

# AFTER-DINNER STORY

By  
*William Irish*



Author of *PHANTOM LADY* and *DEADLINE AT DAWN*

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**THE BEST OF  
WILLIAM IRISH**

including

**PHANTOM LADY  
AFTER-DINNER STORY  
DEADLINE AT DAWN**

**J. B. LIPPINCOTT COMPANY  
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THE CHARACTERS IN THIS BOOK ARE WHOLLY FICTIONAL.  
ANY RESEMBLANCE, BY NAME OR OTHERWISE, TO PERSONS  
LIVING OR DEAD IS PURELY COINCIDENTAL.

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## AFTER-DINNER STORY

MACKENZIE got on the elevator at the thirteenth floor. He was a water-filter salesman and had stopped in at his home office to make out his accounts before going home for the day. Later on that night he told his wife, half-laughingly, that that must have been why it happened to *him*, his getting on at the thirteenth floor. A lot of buildings omit them.

The red bulb bloomed and the car stopped for him. It was an express, omitting all floors, both coming and going, below the tenth. There were two other men in it when he got on, not counting the operator. It was late in the day, and most of the offices had already emptied themselves. One of the passengers was a scholarly looking man with rimless glasses, tall and slightly stooped. The time came when MacKenzie learned all their names. This was Kenshaw. The other was stout and cherubic looking, one of two partners in a struggling concern that was trying to market fountain pens with tiny light bulbs in their barrels—without much success. He was fiddling with one of his own samples on the way down, clicking it on and off with an air of proud ownership. He turned out to be named Lambert.

The car was very efficient looking, very smooth running, sleek with bronze and chromium. It appeared very safe. It stopped at the next floor down, the twelfth, and a surly looking individual with bushy brows stepped in, Prendergast. Then the number 11 on the operator's call board lit up, and it stopped there too. A man about MacKenzie's own age and an older man with a trim white mustache were standing there side by side when the door opened. However, only the young man got on; the elder man gripped him by the arm in parting and turned away remarking loudly, "Tell Elinor I was asking for her." The younger answered, "'By, Dad," and stepped in. Hardecker was his name. Almost at the same time 10 was flashing.

The entry from 11 had turned to face the door, as all passengers are supposed to do in an elevator for their own safety. MacKenzie happened to glance at the sour-pussed man with the bushy brows at that moment; the latter was directly behind the newest arrival. He was glaring at the back of Hardecker's head with baleful intensity; in fact MacKenzie had never seen such a hundred-watt glower anywhere before except on a movie "heavy." The man's features, it must be admitted, lent themselves to just such an expression admirably; he had a swell head start even when his face was in repose.

MacKenzie imagined this little by-play was due to the newcomer's having inadvertently trodden on the other's toe in turning to face forward. As a matter of fact, he himself was hardly conscious of analyzing the whole thing thus thoroughly; these were all just disconnected thoughts.

Ten was still another single passenger, a bill collector judging by the sheaf of pink, green, and canary slips he kept riffling through. He hadn't, by the gloomy look he wore, been having much luck today; or maybe his feet hurt him. This one was Megaffin.

There were now seven people in the car, counting the operator, standing in a compact little group facing the door, and no more stops due until it reached street-level. Not a very great crowd; certainly far from the maximum the mechanism was able to hold. The framed notice, tacked to the panel just before MacKenzie's eyes, showed that it had been last inspected barely ten days before.

It never stopped at the street floor.

MacKenzie, trying to reconstruct the sequence of events for his wife that night, said that the operator seemed to put on added speed as soon as they had left the tenth floor behind. It was an express, so he didn't think anything of it. He remembered noticing at this point that the operator had a boil on the back of his neck, just above his uniform collar, with a Maltese cross of adhesive over it. He got that peculiar sinking sensation at the pit of his stomach many people get from a too-precipitate drop. The man near him, the young fellow from the eleventh, turned and gave him a half-humorous, half-pained look, so he knew that he must be feeling it too. Someone farther back whistled slightly to show his discomfort.

The car was a closed one, all metal, so you couldn't see the shaft doors flashing up. They must have been ticking off at a furious rate, just the same. MacKenzie began to get a peculiar ringing in his ears, like when he took the subway under the East River, and his knee-joints seemed to loosen up, trying to buckle under him.

But what really first told him—and all of them—that something had gone wrong and this was not a normal descent, was the sudden, futile, jerky way the operator was wangling the control lever to and fro. It traveled the short arc of its orbit readily enough, but the car refused to answer to it. He kept slamming it into the socket at one end of the groove, marked Stop for all eyes to read, and nothing happened. Fractions of seconds, not minutes, were going by.

They heard him say in a muffled voice, "Look out! We're going to hit!" And that was all there was time for.

The whole thing was a matter of instants. The click of a camera-shutter. The velocity of the descent became sickening; MacKenzie felt as if he were going to throw up. Then there was a tremendous bang like a cannon, an explosion of blackness, and of bulb-glass showering down as the light went out.

They all toppled together in a heap, like a bunch of ninepins. MacKenzie, who had gone over backward, was the luckiest of the lot; he could feel squirming bodies bedded under him, didn't touch the hard-rubber floor of the car at all. However, his hip and shoulder got a bad wrench, and the sole of his foot went numb, through shoe and all, from the stinging impact it got flying up and slapping the bronze wall of the car.

There was no opportunity to extricate one's self, to try to regain one's feet. They were going up again—on springs or something. It was a little sickening too, but not as bad as the coming down had been. It slackened, reversed into a drop, and they banged a second time. Not with the terrific impact of the first, but a sort of cushioned bang that scrambled them up even more than they were already. Somebody's shoe grazed MacKenzie's skull. He couldn't see it but quickly caught it and warded it aside before it kicked him and gave him a fracture.

A voice near him was yelling, "Stop it! Cut it out!" half-hysterically, as though the jockeying up and down could be controlled. Even MacKenzie, badly frightened and shaken up as he was, hadn't lost his head to that extent.

The car finally settled, after a second slight bounce that barely cleared the springs under it at all, and a third and almost unnoticeable jolt. The rest was pitch darkness, a sense of suffocation, a commingling of threshing bodies like an ant heap, groans from the badly hurt and an ominous sigh or two from those even beyond groaning.

Somebody directly under MacKenzie was not moving at all. He put his hand on him, felt an upright, stiff collar, and just above it a small swelling, crisscrossed by plaster. The operator was dead. There was an inertness that told MacKenzie, and the rubber matting beneath the operator's skull was sticky.

He felt then for the sleek metal wall of the enclosure that had buried them all alive, reached up it like a fly struggling up glass, with the heels of his hands and the points of his elbows. He squirmed the rest of his body up after these precarious grips. Upright again, he leaned against cold bronze.

The voice, there's always one in every catastrophe or panic, that had been pleading to "Cut it out!" was now begging with childish vehemence:

“Get me outa here! For the love of Mike, I’ve got a wife and kids. Get me outa here!”

MacKenzie had the impression it was the surly looking fellow with the bushy eyebrows. The probabilities, he felt, were all for it. Such visible truculence and toughness are usually all hollow inside, a mask of weakness.

“Shut up,” he said, “I’ve got a wife too. What’s that got to do with it?”

The important thing, he recognized, was not the darkness, nor their trapped position at the bottom of a sealed-up shaft, nor even any possible injuries any of them had received. But the least noticeable of all the many corollaries of their predicament was the most dangerous. It was that vague sense of stuffiness, of suffocation. Something had to be done about that at once. The operator had opened the front panel of the car at each floor, simply by latch-motion. There was no reason why that could not be repeated down here, even though there was no accompanying opening in the shaft wall facing it. Enough air would filter down the crack between the jammed-in car and the wall, narrow though it was, to keep them breathing until help came. They were going to need that air before this was over.

MacKenzie’s arms executed interlocking circles against the satiny metal face of the car, groping for the indented grip used to unlatch it. “Match,” he ordered. “Somebody light a match. I’m trying to get this thing open. We’re practically airtight in here.”

The immediate, and expected, reaction was a howl of dismay from the tough-looking bird, like a dog’s craven yelp.

Another voice, more self-controlled, said, “Wait a minute.” Then nothing happened.

“Here I am; here, hand ’em to me,” said MacKenzie, shoveling his upturned hand in and out through the velvety darkness.

“They won’t strike, got all wet. Glass must have cut me.” And then an alarmed “My shirt’s all covered with blood!”

“All right, it mayn’t be yours,” said MacKenzie steadily. “Feel yourself before you let loose. If it is, hold a handkerchief to it. That bulb-glass isn’t strong enough to pierce very deep.” And then in exasperation he hollered out, “For the love of——! Six men! Haven’t any of you got a match to give me?” Which was unfair, considering that he himself had run short just before he left his office, and had been meaning to get a folder at the cigar store when he got off the car. “Hey, you, the guy that was fiddling with that trick fountain pen coming down, how about that gadget of yours?”

A new voice, unfrightened but infinitely crestfallen, answered disappointedly: "It—it broke." And then with a sadness that betokened there were other, greater tragedies than what had happened to the car: "It shows you can't drop it without breakage. And that was the chief point of our whole advertising campaign." Then an indistinct mumble: "Fifteen hundred dollars capital! Wait'll Belman hears what a white elephant we've got on our hands." Which, under the circumstances, was far funnier than was intended.

At least he's not yellow, whoever he is, thought MacKenzie. "Never mind," he exclaimed suddenly. "I've got it." His fingertips had found the slot at the far end of the seamless cast-bronze panel. The thing didn't feel buckled in any way but if the concussion had done that to it, if it refused to open. . . .

He pulled back the latch, leaning over the operator's lifeless body to do so, and tugged at the slide. It gave, fell back about a third of its usual orbit along the groove, then stalled unmanageably. That was sufficient for their present needs, though there was no question of egress through it. The rough-edged bricks of the shaft wall were a finger's width beyond the lips of the car's orifice; not even a venturesome cat could have gotten a paw between without jamming it. What mattered was that they wouldn't asphyxiate now, no matter how long it took to free the mechanism, raise it.

"It's all right, fellows," he called reassuringly to those behind him, "I've got some air into the thing now."

If there was light farther up the shaft, it didn't reach down this far. The shaft wall opposite the opening was as black as the inside of the car itself.

He said, "They've heard us. They know what's happened. No use yelling at the top of your voice like that, only makes it tougher for the rest of us. They'll get an emergency crew on the job. We'll just have to sit and wait, that's all."

The nerve-tingling bellows for help, probably the tough guy again, were silenced shamefacedly. A groaning still kept up intermittently from someone else. "My arm, oh, Gawd, it hurts!" The sighing, from an injury that had gone deeper still, had quieted suspiciously some time before. Either the man had fainted, or he, too, was dead.

MacKenzie, matter-of-factly but not callously, reached down for the operator's outflung form, shifted it into the angle between two of the walls, and propped it upright there. Then he sat himself down in the clear floor space provided, tucked up his legs, wrapped his arms around them. He wouldn't have called himself a brave man; he was just a realist.

There was a momentary silence from all of them at once, one of those pauses. Then, because there was also, or seemed to be, a complete stillness from overhead in the shaft, panic stabbed at the tough guy again. “They gonna leave us here all night?” he whimpered. “What you guys sit there like that for? Don’t you wanna get out?”

“For Pete’s sake, somebody clip that loud-mouth on the chin!” urged MacKenzie truculently.

There was a soundless indrawn whistle. “My arm! Oh, my arm!”

“Must be busted,” suggested MacKenzie sympathetically. “Try wrapping your shirt tight around it to kill the pain.”

Time seemed to stand still, jog forward a few notches at a time every so often, like something on a belt. The rustle of a restless body, a groan, an exhalation of impatience, an occasional cry from the craven in their midst, whom MacKenzie sat on each time with increasing acidity as his own nerves slowly frayed.

The waiting, the sense of trapped helplessness, began to tell on them, far more than the accident had.

“They may think we’re all dead and take their time,” someone said.

“They never do in a case like this,” MacKenzie answered shortly. “They’re doing whatever they’re doing as fast as they can. Give ’em time.”

A new voice, that he hadn’t heard until then, said to no one in particular, “I’m glad my father didn’t get on here with me.”

Somebody chimed in, “I wish I hadn’t gone back after that damn phone call. It was a wrong number, and I coulda ridden down the trip before this.”

MacKenzie sneered, “Ah, you talk like a bunch of ten-year-olds! It’s happened; what’s the good of wishing about it?”

He had a watch on his wrist with a luminous dial. He wished that he hadn’t had, or that it had gone out of commission like the other man’s trick fountain pen. It was too nerve-racking; every minute his eyes sought it, and when it seemed like half an hour had gone by, it was only five minutes. He wisely refrained from mentioning it to any of the others; they would have kept asking him, “How long is it now?” until he went screwy.

When they’d been down twenty-two and one-half minutes from the time he’d first looked at it, and were all in a state of nervous instability bordering on frenzy, including himself, there was a sudden unexpected, unannounced thump directly overhead, as though something heavy had landed on the roof of the car.

This time it was MacKenzie who leaped up, pressed his cheek flat against the brickwork outside the open panel, and funneled up the paper-thin gap: “Hello! Hello!”

“Yeah,” a voice came down, “we’re coming to you, take it easy!”

More thumping for a while, as though somebody were jiggling over their heads. Then a sudden metallic din, like a boiler factory going full blast. The whole car seemed to vibrate with it, it became numbing to touch it for long at any one point. The confined space of the shaft magnified the noise into a torrent of sound, drowning out all their remarks. MacKenzie couldn’t stand it, finally had to stick his palms up flat against his ears. A blue electric spark shot down the narrow crevice outside the door from above. Then another, then a third. They all went out too quickly to cast any light inside.

Acetylene torches! They were having to cut a hole through the car roof to get at them. If there was a basement opening in the shaft, and there must have been, the car must have plunged down even beyond that, to sub-basement level, wound up in a dead end cul-de-sac at pit bottom. There was apparently no other way.

A spark materialized eerily through the ceiling. Then another, then a semicircular gush of them. A curtain of fire descended halfway into their midst, illuminating their faces wanly for a minute. Luckily it went out before it touched the car floor.

The noise broke off short and the silence in its wake was deafening. A voice shouted just above them: “Look out for sparks, you guys below, we’re coming through. Keep your eyes closed, get back against the walls!”

The noise came on again, nearer at hand, louder than before. MacKenzie’s teeth were on edge from the incessant vibration. Being rescued was worse than being stuck down here. He wondered how the others were standing it, especially that poor guy with the broken wing. He thought he heard a voice scream: “Elinor! Elinor!” twice, like that, but you couldn’t be sure of anything in that infernal din.

The sparks kept coming down like a dripping waterfall; MacKenzie squinted his eyes cagily, kept one hand shielded up over them to protect his eyesight. He thought he saw one spark shoot across horizontally, instead of down vertically, like all the others; it was a different color too, more orange. He thought it must be an optical illusion produced by the alternating glare and darkness they were all being subjected to; either that, or a detached splinter of combusted metal from the roof, ricocheting off the wall. He closed his eyes all the way, just to play safe.

There wasn't much more to it after that. The noise and sparks stopped abruptly. They pried up the crescent-shaped flap they had cut in the roof with crowbars, to keep it from toppling inward and crushing those below. The cool, icy beams of torches flickered through. A cop jumped down into their midst and ropes were sent snaking down after him. He said in a brisk, matter-of-fact way: "All right, who's first now? Who's the worst hurt of yez all?"

His torch showed three forms motionless at the feet of the others in the confined space. The operator, huddled in the corner where MacKenzie had propped him; the scholarly looking man with the rimless glasses (minus them now, and a deep gash under one eye to show what had become of them) lying senseless on his side; and the young fellow who had got on at the eleventh, tumbled partly across him, face down.

"The operator's dead," MacKenzie answered as spokesman for the rest, "and these two're out of their pain just now. There's a guy with a busted arm here, take him first."

The cop deftly looped the rope under the armpits of the ashen-faced bill collector, who was knotting the slack of one sleeve tightly in his other hand and sweating away like a fish in the torchlight.

"Haul away!" the cop shouted toward the opening. "And take your time, the guy's hurt."

The bill collector went up through the ceiling, groaning, legs drawn up under him like a trussed-up fowl.

The scholarly looking man went next, head bobbing down in unconsciousness. When the noose came down empty, the cop bent over to fasten it around the young fellow still on the floor.

MacKenzie saw him change his mind, pry open one eyelid, pass the rope on to the tough-looking mug who had been such a cry-baby, and who was shaking all over from the nervous reaction to the fright he'd had.

"What's the matter with him?" MacKenzie butted in, pointing to the floor.

"He's dead," the cop answered briefly. "He can wait, the living come first."

"Dead! Why, I heard him say he was glad his father didn't get on with him, long after we hit!"

"I don't care what you heard him say!" the cop answered. "He coulda said it, and still be dead now! Nuts. Are you telling me my business? You



seem to be pretty chipper for a guy that's just come through an experience like this!"

"Skip it," said MacKenzie placatingly. He figured it was no business of his anyway, if the guy had seemed all right at first and now was dead. He might have had a weak heart.

He and the disheartened fountain pen entrepreneur seemed to be the only two out of the lot who were totally unharmed. The latter, however, was so brokenhearted over the failure of his appliance to stand up under an emergency, that he seemed hardly to care whether he went up or stayed down or what became of him. He kept examining the defective gadget even on his way up through the aperture in the car roof, with the expression of a man who has just bitten into a very sour lemon.

MacKenzie was the last one up the shaft, except the two fatalities. He was pulled in under the lip of the basement opening, from which the sliding doors had been taken down bodily. It was a bare four feet above the roof of the car; in other words the shaft continued on down past it for little more than the height of the car. He couldn't understand why it had been built that way, and not ended flush with the basement, in which case their long imprisonment could have been avoided. It was explained to him later, by the building superintendent, that it was necessary to give the car additional clearance underneath, else it would have run the risk of jamming each time it came down to the basement.

There were stretchers there in the basement passageway, and the bill collector and the studious looking man were being given first aid by a pair of interns. The hard-looking egg was gulping down a large glass of spirits of ammonia between clicking teeth. MacKenzie let one of the interns look him over, at the latter's insistence; was told what he knew already, that he was O.K. He gave his name and address to the lieutenant of police in charge, and walked up a flight of stairs to the street level, thinking: The old-fashioned way's the best after all.

He found the lobby of the building choked with a milling crowd, warded off a number of ambulance chasers who tried to tell him how badly hurt he was. "There's money in it, buddy, don't be a sucker!" MacKenzie phoned his wife from a near-by booth to shorten her anxiety, then he left the scene for home.

His last fleeting impression was of a forlorn figure standing there in the lobby, a man with a trim white mustache, the father of the young fellow lying dead below, buttonholing every cop within reach, asking over and over again, "Where's my son? Why haven't they brought my son up yet?" And

not getting any answer from any of them—which was an answer in itself. MacKenzie pushed out into the street.

Friday, that was four days later, the doorbell rang right after supper and he had a visitor. “MacKenzie? You were in that elevator Monday night, weren’t you, sir?”

“Yes,” MacKenzie grinned, he sure was.

“I’m from Police Headquarters. Mind if I ask you a few questions? I’ve been going around to all of ’em checking up.”

“Come in and sit down,” said MacKenzie interestedly. His first guess was that they were trying to track down labor sabotage, or some violation of the building laws. “Matter, anything phony about it?”

“Not for our money,” said the dick, evidently because this was the last leg of what was simply a routine questioning of all the survivors, and he refused to differ from his superiors. “The young fellow that was lying dead there in the bottom of the car—not the operator but young Wesley Hardecker—was found by the examiner to have a bullet embedded in his heart.”

MacKenzie, jolted, gave a long-drawn whistle that brought his Scotty to the door questioningly. “Whew! You mean somebody shot him while we were all cooped up down there in that two-by-four?”

The dick showed, without being too pugnacious about it, that he was there to ask the questions, not answer them. “Did you know him at all?”

“Never saw him in my life before, until he got on the car that night. I know his name by now, because I read it in the papers next day; I didn’t at the time.”

The visitor nodded, as though this was the answer he’d gotten from all the others too. “Well, did you hear anything like a shot while you were down there?”

“No, not before they started the blowtorches. And after that, you couldn’t have heard one anyway. Matter of fact, I had my hands over my ears at one time. I did see a flash, though,” he went on eagerly. “Or at least I remember seeing one of the sparks shoot *across* instead of dropping down, and it was more orange in color.”

Again the dick nodded. “Yeah, a couple of others saw that too. That was probably it, right there. Did it light up anyone’s face behind it, anything like that?”

“No,” MacKenzie admitted, “my eyes were all pinwheels, between the coal blackness and these flashing sparks coming down through the roof; we’d been warned, anyway, to keep them shut a minute before.” He paused thoughtfully, went on: “It doesn’t seem to hang together, does it? Why should anyone pick such a time and place to——”

“It hangs together beautifully,” contradicted the dick. “It’s his old man, the elder Hardecker, that’s raising a stink, trying to read something phony into it. It’s suicide while of unsound mind, and has been all along; and that’s what the findings of the coroner’s inquest are going to be too. We haven’t turned up anything that throws a doubt on that. Old man Hardecker himself hasn’t been able to identify a single one of you as having ever known or seen his son—or himself—before six o’clock last Monday evening. The gun was the fellow’s own, and he had a license for it. He had it with him when he got in the car. It was under his body when it was picked up. The only fingerprints brought out on it were his. The examiner finds the wound a contact wound, powder burns all around it.”

“The way we were crowded together down there, any kind of a shot at anyone would have been a contact,” MacKenzie tried to object.

The dick waved this aside. “The nitrate test shows that his fingers fired the shot. It’s true that we neglected to give it to anyone else at the time, but since there’d been only one shot fired out of the gun, and no other gun was found, that don’t stack up to much. The bullet, of course, was from that gun and no other, ballistics has told us. The guy was a nervous, high-strung young fellow. He went hysterical down there, cracked up, and when he couldn’t stand it any more, took himself out of it. And against this, his old man is beefing that he was happy, he had a lovely wife, they were expecting a kid and he had everything to live for.”

“Well, all right,” objected MacKenzie mildly, “but why should he do it when they were already working on the roof over us, and it was just a matter of minutes before they got to us. Why not before? That don’t sound logical. Matter of fact, his voice sounded calm and unfrightened enough while we were waiting.”

The detective got up, as though the discussion were ended, but condescended to enlighten him on his way to the door: “People don’t crack up at a minute’s notice; it was after he’d been down there twenty minutes, half an hour, it got him. When you heard him say that, he was probably trying to hold himself together, kid himself he was brave or something. Any psychiatrist will tell you what noise’ll do to someone already under a strain or tension. The noise of the blowtorches gave him the finishing touch; that’s

why he did it then, couldn't think straight any more. As far as having a wife and expecting a kid is concerned, that would only make him lose his head all the quicker. A man without ties or responsibilities is always more cold-blooded in an emergency."

"It's a new one on me, but maybe you're right. I only know water-filters."

"It's my job to be right about things like that. Good night, Mr. MacKenzie."

The voice on the wire said, "Mr. MacKenzie? Is this the Mr. Stephen MacKenzie who was in an elevator accident a year ago last August? The newspapers gave——"

"Yes, I was."

"Well, I'd like you to come to dinner at my house next Saturday evening, at exactly seven o'clock."

MacKenzie cocked his brows at himself in the wall mirror. "Hadn't you better tell me who you are, first?"

"Sorry," said the voice, crisply. "I thought I had. I've been doing this for the past hour or so, and it's beginning to tell on me. This is Harold Hardecker, I'm head of the Hardecker Import and Export Company."

"Well, I still don't place you, Mr. Hardecker," MacKenzie said levelly. "Are you one of the men who was on that elevator with me?"

"No, my son was. He lost his life."

"Oh," said MacKenzie. He remembered now. A man with a trim white mustache, standing in the milling crowd, buttonholing the cops as they hurried by. . . .

"Can I expect you then at seven next Saturday, Mr. MacKenzie? I'm at —— Park Avenue."

"Frankly," said MacKenzie, who was a plain soul not much given to social hypocrisy, "I don't see any point to it. I don't believe we've ever spoken to one another before. Why do you single me out?"

Hardecker explained patiently, even good-naturedly, "I'm not singling you out, Mr. MacKenzie. I've already contacted each of the others who were in the car that night with my son, and they've all agreed to be there. I don't wish to disclose what I have in mind beforehand; I'm giving this dinner for that purpose. However, I might mention that my son died intestate, and his

poor wife passed away in childbirth in the early hours of the following morning. His estate reverted to me, and I am a lonely old man, without friends or relatives, and with more money already than I know what to do with. It occurred to me to bring together five perfect strangers, who shared a common hazard with my son, who were with him during the last few moments of his life.” The voice paused, insinuatingly, to let this sink in. Then it resumed, “If you’ll be at my house for dinner Saturday at seven, I’ll have an announcement of considerable importance to make. It’s to your interest to be present when I do.”

MacKenzie scanned his water-filter-salesman’s salary with his mind’s eye, and found it altogether unsatisfactory, as he had done not once but many times before. “All right,” he agreed, after a moment’s consideration. . . .

Saturday at six he was still saying, “You can’t tell me. The guy isn’t in his right mind, to do a thing like this. Five people that he don’t know from Adam, and that don’t know each other. I wonder if it’s a practical joke?”

“Well, if you feel that way, why didn’t you refuse him?” said his wife, brushing off his dark blue coat.

“I’m curious to find out what it’s all about. I want to see what the gag is.” Curiosity is one of the strongest of human traits. It’s almost irresistible. The expectation of getting something for nothing is no slouch either. MacKenzie was a good guy, but he was a guy after all, not an image on a stained glass window.

At the door she said with belated anxiety, “Steve, I know you can take care of yourself and all that, but if you don’t like the looks of things, I mean if none of the others show up, don’t stay there alone.”

He laughed. He’d made up his mind by now, had even spent the windfall ahead of time, already. “You make me feel like one of those innocents in the old silent pictures, that were always being invited to a big blowout and when they got there they were alone with the villain and just supper for two. Don’t worry, Toots, if there’s no one else there, I turn around and come back.”

The building had a Park Avenue address, but was actually on one of the exclusive side streets just off that thoroughfare. A small ultra-ultra cooperative, with only one apartment to a floor. “Mr. Harold Hardecker?” asked Mr. MacKenzie in the lobby. “Stephen MacKenzie.”

He saw the hallman take out a small typed list of five names, four of which already had been penciled out, and cross out the last one. “Go right

up, Mr. MacKenzie. Third floor.”

A butler opened the single door in the elevator foyer for him, greeted him by name and took his hat. A single glance at the money this place spelled would have been enough to restore anyone’s confidence. People that lived like this were perfectly capable of having five strangers in to dinner, sub-dividing a dead son’s estate among them, and chalking it off as just that evening’s little whimsey. The sense of proportion alters above a certain yearly income.

He remembered Hardecker readily enough as soon as he saw him coming toward him along the central gallery that seemed to bisect the place like a bowling alley. It took him about three and a half minutes to get up to him, at that. The man had aged appreciably from the visual snapshot that was all he’d had of him at the scene of the accident. He was slightly stooped, very thin at the waist, looked as though he’d suffered. But the white mustache was as trim and needle-pointed as ever, and he had on one of the new turned-over soft collars under his dinner jacket, which gave him a peculiarly boyish look in spite of the almost blinding white of his undiminished hair, cropped close as a Prussian’s.

Hardecker held out his hand, said with just the right mixture of dignity and warmth, “How do you do, Mr. MacKenzie, I’m very glad to know you. Come in and meet the others and have a pickup.”

There were no women present in the living room, just the four men sitting around at ease. There was no sense of strain, of stiffness; an advantage that stag gatherings are apt to have over mixed parties anyway, not through the fault of women, but through men’s consciousness of them.

Kenshaw, the scholarly looking man, had a white scar still visible under his left eye where his glasses had broken. The cherubic Lambert had deserted the illuminated fountain pen business, he hurriedly confided, unasked, to MacKenzie, for the ladies’ foundation-girdle business. No more mechanical gadgets for him. Or as he put it, unarguably, “A brassière they gotta have, or else. But who needs a fountain pen?” The hard-bitten mug was introduced as Prendergast, occupation undisclosed. Megaffin, the bill collector, was no longer a bill collector. “I send out my own now,” he explained, swiveling a synthetic diamond around on his pinky.

MacKenzie selected Scotch, and when he’d caught up with the rest the butler came to the door, almost as though he’d been timing him through a knothole. He just looked in, then went away again.

“Let’s go and get down to business now, gentlemen, shall we?” Hardecker grinned. He had the happy faculty, MacKenzie said to himself, of

making you feel perfectly at home, without overdoing it, getting in your hair. Which looks easier than it is.

No flowers, candles, or fripperies like that were on the table set for six; just good substantial man's board. Hardecker said, "Just sit down anywhere you choose, only keep the head for me." Lambert and Kenshaw took one side, Prendergast and Megaffin on the other. MacKenzie sat down at the foot. It was obvious that whatever announcement their host intended making was being kept for the end of the meal, as was only fitting.

The butler had closed a pair of sliding doors beyond them after they were all in, and he stayed outside. The waiting was done by a man. It was a typical bachelor's repast, plain, marvelously cooked, without dainty or frivolous accessories to detract from it, salads, vegetables, things like that. Each course had its vintage corollary. And at the end no cloying sweets—Roquefort cheese and coffee with the blue flame of Courvoisier flickering above each glass. It was a masterpiece. And each one, as it ended, relaxed in his chair in a haze of golden daydreams. They anticipated coming into money, money they hadn't had to work for, maybe more money than they'd ever had before. It wasn't such a bad world after all.

One thing had struck MacKenzie, but since he'd never been waited on by servants in a private home before, only in restaurants, he couldn't determine whether it was unusual or customary. There was an expensive mahogany buffet running across one side of the dining room, but the waiter had done no serving or carving on it, had brought in each portion separately, always individually, even the roast. The coffee and the wines, too, had been poured behind the scenes, the glasses and the cups brought in already filled. It gave the man a lot more work and slowed the meal somewhat, but if that was the way it was done in Hardecker's house, that was the way it was done.

When they were already luxuriating with their cigars and cigarettes, and the cloth had been cleared of all but the emptied coffee cups, an additional dish was brought in. It was a silver chalice, a sort of stemmed bowl, holding a thick yellowish substance that looked like mayonnaise. The waiter placed it in the exact geometrical center of the table, even measuring with his eye its distance from both sides, and from the head and foot, and shifting its position to conform. Then he took the lid off and left it open. Threads of steam rose sluggishly from it. Every eye was on it interestedly.

"Is it well mixed?" they heard Hardecker ask.

"Yes, sir," said the waiter.

“That will be all, don’t come in again.”

The man left by the pantry door he had been using, and it clicked slightly after it had closed behind him.

Somebody—Megaffin—asked cozily: “What’s *that* got in it?” evidently on the lookout for still more treats.

“Oh, quite a number of things,” Hardecker answered carelessly, “whites of eggs, mustard, as well as certain other ingredients all beaten up together.”

MacKenzie, trying to be funny, said, “Sounds like an antidote.”

“It is an antidote,” Hardecker answered, looking steadily down the table at him. He must have pushed a call button or something under the table, for the butler opened the sliding doors and stood between them, without coming in.

Hardecker didn’t turn his head. “You have that gun I gave you? Stand there, please, on the other side of those doors and see that no one comes out of here. If they try it, you know what to do.”

The doors slipped to again, effaced him, but not before MacKenzie, facing that way, had seen something glimmer in his hand.

Tension was slow in coming on, the change was too abrupt, they had been too steeped in the rosy afterglow of the meal and their own imminent good fortune. Then too, not all of them were equally alert mentally, particularly Megaffin, who had been on such a fourth dimensional plane of unaccustomedness all evening he couldn’t tell menace from hospitality, even when a gun was mentioned.

Its first focal point was Hardecker’s own face—that went slowly white, grim, remorseless. From there it darted out to MacKenzie and Lambert, caught at them, paled them too. The rest grew allergic to it one by one, until there was complete silence at the table.

Hardecker spoke. Not loudly, not angrily, but in a steely, pitiless voice. “Gentlemen, there’s a murderer in our midst.”

Five breaths were sharply indrawn together, making a fearful “Ffff!” sound around the table. Not so much aghast at the statement itself, as aghast at the implication of retribution that lurked just behind it. And behind that was the shadowy suspicion that it had already been exacted.

No one said anything.

The hard, remorseless cores of Hardecker’s eyes shot from face to face. He was smoking a long slim cigar, cigarette-thin. He pointed it straight out before him, indicated them all with it without moving it much, like a dark



finger of doom. “Gentlemen, one of you killed my son.” Pause. “On August 30, 1936.” Pause. “And hasn’t paid for it yet.”

The words were like a stone going down into a deep pool of transparent water, and the ripples spreading out from them spelled fear.

MacKenzie said slowly, “You setting yourself above the properly constituted authorities? The findings of the coroner’s inquest were suicide while of unsound mind. Why do you hold them incompe——”

Hardecker cut him short like a whip. “This isn’t a discussion. It’s——” a long pause, then very low, but very audible, “an execution.”

There was another of those strangling silences. They took it in a variety of ways, each according to his temperament. MacKenzie just kept staring at him, startled, apprehensive. Apprehensive, but not inordinately frightened, any more than he had been that night on the elevator. The scholarly looking Kenshaw had a rebuking look on his face, that of a teacher for an unruly pupil, and the scar on his cheek stood out whitely. Megaffin looked shifty, like some small weasel at bay, planning its next move. The pugnacious-looking guy was going to cave in again in a minute, judging by the wavering of his facial lines. Lambert pinched the bridge of his nose momentarily, dropped his hand, mumbled something that sounded like, “*Oy*, I give up my pinochle club to come here, yet!”

Hardecker resumed, as though he hadn’t said anything unusual just now. “I know who the man is. I know which one among you the man is. It’s taken me a year to find out, but now I know, beyond the shadow of a doubt.” He was looking at his cigar now, watching the ash drop off of its own weight onto his coffee saucer. “The police wouldn’t listen to me, they insisted it was suicide. The evidence was insufficient to convince them the first time, and for all I know it still may be.” He raised his eyes. “But I demand justice for the taking of my son’s life.” He took an expensive, dime-thin, octagonal watch out of his pocket, placed it face up on the table before him. “Gentlemen, it’s now nine o’clock. In half an hour, at the most, one of you will be dead. Did you notice that you were all served separately just now? One dish, and one alone out of all of them, was deadly. It’s putting in its slow, sure work right as we sit here.” He pointed to the silver tureen, equidistant from all of them. “There’s the answer. There’s the antidote. I have no wish to set myself up as executioner above the law. Let the murderer be the chooser. Let him reach out and save his life and stand convicted before all of you. Or let him keep silent and go down to his death without confessing, privately executed for what can’t be publicly proved. In

twenty-five minutes collapse will come without warning. Then it will be too late.”

It was Lambert who voiced the question in all their minds. “But are you sure you did this to the right——”

“I haven’t made any mistake, the waiter was carefully rehearsed, you are all perfectly unharmed but the killer.”

Lambert didn’t seem to derive much consolation from this. “Now he tells us! A fine way to digest a meal,” he brooded aloud. “Why didn’t you serve the murderer first, so then the rest of us could eat in peace at least?”

“Shut up,” somebody said, terrifiedly.

“Twenty minutes to go,” Hardecker said, tonelessly, as a chime signal over the radio.

MacKenzie said, without heat, “You can’t be sane, you know, to do a thing like this.”

“Did you ever have a son?” was the answer.

Something seemed to snap in Megaffin. His chair jolted back. “I’m gettin’ out of here,” he said hoarsely.

The doors parted about two inches, silently as water, and a black metal cylinder peered through. “That man there,” directed Hardecker. “Shoot him where he stands if he doesn’t sit down.”

Megaffin shrank down in his seat again like a whipped cur, tried to shelter himself behind Prendergast’s shoulder. The doors slipped together again into a hairline crack.

“I couldn’t,” sighed the cherubic-faced Lambert, “feel more at home if I was in the Brown House at Munich!”

“Eighteen minutes,” was the comment from the head of the table.

Prendergast suddenly grimaced uncontrollably, flattened his forearms on the table, and ducked his head onto them. He sniveled aloud. “I can’t stand it! Lemme out of here! I didn’t do it!”

A wave of revulsion went around the table. It was not because he’d broken down, analyzed MacKenzie, it was just that he didn’t have the face for it. It should have been Lambert with his kewpie physiognomy, if anyone. The latter, however, was having other troubles. He touched the side of his head, tapped himself on the chest. “Whoof!” he murmured. “What heartburn! He should live so long, I don’t take this up with my lawyer!”

“This is no way,” said MacKenzie surlily. “If you had any kind of a case  
\_\_\_\_\_”

“This is my way,” was Hardecker’s crackling answer. “I’ve given the man his choice. He needn’t have it this way; he has his alternative. Fourteen minutes. Let me remind you, the longer the antidote’s delayed, the more doubtful its efficiency will be. If it’s postponed too long, it may miss altogether.”

Conscious of a sticking sensation in his stomach, as though a mass of concrete had lodged there, MacKenzie felt a burning sensation shoot out from it. There is such a thing as nervous indigestion, he knew, but. . . . He eyed the silver goblet reflectively.

But they were all doing that almost incessantly. Prendergast had raised his head again, but it remained a woebegone mask of infantile fretfulness. Megaffin was green in the face and kept moistening his lips. Kenshaw was the most self-controlled of the lot; he had folded his arms and just sat there, as though waiting to see which one of the others would reach for the salvation in the silver container.

MacKenzie could feel a painful pulsing under his solar plexus now, he was in acute discomfort that verged on cramp. The thought of what this might be was bringing out sweat on his forehead.

Lambert reached out abruptly, and they all quit breathing for a minute. But his hand dodged the silver tureen, plunged into a box of perfectos to one side of it. He grabbed up two, stuck one in his breast pocket, the other between his teeth. “On you,” he remarked resentfully to Hardecker.

Somebody gave a strained laugh at the false alarm they had all had. Kenshaw took off his glasses, wiped them ruefully, as though disappointed it hadn’t been the payoff after all.

