining room, and the four women were alone. Even Colin Trale went along, knowing that George would have a glass of light wine for him.

“I’ll be darned if I’ll be left alone with a bunch of women,” he laughed as he walked away with a hand on Ben’s shoulder. “Not after what I saw and heard tonight.”

Sheila looked up at him quickly, her finger to her lips. “I haven’t told George about it yet,” she cautioned him.

“He’ll hear about it, of course,” Irene Trale said. “It would be better—”

“Oh, I’ll tell him later—in the morning, perhaps. He has so much to think about—the factory and everything. I shouldn’t have gone out tonight at all. I’m too easily upset these days. Even a little thing like that—”

“I don’t call that a little thing,” Irene said. “It was enough to upset anyone.”

Sheila leaned toward Inga. “I ought to explain, Inga—about being so easily upset, I mean. The others know, and the whole village will know in a few weeks, I expect. I’m going to have a baby.”

While Inga was congratulating her, George returned gallantly from the other room with a silver tray on which crystal glasses sparkled with muscatel.

“I wasn’t forgetting you girls,” he said with a merry smile as he passed the tray around. When he leaned down to place a glass carefully in Sheila’s hands, Inga saw the ardent tenderness of his eyes.

But he was immediately back in the dining room, and the men’s voices grew loud.

“Our whole economy will bog down unless Washington does something to curb strikes. We can’t get on with the job while . . .” That was old Clarence Higgins talking, originally a New Englander and still a “rock-ribbed Republican” by his own boast.

“It’s easy enough to blame it all on Washington, Clarence.” George Panker was talking now. “We’re as much to blame as the government is. I know I’ve made my mistakes—plenty of them. For one thing, I somehow gave my people the impression that I was going to act as their fairy godfather during the reconversion period. I might have hung on a little longer, if—”

“The problem may be bigger than any of us, including the government,” Colin Trale offered. “It may be that the old order is changing. The world over . . .”

“They sound as if they think they’re settling things,” Irene said dryly. “They don’t have to scrounge around, looking for a piece of beefsteak. And just wait until OPA ceilings go off everything!”

Mrs. Knutson was bewailing her inability to get pajamas and underwear to fit little Jimmie, but Inga found it hard to listen. She sat so close to the dining room that the men’s alarming predictions of things to come occupied all her attention. She was thinking the world of tomorrow held dark promises for children as yet unborn—Sheila Panker’s child, for instance, and perhaps a child of her own.

Clarence Higgins was singling out Russia as the direst threat to world peace, while Colin Trale was countering with the suggestion that the Russian people were probably ordinary human beings like everyone else, and should be given more understanding than criticism. Somehow the talk shifted to religion, and Pete Bellingham launched upon a story about a young soldier who, in his opinion, came closer to being a true Christian than any man he had ever known, although the soldier was of the Jewish faith.

It was while Pete was talking that Inga first became aware of an altogether strange and unaccountable clattering somewhere outside the house. The women fell silent at once, staring at each other as the din mounted with beating of pans, raucous shouts and catcalls, and abortive singing that broke down into hoots and laughter.

Sheila, still seated on her floor cushion, turned her head toward the dining room.

“George! There’s something—please come out.”

In a moment they were all at the windows—all except Sheila, who had started to get up, then sat down again on the cushion while the others gazed out toward the street, where a jeering crowd had gathered in front of the wrought iron gates, their faces pale under the lurid light of flaming torches.

“Let’s have ’em in for a drink!” George Panker said and started, none too steadily, toward the door.

“Don’t be a damn’ fool, George!” Clarence Higgins cried, catching George’s arm. “Do you want them to wreck the place?”

“Hell, I’m democratic!” George laughed.

“Please, darling!” Sheila implored softly.

He turned and looked at her. “Sure—that’s all right, sweetheart.” He stepped over and stroked her head affectionately. “Don’t worry about me. Those guys out there are friends of mine. They’ve known me for years. They’re serenading us, honey—all three of us, eh?” He laughed and stooped to kiss her, then went back to the window.

But the mob had already hilariously snake-danced its way down the street, and soon their off-key singing was little more than an echo in the distance.

George came from the window and glanced at the mantel clock just as its chimes struck twelve. “Midnight!” he said jovially, “Let’s get the news, eh?”

There was a kind of desperate insistence in his heartiness, a headlong eagerness to turn the minds of his guests away from the frankly antagonistic demonstration that had taken place in front of his home. If he had not had too much to drink during the evening, Inga thought, he wouldn’t have been quite so hearty. She glanced across the room at Colin Trale, whose eyes held a warm glimmer as they rested upon Irene. Irene had trotted out her lipstick and was brightening up her soft, plump lips.

But now the voice of the news announcer blared from the radio.

“Turn it down a little, George,” Sheila said.

“. . . local police report flagrant acts of vandalism in spite of appeals to make this a sane Hallowe’en. And it seems we still haven’t learned to celebrate our holidays without adding to the toll of serious accidents due to reckless driving. Hospitalized after a Hallowe’en party tonight at a suburban night spot are Ricky Ross, varsity football star, and Adelberta Wilson, a university senior whose home is at 783 Roberts Avenue, Wahwahnissa Creek. Ross, who suffered contusions, told the police his car skidded and struck the end of a culvert on Merida Road. Miss Wilson, her face badly lacerated, is in critical condition at the General Hospital. Ross, who returned early this fall from the European war theater, where he had been a fighter

pilot, will be lost to the varsity squad for the remainder of the season, hospital authorities asserted . . .”

“How did Adelberta happen to be out on a party with Ricky Ross?” Ben asked, his voice lifted angrily above the announcer’s. “She doesn’t run with his gang.”

Pete Bellingham got up from where he had been sitting on the couch. “Look, folks, I think I’ll be going, if you don’t mind.”

George turned the radio off. “What’s the hurry, Pete? The night’s young.”

“I know, George, but—” His voice sounded oddly limp. “Thanks for a swell evening!”

“It’s time we were going, too, Gooben,” said Inga. “We have to be up early.”

“Oh, I’m sorry you have to leave,” Sheila said, and got up from her cushion.

Her slender body swayed for a moment and she put out a hand toward the piano to steady herself. Inga saw instantly that Sheila’s hand would never reach the support it was seeking. Her breath caught in fright, but George took two long strides and caught his wife in his arms.

In the street, Inga pressed close to Ben. “It was too much for Sheila,” she said as they approached the corner beyond which Ben had left his car at the curb in front of his mother’s house. “She was in misery all evening because of Hannah Humphrey. And then that awful parade! Besides, her nerves are on edge. She’s going to have a baby.”

“She is? Is that supposed to put a woman’s nerves on edge?”

“Don’t be funny. When I saw her starting to fall, I was scared stiff. If George hadn’t caught her—”

“Well, he did,” Ben interrupted. “Quit thinking about it. Look—isn’t that Bill Clifford ahead of us?”

“It *is*! I’d know that sagging overcoat of his anywhere. He—he’s drunk, Gooben!”

Ben grunted. “He looks it. Let’s stand here till he passes the corner. If I know Bill, he doesn’t want to talk to anybody right now.”

In that he was wrong, however, for Bill Clifford stopped, weaved about, and retraced his steps until he stood confronting them, his slouched hat drawn low above his eyes.

"Well, as I live and breathe—a trifle alcoholically, I admit—if it isn't our bride and groom! Great institution, marriage. Better marry than burn—better borrow than mourn—no, that one wasn't so good, was it? But I tried. You got to give me credit for that. All day long I'm trying—sometimes all night long. I used to play with marbles, now I play with words. No—they play with me. Marbles in a man's brain."

"You ought to be in bed, Bill," Inga said gently. "Let us drive you home."

He bestowed upon her a vague smile. "You have a way with words, haven't you? You make them work for you. Remember a couple of weeks ago you showed me one of your poems? 'The first star of eve, and I could scarcely pass you by, my love!' That's the way it began. Tell you what, Inga—and I'm serious though spiffed. Get your poems together and we'll make a little book of them. There's an editor in New York—a good Joe—we were together, you know where. All I have to do is tell him—"

"Oh, Bill! They're not good enough for that."

"How about coming home with us?" Ben put in. "Inga will make coffee and we can have a talk."

Bill began fumbling through his pockets for a cigarette, and Ben whipped out his own pack and offered it to him.

"Thank you, thank you, sir!" Bill bowed extravagantly.

"Let's get into the car," said Ben.

But Bill stood fingering a paper of matches. He struck several before he succeeded in lighting his cigarette. Then he looked narrowly at Ben.

"No, my friend, I am not going to presume on your hospitality. I am not going home with you. I am not going to drink your coffee. Under ordinary circumstances, I might. In fact, I would. But tonight everything is different. Tonight I came home late. I loitered too long with my good friend, Hippocrates. I got a spot drunk. I'm glad I did. If I'd come home sober, I swear to God I'd have killed somebody back there in the house. Maybe my wife or the pigeon-breasted Romeo she was with. Maybe good old Herman, the son-of-a-bitch I'm so grateful to! Maybe little Inez, the blond slut who insisted on kissing me. She was on the party tonight—Molly's and Herman's

big party—in the basement and upstairs—all over the house. Must have been two dozen of them. Young Freddy and his violin were shut up in his attic room, thank God! So I walked out on the crowd. No, that's not quite right. I said something—I started an argument—and I got myself thrown out like a bum—by dear Herman! So you invite me to share your hospitality, chum. You overlook my pride. I'm a bum, chum—so I walk the streets—so I stalk the wee—"

He gave a frightened laugh and sped away from them as if from some demoniac pursuit.

"God damn it!" Ben exclaimed. "The poor guy! Well, let him go. It's a cinch *I* can't catch him."

Inga stood still, trying to smother a sob, and then gave up and started to cry.

Ben drew his arm tight about her. "All right, small one. I feel like it, too. Let's get home."

Chapter Five

1 Clear Sky

Wahwahnissa Creek threaded its glittering ribbon of ice through the whip-bare stands of cottonwood and red willow that lined its banks. It was noon of the second of January.

Sheila Panker, in her green velvet housecoat, stood at the west window of her dining room and looked across her snow-swept garden, across Ring Avenue, and beyond the frost-burned area of park that fell away gently to the creek. The sky was a blue porcelain shell above it all. The day was spellbound in crystal, unstirred by any wind, unshadowed by any weft of cloud. On the creek, a dozen children interlaced shifting patterns of red and blue and white in their skating togs, the blades of their skates flashing over the sunlit ice like silver fish.

With the dear burden of her body, Sheila felt importantly alive, and yet possessed of a pleasant remoteness from the tentacles of living. For a moment she had a sensation of skating in some occult fashion out there among the shining children. But a pang of guilt struck her immediately. What right had she to luxuriate in a simple animal function, with all the world about her so harassed by doubts and fears?

It was not because she had sealed her mind against the encroachment of the outer world that she now clung almost fiercely to the sense of remoteness from living within it. A new world, peculiarly her own, had been created out of all the chaos of her past. Nothing, she was resolved, should endanger the life, nothing disturb the ineffable miracle of the child who stirred within her now with all the imperious impatience of the unborn. She was not in her first youth, she had gone through so much, and that Hallowe'en night when she had all but fainted in her husband's arms had frightened her to the marrow of her bones. It had also stiffened her sense of responsibility to George's unborn son. Oh, yes, it would be a son! She had

said so a couple of weeks ago when Inga had dropped by to leave some books Sheila had ordered over the telephone. Inga had blushed prettily and had said that hers, then, would be a girl, and the two would grow up together—and who could tell! That had been Inga's way of announcing that she and Ben were expecting a baby in July, a couple of months after Sheila's should be born. Well, who *could* tell? A boy and a girl, skating together on the creek as those vivid children were doing today! Sheila drew her robe about her with a slight shiver. The serious responsibility of launching young lives upon a world—but she would not think of that now. The world was God's—if there *was* a God—and God was love.

She wouldn't have thought of anything like that two years ago, she realized suddenly. She had changed since then. In those days her life had been a secret thing not to be shared with others. Now, although there was still animosity toward her in the village, how much there was to be grateful for! The Trales, the Knutsons, Clarence Higgins, Ben and Inga, Sam Flagg and his wife Sadie—they all knew of the devotion between herself and George and rejoiced in it. Little Jimmie Knutson, in his own way, had brought warmth into her life, stopping in casually on his way home from school for a piece of Karl's Danish pastry, or for a blissful hour curled up in the library with *Moby Dick* or *The Pathfinder*. To Sheila's suggestion that he take the books home with him, Jimmie had asserted solemnly that "they belong to be read where they live."

Well, here she was, doing what she had so often resolved not to do—counting, as if on the fingers of her two hands, the few people in the village whom she had come to regard as her friends. In the past six months no others had made any overtures to her, with the exception of the timid little Mrs. Prile, who occasionally passed the time of day to her across the garden fence, her weak eyes alert as if on tiptoe against the dread approach of her husband.

Sheila turned quickly from the window and saw herself reflected in the long antique mirror that hung on the opposite side of the room. George's father had picked that up in Venice or Florence—why couldn't she remember which it was now, when she had known so well? The glass had a curious flaw in one corner which, for some reason, made it more valuable as a collector's item—she couldn't recall just why, at the moment. But George, pointing it out to her, had said significantly—or so it had seemed to her—that precious creations by masters were often more desirable because of some slight fault that made their works identifiable. He had leaned then and

kissed her hair—as if he were identifying her because of the flaw in her own soul and thus finding her doubly precious.

Or perhaps she had only imagined that. At any rate, she loved the old mirror with its flaw. She loved every precious thing within these walls. Hers, she knew, was not the kind of love that George brought to them. She would never be capable of that. She had never, in fact, placed much value on personal possessions of any kind. But now, the mirror, the rugs, the pictures—everything about her meant a warm security such as she had never known. It was the kind of house she would have chosen, had the choosing been hers, for a child to grow in and come to know some of the beauty the world had to offer him.

Karl had already laid the table for lunch, with the Mexican cloth of many colors that seemed to cheer George up to the point of eating a little, if only by way of making a polite gesture toward the food. He insisted on going to his factory every morning, where he met his foremen and set the machines running for a few minutes—"Just to keep them from rusting," he told her seriously.

As she walked past the table, Karl came from the kitchen with the Mexican water pitcher of cloudy blue pottery.

"No ice in the water for Mr. Panker, Karl," she said absently, and went on into the living room.

Why had she said that? Karl needed no reminder that George hadn't been taking ice in any sort of drink now for more than a month. He had what he himself had diagnosed as a "nervous stomach" that seemed to shrink from the shock of anything cold. Doctor Knutson had assured him that there was nothing wrong with his stomach, but if cold drinks disagreed with him he could do very well without them. Karl knew all that . . . There was a sound at the front door, and Sheila pressed her fingers to her brow as she went into the hall.

George was not alone. He and Clarence Higgins were hanging their coats in the closet when she saw them.

"Why, hello, Mr. Higgins!" she said with a gracious smile, offering her hand. "What a nice surprise this is!"

The old druggist's lantern-jawed face became suffused with an absurd, boyish pink. He must have been quite good-looking in his youth, Sheila thought. Why had he never married? She was wondering about people now as she never had during the years of the rule of her profligate heart.

“You can blame your husband for this,” Clarence Higgins said. “I protested against coming unexpectedly, but—well, a happy New Year to you, anyhow!”

“No apologies, now, Clarence!” George interrupted stoutly, and kissed Sheila. “He was sitting down to a cold sandwich at his lunch counter when I went in to pick up your prescription, darling, so I hauled him out with me. Guess we’ve got enough extra to feed a dried up old bachelor, eh?”

“Well, I should hope so!” Sheila laughed. “Though I don’t think your description fits Mr. Higgins a speck!”

George smiled as he put his arm lightly about her waist and handed her the package he had taken from the pocket of his overcoat.

“Here’s your poison—three times a day before meals—slow death!” he said, and the forced levity of his tone was not lost upon Sheila.

“It’s only a tonic,” Higgins told her. “On the other hand, if George suspects there’s anything lethal in it, he can readily prove his point by taking the first dose.”

“It would also prove how much he loves me,” Sheila said in a lilting voice as she led the way into the living room. “Sit down here in front of the fireplace, Mr. Higgins. It isn’t so very cold out today, but I had Karl build a fire just to make things cheerful.” Ah, why had she said that? Things *were* cheerful. “Besides, Karl wants to use up those old apple-tree logs he’s afraid will rot before spring.”

The druggist seated himself, and his long, thin legs crossed swords in front of the fire. “When I retire,” he said, as if to himself, “I’m going to have a small house with a big fireplace where I can sit and do nothing but toast my old bones.”

“I don’t know how you’ve lived all these years in that hide-out back of your store,” George said as he sank back in his chair.

Clarence Higgins smiled. “It has its drawbacks, I admit. But habit is a powerful thing in a man’s life. I made my nest there when I first started my business on the corner. I couldn’t afford anything better in those days. Now, when I can afford it, there aren’t enough houses of any kind to go round. Besides, what would I do with a place like this?”

Sheila rose. “If you don’t mind, I’ll go and speak to Karl. Lunch won’t be ready for another half hour, I’m afraid. How about a sherry or a cocktail or something? Mr. Higgins—?”

“Thank you, thank you, Mrs. Panker. It’s a long time since I took anything before lunch, but—maybe a small gin and bitters. Aids digestion, they say, though I don’t put much stock in popular precept, particularly when it has to do with alcohol.”

“It’ll be gin and bitters for you then,” George said, getting up. “I’ll stir up something for myself. You stay and talk to Clarence, Sheila. I’ll break the news to Karl. What’s for lunch, by the way?”

“Baked oysters à la Karl, bless his old heart! And I s’pose you’ve got to bring me the sherry with raw egg!” She made a face and sat down again as George hurried away to the kitchen.

“Do you happen to know, Mrs. Panker,” Higgins asked hesitantly, cracking his dry knuckles with obvious embarrassment, “is my little Inga Nelson—Inga Start, I should say—is she, by any chance—ah—expectant? Pardon my curiosity, won’t you?”

Sheila blinked involuntarily. “Inga? Why—well, I suppose she—what makes you ask, Mr. Higgins?”

“I’ve been a chemist for half a century, Mrs. Panker,” he reminded her.

“Well, I see no reason for your not knowing about it,” Sheila said. “I think she—well, maybe she’s just shy. Maybe she doesn’t want people to feel sorry for her, living in that funny old coach. But she told me she expects a baby in July, a couple of months after mine.”

Clarence Higgins cleared his throat—with a drain-pipe sound, Sheila thought. “I have a sense of guilt about little Inga,” he said after a moment. “I wasn’t quite happy about her marrying, I confess. Oh, I suppose I was glad on her account, and her husband is a very nice fellow. But the prospect of losing her—well, I suppose I shall have to resign myself to that. Her love of books—she has built up that department in the store. I think I shall have a little talk with her this afternoon. Maybe I can work out something that would help them over what is bound to be a difficult period.”

His face lengthened into such disproportionate melancholy that Sheila had to restrain a smile.

“Inga thinks the world of you,” she said. “So does Gooben.”

“You really think so?” the old man asked eagerly. “I have no close relatives of my own—nephews or nieces or the like—but I’ve often thought that if I’d had children—”

George entered at that moment with his tray of drinks, and Clarence Higgins harrumphed once brusquely and was silent.

"This is my prescription, Clarence," George said, and handed the druggist his drink.

Higgins unscissored his long legs and took a sip from the glass. "Not bad, not bad at all, George!" he approved. "I'll be glad to recommend you to the manager of one of the night clubs along the boulevard, if you ever go looking for a job."

"And that may be sooner than you think," said George as he sampled his cocktail.

It was while they were at the table that Clarence gravely informed them of a blessed event toward which he himself was looking. His golden cocker spaniel Zaza, he hoped, would present him with a litter about the end of January. The sire was a blue-ribbon champion, Sunburst Ronny of Wonder-wild.

"Thank God, the community can produce something!" George laughed. "Even if it's only babies and pups."

"Oh, George—may I have one of the puppies?" Sheila cried.

"Well, now—"

"Have they all been spoken for, Mr. Higgins?" Sheila persisted.

"That, my dear, is still in the hands of God," said Mr. Higgins with his temperate smile. "It happens to be Zaza's first adventure of the kind, and she may present me with any number from one to seven. I scarcely hope for a grand slam, but the law of averages gives me ground for believing there will be more than one. However, the unborn are as yet unmortgaged."

"Put us down for one, Clarence," George said. "My old setter died just before the war, and this house hasn't seemed quite right since. We'd want to pay you for it, of course."

Clarence Higgins aimed near-sightedly at a crescent-shaped piece of something in his salad. It turned out to be a slice of grapefruit, as he had divined.

"My purpose in introducing the subject of Zaza's imminent accouchement," he said, "was not to insure the sale of her offspring. Your offer to pay for a puppy embarrasses me. If Mrs. Panker would accept one as a gift—"

Sheila clasped her hands. “Oh, George—a golden cocker!”

Suddenly in the doorway from the kitchen, Karl’s face appeared between the parentheses of his big, outstanding ears.

“Sorry, Meesus Panker,” he said with the punctilio that was the unfailing evidence of something gone wrong. “I have done my best with the dessert, but the cream being what it is these days—” His pause was timed like that of a stage butler.

“Never mind, Karl,” Sheila hastened to mollify him. “We’ll just have coffee in the living room.”

Over the coffee cups, talk turned leisurely upon the weather.

“Too still and mild for January,” Clarence Higgins said, and glanced toward the window. “Looks like a weather-breeder to me. I wouldn’t be surprised if we have a storm before midnight.”

“I love storms,” Sheila said at random—and felt the child stir in its safe depth.

2 Horizon Cloud

Ben Start drove his car into Miles Hopewell’s old barn which he had been using as a garage. He closed the door and looked up at the January sky. The air, the sky, the earth, held a strange softness. It was late afternoon, and a mane of cloudy flame momentarily hid the sun, all the more sinister because of the ambient luster of the upper sky. Then, by the sullen, putty-colored lip low on the western horizon he saw that the day was growing ugly.

On his way home from the garage he glanced into the concrete storehouse next to the pelting shed, where Miles kept the rations for his herd of mink. Miles sat on a box, cursing prodigiously. He had been sawing a chunk off a block of frozen horse-meat, and the saw had slipped and lacerated his knee.

“That doesn’t look so good to me,” Ben said after he had examined the cut.

“Aw, the hell with it!” Miles raged. “Hand me down that bottle of disinfectant on the shelf there. I wouldn’t give a damn about the leg—it’ll

heal—but them pants are practically new, and you can't get good corduroys any more. Can't get nothin'! Here, give it to me, I'll douse it on."

"Okay—and I'll finish sawing the meat. How about feeding the animals?"

"I'll look after 'em. This don't amount to anything. I'll give a holler if I want you. It's not bad havin' a neighbor, at that." Miles voice was gruff as he smeared his knee with the disinfectant.

Ben cut away a slab of the meat and brushed it off lightly with his coat sleeve. "If you told me this was beef, I'd believe it."

"It's a damn sight better than half the stuff they sell you these days. Take a chunk home with you. I eat it when I'm stuck."

"Well," Ben grinned, "it's just the idea of it I suppose. Anyhow, Inga wouldn't touch it if she knew."

"You wouldn't have to tell her." Miles rose to try his knee, flexed it a bit and then said, "She'll do. Come on up to the house with me, and I'll give you some stewed chicken I have left over from last night. It'll be enough for the two of you."

"Thanks—if you'll change your pants and let me take those with me," Ben said. "Inga can fix anything. Why not come up and eat with us?"

Miles limped out of the doorway. "Never liked fowl myself. I got me some bacon and eggs today. Anyhow, there's a couple things to do around here, and the weather looks like it's workin' up to something. Can't tell when it'll come, and I don't want to be caught like I was when that blizzard hit us in '40."

Ben remembered only too well that Armistice Day storm in which Miles lost half his herd through starvation and suffocation under the ten-foot drifts of snow.

When he strode up the hill a few minutes later, the sky was a wild fan of brilliance. The ashy cloud bank in the west was not perceptibly steeper than it had been earlier, and the declining sun raying upward from behind it suffused the zenith with a preternatural glory of lime-green and peacock-blue that was breathtaking.

He paused outside the door and lifted the lid of the mailbox. There were a small book catalogue and a letter—both for Inga. He pushed the Coach door open and stepped inside. When he had set the pot of chicken stew on

the stove he looked again at the letter addressed to "Inga Nelson." As a poet, that was who she'd always be, of course.

"Cripes!" he exclaimed aloud as he saw the postmark and the name of a New York publisher on the envelope.

He hadn't forgotten that Bill Clifford had sent a sheaf of Inga's poems to his editor friend in the east. He had even been looking daily for the letter that would bring the verdict. Now that it had actually come, however, he wanted to hide it, burn it—do anything rather than have Inga know the heartless comments of some editor who didn't give a damn for the delicate feelings with which she infused her verses. On the other hand, there was always the possibility, incredible though it was—he thrust the letter between two books on the shelf. He might have opened it, of course, in order to break the news gently to her. But there had been a few other letters of rejection or acceptance—from magazines—since they had been married, and Inga had always insisted that they be left for her own first perusal.

He changed his clothes to an old pair of tweeds and a pullover sweater, lighted the oil burner and the hanging lamp, and set about preparing the custard Maggie Fraghurst had taught him to make. "She needs nourishing up," Maggie had told him with an owlishly serious look, adding that she ate it several times a week now, herself, meat being so scarce. Maggie, in fact, had taken Inga's pregnancy with stout and generous pride, almost as if she herself were going to have the baby.

While he peeled the potatoes and put them in cold water to soak, Ben winced at the thought of Inga working when she should be conserving her strength for the difficult weeks ahead. If it hadn't been for his mother's bad turn a month before Christmas, he wouldn't have permitted it. But her hospital stay had set him back again, though Inga had taken it all in her brisk little stride. Didn't he know, she had flipped up at him, that a woman felt better if she worked, especially when she was used to it and she didn't overdo? And wasn't child-bearing a perfectly natural function? Well, sure, Ben had thought, but why in heck couldn't the brats be born on trees and plop down into your hands when they were ripe?

He glanced out of the window at the upper sky. Maybe Miles Hopewell was wrong about the weather, after all. Even the web of cloud low in the west seemed to be raveling off to the south.

He sat down to leaf over one of the books Inga had brought home a week ago. They had laid out a formidable program of reading which, if they followed it, would make of them a well-educated couple by the time they

reached their golden wedding anniversary, Ben estimated. There was still an hour left before it would be time to drive to the drug store and fetch Inga home.

It was only a moment, however, before he realized that he was staring at the page without getting any sense from what its author had written. His mind had gone back to something that had occurred that afternoon. He had changed his delivery schedule so that several families in the village with small children might receive their milk earlier in the day. Damn it, it wasn't his fault that the community had recently brought forth a veritable harvest of babies! But Hannah Humphrey seemed to think so. She had taken the change as an insult to her own sense of importance, apparently. She had hurled a bottle of milk above Ben's head to crash on the sidewalk back of him, and had followed that insane gesture with a torrent of coarse invective. There were other dairy companies who would be glad to supply her with milk and cream, and Gooben Start knew what he could do with his bottles!

It wasn't so much the loss of the Humphrey account that annoyed him, though he and Inga had to stretch every nickel now. He might even have explained the change in his schedule, appeased the woman in some way, and talked her into leaving her name on his list. Had it been anyone else, he might have tried, at least. But not with Hannah Humphrey. He had not forgotten the Hallowe'en party in the church basement. More than that, young Bud had not put in an appearance at the Coach Club since that night. The very thought of Hannah Humphrey was enough to make Ben see red. He would get along without her account, he told himself, but he could guess what Inga would say when she heard about this afternoon. Well, perhaps he wouldn't tell her—not for a few days at any rate. It was too damned petty to worry about.

By the time he drove up in the strangely bright dusk to get Inga at the drug store, he was whistling light-heartedly to himself. He grinned when he saw Brother Pinwinder steal up behind a little bonbon of a girl dragging her sled on the sidewalk that was barely covered with snow. The child was wearing a red hood with a white tassel on top of it. Pinwinder capered close to her, snatched off the red hood, stuffed a pamphlet into it, put the hood back on the little girl's head, and footed it off toward his own prim white picket gate, his black satchel swinging at his side. Poor old bird, Ben thought. In his own way, he was probably in earnest about his religious tracts, and they certainly did no harm to anyone who had the patience to read them.

Inga's mood was a puzzling mixture of elation and ruefulness when she got into the car beside him.

"People are so good to us, Gooben!" she said. "It almost makes me want to cry."

"What now?"

"Mr. Higgins talked to me this afternoon. He knew about me being—this way. What do you suppose he said?"

"Probably hoped it would be quintuplets."

"He told me I won't have to come to work before noon after this week, except Saturdays. And he's going to pay me the same weekly salary. He says I've built up the Nook so that it's really mine, and I mustn't think he is being generous in letting me work half time for the same pay. He's going to find another girl in a couple of months and I'm to train her to take over when I have to leave."

"You shouldn't be going to work at all, of course," said Ben. "You should have married a guy with a big house and lots of money."

"I'm glad I didn't. Anyhow, I married you."

"You sure did, small one. And now you're stuck with me."

"But how do you suppose an old bachelor like Mr. Higgins could have guessed? He was so sweet and—sort of clumsy—about telling me. He should have been a husband and a father. Why do you suppose he never was?"

"What do we know about it?" Ben laughed. "He may have been a father, at that."

"I won't have you talk like that about Mr. Higgins! He's a darling! But aren't you glad—about the arrangement, I mean?"

"Why, sure. Of course I'm glad, kid." He thought suddenly of the letter that awaited her at home. That letter might possibly hold more joy for her. Some people were born lucky. Not that Inga had been so darned lucky in one respect. She had married him, hadn't she? Oh, well—the recollection of Hannah Humphrey had abruptly got him down again. "You deserve it, small one," he added as he turned the car in from the avenue. "You deserve all the luck there is and far more!"

"What happened to you today?" Inga asked with a narrow glance at him.

“Me? What chance has a milkman to have things happen to him?” Ben evaded.

“Oh, I’ve heard of things happening to the milkman—or is it always the iceman?”

“Would that make me mad?”

“Then you are mad—about something,” Inga insisted.

“Miles cut his knee with the saw this afternoon, just as I got home.”

“Oh, Gooben! Was it bad?”

“Not very. But he ruined a good pair of pants. I brought them home to see if you could do anything with them. And he gave me a swell pot of chicken stew for our supper.”

“Really? I’ll make dumplings.”

“I’ve got the potatoes peeled.”

“You’re a treasure, darling!” They were walking up together from the garage, and Inga was looking toward the sky in the southwest, her eyes dilated. “I haven’t been out of the store all day. There’s something strange about the weather, isn’t there? I’ve felt it all afternoon. People who came in had a suffocating warmth about them.”

“Miles thinks we’re in for a storm.”

“Maybe we’ll be snowed in by morning. Wouldn’t that be fun? Oh, I forgot to tell you—Adelberta Wilson was in this afternoon. And you should see her! Honestly, I didn’t know her at first. She’s positively beautiful.”

“Adelberta beautiful—with that nose?”

“She hasn’t any. I mean they gave her a brand-new one—the cutest nubbin of a nose, slightly retroussé, and scarcely a scar visible. She’s using a lot of some kind of special makeup for a while, but she says she won’t even have to do that after a few weeks. I asked her to come over some evening soon and have supper with us.”

“Fine. Let’s ask Pete Bellingham, too. That guy ought to have a woman to look after—or to look after him, maybe.”

They were home now, and Ben opened the door and let her go in ahead of him. He had a cowardly feeling of wanting to stave off the moment when he must tell her about the letter. While she hung up her coat and hat behind the screen in the corner of the living room, Ben went to the kitchen to put

the potatoes on. In a moment she was with him, tying an apron about her waist.

"Gee, I'm hungry!" she said, reaching for a mixing bowl in the cupboard. "If I go on eating the way I have been lately, I'll be a regular tub by spring."

Ben went back to the living room and eyed the letter sticking out from between the books. He took his hat and called out to her.

"I think I'll go down and see how Miles' knee is." He went to the door, paused a moment. "By the way, a letter came for you this afternoon. I left it here on the shelf."

As he went out, he knew he wasn't being quite fair to her. But he had been with her on two other occasions when she had had poems returned merely with rejection slips, and he had wished himself anywhere else. He knew she had wished it, too. He would give her time now to get over the first moment of hurt and disappointment before he came back.

He found Miles Hopewell comfortably drinking a cup of strong tea with honey in it. A half empty bottle of Bourbon stood on the table at his elbow.

"Best cure there is," Miles asserted. "This is only my third cup, and look!" He pulled up one leg of his overalls and showed Ben his knee. "She's sewing up clean as a whistle. Shoot an ounce of hooch into her with every cup of tea you drink—and a little better'n an ounce in the tea—and that does it. Not a sting left in her," he said, stretching his leg.

Ben looked closely at the wound. "It looks good. But you'd better wrap it up before you start using it."

"I won't be goin' out again tonight," Miles said. "Chores all done."

"Do you still think we're due for a storm?"

"She's comin' up, sure! But not like '40. How's your stove set for oil?"

"Okay. We got an extra drum delivered the other day, just in case. Well, I'd better get along back. Inga'll have supper ready. See you tomorrow."

Inga came out of the kitchen as he entered the Coach. "Why didn't you tell me about the letter right away?" she demanded. "Why didn't you leave it on the table?"

"The table? Oh—guess I just forgot," Ben said, hanging up his hat. "You didn't ask—"

“But when I didn’t—”

He turned and looked at her, and her eyes were dancing. “Was it good news?” he asked, still doubting.

She ran and threw her arms about him. “Oh, darling, darling! It’s the best news ever! And where do you s’pose you left the letter? Right beside Walter de la Mare’s poems! They’re going to make a book out of what Bill Clifford sent them. How can I ever thank him? Here, read it yourself.”

She snatched the letter from her apron pocket and he read it quickly. It was true—they were going to bring out a small volume in the early summer and would like to see anything else she might have written during the past few weeks. He could scarcely believe his eyes.

“Well, for God’s sake!” he exploded. “What do you know about that!”

“Oh, you precious fool!” Inga exclaimed. “You know—and I know—why you didn’t give me the letter when we got home. You were afraid, weren’t you? Who’s the sentimental one around here, I’d like to know?”

He grinned sheepishly down at her and took her in his arms. “All right, damn it, I’m a sentimental ass. I expect I always will be where you’re concerned.”

“Don’t ever change, darling!”

They could talk about nothing but the book after that, taking imaginary flights with Inga already an established and successful author, coming back to earth again as they reminded each other that a slight volume of verses was scarcely enough to justify any such wild dreams of the future.

“It doesn’t hurt to talk about it anyhow, kid,” Ben said finally, as they got up from the table. “Shucks, I’ve eaten too much again, thank God!”

“Vulgar! And your wife the poet laureate of Wahwahnissa Creek! Let’s get the dishes done.”

It was almost nine before they had the dishes washed and Inga sat down to mend Miles Hopewell’s trousers.

“Do you want me to read to you?” Ben asked. “We can’t afford to neglect our education, you know.”

“I couldn’t listen tonight. I’m too excited. If you hadn’t brought these pants home, we’d get the car out and go somewhere.”

“For instance?”

“Anywhere—the Pankers’, the Trales’, the Flaggs’. Everywhere.”

“Let’s go then. Miles won’t need—”

“No, that’s silly. I’m not half as excited as I was an hour ago. I think I’m beginning to feel the let-down already. I’ll just go on with this, and you can talk.”

“About what?”

Inga’s hands dropped to her lap. “Gooben Start, what’s the matter with you tonight?”

“I didn’t know there was anything the matter,” he retorted, and switched on their portable radio.

“There is—and don’t turn on that radio until you’ve told me. That’s a hideous program, anyhow. I don’t know how you can stand it!”

He turned it off and sat down on the couch. There was no sense in trying to hide anything from her. He couldn’t. He should have told her about Hannah Humphrey while they were eating supper, and had it over with. Instead, he had done his best to put it out of mind and let her enjoy her little hour of triumph without his casting any shadow over it. But, somehow, perhaps because she had had two happy things occur to her today, his own piffling little disappointment had grown out of all proportion to its importance in his thoughts. Now he plunged almost irritably into the story.

When he had finished, Inga sat for a long time, plying her needle silently, not even looking up to let him know that she had heard.

“Well, what’s the matter with *you* now?” he asked her finally.

She set her work aside and got up from her chair. “It makes me furious. You shouldn’t have to put up with people like Hannah Humphrey. You shouldn’t—”

“I shouldn’t be a milkman, I suppose,” he interrupted coldly.

“I didn’t say that. But maybe you’re right. Having a fool of a woman like that throwing milk bottles at your head—”

“I was a milkman before I married you,” he reminded her.

“You’ve been one for fifteen years. And in all that time you haven’t moved one step up from peddling bottles from door to door before people were out of bed.”

He looked at her thoughtfully. “You’re not getting shrewish by any chance, are you?” he asked, his tone more ill-natured than he had meant it to be.

“Shrewish? Because I resent your being treated as if you were the ragpicker or the town scavenger?”

“I see,” said Ben, and got up from the couch.

It was all a part of the evening’s nervous excitement, he knew. Her pride had been wounded. Since Hannah Humphrey was not on hand to be dealt with as she deserved, he had to take the brunt of Inga’s humiliation on his behalf. She was right, of course. What did he have to show, after all, for his fifteen years of work? He had asked himself that question a thousand times. Had he been too easily satisfied, too ready to make alibis for himself because of his mother? Had he lacked ambition? Would he ever be anything more than he was this minute? Or would he go on, becoming more and more set in his ways, warping Inga’s life down into the shape of his own, leaving no place for dignity or pride? And what would Inga’s children think of having a milkman for a father? With an upsurge of anger against himself more than against anyone else, he jerked his hat from its place and strode out of the door.

On the bank of the frozen creek, he paused in his walking to look at the sky. It was snowing now. Not softly, but in bitter little granules like salt. He wondered how many degrees the temperature had dropped in the past few hours. And a wind was knifing through the bare trees along the creek with a sound like a menacing blade cutting through frozen space.

When he went back into the Coach, he found Inga already in bed. He stepped softly to the side of the couch and leaned over her. Was she pretending to be asleep? He could see no gentle rise and fall of her breast. The bleak loneliness of the outer night seemed to rush in upon him. This was how he would feel if she were dead. He set his jaw stubbornly and moved away from the couch.

There came a small, muffled sound from Inga’s pillow. He looked down and saw her rosy palm curved upward and stealing out from beneath the bedclothes. His throat grew tight and full, but he smiled as he reached over to a fruit dish on the table, took from it a polished red apple and laid it in her hand.

3 Storm

After shepherding another Literary Round Table across the ether, Bill Clifford went directly to visit his old friend Hippocrates of Ye Olde English Tavern. There were few in the bar when he stepped in out of the biting wind that swept the street. Most of the habitués of the place were still at their offices but would start coming in during the next half hour.

"Hail, Hippocrates!" Bill greeted his smiling host as he breasted the bar. "Hail—and possibly farewell!"

The Greek hitched his white apron up across his paunch. "Whot ees thees, Beel—hail and farewell. And whot ees thees Hippocrates, eh?"

"The hail and farewell, my honest friend, you will hear about later. The Hippocrates should warn you that I am in a dignified mood—dignified and dangerous."

"I don't get you, Beel. So you are dignify—so I don't like thees Hippocrates. Call me Joe. I like it better. How's treeks?"

"Never better, Joe," said Bill as he hooked his foot over the brass rail. "Before this time tomorrow night, I'll be looking for another job. I'll be fired."

"No!" Joe grasped a bottle of Bill's favorite Bourbon indignantly by the neck.

"That's what I said," Bill assured him, and tossed his drink off neat.

For a second he thought the liquor would come back on a wrenching cough from deep within his chest, but Joe handed him a glass of water. Tears rolled hot down Bill's flushed cheeks.

"You got a bad cold, Beel," Joe remarked with concern.

"Seems as if. Give me a couple of aspirins and soda with the next one, Joe. I'll sip it." Bill laid his hand across his forehead. Must have a fever, he decided.

Joe set up another drink with a glass of soda water and a couple of aspirins beside it. "So whot happen?" he asked as he ran a cloth over the polished surface of the bar. "I fingered you stay on that job for good, Beel."

“I had it figured different.” Bill wasn’t sure the aspirin had gone all the way down, his chest felt so thick. “I knew it would happen sooner or later. You never heard of a Spoonerism, of course?”

“A— Whot ees thees?”

“Skip it, Joe. Maybe you know what a fluff is.”

“Sure, I hear that one. So you make a floof, eh?”

“And how, Joe! Boy, I really turned one in tonight. I had an old dame from the university set giving a talk on Dickens.”

“The Deeckens! The hell you say!” Joe joked sympathetically.

“Yeah. She was going to give a talk on *A Tale of Two Cities*. That’s a novel, Joe. Only—when I announced her subject—I got it slightly twisted.”

“Sounds interest,” Joe observed affably. “Whot’s eet abot?”

“You don’t really give a damn, Joe, and neither do I.” Bill couldn’t tell whether he felt warmer inside now, or just hotter outside. “The point is, I got the title twisted,” he explained patiently. “Instead of calling it *A Tale of Two Cities*, I called it *A Sale of—*” He was suddenly tired. “Oh, figure it out for yourself.”

A smile of comprehension dawned upon Joe’s face. “I get eet!”

“Anyhow, tomorrow I’ll be out on my ear,” Bill said.

Joe shook his head in condolence. “No gretitude! When yours was a better tittle than the other one!”

Bill checked his laughter. He didn’t want to start coughing again. The door had opened and a cold blast struck across the small of his back. “Look, Joe, give me another shot and I’ll take it over and sit down. Slap me up a ham sandwich and a glass of buttermilk, if you’ve got it.”

“Sure, sure, Beel. You go seet down. And don’t worry, Beel. You get a better job, queeck!”

Not a worse job, anyhow, Bill said to himself as he crouched down in a dim corner booth. He had had a talk with George Panker and George had promised to keep him in mind when the factory went to work again. Something might come of it. He hoped so. Perhaps in the assembling of tufts and ticking and coiled springs so that human beings might spend a third of their time in oblivion, preparing themselves for the last oblivion of all—perhaps in that mindless task there was some clumsy hope of his becoming

what the experts called rehabilitated, readjusted. More words! Sure, he needed readjusting! He didn't have to have any damned expert tell him that. The whole cock-eyed world needed readjusting. He knew, at least, what was wrong with him. Did the rest of the world know what was wrong with it? Did Molly know what was wrong with her? Or Herman Shatts, that swastika-kissing hyphenated oaf—would he even admit it if he were told?

Well, there had been a readjustment there, all right. Molly was scarcely ever at home, and Herman had kept his doors locked against him ever since that Hallowe'en fracas. It was young Frederick who had enlightened Bill about that arrangement. He had stolen down to the basement apartment one night when his parents and Molly were away, and confessed that he had been forbidden to come down and that Bill had been forbidden to come up. Herman locked the doors now when he went out of an evening and left the boy and his mother alone in the house. The fool! As if Bill could have said anything that would justify his being looked upon as if he were a common thief. Well, maybe he had told Herman off that night. He couldn't remember.

He couldn't remember much of anything these days except the grab-bag assortment of emotional curios he had snatched out of the war. After that burial night in the rain last fall he should have gone to see Josie, but his recollection of Della Prince had been there to repel him. He shouldn't have let that stand in the way, however. Molly had seen Josie hanging about the Shatts place after dark. Or so she had declared. In fact, he could have sworn he had seen her himself one evening when he was alone reading in the basement apartment. He had heard something and had looked up from his book and seen her face peering in through the window flush with the ceiling. It may have been only part of his own erratic imagination, of course, but the image had remained with him for days. The thought that she might be falling in love with him was appalling. And yet—

Joe brought him the ham sandwich and the glass of buttermilk, and a hot drink with lemon and ginger in it.

Bill looked at the sandwich and pushed it away. "I don't feel hungry. Yeah, I know I ordered it, but—"

"You eat, Beel!" Joe commanded. "Take that hot drink on the top. Then go home queeck to bed. You got your car?"

"No, my wife has it tonight. Thanks, Joe." He laid a bill on the table. "Take it out of that."

"You keep the money, Beel. Thees ees on Joe's house, and to hell with radio! How you like to come here and work, Beel? Here you talk the Deekens how you like—hah!—feefty a week and eats!"

Bill chewed obediently at the sandwich and took a gulp of buttermilk. "Tastes good, at that, Joe," he said, not tasting it at all. His tongue was like hot sandpaper. "And thanks for your offer. I'll think it over." He opened the sandwich and looked at the slice of ham. "Ever read a book called *Candide*, Joe?"

"No, Beel. Me, I read the papers. Ees enough for me."

"They had rump steak in *Candide*."

"Yeah? Kind of tough, eh?"