MacKenzie said, “You’re alienating whatever sympathy’s due you, by pulling a stunt like this.”

“I’m not asking for sympathy,” was Hardecker’s coldly ferocious answer. “It’s atonement I want. Three lives were taken from me: My only son, my daughter-in-law, their prematurely born child. I demand payment for that!”

Lambert said aloud, for his own benefit, “Jennie wouldn’t believe this when I tell her.”

Prendergast clutched his throat all at once, whimpered: “I can’t breathe! He’s done it to *me*, so help me!”

MacKenzie, hostile now to Hardecker, tried to steady him just on general principle. “Gas around the heart, maybe. Don’t fall for it if you’re not sure.”

“Don’t fall for it,” was the ungrateful yelp, “and if I drop dead are *you* gonna bring me back?”

“He ought to be arrested for this,” said Kenshaw, displaying emotion for the first time. His glasses had clouded over, giving him a peculiarly sightless look.

“Arrested?” snapped Lambert. He wagged his head from side to side. “He’s going to be sued like no one was ever sued before! When I get through with him he’ll go on relief.”

Hardecker threw him a contemptuous look. “About ten minutes,” he said. “He seems to prefer the more certain way. Stubborn, eh? He’d rather die than admit it.”

MacKenzie gripped the seat of his chair, his churning insides heaving. He thought, “If this is the McCoy that I’m feeling now, I’m going to bash his head in with a chair before I go. I’ll give him something to poison innocent people about!”

Megaffin was starting to swear at their tormentor, in a whining, guttural singsong.

“*Mazzeltov*,” seconded Lambert, with a formal nod of approval. “Your breath, but my ideas.”

“Five minutes. It will almost certainly fail if it’s not downed within the next thirty seconds.” Hardecker pocketed his watch, as though there were no further need for consulting it.

MacKenzie gagged, hauled at the knot of his tie, undid his collar-button. A needle of suffocating pain had just splintered into his heart.

Only the whites of Prendergast’s eyes showed, he was going off into some fit or fainting spell. Even Lambert quit pulling at his cigar, as though it sickened him. Kenshaw took off his glasses for the third time in five minutes, to clear them.

A pair of arms suddenly shot out, grasped the silver bowl, swung it. It was uptilted over someone’s face and there was a hollow, metallic groaning coming from behind it, infinitely gruesome to hear. It had happened so quickly, MacKenzie couldn’t be sure who it was for a minute, long as he had been sitting at the macabre table with all of them. He had to do it by a quick process of elimination. Man sitting beside Lambert—Kenshaw, the scholarly looking one, the man who had had least to say since the ordeal had begun!

He was gulping with a convulsive rising and falling of his Adam's apple, visible in the shadow just below the lower rim of the bowl.

Then suddenly he flung it aside, his face was visible again, the drained receptacle clanged against the wall where he'd cast it, dropped heavily to the floor. He couldn't talk for a minute or two, and neither could anyone else, except possibly Hardecker, and he didn't. Just sat staring at the self-confessed culprit with pitiless eyes.

Finally Kenshaw panted, cheeks twitching, "Will it—will it—save me?"

Hardecker folded his arms, said to the others, but without taking his eyes off Kenshaw: "So now you know. So now you see whether I was right or not."

Kenshaw was holding his hands pressed tightly to the sides of his head. A sudden flood of words was unloosed from him, as though he found it a relief to talk now, after the long unbearable tension he'd been through. "Sure you were right, and I'd do it over again! I'm glad he's gone. The rich man's son that had everything. But that wasn't enough for him, was it? He had to show off how good he was—Horatio Alger stuff, paddle your own canoe from riches to more riches! He couldn't take a job with your own firm, could he? No, people might say you were helping him. He had to come to the place I worked and ask for a job. Not just anonymously. No, he had to mention whose son he was, to swing the scales in his favor! They were afraid to offend you, they thought maybe they'd get a pull with you, through him. It didn't count that I'd been with them all the best years of my life, that I had someone home too, just like he had, that I couldn't go anywhere else and mention the name of an influential father! They fired me."

His voice rose shrilly. "D'you know what happened to me? D'you know or care how I tramped the streets in the rain, at my age, looking for work? D'you know my wife had to get down on her knees and scrub dirty office corridors? D'you know how I washed dishes, carried sandwich-boards through the streets, slept on park benches, all on account of a smart-aleck with Rover Boy ideas? Yes, it preyed on my mind, why wouldn't it? I suppose you found the threatening letters I wrote him, that's how you knew."

Hardecker just shook his head slightly in denial.

"Then he got on the elevator that day. He didn't see me, probably wouldn't have known me if he had, but I saw him. I knew him. Then we fell—and I hoped he was dead, I hoped he was dead! But he wasn't. The idea took hold of me slowly, waiting down there in the dark. The torches started making noise, and I grabbed him, I was going to choke him. But he

wrenched himself free and took out his gun to defend himself against what I guess he thought was a fear-crazed man. I wasn't fear-crazed, I was revenge-crazed, I knew what I was doing!

"I grabbed his hand. Not the gun, but the hand that was holding it. I turned it around the other way, into his own heart. He said 'Elinor, Elinor!' but that didn't save him; that was the wrong name, that was *his* wife not mine. I squeezed the finger he had on the trigger with my own, and he fired his own weapon. So the police were right, it was suicide in a way.

"He leaned against me, there wasn't room enough in there to fall. I flung myself down first under him, so they'd find us that way, and eased him down on top of me. He bled on me a little while and then he quit. And when they came through I pretended I'd fainted."

Hardecker said, "Murderer. Murderer." Like drops of ice water. "He didn't *know* he'd done all that to you; oh, why didn't you give him a chance at least, why weren't you a man? Murderer! Murderer!"

Kenshaw started reaching downward to the floor, where he'd dropped his glasses when he had seized the antidote. His face was on a level with the table top. He scowled: "No matter what they've all heard me say just now, you'll never be able to prove I did it. Nobody saw me. Only the dark."

A whisper sounded: "And that's where you're going. Into the dark."

Kenshaw's head vanished suddenly below the table. The empty back of his chair whirled over sidewise, cracked against the floor.

They were all on their feet now, bending over him. All but Hardecker. MacKenzie got up from his knees. "He's dead!" he said. "The antidote didn't work in time!"

Hardecker said, "That wasn't the antidote, that was the poison itself. He hadn't been given any until he gulped that down. He convicted himself and carried out sentence upon himself with one and the same gesture. I hadn't known which one of you it was until then. I'd only known it hadn't been my son's own doing, because, you see, the noise of those torches wouldn't have affected him much, he was partly deaf from birth."

He pushed his chair back and stood up. "I didn't summon you here under false pretenses; his estate will be divided in equal parts among the four of you that are left. And now I'm ready to take my own medicine. Call the police, let them and their prosecutors and their courts of law decide whether I killed him or his own guilty conscience did!"

## THE NIGHT REVEALS

HARRY JORDAN awoke with a start in complete darkness. The only thing he could make out, at first, was a ghostly greenish halo looming at him from across the room, bisected by a right angle: the radium dial of the clock on the dresser. He squinted his blurred eyes to get it in focus, and the halo broke up into twelve numbers, with the hands at three and six. Half-past three in the morning, he'd only been asleep four hours and had four more to go.

Instead of turning over and trying again, he suddenly sat up, wide awake now. He'd had a strange feeling that he was alone in the room from the minute he first opened his eyes. He knew he wasn't, knew he must be wrong, still he couldn't get rid of it, any more than he could have explained it. Probably one of those dim instincts still lurking just below the surface in most human beings, he thought with a shiver, harking back to the days when they were just hairy tree dwellers. Well, he'd knock it for a loop and then go back to pounding his ear, only way to get rid of it.

He pivoted on his elbow, reached out gingerly to touch the Missis' shoulder, convince himself she was right where she was every night. Blank pillow was all that met his touch, and the instinct that had warned him seemed to be laughing down the ages—it had been right after all. He threshed around the other way, flipped on the light on that side of him, turned back again to look. The pillow bore an imprint where her head had rested, that was all; the bedclothes were turned triangularly down on that side. Oh well, maybe she'd got up to get a glass of water——

He sat there for a while giving his head a massage. Then when she didn't come back he got up and went out to see if there was anything the matter. Maybe the kid was sick, maybe she'd gone to his room. He opened the closed door as quietly as he could. The room was dark.

“Marie,” he whispered urgently. “You in here?”

He snapped on the light, just to make sure. She wasn't. The kid was just a white mound, sleeping the way only a nine-year-old can; flashlight powder wouldn't have awakened him. He eased the door shut once more. There wasn't any other place she could be, she wouldn't be in the living room at this hour of the morning. He gave that the lights too, then cut them again. So far he'd been just puzzled, now he was starting to get worked up.

He went back to the bedroom, put on his shoes and pants. The window in there was only open from the top, so there hadn't been any accident or anything like that, nothing along those lines. Her clothes were missing from the chair, she'd dressed while he was asleep. He went out to the door of the apartment and stood looking up and down the prim fireproof corridor. He knew she wouldn't be out there; if she'd come this far, then she would have gone the rest of the way—to wherever it was she was going. The empty milk bottle was still standing there with a curled up note in it, as he'd seen it when he locked up at eleven. There wasn't really anything to get scared about, it was just that it was so damned inexplicable! He'd given up all thought of trying to go back to sleep until this was solved. All the time he kept rubbing one hand down the back of his neck, where he needed a haircut.

He knew for a fact that she wasn't a sleepwalker, she'd never suffered from that as far as he could recall. She hadn't received an emergency call from some relatives in the dead of night, because neither of them had any. And she hadn't got sore at him suddenly and gone off and left him, because they got along hand-in-glove. Take tonight for instance, just before turning in, when he'd filled his pipe for one last smoke, the way she'd insisted on lighting it for him instead of letting him do it himself, the affectionate way she'd held the match until the bowl glowed red, and that stunt she was so fond of doing, turning the match around in her fingers and holding the little stick by the head until the other end of it had burned down. When they got along so swell, how could she have anything against him? And the interest she showed in hearing him tell about his work each night, the way she drank in the dry details of his daily grind, asking him what premises if any he'd inspected that day and what report he was turning in to the office on them and all about it—that wasn't just pretended, it couldn't have been; she showed too much understanding, too much real eagerness. Instead of lessening, her interest in his job seemed to increase if anything as time went on. They'd never even had an angry word between them, not in five years now, not since that awful night riding in the cab when the door had opened suddenly and she fell out on her head and he thought for a minute he'd lost her.

He stepped across the corridor finally and punched the elevator button. If she'd been taken ill suddenly and needed medicine—but he'd been right in the room with her, and they had a telephone in the place. The elevator came up and the night operator shoved the slide out of the way. This was going to sound dumb as hell, but she wasn't in the flat with him, that much he was



sure of. “Did, did—Mrs. Jordan didn’t go down with you little while ago, did she?” he asked.

“Yes sir, she did,” the man said. “But that was quite awhile ago. I took her down about happast two.”

She’d been gone over an hour already! His face lengthened with anxiety, but it gave him a good excuse to say, “I think I’ll go down with you, wait for her by the front door.” On the way down he swallowed a few times, and finally came out with it more than he had wanted to. “She say where she was going?” He hung on the fellow’s words, leaning toward him in the car.

“Said she couldn’t sleep, just wanted to get a breath of fresh air.”

Reassuring, matter-of-fact as the reason sounded, he couldn’t get all the comfort out of it he needed. “She should be back by now,” he murmured, looking down at the floor. She might have been knocked down by a taxi, waylaid by a purse snatcher, a woman alone at that hour of the night! His face was a shade paler at the thought as he stepped from the elevator out to the front door and stood there scanning the desolate street, first up one way, then down the other. To notify the police still seemed a little drastic, like borrowing trouble, but if she wasn’t back pretty soon—he turned around. “Which way’d she go?” he asked the porter.

“Down toward Third,” the man said. Which was certainly the less safe of the two directions, the other one being Park. They were on Lexington. What could she want down there, under the shadow of the El, where drunks lying sprawled in doorways were not an uncommon sight? He began to walk slowly back and forth on the sidewalk in front of the lighted doorway. “I can’t imagine——” he said a couple of times, for the benefit of the porter who had come out and joined him. He was a pipe smoker, but this was no time for a pipe. He took a package of cigarettes out of the pocket of his jacket, which he’d put on over his undershirt. He gave the man one as well as himself, and then he felt for the folder of matches he always carried in his side pocket. They weren’t there; he’d handed them to Marie when she’d asked him to let her light his pipe for him earlier in the evening, and she must have forgotten to give them back to him. He tapped himself all over; she’d kept them all right, absentmindedly, or they would be on him now.

The porter went in, got some, and came out again.

“I wouldn’t worry if I was you, Mr. Jordan,” he remarked sympathetically; Jordan’s fears were beginning to be easily discernible on his face. “I don’t think she went very far away, she’ll prob’ly be back any minute now.”

And just as the calming words were being spoken, Jordan made her out, coming alone up the street toward them, from the corner of Third Avenue. She was walking very quickly, but without showing any signs of being frightened. As she joined him in the radius of the lighted doorway there was nothing either furtive or guilty about her; it might have been four in the afternoon instead of four in the morning.

“Tsk, tsk,” she clucked comfortingly, “I just know you’ve been worried sick about me, haven’t you?”

They rode upstairs together without either of them saying anything further in the presence of the houseman. Her seedy, shapeless black coat, five years old now, looked as dilapidated as ever; she’d gone out without a hat and her graying hair was even untidier than usual as a result; otherwise she looked just the way she always did. She was carrying a small package done up in vivid green drugstore paper.

When he’d closed the door on the two of them once more, Jordan turned to her: “What on earth made you do that? You gave me a good stiff fright, I can tell you that!” There was no melodrama in the way he said it and no melodrama in the way she answered, just a man and wife talking something over quietly.

“I felt I just had to get some fresh air into my lungs,” she said simply. “I’d been lying there two solid hours without being able to close my eyes. You must have woke up right after I left,” she said casually.

He stopped unlacing his shoes and looked up at her in surprise. “Why, he said you’d been gone nearly an hour!”

“Well I like that!” she said in mild indignation. “What ails him anyway? I wasn’t out of the house fifteen minutes all told—just once around the block and then I stopped in at that all-night druggist on Third, Geety’s, and bought a box of aspirin.” She unwrapped it virtuously and showed it to him. “Are you going to take my word for it, Harry Jordan, or that no-account employee downstairs?” she demanded, but without heat. “My stars, I ought to know how long I was gone, I’m not that feeble-minded!” All this, in an easygoing drawl between the two of them, without any emphasis or recrimination.

“Forget it, Marie,” he said good-naturedly, bending over his shoes once more. “He must have dozed off for a minute and lost track of the time.” He yawned cavernously. The thin eerie wail of a fire truck came floating in on the still night air, but from such a great distance that it sounded miles away; it must have been at least two or three blocks to the east, Second or Third Avenue. “All set?” droned Jordan sleepily, and without waiting for any answer he snapped the lights out. Almost before the current had left the

filaments he was sleeping the sleep of the just, now that his good wife was back at his side.

He was a little dopey next day at the office from the unaccustomed break in his sleep the night before, but there wasn't much to do, just type out the report he'd made on that blaze the week before up in Washington Heights. The building had still been under construction, within an ace of completion, when it was mysteriously gutted and just the walls left standing. Neither his own investigation nor the report of the Fire Marshal's office had been able to unearth any evidence that the fire was incendiary: that is to say, deliberate instead of accidental. True, there had been some vague reports of labor trouble, but he had tracked them down and found them to be absolutely groundless; there had been no difficulties of any kind between the contractors and the labor union. Another thing, the blaze had taken place on a Sunday evening, a full day and a half after the workmen had knocked off.

It had been fairly easy to trace its point of origin. One apartment, on the ground floor, had been completed and opened for inspection to prospective tenants. Marie herself, for that matter, had been up there to look at it; she'd been heartbroken when he told her the next day what had happened. As he reconstructed it, some careless visitor had tossed a cigarette into a closet while being shown through the layout. The renting agent had locked up and gone home at six, taking the key with him, and the fire had smoldered away in there for the next two hours. The night watchman had no key to the place, so that absolved him of responsibility. He'd discovered it through the windows around eight.

All this was in the notes Jordan had prepared for his report. His reports were never questioned. If they said "Pay," the company paid; if they said "No Indemnity," the company told its legal talent to stand by for action. Harry Jordan was its best investigator. He slipped a sheet of stationery letterheaded "Hercules Mutual Fire Insurance Corporation" under the roller of the typewriter and began laboriously picking out letters on the keyboard with two fingers. He always hated this part of the job; it was with hopeful anticipation therefore that he looked up as the president's secretary halted beside him. "E. P. would like to see you in his office as soon as you're through.

"This can wait," he said, gratefully, and went in through a frosted-glass door.

"Morning," Parmenter said. "Read about that awful thing on the upper East Side?"

“I got away late this morning, didn’t get a look at my paper,” Jordan admitted. Parmenter showed him his, folded back to the third page. “That’s us, you know,” he added, while Jordan moved his lips soundlessly down the column. The latter looked up, startled. “One of those old-law tenements; I didn’t know we covered——”

“We did this time,” Parmenter told him gloomily. “The bank had taken it over for an investment, tinkered with it a little, slapped on a little paint, replaced the vertical escapes with horizontals so technically it was no longer strictly old-law. It didn’t pan out as well as they’d expected, so they turned it over to a guy named Lapolla, and he had even more extensive remodeling scheduled for the latter part of this month, soon as they could dispossess the remaining tenants. Well, on the strength of that we sold him coverage. He just called me a little while ago, tearing out his hair by the handfuls. Place is a complete wreck and if it hadn’t been for the new escapes, incidentally, everyone on the upper floors would have been cremated alive. As it is there’s three or four of them in the hospital right now with second degree burns.” He motioned with the folded paper. “According to this it started behind the stairs on the ground floor. They have it listed as ‘suspicious origin.’ ”

“You think it smells sort of funny yourself, that it?” asked Jordan.

“Not from the angle of Lapolla, as beneficiary, trying to pull a fast one on us—take out insurance and then commit arson on his own property; we’ve been handling him off and on since ’31. He’s straight. But there’s always this thought: the type people living in a dump like that would be ignorant enough to resent being cleared out for the remodeling, and one of ’em might have tried to get even with the landlord. Anyway, Jordan, you know what to do, give the premises a look-see, get depositions from the janitor and whoever was in the building at the time—or as soon as they’re in a condition to make any. Track down this ‘suspicious origin’ tag the paper has given it for all it’s worth, and if you find any evidence——” But Jordan was already closing the frosted-glass door behind him, the paper wedged in his pocket.

Burned buildings were nothing new to him, but this one was a complete mess, and the teeming tenements all around it only gave its exploded blackened window-spaces an added touch of grisliness. Not a pane of glass, not a splinter of frame, had been left in the whole façade; it was just a shell, and already they had the ropes up to bring down the front wall before nightfall.

“Investigator for the underwriters,” he said, and they let him through the barrier as soon as he’d produced his credentials.

“Three-alarmer,” said his departmental escort, flashing his torch down the nightmare hallway from just within the entrance. “I still don’t know how we got ’em all out, even with the nets. I tell you, if it had happened a month sooner before the new escapes had been tacked on, it woulda made history. Mushroomed up the well, like most of ’em do.” He turned his flash upward and the beam lost itself out of sight. There was no ceiling to stop it, just a weird network of charred beams through which the open sky peered from six stories above, where the roof had fallen through and disintegrated on its way down like something strained through a succession of sieves.

“Anything phony looking about it?” asked Jordan. He edged forward along the fresh planking that had been laid between the doorway and the skeletonized staircase.

“Why would there have to be?” was the answer. “The way they leave their baby carriages parked behind the stairs . . . you can count the frames of four of ’em back there right now, and cripes knows what other junk was piled on ’em that’s just ashes now! That’s begging for it to happen!”

“That where it started, you think?”

“Must’ve. The basement under us wasn’t touched, and fire eats up, not down— Hey, stay back here, those stairs would fold up if a cat tried to walk on ’em!”

“Lemme that a minute,” said Jordan, reaching for the torch. “I’m not going up, I just want to take a look behind ’em. Nothing ever happened to me yet in one of these places.”

He sidled forward to the end of the plank, then got off it onto the original flooring, which was ankle-deep in debris that had fallen from above but hadn’t given way on this floor. Testing it each step of the way before he put his weight down on it, he advanced slowly to what had been the back of the hall. The torch revealed a number of tortured metal frames, upthrust under the stairs, that had once been the hoops enclosing baby carriages. The heat here must have been terrific at the height of the blaze; the door that had once led downward to the basement was completely burned away. An iron knob and two twisted hinges were all that remained to show there had been one. The steps going down were brick however; they remained.

“C’mon back,” the assistant marshal said irritably, “before you bring the whole works down on us!”

Jordan got down on his heels and began to paw about, using the rib of an umbrella for a poker. Fine ash, that had once been the pillows and blankets lining the carriages, billowed up, tickling his nostrils. He sneezed and blew a little round clear space on the charred floor boards.

It was when he had straightened up and turned to go, and had already shifted the torch away, that he first saw it. It sent up a dull gleam for an instant as the light flickered over it. He turned back to it with the flash, lost track of it at first, then finally found it again. It had fallen into one of the springs of the erstwhile perambulators and adhered there, soldered on by the heat like a gob of yellow-brown chewing gum. He touched it, pried it loose with a snap, it came off hard as a rock. It was, as a matter of fact, very much like a pebble, but it was metal, he could see that. He was going to throw it away, but when he scratched the surface of it with his thumbnail, it showed up brighter underneath, almost like gold. He found his way back to the fire marshal and showed it to him.

“What do you make of this?”

The marshal didn't make very much of it.

“One of the bolts or gadgets on one of them gocarts, melted down, that's all,” he said.

But it obviously wasn't one of the “bolts or gadgets” or it wouldn't have fused with the heat like that, the rest of the springs and frames hadn't; and what metal was softer than iron and yellow—but gold? He slipped it into his pocket. A jeweler would be able to tell him in a minute—not that that would prove anything, either.

“What time was the alarm sent in?” he asked the marshal.

“The first one came in at the central station about 3:30, then two more right on top of it.”

“Who turned the first one in, got any idea?”

“Some taxi driver—he's got an early morning stand down at the next corner.”

Jordan traced the cab man to the garage where he bedded his car. He caught him just as he was leaving on a new shift.

“I heard glass bust,” he said, “and first I thought it was a burglary, then when I look I see smoke steaming out.”

“Had you seen anyone go in or leave before that happened?”

“Tell you the truth, I was reading by the dashlight, didn't look up onct until I heard the smash.”

At the emergency ward, where the three worst sufferers had been taken, Jordan found none in a condition to talk to him. Two were under morphine and the third, a top floor tenant named Dillhoff, swathed in compresses steeped in strong tea to form a protective covering replacing burned-away tissue, could only stare up at him with frightened eyes above the rim of the gauze that muffled even his face. His wife, however, was there at the bedside.

“Yah, insurance!” she broke out hotly when Jordan had introduced himself. “He gets his money—but vot do I get if my man diess?”

He let her get that out of her system first, then—“Some of those people that Lapolla forced to vacate were pretty sore, weren’t they? Did you ever hear any of them make any threats, say they’d get even?”

Her eyes widened as she got the implication. “Ach, no, no!” she cried, wringing her hands, “we vas all friends togedder, they would not do that to those that shtayed behind! No, they vas goot people, poor maybe, but goot!”

“Was the street door left open at nights or locked?”

“Open, always open.”

“Then anybody could have walked into the hallway that didn’t belong there? Did you, at any time during the past few days, pass anyone, notice anyone, in the hall or on the stairs that didn’t live in the house?”

Not a soul. But then she never went out much, she admitted.

He left on that note, got in touch with the rewrite man who had shaped the account sent in by the reporter who had covered it. “What’d he say that made you people label it ‘suspicious origin?’ ”

“I put that in myself for a space-filler,” the writer admitted airily. “Anything with three alarms, it don’t hurt to give it a little eerie atmosphere \_\_\_\_\_”

Jordan hung up rather abruptly, his mouth a thin line. So he’d been on a wild-goose chase all day, had he, on account of the careless way some city rooms tossed around phrases! There wasn’t a shred of evidence, as far as he’d been able to discover, that it was anything but accidental.

Parmenter, when he went back at five after seeing Lapolla and getting a statement from the Chief Fire Marshal himself, nodded in agreement after listening to him outline the results of his investigation.

“Make out your report,” he said briefly, “I’ll see that a check’s sent to Lapolla as soon as he files his claim.”

Jordan wound up both reports, the one he'd been working on that morning and the new one, then went home; still heartily disgusted with the methods of city journalism. The kid scuffled to the door to let him in, gamboled about him. Marie planted an amiable kiss on his cheek. "Something you like dear—giblets," she beamed.

It was when she turned her head to reach for something behind her, near the end of the meal, that he looked twice at her neck. "Something missing on you toni——"

She touched her throat absently. "Oh, I know—my locket, isn't that what you mean?"

"What'd you do, lose it?"

"No," she said slowly, "it finally came off, after all these years. I left it at the jeweler's to be fixed."

"That reminds me——" he said, and touched his side pocket.

"Reminds you of what?" she asked calmly.

"Oh nothing, never mind," he answered. If it was worth anything, gold, maybe the jeweler'd give him some trinket in exchange he could surprise her with. He got up and went out again right after the meal, said he'd be right back.

"My wife's locket ready yet?" he asked the little skullcapped man behind the counter.

"What locket?" was the tart response. "She left no locket with me. I haven't seen your wife in three months, Mr. Jordan."

Must've been some other shop then. He coughed to cover up the mistake. "Well as long as I'm in here, take a look at this. Worth anything?" He spilled the shapeless calcinated blob of metal onto the glass counter. The old man screwed a glass into his eye, touched a drop of nitric acid to it, nodded.

"Yop, it's gold. Wait, I find out if it's solid or just plated."

He took a file, began to scrape it back and forth across the surface. There was a tiny click, as though he'd broken it. He turned back to Jordan, holding his palm out in astonishment to show him. There were two blobs now instead of one, both identical in outline but thinner; two halves of what had been a locket before it fused together in the fire. A little powdered glass dribbled off one, like sugar, as the jeweler moved his hand.

"What's that, there?" said Jordan, pointing to a scorched oval of paper adhering to one side. "Lemme use that glass a minute!"



With the naked eye it was just a brown blank, like undeveloped film; under the glass a dim outline revealed itself.

“Haven’t you got anything stronger? Get me a magnifying glass.”

The jeweler came hurrying back with it, Jordan got the thing in focus under it, and suddenly found himself looking at a dimmed snapshot of his own kid, taken at the age of three or four. He didn’t say a word, just gave a peculiar heaving snort down his nose, like a horse drinking water. There couldn’t be any mistake, it was no optical illusion, the glass played up the engraved lettering on the inside of the other half-locket: “H. J. to M. J. 1925.”

He heard some other guy walk out of the shop saying to the jeweler he didn’t want to sell it after all; it must have been himself, because here he was on his way back home with it again. He didn’t say a word when he got in, just sat there reading the account of the fire in the morning’s paper over and over, and shivering a little more each time. Finally he put the crusher on that by getting up and pouring himself a shot from the bottle in the closet.

“What jeweler’d you leave that locket with?” he asked her quietly.

She looked up from one of the kid’s stockings she was darning. “Old man Elias,” she answered, unhesitatingly. “He’s the only one I know of around here.”

He’d just been there. He didn’t say another word for the next hour. Then, very slowly, around eleven he took out his pipe for his usual last smoke. He had to keep his wrists from trembling as he reached for the tobacco tin, filled the bowl, pressed it in with his thumb. His lashes were low over his eyes the whole time, it was hard to tell where he was looking. He took a folder of matches out of his pocket, she came right over to him with a housewifely smile. “No, no, that’s my job,” she said. She lit the pipe for him and then she turned the flickering match upside-down, deftly pinched it at the head, and let it burn itself up to a finish. He kept looking down his nose at the bowl of his pipe, and beyond, to where her other hand was. You could only see a quarter of the match folder now; her hand covered the rest. You couldn’t see it at all now, it had been tucked completely out of sight. She straightened up and moved around the room. She’d forgotten to give him his matches back, as she had the night before. His face was moist sitting there, as if the room were too warm. He got up and went to bed, leaving on his socks and trousers under the covers.

She stayed in the kitchen for a while, and then she came in carrying a cup and saucer with steam coming from it. “Harry,” she said, “I want you to

try some of this, just to make sure of getting a good night's sleep. The druggist I was speaking to last night recommended——”

“You seem to need it, not me,” he said dryly.

“I just had mine out there,” she assured him. “Now don't let it get cold ——”

He took the cup from her, sat up, keeping the covers around his shoulders with one hand. “Well, bring me the box and let me see what it is, I like to know what I'm swallowing.”

She turned and went out again docilely. He promptly thrust one leg far out, flipped up the lid of the radiator cover, and emptied the cup into the humidifying pan below.

“Tasted swell,” he said, handing the cup back when she returned with a can marked “Ovaltine.” He gave her a wretched grimace that was the closest he could get to a grin. “Just like in the ads,” he said, and flopped limply back on the pillow. The lights went out.

She came in again in about half an hour and bent over him, listening. “Harry,” she said guardedly, “Harry,” and even shook him a little by the shoulder. He didn't move. “It sure was supposed to be strong, all right!” he thought. He heard the front door close, and he reared up, shoved his feet into his shoes, whipped on his coat, and made for the door. He heard the elevator slide open and close again outside just as he got there. He tore the flat-door open, attempted to catch the elevator before it went down, then stopped short. Stop her? What good would it do to stop her? She'd only say she couldn't sleep again, like last night, and he'd end up by half believing her himself. He had to find out once and for all, make sure, and there was only one way to do that.

He waited till the red shaft light went out before he rang to bring the car back again. It flashed on again, white, and the porter gave him a surprised look when he saw who it was. There wasn't a joke in poor Jordan's whole system, but he managed to force one out nevertheless. “Insomnia seems to be catching.” The porter smirked. He didn't believe him, and Jordan didn't blame him.

She was still in sight when he got to the door, hugging the building-line as she walked. Third again, where the houses weren't fireproof and there were no doormen. He waited until she'd turned the corner before he started out from their own place, because if she should look back—the porter was right beside him the whole time, wondering what it was all about. Jordan covered the pause by pretending to scrape something off the sole of his shoe

that wasn't there at all. When he finally got to the corner she was already two blocks up, avenue blocks being shorter than the lateral ones. He crossed over to the other side, so he could get closer to her without being conspicuous, then crept up until he was just half a block behind her, she on the west side, he on the east. The El pillars kept coming between them like a sort of sparse picket fence, and then there were occasional barber poles and empty glass sidewalk display cases to screen him. But she never once looked around.

When she got to the corner where the scene of the fire was, ten blocks north of where they lived, she stopped, and he saw her stand there gazing down the street at the wrecked building. The front wall had been pulled down by now, but the side walls were still up, with an occasional floor beam to link them. It was almost as if she was gloating, the way she stood there devouring the scene, and it was the deadest giveaway ever, that she knew what it was, that she'd been there once before.

He put his hand to his windpipe, as if he couldn't get enough air in, and turned his head sickly away. Any shred of hope he may have had until now, that she'd lost the locket and someone living in that house had picked it up and carried it there to lose it a second time in the fire, was swept remorselessly away; no room any more for benefit of doubt.

She started on again, so he did too. Why didn't she turn back, wasn't it bad enough, what she'd done already? Was she going to do it over again, the very night after? But hope springs eternal, and a minute after she'd damned herself irrevocably by standing there staring at her handiwork, he was again trying to find an out for her in his own mind. She had undoubtedly been there the night before—there was no denying that—but could she have come home so calm after she had *purposefully* done a thing like that? Nobody could. It must have been accidental. She might have had to light a match to find her way downstairs, thrown it over the banisters, and gone away without realizing what she'd done. Or someone else had done it, right after she left. She might have been visiting some indigent relative or black sheep that she didn't want him to know about, given them the locket to turn into cash, and then fibbed about it to him; even the best of women kept certain things like that from their husbands at times. It was that alone that kept him from swiftly overtaking, stopping her. Only why didn't she go home, why in God's name didn't she go home now?

Instead she went two blocks further, then abruptly, as if on the spur of the moment, she chose a side street to the right, leading down toward Second Avenue. Again, he took the opposite side of the street, but hung back

a little, since it was much narrower than the north-south artery. It was a neighborhood of decrepit, unprotected tenements, all crammed from basement to roof with helpless sleepers, and his spine turned cold as ice as he darted in and out from doorway to doorway after her. And at each moldy entrance that she herself passed, her head would turn a little and she'd glance in, he couldn't help noticing. Past Second she went, all the way to First, and then without warning she doubled back, began to retrace her steps. He shrank back into the nearest doorway and flattened himself there, to let her go by. At last, he breathed with relief, she was going home. And then the horrid thought occurred—had she just been reconnoitering, trying to pick the right spot for her ghastly act?

There was not even a taxi driver around this time; the street, the whole zone, was dead. She passed a building that was vacant, that had been foreclosed and doomed to demolition perhaps, whose five floors of curtainless windows stared blankly forth, most of the lower panes broken by ball-playing kids. She had passed it once before. Now suddenly, just as she came abreast of it, the blackness of its yawning entry-way seemed to suck her in. One minute she was there in full view on the sidewalk, the next she had vanished; she was gone like a puff of smoke, and he shuddered at the implication.

He came out of his retreat and started crossing diagonally toward where she had gone in. As he neared it he quickened his steps, until he was nearly running. He looked in from the sidewalk; it was like trying to peer through black velvet. He stepped in, treading softly, one hand out before him. Something suddenly slashed across his waist and he nearly folded up like a jackknife. One hand pressed to the excruciating stomach pain that resulted, he explored the obstacle with the other. The front door had evidently been stolen off its hinges, carted away for firewood. In place of it the new owners or the police had nailed up a number of slats to keep out intruders, all but the middle one of these had also been yanked away, and you could either slip in under it or, rather foolishly, climb up over it. He ducked below it, went soft-shoeing down the musty hall, keeping the wall at his shoulder to guide him, stopping every other minute to listen, trying to find out where she had gone.

Suddenly the thin glow of a match showed ahead, far down at the other end of the hall. Not the flame itself—that was hidden—just its dimmer reflection, little more than darkness with motes of orange in it. It was coming from behind the staircase; so too, before he could take even another step forward, was the rattling and scuffling of dry papers, then the ominous sound of a box being dragged across the floor. He plunged forward, still keeping his heels clear of the ground. The match glow went out once before

he got there, then a second one immediately replaced it. He turned the corner of the staircase base and stopped dead——

He saw it with his own eyes; caught her in the very act, red-handed, killing all condonation, all doubt, once and for all. She had dragged a box filled with old newspapers into the angle formed by the two walls of the little alcove just under and behind the long tinder-dry wooden staircase that went up five stories, with a broken skylight above to give it a perfect flue. He saw the lighted match leave her hand, fall downward into the box, saw a second one flare and follow it with the quickness that only a woman can give such a gesture, saw her preparing to strike a third one on the sandpaper.

He caught her with both hands, one at the wrist, the other just under the thick knot of hair at the back of her neck. She couldn't turn, gave a sort of heave that was half vocal and half bodily, and billowed out like a flag caught in a high wind. He flung her sideways and around to the back of him, let go his hold, and heard her stumble up against the wall. The silence of the two of them only added to the horror of the situation, in a gloom that was already beginning to be relieved by yellow flashes coming up from the box, each time higher than before. He kicked it further out with the back of his heel, to where he could get at it, then tamped his foot down into the very middle of it, again and again, flattening the papers, stifling the vicious yellow brightness. It snuffed out under the beating; pitch-darkness welled up around him, and he heard the pad of her footfalls running down the long hallway, careening crazily from side to side until they vanished outside in the street. He couldn't go after her yet, he had to make sure.

He made the mistake of reaching down for the box with his hand, intending to drag it after him out into the open. The draft of the abrupt motion must have set a dozen wicked little red eyes gleaming again inside it, then an unevenness between two boards of the rotting floor jogged it, caught it, upended it behind him before he could check his progress. It was out from under the stairs now, with an open flume straight up through the roof to the sky above sucking at it. Instantly papers and red sparks went swirling upward in a deadly funnel; before his eyes he saw the sparks fanned brighter, bigger, the scorched papers burst into yellow flame once more as they shot up the long dark chute, striking against this banister and that like so many fireballs setting off the dried woodwork. Before he could reach the nearest of them, on the floor above the whole crazy spiral from top to bottom was alight with concentric rings of brightness, one to a floor. It was too late—she'd accomplished what she'd set out to do, in spite of him! He turned back from the first landing that he'd climbed up to, raced down again and out along the hall, remembering the board at the entrance just in time. A

faint crackling already sounded from the shaft behind him, like a lot of mice nibbling at something. He tore out of the tunnel-like doorway, and turned up toward the corner.

He saw her just a few steps ahead of him, she hadn't gone very far after all. She was lingering there about the premises as though she couldn't tear herself away. He caught her by the hand as he swept by, pulled her after him as far as the corner, where the alarm box was. She didn't resist, didn't try to escape from him at all, not even when he let go of her to send in the call. Then he hurried onward with her, not waiting for the apparatus to get there. If he'd been alone it would have been different, but he was afraid she'd say something, give herself away, if they questioned her. He didn't want her arrested—not until he had a chance to find out what was the matter with her first. They were three blocks away already, hurrying homeward, when the engines went roaring and clanging past them up Third Avenue, satanic red lights aglow. He bowed his head, but she turned and stared after them.

The only time he spoke, the whole way, was once when he asked her in a muffled voice: "How many times did you do it—before tonight?" She didn't answer. When the porter in their own building had taken them up to their floor and said "Good night," she was the one who replied, just as though nothing had happened. Jordan closed the door and locked it on the two of them—and what they both knew, and nobody else. He wiped his forehead with the back of his hand, then turned and leaned it against the wall.

"People might have been living in that house," he said heavily.

"But there weren't any, it was vacant," she said simply.

"There were plenty in the houses on either side of it. It doesn't matter even if it was just a pile of brushwood in a vacant lot." He took her by the shoulders and made her look at him. "Don't you feel well? Does your head bother you? What makes you do it?"

She shrank back, suddenly terrified. "No, no, not that! I know what you mean. Oh Harry, don't take my mind from me, you can't! There's nothing the matter with me! They told you that long ago, they proved it, all of them, after my accident!" She would have gone down on her knees, but he held her up.

"Then why do you do it? Why? Why?" he kept asking.

"I don't know. I can't help it." That was all they said that night.

He was still in the same clothes, hadn't been to bed at all, when the morning paper was left at the door. He lifted himself stiffly off the chair that he had tilted on its two hind legs against the door, to make sure that she stayed in the place, took the paper inside and looked for the account. It wasn't played up much, they'd put it out after it had destroyed the staircase, and they were inclined to think that two tramps who had found shelter on one of the upper floors had inadvertently started it, either by smoking or cooking their food. One had run away but one had been found with a broken leg, in the rear yard where he'd leaped down trying to save himself, and was in the hospital. Jordan got an envelope and jotted down the fellow's name and the hospital on the outside of it, then stuck two five dollar bills in it with a note, just two words: "Sorry, buddy."

Then he got the police on the wire: "Are there going to be charges against this vag So-and-so with the broken leg, in connection with that fire last night?" There certainly were, he was assured: vagrancy, unlawful entry, and setting fire to the premises, and who wanted to know anyway? "I'm an investigator for the Herk Insurance Company. He'll have to take the rap on the first two counts maybe, but I'd like to say a word for him on the fire charge. Let me know at my office when the case comes up." Time enough to figure out a way of clearing the man without involving her, when the time came.

Then he telephoned his boss. "Cancel that report I turned in on the fire night before last, the Lapolla property, and hold up the indemnity." He swallowed hard. "It wasn't accidental—it was arson."

Parmenter got excited right away. "Who was responsible, got any idea?"

"An unknown woman," said Jordan limply. "That's all I can tell you right now. Lapolla himself had no connection with it, take my word for it. I'll give you a new report when I get a little more evidence—and, and, I won't be in until late today."

He went to the bedroom door, took the key out of his pocket, and unlocked it. The room was dark, he'd nailed down the Venetian blinds to the window-sills the night before. Looking at her lying there so calm, so innocent, he wondered if she was insane, or what. Yet the specialists who had examined her when he and she had brought suit against the taxi company whose cab she had fallen out of, hadn't been able to find anything not even a fracture or concussion; she was right about that. They had lost the suit as a result. But maybe things like that came on slowly, or maybe there was no connection, it was something deeper, more inexplicable. He woke

her up gently, and said, “Better go in and get the kid ready for school. Don’t say anything about last night in front of him, understand?”

When the boy had left he said, “Let’s go out and get some air, I don’t have to go to work today, Parmenter’s laid up.” She got her hat and coat without a word. They set out without seeming to have any fixed destination, but Jordan led toward Fifth Avenue and there he flagged a bus. He pulled the cord at 168th, and she followed him out in silence. But when he stopped a little further on, she looked up at the building. “Why, this is the Psychiatric Institute!” she said, and got white.

“Parmenter’s in there undergoing treatment, they told me about it when I telephoned the office,” he said. “You come in and wait, I want to go up and see how he’s getting along.”

She went in with him without further protest. He left her sitting there out in the reception room, and asked to see one of the staff members. He closed his eyes, could hardly answer when he was asked what they could do for him. “I’d like to have my wife put under observation.” He had rehearsed what he was going to say on the way there; he still couldn’t bear to tell them the whole truth—not yet anyway. She would be liable to imprisonment if sane, commitment to one of the hideous State Institutions if unbalanced, he couldn’t let that happen to her. There were always private sanitariums, nursing homes, he could put her in himself—but he had to find out first. What symptoms, if any, did she show, he was asked.

“Nothing very alarming,” he said, “she—she goes for short walks by herself in the middle of the night, that’s all, claims she can’t sleep.” The fire must stay out of this at all costs; reluctantly he brought out a small bottle of chocolate-colored liquid that he had collected from the pan of the radiator before leaving the flat. “I have reason to believe she tried to give me a sleeping potion, so that I wouldn’t worry about her going out. You can tell if you’ll analyze this. We have a child; I think for his sake you should set my mind at rest.”

He could, they told him, engage a private room for her if he wanted to and leave her there for the night, have one of the staff doctors look at her when he came in. It would have to be voluntary, though, they couldn’t commit her against her will merely at his request and without a physician’s certificate.

He nodded. “I’ll go out and talk it over with her.” He went back and sat down beside her. “Marie, would you trust me enough to stay here overnight so they can tell us whether there’s anything the matter with you?”



She got frightened at first. “Then it wasn’t your boss! I knew that, I knew you were going to do this from the time we left the house!” She lowered her voice to a whisper, so they wouldn’t be overheard. “Harry, I’m sane! You know it! Don’t do this to me, you can’t!”

“It’s either that, or I’ll have to go to the police about you. Which is it going to be?” he asked her, also in a whisper. “I’ve got to, I’m an accessory if I don’t. You’ll end up by killing somebody, if you haven’t already without my knowing it. It’s for your own sake, Marie.”

“I’ll never do it again—I swear I won’t!” she pleaded, so convincingly, with such childlike earnestness, that he saw where the real risk lay. It was like water off a duck’s back; she didn’t seem to realize even now the heinousness of having done it at all, and certainly she would keep on doing it again and again, every time she got the chance.

“But you said yourself you didn’t know why you did it, you couldn’t help it.”

“Well, keep matches away from me, then; don’t let me see any, don’t smoke in front of me.”

“Now, I haven’t said a word to them about the fire—we’ll keep that to ourselves, until we find out one way or the other. But don’t lie to them, Marie. They’re only trying to help you. If they ask you, tell them openly about this craving of yours, this fascination matches have for you, without letting them know you’ve already given in to it.” He stroked her hand reassuringly. “How about it?”

She was much calmer now, she was over her first fright. “Do you swear they won’t try to hold me here against my will, use force—a straitjacket or something?”

“I’m your husband, I wouldn’t let anything like that happen to you,” he said. “You stay here just for tonight, of your own free will, and I’ll come back tomorrow for you, without fail, and we’ll hear what they have to say.”

“I don’t like to leave the kid like that. Who’ll look after him, Harry? Who’ll get his meals?”

“I’ll send him over to Mrs. Klein, let him eat supper there and stay overnight—the mother of that little fellow he plays with.”

“All right,” she agreed. “I’ll do it—but you’ll see, they’ll tell you there’s nothing the matter with me. Wait’ll you hear what they say.” And as they stood up, she smiled confidently, as if already sure what the outcome would be. He made the necessary arrangements with the reception clerk, and as the nurse led her away she was still smiling. He didn’t like that.

He went to the office but he couldn't keep his mind on what he was doing, tried three times to make out a new report on the Lapolla fire and tore up each attempt. How could he keep faith with his firm, present evidence that it was arson, and not involve her? There must be a way, but it would have to wait until he was calmer, could think more clearly. He went back to the flat at three, to meet the kid when he came back from school.

"Your mother's on a visit," he told him. "You ask Mrs. Klein if it's all right for you to stay overnight at their house." The kid was tickled, and went sailing out. Then in about ten minutes he came back again; the Kleins lived on the next block. "Darn it, Sammy's getting a new brother and they can't have any company in their house!"

Jordan knew he could have taken him out to a cafeteria with him, if the meal was all that mattered, but the kid was so disappointed he felt sorry for him. "Got any other pals you could stay with?" he asked him.

"Sure, I could go to Frankie's house, he's a swell guy!"

"All right, but you give me the address first, I'll stop up there later on tonight, and if I don't like the looks of the place I'm bringing you home with me again." Vizetelly was the name; he jotted down the number of the house, it was in their own immediate neighborhood but a little further to the east. It was a jim-dandy place, the kid assured him, he'd been there lots of times before. Jordan just smiled and let him go. Then he gave a sigh and went back to the office again.

He stayed on at his desk long after everyone else had gone, moiling over the Lapolla report under a shaded light when it got too dark to see any more. The best he could do with it was to doctor up the statement of the taxi driver who had turned in the alarm, making it appear he had seen an unknown woman run out of the doorway fifteen or twenty minutes before the fire had been discovered. The Herk Company wouldn't cross-question the driver over and above his say-so, he felt pretty sure; the trouble was, if it ever got to the ears of the Fire Marshal's office—ouch! It was the first time he'd ever put down a deliberate falsehood in one of his reports, he thought wryly; but to let it go down on the record as being accidental, knowing what he did, would have been an even greater misstatement. That Washington Heights affair of the week before ought to be reopened too, he realized, but an indemnity payment had already been made, and it would be a mess to tackle it now. He clasped his head dejectedly between his hands. Finally he shoved the report out of sight in the drawer, got up and looked at the clock. It was after nine, he'd stayed hours overtime. He snapped out the light, felt his way out, and locked up the silent office after him.

He went into a beanery and bought some food, just out of pure habit, then found he couldn't touch it after all. He sat there smoking one cigarette after the other, wondering what the verdict was going to be. They must have examined her by this time. They wouldn't wait to do it at one or two in the morning. Maybe he could find out if he called. Maybe they'd let him talk to her. He could cheer her up, find out how she was taking it. Why not? She wasn't bedridden, there was nothing the matter with her physically. Finally he couldn't stand it any more, had to know, took a deep breath and stood up. Ten-twenty-five, the clock said. He shut himself in a booth and called the Psychiatric.

"Would it be at all possible for me to say a word to Mrs. Marie Jordan?" he asked timidly. "She was entered for observation at noon, room 210. This is her husband."

"This is not a hotel, Mr. Jordan," was the tart rejoinder. "It's absolutely against the regulations."

"Not allowed to call her to the phone, eh?" he asked forlornly.

"Not only that," the voice answered briskly, "the patient was discharged half an hour ago at her own request, as of perfectly sound mind and body."

Jordan straightened up. "Oh Lord!" he groaned, "do you people know what you've done?"

"We usually do," she snapped. "Just a second, I'll look up the report the examiner left with us, for your information." He was sweating freely as he waited for her to come back. Then she began to read: "Marie Jordan, age thirty-eight, weight one hundred forty, eyes blue, hair—is that your wife?"

"Yes, yes! What has he got to say?"

"Perfectly normal," she quoted. "Strongly developed maternal instinct, metabolism sound, no nervous disorders whatever. In short, no necessity for undergoing treatment of any kind. I would like to call your attention, Mr. Jordan, to a short postscript in Dr. Grenell's own handwriting. Dr. Grenell, you may not know, is one of our biggest authorities in this field. He usually knows what he's saying and he seems to feel rather strongly about your wife's case." She cleared her throat meaningly. "This seems to my mind a glaring instance of willful persecution on the part of the patient's husband. The shoe seems to fit on the other foot, judging by his habit of following her furtively along the street, so that she was finally compelled to go out only when she thought him asleep, as well as the fact that he imprisoned her in a locked room, mounting guard outside her door, and had hallucinations that the food she prepared for him was drugged. A chemical analysis of the

specimen submitted to us proved the charge unfounded. Subjection to treatment of this sort over a period of months or years will undoubtedly have an adverse effect on this woman's mind and bodily health, but so far there are no signs of it. I have told her she is entitled to police protection if it recurs. Case discharged. Grenell, M.D.”

“Tell Dr. Grenell I congratulate him,” groaned Jordan. “He's turned a pyromaniac loose on the sleeping city!” And he hung up and just stood there weaving back and forth on his heels for a minute in the narrow confines of the booth.

Maybe she was sane, maybe they were right—but then she was a criminal, in the worst sense of the word, without even the usual criminal's excuse for her actions, hope of gain! He kept shaking his head. No, he was right and they were wrong, in spite of all their experts and all their findings. She'd been lucky and she'd fooled them, that was all. Her actions alone convinced him that bedtime drink had had something in it, but the sediment must have gone to the bottom of the radiator-pan and in scooping it up he hadn't gotten any of it. He didn't blame them in a way, he'd deliberately withheld the key to the whole thing from them, thinking only to spare her; as a result it had boomeranged. Sure he'd locked her in her bedroom and sure he'd followed her along the street—what they didn't know was he'd caught her dropping burning matches into a box of kindling under the staircase of a vacant tenement at one in the morning! Well, the hell with them, they hadn't helped him any! It was in his own hands again, as it had been at the start. He'd have to handle it the best he could without outside help.

“Strongly developed maternal instinct!” Sure she had it, why not. She was perfect in every way, A-1, except for this one horrible quirk that had cropped up! “Strongly developed——” The kid! His extremities got cold all at once. She'd been discharged half an hour ago, she'd look him up the first thing, he'd told her where he was going to take him! He didn't trust her in anything now. He was going up there and get the kid quick, before she did! He didn't think she'd really harm him, but she might take him away with her, not show up at home any more, disappear, afraid of him now or sore at what he'd done to her. Not while he knew it! He wasn't going to let that kid out of his sight from now on, sleep right in the same room with him even if she did come back to the flat! A woman that didn't have any more moral sense than to cremate people alive, slip a sedative to her own husband—no telling what she'd end up by doing!

He nearly shattered the glass, by the speed with which he got out of the phone booth. He tossed money at the cashier without waiting for change,

jumped into a cab in front of the place, gave the fellow the Kleins' address. "Hurry it up will you—every minute counts!"

"Do the best I can, cap," the driver promised.

"That ain't good enough," Jordan grunted. "Double it, and it'll still be too slow to suit me!"

But they'd started from way downtown, very near his office. Quarter-to-eleven had run up to nearly forty after, even with the driver using a stagger system on the lights, before they got up into the East Side Eighties. He jumped out in front of the Kleins' place, paid the cab, and ran in. He rang the bell of their flat like fury. Klein came to the door himself, there was subdued excitement in the place, all the lights lit. "Sh!" he warned proudly, "my wife's presenting me with an addition to the family." He whipped a long black cigar out of his vest pocket, poked it at Jordan with a grin. Jordan fell back a step in sudden recollection.

"Oh, I remember now! He told me that this afternoon, he didn't come here after all, went someplace else—my kid——" He fumbled in his clothes for the slip of paper he'd written the name and address on.

"Yeah, your wife was here asking for him a little while ago. She thought he was up here too," Klein said. "I didn't know anything about it, but I heard Sammy, that's my youngster, telling her he'd gone to some other boy's house——" He broke off short in surprise, watched the other man go tumbling down the stairs again, holding a scrap of paper in one hand; looked down at his feet and saw the cellophaned cigar he'd just presented him with lying there. He bent down and picked it up, shaking his head. "No fatherly feeling at all," he muttered.

Jordan was hanging onto the paper for dear life, as though that would get him over there quicker. Vizetelly, that was the name, why hadn't he remembered sooner! She must have beaten him to it by this time, been there and already taken the kid away. If she went home with him from there, all right, but if she took it into her poor warped mind to beat it off with him, hide herself away someplace, how was he ever going to——?

The sickening keen of a fire siren, off someplace in the distance, stopped him for a minute like a bullet, turned his spine to ice; he went right on again with a lurch. Too far away to mean anything, but Lord what a thought that had been just now! But it didn't fade out, instead it rose and rose and rose, and suddenly it burst into a full-throated scream as the trucks went tearing across the lower end of the side street he was following, first one and then a second and then a third; and when he turned the corner he saw people running, just like he was running himself only not so fast and not so scared,

toward another side street two blocks up. And that was the one the paper in his hand told him to go to.

He shot across the thronged avenue with the immunity of a drunk or a blind man, and felt some squealing car sweep his hat off his head, and didn't even blink or turn to look. Oh no! he was praying, there are twenty other houses on that block, it can't be just that very one, 322, that's laying it on too thick, that's rubbing it in too strong—give a guy a break once in awhile! He turned the corner, and he saw the ladders going up, the hoses already playing on the roof, the smoke quilting the sky, black on top, red underneath, and it was on the near side, the even numbered side. He had to slow up, he was knocking people over every minute as the crowd tightened around him. 316—gee, he'd better get him out in a hurry, those people must live in the house right next door! 318—a cop tried to motion him back and he ducked under his arm. Then he came up flat against a solid wall of humanity dammed up by the ropes they'd already stretched out, and a yell of agony wrenched from him as his eyes went on ahead unimpeded. One more doorway, 320, with people banked up in it, kept back by a fireman, and then the one beyond, just a hazy sketch through the smoke-pall, blurred oil-skinned figures moving in and out, highlighted with orange by some hidden glare inside. Glass tinkling and the crowd around him stampeding back and axes hacking woodwork and thin screams from way up, as in an airplane, and a woman coming down a ladder with a bird-cage, and somebody hollering, "My kid! My kid!" right next to him until he thought he'd go nuts. Then when he turned to look, it was himself.

He quit struggling and grappling with them after awhile because he found out it used up too much strength, and he only lost ground, they shoved him further back each time. He just pleaded with them after that, and asked them over and over, and never got any answer. Then finally, it seemed like hours had gone by, they had everyone out—and no sign of his kid anywhere. He didn't even know what the people looked like, he ran amuck among the huddled survivors yelling "Vizetelly! Vizetelly!" He found the man in as bad a shape as he was himself, gibbering in terror, "I don't know! I can't find my own! I was in the tavern on the corner when they came and told me!"

This time they had to fling him back from within the black hallway of the building itself, coughing and kicking like a maniac, and the cop they turned him over to outside had to pin him down flat on his back on the sidewalk before he'd quit struggling. "He's up there, I tell you! Why don't they get him out! I'm going to get him myself!"

“Quiet, now, quiet, or I’ll have to give you the club! They’ve gone up again to look.”

The cop had let him up again but was holding onto him, the two of them pressed flat against the wall of the adjoining building as close as they dared go, when he saw the two firemen coming down the ladder again. One of them crumpled as he touched the ground and had to be carried away. And he heard what the other one yelled hoarsely to his commanding officer: “Yeah, there is something up there in the back room of that top floor flat, can’t tell if it’s a kid or just a burnt log, couldn’t get near enough. I’m going up again, had to get Marty down first.” A boom like dynamite came from inside, as if in answer.

“There goes the roof!” said somebody. A tornado of smoke, cinders and embers blew from the door like an explosion, swirling around them where they stood. In that instant of cringing confusion Jordan slipped the cop’s revolver out of its holster with his free hand, hid it under his own coat. The man, wheezing, eyes smarting, already dishevelled from their previous struggle, never missed it.

It was only later, tottering down the street alone, that he began to fully understand why he’d done it. She’d done this, like the others, and he’d known it from the beginning, that was why he had the gun on him now. Some day, sooner or later, he’d find her again. He’d never rest from now on until he had and when he did! He didn’t have to overhear what that woman tenant had been gabbling hysterically to one of the assistant marshals, to know. “I tell you I saw a woman that didn’t belong in the house running out of the door only ten minutes or so before it started! I happened to be by the window, watching for my husband to come home! She was all untidy-looking and she kept looking back all the way to the corner, like she’d done something she shouldn’t!” He didn’t have to see the man Vizetelly straining a kid to him and rolling grateful eyes upward, to know what that “burnt log” in the top-floor-rear stood for now. The only life lost, the only person missing, still unaccounted for, out of all that houseful of people—his kid and hers! It couldn’t have worked out more damnably if she’d plotted it that way on purpose. And maybe she had at that, demented fire-worshiper that she was! “Strongly developed maternal instinct,” and fire was happiness to her, and she’d wanted her kid happy too. He sucked in his breath as he stumbled along. He was going to go crazy himself pretty soon, if he kept on thinking of it that way. Maybe he already was.

They’d wanted to ship him off in an ambulance at first, to be treated for shock, but he’d talked them out of it. He had the cure right with him now

under his coat, the best cure. He was going home first, wait awhile, see if she'd show up not knowing that he already knew, and if she didn't, then he was going out after her.

The porter took him up when he sagged in, and stared at the strange whiteness of him, the hand clutched to his side under his coat as if he had a pain, but didn't say anything. When the operator had gone down again he got his key out and put it to the door and went in.

He was too dazed for a minute to notice that he didn't have to put the lights on, and by that time he'd already seen her, crouched away from him in the furthest corner of the living room, terror and guilt written all over her face. There was the answer right there, no need to ask. But he did anyway. He shut the living room door after him and said in a lifeless voice: "Did you do that to 322 tonight?"

Death must have been written on his face; she was too abjectly frightened to deny it. "I only went there—I—I—oh, Harry, I couldn't help it! I didn't want to, but I couldn't help it—my hands did it by themselves. Take me back to the hospital——"

"You'd only beat that rap again, like you did before." He was choking. "You know what you've taken from us, don't you?" She began to shake her head, faster and faster, like a pendulum. "Come closer to me, Marie. Don't look down, keep looking at my face——"

It went off with a roar that seemed to lift them both simultaneously, so close together had they come, almost touching. She didn't fall; there was a mantel behind her, she staggered backward, caught it with both upturned hands, and seemed to hang there, gripping life with ten fingers. Her eyes glazed. "You shouldn't have—done that," she whispered. "You'll wake up the kid."

The door came open behind him; he turned and saw the kid standing there, staring from one to the other. She was still upright, lower now, one hand slipped from the mantel edge. "Almighty God," he said. He stood staring at the boy. Then he said, "You go out to the telephone and say you want a policeman. You're a big guy, son, you know how to use it. Close the door. Don't stand there looking in at us."



## AN APPLE A DAY

THEY were known as “Fruits” and “Catcher,” those were their professional names. They were partners, and they were getting ready for a business undertaking. Fruits sat at a table, under a shaded light, intently engaged in work of a delicate but indeterminate nature, while Catcher kept pacing restlessly to and fro in the background.

The accessories of the task, spread out on a sheet of newspaper, were a sharp-edged fruit knife, a platter of rosy-cheeked apples, and a small bright object that glittered deceptively and might have been casually mistaken for a diamond, though on closer inspection it proved to be only a nodule of faceted and tinsel-backed glass.

“I’ve got it now,” Fruits announced at last. He had opened a tiny triangular “window” in the surface skin of the apple, a flap, a trap door, that hung back upon itself. He folded this carefully back. Then, poising his knife delicately, he gouged out a small segment of the snowy flesh underneath. He had a little hollowed-out box now, a cubed cell, secreted within the apple. When the scallop of skin was smoothed down into place again, no vestige of it remained.

Catcher shook his head. “It’s too simple,” he said. “I hope it works.”

“It always works the first time,” Fruits assured him. “It works just once to a pitch. And this is our first time for it in this town, so what are you worried about?”

Catcher was still troubled. “People don’t go into places like that eating apples.”

“They’re used to seeing me do it now. I munched one the first time I was in. I munched one the second time. Why should they think anything of it if I do it a third time? To them it’s just a mannerism of mine now.”

Catcher shrugged, only partially convinced. “To me it would still look suspicious.”

Fruits revealed himself as somewhat of a philosopher at this point. “That’s because you’re in on the know. People that are on the up and up, honest, as you might say, they don’t expect anything dishonest, they don’t watch out for it, until after it’s already too late. That’s the big advantage we have over them.”

He donned an impeccably tailored coat, complete down to boutonniere, which had hung awaiting him over the back of a chair while he worked. This mercifully obliterated the knitted elastic arm-bands which he had flaunted heretofore. He drew on one glove, picked up its mate and a polished malacca walking stick in that same hand, adjusted a gray Homburg so that it tilted at just the right clubman-about-town angle, and then turned this way and that, displaying his person to his partner's appreciative gaze.

"Pretty good," the latter murmured admiringly.

"I look like brokers are supposed to, but don't," Fruits explained. "If you look like they really do, then they take you for something else."

He inserted the twinkling nub of glass that had been resting on the newspaper into the opening of his glove, where it remained fixed alongside the fleshy part of the thumb, so that it could be ejected again at the backward prod of a single finger folded against his palm. The invisibly sutured apple he thrust boldly and undisguisedly into the side pocket of his trousers, where it created a slight but not irreparable distortion of their drape over his hip-line.

"That the way you're going to carry it?" Catcher asked dubiously. "Open like that?"

"That's the way one of *them* would, if he came out of his office feeling boyish and bought one off a pushcart standing handy at the curb. It's only housewives that carry them around in paper bags."

Some short time later they parted on a downtown sidewalk, a few doors away from an imposing double shopfront that bore the legend "Corday, jewelers" over it. Their manner of breaking company was gradual, progressive, rather than abrupt, immediate. Until this point they had been walking abreast. Now Catcher slackened, began to fall behind, while Fruits continued his own pace unchanged. He delivered parting instructions out of the corner of his mouth.

"See those three windows on the second floor, right over the store sign? They're the ones to his private office. That'll tell you about where to stand. Got it? Have your hat ready."

Catcher removed his headgear, as though he found the late afternoon excessively warm. He mopped lightly at his forehead with a large handkerchief, and also dabbed it at the headband within the upended hat. This was for the sake of plausibility, to indicate to passers-by, should they happen to notice, why he was keeping it off his head and turned over like that.

Fruits, meanwhile, had entered the jeweler's. He was greeted by cordial bows on every side as he proceeded toward the rear. An assistant manager came forward to bend welcomingly from the waist. "Good afternoon, Mr. Nash. I believe Mr. Corday is expecting you upstairs in his private office."

Mr. Nash nodded affably, without breaking pace. "Quite," he said, with a clipped nasal inflection that might have been taken for Harvard or Oxford, but as a matter of fact had been derived from a California-made film.

Even the page who ran the elevator had been tactfully coached in the use of his name. "Good afternoon, Mr. Nash."

"Good afternoon, son," Mr. Nash said benignly.

Mr. Corday greeted him above. Mr. Corday spoke through a desk-transmitter to persons unknown. "Bring in that tray Mr. Nash was looking at the last time. Number Seven."

The tray was brought with admirable alacrity. The door was closed and they seated themselves to their pleasant and mutually profitable task.

Mr. Nash was fashionably vague as to details. "Now we had reached a point——" he said helplessly.

"We had narrowed it down to these two, Mr. Nash."

Mr. Nash remembered. "Quite."

Mr. Corday separated a cataclysm of fire from the black velvet-lined tray, held it up for individual inspection.

"Now, as I said before, in the matter of quality there is very little choice between the two——"

Mr. Nash was obviously in need of some slight outward stimulation to his powers of making a decision. His hand made a half-start within his coat as if to take out a cigarette case, then desisted again.

"Cigarette, Mr. Nash?"

"No, I'm not allowed. I just remembered. Doctor's orders, you know. I think, if you don't mind——"

He produced an apple and blew on it preparatory to taking a bite. Mr. Corday beamed indulgent approval.

Mr. Nash, apple poised in hand, took up one of the stones. "This one is sixty thousand. And the one you've got is seventy-five. Is that right?"

"Precisely. I see you have a very good memory. Now let me point out ——"

Mr. Nash's straying hand had picked up a third gem at random, not one of the two under discussion.

"That one's only fifty thousand," Mr. Corday said, in a rather reproachful parenthesis.

Mr. Nash promptly put it back again, as though guilty of a faux pas. At that moment he finally delivered his long-pending first bite into the apple. Co-ordination is a commendable attribute, and that was one thing he had no film to thank for; it was native to him.

His teeth sank into it, but the bite was never completed. He grimaced excruciatingly and withdrew them rather hastily.

"What's the matter?" Mr. Corday asked solicitously.

"Sour. Sets my teeth on edge. Brrr. Excuse me a minute till I get rid of it."

Mr. Corday accommodatingly reached toward a tooled leather waste container, to draw it forward for his convenience. Mr. Nash, however, had apparently missed seeing the gesture. He rose without waiting for it to be completed, stepped over to the narrowly-opened lengthwise window, elevated his wrist slightly, and the apple was gone. Then he came back and sat down again.

The transaction seemed now to have gained momentum; almost as though the acid of the offending apple had acted as a lubricant. Mr. Nash took out a checkbook from his pocket, opened it. In another moment he would indubitably have made his decision known, had not an untoward interruption occurred somewhere outside just then.

A woman started to scream piercingly, on the sidewalk just below the office windows.

Both looked up, one as startled as the other. Both left their seats in unison, started for the window to see what it was. Whether both arrived there together or not escaped Corday's notice in the excitement. He craned his neck trying to look down toward street-level at an obtuse angle.

"I can't make it out. I don't see anything——" he reported to the fellow-onlooker he imagined to be beside him.

There was no answer, and there was too much room at the window.

He turned. The room was empty.

The malacca stick still hung from the back of the chair. One glove and the sterile checkbook remained on the edge of the desk.

He jumped forward. All the diamonds seemed in place on the tray, safely embedded in the velvet in parallel rows. The seventy-five-thousand-dollar one, the sixty—— His hastily probing fingers struck the fifty-thousand-dollar one and dislodged a piece of twinkling glass backed with tinsel.

The screaming started again. This time it was the manager, and not the unknown woman on the street.

Catcher didn't see Mrs. Rosoff coming down the street with her baby carriage. He didn't even know she was Mrs. Rosoff. Mrs. Rosoff for her part didn't see Catcher. Her face was turned sharply sideward to take in the jeweled wrist watches, the rings and brooches, the silver candelabra displayed in Corday's window as she went by. They were not of immediate enough pertinency to her own affairs to have caused her to halt outright—such as a head of cabbage or a bargain in hand-knitted fascinators would have been—but it didn't cost anything to look.

For that matter, even had she seen Catcher, it is doubtful whether she would have altered her fixed course. A sidewalk loafer like that hanging around wiping the inside of his hat, it was up to him to get out of her way, not up to her to get out of his.

Mrs. Rosoff had with her, in the tormented bedding of the carriage, a loaf of bread, a bottle of horseradish, ten cents worth of potatoes, five cents worth of soup-greens, three apples, an orange, a rubber ball, and her son, Seymour.

Catcher and Mrs. Rosoff's baby carriage came into juxtaposition. He had been backing slowly outward toward the curb to gain the necessary perspective on the building-front before him, hat held motionless now before him bottomside-up, almost like an oversized alms-cup. Which in a way it was.

Startled at the prod of the baby carriage against the backs of his legs, he hitched uncontrollably forward again, for a distance of several paces. His nerves were taut, and the slight grazing contact had almost exploded them.

He and Mrs. Rosoff exchanged a look.

“What's a metta, you nidd the hull sidewokk?” Mrs. Rosoff lowered belligerently. She trundled on.

Something blurred had fallen into the carriage, unnoticed by either of them at moment of descent. Catcher only caught sight of it, or what he

belatedly sensed to be it, in retrospect, after the carriage was already drawing away.

His eyes shot upward, questioning, appalled. A hand was just in the act of withdrawing itself from the lengthwise gap in the middle window, the one Fruits had told him to watch.

He bolted forward after the carriage. Its interior arrangement had already altered in that brief time. Mrs. Rosoff's hand had just finished prodding its contents into somewhat more semblance of order. There was more of Seymour now and less of the other things.

Catcher came up from the rear, unseen by her until he had already arrived broadside. His hand reached out toward the coverings with a futile plucking motion.

Mrs. Rosoff's voice rose to instant and ear-splitting denunciation, a task for which it was well primed at all times. "Get away from mine baby! What you doing?" She swerved the carriage violently off at an angle, proceeded on that tack.

A yard or so further on and Catcher had reappeared on the other side of her, again reaching out in convulsive clawing motions that fell short each time as the carriage picked up speed.

Mrs. Rosoff by this time was thoroughly alarmed. She showed vocal prowess she had not displayed in years. "Loafer!" she shrilled. "Take your hands off my child! Somebody look! A cop I'm culling he should get away from me!"

Catcher by this time was desperate almost to the point of hysteria. Heads were beginning to turn. The owners of them to stop in their tracks. The carriage was going faster and faster, Mrs. Rosoff on the run behind it, keening as she went.

Catcher made one last dashing sortie after it, at such velocity that he not only overtook but passed it going forward. And as he passed, he nipped at something and finally and successfully removed it, leaving a tent-shaped eruption of bedding behind him through which was left exposed a single pink-stockinged infant's foot, pawing uncertainly at the air. Then he put on a spurt of speed that carried him down to the next corner and out of sight around it like something whisked on a string.

Mrs. Rosoff's outcries were stratospheric in their range. "Kidnaper! Mine Seymour he's trying to take away from me! In broad daylight, yet!" That the object removed was obviously a good deal smaller than the child itself, since he held it in one hand alone, even in full flight, only added fuel

to her paroxysm. “Low-life! Finnd! You seen him, all of you? You seen what he tried to do? That such people there should be! Mine blood it makes run culd!”

She had halted now, the center of a ring of onlookers. She hovered over the carriage, pressing the child to her in fierce maternal protective instinct, that inadvertently also included in the embrace the paper sackful of potatoes and the soup-greens.

In a moment she had calmed sufficiently to take stock. Probing within the ravaged carriage, she made a discovery. She smote her hand to her chest in beatific relief, held it there. “Is only an apple missing. Is only an apple he took.” The discovery, once made, did little if anything to abate the intensity of her indignation. “A fine ting! On the street yet they rob from the children’s mouths!”

A patrolman had finally wormed his way through the knot of spectators and confronted her. The story was poured volubly into his ears. Having heard, he scratched the back of his head, just under his uniform cap, skeptically. “Now what would a grown man want to take an apple away from a kid for, lady?”

Mrs. Rosoff gestured excitably with both hands at once. “You’re asking me? I’m asking *you* why! You’re an officer, ain’t you? You should know these tings!”

Several bystanders chimed in to offer corroboration. “I seen him do it, officer. He did have one in his hand.”

The patrolman scratched some more. “He sure must have been hard up for something to eat. Which way’d he go?” Then, voiding his own question, he suggested halfheartedly to Mrs. Rosoff: “You don’t want me to run after him for *that*, lady, do you?”

She meanwhile had made an additional discovery, canceling out the original one. “No, wait. Is here yet the tird one. Under my dolling’s tochus was lying the hull time, I didn’t seen it until now.” She straightened again, puzzled. “So then what did he took?”

“He had an apple in his hand, I seen it,” one of the bystanders insisted.

Mrs. Rosoff shrugged. “From me he didn’t get, that’s all I know. Tree for ten they chodge me by the grocers, and tree I got.” She kicked up the foot-brake at the rear of the carriage and proceeded on her way, shaking her head, sighing with martyred patience, and protesting in a slightly upward direction: “Always excitement. If it ain’t one ting, it’s another. To me this has to happen. It couldn’t be somebody else.”

The original kidnap-theory had reasserted itself once more, to the exclusion of the unsatisfactory apple-theory, by the time Mrs. Rosoff's husband had come home, been apprised of the event, and dined. They were sitting there now mulling over a list of possible suspects and motives. Mrs. Rosoff did most of the supplying, and Mr. Rosoff the more logical masculine discarding.

“Could be the Horowitzes you tink maybe? I never liked that woman. And from the time you broke up potnership with him, I been telling you Max you should look out, he'll find some way of getting back at you.”

Mr. Rosoff flung a limply discrediting hand downward in her direction. “Three of their own they got already. What would they want another for? Fine way of getting back. And even for such a thing as that they wouldn't use a *goy*, you know how strict is the old lady, Sam's mother.”

Mrs. Rosoff conceded the point. “Could be *outsiders* you tink maybe?” she proceeded darkly, leaning forward over her teacup. “Gengsters, like what you read in the paper?”

Her husband hiccoughed scornfully. “What we got that gengsters would want? You look so swell maybe, going down the stritt?”

Mrs. Rosoff promptly took up the challenge, with an air of long-persistent habit, however, rather than any undue present heat. “Coming from you, is good. Tree years I been asking you should get me a new coat.”

At this point there was a rather peremptory and unheralded knocking at their outside door. A modicum of uneasiness returned to Mrs. Rosoff, the aftermath of her afternoon's experience.

“See who is before you uppen,” she warned him in a whisper. “You tink maybe could be from today again?” By this she meant did he think it was a continuation of that afternoon's erratic persecution, in some unlooked-for shape or manner.

He seemed to have no difficulty in assimilating her rather elliptically conveyed thought. At any rate he adopted the suggestion. He posted himself profileward to the door, head down in an attitude of intent listening. “Hus there?” he inquired cautiously.

A voice came through hollowly from the other side. “Police Department.”

Mrs. Rosoff jumped to her feet with a nod of vindication that was almost avid. “Did I tell you?” she confirmed. “What did I tell you?”



She hadn't, as a matter of fact, told him anything. What she meant was that the afternoon's incident must have had some deeper motivation than the mere theft of an apple to result in an official aftermath of this sort.

Again her husband seemed to read the text of her thought without the necessity of full word-coverage. He nodded in agreement, even as he set about opening the door.

Two men came forward, one behind the other. The foremost one took out some sort of folder or card-case, flapped it up, flapped it down, put it away again, while the eyes of both Rosoffs followed its movements fascinatedly. "I'm Inspector Grady of the Detective Bureau," he announced.

The Rosoffs were impressed; they were even a little in awe. They were not afraid as the guilty are afraid, but they were indubitably anxious to ingratiate themselves as fully as possible with persons of such majestic standing, never before encountered at such close quarters, right here in their own home.

Mr. Rosoff diffidently chafed his hands down his sides, in order to have them suitably groomed in case a handclasp of social introduction were to be expected of him, a point of etiquette he was unsure of.

"Good evening," Mrs. Rosoff simpered tentatively, for her part, and shifted a near-by chair very slightly out from the wall, to show that it was at their disposal if acceptable.

"Did you have an experience with a man this afternoon, madam," the inspector inquired without further overture, "who took some object out of your baby carriage as you were going down the street?"

Mrs. Rosoff liked being called "madam"; they only did that in the most high-class stores. "Indeed yes," she said, tilting her head virtuously aloft. "And rilly it's an outrage such things should——"

"Bring him in, boys," the inspector said over his shoulder, without waiting for her to continue.

Mrs. Rosoff's tormentor of that afternoon was brought in from the outside hall in custody. Double-flanked custody. He looked very dispirited, even apathetic.

"That's him!" Mrs. Rosoff was shrilly accusative. "That's the man you was just mentioning, Inspector! Such a fright he gave me *I'll* never——" Her hands grimly folded to her chest in ladylike distress.