"I wouldn't know. I wasn't there. It was during a campaign and the legions were starving. So they—skip it!" He took another bite of the sandwich. "This will hold me over till morning. There's never anything to eat at home. My wife's too busy to cook."

Joe patted him on the shoulder. "You want another sandwich, you call me over. Then you take a taxi home. This storm, she looks like a funny beesiness coming up."

It was, indeed, a funny business, as Joe had warned him, Bill decided as he stepped into the street a little later. A dense snow was driving almost horizontally from the west—loaded with buckshot, it seemed, as the shock of icy air drove against the fires that were raging within himself. He glanced down at his bare hands, then drew on his cold pigskin gloves—Molly's last birthday gift to him before he went into the service—and stepped to the curb to hail a taxicab. It sailed by with the tiara-ed arrogance peculiar to taxicabs possessed of fares, especially on a stormy night.

A "No Parking—Taxi Stand" sign a block away proved, after ten frigid minutes, a false promise. He might have telephoned for a cab while he was in Joe's place, but even then he might have had to wait an hour before he could start for home, and in the meantime he would have taken more to drink than he wanted. Well, it was three blocks to the bus terminal. He could walk that far and be sure of transportation.

"Manfully breast the gale, my lad!" he said aloud, hunching down into his coat collar. "Didn't Eliza cross the Delaware?"

No, that was Washington, the father of our country, of course. Well, Eliza could have done it—with luck she might even have been the mother of

our country.

Just ahead of him, a stately matron clad in furs stepped across the sidewalk to her car, a liveried chauffeur holding the door open for her. If he had had the gumption of an angleworm, he thought, he'd show her his service button and ask to be driven his six miles home. As it was, he fought his way down the wind-whipped street and came at last to the bus station. Half an hour later, he stepped down and stood watching the bus hurtle off along Sunway Boulevard like a disappearing ghost. Three long blocks were left for him to walk through a wildly tossed and bitter chiaroscuro of black and white.

Although there were no lights visible in it, he could not fail to recognize his brother-in-law's house when he came to it at last, because it stood on the corner of Pine and Jason, and the street light illumined its square, bold, plumberlike whiteness. Were Herman and his family already in bed? It couldn't be much later than ten-thirty. Then he caught a faint glimmer from the window in the attic room—Frederick's room. Before he started down to his own foxhole, he groped his way back to the garage and opened the door. Herman's car was not there. Neither was his own—but he hadn't expected to see that, since Molly had it.

The wind sucked the breath from his lungs so that he had to labor back along the driveway to the basement stairs. The snow had drifted down into the entrance; he was forced to make it almost crabwise to the bottom of the steps where his own door stood unlocked. He went in, turned on the light, and stood for a moment leaning against the door while he recovered his breath. God, what a night for Molly to be out in! Yet, why was he feeling sorry for her?—maybe she wasn't out in it, after all. Maybe she was tucked away cosily in somebody's apartment with a half dozen of her crowd, laughing and chattering above the rising howl of the storm. He laughed hoarsely, sat down in a chair beside the hot-air register, and took off his shoes.

It was while he sat looking at his shoes and thinking they had more real dignity than he had himself, that there came to him from three floors above—almost flutelike through the strident olio of sounds created by the wind—the tentative venturing of Frederick's violin. Bill sank back in his chair, his fevered senses throbbing and alert as the boy went boldly into a Mozart Concerto he had been working on for weeks. *You've got nerve, my little lost friend*, Bill smiled drearily to himself. Even his teacher, according to one of Molly's rare comments on her nephew's progress, had been astounded at his fearlessness in attempting a study so advanced. The music flowed into Bill's

consciousness with a kind of hypnotic grace, so that he presently closed his eyes, no longer aware of the wind and snow pummeling at the foundations of the house. If Frederick Shatts made an error here and there, Bill did not know. To him it was more than music. It was a prism of sound, the refracted colors of heartbreak.

Then, abruptly, the music stopped, and Bill was conscious of nothing but the outer industry of the storm. He glanced at his watch. It was eleven o'clock.

It might be a good idea to take another hot drink and some codeine and go to bed. But he didn't seem to have enough energy to prepare a hot drink. He swallowed two codeine tablets with cold water and wondered that water could taste so parched. If there had been a telephone in the apartment, or if Herman's telephone had not been behind locked doors, he might have called a doctor, though he'd probably have to wait for hours before anyone would come to see him on a night like this. Well, he'd wait until morning and see. "Everything comes to him who waits," he said aloud as he fumbled into his pajamas.

Molly had not made up his couch. It was cold and lumpy, and one blanket snarled about his legs. He jerked it up to his chin, and his mother's patchwork quilt fell to the floor. He looked down at it, counting the squares and triangles, grouping them into larger and larger units until his senses balked at the task and the whole design wavered and became a meaningless flowing together of colors that left him dizzy. He closed his eyes against it, then realized he had forgotten to turn off the light. Herman, who paid the electric bill, didn't like unnecessary lights burning. The hell with Herman! But because he had no human dignity left, he stumbled up and turned off the light.

Back on the couch again, he reached down and drew the patchwork quilt over him. He thought with brief tenderness of his mother, who, as he had told Colin Trale, had been mercifully spared any anxiety about her two sons, death taking her suddenly just before the United States got into the war. He thought with his brief, recurring wrath of the waste of the life of his loved younger brother, Clement, who had been blown to a posthumous reward with his bomber over Germany. He thought of his sister Laurette, comfortably married to a man with a flourishing cold storage business in North Dakota. A certain American dream of carrying the family name down from one generation to another would die with Bill's passing, for he looked forward to no progeny of his own. Too bad, in a way. The Clifford stock was

nothing to be ashamed of. . . . His mind began to wander into lanes leafy and bright with disconnected images of the past.

There was an afternoon in summer. It was a summer field, and he was stroking Molly's slim ankle while crickets rubbed their files tirelessly in the hot, brittle grass. Or maybe they had been grasshoppers. Anyhow, it was a hot, happy, sunny sound, and he had kissed Molly for the first time. He had kissed himself into wedlock. She had been roundly slender then, but now she bulged from the thighs up.

The cloudy wandering of his mind had not been sleep. He knew that when he sat upright at the smell of smoke. From that instant on, his thinking was lucid, his actions almost instinctive. His hand jerked out to the lamp beside him. He sprang out of bed, thrust his feet into his slippers and ran across the room to the coat rack. His arms shook down into the sleeves of his overcoat as his hat rolled on the floor. He snatched his flashlight from the shelf and thrust it into his overcoat pocket.

Less than a minute's search revealed where the smoke was coming from —a crack in the flimsy plaster of the bathroom, near the ceiling. Directly above, he knew, was the Shatts' living room, and the ornately painted field-stone fireplace that was Herman's pride.

Bill kicked off his bedroom slippers as he ran from the bathroom, found his shoes and slid his bare feet into them. It was while he was knotting his shoe-strings with shaking hands that the light went out. He dug into his pocket for his flashlight, snapped it on, and laid it on the floor at his feet. It rolled maddeningly away from him, and he tried twice to pick it up before he had hold of it. Even then its white circle seemed to recede from him like a round pale face in a nightmare.

The snow had drifted down the basement stairway so that it was all he could do to force the door open against it. He clambered up the steps almost on hands and knees. When he reached the top step the snow struck him in the face like a wind-whipped icy sheet. There was a blow-torch at work in his lungs, he thought, and turned to look at Herman's white house. A red neon flicker appeared from within those tightly sealed window panes. Glancing up, he saw the tape of red-white pulled rapidly along under the upper eaves by the wind.

Bill lurched up the steps of the back porch, threw the door open, and hurled all his weight against the locked kitchen door. He pounded on it and screamed with all the strength of his inflamed lungs. The boy was up there —in his attic room! Bill swept his flashlight about the porch in search of

something heavy enough to crash the door. But Freda was a neat housekeeper who had a place for everything—and kept everything in its place. With a last frantic lunge, Bill Clifford threw himself against the door. For a blinding instant it seemed as if the door had shattered and a splinter of wood had pierced his chest. He reeled backward from the pain and turned the ray of his flashlight upon the door. It was still intact. There was a window to the kitchen, and he knotted a fist to break it when some cool sense out of his fever warned him not to let the wind sweep in there.

He scrambled out of the porch, down the steps into the stinging blasts of snow again, and around to the front of the house, on the chance that Herman might have left that door unlocked. If he could get through it and close it behind him, he might still make his way up to the attic room. But the door might as well have been set in cement.

He backed down to the street and stood for a brief second looking around him. Damn it, wasn't there a light showing anywhere? He started running along the street, peering from right to left. No sense, he reasoned, in knocking or ringing a doorbell where people were asleep—it would take too long to rouse them. At the first corner, half a block away on Cherry Street, he saw a light in Nigel Prince's window. As he sprang toward the door, his left leg buckled under him in a smoothly drifted hollow at the edge of the cement walk.

Dragging himself to his feet again, he limped up the steps and beat his fists against the door. Almost immediately there was a familiar figure standing against the inner light, and a familiar voice calling him by name.

"Bill, Bill!"

"The house!" he gasped. "Herman Shatts' house—get the fire department!"

Josie was instantly a swift blur, vanishing away from him as he sank down in the doorway.

4 Refuge

Across Pete Bellingham's shoulder, Adelberta Wilson smiled at herself as they waltzed past the mirror paneling that ran the length of the Rendezvous Night Club. It was the same roadhouse where, last Hallowe'en

with Ricky Ross, she had avoided her reflection in that cruel and endless expanse of glass. But now and always she would cherish every nook and cranny of that roadhouse in her heart of hearts, for it was the place where the dull stream of her life had turned into the way of beauty.

Adelberta had never really learned to dance, but with Pete it was as natural as walking. In the little more than a week since Christmas Eve they had been out together three times, and the rhythmic motion of Pete's body, as he guided her in his arms, had already begun to pervade her dreams.

"What's on your mind, Berty?" Pete asked, drawing away a little and looking down at her as they danced.

She laughed. "Must a girl always have something on her mind?"

"You haven't said a word since we started this waltz."

Adelberta smiled up at his thin, homely face beneath its wiry twist of hair, and was glad he wasn't handsome, like Ricky Ross. Not that she could ever have fallen in love with Ricky, but a girl doesn't have to fall in love to make a fool of herself. Especially when she craves love in any guise.

The music stopped, and Pete led her through the crowd to their table in a rosily lighted corner booth. When they were seated, he leaned toward her.

"So you won't talk, eh?"

"Yes, I'll talk, Pete," she said seriously. "And I'll tell you what I was thinking."

"I was only kidding you about that," he said quickly.

"I'm not. I was thinking about Ricky Ross."

Pete grinned boyishly. "I knew it!"

"I was thinking how much I have to thank him for," Adelberta went on. "If it hadn't been for Ricky, I wouldn't have been in that accident. And if it hadn't been for the accident, I wouldn't have been in the hospital and you wouldn't have come to see me the next day."

"You make it all sound very logical," Pete said. "Of course, you're leaving out the one thing that's really in your mind."

"Well—what?"

"You're thinking that—because of all that—tonight you're the most beautiful girl in the crowd."

"That's not quite true. But I'm happy because you say so."

He reached over and touched her hand. "What you don't realize—or won't—is that I'd have felt the same toward you tonight, accident or no accident. Why do you suppose I left the Pankers' that night as soon as I heard about it, and hurried home to call the hospital? Why do you suppose I went to the hospital the next day and stayed with you as long as they'd let me? You were certainly no beauty that day, with your face all done up in bandages. If I hadn't been so damn clumsy, I'd have told you then that—"

"Oh, Pete, if you only knew how glad I am that you're clumsy—and homely—and—just everything I want you to be!"

Not quite, Pete thought to himself. Certainly not everything he himself wanted to be. He had always been a coward, for one thing, even though he had done his best to hide the craven in him, even from his own family, who persisted in looking upon him as a hero. Hero with the Purple Heart! He had been a coward from the moment of his induction to the moment when he had seen his right arm hurtling away from him, the grenade still clutched in its fingers—unless he had just imagined that part of it. Sometimes, in the recurrent nightmare of that moment, he wished he had died in North Africa, or later in the hell that was Salerno. He should not have lived to be twenty-seven. He should have died and rotted over there in the clean and pitiless sun on that slope to the sky, along with his arm. It was true what they said about a missing arm itching. His itched in his sleep—itched to throw a hand grenade.

Well, he would get over that, he supposed. It would take time, of course. But time would never give him back the good arm he had lost. He looked down now with a sort of aloof humor at the steel hook protruding from his coat sleeve. Nothing but sheer perversity on his part had made him refuse to consider the clammy artificial hand his mother had gaily suggested in its place.

A few months ago, when he had walked from the corner with Adelberta, he had exhibited the contraption with an air of bravado, or so he had thought at the time. He wasn't so sure of it now. Even then, he suspected, he was thinking that his own physical defect struck a kind of balance between himself and Adelberta with what she deemed her own sad disfigurement. He had been a little in love with her that day, and for all the days thereafter. He had not known the full meaning of it, perhaps, until the news of her accident came to him that night in George Pankers' living room.

"What you don't seem to understand, Berty," he said finally, "I—well, what was wrong with me seemed a lot worse than what you thought was wrong with *you*. All my life, I'll be lugging around a damned—"

"Pete! I won't listen to you when you talk like that. You should be ashamed of yourself. At least, you'll never know what it's like to feel humiliated every time you—"

"And I won't let you talk like that!" Pete broke in.

Her dark eyes held his. "Let me—just this once. It's the one thing I've got to get out of my mind. If I tell you about it—" she hesitated.

"Go ahead."

"That night I came out here with Ricky Ross—I've never told you that it was his idea—and his fraternity's—of a practical joke. All the other girls on the party were beautiful. When one of Ricky's fraternity brothers dated the girl Ricky wanted to take, he threatened to take me and—well, ruin the picture, I suppose. They dared him to ask me, and he took them up on it. That's how I happened to be invited."

Pete Bellingham's lips drew to a thin, hard line. "How did you find that out?"

"Very simply. The girl Ricky hoped to date told me, naturally. He put on a show of making violent love to me—for her benefit—and a few minutes later she followed me to the powder room. I thought she was just being spiteful at first, but it didn't take much to convince me. It fitted in with a lot of things that had been going on all evening."

"The dirty louse!" Pete exclaimed. "What did you tell him when you went back to the table?"

"Nothing. Being laughed at wasn't exactly a new experience for me. I just asked him to take me home at once. I think he guessed the truth—because of the way the other girl looked at him—and I believe he felt sorry. Anyhow, he and I left the party and started for home. That's why the accident occurred so early—before eleven."

"And that's why we're both here tonight—and together!" Pete said. He reflected on what Adelberta had told him during her weeks in the hospital—that the Ross car insurance had more than covered all the expense. Well, the practical joke might have cost Ricky a good deal more than that! Pete lifted his empty glass from the table. "We're going to have another drink, Berty—

and this one will be to Ricky Ross and his damned fraternity and lucky accidents—and us!"

He beckoned to the waiter, who came up with a nervous flourish of his tray.

"I'm sorry, sir, but if you want to order something, you'd better do it quick, if you've got far to go. It's snowing and blowing out something fierce!"

"Oh," Adelberta said, "we'd better go then, Pete."

"After this one. And make it snappy!" he told the waiter.

"Now you know what I meant when I said you'd never feel humiliated because of your—" Adelberta began, but Pete interrupted her, his eyes alight.

"Right now I'm the proudest guy living!" he said.

"And I'm the happiest gal!"

Their laughter met as they leaned across the table. But it wasn't the place for a first kiss.

The waiter was beside them again, placing their drinks before them.

"We'll toss these down and shove off," Pete said, and handed the waiter a bill.

"I don't want to hurry you," the waiter apologized, "but it looks like one of them winter twisters. It's really bad out, sir, and if you and the young lady don't want to be stuck somewhere—"

"We're on our way," said Pete, and waved the waiter aside with his change. "To you and me, Berty! If we ever get snowed in, may it be together!"

Outside, they found that the waiter had not underestimated the authority of the storm. In the garish light of the tavern's neon sign, a troop of white whirling dervishes spun and flew out into the impenetrable blackness of the highway that led to the city. Two or three cars were already having difficulty working themselves free of the drifted snow.

They got into Pete's car and closed the doors securely against the storm. Pete started the motor and gave it a minute to warm up before backing out of the parking space.

While they sat listening to the wind and the comforting purr of the engine, Adelberta laid a gloved hand on the steering wheel beside Pete's.

"There's just one thing I'd like you to tell me before we start out," she said.

He turned and looked at her in the dim light reflected from the instrument panel. "Well?"

"Tell me I'm beautiful."

"I've told you that a dozen times already."

"Tell me again."

Pete lifted his maimed arm and put it about her shoulders. "You're beautiful, and I'm crazy about you—if that matters!"

She laughed up at him. "Crazy?"

"In love."

"Oh, Pete!"

She lifted her face close to his. They clung to each other then, not so much with a sense of the newly discovered as with a feeling that they had both found something that had been awaiting their coming for a long, long time.

Pete had parked his car to the leeward of the roadhouse, so that in a few minutes he had it out upon the highway and heading for Wahwahnissa Creek, fifteen miles away. Adelberta sat close to the window, peering dubiously out.

"It looks like a fight in a chicken coop full of leghorns," she said.

"Hope you're not worried, Berty. I had a hunch something was coming up. I should have taken you home before it worked up to this. You're not nervous, are you?"

"I'm not nervous, darling. We could walk home if we had to."

"Like hell, we could!" He leaned forward to frown at the gauges on the instrument board. "We've got plenty of gas, anyhow."

"If we ever get snowed in, may it be together!" Adelberta reminded him, her laugh a rich velvet of sound, Pete thought. "*You're* not nervous, are you?"

“I’m not the nervous type,” he assured her as they came upon a stretch of highway where an open field seemed to have dumped its full burden of snow. “We’ll have to take it in second here,” he muttered, and the car labored fretfully on.

But soon he brought it to a stop. The windshield wipers had given up, frozen against the glass. Adelberta offered to get out and scrape them free, but Pete opened his door and stepped from the car.

“Look out for cars coming from behind,” she warned him.

In a few minutes he was back at the wheel, breathing hard and swearing cheerfully to hide his concern from Adelberta.

“This old hook of mine is better than a hand in ten below,” he observed as the car struggled forward again.

In half an hour they had progressed little more than five miles. They had passed cars canted hopelessly off the shoulders of the highway or meshed to the hubs in snowdrifts. Nimbus-like ahead of them there appeared a cluster of lights.

“This must be the metropolis of Hansford,” said Pete.

“Pete,” Adelberta said casually.

“Yeah?”

“We aren’t going to make it. Home, I mean.”

“We’ll make it. You don’t want to park on the side of the road for the night and freeze to death?”

“No. But there’s a funny old hotel here in Hansford, smack beside the road. Ricky Ross went in there to get some cigarettes that night on our way home. He was gone so long that I had a good look at the place. It has a gingerbread trim and it looks haunted, but it would be shelter, at least.”

“That’s right—the old Lester House,” Pete said. “I remember it from away back. Well, I don’t know—we might give it the once over. Sitting up all night in a chair isn’t so good, but I’ve fared worse. It’s some better than squatting all night in a foxhole with the rain pouring down.”

“Pete?”

“Yeah?”

“We’re not going on tonight, no matter what. The storm is getting worse.”

A half dozen cars were parked in front of the old hotel. “I’m afraid we’re out of luck,” Pete said, “but I’ll go in and see what they have left, if you like.”

“Tell them they’ve got to put us up. If they haven’t anything but a cot—”

“Okay. I’ll only be a minute.”

Adelberta drew her coat snugly about her knees and waited. She had often wondered how love would come to her—if, indeed, it ever came. Strangely enough, in her girlhood dreams-before-sleep she had pictured wild storms enveloping herself and some hypothetical lover—a movie actor, a high-school teacher, a neighborhood boy who whistled indifferently as he passed her on the street—and sometimes an ideal combination of all three of these. But in full waking daylight, she had never believed in such rapture coming to her, Adelberta Wilson. Suddenly, all her doubts vanished. She knew no fear, no shame. Fate, that had so long been cruel, was kind at last. A sweet and wholesome destiny had come to take its place.

Pete opened the door beside her. “They have two rooms left, Berty—a double and a single.”

She didn’t hesitate. “Let us be together, Pete.”

He looked at her blankly, then away, then down at his right sleeve, and again fixed his eyes on her face. “Is that the way you want it?”

“How else?”

He opened the door wide and took her arm. “Go on in. I’ll park the car and phone our families to let them know we’re all right. I’ll say we’ve put up safely till tomorrow.”

He maneuvered the car to the sheltered side of the old hotel where he was astonished to find a clear space for it. When he entered the lobby he looked about him, but Adelberta was not in sight.

“Your wife registered and went up,” the young man at the desk told him, his sympathetic eyes on Pete’s right coat sleeve. “She wanted me to remind you about calling your folks in town.”

“Yes, of course,” Pete said and glanced down at the old-fashioned register where Adelberta had written—Mr. and Mrs. Peter Bellingham. She had taken care of that, then, knowing that he still had difficulty using a pen with his left hand.

"And if you don't mind, sir," the clerk said, "we'd like to have you pay in advance. It's a house rule—guests without luggage, you know. You have room 203—two flights up."

Pete took his wallet from his pocket. "We didn't plan on spending the night away from home," he said, and wondered whether his embarrassment was evident to the young man behind the desk.

"Naturally. But you're not the only ones, sir. It's a brute of a night!"

"Sure is. Where's the telephone?"

"The booth is right over there, near the stairs."

It took only a minute to reach his father and explain that he had decided not to risk driving home through the storm, and would spend the night in Hansford. But when he got through to the Wilsons, it required fully three minutes to assure Grandaunt Sophia that Adelberta was safely housed for the night and would be home in the morning if the roads were passable.

When he left the telephone booth, he sat down in a creaking leather chair that had an ancient cuspidor beside it, and lit a cigarette. The moment's embarrassment he had felt in the presence of the young night clerk had passed, but something deeper, something more searching, had taken its place. There had been nights in the army when he had gone out with three or four of his buddies to "do the town." He had taken drink for drink with them, had fisted his way through street brawls, had stood up to military police and had done his share of K.P. with the rest of them. But he had never been able to overcome his fear of women who accosted uniforms in saloons and on dimly lighted side streets. It had not been a question of morals. He had given little thought to whether it was right or wrong. It was simply that he found it impossible to think of such women without revulsion.