Again the inspector didn't wait to hear her out; with a wisdom born of past interviews of this nature. "Take him out again, boys," he said dryly.

The apparition was whisked away again and the door closed. The two original visitors remained where they were.

“You were bringing home some apples with you in the carriage at the time, weren’t you?” the inspector continued.

“That’s so. I just finished buying,” Mrs. Rosoff shrugged complacently, willing to be lenient now that her sense of injury had been so magnificently solved.

“Would you mind producing them?”

“Look, wait, I show you.” Mrs. Rosoff ran toward the dining table. She came back holding between her hands a glass bowl. Within it, jittering slightly with the vibration of her passage, rested a solitary spoon, nothing else.

“I don’t get you. What’s in this?” the inspector asked.

“Now nothing,” admitted Mrs. Rosoff. “Was in it epplesuss. For supper I made.” She thrust the bowl forward placatingly. “Wipe your finger in. Taste.”

The two detectives exchanged a look of catastrophic frustration. Then Grady turned back to her again, narrowed his eyes implacably.

“Did you find anything in those apples?”

Mrs. Rosoff was nonplused for a moment at the bizarreness of such a question, which contradicted the laws of horticulture as she knew them. “The curs only,” she faltered, doing her best to give the precise answer he seemed to expect.

Grady’s eyes were slits of cross-examination.

“You pretty sure you didn’t find anything in those apples? Where’s your garbage pail? I’d like to examine it for myself.”

Mrs. Rosoff could sense a dramatic crisis, without being at all aware of its components. “Quick!” she said, appealing to her husband. “Didn’t go down the dumbwaiter yet, did it? Go see it shouldn’t go down! I got it on.”

“I didn’t hear him ring yet,” Mr. Rosoff tried to reassure her.

“Sometimes he pulls without ringing. Take it off, quick!” Mrs. Rosoff advised excitably.

By this time all four of them had repaired to the kitchen. A wooden panel was flung open and the pail was rescued in its original state of profusion. The inspector spread a newspaper on the floor with a perfunctory word implying permission gained from Mrs. Rosoff, when as a matter of fact he had not consulted her, reversed the pail, and emptied its contents into

a pyramidal cone, that rapidly lost its sharpness of outline and flattened out under the ministrations of his grubbing fingers.

Finally he reared erect on his haunches. "There's only two here."

"One I didn't yuz," admitted Mrs. Rosoff.

"Why'd'n't you say so sooner?" Grady winced in rebuke, vigorously flicking his hands down floorward and withdrawing them again a number of times in rapid succession, to rid them of unwelcome particles of adhesion.

"Did I know?" Mrs. Rosoff protested. "You didn't ask me how many \_\_\_\_\_"

"What'd you do with the one you didn't use?"

"On the windowsill I put it, to take it beck tomorrow he should give me a good one for it. Hulls from somebody's teeth it had in it. This I wouldn't stand for. To a steady customer like me he shouldn't sell such a——"

Grady and his subordinate exchanged a knowing look. "That's the one," the inspector murmured quietly. He addressed Mrs. Rosoff again. "Show us where you've got it."

"Over there, look, right out there, I show you."

She flung open the window. The ledge was bare.

"Is gun now!" Mrs. Rosoff exclaimed blankly. "What happened?"

Grady leaned out to look down. Instantly a lurking gust of wind had knifed at his hat, unsettling it. He had to clap his hand to it to hold it on.

He drew his head into the room again.

"The wind tumbled it down," he answered her dourly, "that's what happened." He thumbed his assistant in the general direction of the door, hastened out after him. "Let's get down there fast, see if we can catch up with it. We'll have to begin all over again."

The door slammed after the two of them.

Mr. and Mrs. Rosoff reseated themselves once more, presently, to a discussion of the matter.

Mr. Rosoff, husbandlike, was inclined to make his wife responsible for the upsetting series of events. "*Sorus*," he grumbled aggrievedly. "Apples you had to bring home, yet, with tings in 'em! You couldn't bring anything else, apples it had to be!"

"Did I know?" wailed Mrs. Rosoff defensively. "Next time I open a can, believe me, so noting should get inside!"

He'd been standing by the window like that a long time now. Just standing looking out but not seeing anything. Yes, seeing things, but not the things there were outside to see. Not the blank wall of the building across the way, nor the iron slats of the fire escape platform closer at hand, just under the window, nor the uprights that railed it, nor the skeletal iron ladder that came down slantwise from above and gave onto it all the way over at one side. Nor even the piece of cord with which Dot had bisected it, from which hung now two limp skeins that were her stockings.

He'd been standing a long time before these various things, seeing things elsewhere. Elsewhere and yet to be. Seeing a man come up beside him tomorrow, sometime during the day, at his work and hearing him say: "You're wanted in the manager's office, Medwick. I'll take over the window until you get back." Knowing he never would get back, once he got up and went inside there to where he was summoned. Seeing through that door there beyond which they were waiting for him, and knowing that he would never come out again a free man. Never come out again an honest man.

Then the rest would follow. Arrest and exposure, trial and sentence, separation and imprisonment.

He'd managed to cushion one blow, and one only. He'd told her first, and not afterward. He'd told her tonight, a night ahead, so that she wouldn't sit waiting for him to come home tomorrow night and wondering why he was so late. He'd brought her pain tonight, so that she wouldn't have so much pain tomorrow.

They'd stopped talking about it. There wasn't anything left to say that they hadn't already said. There were only tag-ends and scraps left over that they hadn't already used up.

She was sitting there now, somewhere behind him. She'd cried a little, and that was all the crying she'd do for now. She'd have lots more crying to do later. But she'd have lots more time to do it in, too. He didn't look to see where she was. He knew she was there, that was all. Quiet there.

She spoke again finally. "Sit down," she pleaded wanly. "Finish this. You've left it all."

He didn't answer, didn't move.

Presently, she spoke again. "Jerry, you haven't said anything in such a long time. Don't stand there like that. At least turn this way and let me look at your face."

"I don't want to show you my face any more. I'm ashamed of it."

“It’s my face too, Jerry,” she said wistfully. “We only have one face between us, you know.”

He didn’t turn. “I’m no crook, Dot,” he flared rebelliously. “I’ve never been one. I wasn’t born to be one. I don’t know how such a thing ever happened to me!” He put his hand to his forehead for a minute, then dragged it heavily off again.

“Is it an awful lot, Jerry?”

He nodded somberly for a moment without answering. Then he said, “An awful lot for people like us. I don’t even know myself any more. It just kept on, after it once started.”

“Is it all gone? Isn’t there any way of—of making some of it good?”

“I don’t know where it went myself. It just went. There isn’t any way I know of, unless five or ten thousand dollars were to drop from the sky at my very feet this moment.”

“Are they bound to find out right away? Isn’t there a chance of gaining a little time?”

“There’s just tonight, that’s all I have. Tomorrow they re going to find out. They’ll know by the time the bank closes at three o’clock. They’ll know. They’ll know for sure. There’s just tonight. There isn’t anything that can save me after that.”

She saw him look down. He prodded at some imaginary object on the floor at his feet that wasn’t there at all, and thrust it forward with his toe, edged it aside. Then let it be, the nothingness that it was.

“Ach, it’s such an old story, isn’t it?” he said disgustedly.

“To us it’s new,” she murmured.

A period of silence fell between them once again; more of that silence that resolved nothing, that pointed up the futility of the whole discussion. Yet it wasn’t quite intact; she kept making some little sound. Some little sound she was making kept coming from the table she sat by. He didn’t look to see just what it was. It might have been a fork that she kept turning over and over with her hand, from side to side, and that struck the table each time she did so. Strangely enough it didn’t irritate him as he would have thought it might have, it didn’t exasperate his already tautened nerves. He had so seldom found her an irritant in any of his stresses, he reflected, wondering why this should be so; they interacted upon one another with remarkable smoothness.

“I could get out of town, I suppose,” he said somberly, and then before the slight creak of alarm her chair gave as she half rose to her feet could complete itself, he had already added: “But I’m not going to. I’ve sometimes thought—in moments when I’d come back to my right senses—that something like this would happen, was bound to happen sooner or later; but I never saw myself running away, I never counted on that. And I’m not going to now. That’s not the answer. There’s you. And they’d only catch up with me somewhere and bring me back again. I’m not a crook, I wouldn’t know how to—a crook knows how to protect himself.” He whinnied a little. “That sounds funny, doesn’t it, Dot? I’ve taken money that doesn’t belong to me, and yet I keep saying I’m not a crook. But I didn’t *intend* to take it, I didn’t plan on it. It just seemed to happen by itself. A minute before it happened each time, I had no thought of doing it, I didn’t know I was going to. And then I’d look and—it was over, I’d already done it. And it was so *easy*. And oh, it was going to be replaced the very next day, each time; or within the week at the latest. But I couldn’t quit *now*, I couldn’t quit where I was, or then I *would* be in trouble, I’d have lost everything. Then I’d have had no way of making it up. And they’d keep phoning me for more margin and more margin. Every time I’d try to sell short, it would go way down; and every time I’d try to buy in, it would go way up sky high. It was like a quicksand, and the more I struggled, the more I kept getting in deeper and deeper. Five thousand, and then seven, eight, and then ten—— And then—I don’t know what happened—all of a sudden it all went, altogether, and there was nothing left. Just smoke drifting away, and nothing left. Just a big hole in my accounts.” His hand plowed through his hair, over and over, tormentedly. “But I didn’t *mean* to be a crook. I didn’t *know* I was being one——” And then he said limply, “What good is that now?”

She’d come up behind him, close behind him. Her arm crept forward about his shoulder, and clung there, returning over the opposite one. She pressed her cheek against his back, tightly, and held it there. His hand found hers, upon his shoulder, and pressed upon it in turn, crushing it to him for a moment.

“Don’t go, Jerry. You won’t, will you? Don’t do anything like that.”

“I won’t go. I told you I won’t, and I won’t.”

She sighed with exhausted gratitude. They stayed that way, her nestled head hidden behind him. Before them, unseen, the blank wall; opposite them, the iron-runged platform, the diagonal ladder, the two stockings stirring uneasily.

“Your insurance, Jerry?”

“That went. That was the first thing that went, before the other. It was just a drop in the bucket, anyway.”

“Do you think—maybe if you went to him tonight of your own accord and told him ahead of time, without waiting?”

“The manager, you mean? It wouldn’t make any difference. He’s responsible to the board of directors. He’d have to take action, as long as there’s a shortage involved, whether he found it out from me or from the auditors or no matter who.”

Another silence fell.

He took her hand and disengaged it from his shoulder, as if he were about to move away at last. “It’s no good standing here, waiting for something to happen. Waiting for heaven to send me down a sign. Those things don’t happen.”

There was a heavy clanging thud, on the iron staves just outside the sill.

She gave a slight start, all out of proportion to the cause, of tightly coiled nerves releasing themselves. “What was that?”

“Nothing. Just something that fell down on the fire escape outside,” he said dully. “I can see it rolling there.”

“I’d better get my stockings in. The wind’ll blow them off the line. Jerry, can you reach them for me?” The trivia of domesticity reasserting itself even in the depths of a crisis such as they had never experienced before. The terrible resiliency of little things, that will not be downed.

He opened the lower pane and drew them in for her. Then he reached downward to the floor of the platform below, and grappled for, and finally secured and looked at, something. He brought that in too.

“An apple,” he said cheerlessly. “That’s what it was. Must belong to someone above us.”

He continued holding it after that, still standing there where he was. He didn’t hold it statically, he kept tossing it slightly up and down within the hollow of his one hand, just enough so that it broke contact each time. He wasn’t looking at it nor thinking of it. But whatever his thoughts were, they seemed to have a quickening effect upon it. Faster and faster became its bobbing up and down within his palm, as if some determination within him were mounting to a climax.

She meanwhile had gone back to the table, seated herself beside it, drawing one stocking at a time over her hand, to inspect its texture for rents or snarls. Yet with her, as with him the apple, this was an outside thing,

mechanical, a thing that her fingers did that her mind had no part of. That could be seen.

Suddenly the apple had stopped. Decision had crystallized.

She looked up. Held the look with taut, white-faced continuity.

He went over to the chair athwart which his coat still lay rumpled, flung there when he'd first returned hours before. He shrugged it on, carrying the apple down through its sleeve and out again below without releasing it. Then he picked up his hat.

"Jerry," she said with quiet intensity.

"I'm going out for a walk, to think it over. I'll be back soon."

The look she was bearing steadily upon him didn't falter. She got up and went toward him, as if drawn in its wake by its very intensity.

"A breath of air'll do me good," he said. He noticed the apple. "I'll give this back to them if I see them."

He caught her to him with unexpected fierceness, and they clung together for a moment. He kissed her hungrily, twice on the mouth and once above the eye. "I love you," he murmured throatily. "I'm sorry I—brought this on us." Then he released her as abruptly as he had seized her, and opened the door to go out.

The whiteness of her face had become livid. "You're—you're not going to do anything, are you? You wouldn't be that foolish, would you? Jerry, look at me. I don't like the way you're saying good-by."

He looked at her. "I'll be right back. Just let me go out for a minute and think."

He closed the door rather quickly, frustrating some gesture her hands had been about to make toward him. Some gesture of detention or appeal.

Two heavy-set men were filing across the stair-landing as he came out, on their way from the flight below to the next flight leading up. He had to stand back a moment to let them pass. They didn't look at him. "It's the floor above," he heard one mutter. "Rosoff is the name." They trooped on up out of sight, while he went trampling rapidly downward toward the street.

He felt some impediment within his hand, within his coat pocket, and withdrew both, to find out what it was. He saw it was the apple. He was already well beyond the street doorway by now, so he didn't turn back, he continued onward with it, held openly in sight. Who wanted an apple back, anyway?



An urchin on one of the stoops looked rather longingly at it as he went by, and for a minute he was going to present it to him. But his long stride had already carried him too far past before he could put the idea into effect, and again he didn't retrace his steps.

He rounded the same corner that he turned twice a day, going to and coming from work. And then down two blocks that way, and downstairs to the subway stop, was the way he always went. He stood for a minute, and he didn't know which way to go. Because he wasn't going to work tonight; he'd come out for a walk, that was what he'd told her.

A walk. A walk to where?

Then because he always went down that way other days, he went down that way now, tonight, again. The line of stores, the shops and business places, the same familiar line, in the same familiar sequence he knew so well, were beside him along the way. The candy-store first, with its bulky marbled counter, and then the shoe-repair shop, where he sometimes stopped in for a shine or a new pair of lifts. The operator was always close up beside the window, he always did his work close up beside the window, in a vivid green smock or work-jacket. He was there now, slicing away at the edge of a sole with a sharp knife, and he looked up. They exchanged a friendly nod.

The man passing thought: He'll be there in the window tomorrow night again at this same time, but I won't pass by.

And then on the corner the drugstore. Then you crossed the intermediate street, and on the other side, a pawnbroker's. He'd never been in there. You went in there when you needed money badly and fast, and you pledged something of greater value than the sum you were to receive, and you were given the money. If he had something on him now worth a great deal, and he went in there, and the broker said, "I'll give you so much for this," how simple it would be.

The child in him wasn't quite dead yet, he saw, to dream things like that.

Then he came to the slant-roofed subway kiosk of thick murky glass and iron framework, sheltering steps leading down below, and he stopped there at the mouth of it.

Brackish air came billowing up into his face, as from a subterranean commotion, and there was a receding, hollow-sounding vibration accompanying it. A train had just pulled out as he arrived above.

Those trains down there, they took him to work other days. They took you all over, to any part of the city. They could even take him, he supposed,

to the home of the manager, as she had suggested just now, though he wasn't quite sure where that was, he would have had to look it up first. But that would have been a bootless journey.

They took you anywhere, those trains down there. They could even take him—out of this. They could rescue him from disgrace and imprisonment.

The people started coming up, only reaching street-level now from the train that was already well into the distance, far down the track beyond this point. He stepped a little aside, at the entrance to the vent, to be out of their way, and watched them as they crowded and jostled by. Men and women, tired-looking, indifferent-looking, sullen-looking, vacant-looking. They were blind with their own concerns, they saw nothing, not even one another. Their eyes were surface-attributes, with no inner functions; like buttons or pieces of nacre stuck into their heads on the outside for purposes of decoration or symmetry only.

A dozen worlds went by him as he watched, a dozen worlds cut off from one another though they jostled at every turn; worlds that were apart. Each with its hells and heavens.

They were gone now. The space was clear. He could go down now. He'd stay up here a little longer. Like an actor in the wings waiting for his cue; he doesn't come on the stage too soon. The next train wouldn't come in for four or five minutes yet. He knew they always gave them that much headway, at least. He'd be able to hear it coming in the distance, while it was still well short of the station, anyway. He knew that too; he often had, running in the mornings for these selfsame steps, to be on time. He could go down then, when he heard it coming from afar.

He started to jounce the apple up and down once again, as he had back at his home. Slowly at first. Then a little faster. Then faster still.

He wondered for a moment whether he'd have time to eat it before the next train came. He smiled a little at such a curious thought. Basically, you ate to stay alive, wasn't that what you did it for? That would be a contradictory thing to do.

The sound began, of the next train. He caught it almost at its inception; indistinct, far off, still merely a whine, a hum, a muffled whirring somewhere way up the tunnel. Growing louder, growing stronger, not stopping as it was.

The apple was in constant motion now, vibrating, dancing to the pulsing of his hand.

The hum had swollen to a roar now. The train was near, was very near. The train that took you anywhere, the train that took you out of this.

Suddenly the apple had stopped, held fast within his frozen grasp. Then he flung it, aiming it at a half-filled wastepaper receptacle, standing there just outside the entrance, over beside the curb.

He didn't wait to see whether it fell accurately within or not. He turned and ran down the steps, their steel rims clicking with a false impression of looseness under his quick-pedaling feet. He went down the way he always did when he ran for trains, turned partly sidewise to obtain a better equilibrium, and with one leg consistently lagging two steps behind the other all the way down.

The three-sided enclosure where he had stood remained vacant, acting now only as a filter to sounds from below, but with no one there to hear them any longer.

There was no sharp crack of the turnstile to denote an admission. Instead a man's voice called out in indignant authority: "Hey, you, come back here \_\_\_\_!"

The roar still came on for a moment more, swelling smoothly; then abruptly it shattered into a hideous discord of squalling, grinding brakes, applied too quickly but yet not quickly enough. There was a shuddering stoppage, a dislocation of heavy bodies.

The din, the clamor they made, came gushing up the empty steps. Magnified, as though forced by compressed air.

Then in its wake the smaller, human sound of a woman screaming rabidly, taken up instantly by a second, by a third, until all were blended together in a harrowing chorus of unreason.

But the place above remained as barren, as lifeless, as ever, with nothing to show there had been anyone standing there until just now.

A door-threshold for a mattress. A lower step for a head-rest. The sharp bite of the step didn't even hurt his neck any more, he was so used to it. He'd fit it into the indentation between his jaw-line and his collarbone and cushion it there.

No one ever disturbed him, if he picked the right kind of doorway, a laissez-faire kind of a doorway. He could stay in it until the smoke cleared from his brain and consciousness came back again. This had nothing to do with the arbitrary bourgeois subdivisions of sleeping-time and waking-time,

night and day. This had to do solely with nickels and dimes, and the smoke he quaffed by means of them. When he didn't have them, that was waking-time, that was time of pain and chill and threatened attacks of memory; when he did have them, that brought on sleeping-time soon after, as surely as effect follows cause.

He got up, very uncertainly, very waveringly, and stretched and rubbed himself, and squirmed within the never-discarded cocoon of his clothing, and looked out of the doorway and saw that it was the bourgeois subdivision, night, though several hours short of their actual sleeping-time yet. How strange to all go to sleep at one time, how strange to all go to sleep in beds, in rooms that belonged individually to each sleeper.

He shuffled out of the doorway, and lights were on, blossoming like big translucent oranges and lemons all up and down the murky pathway of the shadowed street. Each one was swollen to still greater size, in his eyes alone, with a nebula like a soap-bubble around it, but these were pricked to extinction one by one as his pupils slowly contracted to normal.

He started down the street, the long street that never led anywhere. Sometimes it was called this, sometimes it was called that, but it never had a destination. Now he was coursing it again, keeping rather more closely to the walls than to the outer side of it. Why, he could not have told; nor why he should go down this one way rather than up the other; nor for that matter why he should move at all and not just stay where he was.

He'd once had a name. Oh sure, he could remember it if he tried hard enough. It would come back almost always. Once in a while not. But mostly it would come back, strange-sounding and unfamiliar, like something objective, that belonged to somebody else entirely, not to him. It was like an ascot tie or a pair of spats; you knew where it went, but hell, you never thought of putting it on you there.

He kept from trying to remember it all he could. He didn't want it back. There was pain in it. It hurt. It was like pins and needles creeping through the memory, trying to bring back circulation. Just like when your foot's been asleep, so with your memory; it hurts to stir it.

Once in a while he got a strange feeling. It was a feeling that he wasn't going to live very much longer. It didn't come from any bodily symptom of illness; he had none. It was more a sort of foreknowledge, hanging over his mind. A sense of all things having their appointed time, and of his own appointed time hovering over him more closely day by day and almost hour by hour.

And then when he got this feeling, a smoldering sense of rebellion would come over him. Not rebellion at having to die. He really didn't care, he didn't mind that at all. The doorsteps in the void couldn't be any colder or harder than those on this side. But rebellion at having to die like *this*. Still having nothing, after never having had anything all his life long. Without at least having had *something* once before he died. Why couldn't he just once have—have everything, before he died? Just for one last time, that would have also been the first. Just for a night. All right, just for an hour. Fine clothes. A wallop huge meal, with no room left over, none of those crannies and crevices. Smokes galore. Wine. A car, to stop by and pick up the rest of the boys and take them for a ride in. Not to keep those things. Just to try them out. You shouldn't leave this world behind without at least sampling what was in it. That was what you were put here for. Not to, was rudeness to your host, and a reflection on His hospitality.

Even when they executed you legally for a crime, they gave you one last big fat meal before they did.

This then was his rebellion. It only came with that feeling. He'd quench it with alky, with smoke, in order not to be annoyed. It went out easy enough. It wasn't a very strong flame. It wasn't a flame at all. It was just a smoldering, banked discontent, a regret lurking down deep where you couldn't get at it, sending up a thin coil of smoke through the litter and debris with which existence had filled him.

The feeling was on him tonight. The feeling was very strong tonight. The feeling about not living very much longer, that is. He'd sluice it out with alcohol in a little while, as soon as he got the requisite nickels and dimes. No good to tell any of the boys about it. You kept a thing like that to yourself. That was about all you had left to keep to yourself: past life and future death.

He thought he'd like to go uptown for a little while. Well, that was easy enough. And by that he didn't mean walking, either. Transportation was never any problem. Sometimes it took a little longer to achieve, sometimes not quite so long, that was all.

A man was coming toward him. He marked the approaching figure down, aimed himself at him with that peculiar, sidewise, crablike scuttling motion they all of them made use of in the touch.

“Hey mister, could you spare me a nickel to get uptown?” He spoke low, almost inaudibly, and this was done with a purpose too; if they didn't hear you the first time, sometimes they automatically slackened or halted, to give you time to repeat, and that was as good as winning the touch.

The man was short and to the point, and he didn't slacken.

“Get out of here, bum!”

He got out of there. A first refusal was a permanent refusal. If you argued with it you only got in trouble. He'd learned that long ago.

He marked another figure down. He was getting back into the rhythm of it now, after his sleep.

This time he got a moral stricture with it. “Why don't ya cut that out?”

He got a nickel the third time, and that was about the usual ratio of donations to refusals. Possibly a little higher. That was all he'd wanted, and he desisted for the time being.

He got on a Third Avenue trolley car and dropped the nickel into the fare register almost before the warmth of the legitimate owner's hand had had time to wear off it. He rode all the long way past the Williamsburg Bridge plaza and Cooper Square and St. Mark's Place, up into the regions where the streets squared off into rectangles and started to have numbers instead of names, up into the zones where everyone worked and the doorways might have had figures in them but they were standing up and not recumbent. All the long way up he rode. He got out again at random, and now he was uptown.

You had to be careful uptown. Uptown was dangerous ground. They ran you in at the drop of a hat, uptown. But the pickings were better uptown, too. It equalized itself.

This was a veritable fruit orchard of incandescent oranges and lemons; down his way they had been scattered sparsely about in the dark. Here the darkness was pushed all the way back, high into the sky. And even up there it was kind of bright by reflection. As though all the luminous pollen floating upward stuck to the roof of the sky.

Or they were like glowing balloons, the lights of night, the lights of life, that was another way of looking at it. He imagined when you died this was what it would be like, this was what would happen: the pin point that was your death would touch them one by one—not all together at one time, but one after the other, going down the line away from you into the furthest distance—and one by one they would pop into nothingness, until the last was gone, the last was out, the long vista was blankness, darkness unrelieved. Then that would be death, your death. They'd still be there for someone else, but not for you.

A sailor and his girl were coming along. The boys, his kind of boys, always called this a natural. There was not only the innate generosity of the

typical seafaring man, there was the feminine-audience factor to puff it up still further. He jacked up his request accordingly. “Admiral, could you let us have a quarter?”

He saw them look at one another and grin. But it wasn't in a sneering, derogatory way. It was hard to explain, but it was more in a raffish, broadminded way. The sort of grin that said: “What the dickens, you have to expect this.”

The quarter was produced from a curious little blouse pocket high up near the man's shoulder.

He thanked him. “I hope you and your young lady have a good time, young fellow,” he benisoned them diplomatically.

A second quarter was produced.

The girl giggled. “Come on, Brad, that's enough for one time,” she cautioned.

They went on. “Poor old duffer, I'd hate to be like that,” he overheard the sailor remark before they were well out of earshot.

He thought about that for a little while, as far as the next corner, or perhaps the one after. He answered it in his own mind. “So would I have, once. So would I have, once. But I didn't know it was coming.” He felt like turning his head to call back after them: “After it does come, you don't mind so much.” But when he did turn it, they were already long gone from sight. Forever gone, except in his own mind now. And they would be washed out of there, presently, when the next inundation of smoke came.

Two quarters was a lot. He could get four shots of smoke out of that, and a nickel to ride back on to where the smoke was waiting, and still have a nickel left over. He'd better wait long enough to get just a little more, now that he was all the way up here. Four shots wasn't quite enough to put him fast asleep, he'd been noticing of late. It was taking five and upwards to do that, recently. And he hated that in-between state, where you didn't quite make oblivion but were blurred and helpless. He'd better stick around a little longer. He'd go one more block, and then he'd turn back and work his way slowly over to where the trolley line was once more. There, where those subway-stairs were ahead, descending below the ground, he'd turn there. You had to turn some place or other, you had to turn sooner or later, or you never stopped going, you kept on forever.

He made his turn, and stopped for a moment by the wastepaper receptacle standing there at the curblin to browse and see if there was

anything in it of worth to him. Sometimes you got pretty good papers to read, if they weren't too old, and too battered and rumped.

It was made of large wire-mesh, and you could see into it all the way down the sides to the bottom. A fleck of color embedded in the white and dun filling that stuffed it, about halfway down and peering through against the wire, caught his eye. He burrowed his way down toward it, nearly up to the elbow of one arm, upheaving the strata of papers that had formed atop it since it had been inserted. It could perhaps have been told by this how long it had been in there, if there had been some sure way of calculating how long it took one of these holders to fill up to its brim.

Then when he'd brought it up through the paper-drifts, it was only an apple.

He was going to let it drop back again for a minute, but he didn't. He looked at it more closely, turned it. Why, it was good. It was whole. It had teeth-marks faintly visible in it, but no overt amputation. And after all, other people's teeth couldn't hurt you, they were just bone.

He dusted it off a little against his shaggy sleeve. It was a meal, a delicacy. He'd keep it till later. Why eat it now? It would always hold good. At least it wouldn't turn rotten for maybe another whole day yet. You could tell that by looking at it. It didn't have a soft spot in it.

He folded it over with a scrap of rag he had about him, and put it into one of the bottomless abysses lurking in his clothing that served him as places of safekeeping.

Then he went on.

This venture had turned out to be highly profitable, more so than many another excursion uptown. But the discontent was on him, as if perversely fanned by his very success. That feeling of mortality that was the cause of it, that it stemmed from, was very strong right now, stronger than ever. That was the reason for it.

A glowing show-window drifted up beside him as he moiled along, and he turned and stopped and stood before it, rooted there with a curious mute yearning. It was like looking into a lighted tank of tropical fish, with the variegated colors in it artfully disposed here and there like schools of just such fish in arrested swimming-formation.

He moved a little closer to the glass sheath that walled him off from it. The colors burned in his face. Why couldn't he have neckties like that, once before he died? He was a man, he was a human being. He had a neck for



them to go around. They were made for anyone to wear. Why hadn't he ever had one, all his long life long?

Suddenly he began to pound against the thick plate-glass with the flat of his hand. Faster and faster. His hand was flabby and the glass was stout, so the casing wasn't in much danger.

People turned their heads at the sound. Abashed, he scurried on, away from there. "I haven't much time, I haven't much more time," he whimpered aloud in excuse, as if somebody unseen were taxing him with what he had just done. "Why can't *I* have one—before I go where there aren't any?"

And then a little later on, a street or two further over, the same thing happened over again. Another lushly suffused panel, opening in the wall he was trudging along, trapped him, held him fast. This one had living beings in it. Two of them were up close, others deeper within. Semi-transparent curtains veiled the sides, but in the center where they failed to come quite together there was a gap, and through this he looked.

The two persons at the table directly before him were a man and woman. They remained stubbornly unaware of him, though they must have seen his face peering in that close beside them. In the background waiters streaked about, taking sudden turns of direction where there were unguessed aisles between the tables that he could not see from where he was.

The woman's chair had a ruff of fur curved about its back. She poised a fork, occasionally touching it to something on her plate. The man removed the lustrous silver dome of a chafing-dish, spooned something out, replaced it again.

Standing there, eyes hungrily following every slightest move they made, he knew it wasn't their food itself he wanted, it was—well, the privilege of being in there where they were, and having such food. Just once, just once sitting down to such a table, spread with damask linen, covered with a profusion of crystal and china and silver, having such a lovely lady opposite him for his guest, having such food and drink brought to him by white-gloved waiters. All that, all that. Just once, just one brief time.

Again he pounded—despairingly, bitterly—not very forcefully. The woman drew her fur protectively closer about the shoulder on that side, as though he were a draft to be warded off. The man shot him a rebuking look, then turned his face the other way, out into the room, in search of redress.

Someone came to the entrance, swung a loose arm at him. "Get away from there. What're you doing?"

The hand with which he'd been pummeling slipped reluctantly down the glass, with a sort of clawing motion.

"Get your hands off the glass. What're you trying to do, smear it up?"

He'd better quit it, he'd get in trouble. He shuffled off into the dark, left the window behind. The rebellion was troublesome tonight. He recognized that. He'd better go downtown and get some sleep. He'd better go down and buy some sleep.

The sense of finality, that was strong, that was almost overpowering. That was in every breath he took, even now as he walked along. That was in the way he found himself panting, without having hurried at all. Above all, that was in the unwonted clarity rather than habitual dimness of his senses and perceptions. Their usual cobwebby contentment was gone tonight. He wanted to stand on a corner and scream: "Give me things! Quick, give me all the things I've done without, before I leave them behind forever."

More than anything, that was in the incident that occurred just before he boarded the trolley that was to take him back downtown again. A man had just emerged from a cigar store as he passed before its entrance himself, and had halted a moment to scan a palmful of change he had just received following whatever purchase it was he had made, to make sure it was accurate before reimbursing it. A common enough turn of habit.

Through long habit of his own, unpremeditated now, he promptly accosted the man. Again the boys called this a natural. Anyone already holding coins out in full view in his hand usually found it doubly difficult to refuse, the burden of most refusals being "I haven't anything to give you."

The man gave him a nickel, pocketed the rest, and walked away.

He stood there looking at it for a moment, as though he'd never seen one before. And then the rebellion took him fiercely. He raised his hand and flung it down violently, so that it bounced and rolled away. He'd never done that before, never yet. Not even to a penny. "I don't *want* nickels from strangers!" he railed tearfully at the top of his cracked voice. "I want something that *belongs* to me! Something of my own!"

He boarded the trolley car and he went downtown, to where the lights were few against the all-enveloping dark and legs peered horizontally from doorways.

He went into the place they called "Old Joe's," nobody knew why. There was nobody there named Joe, Old Joe or New Joe. But it was his favorite place; the smoke was stronger, and they gave you a finger's breadth more.

With the first short tumbler of the smoke, the rebellion was quenched. It became a mild regret. "I shouldn't be down here," he murmured. "I should be uptown, at one of those tables like I saw through that window." Then even that went too. Peace had come back, ear-ringing, eye-dimming contentment. Sleep would soon follow.

He fumbled in his clothing to pay for the first smoke. They made you pay right as you went along, naturally; where would they have been if they hadn't? He fumbled and he felt the firm round shape of the apple. He explored it with his fingertips, leaving it in where it was.

He ought to eat it now, he supposed. No telling how long he would sleep after this, and it might be spoiled by that time. He ought to go outside into the privacy of one of the near-by doorways and munch it, before he went any further with the smoke. And then come back again afterwards and go ahead.

He turned from the dank, moldering counter, to carry this project out. If you didn't do things right while you were thinking of them, you forgot what they were after a minute or two.

Somebody standing next to him put out a hand to detain him, said: "How're you doing, old-timer?"

"I'm doing all right," he said confidentially. "I was uptown just now, and I had a good night. I had a very good night."

He turned back to the counter again, to prove to him that he was telling the truth, and he ordered another smoke. He'd already forgotten what he'd been about to go outside for anyway.

After the fourth smoke he wasn't standing upright any more. He was lolling face-down at one of the tables at the back of the place, and somebody, maybe it was his new acquaintance from up front, was bending over him and shaking him and urging him to come outside with him. He couldn't see very well any more, but he could hear his voice. "Come on outside, I know where we can get some more of it. I got a friend outside, he can get us some more of it."

He wasn't conscious of moving, but then you never could feel yourself walk at this point of progression into oblivion, anyway. Darkness had seeped around him once more, on the outside, with those glowing disks, those balloons, floating sparingly about on it here and there, so he knew he must be on the open street again.

Then the two stone arms of a doorway shot forward to embrace him, to shield him lovingly, and he was down.

There were two voices now instead of one.

“He said he had a good night,” one said to the other.

Somebody was going through his pockets.

But there was something more important than that which took his mind off it. One of the balloons, outside there just beyond the doorway, had just gone out. He could see it from where he was. Pricked into nothingness by the point of a pin that he knew was for himself alone. Then the next one was gone. Then the one after that. All down the line, back as far as he could see, they were going out one after the other.

“An apple,” one of the voices said. “A lot of good that is!” There was a short breath of exertion, as when an arm has flung something far and wide.

He said with a sort of petulant aggrievement: “I ain’t going to wake up again. This time I ain’t waking up again, you hear me?”

Somebody laughed, he couldn’t tell who.

It was close at hand first, but then it trailed off.

Maybe it was life itself laughing at him.

She never missed early morning mass. That was all she had. That, and her friendship for him. She didn’t know his name, but it didn’t matter, she didn’t have to know it to be friends with him. She always came across him on her way back from early mass, that was when she looked for him, at that early hour, when the streets were newly sprinkled and fresh smelling and the sunlight was old rose and lavender. She knew just where to find him, what particular street to pass along on her way from the church in order to come upon him. He was always somewhere along that one certain street at that hour, she could be sure of that. Later in the day he wasn’t about any more; she didn’t know where he went or what he did, but he wasn’t to be seen any more. But at that pristine hour, with the crisp blue shadows still long upon the ground, he was always sure to be there, along her homeward way.

This friendship had been going on for months now. She prized it as only the lonely can prize an interruption in their daily solitude. And since to feel friendship is to want to bestow marks of attention, even when they are unsolicited, she was never without a lump or two of sparkling sugar in her worn black bag, to offer him when they met.

He was a lovely roan with a white streak down his forehead. He was a mounted policeman’s horse. Everyone must have something to love.

His rider was a tall, forbidding man, and she was rather in awe of him. He had a habit of looking straight out high above her head into the far distance, and seeming not to see her, but she had a feeling he knew everything she was doing. When he was up, the most she would dare was a stolen little pat on the flank as she went by, and she wouldn't linger. But once in a while he'd be inside talking to one of the men in the stores along there, and her friend would be waiting there alone. Then they'd have a time together.

She couldn't bring him the sugar now any more because of the new regulations. She'd bring him a carrot instead whenever she could, but they were harder to smuggle to him without being detected, and she knew his rider didn't approve. He tolerated, but he didn't encourage. Once he'd said to her openly, "Not too much of that now, lady, you'll spoil him on me." He'd frightened her a little, though perhaps without meaning to. She was quite easily frightened. She had white hair, and a tiny figure, no bigger than that of a child of twelve. And just as slim and just as straight.

He knew her step already. He was usually facing the other way, and he'd turn his head when he'd hear her coming, slight as her tread was, and watch her hopefully as she approached. It wrung her heart to have to disappoint him, to have to come up to him empty-handed.

But today there was this. This windfall. She wouldn't have to today. It had caught her eye, back there around the corner, just when she was wishing that she'd had something to give him. She'd retrieved it and looked it over carefully. As carefully as she would have if it had been intended for herself. There was nothing about it that could hurt him. She'd cleaned it for him thoroughly, before bringing it with her. She had it wrapped in a clean handkerchief now, secreted within her bag.

His rider was inside, talking to someone again. He turned his head when he heard her coming, the way he always did, and fixed those limpid, knowing eyes on her. She came hurrying up to him, in order to gain all the time possible before they were interrupted. She stroked him and patted him and spoke to him low. Everyone must have something to love.

He nuzzled her hand, and he even nuzzled the seam of her bag before she had got it quite open. She whisked the handkerchief off. She said, "Here, look what I've got for you." She stole a wary glance over her shoulder. She said, "Hurry up, before he comes out." She smoothed his coat down while he was busy enjoying it, made a great to-do over him, as a friend does.

Some men were shouting about something further up the street. She didn't pay any attention at first, didn't even turn to look. These stolen

minutes were too precious to waste. Then they came running toward her, two of them, one behind the other. He finished the last of it just as they reached her. They were all out of breath, as though they'd been hurrying for a long time. Not only now, but for hours past, all night long, all over town.

“What'd you just give that horse?” the foremost one panted.

Instantly she was acutely frightened. Were they going to arrest her for it? “Only an apple,” she faltered.

“Where'd you get it? Did you just pick it up out of an ashcan, back there around the corner, where the El runs?”

“Y-yes. I didn't mean any harm. It didn't seem to belong to anyone——”

“Wait a minute,” he insisted. “Did it have teeth-marks on one side of it—little dents?”

She nodded fearfully, unsure just what heinous dereliction she had been guilty of, but expecting imminent arrest.

However, that point having been established, they seemed to exclude her from all further part in the problem that was agitating them, whatever it was. She saw one of them strike himself calamitously across the forehead, look at the other one.

“There's only one thing to be done now,” he groaned dismally.

The strange little procession wended its way slowly along, following the customary beat of the horse's rider. Now, however, he was paced by a train of three persons afoot. One man walked slowly along on each side with a hand resting encouragingly against the animal's glossy flank. A street cleaner brought up the rear with his long-handled brush in poised readiness.

They would plod patiently to the limits of the mounted patrolman's beat in one direction, then turn back and retrace their route until they had reached its limits in the opposite direction. Then turn once more and go back the first way again. This had been going on uninterruptedly for the past several hours.

Nobody could understand what they were doing. Some said the men on foot were a bodyguard for the policeman. Some said the policeman was a bodyguard for the two men afoot. Since they kept tracing and retracing the same limited course, passing any given point not once but numberless times, this latter postulate wasn't very tenable. And into neither theory would the street cleaner fit very plausibly. Presently, since nothing continued to happen, people stopped loitering along the sidewalk waiting to see what it was that was meant to happen.

“Keep moving him, Donnelly, keep moving him,” one of the self-appointed grooms would urge occasionally, and quite unnecessarily.

The rider didn't seem to relish the false position he found himself and his steed placed in, through circumstances beyond their control. “Don't hang around him so close, he's not used to it,” he answered tartly.

“This is a crowded neighborhood,” the unhappy Inspector Grady, who was on the left flank, let him know. “I've got a job to do, and I'm not taking any chances, with all these people around.”

“Just be patient,” was the sulky reply, “you'll get it.”

As the cavalcade reached the last intersection but one, short of the perimeter of the beat they were advancing toward, the crossing-light suddenly changed, flashed red. They halted. A moment later there was a sudden shout of excitement that the passers-by were unable to account for. The small group milled about for a moment in a state of flux. One of the men on foot flung his arm up, and the rearguard street cleaner closed in. The horse side-stepped nervously.

The cop reached forward and patted his mount's neck as a mark of merited approval. “I told ya you'd get it,” he said complacently to those immediately around him.

Inspector Grady floundered toward the curb and sat down on it in a state of semi-prostration. He took off his hat and fanned himself exhaustedly.

“Guard, how I hate apples!” he remarked vehemently to no one in particular. “It's given me an allergy to 'em!”

## MARIHUANA

THE bell rang at about eight that night, and it was a couple of King Turner's friends, Bill Evans and Wash Gordon, come to take him out. "To get him away from himself," as they would have put it. They had a girl with them whom they introduced simply as Vinnie.

That he mightn't want to go out, or if he did, that he mightn't want to go out with them, didn't enter into their calculations at all. They couldn't imagine anyone not wanting to go out with them, especially when they went to all that trouble just to brace him up.

Turner opened the door and just looked at them when he saw who it was. He didn't say "Come in" or anything. He didn't have to with them. They parted in the middle, the girl and Evans pushed past on one side of him, Gordon on the other, and all of a sudden his apartment was full of noise. The radio was going at three-quarters tone, the girl named Vinnie was experimenting with a cocktail-shaker that played a tune, and Evans was busily slapping the lids of boxes up and down looking for a cigarette. This came under the general heading of camaraderie. Turner had experienced a lot of it since his wife had left him and he'd been living alone. As long as the fort had already been taken over, he went ahead and closed the door; but with a rueful look, as if he would rather have done it while they were still out there in front of him.

Evans spread his hands astonishedly, said: "Well, come on, get your things, what're you waiting for?"

"Know where we're taking you?" Wash Gordon added. "To a ranch. To a ranch to blaze weed."

"What's a ranch?" Turner asked. "And what's weed?"

The three of them exchanged a pitying look among themselves, as if to say: "Isn't he corny? Doesn't know anything, does he?"

"Marihuana. The ranch is the flat where you smoke it. We just found it ourselves."

Turner sliced his hand at them in rejection, turned away.

"No, he'd rather stick around here and brood down his shirt-collar all evening. Brood about Eleanor."

"It's just for you," Evans urged. "It'll make you think you've got her back." He dropped one eyelid toward the other two.



The girl had found a picture, was studying it. “I don’t see so much to brood about,” she said felinely.

Turner came over and hitched it away from her, turned it face-down.

“Not on that subject,” Gordon warned her in an undertone. “Can’t take it.”

“Well, are we going or aren’t we?” she wanted to know sulkily.

“Sure we’re going.” Evans found Turner’s hat, flattened it down on his head, slapped his topcoat lengthwise around his neck like a scarf. “So is he.” He caught him by one arm and pulled him, Gordon by the other. “We know what’s good for him, don’t we, Wash?”

“I don’t think it’ll be much fun taking him along,” the girl commented under her breath to Gordon.

“Sure it will, watch. He’s never tried it before; he’ll hit the ceiling. You should always have an amateur along on this kind of a party, for comic relief.”

After they’d finally hauled him across the threshold, Turner quit trying to dig his heels in.

The girl came out last and closed the door after her, after sticking out her tongue at Eleanor’s photograph. “You’ll thank us for this,” she promised Turner pertly. “It’ll put a little life in you, Old Faithful.”

“I left my latchkey in there,” Turner protested. “I won’t be able to get in again when I come home.”

“It’ll be so long before you come home,” Gordon jeered, “the building’ll probably be condemned and torn down from old age.”

They got into a cab and drove west to Tenth Avenue, then up that into the lower Sixties, the Hell’s Kitchen district, without giving any exact address.

“We ought to get a rebate for bringing a new customer,” the girl said breezily.

Evans motioned to his lips and jerked a cautioning thumb toward the driver. “Wait’ll we get outside again,” he warned.

They got out at a blind street corner, apparently chosen at random, stood for a moment in the ghostly pall of a street light until the cab’s taillight had winked out ahead. “We’ll walk it from here,” Evans said. “Driving right up to the door in a cab, in this neighborhood, is a tip-off something’s doing inside. The neighborhood grapevine would finally get word to the cops.”

They crossed over toward Eleventh, went up a side street on that side on foot. Turner's reluctance to accompany them, even this late in the proceedings, was plainly visible on his face, but they ignored it.

They stopped finally outside one of the moldering Civil War era tenements that, interspersed with billboards and lofts, lined the dismal thoroughfare. Turner tried to extricate himself for the last time, as if assailed by some intangible premonition. "I'm going to call it off. I got a feeling something's going to go wrong if I go up there. I got a feeling something's going to happen."

"Aw, don't be yellow," Gordon snarled. Turner could see by their expressions that they didn't really like him, there was no real friendship there; they wanted him to come along simply to have a good time at his expense, to make him the butt of a joke, laugh at his inexperience.

They looked at him scornfully, and the girl said contemptuously, "Oh, let him go. Don't make him come up if he's afraid."

It was the sort of challenge that usually works, against all reason and logic, with almost anyone. It did this time too. Turner turned toward the tenement entrance without another word, followed them in. If the girl's elbow nudged Evans' ribs in the gloom ahead, he failed to see it.

"Don't make any noise now," Gordon cautioned in the murky depths of the entrance-hallway. "They don't want the other tenants in the building to get wise."

There were stairs ahead, lit—or rather hinted at—by a single bead of gaslight, the size of a yellow pea, hovering over a jet sticking out of the wall. They tiptoed up them Indian-file. They had to go that way, the rickety case was too narrow to take two of them abreast.

"Once you get in it's not so bad," Evans tried to hearten Turner in a stage whisper over his shoulder. "They've got it fixed up pretty nice, out of the profits they make."

"Aren't they taking a chance on the law?" Turner asked, tailing the rest of them around a creaky landing and up another flight.

"If the dicks do bust in, what evidence have they got? How can they prove these people aren't just having a few personal friends in for a sociable evening? How long does it take to get rid of a few dozen reefer down the air shaft?"

They climbed the rest of the way in silence until they had reached the top floor of the sinister place, stood huddled there for a moment getting their breaths back. There was a peculiar, insidious trace of something in the air up

here, very hard to identify—a ghostlike pungency that prickled the nostrils. Turner had never met with it before, couldn't tell what it was. But he had his suspicions.

“Well, here goes.” Evans took a tug at his necktie, strode forward, knocked at a door fronting the top-floor hall. The others moved after him, stood grouped there as if for mutual protection.

There was a single, muffled footfall somewhere on the other side of the door. Then a wait, that probably seemed longer than it was. The backing of a handmade peephole, bored through the woodwork with an awl, was removed, and an orange-lidded eye presented itself. That was because the light was on the eye's side, the hall where they stood held simply a pin-point of gas.

Evans made himself their spokesman. “Charlie and Joe,” he offered. “Remember us? We brought a friend back with us this time.” Girls evidently didn't count in this little subdivision of the underworld; a miscalculation many a shady character has made.

The eye blacked out and a chain dropped with a clunk. Then another one followed it. Then the door opened narrowly, little better than a foot-and-a-half. So narrowly they couldn't see who was behind it. The invitation to enter, however, was implicit. It reminded Turner inescapably of the old-time Prohibition gin-flats, only it purveyed something a good deal worse.

Evans, as ringleader, squeezed himself in first. The girl went next, with a shiver of thrilled anticipation, that was mostly faked to make herself seem a novice. Gordon went next, and Turner came last. Somebody's hairy, sleeve-rolled arm dropped behind him like an ax, to close the door and pull up the chains.

They were standing at the end of a long “railway” hall that seemed to go on indefinitely into the distance. A solitary electric light bulb overhead was made even dimmer with a jacket of crepe-paper. A man was standing there beside them with one hand held at a receptive level, as if waiting for something to be put into it without having to ask for it. He squinted at Turner, the newcomer, said: “This guy all right?”

“Perfect,” Evans assured him. He got out money, said to Gordon: “I'm paying for Vinnie, you take care of Turner.” There was evidently a flat admission-rate, with as many cigarettes supplied as the customer asked for. The doorkeeper had produced an ordinary white stationery envelope, was doling them out as they passed him.

“I’ve got money here——” Turner objected, used to the etiquette of the upper world. But vice is never stingy when it comes to roping a neophyte in.

“You’re our guest,” Gordon overrode him, pushing his hand down. “Just one for him, he’s green,” he said patronizingly to the man in shirt sleeves. The latter handed Turner a cigarette that looked like an ordinary cigarette, only the fill was a little darker and coarser. Turner didn’t know what to do with it, stuck it upright in his breast pocket.

“Use it right here, don’t carry it out with you,” the man warned. “We got a house rule against that.”

“He’ll blaze it right away,” Gordon promised.

They went down the long hall single file, the way they’d come in. The man who had admitted them followed at Turner’s heels only as far as the first open doorway they passed. Then he turned aside and went in there. It was a barren sort of a kitchen. Turner glimpsed a bare wooden table and chair as he went by, placed lengthwise so that they could command a view of the hallway and anyone who went by outside. A deck of greasy cards was spread out in solitaire formation on the table.

The “paying guests” had continued on down the hall by themselves, so Turner went after them. The operators of the place evidently believed in a policy of laissez-faire, left their callers to entertain themselves as best they could. Turner followed the hall past several more doors until it had emerged into a depressing sort of front parlor, provided with a radio, a divan and several easy chairs. Two windows on one side that evidently overlooked the street had dark shades tightly nailed down all around their frames. A third that looked out on an air shaft was wide open top and bottom, and in addition there was a small electric fan facing it from floor-level across the room, to help dissipate the telltale fumes.

The way they made themselves at home they might have been, as Evans had suggested, just company dropping in for a friendly visit. Except that they kept their hats and coats on, as if finding it advisable to be ready to leave in a hurry if they had to.

They were apparently the only customers at the moment. There was a man in there already, but he seemed to belong to the place, one of the operators. He was in shirt sleeves, like the other one, but with a vest dangling open over some kind of a strap, a little too slantwise to be a suspender-loop. He was reading a newspaper when they came in; just looked up briefly, then dipped into it again without paying them any further attention.

They made themselves comfortable. Vinnie pre-empted the sofa and patted it for Gordon to sit down next to her. Evans strolled across the room to change the wave length on the radio. Turner, after a momentary indecision, sat down in an easy chair in the corner, a little withdrawn from everyone else.

Gordon had struck a match for Vinnie and himself. He blew it out, dropped it tidily in an ashtray beside them. If it hadn't been for what they had said at his own place, Turner wouldn't have been able to tell what they were doing. The whole procedure, so far, was perfectly casual, innocent-looking.

"Here we go again, gang," Vinnie giggled.

They all turned to look at Turner expectantly, watching to see what he'd do. He didn't do anything. Evans came over to him finally. A thread of smoke was looping around his wrist now too. "I'll steer you how to do it," he said affably.

Turner said in a low, discontented voice: "I don't want to do this. I gotta feeling something's going to happen. I gotta feeling this night's going to end up bad."

Evans took it out of his breast pocket for him, aimed it at his lips. "Aw, don't be a wet blanket. Join in the spirit of the thing. If it was a drink you wouldn't refuse. So what? It's just an aerial drink." He'd clicked a pocket-lighter before Turner could swerve his head away. A sharp pain like a knife slashed down Turner's windpipe into his lungs. "Hold it," Evans coached. "Hold it." He pressed the flat of his hand across Turner's mouth for a minute, preventing him from exhaling. Then he picked up the fallen reefer, handed it back to him.

Then he stood a minute watching. "Take another drag," he said finally. Slowly Turner's hand rose to his mouth. Almost against his will, but it rose. The pain wasn't nearly as sharp this time.

Evans turned away, did something with his left eyelid for the benefit of the other two. "It's got him," he smirked. "He's tuned-in from now on."

Time started to slow up and act crazy. Minutes took much longer to pass than they had before. It was hard for him to adjust himself to the new ratio, he got all balled-up. When it seemed like half an hour had gone by, the radio would still be playing only the first chorus of the same selection that had begun a good thirty minutes before. Otherwise, nothing much happened. Vinnie was doing a good deal of muffled giggling over there on the divan. The stranger who had been sitting reading the paper got up, yawned,

stretched ponderously, and strolled out into the hall, with a muttered “Happy landing!” by way of leave-taking. He didn’t come back again any more.

Turner looked down one time and a quarter of an inch of charred paper was all that was left between his fingers. Then the next time he looked there was a full-length cigarette again.

There was evidently a sort of sketchy buffet included in the admission charge. Or else Evans, who wasn’t a bashful type person, had gone out and helped himself. He came back into the room after a brief absence holding a loaf of white bread tucked under one arm and hacking thick chunks off it with a bright-bladed jackknife that he must have borrowed from one of the proprietors. The three of them, even the girl, wolfed at the thick slabs. “Find something to spread on it,” Turner heard her suggest.

Evans had been standing before Turner. He put the knife down on the arm of his easy chair, turned and went out again. Turner stared bemusedly down at the shimmering blade, as though the gleam it cast half hypnotized him.

From far away he heard the girl’s whispered comment to Gordon: “Look at Rain-in-the-face. I told you not to bring him with us, he’s a total loss.”

“Somebody ought to light a firecracker under him,” Gordon agreed.

He didn’t connect it with himself. It came from so far away, it wasn’t as though they were talking about him at all. He started running the tip of his finger absently up and down the razorlike blade-edge of the knife Evans had left on the arm of his chair.

Evans came back in the room and he heard him say: “How’s this? It’s all I could find out there.”

The girl said “Ugh!” in a nauseated voice.

Turner didn’t look over to see what it was. He didn’t pay any more attention to them from then on. Something much more important was happening. Eleanor had showed up in the place. His Eleanor! The perfect lady that never could have been persuaded to set foot in such a——

First came her music, from the radio, that tune that he and she had danced to so many times in the past.

“After you’ve gone  
And left me crying——”

Then came the thought of her. Then she herself. She was crouched down, trying to hide herself there behind the console, so that he wouldn’t catch her in such a place. She peeped over at him, then ducked her head down. It wasn’t just a private hallucination of his own brought on by the

refers, either; the others saw her too, he could tell by the way they spoke. Evans called over to him: “Hey, Turner, isn’t that your wife across the room there? Better find out what she’s doing here.”

She stood up and came forward when she saw that they’d spotted her. She was trying to keep her face covered with a gauzy sort of handkerchief, and get over to the hall door and out, before they could stop her.

Turner jolted to his feet, headed her off, got in front of her. He caught her by the shoulders, tried to turn her toward him. “Eleanor! Who brought you to such a place? I’ll punch them in the jaw!”

She writhed in stubborn silence, trying to get away from him.

“You got no right being here! You’ll get yourself talked about. Come on, let me get you out, before somebody recognizes you——”

She wrenched herself free, turned and ran back to the opposite end of the room, away from him. He went after her. She dodged and doubled back again. He went after her a second time.

It must have seemed funny to those other fools. They were laughing their heads off around him, instead of trying to help him. He heard Evans call out to him: “You’ll never catch her that way. Here, pin her down with this.” And then a muffled cry of alarm from Vinnie, the other girl, “Don’t! Don’t give him that, you fool!”

It came too late. Something went wrong. She turned midway in full flight, when he wasn’t expecting her to, and they collided front to front. The recoil sent him back a step. She stood there perfectly still, only wavering to and fro a little as though the current of the electric fan on the floor was too strong for her. She was holding her hands clasped at one side of her bosom, as though something there hurt her a little——

Then as he stood there facing her, a hideous thing happened. Red peered through the crevices of her intertwined fingers. As though she were squeezing it out of her own heart by the pressure of her hands. His eyes dilated and he held his hands protestingly toward her, as if to warn her of her danger——

Suddenly she was gone and the blank wall across the room was all that met his uncomprehending gaze. He looked down, and she was flat upon the floor, almost at his feet. Her hands had separated now, and on the place they’d clasped there was a blotch of red that kept on growing——

But more than that had happened to her. In the fall, she seemed to have disintegrated into a flux of light-particles. Then they cohered again, into her

face and form, but she wasn't Eleanor any more, she was—Vinnie, that girl that had come here with them.

He glanced behind him, to make sure, and all he met were Gordon's and Evans' frightened faces, livid with paralyzed horror. She wasn't anywhere but on the floor before him.

One of them jumped forward, crouched over her, said in a choked voice: "Help me get her on the sofa."

Turner missed seeing what they did next; he was staring in dazed consternation down his own arm, at the knife-blade protruding from his folded-over fingers. No longer glistening cleanly but ruddied now. "How'd it get there?" he groaned, mystified. He opened his fingers and it popped on the floor.

They both had their backs to him, they were bending over her on the sofa, in frantic, furtive attempts at first aid. Evans had pulled the tail of his shirt out from under his belt, was trying to do something to her with it. "Gotta find some way to stop the bleeding——"

"That's no good. Hurry up, we better send out for a doctor!"

"They wouldn't let one in here; they're afraid of being reported."

"What'll we do? We can't just let her lie here bleeding to death——"

One of them glanced around remorsefully at him, then turned back again. "She shouldn't have teased him. I told her to lay off that subject——"

Turner's foot edged forward along the floor, pointing toward the hall doorway and escape. His body followed it. Then his other foot slid forward, like a skater's. He was leaning forward above the waist in crafty, narcotized stealth. They kept their backs turned obviously toward him, absorbed in their clumsy, befuddled attempts to revive the inert figure on the divan.

He had already gained the doorway unnoticed, was looking back from the semi-sanctuary of the hall, when he saw one of their heads dip down lower over her. Heard the horror-smothered exclamation that followed. "Bill—oh my God, she's gone! I can't hear her breathing any more. It must have grazed the heart——"

He went wavering down the interminable reaches of the hall, rocking from side to side like someone breasting a ship's corridor in a high sea.

Before he was out of earshot one last exclamation reached him, from that parlor behind him that had turned into a bier now. One of them must have looked around and missed him. "Where'd he go? Get hold of him! He can't run out and leave us with her on our hands, we're all in this together!"



And then the reassuring answer, “He probably just went to the bathroom, to be sick. He won’t get out without us, don’t worry; the door’s all chained up.”

Oh, won’t I? he thought craftily. He kept going, panic simmering deep within him; ready to boil over into a tide of destruction engulfing anyone who stood in his way. The hallway seemed to be of elastic; the more of it he covered, the more of it was stretched away before him. And the seconds went by so slow. He’d been under way, trying to get to that far front door, for fully fifteen or twenty minutes now. They’d come after him soon, they wouldn’t wait back there much longer for him to return.

The first of the side doorways that lined the hall came creeping toward him at last. It had been left narrowly ajar. He stopped, afraid to brave the opening, scanty as it was. The light was on in the room behind it. He crept forward, paying out his hands along the wall as he went, for balance. He found the crack of the door, peered through it. He saw a slice of an iron bedframe, a motionless hand. Emboldened, he advanced to the other side of the doorway, where the gap was. He looked in cautiously through that. One of the two owners, the man who had been sitting in the front room, was stretched out in there asleep, stockinged-toes pointed at the ceiling, one hand backed defensively against his eyes to ward off the light. He’d taken off his vest and shoes, and that strap that wasn’t straight enough to be a suspender-strap was dangling now around one of the knobs at the foot of the bed. It ended in a holster, with a black, cross-grained slab of metal protruding from it. Turner couldn’t take his eyes off it, while the long seconds that to him were minutes toiled by.

That meant out, that black slab, more surely than any door. He had to have it. More than that, it meant a continuance of out, for so long as he had it. And he wanted out with all the desperate longing of all trapped things, blindly scratching, clawing their way through a maze to the open. To the open where the equal chance is.

He widened the door, until the gap had become entry. He felt his way across the room toward it, using his feet on the floor the way the hands are usually used across an unknown surface, testing for unevennesses that might cause sound, avoiding them where they seemed to lurk. And through it all he had the uncertainty of balance, produced by the narcotic, to contend with as an added difficulty. He kept his eyes on the sleeper’s half-shielded face; he knew the danger would come from there first, if there was going to be any.

He’d reached it finally; he was standing by it now. He tilted the bottom of the holster out, to keep it from striking the iron bedframe. He knew all the

right things to do; perhaps it was his subconsciousness. All the tricks of stealth seemed to come to him instinctively. Or maybe the self-protective facets of his mind had been made keener. Dangerously so.

He drew the gun up until its snub nose had come clear. Then he let the holster down to gravity line again. He stood there still wavering slightly, but with his perceptions diamond-clear. Like a rattlesnake's. "I've got a gun now. If this town tries to stop me, that'll be this town's hard luck!"

He moved backwards for the room door, in order to keep his gaze on the sleeper's face. Only, now there was a difference: if that face awoke, that face would go to sleep for good. He kept fanning his free hand behind him to find the exit, as he retreated. Halfway across, a worn floorboard creaked treacherously, and he flexed his knees and crouched. The sleeper's hand slid down from his eyes to his mouth. But his eyes didn't open.

He went on. The door sill nudged his heel, and he was over and out in the hall. He eased the door back to its original width, and started sidling along, shoulder to wall, toward the next doorway down, behind which the card-playing lookout was.

He stopped just short of it and held his breath. He'd never known before that cards, a game of solitaire, could be heard so clearly. He heard: *snap!* and then a long wait, and then *snap!* again, as the unseen player laid them down one by one.

And then, just as he was starting to inch the gun muzzle past the frame of the doorway, preparatory to swerving it around and training it into the room, there was a catastrophic interruption. A sudden knocking on wood sounded, so close by it almost seemed to hit him in the face. A chair scraped back, and the card player cut out into the hall less than a foot ahead of him, so close his back almost grazed the gun point. The doorkeeper turned toward the front without looking back the other way, or he would have seen him there immediately behind him. Turner saw the light blur of his shirt sleeves recede into the shadowy haze of the hall just ahead.

He took a furtive step after him, his intention to champ the gun into his spine as soon as the chains were let down and overawe his way out, through doorkeeper, callers, and whatever other opposition might present itself. Again something happened to freeze his inflamed blood to new lows of panic.

The lookout had stopped before the panel, head tilted to the peephole. "Who are you?" Turner heard him ask gruffly.

A blurred voice answered something indistinguishable from outside. Turner couldn't catch it directly, was too far back, but he got it—or thought he did—indirectly, through the lookout's abbreviated repetition.

“Dicks?” he heard him say clearly.

Dicks! Detectives had already been summoned, were at the door to arrest him. Evans and Gordon must have betrayed him, must have gotten word out in some way, perhaps through the windows overlooking the street, or perhaps by some telephone he had failed to notice, as soon as he'd left the death chamber.

The reaction of the lookout in the face of this situation should have had some meaning, but it failed to register on his jangled faculties. The lookout didn't seem unduly perturbed, he started unlacing the chains without trying to warn those in the front of the flat. Perhaps the password he had heard was: “A friend of Dick's” and not “Dicks!” Turner was never to know.

To retreat was simply to return to the scene of his crime. To step aside into the kitchen was simply to be discovered by the lookout within the next moment or two. To carry out his original idea of weaponing his way out gun-first was now suicide; detectives were a different matter and he knew it.

Then his eyes focused on this closet door, down ahead but on the opposite side of the hall from the kitchen—and the other doorways. It must have been there all along, but it only now peered through to his taut consciousness, almost like a trick dissolve in motion-photography, coming clear while you watched it. It was so close to the end of the hall it formed nearly a right angle with the front door. It meant almost treading on the lookout's heels to sidle in through it.

There was no time to weigh chances. There was no such thing as chances anyway, in the distorted perspective of the weed fumes. He crept up behind the lookout, covered by the noise the pendant chains were making, knifed his hand behind the refuge-door—it hadn't been shut tight into its frame—drew it out and slid in in back of it. Then he reversed it to about where it had been before, to avoid the risk of the latch-tongue clicking home.

He was in darkness. He could feel something soft hanging beside him, like an old sweater. Whatever noise there had been had blended with the opening of the other door. He heard feet shuffle by outside his hiding-place, only inches away, and a voice said: “Straight down the hall, gentlemen.” That convinced him of who the newcomers were and what they were here for; it sounded like the sort of grudging permission that might be given to detectives forcing their way in. Somebody's coat sleeve even scuffed the

panel he was lurking behind, in passing. The chains had gone up again. A follow-up tread went by, after the others. The silence fell again—at least immediately outside the cubicle he was in.

He couldn't linger. He had to get out, now more than ever, now faster than ever. He widened the door, looked out, gun still bare in death's-head fist. Their retreating tread was still vibrating at the upper end of the interminable hall. The lookout seemed to be accompanying them straight through to the front this time—further evidence, to him, that they were punitive agents—he could see the receding blur of his white shirt dwindling in the gloom.

He was at the door by now, palsied hand to chain. He had to pocket the gun, for the first time since he'd had it, to free both hands. He got one off the groove with little more than a faint clash. Someone gave a hoarse cry of alarm down at the other end—that meant they'd finally discovered her. Then a great welter, a hubbub, of voices sounded. There was a lurking note of the crazed laughter of marihuana somewhere in the bedlam.

The remaining chain swung down, he wrenched the door out, and he was free. The last thing he heard behind him was the oncoming stomp of running feet.

Now began flight, that excruciating accompaniment to both the sleep-dream and the drug-dream as well. Down endless flights of stairs that seemed to have increased decimally since he had come up them so many days before. Four, fourteen, forty—there seemed no end to them, no bottom. Round and round he went, hand slapping at the worn guard-rail only at the turns to keep from bulleting head-on into the wall each time. The clamor had come out onto a landing high above him now, endless miles above him; a thin voice came shouting down the stair-well, "There he is! See him down there?" raising the hue and cry to the rest of the pack. Footsteps started cannonading down after him, like avenging thunder from on high. They only added wings to his effortless, almost cascading waterlike flight.

Like a drunk, he was incapable of hurting himself. At one turning he went off his feet and rippled down the whole succeeding flight of stair-ribs like a wriggling snake. Then he got up again and plunged ahead, without consciousness of pain or smart. The whole staircase-structure seemed to hitch crazily from side to side with the velocity of his descent, but it was really he that was hitching. But behind him the oncoming thunder kept gaining.

Then suddenly, after they'd kept on for hours, the stairs suddenly ended, he'd reached bottom at last. He tore out through a square of blackness at the

end of the entrance-hall, and the kindly night received him, took him to itself—along with countless other things that stalk and kill and are dangerous if crossed.

He had no knowledge of where he was; if he'd ever had, he'd lost it long ago. The drums of pursuit were still beating a rolling tattoo inside the tenement. He chose a direction at random, fled down the deserted street, the wand of light from a wan street-lamp flicking him in passing, so fast did he scurry by beneath it.

A corner opened out before him, and he went skidding around it on the sides of his shoes, and nearly went down, but managed to stay up from sheer momentum alone. He was on an avenue now, where there was more light, and instinct warned him not to go so fast or he was automatically inviting pursuit and seizure by whatever passers-by he encountered. A man coming out of a saloon stepped back just in time to avoid being hurled down, and hollered maudlin imprecations after him, any one of which might have elicited sudden lead-spattering death for an answer, had he but known it. Another corner, and he'd put two bends now in the line of direct vision between himself and his original pursuers. But he couldn't keep up this pace much longer; his breath was clogging and his heart felt as if it was swelling up like a balloon. He had to get in out of the open, put some kind of a barrier around himself, no matter how flimsy, behind which to gain a breathing-spell undisturbed.

He saw a little hole-in-the-wall candy shop ahead, the kind that the neighborhood kids patronize with their pennies, casting a weak swath of light across the sidewalk through its glass front. He tottered past the first time; he would have preferred a doorway or a basement areaway. But then he couldn't go on any further; his breath clogged up entirely, and he had to flounder to a stop against the wall. He turned back to it and made his way in by a process of rolling his shoulders along the plate-glass front, rather than using his legs any more.

There was only one person in it at the moment, a short stout woman in a sweater, evidently the shopkeeper. She was sitting with elbows propped on the grimy soft-drink counter, reading a newspaper. He had wavered past her toward the back before she had had time to look up. She was the kind of shopkeeper who finishes the paragraph she is reading before waiting on a customer. Then by the time she had he was already abreast of the single telephone booth to the rear of the counter. She took that to be his errand and lowered her head again.

A bulb went on dimly over him as he spread the folding glass panel to muffle his asphyxiated breathing. He clawed at it, hectically twisted it until he had gotten kindly, sheltering darkness around him again. The booth had a little, inadequate seat, little better than a corner-bracket. That supported him for a while. Then he let himself go floundering down to the floor, back upright against the booth wall, one knee reared before him, the other folded under him.

Reprieve for a little while. But the night was so long, the drug was so strong. Everyone's hand was against him, every face was an enemy's.

"All right, one at a time," the Lieutenant glowered. He didn't like either one of them, after what they'd just finished telling him. He probably wouldn't have even without that. He had them typed at a glance. No-good bums. Dressed up, and with jobs, and money in their pockets, but bums just the same.

They were both unstrung, on the verge of hysteria by now, faces like chalk at the horrendous consequences unleashed by their own thoughtlessness. Gordon kept whining over and over, uncontrollably, "We didn't mean no harm. . . . We didn't mean no harm. . . ." He had a black eye from one of the cops.

"Shut up!" thundered the Lieutenant, pounding a fist down on the desk top. "You say that once more, and I'll let you have one across the snoot! Speak up now—where else is he likely to go? Any place you know of? Any close friends he's liable to turn to?"

They both shook their heads dazedly. Evans was still clutching a flimsy bit of woman's scarf, shredding it nervously in his hands. A scarf that had belonged to the girl named Vinnie. He didn't know he still had it with him. "We two were about his best friends," he faltered, "I don't know of anyone else he——"

"His *best* friends! Hagh!" If the Lieutenant didn't actually expectorate his contempt on the floor, he made a sound to that effect. He flipped the lever on a desk transmitter. "Send Spillane in here." Then he backed an arm toward the two cringing objects before him. "Take 'em out!" he rasped. "Take 'em out of my sight before I——"

A lean, springily-knit individual thumped the already open door in passing, came striding in twenty inches to the stride while they were being hustled out.

“Spillane——” said the Lieutenant. Then he dropped his voice confidentially, while the detective hand-heelled the corners of his desk. It rose again toward the end, as he finished giving the instructions, consulted the memoranda he’d taken down. “His name’s King Turner. He’s twenty-five, medium build, light-brown hair, he’s got a peculiarly thin face that you can’t miss, cheeks sort of hollowed-in. He’s wearing a pepper-and-salt suit—know what I mean by that?—a telescope-crown gray hat, a belted gray topcoat that he may or may not still have with him. His own address is 22 East Fifth, between Lexington and Third. You may be able to head him off there, but I’ve got my doubts he’ll go back there. The point is he’s roaming the streets or holed-up some place right now, a menace, a living death, to anyone and everyone that happens to cross his path. For all practical purposes he’s a maniac, he’s all hopped-up with marihuana. He broke out of there armed, you know; he’s got a Luger packed with six bullets on him at this minute—I’m sending out a general alarm on him, but I’m giving you this special assignment in addition. You’ve got to catch up with him before it’s too late and——”

The cop that had taken Gordon and Evans out thumped the door, stuck his head in. “One of them two birds just remembered another place he thinks he might go, Lieutenant,” he interrupted.

“Let’s have it,” said the Lieutenant alertly.

Evans’ pasty face was thrust in, with the cop’s hand guiding it at the back of the neck like a terrier’s scruff. “His former wife, he’s still crazy about her,” he said disconnectedly. “That brought on the whole thing, over at the ranch—— They’re separated, and she’s living at the Continental, on 49th Street, under her own name, Eleanor Philips——”

The Lieutenant turned back to Spillane. “He’s liable to go there, to change his clothes or try to borrow enough money to get out of town on. Try for him there too—and you’d better warn her she’s in danger, not to let him in, not to let him get too close to her. To communicate with us immediately if he shows up or she hears from him in any way. And whatever you do——”

Spillane hung back for a minute at the threshold, turned his head.

“—see that that guy is overtaken and stopped *before this night’s over*, or there’s going to be some killing like there never was before!”

He was still coiled there in the unlighted depths of the phone booth, like someone half-suffocating in an upright coffin with a glass pane set in it.

Minutes—or a half-hour? His breathing was a little less harassed, but he couldn't tell how long it had been. More of that tricky time-confusion, that is the hempseeds' chief symptom. The only sound had been an occasional crackle as the woman up front turned a page of the paper she was poring over. She must have lost track of him, forgotten that he was still in there

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Suddenly a tread on the wooden flooring at the shop entrance, heavy, authoritative, inward-bound. Then a voice, resonant, masculine, ominous: “Ye know who I'm looking for, don't ye? Ye know who it is I'm after?” And a chuckle. But a grim chuckle.

The woman's betrayal was instant, almost indifferent. A page crackle even punctuated it, so she must have gone ahead reading right while she was in the act of answering. “He's back there, where do you suppuz? Go and get him yussel!”

Turner's heart spiraled frantically up, dropped down again where it belonged only because it couldn't burst out of his chest cavity. The gun came out almost by reflex action. He rose cobra-like within the narrow confines of his hiding-place, on the leg that had been folded under him until now. He edged the slide back an unnoticeable fraction of an inch—they were both too far forward, out of range of the pane itself—peered laterally out, with two eyes on a vertical axis. One, his own; the other, the gun-bore, six inches lower.

A lowering uniformed cop, a big bull of a man, was standing up there, opposite the soft-drink counter that ensconced the woman. But his head was turned down Turner's way, and there was a knowing glint to his slitted eyes.

Turner flung his own head back so violently the other way it struck the inner wall of the booth. He didn't even feel the impact, and his hat, crushed, deadened the sound of it. He dropped down again, to the lower rim of the glass, eyes just above it, gun-mouth just above it. If he came toward him, if he came down this way——

A heavy preliminary footfall sounded. Then a second. Then a third. The cop's blue uniform-front impinged on the edge of the glass. Turner sighted the gun, centered it directly over his shield.

He took one more step forward and he stopped right outside the booth, blurring the pane. He didn't seem to be looking in, he craftily kept his profile turned toward it, as if unaware of it. But Turner saw his shoulder shift position, slope downward. That meant his arm was reaching back, that meant he was drawing.



His fear-inflamed mind sent the control-signal to his finger-joint to fold back. The trigger sliced back. The blast seemed to lift the booth clear off the floor, drop it down again. A pin-wheel of vacancy appeared in the glass, flinging off shards and slivers.

The cop's profile went down without turning full-face even at the very end, stunned unawareness of what had hit him written on it. Turner slapped back the remaining lower section of the panel, revealed it once more. On the floor, already dead. But still surprised. He took a step out, found himself facing a tableau of three rigid figures, only two of them still breathing.

There was a little runty man standing there, just past the booth in the other direction, as though he had been coming forward to meet the cop from the rear of the store, holding a numbers-slip in his extended hand. Still clutched in the cop's nerveless hand on the floor was, not a gun, but a dollar bill, freshly withdrawn from his back pocket.

The tableau held for a frozen minute. Neither of them, the woman nor her husband, seemed able to realize what had happened to him, he had dropped so suddenly, midway between them, like a felled ox. Then as Turner stepped forward into their line of vision, smoking gun out before him, the woman's slack jaw tautened for a scream. He dialed the gun her way and the scream suffocated to death in her larynx.

"In back the two of you!" It was the berserk yowl of an enraged tomcat on a back fence.