There wasn't the remotest resemblance between that sort of thing and this, he told himself. The girl who was waiting for him now in a room above was not a creature of purchase, to be cast aside when he had no more use for her. She was in love with him, as naturally, as simply, as he was with her. Well, he would place the gift of his own love beside hers. There would be no compromise. He ground his cigarette into the ashtray beside his chair and got up. The hotel had only two floors of rooms for guests. He went up the stairway.

When he entered the room he found Adelberta already in bed, the covers drawn close under her chin. He locked the door and tossed his hat into a chair. A single light, with a fluted shade of orange hue, hung from a cord in

the center of the ceiling. The little room was clean and warm, its space crowded by a brass-framed bed, a washstand and two chairs, a bureau and a walnut wardrobe. There were clean towels and a small bar of soap still in its paper wrapper.

Pete took off his coat and hung it in the wardrobe, then walked over to the bureau where a Gideon Bible lay unneighbored by any other object except a chipped glass ash tray. He turned to find Adelberta smiling at him from her pillow. She had not spoken.

"I phoned the folks," he told her.

"Yes." Even on the one word, her voice trembled.

He went over and sat down on the side of the bed. "Do you want to marry me, Adelberta?" Beneath the indifferently colored cusp of his hair his eyes were darkly intent.

She lay very still, her cheeks paling as she looked up at him. "Only if you want to marry me. I don't want you to think that because of this—"

"This has nothing to do with it," Pete said. "I want to marry you—just as soon as you'll let me."

She saw his lean cheekbones spring into curious mottled color. "Can you wait until I graduate?" she asked.

Without answering, he got up from the bed and stepped across the room to the bureau. When he came back, he had the Gideon Bible in his hands. He held it toward her. "Put your hand on this, with mine."

She drew her arm from beneath the bedclothes and laid her hand on the rusty and scuffed cover of the old Bible so that her fingertips were touching his. When she looked at him, his eyes were blinking fast. She had never before seen tears in a man's eyes, and it was more than she could bear. She sat up, the covers falling away from her shoulders, and threw her arms about him. She sobbed with her face pressed close against his breast. In a moment she felt his hand ruffling her hair.

"God, we're a gay couple!" he laughed huskily. "Here's my handkerchief. Blow your nose and kiss me."

He pressed her gently back upon her pillow and their lips met solemnly.

5 Calm

The storm had passed. For five days now the sun had been shining in a cloudless sky.

Colin Trale nodded to the nurse at the desk and started down the long white corridor. Why had black become the symbol of death? He had asked himself the same question scores of times—every time he came into a hospital, in fact. Death was white—white walls enclosing a white bed, white silences out of which starched white nurses appeared with little white trays and told little white lies—"*We're coming along nicely, Mrs. Jones. A good night's sleep now, and you'll wake up feeling fine.*" The fantastic fabric of living! White angels looking down upon a sick humanity—"*Everything is going nicely, Mr. World. Just close your eyes now—*"

He paused before an open doorway across which a white screen had been placed out of respect for privacy. He stepped softly and thrust his head past the edge of the screen. Bill Clifford was lying on his back, staring at the ceiling.

"Hello, there!" Colin greeted him, and moved into the room.

Bill turned his head. "Oh, hello! Nice to see you, sir. Take off your coat and sit down, if you're not in a hurry."

Colin laid his coat over a chair. "I'm never in a hurry on Mondays. It's my day for loafing."

"You picked a nice afternoon for it," Bill said, and glanced toward the window.

"Not bad. Looks as if we're in for our January thaw. How are you feeling?"

Bill shrugged a shoulder. "Pretty good today. Doc Knutson says I'm going to live, anyhow."

"Pneumonia doesn't kill the way it used to," Colin said, "though your chances didn't look any too bright when I saw you that morning in the Princes' house, before they brought you here."

"They tell me I had enough life in me to talk, anyhow," Bill grinned. "I tried to get Knutson to tell me some of the things I said, but he just laughed."

Colin had heard some of his delirious raving, mostly profane, but he saw no point in going over it now. "Have you had many visitors?" he asked.

"A few. Gooben and Inga came in for a little while yesterday afternoon. They told me about the memorial service you held for Freddy Shatts."

"It was the hardest thing I ever had to do," Colin admitted.

"It would be," Bill said softly, and his eyes again sought the window. "My wife was here for a few minutes last night. You haven't had a chance to talk to her, I suppose?"

Colin hesitated for a moment. On his way to the hospital he had spent a half hour with Molly, at the small hotel where she was staying. The visit had not been pleasant.

"Yes," he said finally, "I have. In fact, I've just left her."

"Did she tell you she was going to the coast?"

"Yes. I understand her brother is going out to look for another set-up in the plumbing business as soon as he can straighten out his affairs here. Herman wants to get away as far as possible from the scene of his son's death. If it hadn't been for his wife's steadying him, he would have gone off the deep end entirely."

"Molly told me," Bill said, and began staring at the white ceiling again.

He was silent so long that Colin's mind went back to Molly while he had talked with her that afternoon. She had reached down to her thin leg, discovered a run in her nylon stocking, and had whipped out a little bottle of nail polish and applied some of it to the run. But that was scarcely a detail to report to Bill in the hospital.

"Yes, she told me," Bill continued. "I've been doing a little thinking to myself, lying here. I should have died out there, alongside Frank Stone."

"That's nonsense, of course," Colin replied.

"I sat with you beside the creek one afternoon last fall, remember?"

"I remember it very well."

"You said something that day—something about being born to a pattern and having to live within it. And I was all for smashing the pattern. You remember that?"

"Yes," said Colin.

"Well, I've been thinking it over. If I had died out there—if I hadn't come back—there wouldn't have been any trouble between Molly and me. I wouldn't have gone home drunk on Hallowe'en and got into an argument

with Herman Shatts. If I hadn't had that run-in with Herman, he wouldn't have locked his doors against me. And if the doors hadn't been locked, I could have got Freddy out when the fire started. You see how simple—"

"That's bad thinking, Bill," Cohn put in.

"What's wrong with it? It covers the pattern, doesn't it?"

"Only a part of it—and a very small part, at that," Colin said, and looked at his watch. It was already half past four, and he had promised Irene he would be home by five o'clock. They were going to have dinner with the Pankers. Well, it wouldn't matter, he supposed, if he turned up half an hour late.

Chapter Six

1 Spring Twilight

The dusk of early April was gentian-hued, and a young moon was coasting down the sky in the wake of the vanished sun. Inga sat at her small table beside a window of the Coach, gazed out at the slender moon, and bit on the eraser at the end of her pencil as she frowned critically down at the yellow foolscap pad in front of her. With brief regret she crossed out a line.

"Words that are deleted are like babies that don't get to be born," she said to herself, and looked out of the window.

Ben was late today. She wondered what could be keeping him. The split-pea soup was almost ready. She ought to get the lamps going, but she loved to write in the twilight. It was like writing on the violet-blue and watered silk curtain of the air that would soon be drawn down into eternity below the rim of the night world. She bent and added another phrase to her poem.

Usually Ben came in with the disrupting force of a tornado, to gather her up in his arms and demand why she hadn't been at the door to meet him. But tonight she did not hear him when he entered on tiptoe and crossed the braided rugs. He was almost at her shoulder before she realized she was not alone in the room. Then she jumped.

"Gooben! You ought to know better! You shouldn't scare me when I'm __"

"Plumb forgot, honey!" He kissed her with a grin and looked down across her shoulder at what she had written.

She covered the page with both hands. "Oh, darling, it's only a rough draft! Don't look at it yet."

But Ben lifted her hands and read:

What is the hammock of the new moon made of, dear?
Silver threads?
Gold threads?
Naught to be afraid of, dear!
Let us wish upon the hammock of the new moon,
For it will be an old one,
Not to swing our wishes on—
Soon!

Inga looked up expectantly and saw him standing behind her, oddly biting his lip. "It's just an idea I had—maybe for a woman's magazine. It probably won't amount to anything."

"I wouldn't say that. It's—damn it, it's cute!"

"Cute!" Inga wailed. "*Must* you use that word, after all I've—oh, shucks, I've got to stir the soup!" She rushed into the kitchen.

"If it's scorched I'm not having any of it," he said as he followed her. "We'll go out for dinner."

She lifted the cover. "It's all right, so you can save your money and buy shoes for the baby."

"Sure—everything from now on, I suppose will have to be for *her*."

"*Her?* I thought you wanted a boy."

He put an arm about her. "I'll settle for either, small one—another poet or another milkman."

"Sheila insists hers is going to be a boy. By the way, I saw her this afternoon on my way to the store. She wants us over for another game of bridge soon. I thought she looked awfully frail. I felt like a horse beside her."

He leaned over and took the spoon from her hand. "Give me a slurp of that."

"No, you'll spoil your supper. The potatoes are almost done. Hand me down the paprika from up there. You can set the table. I'll have everything on in a jiffy. What kept you so late tonight?"

"I was held in a conference," Ben replied with mock pomposity, thrusting his thumbs into the armpits of his shirt and rocking back and forth on his heels.

"With a red-headed customer?"

He grinned down at her. "Behold a potential future partner in the Mayflower Dairy, Mrs. Start," he intoned grandly.

Inga blinked at him. "What do you mean?"

"Just what I said, kid. Old man Corbett called me into his office this afternoon to tell me he was giving me a ten-dollar raise."

"Gooben!"

"Wait, now, that isn't all. The old man is getting set to retire, and he has picked three of us to take over when he gets out. It wasn't exactly a surprise, because he gave me a hint of it nearly a year ago. He has been working out a plan to turn the business over to the men who helped build it, and I happen to be one of them, that's all."

"Honestly, darling!" Inga stretched on tiptoe and twined her arms tightly about his neck. "Isn't it exciting? But you deserved it."

"Take it easy, small one. It isn't going to happen tomorrow, and I don't know much about it yet but it'll mean I'll be handing over my route one of these days and going to work inside. I won't be peddling milk much longer. That ought to be a load off your mind."

He walked into the living room as he spoke, and Inga stood watching him. "Gooben!" she said after a moment.

He halted and looked back at her. "Well?"

"How long are you going to keep that up?"

"Keep what up?"

"I wasn't myself that night, and you know it. I don't care if you peddle milk or mutton! I was mad at Hannah Humphrey and I hated to think you had to—"

He was beside her at once, rubbing his chin in her hair. "I know, kid. Can't a guy rag his own wife when he feels like it? Maybe you'd like it better if I just stayed on the old milk truck, h'm?"

"You know I wouldn't. I'm glad—and I'm proud! Even if it didn't mean more money—"

"Watch that soup!" Gooben interrupted. "We'll have lots of time to talk about the job."

That, of course, was the real difference between himself and Inga, he mused as he tossed a freshly laundered blue and white checked cloth over the table and smoothed it into place. She was ambitious for him—far more so than he was for himself. He had never been possessed of any burning ambition. He had never been envious of the good fortune that fell to others. Damn it, he thought to himself now, he was just a milkman at heart and he'd never be anything else.

Inga appeared from the kitchen with a platter of ham and vegetables and briskly ordered him to fetch the soup. When he was in his place opposite her at the table he saw the tall bottle and two glasses she had set beside his plate.

"That's the last of Maggie's grape wine, isn't it?" he asked.

"Do you mind, dear?"

"I thought we were keeping it for a special occasion."

"Oh, darling, I love you, but you *are* such a stick!" Inga cried, her eyes sparkling. "Isn't this a special occasion?"

Just as he'd thought!—already her imagination had leaped beyond the years and she was living excitedly in the future. Her husband was a successful business man, her home was a white Cape Cod cottage with green shutters and rambler roses and a mossy rock garden; every year or two they journeyed to some romantic spot in the world, and her every want was satisfied. She took it for granted that they would keep what could be found only within themselves, the precious thing they had already found—and once lost could never be recaptured in a lifetime. Well, George Panker was a successful business man, wasn't he? His wife Sheila had every luxury the world could provide—or just about. And how much had it brought them? Even their love for each other was not enough to give them the serenity, the all-pervading peace that filled every corner of this old railway coach that stood on its little knoll beside the creek.

But there was no point in arguing that now. Ben looked across the table and smiled. "Okay, kid!" he said, and began pouring the wine. "There's one thing about it, anyhow. Even if the country flops into another depression, people will still have to buy milk. Nothing is going to stop them having kids." He handed her a glass of wine and picked up his own. "Here's looking at you, small one!"

After dinner, with the dishes washed and Ben stretched out on the couch with his arms cradling his head while he listened half asleep to a radio program Inga had turned low, the Coach was very pleasant. Inga was busy

on a bit of small sewing she had been working on for a week. It was her private opinion that layettes were ridiculous—something like making a frame for a picture before it was painted. But perhaps that was really because she detested sewing, although she loved cooking, and even laundering. Sewing—one stitch after another—when adults would be far more comfortable in togas, and babies in the swaddling clothes of the original Manger. Her thoughts were split by a sharp knock on the door. Ben untangled his long body, jumped up and opened the door to Pete Bellingham and Adelberta Wilson. Inga laid her sewing aside, and saw behind them through the open doorway that the evening was tenderly lighted by the palest green elf-glow of spring among the willows.

"The picture of domestic bliss!" Pete said, his eyes upon Inga.

"You ought to see the picture you two make, framed in that doorway!" Inga laughed.

But Ben had got them inside and closed the door, and Pete said they could stay only a few minutes, because they were on their way to the meeting.

"What meeting?" Ben asked, and then frowned in recollection. "Oh, you mean in the park? That's tonight, isn't it? I'd forgotten all about it."

"You're getting so damned smug here in this coach you'll be forgetting to go to work one of these days," said Pete.

"I can't blame him," Adelberta observed. "Inga has fixed it up so cute."

"*Cute!*" Ben laughed. "You mustn't use that word in this house, Berty. Sit down before Inga jumps on you."

"But it *is* cute," Adelberta insisted as she went to sit beside Inga. "And I don't blame her for not wanting to mix with that rabble in the park."

Pete Bellingham sat in a chair close to Ben. He held a cigarette now, Ben observed, as daintily as a praying mantis might hold its prey. There would never be any pain in that hand again for the owner of it, though there might be death for the enemy of it.

"George Panker is having his share of trouble these days," Ben said, lighting a cigarette. "We've seen them several times lately. Seems to me George has changed in a lot of ways."

"Dad thinks he's changed, too," Pete said.

Ben glanced toward the couch where Inga and Adelberta were in a deeply private conversation of their own.

"George used to be—well, he was always friendly," Ben said. "He was the same with everybody he met. He seemed to like people, and people liked him. He belonged in this town, and he had a way of making you feel you were as good as he was, whether you had a dollar of your own or not. But lately—I don't know—he seems suspicious of everybody—as if he feels the whole town's against him. He's not the same guy he was a year ago. I don't think it's just the factory problem that's done it, because he could shut up shop and retire if he wanted to—and then where'd the town be?"

"Dad's been afraid that he might do that very thing," Pete said.

"Do you suppose it has any connection with the way Sheila has been treated since she came here?"

"Could be. But George has a tough crowd to handle in that gang he had working for him during the war. I don't think he's the sort to quit in the middle of a fight, though. He met the men half way when they made their demands. He even accepted the closed shop, though he told them he was opposed to it in principle. But when they refused to go back to work or talk unless he adopted their proposed wage scale as a basis, George got stubborn. In fact, if Dad has it right, he told them he'd let the damned factory rot before he'd give in. And there are a few over there—led mostly by Andy Burgess—who wouldn't mind that a bit. They'd love to see the place rot. They're ready to blow it to hell rather than make any kind of deal that isn't *their* kind."

Ben scratched his head. "What do they expect to get out of holding a public meeting like this one tonight?"

"Well, they've tried everything else," Pete said. "Dad sat a whole afternoon with a committee of the workers, and got nowhere. He talked with George Panker for three hours and wound up where he started. He's taking this way of bringing public sentiment to bear on it in the hope of forcing a settlement. Dad has a high opinion of the power of public sentiment. He has had the people of this town behind him for a long time. He was on the town council when George's father was alive, and old man Panker thought a lot of him. What he has to say bears weight, I think, even though he is my dad. Anyhow, Berty and I thought we'd stroll around and listen in."

"I'd like to go along," Ben said, "but it's no place for Inga just now. Besides, I've still got to turn out at daylight. What have you been doing

today, besides loafing?"

"I've had a hell of an afternoon. Young Bud Humphrey is in trouble with the cops."

"What?"

"There's been a gang of young roughnecks operating in town for the past month or so, and—"

"Yeah. Old Sam Flagg was telling me his place was broken into a couple of nights ago."

From the couch at the end of the long room where she had been talking with Adelberta, Inga rose and got a large cardboard box out from behind a screen she had painted in a blue-bird and apple-blossom design.

"That screen is going to mark off the nursery," she told Adelberta as she sat down again to open the box and display the things she had already prepared for the baby.

"That was only kid stuff," Pete resumed in his talk with Ben. "All they took was what they could carry away—coke and candy bars and a few packs of cigarettes. But a squad car caught up with four of them last night out on Sunway Boulevard. They were heading west in a stolen car and one of them had a gun. Bud wasn't with them, but when the kids were brought in and grilled they broke down and told everything—all the jobs they'd been on and the names of six or seven others who were members of the gang. Bud was named, though he'd been on just that one job at Flagg's, and today they took him in. Barney Olson—he's been on the force for nearly thirty years, and he's a right guy—hell, you must remember him; he must have chased every kid in town at one time or another."

"Sure, I remember."

"Barney called me down to the station—he knew all about the Coach Club, of course—and we had quite a talk. We decided to send for Steve Humphrey, and the three of us had a session for over an hour. The upshot of it was that Bud is back home on what you might call probation, only Barney didn't go through any of the formalities."

"You had that kid headed right until his mother dragged him out of the Hallowe'en party at the church," Ben said. "Damn Hannah Humphrey! Somebody ought to take a shot at that bitch!"

Inga had been telling Adelberta about the knitting and embroidery Maggie Fraghurst and Mrs. Start were doing for the baby, but now at the

harsh tone in Ben's voice she glanced across at him.

"What has Mrs. Humphrey been doing now?" she inquired, folding a crocheted jacket back into the box.

"I'll tell you about it later, Inga," Ben said.

Pete got up quickly. "Come on, Berty, break it up! We've got to get going."

Then it was arranged that they should all have dinner together the following evening in the Coach. Inga would roast a leg of lamb and Adelberta and Pete would bring the ingredients for a salad and for cocktails.

"What's all the celebrating about?" Ben demanded of Inga when they had gone. "You'd think those two had just got married."

Inga sat down in the biggest chair with her sewing again in her hands.

"You're right as usual, darling," she said happily. "And, as usual, a little slow. They've been married for over two weeks."

"What?"

"Adelberta told me all about it. I'd already guessed something of the sort, though. Nobody else knows. They drove across the state line and were married by a justice of the peace. Berty said it was all right for me to tell you. Pete was afraid you'd think it was a silly thing to do when he didn't have a job and she's still in college, so he didn't want her to tell us. Of course, we're to keep mum. It seems that they're so much in love they didn't dare to wait. Anyhow, Pete's father is talking about investing in a new building project over on the north side, and if he does Pete will have a chance at the blueprints of it. He doesn't want to mention that, either, until it's 'in the bag,' as he says. In any case, as soon as Adelberta graduates in June, they're going to fake an elopement and announce their marriage when they come back. In the meantime, they're protected in the event that nature takes a hand in things. *Cute* isn't it?" Inga laughed.

"Well, that old so-and-so!" Ben remarked and sank back into his chair. "My God, what a cock-eyed world! Bill Clifford's wife out in Reno getting a divorce—the mayor's son pulling off a secret marriage—the town ready to bust wide open over a labor dispute—young Bud Humphrey nabbed by the police—"

Inga dropped her sewing. "Gooben—no!"

He told her then about Bud, and wound up by demanding, “Isn’t there anything normal left in the world?”

“Well, darling,” Inga said gently, and smiled as she examined a blue featherstitch that had snarled on the flannel she held in her hands, “we’re not doing so badly, are we? Of course we’re a little old-fashioned maybe.”

2 Spring Tumult

The factory had been hobbling along for a little over a month with only a token crew made up of workers who declared themselves out of sympathy with the strike. George Panker had Steve Humphrey largely to thank for that, though his heart had hardened daily against any such makeshift arrangement. His father would never have tolerated any such puttering, he was convinced. Nor would he have stood by and looked on while a crowd of ingrates schemed to wrest from his hands the control of an industry he had spent years in building.

The results had not been happy. Production, in any true sense of the word, was at a standstill. The few workers Steve Humphrey had persuaded to return to their posts were heckled and often jostled by pickets whenever they entered or left the plant. Somebody slashed a belt on the main shaft of the motor in the factory basement. Only Steve’s alertness had averted irreparable damage to the machinery and possible tragedy among the men. Old Jim Henderson, who had served for years as night watchman, fled in terror one night after a brick crashed through a window beside which he was sitting; tied to the brick was a crudely penciled note warning him to get out if he wanted to live to see daylight. It was a criminal threat, and the police had been working on it ever since without discovering the culprit. They had stationed a man in uniform, moreover, at the main entrance to the factory and had kept the grounds in front of the building bathed in floodlights from sunset to sunrise every night since the episode.

Mayor Henry Bellingham finally called Colin Trale to his office.

“This thing has gone far enough, Trale—too far!” he said when they were alone together. “Neither George Panker nor this man Andy Burgess is going to move an inch unless some of the rest of us do a little shoving. I want you to talk to George. The reason I’m asking you is that you’re the only man whose opinion he respects these days. He’s sour on the world. I’ll

talk to Burgess. I know his kind, and I have the approach that ought to bring him into line."

"I'm willing to do my best with George Panker," said Colin, "but I'd like to know first what you expect me to say."

Henry Bellingham tilted back in his chair and rubbed his knuckles together over his bulging waistline. "I believe in letting these affairs settle themselves—and they usually do when one side or the other, or both, get tired. I began life as a working man. When I was a stonemason, I belonged to a union. Today I hire union labor on all my building projects. I understand working men and they understand me. They elected me to this chair I'm sitting in. But I've had some experience with men like Andy Burgess. They don't want to settle anything. They thrive on confusion and disturbance and hate. I'm going to call a public meeting and invite the whole village to come out where anybody that wants to can speak his piece and get it off his chest. I want to get George there. He can speak to the crowd or not, just as he pleases. I think he should, but that'll be up to you. I'll get hold of Burgess. Unless I'm sadly mistaken, he'll jump at the chance to harangue the villagers. I'm going to send them all home after the meeting and give them a chance to think it over, and talk it over. And I'll bet my bottom dollar, Trale, this thing will be settled before another week rolls by. I've had something to do with public opinion. I've seen it take shape and grow until nothing on God's green earth can oppose it. There you are, my friend. Go and have a talk with George Panker and let me know how you make out."