It was impossible for her to escape from the counter that walled her in on three sides, in any direction but toward him. She was afraid to go toward him. They were ignoramuses, but they could tell they were up against something that wasn't normal, they could tell by his eyes.

The little man, gums white, quavered: "Please, Momma, don't argue; you heard him."

She wrung her hands, whined: "Please, mister, just let me go by, I only want to get on the other side of you, like you said; don't do nothing——" and scurried by, head and shoulders defensively lowered as though he were an overhanging branch.

He shepherded them into the little back room the man had come out of, looked around to make sure there was no other way out, changed the key to the outside of the door and locked the two of them in, with a hissing "Keep quiet now, or I'll come back and——"

The shop entrance was still clear, no inquisitive figures blocking it. Maybe the booth had muffled the report somewhat. Facing it, and the

prospect of further, indefinitely-continued flight, he raked distracted fingers through his hair. That dislodged his hat. He saw it, but left it lying where it had fallen. There was no time, no time for anything but to keep going—until he dropped.

Outside in the dark again, a sinister afterthought caught up with him, just too late. “I shouldn’t have left them alive. They’ll tell who it was, what I looked like.” But there was no turning back again, either, on this satanic treadmill that had caught him up, that was wearing out his body, mind and soul.

He hurried along furtively, hugging the building-line, a shadow that progressed by fits and starts, from doorway to doorway, crevice to crevice, that darted across the open spaces before you could be sure you had seen anything pass at all. A shadow looking for a home. Wasn’t there any which way he could turn, wasn’t there anyone in town who would——

She came this time without the help of music. She was never very far removed from his thoughts. Eleanor. She was golden letters lighting up the frightened darkness of his mind. She was rain on the desert, she was sunshine in the dark. She’d help him; she’d hide him, or help him to get away. She was the only one he could trust, in all the world. She’d once loved him. All that love couldn’t be completely gone, there must be a little of it left.

But where was she? He couldn’t remember, he couldn’t remember that name. Some hotel or other, but he couldn’t remember the name.

Sometimes it seemed almost to come to the tip of his tongue, then it receded again tantalizingly. Commodore? No. Concord? No. Con-? Con-?

He dogtrotted along through the dark, whimpering disjointedly: “Eleanor! Eleanor! I’ve got to find her.”

A cop from a radio-car had just let them out of the back room when Spillane got there. Half the neighborhood had come crowding into the store, was milling around inside it. One half-grown flapper even got up on one of the tall counter stools, to crane her neck over everyone’s heads—until someone inadvertently gave it a twirl that knocked her off. The crowd hid the dead cop on the floor from Spillane’s sight for a minute. He nearly tripped over him when it gave way unexpectedly at his pressure.

The storekeeper’s wife made straight for the fountain, wrenched at one of the spigots, gulped a mouthful of soda water from the hollow of her hand. Then she darted to the cash register, opened the drawer, hastily clawed at its

contents. She gave a bleat of relief. “It’s ull right, Poppa! Dolla ninety-seven! He didn’t take nothing!”

“For no rizzon,” the little storekeeper panted amazedly.

“Like gless, his eyes!” the woman shuddered.

Spillane had picked up the much-trodden-on hat. “K. T.” he read from the sweatband. “Yeah, I think I know who he was,” he said gloomily.

“For no rizzon,” the shopkeeper heaved again. “Officer O’Kiff didn’t even know he was in there. I didn’t myself! Did you, Momma?”

“Sure, but I forgot.”

Spillane eyed the glass-littered booth. Then he reached in and from its furthest recesses picked up a dislodged “Out of Order” placard, that must have fallen unnoticed long hours before Turner had ever sought refuge in it.

“Yeah, that was him,” he repeated. He questioned them on his appearance. They told him. They told him copiously, nearly breaking their necks nodding in confirmation.

He started out toward the locked store entrance, beyond which the shoals of excluded onlookers now stood peering in, like fish in an overcrowded tank; their faces ranged in rows—and just as vacant.

They didn’t understand what he meant when they heard him mutter troubledly: “Now it *is* too late—— Now there’s only one language to speak \_\_\_\_\_”

The key to memory had been a simple one after all; simple but effective. An unguarded telephone directory, this time hanging on the wall, almost at the entrance of a long, narrow, all-night lunchroom, with a dozing vagrant or two nodding in the one-armed chairs and no employee any nearer than the counter far at the back. The huddled entrance, the book snaked from the hook and covered-over in the corner with back turned, the vibrating finger tracing the classified list of hotels, recognition—like striking a match on sandpaper—when his nail struck the name. The Continental.

And now, the Continental itself.

She stepped out of the car in a peach-colored wrap, and she was beautiful enough to have caused even death to relent and pass her by. The man who loved her was standing beside her, holding her hand, and she was right under the lighted marquee of the hotel she lived in; how could anything happen to her. There was nothing waiting for her but sleep, upstairs.

“Good night and thanks, Matt. I enjoyed the evening tremendously.”

“Won’t you let me come up for a minute? Just to the door of your room.”

She smiled disarmingly. “It’s late and I’m tired. Call me from your office tomorrow, instead.”

“Well, at least let me take you in as far as the elevator, see you in.”

This time she laughed outright. “You don’t have to be so formal. You’d better run along home and get some sleep yourself. No one will kidnap me between here and the lobby.”

“Well, may I call you back in ten or fifteen minutes, just to say good night? It’s hard to say it the way I’d like to, down here in the middle of the street.”

There was another machine, blocked off from the entrance by his, trying to reach it and discharge its occupants. It had already sounded its horn querulously a couple of times. He had to get in and drive off without waiting to hear whether he had her permission or refusal for the last request.

She waved and turned away. On the bottommost entrance-step she dropped her handkerchief or something. She had to stop a minute to pick it up. Otherwise perhaps——

That was when the whisper reached her, from the outer darkness beyond the marquee, which was shielded so that it cast its light only downward. “Eleanor! Eleanor!” She turned and looked that way, uncertain she had actually heard anything, and a blurred form seemed to draw still further back into the gloom. There were a line of shrubs, growing in tubs, ranged on each side of the entrance, and it seemed to sidle in between two of them.

She hesitated, stepped toward the border of the light, tried to pierce the pall beyond with her eyes. The whisper came again, clearer now that she was nearer. “Eleanor. Come out of the light, I gotta speak to you——” She could make out a crescent of pale face looming there between the shrubs.

The darkness fell over her peach cloak like a gray curtain as she advanced a step further in that direction. The crescent-face enlarged to full. “King! she gasped in astonishment.

“I have to see you. I have to see you right away. I called your room from the outside, and they said——”

“I’m always glad to see you any time, King. Come on up a minute then.”

“I’m afraid to go in there with you. Somebody might see me——”

She could make out his harassed, disheveled condition, misunderstood the cause of it. “You’ve been drinking again,” she reproved forgivingly.

“Poor King. Never mind, come on up and I’ll straighten you out.”

“But I can’t go in through there! I’m afraid to let them see me——”

“There’s an all-night drugstore down at the lower corner there. From the back of it you can go directly into the hotel without having to pass in front of the desk. Suppose we go in that way.”

Even before they’d reached it, a sudden surge of cold fear drenched him. Could he trust her? Should he take a chance and go up after all? Once he was up there, escape might be cut off. Then the reassuring thought came: she didn’t know what he’d done yet, she didn’t even know they were after him, so there was no reason for her to give him away.

There was no one in sight in the drugstore, only a night clerk busied behind a partition filling a prescription. They passed through completely unseen. A passageway to the rear of it, leading to the hotel coffee-shop, was serviced by the elevators. She brought one down and they got on. She had the moral courage of utter respectability. “Straight up, Harry; don’t stop at the main floor.”

“Yes, Miss Philips.” She got the respect due utter respectability. Though he’d seen the man step into the car after her, he kept his eyes straight front, didn’t leer around over his shoulder. He kept on living, because of that. Turner’s hand was on his back pocket the whole way up.

The main floor passed with a blurred flash of black-and-white tiled floor. The desk was off side out of sight somewhere; even if it hadn’t been, no one could have focused the car’s occupants as it shot up past the opening.

They got out, and she made a turn, keyed a door, threw it open. She lighted up the room beyond. Then she turned and said, “Now, King, what’s all this great——?”

He said, “Close the door, first. Hurry up, come inside, first.”

She did. By that time he was already over at the first of the two other doors it contained, looking into a closet. Then at the next one, looking into a bath. Coming back, he saw himself in a mirror, and shied, and nearly drew. He stopped himself just in time. He said, “Are you alone? You sure you’re alone?”

“Come here, King,” she said soothingly. “Sit down in this chair. You’re all unstrung. I don’t like the way you’re acting. What is it?”

“Eleanor, if I told you something, could I trust you not to give me away?”

She smiled rebukingly. “Have I ever let you down?”

“But this is something different. Once I’ve told you, I’m wide open, I’m at your mercy.”

She said with charming ruefulness, “If you think I could take advantage of you, then maybe you’d better not tell me.”

“But I have to. I’m all choked up with it.” He tore open his vest with both hands and a button popped off. “And I need your help, I’m cut off, surrounded!”

“Tell it, then. I think you can count on me.” She had forgiven him in advance; a bad check, a hit-and-run accident, a mess with a girl, no matter what it was.

He sat down at last. He let his hands dangle limp over his knees like severed chicken-claws. “Eleanor, I killed a girl over in a place where I was.”

He saw her go down out of her depth for a minute. He saw the blue-gray tinge of shock course through her skin, mottling it, as from an immersion. She hadn’t been thinking along those lines. This was *finis*. “Are you sure?” That was just a cover-up, to gain time while she was fighting for self-mastery. She kept her voice steady. The end of the last word shook a little, that was all. She knew he must be sure; he wouldn’t have come to her if he hadn’t been.

“I saw them pick her up. I heard them say she wasn’t breathing any more. I was holding the knife in my hands, all red.”

He was a thing apart now; one of those things you read about in the papers, but didn’t have right in the same room with you. But still she tried to help him; she was that kind. “It’s ghastly, but the only thing to do is go to them and——”

“But you don’t understand. There was a second one. A policeman, in a candy-store. He came in and—I did that one purposely.”

She took a step back. Then another one. The peach cloak dropped in a puddle. Her voice was thin and still, he could hardly hear her.

“What is it? What’s acting on you? What’s the matter with your eyes? It’s not drink, I can tell that——”

“Marihuana.”

She stopped looking at him, looked down at the floor. Something made her shiver. He could see her doing it quite plainly. Something made her feel cold.

A spark kindled in the room. A spark of suspicion in his mind. Once lit, there was no way of reaching it, from then on, to put it out again. Everything

she did from now on simply fanned it brighter.

“Who was that man, in the car down at the door?”

“A friend.”

“Is he coming back? Is he coming up here?”

“No, no.” Her voice was shaking now beyond control. Only her demeanor was still steady, her facial expression. She was so used to peace and safety, it hadn’t cracked yet. “Don’t you want to lie down on the bed, King? It might help you—get over it, wear it off——”

He glanced over at it longingly, as if worn out; almost seemed to incline the upper part of his body toward it, but without leaving the chair, without shifting his feet. Then he checked himself, drew back. The spark glowed bright, and he darted her a suspicious sidelong glance.

She drew slowly back across the room, without turning her back on him; the way a person does who is already in mortal terror, but trying not to give offense.

Presently he pointed to the bath door. “Can I go in there a minute?”

“Yes, surely.”

He closed the mirrored door after him. Instantly it flashed open again. “What were you doing—what were you reaching for? I saw your hand go out.”

Horror showed in her eyes, but she overcame it. “I was only reaching down for a cigarette. Here they are, right down here. See them?”

“But you’re standing nearer the outside door than you were a minute ago.” He came out into the room, stayed out, on guard.

The cords at the side of her neck were pulled taut. She tried to smile waveringly at him, re-establish a normal atmosphere. “Here, I’ll sit all the way over here; I promise you I won’t move——”

He sat back in his original chair, nearer the door. He never took his eyes off her for a single instant. She faced him, eyes steady by sheer will power alone in a face calcium-white with tension, while the minutes seemed to explode around them like popcorn. Once she broke, heeled hands to her eyes as if overcome, pleaded in a smothered voice: “Don’t! You’re torturing me. My nerves are tearing. You’re not human any more. That devilish drug——”

He slitted his eyes at her. “You’re scared of me,” he said accusingly. “That must be because you——”

“Only because you’re making me so. You’re acting so unpredictable.” She was twining and untwining her fingers desperately. “Lie down for only a

minute, close your eyes for only a minute, give me a chance to pull myself together. I've just experienced a shock, I need time to adjust myself. Then, in five minutes from now, we'll be more used to each other, more at ease, not so jumpy——”

“In five minutes you could be all the way down in the lobby——” He stopped short, blinked puzzledly. “What were we talking about just then?”

She clawed at her lips, forced back a scream. She quickly recovered, smiled at him again with dearly-bought composure. “For my own sake and yours, let me bring you out of it, let me try to clear it out of your mind. What's——what's good for it? Please lie down—I won't move; I'll sit beside you; you'll hold my hand if you want; you'll tie my wrist to yours——”

She seemed on the point of winning him over. He looked yearningly toward the bed. She could sense, rather than actually tell by anything he said or did, that he was about to give in, relax this unendurable deathwatch, if only for a moment. And once his eyes dropped close——

The telephone shrilled out janglingly in the coffin-silent room. She gave a spasmodic, excruciating start, that was almost a leap in air. Instantly he was on his feet, hovering watchfully between her and it. He, for his part, had almost bounded as though there was a spring under him. His hand was slapped flat over his hipbone with a report.

“Who is it?”

“I don't know; how can I tell, until I answer?”

“*Don't touch it or I'll——!*”

She had made an inadvertent little gesture toward it; she quickly whipped her hand back again, as if it had been burned. She shivered, stroked her own upper arms as if she were unbearably cold. Help——that was so near and yet so far.

Both their gazes were fixed on it, the inanimate instrument, now; his in hair-trigger menace, hers in swooning helpless frustration. If she could only knock it off the edge of the——

“*Keep your elbow down!* I saw it move——” His own hitched up.

“But it may be Matt, the man you saw bring me home. He knows I'm up here. If I don't answer, it'll be worse than if I do—I won't say anything, I won't say a word; I'll tell him I'm in bed, I'll tell him not to bother me——”

The continued ringing was an irritant, perhaps that helped. “Go ahead,” he gritted. “Get rid of him.” But the gun had come out now, was pressed into the soft flesh of her throat, just under the chin.



Her hand crept out toward the transmitter, cautiously, as if fearful of bringing on calamity if it betrayed too much eagerness. One of the breaks in the ringing had just occurred. It didn't end! It stretched—it stretched—— Silence. The call was killed. He flicked her futilely-extended hand back with the point of the gun.

Her head dropped down on her chest with a swinging roll. He tilted it back with his free hand. Moisture squeezed out of her eyes.

“What're you crying for?” he scowled viciously. “You musta wanted to talk to him bad! You musta wanted to——”

She didn't make any answer. You don't reason with a hooded cobra or a hydrophobic dog or a time bomb. You can't. There was only silence in the room, waiting silence—and the three of them.

There were three of them in the room now, where only two had first come in. Death was in the room with the two of them.

Spillane touched the requisitioned passkey gingerly to the door, gun unlimbered in his right hand and standing well off to one side of the opening. He sent the freed door back with a stub of his toe and followed his gun in like a compass.

Darkness and silence.

The place swallowed him up. There was a wait. Then the snap of a wall switch and a gush of light. He came back again to the outside doorway, hitched his head at the empty hallway, and a lurking auxiliary materialized around a bend in it, almost as if by mind reading.

“Not here,” Spillane breathed when he had approached. “Hasn't been back since.” They both went in and he closed the door after the two of them.

Eleanor's picture was still where Turner had put it down after last looking at it.

“Pick your spot while you can still see,” Spillane cautioned. “I'm going to kill the lights as soon as I try to get hold of her once more. He may show up from one minute to the next——”

He lifted Turner's phone, slotted the dial.

A voice said, “Good evening, Continental.”

He asked without any introductory explanation, “Did she come in yet?”

The answer was given with immediate understanding, as though this was only the latest of many such calls, repeated at short intervals. “I'll try once

more, but I don't think she has or I would have seen her." Then a period of vacant humming. The voice returned. "No, Miss Philips hasn't come back yet, her room doesn't answer——"

"Hold her downstairs at the desk with you, if she does, like I told you!"

He hung up, eyed the picture somberly.

"I'd better get over there myself—and fast," he said. "She's got to be tipped off the minute she comes in!"

The other man had disappeared by now, though the room was still fully lighted. A low voice from behind a reversed wing chair said: "I'm set. Give it the gun."

The wall switch snapped a second time, and they both disappeared.

"You sit tight here, we'll work both ends at once. He's still likely to come back here—if he can remember to locate it. If he does, don't take any chances—he's dynamite!"

"That's all right," the voice from behind the wing chair said dryly, "I used to be foreman of a blasting crew before I joined the outfit."

The outside door opened and closed again. Darkness and silence.

She was a rag doll now, a scarecrow in a stringy silver dress, the beautiful thing that had alighted under the marquee downstairs so short a while before. But the will to live was left, continually seeking new outlets, groping, cajoling, tempting, keeping her on her feet when her flagging, beaten down spirit wanted to let her down in an inert heap at his feet.

"—and they put mayonnaise on them, and they toast the bread if you want them to; I've often had one sent up late at night——"

"Yes," he assented eagerly, "I'm hungry! I haven't eaten for days, I haven't eaten since Tuesday night, before I went to that—— But how do I know you won't say a word too much, try to give me away?"

"You'll hear me, you'll be right beside me—I'll just give the order—not a syllable more."

"But when he comes up with it?"

"I'll have him leave it on the floor outside the door, I won't let him in."

The hempseeds create a false, insatiable appetite, as well as distort the time sense. He couldn't resist the picture she had so temptingly drawn for him; his mouth was actually dribbling at one corner. "All right, go ahead," he said truculently, and hovered nearer. He poised two fingers of his free hand directly over the transmission hook, ready to press down as on a telegraph key.

“But not into my cheek like that,” she pleaded subduedly. “I can’t speak clearly, it distorts my mouth——” He withdrew the gun a little, just beyond contact point.

She had it in her hand at last, at her ear; a skull that was still alive, sending down for sandwiches. She swallowed twice, to lubricate her strained throat. She was not going to try anything so foolhardy as to—that was not the plan. The will to live was too strong for that.

“Coffee-shop, please.” His breath was coming down her forehead from above in a hot stream.

After a wait that seemed eternal, a voice answered.

She said: “Send up two sandwiches, double-decked and toasted——” Something wet fell on her forehead. “And coffee in a container, to 815.” And she added, with quiet urgency, “*Just like the other night.* I can’t seem to sleep.”

The voice at the other end said, with sudden understanding: “Oh, you mean you want some of that sleeping-stuff I got from the drugstore for you put into it again, Miss Philips?”

“A lot,” she answered. “A lot——” And then as the connection broke, “—of mayonnaise.” She replaced the transmitter as though its weight had broken her arm.

“What was that, just like the other night?” he demanded suspiciously.

“Not too sweet, I don’t like the coffee too sweet.”

“How do I know who you were really talking to just then?”

“But you heard me.”

“How long will it take to get up here?”

“Oh, about five minutes,” she said incautiously.

“Yeah? Well, we’ll see. If no sandwiches have come in five minutes, I’ll know you put something over on me, gave me away——”

This time her face turned ashen; more stricken than it had yet been since they’d come into the room. “No! Don’t—you can’t do that! That stuff has damaged your time conception—you think Tuesday night was a long time ago, and it’s still only Tuesday night! You won’t be able to tell——!”

He gave her a grim smile. “You seem frightened, Eleanor. If you just phoned down for sandwiches, why are you looking so white?”

“Let me call back, tell them to hurry it——”

He moved toward her with catlike agility. “You’re not touching that thing again tonight! I was a fool to let you do it the first time!” He gave a foreshortened tug of rabid violence, and the phone cord dangled loose in his hands.

She ran a distracted hand through her hair. A disheveled lock of it fell forward, shadowing her cheek. “Then in fairness to me, look! Look at the clock over there! Set the time at which I made my call. Twenty-five minutes past four. See?”

He turned and glanced at it, but his face didn’t change.

“Let me have a cigarette, in mercy’s name,” she breathed huskily. “Pass me one, since I’m forbidden to go that near the door.”

He flung one at her. He began taking short, quick turns back and forth, directly in front of the room door, not more than three paces each way. Every so often he’d stop and listen intently, head tilted. There was silence, silence inside and out. Only the sound her breathing made, and his velvety tread on the carpet.

The gun had stayed out. Presently his eyes stabbed over at her. “It’s taking a long time——” he said threateningly.

She dropped the cigarette, as though it were top-heavy between her fingers. “But King, you’re loading the dice against me,” she moaned. “His coffee-maker may be out of order, he may have gotten off at the wrong floor—any little thing like that, and you’re penalizing me for it!”

“You didn’t phone for any room service!” He had stopped pacing now. This was the showdown, at long last. She cringed back against the wall, pressing as though trying to topple it down behind her. “You gave way on me to the dicks, and they’re probably on their way over right now——”

“But you *heard* me——”

“I can’t remember what I heard any more. I can’t think straight and you know it, you’re trying to kid me—— I know how they close in on someone they’re after; they sneak up and surround the place first. That’s what’s taking them so long. It’s over half an hour already!”

Her head rolled dismayedly from side to side against the wall. “It isn’t—it’s only a little over three minutes! Look at the clock!”

She held out her arm, pointing, but this time he wouldn’t turn. “You set it back. It’s long ago you called down. I know how it *feels*!”

She only had one more dodge left. One more, and then the struggle for life was out of her. “Our song. Wait! I have it here——” She floundered

across to a turntable, began shuffling through records with furtive haste. One dropped, broke; another, a third; she didn't even stop to look at them.

She found one, fitted it on, set the needle-arm. Then she turned to face him, at last gasp. Already more dead than alive. He had already killed her, all but her body. Life wasn't worth this price, anyway.

The music came from behind her, seemed to well up out of nowhere in the room.

“King! Do you remember our first Christmas together? That little house in New Rochelle. The tree we put up. *Don't come any nearer*. The clock! It's only six minutes; he'll be here any——”

“Why did you have to give way on me? All I asked was to stay here in your room until the heat cooled. Why did you have to phone 'em and tell 'em where they could find me?”

“*Don't point it this way! Don't tighten your arm!* I'm going to get married again next month! I was going to be happy again, until you came here tonight! Don't take it away from me——!”

“Now I'm sure you squealed on me.”

It crashed out like thunder, making the room seem smaller and lower-ceilinged than it was. She went down saying two things: “The clock!” and “I'm Eleanor!” Then she said one thing more, spoke a name he didn't know “Matt!” Then she died on the floor.

“After you've gone, after you've gone a-wa-a-a-ay.”

The record whined off into silence. The smoke thinned into invisibility. The knock on the door came just as the minute hand on the disregarded clock behind him nicked twenty-five minutes to five in the morning—ten minutes after she had telephoned down to the coffee-shop. A lifetime. A deathtime.

He pivoted, then stood there tense, without moving, gun ready again. He didn't try to lock the door. Let them come in and get it. The knob turned and it opened slowly. An aluminum tray covered with a napkin came in first, alone, as if suspended in mid-air. A voice came second, cheerfully unaware. “Here y'are. How's 'at for quick service, bread toasted'n all——?” A waiter's face came last, hitched back, smirking proudly.

He hadn't heard the shot. He must have been still coming up in the car shaft when it sounded. He looked in past Turner and gun, saw her there, like

a crumpled silver flag lowered in defeat. His face turned flour-white. The tray slowly upended, somersaulted, went down flat with a crash.

The rest happened fast, while people behind other doors all up and down the hall must have been still rearing uncertainly upright in their beds or struggling sleepily into bathrobes or trying to report over an unanswered telephone: "I thought I heard a shot up here somewhere."

Turner said, "In! In all the way!" and locked the bath door on the palsied waiter. Then he shoved the tray litter aside with his foot and closed the room door. Then he sprinted down the hall and around the turn and skidded to a stop on the rubber matting before the twin elevator-panels. He gouged a thumb into the push button.

There was a dial over each to indicate each car's position. An uncanny, an unbelievable synchronization, that might never have occurred again in ten years of nights, had taken place just as he arrived. The two cars were proportionately distant from him, one a floor below, one a floor above. The latter (evidently the same one that had discharged the waiter on its way up just now) coming down, the former coming up.

He shifted toward the dial whose indicator was descending toward "8." The effect of the fumes was beginning to wear off and perhaps he reasoned that a descending car would continue downward, while an ascending one would most likely continue upward, trapping him hopelessly in the building's upper reaches. In that slight step to the left lay eight or ten months' life, lay the difference between legal death and death by violence.

Both cars arrived simultaneously, with stop-watch precision that could not have been arrived at if rehearsed for hours by the operators. The two slides slid back so in unison that it made one continuous motion toward the right—with just the interruption of a mail-chute in between.

The back of Turner's heel lifted into the one opening just as the hub of Spillane's toe preceded him out of the other.

The panel cut him off again, put bronze between them before there had been time for a full bodily glimpse, and Turner was soldering his gun like a blowtorch into the operator's spine, just under where the short mess-boy jacket ended. "All the way down—basement, and no stops!"

Again a blurred flash of black-and-white tiled lobby, too quick to focus, and then he tomahawked the back of the operator's head with his gun-heft, stepped out of the car. Someone was discontentedly bouncing a half-dollar on the counter in the deserted coffee-shop and snarling: "Where's that damn

counterman? What kind of service d'ya get here anyway? I gotta make a train!"

That damn counterman was nine floors up, locked in the bath of a murdered woman's apartment. Turner went out the other way, through the drugstore.

The sight of his own inscrutable door, twenty minutes and a wild taxi ride later, fingertips outstretched to it helplessly, reminded him of something from that night weeks ago, that night from another lifetime when he had last left here: he'd left his key inside, he couldn't get in without rousing the night doorman, whom he had sidled by without awakening just now.

The fumes were all gone now—too late. He'd killed the thing he loved best. He'd still go through the motions of escape, because the life spark glimmers on to the last; of going in there, getting money, packing a bag, and trying to make one of the bus or railway stations. But it was just reflex now, momentum; the way a chicken keeps going after its head is cut off. His heart had died during the night.

There was another way in. His quarters were so high up he never locked his windows. There was a ledge, a slim coping running along the face of the building flush with them. He went down the hall, turned into an indentation, threw open the ventilating window backing it.

He climbed out on the narrow place and stood up, turned inward to the wall. Then he started to shuffle his feet along—he couldn't intercross them—and pat his hands along the stone like suction cups. It was starting to get light-blue in the east, but the streets were still dark chasms fifteen stories below. First came his tiny bath window, higher than the others and too small to go in through. He passed it, after resting a moment on the steadier grip its sill gave his hands, went on.

The main, full-sized window came inching up alongside him, and he'd made the harebrained passage, was gripping the edge of the stone window-trim, looking in. His room was still darker than the sky out behind him, but a pale oval stood out against the reflected light. It moved and he identified it. Suddenly a waiting man had reared from his wing-backed chair, screened from the door, was drawing.

Turner drew faster, fired through the glass and all. What felt like sand stung his forehead, and an intolerable pain shot from his eyeball. He slapped a hand to it—the other he needed to stay up on the ledge—and his gun went sailing down into oblivion.

He'd missed. Through the blinding smoke and with only one eye, he saw the man still on his feet, coming toward the window, gun sighted at him. Heard him say: "Don't move! Stay where you are!"

He knew the man wouldn't fire. He wouldn't have cared if he had. He started inching back along the lip of stone the way he'd come, one hand patting a little red along the stonework now at first, until it wore off. He was back out of reach by the time the man had thrown up the shattered pane, was looking out at him, still trying to overawe him with his ineffective gun. "Come in here or I'll fire!"

Turner jeered, "Come out and get me!" kept sidling back. He was past the bath window now. The man got to it too late, found when he'd raised it it wouldn't have done him any good anyway, was too high up. There was a longer space between it and the hall window.

Far down below he heard sirens hooting up, and shouts reached him dimly, and though he didn't turn to look down (knew better!) he could imagine the white roofs of the two or three patrol cars peering up like overturned rowboats.

A head thrust out of the hall window ahead, sighted over at him. Spillane's head, although he didn't know him. They looked at one another squarely for the first time, although one had been chasing the other all night. Spillane tried to intimidate him with a gun too. Turner didn't even bother looking at it. He knew they wouldn't shoot him in cold blood while he was out here, for some reason, now that he was unarmed himself. If he'd still been in full flight on the streets below——

He looked down the other way. The first man had gone back to the living room window again. He was cut off. He'd stopped moving now, just stayed there where he was, equidistant from the two. All right, they had him. Let them come and get him then. He hated everyone in the world, now that Eleanor was gone. He'd take whoever came out after him, off with him. He just stood there waiting for the end, face turned toward the blank wall, conscious of a great humming crowd far down below; deaf alike to their threats at gun-point, their cajoleries, their hidden conferences and maneuvers back out of sight of the windows.

The hall window had been vacant for a while. Now Spillane came back again. Not only his face this time, his knee, his thigh, then his whole body. So he was coming out after him, was he? He'd muffed an assignment and he was going to atone for it by playing the hero.

"You're going to die if you come out here," Turner warned him with deadly quietness.



Spillane stood up, full-height now against the wall like he was. Turner didn't begin edging away as he advanced. That would have only taken him back toward the opposite window again, where others were waiting. This had to end sooner or later; it may as well end now.

He didn't even bother answering the detective's ingratiating patter, half-heard it. "Look, I have no gun, Turner. . . . Come inside with me and let's talk it over. . . . Listen, I'll make a deal with you. . . ."

He only spoke once—when the detective had reached the halfway mark. "This is your last chance, whoever you are. If you've got someone you love, don't be a sucker, go back."

He thought he saw the other man's face whiten a little, but he never hesitated, came slowly on.

They were a yard from each other now. "All right," Turner said clippedly. He took both hands off the wall, turned shoulders and waist toward him, started leaning, arms in hook position; then as gravity caught at him, plunged at him, wrapped him in a death-grip, and the two of them went off into space. Someone screamed thinly, most likely Turner, and a horrified moan went up from the street.

The rope that Spillane had had wound about his waist jerked taut at about the third floor down, and the commingled bodies dangled there with a shudder for a moment. Turner's grip had broken in the fall. Spillane had him by the slack of the coat and the collar and could no longer risk shifting his hold without losing him altogether.

In the frozen silence the scores of upturned faces could see the coat part as its buttons went with the strain. Then Turner's arms started to pull out of the sleeves with hideous slowness. Spillane writhed frantically, trying to grasp him by the body itself. They shot apart, and he was alone there with an empty coat.

The net they had spread in the street might still have saved Turner, but his body didn't go out far enough, it broke across a projection at second-story height, stayed partly on and partly off.

When they had hauled Spillane up again to safety, he hung his head, had very little to say, like a man who feels he has been frustrated through no fault of his own.

"Don't feel that way," they tried to tell him, patting him on the back. "You did your best, that's all that anyone can do."

He kept shaking his head. "If I could only have caught up with him in time, before he dropped that first cop in the candy-store! After that it was

too late. But in the beginning, all I was sent out after him for was to tell him \_\_\_\_\_”

The other girl was assailed by misgivings. She tried to join in the unrestrained hilarity when Vinnie finished telling it. But she couldn't. Finally she asked: “But what was so funny about it?”

Vinnie was almost incoherent with laughter, she could hardly articulate at all. “If you coulda seen the look on his face,” she strangled, “when he saw me lying there on the floor, squeezing out this gob of bread with ketchup on it against my side! And the careful way the boys picked me up and laid me on the sofa, as if I was dead! I bet he's still running! I must ring up and find out whether the boys have seen or heard from him since. It was worth the price of admission, alone! I tell you, never a dull moment when I'm around!”

The other girl dutifully chortled a little in accompaniment to Vinnie's guffaws. But she still had her doubts. “It was kind of a mean trick to play on anyone, though.”

Vinnie shrugged. “Oh, well—what harm was there in it?”

“There's someone at the door. I'll answer it for you.” The friend came back and reported: “There's a man out there waiting to see you, and I don't like the look on his face. It spells trouble to me. He's either a bill collector or a plain-clothesman”—and with unconscious prophecy she added—“or maybe a little of both.”

## REAR WINDOW

I DIDN'T know their names. I'd never heard their voices. I didn't even know them by sight, strictly speaking, for their faces were too small to fill in with identifiable features at that distance. Yet I could have constructed a timetable of their comings and goings, their daily habits and activities. They were the rear-window dwellers around me.

Sure, I suppose it *was* a little bit like prying, could even have been mistaken for the fevered concentration of a Peeping Tom. That wasn't my fault, that wasn't the idea. The idea was, my movements were strictly limited just around this time. I could get from the window to the bed, and from the bed to the window, and that was all. The bay window was about the best feature my rear bedroom had in the warm weather. It was unscreened, so I had to sit with the light out or I would have had every insect in the vicinity in on me. I couldn't sleep, because I was used to getting plenty of exercise. I'd never acquired the habit of reading books to ward off boredom, so I hadn't that to turn to. Well, what should I do, sit there with my eyes tightly shuttered?

Just to pick a few at random: Straight over, and the windows square, there was a young jitter-couple, kids in their teens, only just married. It would have killed them to stay home one night. They were always in such a hurry to go, wherever it was they went, they never remembered to turn out the lights, don't think it missed once in all the time I was watching. But they never forgot altogether, either. I was to learn to call this delayed action, as you will see. He'd always come skittering madly back in about five minutes, probably from all the way down in the street, and rush around killing the switches. Then fall over something in the dark on his way out. They gave me an inward chuckle, those two.

The next house down, the windows already narrowed a little with perspective. There was a certain light in that one that always went out each night too. Something about it, it used to make me a little sad. There was a woman living there with her child, a young widow I suppose. I'd see her put the child to bed, and then bend over and kiss her in a wistful sort of way. She'd shade the light off her and sit there painting her eyes and mouth. Then she'd go out. She'd never come back till the night was nearly spent. Once I was still up, and I looked and she was sitting there motionless with her head buried in her arms. Something about it, it used to make me a little sad.

The third one down no longer offered any insight, the windows were just slits like in a medieval battlement, due to foreshortening. That brings us around to the one on the end. In that one, frontal vision came back full-depth again, since it stood at right angles to the rest, my own included, sealing up the inner hollow all these houses backed on. I could see into it, from the rounded projection of my bay window, as freely as into a doll house with its rear wall sliced away. And scaled down to about the same size.

It was a flat building. Unlike all the rest it had been constructed originally as such, not just cut up into furnished rooms. It topped them by two stories and had rear fire escapes, to show for this distinction. But it was old, evidently hadn't shown a profit. It was in the process of being modernized. Instead of clearing the entire building while the work was going on, they were doing it a flat at a time, in order to lose as little rental income as possible. Of the six rearward flats it offered to view, the topmost one had already been completed, but not yet rented. They were working on the fifth-floor one now, disturbing the peace of everyone all up and down the "inside" of the block with their hammering and sawing.

I felt sorry for the couple in the flat below. I used to wonder how they stood it with that bedlam going on above their heads. To make it worse the wife was in chronic poor health, too; I could tell that even at a distance by the listless way she moved about over there, and remained in her bathrobe without dressing. Sometimes I'd see her sitting by the window, holding her head. I used to wonder why he didn't have a doctor in to look her over, but maybe they couldn't afford it. He seemed to be out of work. Often their bedroom light was on late at night behind the drawn shade, as though she were unwell and he was sitting up with her. And one night in particular he must have had to sit up with her all night, it remained on until nearly daybreak. Not that I sat watching all that time. But the light was still burning at three in the morning, when I finally transferred from chair to bed to see if I could get a little sleep myself. And when I failed to, and hopped back again around dawn, it was still peering wanly out behind the tan shade.

Moments later, with the first brightening of day, it suddenly dimmed around the edges of the shade, and then shortly afterward, not that one, but a shade in one of the other rooms—for all of them alike had been down—went up, and I saw him standing there looking out.

He was holding a cigarette in his hand. I couldn't see it, but I could tell it was that by the quick, nervous little jerks with which he kept putting his hand to his mouth, and the haze I saw rising around his head. Worried about her, I guess. I didn't blame him for that. Any husband would have been. She

must have only just dropped off to sleep, after night-long suffering. And then in another hour or so, at the most, that sawing of wood and clattering of buckets was going to start in over them again. Well, it wasn't any of my business, I said to myself, but he really ought to get her out of there. If I had an ill wife on my hands. . . .

He was leaning slightly out, maybe an inch past the window frame, carefully scanning the back faces of all the houses abutting on the hollow square that lay before him. You can tell, even at a distance, when a person is looking fixedly. There's something about the way the head is held. And yet his scrutiny wasn't held fixedly to any one point, it was a slow, sweeping one, moving along the houses on the opposite side from me first. When it got to the end of them, I knew it would cross over to my side and come back along there. Before it did, I withdrew several yards inside my room, to let it go safely by. I didn't want him to think I was sitting there prying into his affairs. There was still enough blue night-shade in my room to keep my slight withdrawal from catching his eye.

When I returned to my original position a moment or two later, he was gone. He had raised two more of the shades. The bedroom one was still down. I wondered vaguely why he had given that peculiar, comprehensive, semicircular stare at all the rear windows around him. There wasn't anyone at any of them, at such an hour. It wasn't important, of course. It was just a little oddity, it failed to blend in with his being worried or disturbed about his wife. When you're worried or disturbed, that's an internal preoccupation, you stare vacantly at nothing at all. When you stare around you in a great sweeping arc at windows, that betrays external preoccupation, outward interest. One doesn't quite jibe with the other. To call such a discrepancy trifling is to add to its importance. Only someone like me, stewing in a vacuum of total idleness, would have noticed it at all.

The flat remained lifeless after that, as far as could be judged by its windows. He must have either gone out or gone to bed himself. Three of the shades remained at normal height, the one masking the bedroom remained down. Sam, my day houseman, came in not long after with my eggs and morning paper, and I had that to kill time with for a while. I stopped thinking about other people's windows and staring at them.

The sun slanted down on one side of the hollow oblong all morning long, then it shifted over to the other side for the afternoon. Then it started to slip off both alike, and it was evening again—another day gone.

The lights started to come on around the quadrangle. Here and there a wall played back, like a sounding board, a snatch of radio program that was

coming in too loud. If you listened carefully you could hear an occasional clink of dishes mixed in, faint, far off. The chain of little habits that were their lives unreeled themselves. They were all bound in them tighter than the tightest straitjacket any jailer ever devised, though they all thought themselves free. The jitterbugs made their nightly dash for the great open spaces, forgot their lights, he came careening back, thumbed them out, and their place was dark until the early morning hours. The woman put her child to bed, leaned mournfully over its cot, then sat down with heavy despair to reddened her mouth.

In the fourth-floor flat at right angles to the long, interior “street” the three shades had remained up, and the fourth shade had remained at full length, all day long. I hadn’t been conscious of that because I hadn’t particularly been looking at it, or thinking of it, until now. My eyes may have rested on those windows at times, during the day, but my thoughts had been elsewhere. It was only when a light suddenly went on up in the end room behind one of the raised shades, which was their kitchen, that I realized that the shades had been untouched like that all day. That also brought something else to my mind that hadn’t been in it until now: I hadn’t seen the woman all day. I hadn’t seen any sign of life within those windows until now.

He’d come in from outside. The entrance was at the opposite side of their kitchen, away from the window. He’d left his hat on, so I knew he’d just come in from the outside.

He didn’t remove his hat. As though there was no one there to remove it for any more. Instead, he pushed it farther to the back of his head by pronging a hand to the roots of his hair. That gesture didn’t denote removal of perspiration, I knew. To do that a person makes a sidewise sweep—this was up over his forehead. It indicated some sort of harassment or uncertainty. Besides, if he’d been suffering from excess warmth, the first thing he would have done would be to take off his hat altogether.

She didn’t come out to greet him. The first link, of the so-strong chain of habit, of custom, that binds us all, had snapped wide open.

She must be so ill she had remained in bed, in the room behind the lowered shade, all day. I watched. He remained where he was, two rooms away from there. Expectancy became surprise, surprise incomprehension. Funny, I thought, that he doesn’t go in to her. Or at least go as far as the doorway, look in to see how she is.

Maybe she was asleep, and he didn’t want to disturb her. Then immediately: but how can he know for sure that she’s asleep, without at least

looking in at her? He just came in himself.

He came forward and stood there by the window, as he had at dawn. Sam had carried out my tray quite some time before, and my lights were out. I held my ground, I knew he couldn't see me within the darkness of the bay window. He stood there motionless for several minutes. And now his attitude was the proper one for inner preoccupation. He stood there looking downward at nothing, lost in thought.

He's worried about her, I said to myself, as any man would be. It's the most natural thing in the world. Funny, though, he should leave her in the dark like that, without going near her. If he's worried, then why didn't he at least look in on her on returning? Here was another of those trivial discrepancies, between inward motivation and outward indication. And just as I was thinking that, the original one, that I had noted at daybreak, repeated itself. His head went up with renewed alertness, and I could see it start to give that slow circular sweep of interrogation around the panorama of rearward windows again. True, the light was behind him this time, but there was enough of it falling on him to show me the microscopic but continuous shift of direction his head made in the process. I remained carefully immobile until the distant glance had passed me safely by. Motion attracts.

Why is he so interested in other people's windows, I wondered detachedly. And of course an effective brake to dwelling on that thought too lingeringly clamped down almost at once: Look who's talking. What about you yourself?

An important difference escaped me. I wasn't worried about anything. He, presumably, was.

Down came the shades again. The lights stayed on behind their beige opaqueness. But behind the one that had remained down all along, the room remained dark.

Time went by. Hard to say how much—a quarter of an hour, twenty minutes. A cricket chirped in one of the back yards. Sam came in to see if I wanted anything before he went home for the night. I told him no, I didn't—it was all right, run along. He stood there for a minute, head down. Then I saw him shake it slightly, as if at something he didn't like. "What's the matter?" I asked.

"You know what that means? My old mammy told it to me, and she never told me a lie in her life. I never once seen it to miss, either."

"What, the cricket?"

“Any time you hear one of them things, that’s a sign of death—someplace close around.”

I swept the back of my hand at him. “Well, it isn’t in here, so don’t let it worry you.”

He went out, muttering stubbornly: “It’s somewhere close by, though. Somewhere not very far off. Got to be.”

The door closed after him, and I stayed there alone in the dark.

It was a stifling night, much closer than the one before. I could hardly get a breath of air even by the open window at which I sat. I wondered how he—that unknown over there—could stand it behind those drawn shades.

Then suddenly, just as idle speculation about this whole matter was about to alight on some fixed point in my mind, crystallize into something like suspicion, up came the shades again, and off it flitted, as formless as ever and without having had a chance to come to rest on anything.

He was in the middle windows, the living room. He’d taken off his coat and shirt, was bare-armed in his undershirt. He hadn’t been able to stand it himself, I guess—the sultriness.

I couldn’t make out what he was doing at first. He seemed to be busy in a perpendicular, up-and-down way rather than lengthwise. He remained in one place, but he kept dipping down out of sight and then straightening up into view again, at irregular intervals. It was almost like some sort of calisthenic exercise, except that the dips and rises weren’t evenly timed enough for that. Sometimes he’d stay down a long time, sometimes he’d bob right up again, sometimes he’d go down two or three times in rapid succession. There was some sort of a widespread black V railing him off from the window. Whatever it was, there was just a sliver of it showing above the upward inclination to which the window sill deflected my line of vision. All it did was strike off the bottom of his undershirt, to the extent of a sixteenth of an inch maybe. But I hadn’t seen it there at other times, and I couldn’t tell what it was.

Suddenly he left it for the first time since the shades had gone up, came out around it to the outside, stooped down into another part of the room, and straightened again with an armful of what looked like varicolored pennants at the distance at which I was. He went back behind the V and allowed them to fall across the top of it for a moment, and stay that way. He made one of his dips down out of sight and stayed that way a good while.

The “pennants” slung across the V kept changing color right in front of my eyes. I have very good sight. One moment they were white, the next red,



the next blue.

Then I got it. They were a woman's dresses, and he was pulling them down to him one by one, taking the topmost one each time. Suddenly they were all gone, the V was black and bare again, and his torso had reappeared. I knew what it was now, and what he was doing. The dresses had told me. He confirmed it for me. He spread his arms to the ends of the V, I could see him heave and hitch, as if exerting pressure, and suddenly the V had folded up, become a cubed wedge. Then he made rolling motions with his whole upper body, and the wedge disappeared off to one side.

He'd been packing a trunk, packing his wife's things into a large upright trunk.

He reappeared at the kitchen window presently, stood still for a moment. I saw him draw his arm across his forehead, not once but several times, and then whip the end of it off into space. Sure, it was hot work for such a night. Then he reached up along the wall and took something down. Since it was the kitchen he was in, my imagination had to supply a cabinet and a bottle.

I could see the two or three quick passes his hand made to his mouth after that. I said to myself tolerantly: That's what nine men out of ten would do after packing a trunk—take a good stiff drink. And if the tenth didn't, it would only be because he didn't have any liquor at hand.

Then he came closer to the window again, and standing edgewise to the side of it, so that only a thin paring of his head and shoulder showed, peered watchfully out into the dark quadrilateral, along the line of windows, most of them unlighted by now, once more. He always started on the left-hand side, the side opposite mine, and made his circuit of inspection from there on around.

That was the second time in one evening I'd seen him do that. And once at daybreak, made three times altogether. I smiled mentally. You'd almost think he felt guilty about something. It was probably nothing, just an odd little habit, a quirk, that he didn't know he had himself. I had them myself, everyone does.

He withdrew into the room again, and it blacked out. His figure passed into the one that was still lighted next to it, the living room. That blacked next. It didn't surprise me that the third room, the bedroom with the drawn shade, didn't light up on his entering there. He wouldn't want to disturb her, of course—particularly if she was going away tomorrow for her health, as his packing of her trunk showed. She needed all the rest she could get, before making the trip. Simple enough for him to slip into bed in the dark.

It did surprise me, though, when a match-flare winked some time later, to have it still come from the darkened living room. He must be lying down in there, trying to sleep on a sofa or something for the night. He hadn't gone near the bedroom at all, was staying out of it altogether. That puzzled me, frankly. That was carrying solicitude almost too far.

Ten minutes or so later, there was another match-wink, still from that same living room window. He couldn't sleep.

The night brooded down on both of us alike, the curiosity-monger in the bay window, the chain-smoker in the fourth-floor flat, without giving any answer. The only sound was that interminable cricket.

I was back at the window again with the first sun of morning. Not because of him. My mattress was like a bed of hot coals. Sam found me there when he came in to get things ready for me. "You're going to be a wreck, Mr. Jeff," was all he said.

First, for a while, there was no sign of life over there. Then suddenly I saw his head bob up from somewhere down out of sight in the living room, so I knew I'd been right; he'd spent the night on a sofa or easy chair in there. Now, of course, he'd look in at her, to see how she was, find out if she felt any better. That was only common ordinary humanity. He hadn't been near her, so far as I could make out, since two nights before.

He didn't. He dressed, and he went in the opposite direction, into the kitchen, and wolfed something in there, standing up and using both hands. Then he suddenly turned and moved off side, in the direction in which I knew the flat-entrance to be, as if he had just heard some summons, like the doorbell.

Sure enough, in a moment he came back, and there were two men with him in leather aprons. Expressmen. I saw him standing by while they laboriously maneuvered that cubed black wedge out between them, in the direction they'd just come from. He did more than just stand by. He practically hovered over them, kept shifting from side to side, he was so anxious to see that it was done right.

Then he came back alone, and I saw him swipe his arm across his head, as though it was he, not they, who was all heated up from the effort.

So he was forwarding her trunk, to wherever it was she was going. That was all.

He reached up along the wall again and took something down. He was taking another drink. Two. Three. I said to myself, a little at a loss: Yes, but he hasn't just packed a trunk this time. That trunk has been standing packed

and ready since last night. Where does the hard work come in? The sweat and the need for a bracer?

Now, at last, after all those hours, he finally did go in to her. I saw his form pass through the living room and go beyond, into the bedroom. Up went the shade, that had been down all this time. Then he turned his head and looked around behind him. In a certain way, a way that was unmistakable, even from where I was. Not in one certain direction, as one looks at a person. But from side to side, and up and down, and all around, as one looks at—*an empty room*.

He stepped back, bent a little, gave a fling of his arms, and an unoccupied mattress and bedding upended over the foot of a bed, stayed that way, emptily curved. A second one followed a moment later.

*She wasn't in there.*

They use the expression “delayed action.” I found out then what it meant. For two days a sort of formless uneasiness, a disembodied suspicion, I don't know what to call it, had been flitting and volplaning around in my mind, like an insect looking for a landing place. More than once, just as it had been ready to settle, some slight thing, some slight reassuring thing, such as the raising of the shades after they had been down unnaturally long, had been enough to keep it winging aimlessly, prevent it from staying still long enough for me to recognize it. The point of contact had been there all along, waiting to receive it. Now, for some reason, within a split second after he tossed over the empty mattresses, it landed—*zoom!* And the point of contact expanded—or exploded, whatever you care to call it—into a certainty of murder.

In other words, the rational part of my mind was far behind the instinctive, subconscious part. Delayed action. Now the one had caught up to the other. The thought-message that sparked from the synchronization was: He's done something to her!

I looked down and my hand was bunching the goods over my kneecap, it was knotted so tight. I forced it to open. I said to myself, steadily: Now wait a minute, be careful, go slow. You've seen nothing. You know nothing. You only have the negative proof that you don't see her any more.

Sam was standing there looking over at me from the pantryway. He said accusingly: “You ain't touched a thing. And your face looks like a sheet.”

It felt like one. It had that needling feeling, when the blood has left it involuntarily. It was more to get him out of the way and give myself some elbow room for undisturbed thinking, than anything else, that I said: “Sam,

what's the street address of that building down there? Don't stick your head too far out and gape at it."

"Somep'n or other Benedict Avenue." He scratched his neck helpfully.

"I know that. Chase around the corner a minute and get me the exact number on it, will you?"

"Why you want to know that for?" he asked as he turned to go.

"None of your business," I said with the good-natured firmness that was all that was necessary to take care of that once and for all. I called after him just as he was closing the door: "And while you're about it, step into the entrance and see if you can tell from the mailboxes who has the fourth-floor rear. Don't get me the wrong one now. And try not to let anyone catch you at it."

He went out mumbling something that sounded like, "When a man ain't got nothing to do but just sit all day, he sure can think up the blamest things ——" The door closed and I settled down to some good constructive thinking.

I said to myself: What are you really building up this monstrous supposition on? Let's see what you've got. Only that there were several little things wrong with the mechanism, the chain-belt, of their recurrent daily habits over there. 1. The lights were on all night the first night. 2. He came in later than usual the second night. 3. He left his hat on. 4. She didn't come out to greet him—she hasn't appeared since the evening before the lights were on all night. 5. He took a drink after he finished packing her trunk. But he took three stiff drinks the next morning, immediately after her trunk went out. 6. He was inwardly disturbed and worried, yet superimposed upon this was an unnatural external concern about the surrounding rear windows that was off-key. 7. He slept in the living room, didn't go near the bedroom, during the night before the departure of the trunk.

Very well. If she had been ill that first night, and he had sent her away for her health, that automatically canceled out points 1, 2, 3, 4. It left points 5 and 6 totally unimportant and unincriminating. But when it came up against 7, it hit a stumbling block.

If she went away immediately after being ill that first night, why didn't he want to sleep in their bedroom *last night*? Sentiment? Hardly. Two perfectly good beds in one room, only a sofa or uncomfortable easy chair in the other. Why should he stay out of there if she was already gone? Just because he missed her, was lonely? A grown man doesn't act that way. All right, then she was still in there.

Sam came back parenthetically at this point and said: “That house is Number 525 Benedict Avenue. The fourth-floor rear, it got the name of Mr. and Mrs. Lars Thorwald up.”

“Sh-h,” I silenced, and motioned him backhand out of my ken.

“First he want it, then he don’t,” he grumbled philosophically, and retired to his duties.

I went ahead digging at it. But if she was still in there, in that bedroom last night, then she couldn’t have gone away to the country, because I never saw her leave today. She could have left without my seeing her in the early hours of yesterday morning. I’d missed a few hours, been asleep. But this morning I had been up before he was himself, I only saw his head rear up from that sofa after I’d been at the window for some time.

To go at all she would have had to go yesterday morning. Then why had he left the bedroom shade down, left the mattresses undisturbed, until today? Above all, why had he stayed out of that room last night? That was evidence that she hadn’t gone, was still in there. Then today, immediately after the trunk had been dispatched, he went in, pulled up the shade, tossed over the mattresses, and showed that she hadn’t been in there. The thing was like a crazy spiral.

No, it wasn’t either. *Immediately after the trunk had been dispatched*

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The trunk.

That did it.

I looked around to make sure the door was safely closed between Sam and me. My hand hovered uncertainly over the telephone dial a minute. Boyne, he’d be the one to tell about it. He was on Homicide. He had been, anyway, when I’d last seen him. I didn’t want to get a flock of strange dicks and cops into my hair. I didn’t want to be involved any more than I had to. Or at all, if possible.

They switched my call to the right place after a couple of wrong tries, and I got him finally.

“Look, Boyne? This is Hal Jeffries——”

“Well, where’ve you been the last sixty-two years?” he started to enthuse.

“We can take that up later. What I want you to do now is take down a name and address. Ready? Lars Thorwald. Five twenty-five Benedict Avenue. Fourth-floor rear. Got it?”

“Fourth-floor rear. Got it. What’s it for?”

“Investigation. I’ve got a firm belief you’ll uncover a murder there if you start digging at it. Don’t call on me for anything more than that—just a conviction. There’s been a man and wife living there until now. Now there’s just the man. Her trunk went out early this morning. If you can find someone who saw *her* leave herself——”

Marshaled aloud like that and conveyed to somebody else, a lieutenant of detectives above all, it did sound flimsy, even to me. He said hesitantly, “Well, but——” Then he accepted it as was. Because I was the source. I even left my window out of it completely. I could do that with him and get away with it because he’d known me years, he didn’t question my reliability. I didn’t want my room all cluttered up with dicks and cops taking turns nosing out of the window in this hot weather. Let them tackle it from the front.

“Well, we’ll see what we see,” he said. “I’ll keep you posted.”

I hung up and sat back to watch and wait events. I had a grandstand seat. Or rather a grandstand seat in reverse. I could only see from behind the scenes, but not from the front. I couldn’t watch Boyne go to work. I could only see the results, when and if there were any.

Nothing happened for the next few hours. The police work that I knew must be going on was as invisible as police work should be. The figure in the fourth-floor windows over there remained in sight, alone and undisturbed. He didn’t go out. He was restless, roamed from room to room without staying in one place very long, but he stayed in. Once I saw him eating again—sitting down this time—and once he shaved, and once he even tried to read the paper, but he didn’t stay with it long.

Little unseen wheels were in motion around him. Small and harmless as yet, preliminaries. If he knew, I wondered to myself, would he remain there quiescent like that, or would he try to bolt out and flee? That mightn’t depend so much upon his guilt as upon his sense of immunity, his feeling that he could outwit them. Of his guilt I myself was already convinced, or I wouldn’t have taken the step I had.

At three my phone rang. Boyne calling back. “Jeffries? Well, I don’t know. Can’t you give me a little more than just a bald statement like that?”

“Why?” I fenced. “Why do I have to?”

“I’ve had a man over there making inquiries. I’ve just had his report. The building superintendent and several of the neighbors all agree she left for the country, to try and regain her health, early yesterday morning.”

“Wait a minute. Did any of them see her leave, according to your man?”

“No.”

“Then all you’ve gotten is a second-hand version of an unsupported statement by him. Not an eyewitness account.”

“He was met returning from the depot, after he’d bought her ticket and seen her off on the train.”

“That’s still an unsupported statement, once removed.”

“I’ve sent a man down there to the station to try and check with the ticket agent if possible. After all, he should have been fairly conspicuous at that early hour. And we’re keeping him under observation, of course, in the meantime, watching all his movements. The first chance we get we’re going to jump in and search the place.”

I had a feeling that they wouldn’t find anything, even if they did.

“Don’t expect anything more from me. I’ve dropped it in your lap. I’ve given you all I have to give. A name, an address, and an opinion.”

“Yes, and I’ve always valued your opinion highly before now, Jeff——”

“But now you don’t, that it?”

“Not at all. The thing is, we haven’t turned up anything that seems to bear out your impression so far.”

“You haven’t gotten very far along, so far.”

He went back to his previous cliché. “Well, we’ll see what we see. Let you know later.”

Another hour or so went by, and sunset came on. I saw him start to get ready to go out, over there. He put on his hat, put his hand in his pocket and stood still looking at it for a minute. Counting change, I guess. It gave me a peculiar sense of suppressed excitement, knowing they were going to come in the minute he left. I thought grimly, as I saw him take a last look around: If you’ve got anything to hide, brother, now’s the time to hide it.

He left. A breath-holding interval of misleading emptiness descended on the flat. A three-alarm fire couldn’t have pulled my eyes off those windows. Suddenly the door by which he had just left parted slightly and two men insinuated themselves, one behind the other. There they were now. They closed it behind them, separated at once, and got busy. One took the bedroom, one the kitchen, and they started to work their way toward one another again from those extremes of the flat. They were thorough. I could see them going over everything from top to bottom. They took the living room together. One cased one side, the other man the other.

They'd already finished before the warning caught them. I could tell that by the way they straightened up and stood facing one another frustratedly for a minute. Then both their heads turned sharply, as at a tip-off by doorbell that he was coming back. They got out fast.

I wasn't unduly disheartened, I'd expected that. My own feeling all along had been that they wouldn't find anything incriminating around. The trunk had gone.

He came in with a mountainous brown-paper bag sitting in the curve of one arm. I watched him closely to see if he'd discover that someone had been there in his absence. Apparently he didn't. They'd been adroit about it.

He stayed in the rest of the night. Sat tight, safe and sound. He did some desultory drinking, I could see him sitting there by the window and his hand would hoist every once in awhile, but not to excess. Apparently everything was under control, the tension had eased, now that—the trunk was out.

Watching him across the night, I speculated: Why doesn't he get out? If I'm right about him, and I am, why does he stick around—after it? That brought its own answer: Because he doesn't know anyone's on to him yet. He doesn't think there's any hurry. To go too soon, right after she has, would be more dangerous than to stay awhile.

The night wore on. I sat there waiting for Boyne's call. It came later than I thought it would. I picked the phone up in the dark. He was getting ready to go to bed, over there, now. He'd risen from where he'd been sitting drinking in the kitchen, and put the light out. He went into the living room, lit that. He started to pull his shirt-tail up out of his belt. Boyne's voice was in my ear as my eyes were on him, over there. Three-cornered arrangement.

"Hello, Jeff? Listen, absolutely nothing. We searched the place while he was out——"

I nearly said, "I know you did, I saw it," but checked myself in time.

"—and didn't turn up a thing. But——" He stopped as though this was going to be important. I waited impatiently for him to go ahead.

"Downstairs in his letter box we found a post card waiting for him. We fished it up out of the slot with bent pins——"

"And?"

"And it was from his wife, written only yesterday from some farm up-country. Here's the message we copied: 'Arrived O. K. Already feeling a little better. Love, Anna.'"



I said, faintly but stubbornly: “You say, written only yesterday. Have you proof of that? What was the postmark-date on it?”

He made a disgusted sound down in his tonsils. At me, not it. “The postmark was blurred. A corner of it got wet, and the ink smudged.”

“All of it blurred?”

“The year-date,” he admitted. “The hour and the month came out O. K. August. And seven thirty P.M., it was mailed at.”

This time I made the disgusted sound, in my larynx. “August, seven thirty P.M.—1937 or 1939 or 1942. You have no proof how it got into that mailbox, whether it came from a letter carrier’s pouch or from the back of some bureau drawer!”

“Give up, Jeff,” he said. “There’s such a thing as going too far.”

I don’t know what I would have said. That is, if I hadn’t happened to have my eyes on the Thorwald flat living room windows just then. Probably very little. The post card *had* shaken me, whether I admitted it or not. But I was looking over there. The light had gone out as soon as he’d taken his shirt off. But the bedroom didn’t light up. A match-flare winked from the living room, low down, as from an easy chair or sofa. With two unused beds in the bedroom, he was *still staying out of there*.

“Boyne,” I said in a glassy voice, “I don’t care what post cards from the other world you’ve turned up, I say that man has done away with his wife! Trace that trunk he shipped out. Open it up when you’ve located it—and I think you’ll find her!”

And I hung up without waiting to hear what he was going to do about it. He didn’t ring back, so I suspected he was going to give my suggestion a spin after all, in spite of his loudly proclaimed skepticism.

I stayed there by the window all night, keeping a sort of deathwatch. There were two more match-flares after the first, at about half-hour intervals. Nothing more after that. So possibly he was asleep over there. Possibly not. I had to sleep some time myself, and I finally succumbed in the flaming light of the early sun. Anything that he was going to do, he would have done under cover of darkness and not waited for broad daylight. There wouldn’t be anything much to watch, for a while now. And what was there that he needed to do any more, anyway? Nothing, just sit tight and let a little disarming time slip by.

It seemed like five minutes later that Sam came over and touched me, but it was already high noon. I said irritably: “Didn’t you lamp that note I pinned up, for you to let me sleep?”

He said: “Yeah, but it’s your old friend Inspector Boyne. I figured you’d sure want to——”

It was a personal visit this time. Boyne came into the room behind him without waiting, and without much cordiality.

I said to get rid of Sam: “Go inside and smack a couple of eggs together.”

Boyne began in a galvanized-iron voice: “Jeff, what do you mean by doing anything like this to me? I’ve made a fool out of myself, thanks to you. Sending my men out right and left on wild-goose chases. Thank God, I didn’t put my foot in it any worse than I did, and have this guy picked up and brought in for questioning.”

“Oh, then you don’t think that’s necessary?” I suggested, dryly.

The look he gave me took care of that. “I’m not alone in the department, you know. There are men over me I’m accountable to for my actions. That looks great, don’t it, sending one of my fellows one-half-a-day’s train ride up into the sticks to some godforsaken whistle-stop or other at departmental expense——”

“Then you located the trunk?”

“We traced it through the express agency,” he said flintily.

“And you opened it?”

“We did better than that. We got in touch with the various farmhouses in the immediate locality, and Mrs. Thorwald came down to the junction in a produce-truck from one of them and opened it for him herself, with her own keys!”

Very few men have ever gotten a look from an old friend such as I got from him. At the door he said, stiff as a rifle barrel: “Just let’s forget all about it, shall we? That’s about the kindest thing either one of us can do for the other. You’re not yourself, and I’m out a little of my own pocket money, time and temper. Let’s let it go at that. If you want to telephone me in future I’ll be glad to give you my home number.”

The door went *whopp!* behind him.

For about ten minutes after he stormed out my numbed mind was in a sort of straitjacket. Then it started to wriggle its way free. The hell with the police. I can’t prove it to them, maybe, but I can prove it to myself, one way or the other, once and for all. Either I’m wrong or I’m right. He’s got his armor on against them. But his back is naked and unprotected against me.

I called Sam in. “Whatever became of that spyglass we used to have, when we were bumming around on that cabin-cruiser that season?”

He found it some place downstairs and came in with it, blowing on it and rubbing it along his sleeve. I let it lie idle in my lap first. I took a piece of paper and a pencil and wrote six words on it: *What have you done with her?*

I sealed it in an envelope and left the envelope blank. I said to Sam: “Now here’s what I want you to do, and I want you to be slick about it. You take this, go in that building 525, climb the stairs to the fourth-floor rear, and ease it under the door. You’re fast, at least you used to be. Let’s see if you’re fast enough to keep from being caught at it. Then when you get safely down again, give the outside doorbell a little poke, to attract attention.”

His mouth started to open.

“And don’t ask me any questions, you understand? I’m not fooling.”

He went, and I got the spyglass ready.

I got him in the right focus after a minute or two. A face leaped up, and I was really seeing him for the first time. Dark-haired, but unmistakable Scandinavian ancestry. Looked like a sinewy customer, although he didn’t run to much bulk.

About five minutes went by. His head turned sharply, profilewards. That was the bell-poke, right there. The note must be in already.

He gave me the back of his head as he went back toward the flat-door. The lens could follow him all the way to the rear, where my unaided eyes hadn’t been able to before.

He opened the door first, missed seeing it, looked out on a level. He closed it. Then he dipped, straightened up. He had it. I could see him turning it this way and that.

He shifted in, away from the door, nearer the window. He thought danger lay near the door, safety away from it. He didn’t know it was the other way around, the deeper into his own rooms he retreated the greater the danger.

He’d torn it open, he was reading it. God, how I watched his expression. My eyes clung to it like leeches. There was a sudden widening, a pulling—the whole skin of his face seemed to stretch back behind the ears, narrowing his eyes to Mongoloids. Shock. Panic. His hand pushed out and found the wall, and he braced himself with it. Then he went back toward the door again slowly. I could see him creeping up on it, stalking it as though it were something alive. He opened it so slenderly you couldn’t see it at all, peered

fearfully through the crack. Then he closed it, and he came back, zigzag, off balance from sheer reflex dismay. He toppled into a chair and snatched up a drink. Out of the bottle neck itself this time. And even while he was holding it to his lips, his head was turned looking over his shoulder at the door that had suddenly thrown his secret in his face.

I put the glass down.

Guilty! Guilty as all hell, and the police be damned!

My hand started toward the phone, came back again. What was the use? They wouldn't listen now any more than they had before. "You should have seen his face, etc." And I could hear Boyne's answer: "Anyone gets a jolt from an anonymous letter, true or false. You would yourself." They had a real live Mrs. Thorwald to show me—or thought they had. I'd have to show them the dead one, to prove that they both weren't one and the same. I, from my window, had to show them a body.

Well, he'd have to show me first.

It took hours before I got it. I kept pegging away at it, pegging away at it, while the afternoon wore away. Meanwhile he was pacing back and forth there like a caged panther. Two minds with but one thought, turned inside-out in my case. How to keep it hidden, how to see that it wasn't kept hidden. I was afraid he might try to light out, but if he intended doing that he was going to wait until after dark, apparently, so I had a little time yet. Possibly he didn't want to himself, unless he was driven to it—still felt that it was more dangerous than to stay.

The customary sights and sounds around me went on unnoticed, while the main stream of my thoughts pounded like a torrent against that one obstacle stubbornly damming them up: how to get him to give the location away to me, so that I could give it away in turn to the police.

I was dimly conscious, I remember, of the landlord or somebody bringing in a prospective tenant to look at the sixth-floor apartment, the one that had already been finished. This was two over Thorwald's; they were still at work on the in-between one. At one point an odd little bit of synchronization, completely accidental of course, cropped up. Landlord and tenant both happened to be near the living room windows on the sixth at the same moment that Thorwald was near those on the fourth. Both parties moved onward simultaneously into the kitchen from there, and, passing the blind spot of the wall, appeared next at the kitchen windows. It was uncanny, they were almost like precision-strollers or puppets manipulated on one and the same string. It probably wouldn't have happened again just like

that in another fifty years. Immediately afterwards they digressed, never to repeat themselves like that again.

The thing was, something about it had disturbed me. There had been some slight flaw or hitch to mar its smoothness. I tried for a moment or two to figure out what it had been, and couldn't. The landlord and tenant had gone now, and only Thorwald was in sight. My unaided memory wasn't enough to recapture it for me. My eyesight might have if it had been repeated, but it wasn't.

It sank into my subconscious, to ferment there like yeast, while I went back to the main problem at hand.

I got it finally. It was well after dark, but I finally hit on a way. It mightn't work, it was cumbersome and roundabout, but it was the only way I could think of. An alarmed turn of the head, a quick precautionary step in one certain direction, was all I needed. And to get this brief, flickering, transitory giveaway, I needed two phone calls and an absence of about half an hour on his part between them.

I leafed a directory by matchlight until I'd found what I wanted: *Thorwald, Lars. 525 Bndct. . . . SWansea 5-2114.*

I blew out the match, picked up the phone in the dark. It was like television. I could see to the other end of my call, only not along the wire but by a direct channel of vision from window to window.

He said "Hullo?" gruffly.

I thought: How strange this is. I've been accusing him of murder for three days straight, and only now I'm hearing his voice for the first time.

I didn't try to disguise my own voice. After all, he'd never see me and I'd never see him. I said: "You got my note?"

He said guardedly: "Who is this?"

"Just somebody who happens to know."

He said craftily: "Know what?"

"Know what you know. You and I, we're the only ones."

He controlled himself well. I didn't hear a sound. But he didn't know he was open another way too. I had the glass balanced there at proper height on two large books on the sill. Through the window I saw him pull open the collar of his shirt as though its stricture was intolerable. Then he backed his hand over his eyes like you do when there's a light blinding you.

His voice came back firmly. "I don't know what you're talking about."

“Business, that’s what I’m talking about. It should be worth something to me, shouldn’t it? To keep it from going any further.” I wanted to keep him from catching on that it was the windows. I still needed them, I needed them now more than ever. “You weren’t very careful about your door the other night. Or maybe the draft swung it open a little.”

That hit him where he lived. Even the stomach-heave reached me over the wire. “You didn’t see anything. There wasn’t anything to see.”

“That’s up to you. Why should I go to the police?” I coughed a little. “If it would pay me not to.”

“Oh,” he said. And there was relief of a sort in it. “D’you want to—see me? Is that it?”

“That would be the best way, wouldn’t it? How much can you bring with you for now?”

“I’ve only got about seventy dollars around here.”

“All right, then we can arrange the rest for later. Do you know where Lakeside Park is? I’m near there now. Suppose we make it there.” That was about thirty minutes away. Fifteen there and fifteen back. “There’s a little pavilion as you go in.”

“How many of you are there?” he asked cautiously.

“Just me. It pays to keep things to yourself. That way you don’t have to divvy up.”

He seemed to like that too. “I’ll take a run out,” he said, “just to see what it’s all about.”

I watched him more closely than ever, after he’d hung up. He flitted straight through to the end room, the bedroom, that he didn’t go near any more. He disappeared into a clothes-closet in there, stayed a minute, came out again. He must have taken something out of a hidden cranny or niche in there that even the dicks had missed. I could tell by the piston-like motion of his hand, just before it disappeared inside his coat, what it was. A gun.

It’s a good thing, I thought, I’m not out there in Lakeside Park waiting for my seventy dollars.

The place blacked and he was on his way.

I called Sam in. “I want you to do something for me that’s a little risky. In fact, damn risky. You might break a leg, or you might get shot, or you might even get pinched. We’ve been together ten years, and I wouldn’t ask you anything like that if I could do it myself. But I can’t, and it’s got to be done.” Then I told him. “Go out the back way, cross the back yard fences,

and see if you can get into that fourth-floor flat up the fire escape. He's left one of the windows down a little from the top."

"What do you want me to look for?"

"Nothing." The police had been there already, so what was the good of that? "There are three rooms over there. I want you to disturb everything just a little bit, in all three, to show someone's been in there. Turn up the edge of each rug a little, shift every chair and table around a little, leave the closet doors standing out. Don't pass up a thing. Here, keep your eyes on this." I took off my own wrist watch, strapped it on him. "You've got twenty-five minutes, starting from now. If you stay within those twenty-five minutes, nothing will happen to you. When you see they're up, don't wait any longer, get out and get out fast."

"Climb back down?"

"No." He wouldn't remember, in his excitement, if he'd left the windows up or not. And I didn't want him to connect danger with the back of his place, but with the front. I wanted to keep my own window out of it. "Latch the window down tight, let yourself out the door, and beat it out of the building the front way, for your life!"

"I'm just an easy mark for you," he said ruefully, but he went.

He came out through our own basement door below me, and scrambled over the fences. If anyone had challenged him from one of the surrounding windows, I was going to backstop for him, explain I'd sent him down to look for something. But no one did. He made it pretty good for anyone his age. He isn't so young any more. Even the fire escape backing the flat, which was drawn up short, he managed to contact by standing up on something. He got in, lit the light, looked over at me. I motioned him to go ahead, not weaken.

I watched him at it. There wasn't any way I could protect him, now that he was in there. Even Thorwald would be within his rights in shooting him down—this was break and entry. I had to stay in back behind the scenes, like I had been all along. I couldn't get out in front of him as a lookout and shield him. Even the dicks had had a lookout posted.

He must have been tense, doing it. I was twice as tense, watching him do it. The twenty-five minutes took fifty to go by. Finally he came over to the window, latched it fast. The lights went, and he was out. He'd made it. I blew out a bellyful of breath that was twenty-five minutes old.

I heard him keying the street door, and when he came up I said warningly. "Leave the light out in here. Go and build yourself a great big

two-story whisky punch; you're as close to white as you'll ever be."

Thorwald came back twenty-nine minutes after he'd left for Lakeside Park. A pretty slim margin to hang a man's life on. So now for the finale of the long-winded business, and here was hoping. I got my second phone call in before he had time to notice anything amiss. It was tricky timing but I'd been sitting there with the receiver ready in my hand, dialing the number over and over, then killing it each time. He came in on the 2 of 5-2114, and I saved that much time. The ring started before his hand came away from the light switch.

This was the one that was going to tell the story.

"You were supposed to bring money, not a gun; that's why I didn't show up." I saw the jolt that threw into him. The window still had to stay out of it. "I saw you tap the inside of your coat, where you had it, as you came out on the street." Maybe he hadn't, but he wouldn't remember by now whether he had or not. You usually do when you're packing a gun and aren't an habitual carrier.

"Too bad you had your trip out and back for nothing. I didn't waste my time while you were gone, though. I know more now than I knew before." This was the important part. I had the glass up and I was practically fluoroscoping him. "I've found out where—it is. You know what I mean. I know now where you've got—it. I was there while you were out."

Not a word. Just quick breathing.

"Don't you believe me? Look around. Put the receiver down and take a look for yourself. I found it."

He put it down, moved as far as the living room entrance, and touched off the lights. He just looked around him once, in a sweeping, all-embracing stare, that didn't come to a head on any one fixed point, didn't center at all.

He was smiling grimly when he came back to the phone. All he said, softly and with malignant satisfaction, was: "You're a liar."

Then I saw him lay the receiver down and take his hand off it. I hung up at my end.

The test had failed. And yet it hadn't. He hadn't given the location away as I'd hoped he would. And yet that "You're a liar" was a tacit admission that it was there to be found, somewhere around him, somewhere on those premises. In such a good place that he didn't have to worry about it, didn't even have to look to make sure.

So there was a kind of sterile victory in my defeat. But it wasn't worth a damn to me.



He was standing there with his back to me, and I couldn't see what he was doing. I knew the phone was somewhere in front of him, but I thought he was just standing there pensive behind it. His head was slightly lowered, that was all. I'd hung up at my end. I didn't even see his elbow move. And if his index finger did, I couldn't see it.

He stood like that a moment or two, then finally he moved aside. The lights went out over there; I lost him. He was careful not even to strike matches, like he sometimes did in the dark.

My mind no longer distracted by having him to look at, I turned to trying to recapture something else—that troublesome little hitch in synchronization that had occurred this afternoon, when the renting agent and he both moved simultaneously from one window to the next. The closest I could get was this: it was like when you're looking at someone through a pane of imperfect glass, and a flaw in the glass distorts the symmetry of the reflected image for a second, until it has gone on past that point. Yet that wouldn't do, that was not it. The windows had been open and there had been no glass between. And I hadn't been using the lens at the time.

My phone rang. Boyne, I supposed. It wouldn't be anyone else at this hour. Maybe, after reflecting on the way he'd jumped all over me— I said “Hello” unguardedly, in my own normal voice.

There wasn't any answer.

I said: “Hello? Hello? Hello?” I kept giving away samples of my voice.

There wasn't a sound from first to last.

I hung up finally. It was still dark over there, I noticed.