"I'll talk to him, of course," Colin replied, concealing his lack of enthusiasm. Mayors were ever mayors, he thought to himself. "And I'll let you know. I'd like to think you were going at this in the right way. Maybe I'm over-cautious, but I've seen crowds do some strange things when they get out of hand, Mr. Bellingham."

"Don't let that worry you. I'll see to it that they're kept in hand. We'll have plenty of protection. But we won't need it. The citizens of this town are peaceful-minded men and women, Trale. I'll promise you there won't be any trouble."

Colin bade him good-by with a mild wonder that a stuffed shirt like Henry Bellingham could have produced a son like Pete. Henry was a well-meaning and conscientious shirt, but still stuffed. Mrs. Bellingham, of course, was not stuffed; she was lean and skeptical.

It was certainly a peaceful-minded crowd that Pete and Adelberta found gathered around the bandstand in the park. A squad car with the police chief and three officers stood at the curb near the entrance to the grounds, and less than a block away a red fire truck had taken its place beside a hydrant, but such precautionary measures were obviously unnecessary. The crowd was in jovial mood. Youngsters chased each other across the grounds now greening after a week of warm days and soft nights. The grown-ups were grouped about, talking and laughing as if they had come to a county fair. When the high school band, already seated on the cupola-roofed bandstand, began to play, Pete Bellingham laughed.

"Dad's a great old showman," he said. "Isn't this a circus, baby?"

"You're laughing at my father-in-law," Adelberta reminded him and drew his arm close within her own.

"As a father-in-law, he'll be okay," Pete assured her, "and he's okay as a dad, but as a mayor he'll never be anything to me but just funny."

"Mayors are all funny," Adelberta observed, "—at home."

Nigel Prince sauntered past, all by himself, and smiled a diffident greeting. "Good evening, Peter—Adelberta! Nothing like a nice spring evening to bring people out," he remarked, scarcely pausing. Even his voice seemed to be on tiptoe.

Pete acknowledged the greeting with a wave of his hand. "See," he commented as soon as Nigel was out of earshot, "he thinks the spring did it."

A vaguely familiar voice reached him from over his shoulder. He turned his head and saw the tall, angular figure of Gilbert Pinwinder moving eagerly through the crowd, thrusting a pamphlet into a hand here, a pocket there, exhorting as he went . . . "Set thine house in order, brother. Let the wicked forsake his way and the unrighteous man his thoughts, and let him turn . . ."

"Yea, brother! All we need now is a bunch of toy balloons," Pete suggested. "Next time His Honor throws a party like this, I'm going to ask him for the hot dog and peanut concession."

But the band had ceased playing and the flutter of hand-clapping mounted quickly to a storm as the mayor of Wahwahnissa Creek climbed the steps to the bandstand and stood with hands folded across his middle while he smiled down at the crowd and waited for the applause to subside.

"My fellow citizens," he began, and immediately Pete Bellingham thought he detected a seriousness in his father's voice and manner that he had never before exhibited in a public appearance. He was not telling any of his allegedly funny stories—stories that had long since grown stale to Pete's ears. He was appealing earnestly for a fair and respectful reception of the speakers he was about to invite to the platform. He wanted the people of his village to understand clearly the issues in a dispute that was threatening the security of his and their community. He wanted no heckling, no interrupting of the speakers, no rowdyism in the crowd. They had assembled here for a peaceful discussion of a vital problem and he was confident the citizens of Wahwahnissa Creek would see to it that order was maintained—and that went for the boys and girls as well as for their fathers and mothers.

During the round of applause that followed his appeal, the mayor leaned over the railing of the bandstand and beckoned to a small group of men who stood below. The applause continued as three men slowly climbed the steps to seat themselves in the light beneath the cupola. Colin Trale lead the way, followed by Andy Burgess and George Panker.

"Is this a public hanging or a prizefight?" someone whispered, and Pete turned to find Bill Clifford close behind him with Josie Stone at his side.

Pete grinned. "Who let you in?"

Bill started to say something, but the mayor was already introducing George Panker.

Pete glanced around him and listened to measure the applause that greeted George. *Fair enough!* he said to himself as the central figure in the dispute began to speak.

It wasn't a good speech. Pete doubted that those who stood on the outermost edge of the crowd could even hear what George Panker was trying in his fumbling way to say. He showed no desire to make a case for himself. Haltingly, diffidently, he spoke of the factory and its problems as if they were outside and beyond him. He seemed puzzled, at a loss to understand what had disrupted the pleasant relations that had always existed between him and the men and women who worked in his factory. He had considered their demands and he had done his best to meet them, but there was a point beyond which he could not go and hope to keep the plant running. Finally, he was prepared to submit all the facts and open his books, if necessary, to any board of investigators Mayor Bellingham might name. He was asking only what his workers were asking—and that was for a chance to get back to work.

As George Panker turned and went back to his chair, Pete once again measured the crowd's response, but before he could make up his mind his father was calling upon Andy Burgess.

Burgess stood up, tousle-headed, his clothes rumpled, his eager eyes darting here and there as he rocked impatiently from one foot to the other, waiting for the applause to cease. Then he lashed out in a voice that reached every corner of the park.

"The guy can talk!" Pete said to Adelberta as Andy Burgess flayed industry for the profits it had made during the war and for its attempts to reduce the income of the workers now that the war was over. He even managed to dramatize the statistics with which he strove to prove his argument that mounting prices and scarcity of goods were the artificial results of a policy arbitrarily imposed upon a long-suffering public. He sneered at what the daily press and the radio had the effrontery to call "prosperity." He predicted economic collapse and a return to the days when men sold apples on the street corners. He declared the duly appointed representatives of the workers in the factory had suggested mediation early in the dispute only to have the offer rejected by George Panker, who swore he would be damned before he'd let anyone else tell him how to run his business. It was the men's turn now to refuse to submit to arbitration. They no longer trusted anyone but themselves—and they were ready to carry on this fight till hell froze over!

Pete's eyes had been fixed upon his father during the past minute or so. The mayor was very obviously becoming more and more disturbed. He sprang to his feet, in fact, the moment Burgess, having delivered his ultimatum, wheeled abruptly and strode back to his chair.

"All right, all right!" he shouted as he thrust his hands out, palms downward, in an appeal for quiet. "All right, now! Quiet, *if* you please!" He stood for a moment, his hands still in the gesture of pressing the crowd down, then turned upon them the broad smile for which, locally at least, he was famous. "We are grateful to both of these gentlemen for having stated their cases so clearly for us all. They have spoken frankly, fearlessly—as we hoped they would. And you have given them both a fair hearing. It is only right that you should now be permitted to question the speakers concerning the issues involved, and hear their answers. But first, I want to call upon the Reverend Trale for a few words." He turned halfway about and beckoned. "Come out, come out, Mr. Trale, and speak your piece!" he invited with a hearty laugh, but just as Colin came beside him, while the applause was

crackling about them, Henry Bellingham leaned slightly and whispered, "For God's sake, give them a chance to cool off! That last speech—"

Colin Trale nodded quickly and stepped forward to lay his hand on the bandstand railing. He had no need of being told what he must do. Sitting quietly in his place beside George Panker, he had felt the tension grow and had been amazed that it had not broken somewhere in the crowd before Andy Burgess came to the end of his speech. But, though he knew what he must do, though he knew what was expected of him, he knew also how hopeless any effort of his would be to clear the air of excitement now. He knew, moreover, that nobody down there in the crowd wanted to hear him. They would accord him the respect they were in the habit of showing a man in his position, and nothing more. Never before, in all his life, had he felt so futile, so helpless, so utterly out of place. Even the power of speech seemed suddenly to have deserted him. Words were meaningless anyhow. For what amounted to an eternity he merely stood and looked out to where night was gathering in the trees—and the crowd, grown silent with something like awe within their hearts, waited and looked at *him*.

It was a silence that could not hold for long. And it didn't. Bill Clifford, sensing quickly what had happened, called from the thick of the crowd.

"Let's sing, padre!"

Cohn turned at once to the uniformed band leader. "Give us—*God Bless America!*"

A moment later the park was echoing with the chorus. The mayor stepped forward and waved his arms, encouraging the backward ones to lift their voices, raising his own to the upward surge of the melody, calling upon them to sing it again before they had come all the way to the end of the first refrain.

"And this time—*sing* it! Put your hearts into it!"

The old boy is hedging, Pete thought. He's going to squirm out of something that isn't going his way. Questions and answers, my neck!

While they sang, the mayor spoke urgently to Colin Trale. "All right, I'll take over. We've got to get them out of the park. Go back and tell Panker and Burgess to get ready to leave."

Colin took one glance at the mayor's face. It was beaded with sweat, but the old campaigner went on waving his arms in time with the music, and began singing again at the top of his voice. When the chorus ended, he turned his broad smile once more upon the crowd.

“That was singing!” he beamed heartily. “That was the kind of singing that’s good for the soul. And that’s the spirit I want you to take home with you. That’s why I’m asking you all now to leave peacefully and ponder quietly what you have heard here tonight. I am going to dispense with the question and answer period. Let’s get together and visit for a while. We’ve had enough talk for one night. You don’t want any more speeches—and I don’t. The band will play for us while we all shake hands and say ‘Hi, neighbor!’ to the fellow standing right next to us. I’m coming down there to shake a few hands myself, so get started. Hi, neighbor!”

For a moment, as Henry Bellingham clasped his two hands and shook them above his head, it looked as if he had broken the tension and had the crowd well under control, until one man’s voice rose above the confusion and the mayor peered down to find Steve Humphrey pushing his way toward the bandstand, one hand lifted, and shouting as he came:

“Let me speak! Let me speak!”

Cries, half in protest and half in approval, followed him as he brushed aside all attempts to restrain him, mounted the steps, and stood where, only a moment before, the village mayor himself had stood, exhorting his fellow citizens to neighborliness.

“There goes the apple cart!” Pete muttered, and started to lead Adelberta toward the outskirts of the crowd.

“Let’s listen—just for a moment,” Adelberta urged.

And Bill Clifford said, “What’s the hurry, Pete? Stick around. This ought to be good.”

Steve Humphrey wasted no time. As soon as he could make himself heard, he begged for three minutes in which to say what he had to say. His voice all but broke as he pleaded for a hearing, and Pete Bellingham halted abruptly to listen.

“You all know me,” Steve began, “and I know you. I’ve lived here and worked here—like a lot more of you—for years. I’ve heard what was said here tonight, and I’ve tried to think about it. But I can’t think—I tell you, I can’t think.” Something like a sob checked his words so that he had to pause for a moment before he could go on. “I can’t think, because I don’t give a damn who’s right or wrong in this thing. While I’ve been spending my days and nights trying to find the answer, something else has been going on—something I didn’t know about till a few hours ago. Today my boy—” He paused and his face worked painfully as he fought back the feelings that

were destroying him. “Today—my boy was taken in by the cops—for a crime he helped other boys to commit. He was thrown into jail with—”

“That’s where he belongs!” a voice shouted out of the crowd. “I hope they keep him there!”

Pete Bellingham froze where he stood, but for a second only. The voice had come from a man less than three paces away. And the man was Rupert Prile.

“That bastard!” Pete snarled, and lurched forward until he was directly behind Prile.

He said no more, gave no warning. The steel hook that was his right arm lunged out and fastened upon the man’s coat collar. He jerked once and then smashed the clenched fist of his left hand into Rupert Prile’s face.

3 Spring Darkness

Sheila Panker lay on her chaise-longue with the pink swan’s-down throw across her knees and tried to keep her mind on the book she was reading. She had begun it that afternoon, immediately after she had carried it home from the Book Nook in Clarence Higgins’ corner drug store, and she wanted to finish it before George got back from the meeting in the park. But her wits were wandering. She had stood at the west window of the dining room and looked out at the crowd gathered about the bandstand. She had heard the band play its first number before the speakers appeared. Then, because she could hear nothing of what was being said, and because it only made her nervous to stand there and fret about George, she had taken her book and gone upstairs.

She had read a little at first—until she realized that the words on the printed page were a meaningless blur. Her mind seemed to have escaped through the open window to the gentle soughing of the wind in the trees beside the house. Only today she had found them surely and hopefully in tender April bud. She feared for them—the fruit trees and the lilacs, the mock-orange trees and the lovely flowering crab that bore no fruit except beauty. It had been so warm during the past week. The buds had all come out on tentative tiptoe and now seemed resolved to stay, but there was no telling about the weather so early in the spring.

The tall clock in the hall downstairs began striking ten, and all at once the band in the park was playing *God Bless America*. Voices were singing it. The meeting was over, then, and George would be home in a few minutes. He had promised not to linger, though he hinted he might bring someone along for a drink if it wasn't too late. She hoped he would. With the exception of old Clarence Higgins, who still turned up regularly for his weekly game of chess, and Ben and Inga Start who had come in for bridge a couple of times, nobody except the Trales had been in this house to visit for nearly a month. Sheila picked up her book again. She would just lie where she was until she heard them at the door.

She did not know exactly when it was that the shouting of the crowd first came to her through the open window. It had begun like a rising of the wind, that brought only a vague fear that the weather would change overnight and threaten the brave little buds in her garden. But when the wail of a siren reached her, she dropped her book and lay for an instant in rigid immobility, then got to her feet and stood tying her robe about her with fingers that were like ice.

She was halfway down the stairs when old Karl Berg came into the hall and spoke in a voice that was too calm to be reassuring.

"Do not be disturbed, Meesus Panker. There iss a fire some place near. Grass burning in a vacant lot, perhaps."

Sheila gripped the banister and made her way cautiously to the bottom of the stairs. "You think that's all it is, Karl?"

"I'm quite sure. It issn't here, that I know."

Sheila listened. "But—all that yelling—"

Karl's hands seemed to dabble the air inconsequentially. "Just the people in the park. Where there iss a crowd—"

But Sheila was already on her way to the dining room window. The siren was shrill now and the sound of shouting had increased. She jerked the curtains apart and looked out.

"Do not, please, Meesus Panker!" Karl said with hurried breathlessness now as he tried to draw her away. She shook him off.

"It isn't a fire!" she cried. "Look, the people over there in the park—"

"Yes, yes," Karl said, his anxiety breaking through his voice now, and Sheila hearing it too well. "I was on the back porch when it started. You must not let it upset you. Mr. Panker will be home quick now and tell us all

about it. Don't you think you be better on the living room couch? It iss not good for you to get excited—"

"Go and find Mr. Panker," Sheila ordered, and laced her fingers hard to control their trembling. "Find him and bring him home."

"Yes, Meesus," the old man replied, but did not move.

"They're rioting, Karl, don't you understand?" Sheila said sharply. "Go at once and bring—"

"Bratruud has already gone. He was with me on the back porch. I think it best if I stay here—with you—until they come in."

Sheila looked from the window again. The shouting had died down, the siren had ceased wailing, the street was filled with hurrying shadows.

"See, Meesus Panker!" said Karl with a sigh of relief. "The trouble iss over. I think you should go back and—"

Sheila started toward the living room. "I'll sit here till they come in," she said.

"You would be much more comfortable in your room," Karl urged.

"No, Karl, I'll wait here." She sank heavily to the couch. "I wish—bring me a glass of cold water, please."

Karl was still in the kitchen when she heard the footsteps approaching the front door, and men's voices—George's among them. She drew herself up from the couch and stood in the middle of the living room floor, waiting for the door to open.

"Your glass of water, Meesus," Karl announced, hurrying out of the dining room with a small silver tray in one hand. Even in a crisis, Karl was not one to forget the amenities.

Sheila was reaching for the glass when the front door swung open and George spoke. "Go along in, Trale. Sheila is probably upstairs. I told her I wouldn't come home alone."

Sheila pressed a hand to her brow, half in relief, half in an effort to rid herself of the dizziness that had assailed her the moment she rose from the couch.

She saw Colin Trale first, then George leaning slightly sideways, it seemed, on the arm of Ole Bratruud. And she saw the startled frown on George's face.

"You're downstairs, honey! Don't look so scared. Everything's swell. All we need now is a long drink."

He was coming toward her now, but Sheila saw his face, gray as putty except for the smear of blood that hadn't yet dried on his right cheek. She was not aware of going to meet him. The tide of black heat surged over her before she could put her hand out to the polished console table for support. The table crashed as it took the weight of her unconscious, backward-falling body.

It was almost three o'clock in the morning when Doctor Knutson came downstairs to the living room where George Panker sat with Colin Trale. The doctor's mouth was grimly set as he looked down at the man whose eyes were turned strickenly up to him.

"There's no point in saying I'm sorry, George," he said bluntly. "We did our best. If I hadn't been able to call Michener in, it might have been much worse. We're just lucky that Sheila is still alive. She may not feel so lucky when she hears she has lost her son, but we'll have to—"

"Never mind about the baby!" George barked. "Are you sure Sheila is going to be all right?"

"She'll be all right. She's had a bad bruise of the spinal muscle that will take a little time to clear up, but she'll be all right again in a couple of weeks or so if she stays where she is."

"You haven't told her anything—about the baby, I mean?"

"No. She was in no shape to be told about it tonight. In fact, we had to put her under to complete the delivery, and she doesn't even know about that. I gave her a hypo, so she'll sleep till I get back in the morning."

George Panker moaned. "God, what a fool I was to walk in on her like that!"

"Well, these things just happen, George," Knutson said. "Let's take another look at that head of yours before I go." He pressed his fingers lightly about the area of the scalp where, earlier that night, he had hurriedly placed a dressing. "Hm-m-m—you certainly came up with a nice one there! You have no idea who hit you?"

"Hell, no! I don't even want to know."

Knutson turned and grinned at Colin Trale. “That’s an excellent Christian spirit, isn’t it?” He slapped George’s shoulder and stood back. “You’re going to have a headache for a couple of days. Better stick around the house. That dressing will do for tonight. I’ll change it when I come back in the morning. I managed to get hold of that nurse, incidentally—the one I called when I first came in. She’ll be here around six.”

“When can I see Sheila?” George asked.

“Don’t be in a hurry about that. You can come in with me in the morning—after I’ve taken that bandage off your head and made you look a little more human. She ought to see you when she wakes up, or she’ll start worrying about you. Besides, she’ll have to be told about the baby and I want you to be there. Right now, George, what you need is a few hours’ sleep.” He took a small bottle from his bag. “Here—take a couple of these and get to bed. See you in the morning.”

He closed his bag, bade the two men good night, and went out.

“You’d better get some sleep yourself, Colin,” George suggested as he got up carefully from his chair.

“I think I will,” Colin said. “You’ll be all right now? If there’s anything I can—”

“You’ve done too much already. I’d never have been able to sit it out alone.”

“It’s a time like this that makes me feel how useless I am when it comes right down to it,” Colin said.

“It’s a time like this when we need you most of all, Colin. A man without friends is in a bad spot when he’s in trouble.”

Colin smiled at him. “You have friends, George, lots of them. I venture to say they’ll come out and tell you so, after they know what has happened tonight. Get some sleep now, and I’ll drop in around noon.”

When Colin had gone, George turned out the lights, then paused on his way to the stairs and listened to the low murmur of voices that came from the kitchen. Karl Berg and Ole Bratruud had told him earlier that they would sit up and play pinochle while they remained on the alert for any sound from Sheila’s bedroom.

George strode down the hallway and opened the door to the kitchen. The two old cronies were sitting at the table, bottles of root beer within reach, their cards spread out before them.

"You boys might as well go to bed," he told them. "There's nothing any of us can do, and there's a nurse coming in two or three hours."

"Ve vait oop, yust the same!" Ole Bratruud declared flatly. "You go now and sleep."

George knew there was no use in trying to argue with Ole. "Well—all right. Call me if you want anything."

"Sure!"

He bade them good night and left them to their cards and root beer. As he started wearily up the stairway, he thought of the two old men who had served him in so many ways during the past years. He had never looked upon them as servants. They were as much a part of the household as he was himself. Tonight they seemed even more.

"I have friends," he murmured to himself, recalling what Colin Trale had said, and a little of the loneliness he had felt for weeks fell away from him and left him grateful.

4 A Pinch of Snuff

Ole Bratruud's nightlong vigil had been almost too much for the rugged old lake captain. It was not so much his loss of sleep—he had weathered many a sleepless night in the old days, and could do so again if there were any occasion for it. Nor was it that Karl Berg had beaten him sorely at pinochle—he had beaten the old Dane often enough, and would beat him again if he put his mind to it. The trouble was, he had been able to think of nothing all night except Maria, the dark, slim girl who had mermaid's eyes like Sheila Panker's, and whom he might have married had he not rashly taken her out in his fishing smack one day when a curious tingling of his scalp should have warned him that Lake Superior was priming itself for something more than a squall. Maria had been so light, so light, and though he had clung to her with all his strength, a wave of that inland sea had knifed her away from him and she had vanished in the cruel tumult of it as lightly as its own foam.

Ole, therefore, had not gone to bed for a few hours' rest as Karl Berg had done as soon as the nurse arrived. He had gone out to walk about the garden, his garden and Sheila's, where there was nothing more he could work at

until the season advanced a little. He glanced up at the morning that had dawned bluebell clear, and stood for a long time, looking at the window of the room in which Sheila slept. Then he rubbed his nose with a rough finger and walked out into the lane behind the Panker place. He would go down to the creek and have a look at his old rowboat that he hadn't seen since he pulled it up and turned it over on the creek bank when the ice began to form last November. He was confident it would still be there, exactly as he had left it. It always was. Nobody would bother to make away with the leaky old craft, even though perch and the odd sunfish could be caught from it if you knew where to look for them.

He found the boat under its shelter of overhanging willows, its pitch-filled seams gleaming beneath the morning sun. He ran his thumbnail along the seams, made a mental note of where he would have to do a little calking to make it waterproof, brushed away a few dead leaves that had clung to its sides during the winter, and for no reason at all rolled it halfway over and glanced under it as if he expected to see something hiding in the dank grass. Then he let it fall back again, seated himself on its venerable keel, and dug into his vest pocket for his box of snuff. There was no more than a pinch left, but he gleaned the last shred from it and with his gnarled forefinger pressed it snugly behind his nether lip. He would have to buy himself another supply on his way home, he decided as he tossed the empty box into the creek.

Well, he supposed, there wasn't much sense in sitting all day on an overturned boat and staring at the sky. There hadn't been much sense in his coming down here at all, in fact, except that he couldn't stay in the house, knowing that Sheila would be waking soon to hear what the doctor had to tell her. He had helped to carry her upstairs last night before Doctor Knutson arrived and he had guessed, even then, what the results of her fall would be. He had seen it in her eyes—those eyes that were so like the eyes of his lost Maria.

He got up heavily, ran his hand gently over the rounded belly of his boat, heaved a deep sigh and started back along the creek shore under the railroad trestle, and plodded up the slope to the rear door of Sam Flagg's grocery. He had no desire to mingle with the crowd of women who usually gathered in the store at this time of day to do their marketing and exchange their bits of neighborhood gossip. He would help himself to a box of snuff, pay for it, and go home.

When he opened the back door Sam Flagg was at the meat block, slicing a ham.

" 'Mornin', Ole!" Sam greeted him with a glance over his shoulder. "You're among the livin', I see."

"Yah." Ole looked toward the front of the store where Sam's wife Sadie was busy behind the counter.

Some dozen women were standing about, apparently intent more upon the events of the past night than upon getting their day's marketing done. Sam shook his head at Ole and put his hands over his ears.

"Cackle-cackle! Been that way all morning. Seems like every old hen in the village has been here, one time or another, since I opened up." He set the slice of ham on the scale, threw his head back to bring his bifocals to bear upon the figures, then wrapped the ham in a piece of waxed paper and set it on top of the glass showcase where Sadie could get it.

"Lookin' for something, Ole?" he asked as he took a slip from a nail on the wall and got ready to fill another order.

"Yah, I vant some snuff," Ole said, and added doubtfully, "—but maybe I get it myself."

"No use your gettin' mixed up in that mob," said Sam, and sprinted through the flock of women to return at once with the small round box. "Awful bad about Mrs. Panker," he said as Ole gave him the money.

"You heard already?"

"Don't take long for news like that to get round town," Sam said, and lifted a loin of pork from its hook to the block. "And you know as well as I do who's to blame for what happened to George Panker's wife. I've heard 'em talkin' here. Some of 'em blame George for walkin' in with his head busted and scarin' the daylights out of her. They say the shock did it."

"Might be," Ole conceded.

"Where *would* a man go when he gets his head busted? That's what I'd like to know. Between you and me and the lamppost"—he stepped close to Ole and tapped him on the chest with the flat of his big knife—"George Panker is takin' a mite more than a man can stand. There's a bunch behind this ruckus that don't want to work and don't want to see anybody else workin' either. That's what's the matter with this town right now. Why, I had a fellow come in here the other day and try to tell me I didn't have any right to make a profit on the things I sell in my own store. The whole profit system is wrong, he says. Where in tarnation do they get ideas like that? I told him—I said—"

Sadie's face thrust itself across the top of the showcase. "Sam, Mrs. Arp is waiting for her pork roast."

"Comin' right up," Sam promised and gave his knife a few deft strokes on the steel before setting to work. "What the whole country needs," he growled softly, "is a gover'ment that'll throw these no-goods out and let the rest of us get on with the job. Sometimes it makes me so hoppin' mad—"

"Sam!" Sadie was there again, smiling at Ole as Sam hastily set the roast on the scale. "I'm coming over to see you this afternoon," she said.

"Yah? I look for you."

"While the nurse is off," Sadie explained. "I told Doc Knutson on the phone what I thought of him for not calling me last night when he couldn't get a nurse right away." Sam handed her the roast. "Get Maggie Fraghurst's order out next. She's been waiting, and she can't stay away from the house. Hortense didn't sleep last night, after all the carryings-on in the park."

Ole said good-by to Sam, but as he turned to go out the way he had come in, a strange sound broke above the chattering in the store—a muffled sound as if something soft and heavy had fallen upon the roof. The women ceased talking at once and looked from one to another.

"What in hell was that?" Sam Flagg said, and went to the front door. As he stood looking out, a heavy freight train labored up the track and approached the trestle over the creek. The fireman waved from the open window of the cab, and Sam lifted his arm in response before turning back into the store.

"Can't see anything out there," he remarked. "We're all so jumpy this morning we keep expectin' something to happen every minute."

Ole Bratruud had already left by the back door. He had been as curious about that strangely muffled sound as Sam had been—until he heard the engine coughing its way along the track. He stood and waited for the train to pass, then started off along Cherry Street.

Four blocks away, the rolling ground that was the golf course lifted gently to the westward, its new blanketing of green already a delight to the eye. Across the street, the buds on the lilac bushes in front of Nigel Prince's place were venturing forth into the hazardous and unguessable realm of spring. On the trees everywhere tiny clusters of bristling, impatient activity, waxen or frailly green, were taking their fill of the warm April sunshine.

These were the things Ole Bratruud's mind was intent upon as he strolled up Cherry Street. He gave scant heed to the few people who had come out of their houses in Red Willow Terrace to gaze about them in a kind of blank wonderment before they went indoors again. He didn't like the Red Willow crowd anyhow—malcontents for the most part who had fattened on world disaster and were disgruntled now that their swollen wartime wages were no more. He had walked to the end of the street, in fact, before he became aware of sirens shrieking somewhere to the northward, on Ring Avenue.

His first thought, naturally, was of the house behind the copper beeches, where Sheila Panker lay helpless in her upstairs room. He quickened his pace until he came to the corner, and there he saw, three blocks away, fire trucks maneuvering into position in front of the factory. From the windows in the rear of the building smoke was pouring to form a black cloud against the sky.

5 A Cup of Tea

Hortense Start had slept poorly. She had gone to bed earlier than usual last night because Maggie had insisted she should "settle down" before the meeting in the park got noisy, as such events usually did. Hortense had been cross about that, preferring to sit up and listen to the radio until the meeting was over rather than lie awake wondering what all the shouting was about. But Maggie had had her way. Maggie was having a little too much of her own way lately. Ever since Gooben had left the house, in fact. For the past month she had been going back and forth on visits to that makeshift domicile of Gooben's with pastries and things that could not be so well done in an oil stove, Maggie said. Not that Hortense begrudged Gooben and Inga anything. Hadn't she knitted booties and a hood for the baby? With her twisted hands? But it did seem lately as if Maggie was being paid to look after Gooben and Inga instead of attending to her duties at home. Well, Hortense supposed, you had only to be old and helpless, as she herself was, to realize how little the world cared about what became of you.

So Maggie had had her way last night. Hortense was bundled into bed as soon as she had her supper. It was not until later that she began to suspect there was more to Maggie's hustling her off than appeared on the surface. Hortense was lying propped up on her pillows, absorbed in a murder story,

when the band first began playing in the park across the street. She laid the book on the bed beside her and listened until she could no longer stand the feeling of being shut away by herself. Then she called Maggie. Three times she called her, and when she received no response she lifted her book and thumped the wall beside her bed. Maggie came rushing in at last and explained that she had just stepped out on the porch for a breath of air and hadn't heard her call. But Hortense knew why she had gone to the front porch instead of staying in the house where she would be ready to answer a call if she was needed. Maggie was more interested in what was happening over there in the park than she was in the helpless cripple she had put to bed in order to be rid of her.

The same thing happened later, when the shouting began, only this time no amount of calling or pounding the wall had the slightest effect. For a while Hortense lay back exhausted from her efforts, but when at last the sound of a siren rose until it seemed to split the very air of her room, she threw the covers from her bed and sat up, her bare feet on the hooked rug. Sheer anger brought her strength that had been lost to her for years. She was thrusting her feet into her lamb's-wool bedroom slippers when Maggie appeared, breathless from excitement, her face flushed, her eyes staring.

There had been a scene, of course, Hortense demanding where Maggie had been and what she was doing, and Maggie ordering her back into bed as if she were no more than a child. Maggie had gone no farther away than to the corner of the park, and if she couldn't walk as far as the corner of the park on a spring night without getting a tongue-lashing, she would pack up and walk as far as she had a mind to—and never come back. Hortense had wept then and allowed herself to be tucked in for the night if Maggie would only tell her what she had seen and what was the meaning of all the sudden uproar. It developed that Maggie knew as little about it as Hortense. All she knew was that Steve Humphrey had been speaking from the bandstand and that somewhere a fight had started and all at once the whole crowd seemed to be fighting and the police and the fire department had gone in to drive the mob out of the park. At that point Maggie had run back to the house to see that Hortense was all right.

It had been an all but sleepless night after that. Why must people gather in a park at night anyhow? It no doubt had something to do with the trouble George Panker was having with his workers, but why hadn't Gooben said something about a meeting when he was in for a few minutes at noon? Nobody ever told her anything. There was no sense to it at all, no more than there was to a war that had turned the country upside down so that a person

couldn't get a decent bite to eat. Thus Hortense had mulled things over during most of the night.

Now, seated in her favorite chair within reach of the radio, she concluded that she had nothing to regret concerning her statements to Maggie last night. True enough, she had for a moment lost the self-control of which she was so proud, but it had been sorely tried. At this very moment, in fact, Hortense was finding it increasingly difficult to keep her patience. It was half an hour since Maggie had gone to get a few things for their lunch. And why hadn't Gooben dropped by, even though it would mean changing his route a bit? Perhaps he had got mixed up in that fracas last night. Now that she thought of it, Hortense recollected that Maggie had acted very mysteriously when she had answered the telephone just before she went out to the store. It was only Della Prince, she had said, asking how they were. She was lying, Hortense was convinced of that now. Somebody else—Inga, like as not—had called to say that Gooben had been hurt. No wonder Maggie had left in such a hurry. This was too much, far too much! Hortense reached for her cane and planted it firmly in front of her.

She was leaning forward for a look from the window when something struck the side of the house. It was almost as if a heavy truck—no, it was an earthquake! The windows rattled. The little cuckoo clock trembled against the wall. A pan clattered in the kitchen. The stuffed canary and its mahogany slab swayed above the archway, then crashed to the floor.

"*Cheeree!*"

Hortense heard her own voice, distinct and frightening, apart from her. She was on her feet, brandishing her cane as though to ward off an unseen but nonetheless deadly peril that threatened her. Before she knew what she was doing, panic drove her out the door, across the porch, down the steps and out to the gate, where she clung for support and screamed at the half dozen men who were already running from every direction toward the factory on the other side of Ring Avenue.

She was still at the gate when Maggie came racing up to her a few minutes later.

"Holy catfish—what are you doing out here?" Maggie demanded, gasping for breath.

Hortense looked prim. "I couldn't stay in there with the walls falling down. What's happening?"

“Get back into the house,” Maggie ordered. “How would I know what’s happening?” Her left eye caught the plume of smoke from the factory windows. Her right arm grasped Hortense about the waist so that she could not look toward the avenue.

“But you must have heard something?” Hortense insisted.

“You won’t hear a word of it until you get back into the house.”

“Oh, dear! I’m treated like a nobody, just because I’m a helpless—”

“Helpless, my back hair!” Maggie exploded. “You came all the way out here under your own steam, didn’t you? Come on, come on!”

Hortense, with Maggie’s steadying arm, was on the top step of the porch when the terrifying shriek of a siren set her to trembling again.

“Maggie, Maggie, what *is* going on?”

“It’s just another fire. Come along now, it isn’t our house that’s burning.”

Maggie helped her into the living room, and there on the floor saw the remains of what had once been a songbird.

“*Cheeree!*” cried Maggie.

“Yes, we’ve lost him,” Hortense whimpered.

“I see nothing to snivel about,” Maggie told her. “Sheila Panker lost her baby last night.”

Hortense gave her an incredulous look, then sank back into her chair. “That will be hard on her, poor thing,” she breathed. “Isn’t it strange, though, how a woman’s sins will—”

“If that’s all you can say about it, I’m not going to stay here and listen,” Maggie interrupted, and heavy-footed it off to the kitchen.

Hortense took her handkerchief and dabbed at her eyes. It wasn’t like her to give way to tears. But last night had been too much for her. And now, this morning! She wished all that commotion outside would die down and give her nerves a chance to steady. She could feel her heart racing. She wished Gooben would come.

And just then Gooben did come. She heard his truck stop in front of the house, and the next moment he was bounding across the porch and into the hall.

“Gooben!”

“Hi! How’s everything? You’re okay, Mother?”

“Of course, son. I’m so glad you came. I was afraid you—”

“I came as soon as I heard the siren up this way. The first thing I thought of was the house, of course. When I found out the fire was over at the factory, I came in anyhow just to make sure you were all right.”

“The factory, you said?”

“Yeah, something exploded in the basement and the fire—Jehoshaphat, what happened to the canary?” Ben stooped and picked up all that was still intact of the erstwhile Cheeree.

“Take it away,” Hortense begged. “I can’t bear to look at it.”

He carried it to the kitchen, and Hortense waited impatiently for him to come back. But Gooben was apparently in no hurry. She could hear him talking with Maggie, and once she was sure she heard them laughing, and Maggie saying, “Cheeree!”

“Gooben!”

He came at once to her call. “Look, Mother, now that you’re okay, I’ve got to run down and look in on Inga.”

“You’re not going?”

“I’ll be back as soon as I finish my route,” he promised her, and kissed the top of her head.

“Oh, dear, you’re always in such a rush these days. I scarcely ever see __”

“I’m a married man, Mother,” Ben laughed. “I’ve got responsibilities, with more on the way. See you later.”

He was gone then, and Hortense was alone. But she must not give way again to self-pity.

“Maggie!”

The faithful Maggie appeared promptly, a laden tray in her hands. “Hold your horses, Honey,” she said. “I thought you might like a cup of tea.”

Hortense smiled gratefully. “That’s nice of you, dear. I feel the need of something to settle my nerves. And it’s so much easier to talk over a cup of tea.”

Chapter Seven

1 Broken Walls

If, back there at the end of January, Della Prince had held any reservations about inviting Bill Clifford to occupy the vacant room in her home when he came from the hospital, she kept them to herself. Her husband Nigel had suggested the young man's convalescence might be hastened if he had a quiet room to himself and home-cooked meals for a week or so, instead of having to put up at some hotel in the city. After all, as Nigel was careful to point out, Bill had spent two nights with them before Doctor Knutson had been able to find room for him in the hospital.

Nigel should have left it at that. Della seized greedily upon the idea and made it her own. It was nothing but Christian duty, and it would redound to her credit in the village. She telephoned Knutson, asked him to convey her message to Bill Clifford, accepted the doctor's compliments—"It's a fine thing you're doing, Mrs. Prince, and I'm sure Bill will be grateful!"—and set about, the very next morning, brightening the room with new curtains and a couple of cheerful scatter rugs, and giving it an air of warm welcome. When her husband came home from the office that evening, she sent him upstairs to look at what she had done.

Nigel was pleased. And when Nigel was pleased, he talked too much. He told her she was acting very charitably, indeed. He was glad they were able to do something—and it was very little, come to think of it—for Frank's best friend. That was Nigel's initial mistake—Della had hated Frank Stone. He said Josie would be pleased. He made the grave error of hinting that it would be nice to have a young man about the house again. Della had been listening and her eyes had been narrowing. She remembered all at once that inviting Bill Clifford to occupy the vacant room had been Nigel's idea—not hers, though she had been quick to turn it to her own purposes in at least a half dozen telephone conversations she had had during the day. Had she been

trapped by the mouse that was her husband? Why would Josie be pleased? Had they talked it over between themselves before making the suggestion to her? And what did he mean by saying that it would be nice to have a young man about the house again? Nice for whom? Bill Clifford was still a married man, no matter what was being said about his wife having gone out west to get her divorce. Luckily, Josie was working again, helping to make some kind of surveys for the Labor Department that required her spending days at a time in the rural districts of the State. She usually came home for the week-ends. Well, Della would just have to keep her eyes open. There would be no carryings-on in her house.

Bill himself had a definite sense of relief, when he arrived in Colin Trale's car on that afternoon in late January and entered the house, to find that Josie was away on one of her trips. Already there was too much between them for his own peace of mind. There was the memory of Frank Stone—and of that night of rain among the willows beside the creek where a sacred promise had been kept. But there was more. He had only Molly's word for it that Josie had loitered about Herman Shatts' place on more occasions than one, but he did not doubt it. He could understand it too. He was her one link with the past away from which her heart could not tear itself. She might even imagine herself in love with him. She had visited him frequently during his stay in the hospital, and her voice and her eyes had betrayed far more than the words she spoke. There had been one night in particular, the last time she had come to see him, when she had told him that she had not taken a drink since the night he had come home from the Pacific. Well, that was all right. That was good, and he told her so. But he wanted her to act for her own sake, not for his.

Della Prince welcomed him with large graciousness, and Bill felt the color suffusing his cheeks as he tried to apologize for putting her to the trouble of giving him shelter until he could get out and look for permanent quarters. The sudden quickening of warmth, however, did not confine itself to his cheeks. It passed all over his body, and he realized he was weaker than he had thought when he walked out of his room in the hospital. When he stepped down from Colin Trale's car, in fact, his knees had all but buckled under him, so that he had to stand for a moment to steady himself. He would have to take it easy for a few days.

"Well, what are neighbors for?" Della retorted brightly to Bill's apologies, and he began to feel a little more comfortable.

Even Colin Trale found himself revising his opinion of Della Prince. Perhaps she was not so bad after all. He knew she didn't like him, but that

was her privilege—and maybe the fault was quite as much his as it was hers. He decided he would have a heart-to-heart talk with her one of these days.

"Don't you think you'd better lie down till it's time for supper?" Della suggested to Bill. "You look kind of peaked to me. You know the way—it's the same room—"

"Well, thanks. Guess I will, if you don't mind."

The truth was that Bill felt little compunction about accepting Della's hospitality, despite his private opinion of her. He regarded it really as the hospitality of the gentle Nigel, who had been so kind to him during his brief stay here before. Bill climbed the stairs slowly, Colin following immediately with the suitcase that contained all that was left now of Bill's personal possessions except what he wore on his back—a few toilet articles, two suits of pajamas, a pair of bedroom slippers and a bathrobe. Colin had supplied him with an old blue serge suit, a bit short in sleeves and legs.

"I think I'll stretch out for an hour or so, maybe take a little shut-eye," Bill said. "I'm not good for much, I guess."

"You'll be all right in a couple of days," Colin assured him. "All you need now is a little rest and quiet." He cleared his throat. "You know, Irene and I wanted to ask you to our place, but all we've got is a little stuffy cubby-hole where you wouldn't get enough air. This is a nice room. Funny they haven't rented it out, with people—"

Bill winked and grimaced at the door. "Your guess is as good as mine, padre!" he laughed.

Colin raised his eyebrows and nodded. "The lares and penates wouldn't stand it, eh? Well, I'll drop in and see you tomorrow."

Alone again, Bill undressed and got into bed. He roused from a deep sleep two hours later when Nigel Prince knocked on the door and came into the room, his pinched face beaming.

"Well, this is splendid, Bill! You have no idea—you don't know how good it is to have you back with us. Are you ready for supper? Would you like to come down or—you can have a tray up here, you know. No trouble at all."

"Sit down a minute, Nigel," Bill said and lifted himself on one elbow. "I'm not quite awake yet." He fumbled about for a moment, getting his sleep-dazed wits in order. "There's a pack of cigarettes in my pocket over there. Would you mind—"

But Nigel was already rummaging in his own pockets. Then he was standing over Bill and holding a lighted match.

"This was a grand idea of Della's," he said, lighting a cigarette for himself.

Bill gave him a quizzical look. "You didn't have a hand in it yourself, I suppose?"

"Well, now, I—it was a sort of family idea," Nigel confessed.

Just about the way I figured it, Bill thought to himself, though he didn't say so. He got up and laid his cigarette in an ash tray on the night table. He looked toward his clothes hanging over the back of a chair, then sat down again on the side of the bed and closed his eyes.

"I think I'd better stay right where I am for tonight," he said after a while when the dizziness left him. "I don't think I'd be able to eat anyhow."

"That's all right, Bill, perfectly all right," Nigel said. "You go back to bed and I'll bring you up a tray."

The next evening Bill went down to supper, and the evening after that. On the fourth night, he felt so much stronger that he accepted Nigel's challenge to a game of cribbage in the den when they got up from the table. The old man chuckled at the end of the fifth game—he had taken four of them—and pushed the cards and board aside. Bill knew he was in for another hour of listening to Nigel's talk, unless he could find some excuse to leave without hurting his feelings. Nigel rarely uttered a word in the presence of his wife, but the moment she was out of earshot he swung the floodgates wide.

"Look," he said with his diffident eagerness, "—don't go away for a minute. There's something I want to show you." He got to his feet and took a step toward the door. "You're not too tired, are you?"

"I'm all right," Bill assured him. "I'm feeling fine—for a little while."

Nigel thrust his head beyond the doorway and stood on tiptoe while he listened. Then he stepped back and closed the door softly. He winked at Bill and opened a drawer in his desk. From underneath an orderly pile of papers held together by rubber bands, he brought out a folder which Bill recognized at once as an automobile road map. He leaned back in his chair, the folded map in his hands, and looked at Bill with a puckish smile.

"I'm a very funny fellow," he said after a moment, "—and that's something not many people know about me. Not even my wife knows it.

And I'll bet you haven't guessed it, smart as you are."

"Well, no," Bill admitted, "though I'm not so smart either."

"Maybe we're all funny—only people don't know about us. They see us walking around and going to work and coming home and eating and sleeping, but they don't know what's really going on inside of us. That's what makes us funny. Take me, for example. I'm an accountant. I juggle figures all day long, and sometimes half the night. People know about that. But they don't know what happens to figures when you really get to juggling them. Figures can do the most fantastic things—things you'd never dream of. You can put them together so they make sense to anybody that looks at them. But you can take a second look at the same figures and they start dancing right in front of you. Or they sit up and laugh at you. Sometimes they don't laugh. I've seen the figure nine break down and cry just while I looked at it. I've seen the figure four go down in a heap—all tired out from standing on one leg—"

My God! Bill cried within himself. *Figures or words—it doesn't matter which—can drive a man insane, given enough time to think about them.* He would never have suspected it of Nigel Prince.

"But that's just by the way," Nigel went on. "I'm just telling you about figures because I want you to see that if they didn't carry on for me once in a while—if their antics didn't amuse me now and then—they'd have killed me years ago. Now then—let me show you something else. This is a very different thing, but it's the same, too, in a way." He opened his folder and spread it on the desk. It was the map of Wyoming. "People look at me and say, 'There goes Nigel Prince, the quiet little man who never leaves home—the tidy little man who tends his garden—the good little man who lives with his wife at 107 Cherry Street and never speaks a cross word to his family.' That's what they say, but it isn't true. I don't live here at all. That's what they don't know about me. That's what makes me say I'm a very funny fellow. Look, I'll show you what I mean." He smoothed the map and placed his fingertip on a spot which seemed to be not far from the western boundary of Wyoming. "Can you see that?"

Bill bent over the small print. "You mean—Cody?"

"That's it," Nigel's voice softly radiated. "Cody, Wyoming. Where the Old West still lives!"

"You've been there?" Bill asked, a trifle bewildered.

"I live there," Nigel replied proudly. "I've lived there for—oh, ever since about two years after I was married. I went there soon after Josie was born, and I never came back."

Bill stared at him. "I don't quite get you, Nigel," he said, thinking that this was either a kind of fantasy on Nigel's part, springing from some brief visit to Cody years ago, or—maybe it was just *pure* fantasy.

The little man folded the map hastily and opened the drawer in his desk. "Look at that bundle of folders," he said as he tapped the papers with his fingers. "It took me months to get them together. I routed every mile of the way from where we sit right here in Wahwahnissa Creek, through every town and village right out to Cody, Wyoming. But before that I had studied old road maps for years, where there was nothing but mud and clay indicated. Tonight I could tell you something about every mile between here and there."

"But you've never been there? You've never actually seen the place?" Bill asked. He felt pity, but curiosity, too.

Nigel thrust his map back into place, closed the drawer, and turned to look at Bill with eyes that were dewed with sadness. "I thought you might understand," he sighed, looking at his watch. "Well, it's time you were in bed."

Bill got up and put an arm about Nigel's shoulders. He wasn't really an old man, he thought—only about sixty. He had married not in his first youth. Della, not in hers either, had probably caught him off guard. And so they had had Josie.

"It's all right, Nigel," Bill said. "I think I do understand."

Nigel opened the door and waited below until Bill was in his room, then turned off the stairway light.

It was still early, not yet nine o'clock. But Bill had a magazine on his table, so he undressed and got into bed. Tomorrow, he decided, he would walk once around the block if the weather was good. He had to get himself into physical shape for work. Psychiatrists said that if you were physically well-equipped . . . and then psychiatrists said that if you were too well-equipped physically . . . It didn't matter much, one way or the other. What about poor Nigel Prince? He was not insane, of course. He had merely found a way of keeping his sanity despite a strain that would have driven him to madness had his ingenious brain been unable to devise some form of escape. But he was mistaken if he thought Bill could not understand it. He

understood it only too well. Hadn't he wished himself dead only a few short weeks ago? Colin Trale had steered his thoughts away from that. But even Colin had no idea of how strong the desire had been to escape from a life that was without meaning. Or had he an idea? Deeply hidden within everybody, perhaps, was the longing for escape in one form or another. Some took their own lives when they could see no other way out, but Bill had never had the courage—or whatever it might be called—to contemplate that. He had drunk himself into a blind stupor on occasion, however, and what was that but a kind of death from which one returned to the same fears, the same defeats, the same frustrations? He snatched the magazine from the bedside table and riffled its pages in search of a story worth reading. That, too—a form of escape.

A pretty girl involved in a small-town bank robbery brought a pleasant yawn to Bill, and then he heard Josie Stone's voice from downstairs. At the supper table Della had said something about expecting her tomorrow, and had given Bill a glance which he might have interpreted as shrewd—had he had any reason to look for shrewdness from Della just then. He had said nothing, but he had given a moment's thought to the possibility of finding a room for himself immediately and presuming no longer upon the Princes' hospitality. He had already placed himself under an obligation he would never have contemplated had the circumstances been different. He had yielded to Doctor Knutson's persuasions, in fact, rather than follow his own instincts. If he had known that Colin Trale's house had even had an airless cubby-hole . . .

But there came Josie's voice again from downstairs, and he was about to turn off his light, pretending sleep, when it occurred to him that she must have seen his room lighted from the street a few minutes ago, before she entered the house. He did not want to seem churlish. If she wished to put her head in his door and say hello, there could be no harm in that. He went back to his story in the magazine.

He heard her quick, light run up the stairs, her tap on his door.

"You're not asleep, Bill?"

"No, but I'm in bed."

The door opened and she stood looking at him, her cheeks glowing from the fresh air. Her smile was radiant, Bill thought. *The kid looks swell. Damn it, she's pretty!* He had never before realized how pretty she was.

"It wouldn't be the first time I've seen you in bed," she laughed, and stepped into the room.

"I thought you weren't coming home until tomorrow."

"I wasn't, but I got a chance of a ride in a car instead of the bus, and I took it. I knew you'd be here."

"Sure—and you couldn't stay away another minute. You don't have to give me that hooey."

Josie laughed, stood high on her toes, winged her arms out in the pose of a ballet dancer, then sped across to his bed and flung herself upon it. "I'm so darn glad to see you, I could cry!" she said, her cheek pressed against his breast. "In fact, I think I will!"

Then, as if she had materialized out of Bill's own fears of what might happen, Della Prince appeared suddenly in the open doorway.

"*And* how long has this been going on?" she demanded, her nostrils distended.

Josie leaped to her feet. "This—as you call it, Mother—has not been going on. I just—"

"If you have nothing better to do, go to your own room," Della ordered and held the door wide, one hand gripping the knob.

Except for the struggle Josie was so evidently making to keep back tears, Bill would have laughed. He would have laughed at Della's perfect timing. Her coming at that moment had been no accident. And she was gloating now, no doubt, over the neat way in which she had trapped them. The silly old fool!

Josie was shaking with rage. In a moment, Bill knew, she would fly at her mother unless he could do something to stop her. But just then there came a soft shuffling sound from the hall and Josie buried her face in her hands, her dark hair falling over her fingers.

Nigel spoke timidly from beyond the doorway. "Come along, baby. We mustn't do anything to upset Bill. He has been a very sick young man, you know. Come along, now."

Bill did not move until Della Prince closed the door. Then he flung his magazine across the room and turned off his light.

The next day broke clear and cold. Bill awoke early enough to hear the first stirrings of the household. He heard the footsteps pass his door and go

down the stairs. He knew when Nigel and Della went down. He knew when Josie slipped by almost without a sound. And he knew when, breakfast over, Nigel and Josie went out of the house together. But although he had listened hard, he had not heard a word spoken except for Nigel's perfunctory good-by at the door. Then he got slowly out of bed, sat while he smoked a cigarette, and finally began to dress. He took his time about it. There was no need for hurry in what he had planned to do. When he was dressed, he packed his small suitcase, closed it securely, and left it on a chair at the foot of his bed. From his wallet he took a bill and laid it conspicuously on the dresser, where Della would be sure to find it when she came into the room. He didn't want to offer it to her and have it refused, as he was quite sure it would be. He didn't want to talk to her. He could write her a thank-you note as soon as he got away. It would be all right with him if he never set eyes on her again. For a little while, as he got into his overcoat, he weighed the possibility that Nigel might take offense at having money forced upon him in return for his hospitality. Perhaps even Josie would feel hurt. Well, damn it, he couldn't help it. They would have to understand. They *would* understand.

Della Prince was at work in the kitchen when he went downstairs. Once outside, he hurried down Cherry Street without looking back. At the corner of Jason Avenue, he paused for breath. *Take it easy, you fool*, he said to himself. *What are you running away from?* And because last night he had planned to walk around the block, he set off along Jason. He gave little thought to where he was until he had gone the length of the block and stood at last on the corner of Pine Street. Then he looked across to where Herman Shatts' house had stood. He looked at the jagged parts of two walls that still stood like shattered ramparts above a heap of ashes and rubble partly buried under a drift of snow. Had he thought of it, he must have known how it would look. But he had locked his mind against it. Now the shock he felt was almost more than he could withstand. Somewhere in that tangled, that frozen heap, lay the ashes of a boy's violin—the ashes of a young life that had moved in beauty. Ramparts? No, those broken walls were the grotesque monument some disordered brain had left to remind the passer-by that he walked in a world without design. *And the world was without form and void* —the words came to Bill out of a half-forgotten past. On a racking breath that was more a sob, he turned away and hurried along Pine Street.

At the corner of Roberts Avenue, he crossed the intersection and rang the bell on Colin Trale's door.

"Bill! What are you doing, out at this hour of—"

“Can I come in?” Bill asked.

Colin stepped back from the doorway. “Certainly. Irene and I are just having breakfast, but come on in and have a cup of coffee.”

“You can add an egg to that order, if you have one handy,” Bill said. “I haven’t had my own breakfast yet.”

At the table, he told them what had happened in his room the night before. He told them he was not going back, he would have to find some place to stay where he could pay for his room and board—and he would have to find it at once.

“Why can’t you stay here with us till you find a suitable place?” Irene said. “Our extra room is only a hole-in-the-wall, but if Mrs. Prince hadn’t asked you first Colin and I thought you might—”

Bill protested. He was feeling fine. In a few days he’d be strong enough to get out and rustle for himself again—find something that would hold him until George Panker got his factory back into production again and could give him the job he had promised him.

“Well now, Bill,” Colin said, “you’d better just take it easy. Stay with us while you’re looking for something. I’ll step over and get your bag and tell Della we’re going to have you visit us for a day or so.”

“I feel like a heel!” Bill declared, but Colin laughed and reminded him there was really nothing he could do about it, no matter how he felt.

“You can’t just telephone and find a room in fifteen minutes these days, Bill. You’re stuck with us!”

Colin was laughing, too, when he came back a little later with Bill’s suitcase and set it down in the middle of the living room floor. But his laughter had a different tone.

“Boy, you certainly stirred up a hornet’s nest when you turned your back on Della Prince this morning,” he said. “I’m lucky I got away with any hair on my head. She threw this at me—” he produced the ten dollars that Bill had left on top of the dresser, “—and what she thinks of a Methodist preacher and his wife who would give sleeping room to a man who is being sued for divorce—”

“That does it!” Bill said. “I’ve got to get out of here. Help me find a place now—any kind of dump!”

Colin remonstrated. “For heaven’s sake, don’t pay any attention to Della! She’s not running our lives, whatever she may think of herself. You stay, Bill—”

But Bill wouldn’t hear of it, and two days later he was a “paying guest” in the home of Mrs. Arp, just off Sunway Boulevard, on Mellow Avenue. The place was shabby and run-down, as was Mrs. Arp herself, who nevertheless clung to some pretense of dignity which the old house had long since grown too weary to affect. But the arrangement suited Bill Clifford, who seldom gave a thought to physical comforts during the two aimless, dreary months that followed. Living had come to a full stop, just as surely as if he had died back there in the white hospital room where for weeks he had been surrounded by the impersonal ministrations to the dying and the dead. Perhaps it was his sense of having been the indirect cause of the tragedy that had befallen Freddy Shatts, perhaps it was his feeling that he himself had been responsible for Molly’s decision to leave him, perhaps it was something even deeper, some profound dislocation that would require months to repair. Whatever it was, he knew he could do nothing now but wait. By day, he went into the city and walked the streets, returning to Mrs. Arp’s only when he was too weary to trudge another block. He avoided the village and the people in it. Above all, he avoided the old spots he used to visit when he craved a drink. Twice he had run across Colin Trale and was persuaded to go home with him for dinner. And one evening he had gone to see George Panker and found only his wife Sheila at home. She had urged him to come in, however, and they had talked for nearly an hour before George arrived home from a meeting with Mayor Bellingham. It had been a good evening. Sheila’s high spirits and George’s assurance that there would be a job for him just as soon as the factory opened again, had sent Bill back to his dingy room at Mrs. Arp’s with a feeling that his time of merely waiting might not be so long after all. A small impatience to be working again was stirring within him. It was no larger than some of the buds that were pushing their way outward now on the trees along the village street, but it was there. It was there, and it was alive.

A week later, he walked to the park to attend the public meeting that Mayor Henry Bellingham had called. It was while he was standing by himself among the shadows, listening to the music from the high school band, that he felt the light touch of fingers on his arm and looked down to find Josie Stone gazing wide-eyed up at him.

“Josie!”

“Oh, Bill! Where have you been all this time?”

He laughed uneasily. “I’ve been around. Just keeping to myself mostly.”

“I know you’ve been staying with Mrs. Arp—I saw her in the Flagg grocery one day. But—why haven’t you ever called me—or Dad, anyhow?”

“You could ask me a lot of questions I could answer easier than that one, kid,” he told her.

“You’re not sore at me because of—well, Mother was so silly that night! I didn’t mean—”

Her fingers were still on his arm and he reached over and patted them gently.

“Hell, no! Why should I be? I’m not sore at anybody—unless it’s myself. How’s Nigel?”

“He’s all right. But he—well, he felt pretty awful about what happened when you were at our place—Mother acting up like that for no reason. He would have tried to see you, but Dad is pretty sensitive, you know.”

“Yes, I know,” Bill said ruefully. “I should have looked him up and thanked him, anyhow, for all he did for me. But I’ve not been in a very good frame of mind, Josie. You tell him—”

She looked about her. “He’s somewhere in the crowd. I left him just a second ago—when I saw you standing here all by yourself. Wouldn’t you like to move in a little closer so we can hear the speeches when they begin?”

“Nigel won’t be wondering where you’ve gone?”

“He knows I’m with you. He saw you before I did.” She smiled up at him. “He knows you’ll look after me, Bill.”

Nigel’s confidence in that respect would have been put to a severe test less than two hours later had he seen Bill, with one arm around Josie, battling his way through a mob that had suddenly gone mad. But by that time Nigel was probably too excited to think of anything but the fighting and the shouting and the screaming of sirens. Bill himself had become excited, and Josie was all but hysterical by the time they reached the street.

“Let’s get out of the way,” Bill said and drew her with him until they were on the corner of Walnut Street, a safe half block away from the rioting. There they stood to catch breath while they watched the police and the firemen break up the crowd and clear the park. Then they moved away along Ring Avenue.

"I'd better get you home before Nigel starts worrying about you," Bill said.

"Oh, Bill, let's not hurry. Dad won't worry about me. And I want to talk to you. Do you realize how long it's been since I last saw you?"

"I thought that was the best way to do it. Seeing me would only make trouble between you and your mother."

"There'll be trouble between us anyhow, over something, Bill. There always has been."

He frowned. "Why do you live with it? Not that it's any of my business."

"Why has Dad lived with it all these years? You get stuck with something, and you don't know how to get out of it, that's all. I thought I was out of it when I married Frank and we had a tiny apartment. I should have hung onto that somehow, instead of going home when—when he was lost. But Dad wanted me home."

Bill didn't want to talk about Frank. "You can't compare yourself with your dad. He's too old to do much about it now. I suppose he has talked to you about Cody, Wyoming?

"By the hour—when mother was away. All his maps and letters and pamphlets! Poor old Dad!"

"He ought to take a trip out there, at least, before he's too old to enjoy it. I was thinking about him the other day when I was waiting for a bus at the terminal downtown. Just for the fun of it, I checked at the information desk. He could make the round trip for less than forty bucks. There's a bus that leaves here at eight-thirty in the evening and gets out there in a little more than—"

"I wouldn't let him risk it," Josie put in. "There's no place anywhere in the world like Dad's Cody, Wyoming. There couldn't be." They were approaching the end of Ring Avenue. The heavy-sweet smell of the swampland met them as they moved down the slope. "Would you like to walk along the creek?" Josie asked.

Bill hesitated. No, he thought, not tonight. He could feel a tenseness in the girl beside him, in the way she walked, in the sound of her voice, in the pressure of her hand upon his arm. "I think I'd better take you straight home, kid," he said.

She jerked her hand from his arm and stepped away from him. "I've been making a fool of myself long enough!" she flared suddenly. "I used to

walk past your place at night, hoping I might see you. I even looked in at your window. I used to listen to you on the radio, just to hear your voice. When you were in the hospital, I went to sit beside you every chance I had. And now—when I ask you to walk along the creek with me, all you can think of is taking me home. I can go by myself. I don't want you to take me home. I only want you to—oh, what's the matter with me?"

She turned away quickly to hide her tears, but Bill put out his hand and drew her to him. With an arm about her he held her close for a moment before he could say what he knew he must say.

"Look, Josie," he began finally, "there's nothing the matter with you—nothing except that maybe you imagine you're in love with me."

"But I am—and I have been ever since—"

"Now, just a minute, kid," he interrupted her. "It wouldn't be hard for me to imagine myself in love with you. I haven't been thinking much about that sort of thing lately. I've had other things on my mind. But it would be easy for me to take you down along the creek where we could be alone, and where I could hold you in my arms and make love to you. I'd like to—and I want to—but I won't. I don't want to look at the creek tonight—not with you, Josie. I don't go for—for *affairs*. And if I did, I wouldn't pick you for one. If we ever get together, it will be for keeps."

"I wouldn't want it any other way," Josie said.

"We're not ready for that," Bill persisted. "We're not free. I'm not free. I don't know what it is, but it takes more than a judgment in a divorce court to cut a man loose from—from whatever it is. And you're not free. You've got me all mixed up in your mind with—with one of the swellest guys you and I ever knew. We've both got to have more time, Josie. I haven't messed up one woman's life just to jump in and mess up another's. So I'm not going to take you walking along the creek, and I'm not going to let either of us get into situations like this, where we'll have to go all over it again. Now, let me take you home."

She looked up at him. "You might—it wouldn't matter if you kissed me—just once."

"It would matter," Bill said. "But I'd like to—and I will."

He saw to it that it was a light kiss. But it was also even sweeter than he had feared it would be.

Bill had refused to look at the creek with Josie, but he went alone to look at it the next night, after he learned from Mrs. Arp that Sheila Panker had lost her baby and that someone had tried to burn the factory.

He walked down Mellow Avenue until he came to the concrete bridge over the creek. There he leaned over the side and watched the dark water flowing smoothly away to its destined goal beneath the stars. How many dreams, he thought, had been borne away under those same stars, to be lost in seas of oblivion! And a corny thought it was, he added to himself. What isn't lost in the seas of oblivion?

Yet he was still thinking of Sheila's lost dream when he walked reluctantly back to his room at Mrs. Arp's.

2 The Cardinal Bird

Sheila Panker had slept late. It was almost noon when she awoke to the song of a cardinal bird in her garden.

George had left early to supervise the work of repairing his fire-damaged factory. The work had been under way for the past three weeks and he was anxious to complete it now that the end of the strike was finally in sight and the men were eager to get back to work.

If it were only possible, Sheila thought, to rebuild the ruined house of her body as simply as that. The loss of her baby had been hard to accept, but she had done her best to thrust it into that closed part of her mind that held so much she had to forget. George had helped her with that by taking her hands in his and kissing them softly as he whispered, "There'll be another time, Sheila." When he left the room, she had lain fiercely still, all the strength of her spirit beating violently as with fists to silence the cruel doubts that cried within her. Would there ever be another time?

Two weeks later, she demanded the truth from Doctor Knutson. He had been prepared for the question—he had his answer ready. She wasn't helping herself by brooding over any such possibility. Besides, it was much too soon for any certainty. What she needed now was rest and care. George had done his best to help her then, as he had helped her before. "Don't think about it, darling. We can always adopt one and make it our own." So—he knew! He had been talking to Doctor Knutson. He had known she could never have another baby—known it before she had known.

It had been harder to lock that knowledge away, but she had done what she could. On her first day downstairs, she had got Karl Berg to go to the room that was to have been the nursery, and carry out the little rosewood chest, inlaid with mother-of-pearl, that George's father had picked up in his travels years ago. She did not open it. She knew that everything was there, just as she herself had laid it away piece by piece against the day when her baby would wear it. She did not open it because she dared not. She wrote a brief note to Inga Start and gave it to Ole Bratruud and asked him to take the rosewood chest down to the Coach and leave it there. She had asked Inga not to speak to her of the chest or what it contained. She promised herself she would never think of it again.

That was the day on which Clarence Higgins brought her the cocker spaniel puppy and placed it beside her where she was sitting on the living room couch. Taffy—she had given him the name immediately—was like skeins of sunlit silk, his eyes in perpetual dark velvet mourning while his mouth gaily smiled. He put his feathered golden paws on Sheila's knees, and when she caught him up into her lap he lolloped his soft tongue across her chin.

"Why, Clarence," she said, "his paws are like lovely birds' nests!"

Clarence made that rusty-drain sound in his throat, remarked that the puppy had been housebroken, that letting him out morning and night would suffice, that he had been wormed but should have a distemper inoculation in a couple of months, and that he should be fed according to the instructions he had written on the slip he gave her. Then, before Sheila could properly thank him, the old druggist took himself off with a stern mist in his eyes, and Taffy stretched out long and sleek, belly upward, his tasseled paws in the air, his eyes upon the face of his mistress with a dark and broodful love.

"Baby!" Sheila whispered, and caught him unashamedly against her breast . . .

There had been something odd in Doctor Knutson's manner after he gave her what he described heartily as a "thorough going over" a few days later.

"Have you noticed any discomfort in that hip of yours—any tendency to favor it when you walk—climbing stairs, for example?"

"I hadn't thought of it," Sheila told him, "but now that you mention it, I have felt something of the sort. Getting up out of a chair sometimes—"

“That injury to your spine—” he said after a moment of thought. “And there is such a thing as pelvic arthritis.” He turned to the telephone on his desk. “I’m going to have a good friend of mine look you over. Doctor Samuels has the equipment—an expert’s opinion in these cases—”

Sheila felt herself go pale. “What is it now?”

But he was already talking on the telephone, making the appointment for her, giving her name. He scribbled instructions on a slip of paper and handed it to her. She glanced at the paper and got up to leave. Why ask questions when she knew he would give her only evasive replies?

With the song of the cardinal bird rippling through her open window, Sheila began dressing for her second visit to Doctor Samuels’ office. Three days ago, he had given her a lengthy and conscientious exploration—blood tests, fluoroscope, and X-ray—and had set a time for her return.

The appointment was for three o’clock, a convenient hour since it enabled her to catch the 2:21 bus at the corner and be downtown in time to walk calmly, without haste, to the Physicians’ and Surgeons’ Building where the young, brilliant Doctor Samuels would dole out to her some minutes of his precious time. A quite needless waste of his time, harsh intuition had told her repeatedly since her former visit. But physicians’ ethics—like those of lawyers and judges, she said to herself—permitted no haste. The victim must wait while the evidence was being weighed and the verdict prepared.

George had told her last night that he would have to drive out to Granite City after spending an hour or so at the factory. He wanted to hasten the delivery of some building material he had ordered two weeks ago. Sheila had won Doctor Knutson to temporary silence, at least, so far as George was concerned, about her examination by Doctor Samuels. George therefore did not know that she planned to go downtown today. He would be gone until late in the evening. Sheila could not help feeling relief that he was not at home, where her burden of fear might somehow convey itself to him, adding to the weight of all the anxieties he had been forced to carry during the past weeks. She had told him nothing of her own anxiety. She would face that alone.

The afternoon was gilded to the brim with the sun of early May as she left the house. Across the street stood the buttery curd of a forsythia hedge, and on a shaded slope around the corner from it the unfurling pennants of irises, tiger-striped and purple. A woman in a yard was hoeing her vegetable

garden. Sheila, watching her, almost stumbled over three small children who suddenly debouched from an alley towing a little blue wagon upon which sat a fourth child clasping a protesting mongrel puppy.

Sheila laughed and put her tan doeskin-gloved hand on the thistledown head of the little boy who was bawling out directions to his crew. But the child was too preoccupied to notice her. It was foolish of her to feel hurt, she knew, as she walked on toward the corner. After all, little Jimmie Knutson came to the house almost every day with bones and scraps for Taffy.

The bus approached under the overhanging boughs of the great elms in flushed staminate flower that flanked Sunway Boulevard. Sheila glanced at her reflection in the long panel of mirror decorating one side of the entrance to Clarence Higgins' drug store. Beneath the names of cut-rate toilet soap and shaving cream, bargains of the day, she saw herself—her buff-colored tailored spring suit of sheer wool with its blouse of shell-pink handkerchief linen, her three-skinned stone marten scarf, her absurdly sweet pineapple straw cockade of a hat with its flirt of veil, her doeskin gloves and her purse to match. A week ago, George had insisted that she was well enough again to go into the city and get herself a new spring outfit from top to toe. When he had driven her downtown to the best shops she had, for his sake, feigned a girlish excitement, a laughing giddiness, a vernal renewal, as if she herself were to take part in all the burgeoning of spring. It was rather a shame, she thought now, that such lovely extravagance should adorn so mere a shell. She was so thin that the narrow frame of the mirror all but enclosed her reflection. There were violet hollows under her eyes.

The twenty-minute ride on the bus was a long one for thoughts. Time passed so much more slowly than space. She hoped Ole Bratruud would see to it that Taffy kept away from Rupert Prile's place. A couple of days ago the little scamp had sighted his first squirrel and had given it chase until it had scuttled up a tree on the far side of Rupe's vegetable garden. Rupe, hearing the dog's excited yapping, had come tearing like a madman from his back porch, seized a spade and flung it, but Taffy had spumed himself swift and golden under the Pankers' fence to safety. Rupe had shaken his fist in rage at Ole and had bellowed, with trimmings Ole could not repeat to Sheila, that any dog trespassing on his garden wouldn't live to do it again.

The bus swept past a blue lake on which the first sailboats of spring careened like white kites about to be released into the cloudless sky. Sheila looked at her wrist-watch—seven minutes more before the downtown bus-stop where she must get off to walk to Doctor Samuels' office. Perhaps, after her visit with the doctor, she might go across to the department store

and pick up one of the newer English novels. She had been reading English novels lately. The English really seemed to *own* their language, though Sheila often wondered how they ever found time to use it, so much were their waking hours taken up with eating. Vast sideboard breakfasts, luncheons, dinners, and frequently midnight suppers. And the everlasting, hallowed tea of the British, with bread and butter and jam and cake! No matter how poor the household—an always gracious and often elegant poverty, because mother or uncle had usually left a little legacy of five hundred a year—it was never without a cook and parlor maid and "char." And all their country places and their shootingboxes—what was left of them now, Sheila wondered, after the ravages of war?

She looked from the bus window. Only three blocks more now. For the first time since getting into the bus, she gave a cursory glance about her at her fellow passengers. That cadaverous man directly across from her—he had no eyebrows and looked like a vulture—was he perhaps on his way to consult a specialist, too, steeling himself against the verdict that awaited him? A verdict, perhaps, of doom—no, she must not give in to such morbid thoughts!

She was the first to get down from the bus. She walked off with the pleasant leisure of any woman shopper on a lovely afternoon, merely glancing into this store window—and this—refusing to look back over her shoulder. But she did look, and the vulture was following her. His long, plucked-looking neck was thrust forward, his bald eyebrows jutted forward from beneath his greenish-black hat . . .

Was it time or space that Einstein or somebody else had annihilated? It didn't matter. She was outside the Physicians' and Surgeons' Building again, and the afternoon sun dibbled the mica-flecked concrete of the sidewalk as if it were trying to plant something there.

Perhaps she had been wrong, after all, she thought as she stepped out of the elevator and walked down the hall toward the door that bore the name of Doctor Samuels. Doctor Knutson had told her nothing to justify the fear that had gnawed steadily at her heart ever since her last talk with him. That, of course, was it—he had told her nothing. That was what had started her thinking. If he had told her—perhaps, after all, he had nothing to tell her. Doctor Samuels had told her nothing, for that matter. Maybe there had been nothing to tell. There was such a thing as working yourself into a state for no reason at all.

But when she entered the inner office and found Doctor Knutson sitting with Samuels, she was filled with panic. Why was he there? Couldn't Doctor Samuels have said whatever there was to say? They both greeted her, and Doctor Knutson placed a chair for her. She sat down and began loosening her scarf with shaking fingers. *Why doesn't one of you talk and get it over with? Say something—anything to break this horrible nightmare of silence!*

And then Doctor Samuels was talking—slowly—his eyes seeming to search the thick X-ray film that lay on the desk before him, a needless searching, Sheila knew, since he must have known what was there long before she came in. But he was trying to be tactful and at the same time professionally judicious. She was so young—but it did happen, even to the young—and there were treatments that provided some ray of hope, especially in the early stages. His eyes shadowed over as he spoke the name of the disease—osteo-sarcoma of the left ilium. There was a new treatment, a recently devised technique . . .

But Sheila's mind had already closed itself against what he was saying, even though her ears still heard. Did he think he was softening the verdict by couching it in professional words? She had not told him that her mother had died of cancer. She understood what he was saying. She had read enough about it for that. The pelvic bone would eventually waste away to ashes or vanish in a hidden fog, and there was nothing to be done about it. Perhaps this new atomic age would find an answer, but not in time for her.

She had no sense of panic when she left the office with Doctor Knutson walking beside her. All feeling had frozen within her. She was rigid with the cold acceptance of what Doctor Samuels had told her. They did not speak until they were in the street together.

"My car is just across the street," Doctor Knutson said. "I have time to drive you home."

"Thanks, but I'd rather go back on the bus," Sheila told him. "I took a bus down—I didn't want a taxi. George had to drive out to Granite City this morning."

"Yes, I know. I tried to reach him just before noon."

"I wish you hadn't, Doctor Knutson. And I'd rather you wouldn't discuss this with him for a day or two. I'll find a way to tell him."

"Well, whatever you think best, my girl. In the meantime, try not to worry too much. I know it's easy to say these things, but—"

"I'll try," Sheila said. Her voice was hard, but she couldn't help it. She hadn't meant it to sound hard.

"Good girl! Shall I give you a lift to the bus?"

She forced a smile. "Thanks again, but I'd rather walk. I feel all right."

"You're quite sure, now?" His eyes were sharp upon her, and she could almost *hear* him thinking, *It'll be good for her to walk a couple of blocks and calm her mind*.

"I'm neither a fool nor a coward, Doctor Knutson," she said abruptly and was immediately sorry she had said it. "Oh, please—I know you're trying to be kind to me, but I'd much rather you wouldn't. I'm quite all right—really!"

She started off along the street, past a quaint little English tea shop in the window of which a few pieces of Wedgwood pottery were on display. For a moment she considered entering the place, out of homage to the English, and having herself a spot of tea and some scones. Was it *scone*, to rhyme with *lone*, or was it *scon*, to rhyme with *lawn*? There seemed to be two schools of thought on the subject. Anyhow, she did not go in, because the moment was as substanceless and unreal as she felt herself to be. In a queerly floating trice, she was on the bus again, hurrying toward the boulevard that would take her to Wahwahnissa Creek.

Perhaps she should have taken a taxi home, so that she might have had a cigarette on the way. She didn't quite know why she hadn't thought of it. Maybe she was automatically going back the way she had come, as if she were the same person—or rather as if she were pretending to be the same person.

The bus was not crowded, and she found a seat near the door. Her eyes—of their own volition, it seemed—drifted backward over the passengers, and when they did not find the man in the black hat she breathed a sigh of relief and relaxed for a moment back against the seat. *Looking for signs*, she thought to herself. *You must be going balmy.* Once, in a stifling courtroom, she had looked for a sign. If the judge mopped his brow with his handkerchief in his left hand—but that was before the verdict had been read. Signs meant nothing now. The verdict was in. She was on her way home to George—no, George had gone to Granite City, of course—but to Taffy and the tulip beds and the white-pink foam upon foam of the blossoming orchard, and the grass so newly young again, so piercingly green! *I love the*

black-purple tulips best. They are like onyx inkwells, carved paper-thin and filled with purple ink.

It was only a little after four when she closed the front door softly behind her and began removing her scarf and gloves. The house was in silence, except for an odd commotion somewhere in the region of the kitchen. She stood for a moment and listened, then took off her hat and hurried down the hall. When she swung the kitchen door open, Karl and Ole looked up from where they were kneeling together on the floor. Between them lay Taffy, with a bottle of something and a dish of what looked like egg-white near his limp, sun-satin body.

"What has happened?" Sheila asked in a harsh voice.

"Poison," Karl answered, and the wrath in his eyes could be given no word. "Prile—he put it out in his yard."

Sheila sank to the floor and gathered the puppy into her arms. Her throat tensed against speech, but after a moment she was able to ask if they had sent for a veterinarian. Yes, Karl had telephoned at once and had been told what to do until the man could get there. He was coming over as soon as possible.

"I vass vatching him—in the garden," Ole explained as he stood up and looked miserably at Sheila. "I keep vun eye on him all the time. But I had to go to the shed for some tools, a minute yust, and ven I get back he vass gone. I vent round the house and I call Karl, and ve both look for him, and in a little vile he come back under Prile's fence—like he iss now. Only he's vorse now dan he vass."

The front doorbell rang and Karl rose heavily to answer it. "That must be the vet."

But Taffy nuzzled his frothy mouth against Sheila's throat, rolled back his glazed, reproachful dark eyes, and stiffened in one final spasm.

At half past five, George telephoned from Granite City. Sheila had been sitting at the window of the big bedroom, staring with tearless eyes down at the garden and at the flowering crab beneath which the earth had been newly turned and tamped into place again by Ole Bratruud. But of that she must not speak to George—nor of that other death, that living death, which had come to her this afternoon in Doctor Samuel's office.

She sat on the side of the bed, the extension telephone pressed to her ear and listened while George explained that he would not be home much before midnight. Then he was asking about her, and she was answering him.

"It was such a lovely afternoon, dear, and I took the bus downtown and browsed around in the stores . . . No, I didn't buy anything. I'd rather wait until you can go with me, and . . . Oh, you're having dinner with Mr. Blythe? That's nice, dear . . . No, I'm not a bit tired—I feel fine, darling, only it's lonesome without you . . . All right, I'll look for you about midnight, then." What did George say? There was a hollow buzzing in her ears. "Drive home carefully, won't you, George? I love you . . ."

She set the receiver back in its cradle and got up from the bed, her knees stiffening as she made her way to the window that looked out upon the Prile garden. She took a long, hard breath before she realized that Mary Prile was down there leaning against the fence and talking to Ole Bratruud.

Mary was twisting her apron into a knot. "If I'd only known what Rupe was up to! Do you s'pose I could talk to Mrs. Panker—just for a minute? I'd like to tell her—"

But at that moment Rupert Prile stalked out of his house, down the back steps, and across his garden. "What the hell are you doin' out here?"

"Mrs. Panker's little dog is dead," Mary said, her hand fumbling across one cheek.

Rupert Prile reached out a hairy hand that clutched her shoulder and swung her viciously away from the fence.

"Get back into the house where you belong, you slut!"

Mary's glasses fell to the ground, and Sheila pressed her hand to her lips to check an outcry as she turned from the window. She crossed the room to the west windows, saw the transient beauty of the May beginning of sunset float on its light wings across the garden. She glanced once down at the flowering crab, only in tight bud now but sure to bloom sweetly over the place where Taffy slept while Rupert Prile went his brutal way—as all brutality would go, until the world was cleansed of evil and disease.

A veil seemed to grow dense over her eyes with a strange sense of bubbling at the back of her head as the twilight crept into the garden. There was a box of sedative powders in her bathroom, she knew, a blue-bordered box with Clarence Higgins' label on it. Ten, twenty, thirty of them? How many would be needed for the really *good* sleep? Her mind dwelt upon the problem coldly, while she watched a cardinal bird dip through the trees

outside the window, his gaudy costume as daring as his song. No, not now—not today. George was coming home to her at midnight. And not tomorrow, to leave George waging his fight alone in this little world to which he had brought her because of his love. There would be a time, another time. She would know it when it came. And it would come before the cardinal bird in the garden could sing for her in another spring.

The rain was like wet eyelashes, Bill Clifford thought a few evenings later when he pushed open the door of Ye Olde English Tavern and stepped inside. It was still early, and there were few in the place.

Joe, the one and only Hippocrates in captivity so far as Bill knew, was half dozing, his elbows on the polished bar, his eyes all but closed. Bill edged his way along the bar.

"Joe!"

The nodding head jerked up, the black eyes snapped open, then narrowed to an incredulous squint as he stood rubbing his bluish jaw.

"Beel! No! Whot ees thees I am drimming?"

"You're not dreaming, Joe. Give me a drink."

"Sure, Beel!" He set a bottle and glass on the bar.

Bill looked at the bottle and smiled. "My own brand! You haven't forgotten me."

"Me? Oh, no, Beel. Some theengs I remember as long as I leeve. Halp yourself. Thees one ees on me. So whot happen you stay away so long? I hear you get seeck, eh?"

Bill swallowed his drink. "That's what they told me, too, Joe. But I got over it. I'm feeling okay now. Be all right with you if I get drunk tonight?"

Joe rubbed the back of his neck. "Thees I don' like to see, Beel."

"Suppose I told you a friend of mine is dying?"

"No, Beel!"

"I didn't believe it either. But a very good man whose business is telling the truth told me, and I had to believe it."

"Too bad, Beel. Still I don't like to see you dronk."

"Well, suppose I told you that this friend of mine who is dying is a very beautiful woman?"

"Oh—I get eet, Beel! Well—" He shrugged his shoulders and turned the palms of his hands upwards in a gesture of resignation.

"Sure, you get it, but you get it wrong. So we'll skip it. I'll just go over there in the corner and sit down." He opened his wallet and took out a bill. "That ought to be enough to do it," he said as he shoved the money across the bar. "Set 'em up while it lasts."

He went to a corner booth near the back of the room and sat down to think over what Colin Trale had told him this afternoon when they had happened to meet on Mellow Avenue. Colin had been delicate in his telling—the village knew nothing about it as yet—but he had used that ugliest of words, a word that even now made Bill wince when he thought of it. Had Colin said that Sheila Panker had died suddenly, Bill felt that he could have taken the shock. But Sheila Panker, the beautiful, was dying—of *cancer*. No, not dying! There was dignity in death. Sheila was slowly crumbling. The relentless rhythm of the hours that had once molded her beauty into living form was now intent only upon its patient and irreparable destruction.

"Hippocrates, my friend!"

"Comin' up, Beel!"

Three men came in from the street, and Bill shrank back into his corner as he recognized them. They had once been his friends at the radio station. He did not want to see them. There was nothing convivial in his mood tonight. What he had resolved to do he would do alone. And he was doing it, he reflected darkly. He wasn't drunk yet, but the ragged edges of reality were wearing off. He took his wallet from his pocket and absently thumbed over the bills it contained. He had drawn money from the bank to pay Mrs. Arp today. His fingertips were pleasantly numb. The drinks were having their effect. He counted the money twice—reckoned the balance he still had left in the bank. His brain was still unfogged, clear and sharp as crystal, like Nigel's brain when it poised above some irrefutable computation before the figures began their dance. He closed his wallet and put it away, then tapped his empty glass against the table top.

His thoughts went back to Sheila Panker. He could have loved a woman like Sheila. But that meant nothing. Hell, the world was full of women who wanted to be loved, and men who were ready to love them. He had loved Molly, in his way. He could still love Josie—and maybe he did. He would

know about that later. He couldn't imagine anyone loving her mother. And yet, Della Prince had been loved until Nigel began to dream of cities flung up against far horizons that had never been.

The thing to do, of course, was to get away. Colin Trale had said something about that this afternoon. He was considering a position that had just been offered him on the staff of a small college somewhere in the south. Would he find it there, the thing he sought? Would he ever go? Had Nigel Prince found it in his bundles of maps bound up in rubber bands and hidden away in his desk? Had Brother Pinwinder found it in his religious tracts—or in the Widow Gates? And what was he, Bill Clifford, doing right now? It was the only thing he could think of doing after what Colin Trale had told him there in the street. But it wasn't enough. It wasn't lasting. You were always back again where you started from, long before you'd had time to find what you sought.

His drink suddenly turned bitter to his tongue. He got up from his corner and began walking toward the door. He wasn't drunk. Maybe this was one of those nights when he couldn't get drunk. Or maybe he was. He didn't know.

What he did know was that he wasn't staggering. He was walking down the length of the bar, out through the door, and into the street. He knew, too, where he was going. At the first corner, he turned to the left and strode down the street at the far end of which stood the depot where he always went to get the bus that took him back to Wahwahnissa Creek. He would be just in time to catch the bus he wanted. Only this time he was not getting off at Wahwahnissa Creek.

He presented himself at the ticket window. "Give me a ticket to Cody, Wyoming."

"Cody, Wyoming?" said the young man at the window.

"Why not?" Bill retorted.

The young man looked up. "I was just asking," he said testily.

"That's all I was doing," said Bill, and produced his wallet.

On the bus, he took a seat immediately behind the driver. The rain skittered across the window beside him so that he could scarcely see out. But he knew when they came upon Sunway Boulevard, and he knew when they were passing through Wahwahnissa Creek. He pressed his face close to the window and waved his hand toward the little town lying under the night and the rain.

“I’m doing this for you, Nigel, and for you, Colin—yes, and for you, Sheila,” he muttered.

The bus driver turned halfway toward him. “You said something?”

Bill laughed. “I must have been dreaming.”

Chapter Eight

1 Street Numbers

The ruddy-cheeked farm lad who sat beside Ben Start in the freshly painted green, yellow, and blue Mayflower truck had been provided with a roughly drawn map of the village of Wahwahnissa Creek, his milk route clearly marked in red pencil. Tomorrow Dick Allen would take over this outdoor world and all its weathers, while Benjamin Start would reap the reward of his years of service by taking his place within the shelter of the Mayflower Dairy.

Ben felt a wistful pang at the thought and wondered if he would have so willingly surrendered this comparative freedom had he not married Inga. Well, there was no sense in getting sentimental about it now. He had this lad to instruct in his new job. As he piloted the truck across Sunway Boulevard, from some airy perch to the southward a mourning dove intoned its changeless lament, the first three notes muffled, the last three emerging strong. It always reminded Ben of a song that had been popular some years past. He sang it to himself now: *Down by the O-hi-o*!

"This is Thorpe Avenue," he said as he turned south from the boulevard. "I marked it there on your map."

"I've got it," Dick said, and read off the names of the customers in the block.

"Just nice, ordinary people—never kick about anything." Ben drew into the curb. "You take one side and I'll take the other."

When they were back in the truck again, Ben nodded toward Rupe Prile's place. "Watch your step there, kid. Guy's name is Prile. You step on one of his cabbage plants and he'll take your head off. He's a mean bastard, and you'll probably want to pin his ears back when you get to know him. But forget it. A friend of mine took a swing at him one night in the park and

it cost him twenty-five bucks in court the next day. And he was the mayor's son, at that." Ben started the truck. "That big house is where George Panker lives. He owns the factory over there. He's had his troubles—still has plenty. Doc Knutson says his wife hasn't much longer to live. But George is carrying on, hell or high water. Just about had to, I guess. Half the town depends on him, one way or another."

Front porches, back porches, gateways and doorways, back lanes and fenced gardens—and over all, a dove mourning, ever near, yet ever remote: *Down by the O-hi-o*!

They were in front of Brother Pinwinder's, and Ben sat in the truck while Dick carried the milk around to the back of the house. He decided to say nothing to the boy about the old prophet of doom.

"These places are only street numbers to you now," he said when they were on their way again, "but they'll get to be something more when you've been on the job for a while. Over there, on the corner, where they've started putting in a new basement—that's where a fellow, Bill Clifford, used to live. Bill disappeared suddenly a few weeks ago, but I hear he's coming back one of these days to start a weekly paper here in town. We'll pull in at the next corner, across from the church. Take another look at your map."

"I have four customers here," Dick said, "—including the preacher, I guess."

"That's right. Go ahead, I'll sit this one out." Ben took a pack of cigarettes out of his shirt pocket.

It was going to be another hot day. He hoped Inga wouldn't feel it too much. They were lucky to have a place so close to the creek and the marshland. It was always cool in the evenings, at least. But he would have to begin planning on something else pretty soon. In another month, if everything went well, there would be three of them in the Coach.

"You said you were through high school, Dick?" Ben remarked when the boy climbed back into the truck.

"Last year," Dick said. "I should've made it sooner, but my old man had to have help on his goat farm. He wanted me to stay on with him—we're Swiss, you know. My grandfather changed the name to Allen when he came to this country."

"Why didn't you stay with him?"

“No. Once you get with goats, you never get to see anything else. I’ve seen it happen to my grandfather and my uncle and my dad and mother, down there in the Minnesota Valley, where they’ve got the farm.”

Ben laughed. “A case of your goat getting you, eh? You think you’re going to like this business better than farming goats?”

The boy looked solemn, gazing out at the exultant sunrise of June that was filled with birdsong.

“What I figure,” he said with careful enunciation, “is that I can make enough to put me into college in a few years.”

“What are you going in for?”

Dick blushed. “Oh, I have ideas. Maybe science,” he said, and that was all.

I had ideas, too, Ben thought as the truck moved down the street. What happens to all the ideas that spring from the mind of youth? Even Colin Trale must once have seen himself as a prophet with a burning evangel for the world’s salvation. What he had become, what he would always be, was a good man going daily about among his people, lifting the lowly, bringing solace to the grief-stricken, leading the errant gently back into the path of duty.

As he drove his truck around the corner, Ben looked briefly at the church and the small white house beside it. In the gold wash of sunlight it wasn’t so noticeable that Colin Trale’s house was in need of a new coat of paint.

“Well, hang on to those ideas, kid,” Ben told the boy. “No matter what they are, they’re the only thing that’s worth a damn to you. That’s Red Willow Terrace down there, just this side of the creek.”

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.

Book name and author have been added to the original book cover. The resulting cover is placed in the public domain.

[The end of *Milk Route* by Martha Ostenso]