Sam looked in to check out. He was a bit thick-tongued from his restorative drink. He said something about “Awri' if I go now?” I half heard him. I was trying to figure out another way of trapping *him* over there into giving away the right spot. I motioned my consent absently.

He went a little unsteadily down the stairs to the ground floor and after a delaying moment or two I heard the street door close after him. Poor Sam, he wasn't much used to liquor.

I was left alone in the house, one chair the limit of my freedom of movement.

Suddenly a light went on over there again, just momentarily, to go right out again afterwards. He must have needed it for something, to locate something that he had already been looking for and found he wasn't able to put his hands on readily without it. He found it, whatever it was, almost immediately, and moved back at once to put the lights out again. As he

turned to do so, I saw him give a glance out the window. He didn't come to the window to do it, he just shot it out in passing.

Something about it struck me as different from any of the others I'd seen him give in all the time I'd been watching him. If you can qualify such an elusive thing as a glance, I would have termed it a glance with a purpose. It was certainly anything but vacant or random, it had a bright spark of fixity in it. It wasn't one of those precautionary sweeps I'd seen him give, either. It hadn't started over on the other side and worked its way around to my side, the right. It had hit dead-center at my bay window, for just a split second while it lasted, and then was gone again. And the lights were gone, and he was gone.

Sometimes your senses take things in without your mind translating them into their proper meaning. My eyes saw that look. My mind refused to smelter it properly. "It was meaningless," I thought. "An unintentional bull's-eye, that just happened to hit square over here, as he went toward the lights on his way out."

Delayed action. A wordless ring of the phone. To test a voice? A period of bated darkness following that, in which two could have played at the same game—stalking one another's window-squares, unseen. A last-moment flicker of the lights, that was bad strategy but unavoidable. A parting glance, radioactive with malignant intention. All these things sank in without fusing. My eyes did their job, it was my mind that didn't—or at least took its time about it.

Seconds went by in packages of sixty. It was very still around the familiar quadrangle formed by the back of the houses. Sort of a breathless stillness. And then a sound came into it, starting up from nowhere, nothing. The unmistakable, spaced clicking a cricket makes in the silence of the night. I thought of Sam's superstition about them, that he claimed had never failed to fulfill itself yet. If that was the case, it looked bad for somebody in one of these slumbering houses around here——

Sam had been gone only about ten minutes. And now he was back again, he must have forgotten something. That drink was responsible. Maybe his hat, or maybe even the key to his own quarters uptown. He knew I couldn't come down and let him in, and he was trying to be quiet about it, thinking perhaps I'd dozed off. All I could hear was this faint jiggling down at the lock of the front door. It was one of those old-fashioned stoop houses, with an outer pair of storm doors that were allowed to swing free all night, and then a small vestibule, and then the inner door, worked by a simple iron key. The liquor had made his hand a little unreliable, although he'd had this

difficulty once or twice before, even without it. A match would have helped him find the keyhole quicker, but then, Sam doesn't smoke. I knew he wasn't likely to have one on him.

The sound had stopped now. He must have given up, gone away again, decided to let whatever it was go until tomorrow. He hadn't gotten in, because I knew his noisy way of letting doors coast shut by themselves too well, and there hadn't been any sound of that sort, that loose slap he always made.

Then suddenly it exploded. Why at this particular moment, I don't know. That was some mystery of the inner workings of my own mind. It flashed like waiting gunpowder which a spark has finally reached along a slow train. Drove all thoughts of Sam, and the front door, and this and that completely out of my head. It had been waiting there since midafternoon today, and only now—— More of that delayed action. Damn that delayed action.

The renting agent and Thorwald had both started even from the living room window. An intervening gap of blind wall, and both had reappeared at the kitchen window, still one above the other. But some sort of a hitch or flaw or jump had taken place, right there, that bothered me. The eye is a reliable surveyor. There wasn't anything the matter with their timing, it was with their parallel-ness, or whatever the word is. The hitch had been vertical, not horizontal. There had been an upward "jump."

Now I had it, now I knew. And it couldn't wait. It was too good. They wanted a body? Now I had one for them.

Sore or not, Boyne would *have* to listen to me now. I didn't waste any time, I dialed his precinct-house then and there in the dark, working the slots in my lap by memory alone. They didn't make much noise going around, just a light click. Not even as distinct as that cricket out there——

"He went home long ago," the desk sergeant said.

This couldn't wait. "All right, give me his home phone number."

He took a minute, came back again. "Trafalgar," he said. Then nothing more.

"Well? Trafalgar what?" Not a sound.

"Hello? Hello?" I tapped it. "Operator, I've been cut off. Give me that party again." I couldn't get her either.

I hadn't been cut off. My wire had been cut. That had been too sudden, right in the middle of—— And to be cut like that it would have to be done somewhere right here inside the house with me. Outside it went underground.

Delayed action. This time final, fatal, altogether too late. A voiceless ring of the phone. A direction-finder of a look from over there. “Sam” seemingly trying to get back in a while ago.

Surely, death was somewhere inside the house here with me. And I couldn’t move, I couldn’t get up out of this chair. Even if I had gotten through to Boyne just now, that would have been too late. There wasn’t time enough now for one of those camera-finishes in this. I could have shouted out the window to that gallery of sleeping rear-window neighbors around me, I supposed. It would have brought them to the windows. It couldn’t have brought them over here in time. By the time they had even figured which particular house it was coming from, it would stop again, be over with. I didn’t open my mouth. Not because I was brave, but because it was so obviously useless.

He’d be up in a minute. He must be on the stairs now, although I couldn’t hear him. Not even a creak. A creak would have been a relief, would have placed him. This was like being shut up in the dark with the silence of a gliding, coiling cobra somewhere around you.

There wasn’t a weapon in the place with me. There were books there on the wall, in the dark, within reach. Me, who never read. The former owner’s books. There was a bust of Rousseau or Montesquieu, I’d never been able to decide which, one of those gents with flowing manes, topping them. It was a monstrosity, bisque clay, but it too dated from before my occupancy.

I arched my middle upward from the chair seat and clawed desperately up at it. Twice my fingertips slipped off it, then at the third raking I got it to teeter, and the fourth brought it down into my lap, pushing me down into the chair. There was a steamer rug under me. I didn’t need it around me in this weather, I’d been using it to soften the seat of the chair. I tugged it out from under and mantled it around me like an Indian brave’s blanket. Then I squirmed far down in the chair, let my head and one shoulder dangle out over the arm, on the side next to the wall. I hoisted the bust to my other, upward shoulder, balanced it there precariously for a second head, blanket tucked around its ears. From the back, in the dark, it would look—I hoped

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I proceeded to breathe adenoidally, like someone in heavy upright sleep. It wasn’t hard. My own breath was coming nearly that labored anyway, from tension.

He was good with knobs and hinges and things. I never heard the door open, and this one, unlike the one downstairs, was right behind me. A little

eddy of air puffed through the dark at me. I could feel it because my scalp, the real one, was all wet at the roots of the hair right then.

If it was going to be a knife or head-blow, the dodge might give me a second chance, that was the most I could hope for, I knew. My arms and shoulders are hefty. I'd bring him down on me in a bear-hug after the first slash or drive, and break his neck or collarbone against me. If it was going to be a gun, he'd get me anyway in the end. A difference of a few seconds. He had a gun, I knew, that he was going to use on me in the open, over at Lakeside Park. I was hoping that here, indoors, in order to make his own escape more practicable——

Time was up.

The flash of the shot lit up the room for a second, it was so dark. Or at least the corners of it, like flickering, weak lightning. The bust bounced on my shoulder and disintegrated into chunks.

I thought he was jumping up and down on the floor for a minute with frustrated rage. Then when I saw him dart by me and lean over the window sill to look for a way out, the sound transferred itself rearwards and downwards, became a pummeling with hoof and hip at the street door. The camera-finish after all. But he still could have killed me five times.

I flung my body down into the narrow crevice between chair arm and wall, but my legs were still up, and so was my head and that one shoulder. He whirled, fired at me so close that it was like looking a sunrise in the face. I didn't feel it, so—it hadn't hit.

"You——" I heard him grunt to himself. I think it was the last thing he said. The rest of his life was all action, not verbal.

He flung over the sill on one arm and dropped into the yard. Two-story drop. He made it because he missed the cement, landed on the sod-strip in the middle. I jacked myself up over the chair arm and flung myself bodily forward at the window, nearly hitting it chin first.

He went all right. When life depends on it, you go. He took the first fence, rolled over that bellywards. He went over the second like a cat, hands and feet pointed together in a spring. Then he was back in the rear yard of his own building. He got up on something, just about like Sam had—— The rest was all footwork, with quick little corkscrew twists at each landing stage. Sam had latched his windows down when he was over there, but he'd reopened one of them for ventilation on his return. His whole life depended now on that casual, unthinking little act——

Second, third. He was up to his own windows. He'd made it. Something went wrong. He veered out away from them in another pretzel-twist, flashed up toward the fifth, the one above. Something sparked in the darkness of one of his own windows where he'd been just now, and a shot thudded heavily out around the quadrangle-enclosure like a big bass drum.

He passed the fifth, the sixth, got up to the roof. He'd made it a second time. Gee, he loved life! The guys in his own windows couldn't get him, he was over them in a straight line and there was too much fire escape interlacing in the way.

I was too busy watching him to watch what was going on around me. Suddenly Boyne was next to me, sighting. I heard him mutter: "I almost hate to do this, he's got to fall so far."

He was balanced on the roof parapet up there, with a star right over his head. An unlucky star. He stayed a minute too long, trying to kill before he was killed. Or maybe he was killed, and knew it.

A shot cracked, high up against the sky, the window pane flew apart all over the two of us, and one of the books snapped right behind me.

Boyne didn't say anything more about hating to do it. My face was pressing outward against his arm. The recoil of his elbow jarred my teeth. I blew a clearing through the smoke to watch him go.

It was pretty horrible. He took a minute to show anything, standing up there on the parapet. Then he let his gun go, as if to say: "I won't need this any more." Then he went after it. He missed the fire escape entirely, came all the way down on the outside. He landed so far out he hit one of the projecting planks, down there out of sight. It bounced his body up, like a springboard. Then it landed again—for good. And that was all.

I said to Boyne: "I got it. I got it finally. The fifth-floor flat, the one over his, that they're still working on. The cement kitchen floor, raised above the level of the other rooms. They wanted to comply with the fire laws and also obtain a dropped living room effect, as cheaply as possible. Dig it up——"

He went right over then and there, down through the basement and over the fences, to save time. The electricity wasn't turned on yet in that one, they had to use their torches. It didn't take them long at that, once they'd got started. In about half an hour he came to the window and wigwagged over for my benefit. It meant yes.

He didn't come over until nearly eight in the morning; after they'd tidied up and taken them away. Both away, the hot dead and the cold dead. He said: "Jeff, I take it all back. That damn fool that I sent up there about the

trunk—well, it wasn't his fault, in a way. I'm to blame. He didn't have orders to check on the woman's description, only on the contents of the trunk. He came back and touched on it in a general way. I go home and I'm in bed already, and suddenly pop! into my brain—one of the tenants I questioned two whole days ago had given us a few details and they didn't tally with his on several important points. Talk about being slow to catch on!"

"I've had that all the way through this damn thing," I admitted ruefully. "I call it delayed action. It nearly killed me."

"I'm a police officer and you're not."

"That how you happened to shine at the right time?"

"Sure. We came over to pick him up for questioning. I left them planted there when we saw he wasn't in, and came on over here by myself to square it up with you while we were waiting. How did you happen to hit on that cement floor?"

I told him about the freak synchronization. "The renting agent showed up taller at the kitchen window in proportion to Thorwald, than he had been a moment before when both were at the living room windows together. It was no secret that they were putting in cement floors, topped by a cork composition, and raising them considerable. But it took on new meaning. Since the top floor one has been finished for some time, it had to be the fifth. Here's the way I have it lined up, just in theory. She's been in ill health for years, and he's been out of work, and he got sick of that and of her both. Met this other——"

"She'll be here later today, they're bringing her down under arrest."

"He probably insured her for all he could get, and then started to poison her slowly, trying not to leave any trace. I imagine—and remember, this is pure conjecture—she caught him at it that night the light was on all night. Caught on in some way, or caught him in the act. He lost his head, and did the very thing he had wanted all along to avoid doing. Killed her by violence—strangulation or a blow. The rest had to be hastily improvised. He got a better break than he deserved at that. He thought of the apartment upstairs, went up and looked around. They'd just finished laying the floor, the cement hadn't hardened yet, and the materials were still around. He gouged a trough out of it just wide enough to take her body, put her in it, mixed fresh cement and recemented over her, possibly raising the general level of the flooring an inch or two so that she'd be safely covered. A permanent, odorless coffin. Next day the workmen came back, laid down the cork surfacing on top of it without noticing anything, I suppose he'd used one of their own trowels to

smooth it. Then he sent his accessory upstate fast, near where his wife had been several summers before, but to a different farmhouse where she wouldn't be recognized, along with the trunk keys. Sent the trunk up after her, and dropped himself an already used post card into his mailbox, with the year-date blurred. In a week or two she would have probably committed 'suicide' up there as Mrs. Anna Thorwald. Despondency due to ill health. Written him a farewell note and left her clothes beside some body of deep water. It was risky, but they might have succeeded in collecting the insurance at that."

By nine Boyne and the rest had gone. I was still sitting there in the chair, too keyed up to sleep. Sam came in and said: "Here's Doc Preston."

He showed up rubbing his hands, in that way he has. "Guess we can take that cast off your leg now. You must be tired of sitting there all day doing nothing."



# MURDER-STORY

## 1

IT WAS FIVE TO FOUR on the clock above the change-booth when I came up the steel-rimmed steps from train-level. The receding roar of the train dwindled away underground.

I stopped a minute as though the climb had tired me. But I'm not old, why should a flight of subway-stairs tire me? It was cooler above ground, it always is, winter or summer. I took a deep breath, blew it out again, puffing my cheeks like bellows. But I'm not short-winded, why should I need air so badly?

Larry, the newsvendor, was on duty in front of his stand, just outside the entrance, like every night from ten until six. An oil lamp stood on the counter to light it, an open cigar-box held his change. A row of colored magazines hung triangularly along the top of the shed, suspended from clips. As soon as he saw me he slapped together a pale-green tabloid and a white standard-size, both midnight editions of tomorrow morning's papers, rolled them together, held them toward me. This had been going on for years.

He said, "Hello there. How're you?"

My hand wouldn't hold still, picking out five cents from a fistful of change. I dropped a nickel and a dime. I was ashamed the way it vibrated, and his so steady. I tucked the papers under one arm, shoved both hands deep in my pockets, so the shaking wouldn't show. I wasn't drunk, why should my hands shake so? But then for that matter, why should I care whether the shaking showed or not? There's no law against trembling hands.

Derndorf, the cop, was rolling traffic-stanchions in out of the way for the rest of the night. Heavy-bottomed things that weighed a ton, used to keep a safety-lane for people to alight from trolleys. They weren't needed any more. As a matter of fact they should have been parked hours ago, when the lights went off, but maybe there was a rookie on the beat. He said, "Hello there. What d'ye say?" This had been going on for years.

I went in where I lived. Hamilton, the ashen-faced night clerk, was poring over his ledgers, poor devil. He had that yeasty complexion fellows get from working at night all their lives.

He glanced up and he said, "Who won the fight tonight?"

I looked it up and told him; he had to get his sporting results second-hand, cooped up behind a desk like that.

He said, “Any call for tomorrow?”

I tightened my jaw. “Try it,” I warned. “Just try it.” But maybe I meant it less humorously than he thought.

“You look all-in,” he admitted.

The point of all this is: all these people knew me, had known me for years past. I was an old familiar face to them. I wasn’t one of those people things happen to, that you read about in the papers. I was part of the scene.

Upstairs in the corridor, outside my door, my hand played tricks on me again. My key dropped with a clash, first out of my hand, the second time out of the lock itself. I’d been using it long enough, I should have known how to handle it by now. I finally got the door open, felt for the light switch.

I’d been living in this room for years, it was the same as when I’d left it a few hours ago. And yet the way I looked around it, you’d think I’d never seen it before. So maybe it wasn’t quite the same to me—as when I’d left it.

I closed the door behind me. I suddenly caught my head between both hands, as suddenly as though it was something that had just fallen from the ceiling, alighting on my shoulders. I dragged myself sort of stickily across into the bathroom, as though something were impeding my feet, as though I had on snowshoes. I shrugged off my coat, rolled up my cuffs, spun the hot-water tap, tempered it with a little cold so I wouldn’t scald myself.

I started to wash my hands. They weren’t particularly grimy. I happened to look up, caught sight of my face in the cabinet-mirror before me. I quickly opened the cabinet, folded the mirror back out of the way. It’s a rare man that can’t stand the sight of his own face.

The water poured down endlessly, and I never seemed to get through washing my hands. They started to redden and become sensitized. Then when I’d gotten them all dried, I suddenly plunged them back in again, as though I couldn’t get them clean enough to suit me. I kept staring at them as though I’d never seen them before. Or as though they’d played a dirty trick on me.

I came out of there, wiping them furtively down my sides, although I’d just finished toweling them. My portable was open, lying where I’d left it. The usual sandwich-arrangement stuck up out of the roller, a white original, a carbon filler, a yellow second. The insert had a single line of type across the top of it: “Murder Self-Committed, by William S. Tucker.” Just that and nothing else. But the jumbo ashtray next to it held the smoked-down

remains of two entire packages of cigarettes in it. There was a disproportion between the amount of work done and the effort expended trying to do it.

Beside the telephone lay a penciled message received at the hotel-desk earlier in the day, which I had brought in with me that afternoon.

“Mr. Wayne of the Stoddard Co. called.  
Wants to know when he can have that  
story you promised him?  
Received at: 4:15 P.M.”

I picked the form up, looked at it. “He can have it right now!” I said. A funny choked sound broke in my throat, like a groan that had stalled halfway up.

I sat down at the machine. It was pretty late to be hammering the keys, but Mr. Wayne had to have his story. There was a deadline on it. The management had tacked strips of felt around the seams of my room-door several months before, at my request. I was fairly-well sound-proofed. And Mr. Wayne had to have his story.

For the first time since I’d been writing commercially, I started out from scratch, without a plot-outline beside me, without a single note to help me. Maybe I didn’t need any—this time.

2

**Murder Self-Committed**  
**by William S. Tucker**

Leslie Quiller didn’t seem pleased to see Strickland when he answered the ring at his doorbell in the early hours of that morning. He would have been even less pleased if he had known what had brought him there at that time, after all these years. Strickland had come to cause his death.

He had brought no gun with him, no knife, nothing that would have to be disposed of later. He’d thought it over carefully; he knew things like that, *implements*, always backfired, were traced in the end. Killers had been tracked down by strands of cord, pieces of string, by very threads.

He’d brought nothing but his two bare hands. And yet he wasn’t going to strangle Quiller either; that might result in outcries, a scuffle. A scratch, a betraying tuft of hair, a skin-scraping beneath a fingernail. There was going to be no violence between the two of them, no contact. Quiller was going to precipitate his own death, *after* Strickland had gone away again, leaving him

still alive. Murder? Yes. But subtle, not crude. Who could call it murder, and not an accident? Who would know, but Strickland himself?

Strickland's reasons for wishing Quiller dead were good and sufficient. But the law recognizes no excuse for murder, and Strickland had no wish to pay the penalty for what he was about to do. To accomplish it successfully and remain undiscovered afterwards was his whole point, not simply to accomplish it at all costs, not caring what happened to him himself afterwards. Any fool could do that.

That was why he had bided his time, waited so long. For two years he had nursed his burning resentment, yet made no move. His was one of those inward festering grievances that are so hard to detect, that sometimes not even the victim himself is aware of having caused, much less the police when the time comes to find a motive for the crime that resulted. A woman? Money? The police are quick to uncover a motive like that. But Strickland wanted nothing from Quiller but his life. His grievance dealt in intangibles; how then could they ever hope to unravel it?

Success had something to do with it. Quiller's success and Strickland's lack of it. Through him Quiller had gotten his start, and promptly kicked over the stepladder that had gained him his foothold. Strickland was that ladder, Quiller was the climber. The ladder stayed there flat, the climber went on up.

Time only magnified the injury instead of healing it. For two years, while Quiller went from one undeserved success to another, he was already dead in Strickland's mind. It was as though three divergent lines labeled "opportunity," "method," and "maximum of safety" were slowly drawing to a single point. The day and hour they all met, would be the hour of Quiller's death. "Opportunity" was almost continuously within reach; "maximum of safety" approached several times during the two years; it was "method" that was the elusive one. And the other two depended upon it entirely.

It was in a doctor's office one day that the three suddenly intercrossed without warning.

Strickland had gone there to have a minor but painful sprain in the back seen to. He was healthy as a rule, seldom went to a doctor. He had always gone to this one doctor, and that Quiller might be a patient of his too never occurred to him. Perhaps, at the time of their association, he had recommended him to Quiller; if so, he had forgotten about it, never thought to link their two names. The doctor, on his part, was apparently unaware that they had once known each other.

Had Quiller called up any other day but this one, for that matter had he called up the same day but an hour sooner or an hour later, his life would have been saved. Strickland had not been to the doctor for two years, might not have come for another two years. But the three lines came to a single point at precisely that place and time.

Strickland had waited his turn in the outer room, then had come into the doctor's office proper to be examined. He stripped off his shirt, winced when the doctor felt his back with experienced fingers. "Every time I try to turn my head or shoulders, it hurts like blazes," he complained.

"That's no sprain," the doctor reassured him. "You've simply caught cold in the muscles of your back. Must have been sitting in a draft under an open window, with a wet shirt on your back."

Strickland snapped his fingers. "Guess you're right! I was using the typewriter yesterday right by the open window, and my back got all wet with perspiration." He put his shirt on again.

"Rub a good strong liniment on it, it'll probably be gone by tomorrow," the doctor said.

His assistant thrust her head in. "Mr. Leslie Quiller would like to speak to you on the phone."

Strickland's jaw suddenly tightened; his face, however, showed no surprise or recognition.

"Oh, that hypochondriac," the doctor remarked contemptuously. "Every two days he has another tummy-ache. All right, I'll take it in here."

Strickland had carefully turned his back, pretended to be busy reknitting his tie in front of the mirror, as an excuse for staying in the room.

The doctor's change of voice as he picked up the phone showed that, whatever his private opinion of Quiller, he was a lucrative patient whom it paid to humor. "Well, well," he said jovially, "how are we today? Feeling any better? . . . You're not, eh? What seems to be the trouble? . . . Have you been taking that stomach- tonic I prescribed? . . . Nonsense, a two-year-old child could take it and never know the difference! It's odorless and colorless. You're like a lot of people, Mr. Quiller, the minute you know a thing is medicine you shy away from it. Pretend it's a highball. Pour it out liberally into a glass just before you retire, mix an equal part of water with it, and drink it down without stopping to think. Pinch your nose if that'll make it easier."

The doctor's voice droned on soothingly. Strickland was tying the third knot in as many minutes in his tortured tie; couldn't seem to get it to his

satisfaction. His hands were perfectly steady, though. The thought of murder can be faced without flinching when it has been a familiar one for two years past.

The doctor's conversation had become more general. "I see by the papers you just made a nice juicy sale to the pictures. Have to share it with anyone? . . . You didn't, eh? Good for you!"

Strickland's eyes were venomous slits as he slowly buttoned his vest, then his jacket over it. The doctor, across the room, was sitting draped negligently astride a corner of his desk, looking off the other way. He would have mistaken the expression for a nearsighted squint anyway, probably, had he seen it.

"How's Mrs. Quiller? . . . Oh, she's out on the Coast? You're all by yourself in the apartment? Well, that explains your upset stomach. Be careful what restaurants you eat in, and as I say, be sure you take this tonic. Keep it handy on your bathroom shelf, where you won't forget it. Let me hear from you."

The doctor hung up, turned, took a minute to readjust his mind to the less important patient awaiting his attention. "Let's see, where were we? Oh yes, rub your back with a good strong liniment——"

Strickland said blandly, "Do you know of any that's odorless and colorless? Most liniments smell so strong, I don't want to go around all day reeking like a horse."

The doctor scratched something on a prescription-blank. "Ask for this at a drugstore. They won't give it to you without a doctor's order. Be sure you wash your hands after you apply it, don't let it get near your mouth, it's dangerous stuff. Good day."

Strickland returned to his room with a bottle labeled: "Poison—For External Use Only. Antidote: white of an egg and mustard." He allowed warm water to drip over the outside of the bottle without opening it, peeled the label off. He spread it across the edge of the washstand and waited for it to dry again. When it had, he put a match to it and burned it to a tiny flake of ash.

He set out at 10:30 with the unlabeled bottle in his inside pocket. He knew Quiller's habits as well as his own, from their former association. He wouldn't be in until twelve or one, or if he did would have friends with him. He always read for relaxation for an hour before retiring, never retired before three. Whether he is outwardly successful or not, a man's intimate personal habits do not change much once he has reached middle age.

Strickland took a walk that led him past where Quiller lived. He'd done this often enough before, God knows, and each time with murder in his heart. But the three lines had never converged until today in that doctor's office.

The row of windows on the third floor were all dark. He was out, at a party or a theater, basking in the success, enjoying the laurels, that Strickland's talents, and not his own, had gained for him.

Strickland continued onward, visited a friend of his own, stayed an hour, suggested that they both go to one of the "night-owl" matinees at a Times Square picture-house, knowing well that the friend loathed pictures. He did consent, however, to accompany Strickland as far as the theater-entrance, to get a breath of fresh air before turning in. He saw Strickland buy his ticket, go inside.

Strickland stayed inside about forty minutes, then came out, started to walk slowly uptown again toward where Quiller lived. He kept his torn admission-stub folded in the buttonhole of his lapel. There was no uncertainty about the way he walked, no haste.

There was a subdued light in Quiller's windows now, caused by a shaded reading-lamp. It was the "intimate" type of apartment-building, a reconstructed mansion without doormen or elevators, both more fashionable and more expensive than the ready-made "incubator" type. Strickland had called here many times before at this same late hour—two years ago, with a briefcase under his arm and trust in his fellow men in his heart. He had no briefcase now; he had a bottle in his inside pocket, and death in his heart.

He rang Quiller's bell from the vestibule. There was a short wait, then a familiar voice said in his ear: "Yes?"

"Hello, Les," he said cheerfully, but keeping his voice down as befitted the hour. "This is Strick. Can I come up for a minute?"

"Strick? Who's Strick?" That was Quiller's way of saying, "I have been successful, you have not. I don't know you any more."

Strickland simply felt the bottle in his pocket; it held a cure for more than lame backs. It cured dishonesty too, and deceit, and snubs.

The metallic voice condescended: "Oh yes, John Strickland, you mean? Well, it's pretty late——"

"I won't keep you, just wanted to say hello."

Quiller didn't answer, but the door snapped back. Death had been let into the house.

His face plainly showed his annoyance when he came to the upstairs door, in an expensive polka-dotted lounging-robe. Behind him the room looked cool and restful with its pale-green walls, a breeze blowing through the Venetian blinds, a cigarette smoking away on a stand beside an easy chair. On a table stood a photo of Quiller's absent wife, in an easel-frame. Near by a book, presumably for decorative purposes only, "I Was Born Lucky, by Leslie Quiller."

Quiller didn't offer his hand, barely moved aside to allow his caller to enter. If he closed the door, it was obviously more because it was creating a draft than because he wanted to invite Strickland to stay any length of time.

He said, "Well, what are you doing these days?" without trying to keep an edge of scorn out of his voice. "Cigarette?"

"No thanks." No cigarette-butts were to be left behind, nothing like that. "I haven't been as successful as you."

Quiller batted his eyes conceitedly. "You have only yourself to blame. I have made my own chances." He was one of those lucky people who can only see one side of any question—their own. "I'm not sure I ought to receive you here," he had the gall to remark, "after the way you went down to those publishers trying to get more money than was rightfully coming to you on that book." He indicated the one on the table. "I heard all about that, you know."

Strickland's face went very pale, as though he were struggling to control himself. He said softly, keeping his voice down: "Let's let bygones be bygones. We probably won't see one another any more after tonight." He looked at his hands in surprise. "Wonder how they got so dirty? Mind if I wash them a minute before I go?"

"The bathroom's in there," said Quiller discourteously. "I'm not in the habit of having my apartment used as a lavatory, though."

Strickland closed the door after him. He took a towel in both hands, opened the medicine-chest, removed the easily-recognizable bottle of stomach-tonic and emptied its contents down the drain. He refilled it from the bottle in his pocket, replaced both. It didn't take a minute. Hand still wrapped in the protective towel, he gave the electric bulb in the wall a couple of quick turns to the right that disconnected it. Then when it was out, he snapped off the useless control switch, hung the towel on the rack, and came out.

Quiller was waiting by the apartment door, as a gentle hint. He even reached for the knob and opened it as Strickland reappeared.



“I suppose what brought you here was reading about the picture sale of ‘Born Lucky’,” he said sarcastically. “Everyone I ever knew will be showing up now, trying to get something out of me. Did you want to borrow some money, that it? I suppose you are entitled to something; after all, you did the typing on it.” He went across the room, took a wallet out of a drawer. “Here—here’s fifty dollars. Don’t pretend you’ll try to repay it. Understand one thing, this ends all supposed obligation on my part toward you once and for all. Take it or leave it.”

Strickland’s face wasn’t white any more. Quiller’s barbs no longer seemed able to wound him. He took it. After all, just in case they scented murder, here was a ready-made red herring for a motive. Fifty dollars missing from the apartment; some sneak-thief——

“Good-by, Quiller.” He said it slowly, with emphasis, smiling as he said it. His eyes were shining remorselessly.

Quiller closed the door after him. He stood there on the outside of it for a minute, head bent, listening to his host’s footfalls recede into the depths of the death-chamber. He was still smiling as he turned and went softly down the carpeted stairs.

No one saw him leave, just as no one had seen him enter. He might have been the shadow of death itself, so unnoticed had he come and gone. He *had* been—the shadow of a death that was still to come.

Blocks away from there he stopped a minute to burrow a little hole in the top of the pile of ashes that filled a can standing waiting for the ash-truck, thrust the fifty dollars in, covered it up. Later, further away still, glass tinkled lightly as a small empty bottle crashed against the curbstone, was shoveled at the edge of a foot into the mouth of a sewer. And at the same instant, as if by prearranged signal, back where he had come from, there was the tinkle of other glass in a darkened bathroom, as a body fell heavily to the floor, writhed there uncontrollably a moment or two, stiffened, then lay still.

THE END

After I’d been writing about five hours straight, and had nearly fallen off the chair twice, I had to quit for a minute and go down for a cup of coffee and a breath of air, to pull myself together, before I went ahead. The ribbon on my machine was all worn out too, had needed changing for a long time past, had been giving me a lot of trouble. I decided I’d better get a new one while I was at it.

I always bought them directly from the typewriter concern that manufactured my make of machine. They had a branch office and salesrooms a few blocks away from the hotel. That way I was sure of getting them fresh. I'd found out by experience that it was a mistake to buy them at little neighborhood stationers; they were kept in stock too long and the ink in them dried out.

The clerk knew me by sight and knew just what I wanted without my having to ask for it. "All black for one of our portables, right?"

"You never knew me to get any other kind, did you?" I said wearily. "Make sure it's fresh, now." I always said that, like a fussy housewife buying tomatoes.

"Brand-new shipment, just came in today," he assured me. "Hasn't even been distributed on the shelves yet." He went to the back, reached into a tremendous carton with its top off, brought me back one of the little enameled tin boxes the company put them up in. I put it in my pocket without looking at it; you could almost smell the fresh ink through box and silver foil-wrapper and all.

Then when I got back, and already had the spool off my machine, I opened the new one and saw to my disgust that the young fool had given me the very kind I didn't want, a half-red half-black one. I'd never yet bought one of them, in all the years he'd been waiting on me, and he knew it! You never use the red part, and if your machine-carriage is shaky like mine was, you were liable to get shaded capitals and upper-stems, a piebald script that looked like hell.

I knew he hadn't done it purposely, it had happened because the shipment hadn't been assorted yet and he hadn't troubled to look and make sure. I was too all-in from writing all night to go all the way back and exchange it, and I had a deadline on the story anyway, and the post office to make, so I went ahead and inserted it on the spool and went ahead, now that I'd brought it back with me. I pitched the little tin box ill-humoredly off into a corner, without bothering to throw it out.

I finished it about five that afternoon, with an hour to spare before closing-time at the P.O. The room was a fog of cigarette-smoke, I had the ground-work for a beard, my shirt was sticking to my back like a wet application, and white and yellow leaves were lying all over the floor like there'd been a blizzard. I tapped out "The End," that favorite word of all writing guys, collected the loose whites and yellows, and stacked them neatly together in two piles.

I didn't go right out to mail it, gave myself a couple of minutes to rest up first, and phoned down for a paper while I was waiting. They sent me up a four o'clock edition. On page three, this:

## CELEBRITY FOUND DEAD UNDER STRANGE CIRCUMSTANCES

Hilary Robbins was found dead in the bathroom of his apartment early this morning by a cleaning-woman who worked there by the day. . . .

Mr. Robbins, who was suffering from a stomach-ailment, was found to have swallowed a quantity of highly-poisonous liniment which he had mistaken for a tonic in the dark. . . .

The police are inclined to suspect foul play. They immediately ruled out suicide on learning that only the day before Mr. Robbins had signed a highly lucrative contract with a film company and was expected in California by the first of the month. That it might have been more than simply an accident was suggested by a number of baffling features to the case. The liniment was in the original bottle reserved for the tonic, and the latter had disappeared entirely. The bathroom light, whose failure to work played a part in the mishap, it was found upon examination was not defective as had been supposed but had been deliberately tampered with, as though to misguide Mr. Robbins to his death. . . .

A small quantity of money was missing from the apartment. . . .

When I'd finished reading it, I just shook my head, and maybe looked sort of cocky. Just like in my story, I told myself. Truth was supposed to be stranger than fiction. This was one time fiction had caught up with truth. Fiction?

I had a fireplace in my room. It wasn't the right season for fires, but I readied a small one, with just a couple of thin logs left over from the previous winter for decorative purposes. Tossed in a balled-up newspaper or two on top of them, and got it going. When it was on the downgrade again, just giving off a hot glow, I took the snow-white typescript I'd just finished and held it by one corner and held it over it. The outer edges slowly yellowed from the reflected heat, just as they would have from age, if they'd been kept knocking around the room for a long time. The carbon was on yellow paper already, so that wouldn't work. I got a palmful of dirt from the

window-box, crumbled it to fine dust, sprinkled it between the pages, ground them together, blew the residue off again. It left a dusty grayish patina.

I stuck the original in a manila envelope, went out and mailed it. Wayne would get his story the first thing in the morning.

I didn't come back again. From the post office I went into a bar, stayed out until four, legal closing-time, and came home blind drunk. Many writers drink between stories. I never had before, though; why should I now?

Larry slapped together a pale-green tab, a white standard-size. He got a load of my bouquet, grinned. "I'd like to take a night off once in awhile, myself." Derndorf the cop wasn't around, the traffic-stanchions had been rolled in on time tonight.

Hamilton was poring over his ledgers again. He looked up when I floundered in, grinned amiably. "What *you* been up to?"

I thought he meant being tanked. "There's no law against it, is there?" I countered.

"No, I mean there was a couple of guys around to see you earlier in the evening. Claimed they were detectives." He came right out with it like that because, like everyone else that knew me, he knew it couldn't have been anything serious.

Yet, on hearing that, although I couldn't stand straight, I was suddenly cold sober. "What'd they want?"

"They didn't say. Said they'd try their luck tomorrow. I told them you never get in until all hours."

I said, "Must have been about this guy, Hilary Robbins. Have you read about it? I used to know him, you know." I showed him the two papers. On the tab it had made a scarehead already, as was to be expected. But even on the standard-size, it had worked its way forward to the front page, third column from the left. It was murder now, they were certain of it.

"No kidding?" he said interestedly. He read it avidly, looked up. Went "cluck-cluck-cluck" with his tongue. "What d'ye know about that?" The question was purely rhetorical. Then with friendly concern, "Say, I hope they don't start making your life miserable on account of it. If they come back in the morning, should I tell them you're not in?"

"By no means," I said emphatically. "You shoot 'em right up to me. The quicker I see them, the quicker it'll be over with."

Upstairs I put on the lights, closed the door. "It couldn't have been on a main line of investigation," I assured myself, "or they would have waited downstairs for me to get back, not put it off until tomorrow." I undressed, darkened the room, let myself fall back in a straight line on top of the bed, in my underwear. I lit a cigarette, clasped my hands comfortably under my head, crossed my ankles. "The trouble with most of these murderers," I murmured reflectively, "is they're low-brows, little better than mental defectives. If an intelligent person were ever to go in for that sort of thing, he'd know how to hold himself afterwards. The average detective and police-official being just one degree above the murderer, in other words sub-normal himself, a really intelligent murderer would be able to beat the rap with one hand tied behind his back." The red spark of my cigarette winked knowingly back at me in the dark.

Their knock on the door woke me up out of a bleary sleep at nine-thirty the next morning. On the job early. The knock, however, was considerably subdued, not insolent or aggressive. I knew right away whom I could expect, put on a bathrobe, opened for them.

They didn't look bad. I'd never seen professionals before, although I made a living out of them. For one thing, I was surprised at how young and well-groomed they both were. One in particular was little more than a kid; by which I mean of course a thirty-year-old kid. Nice, honest, open face, not hardened and seamed by his job yet. The other was somewhat older, but no roughneck either. There wasn't a derby or a cigar between the two of them.

"Mr. Tucker? We're from Headquarters." They didn't go through that business of flourishing a badge. I was supposed to be a gentleman, who took the word of other gentlemen as given.

"Oh yes, you were here last night they told me. Sorry I wasn't home. Come in, won't you?"

"Did we get you up?" the younger one said friendlily. "Sorry to bust in like this." It was a regular love-match.

The older one shook his head enviously. "You writers have the life of Riley. I think I'll be a writer." His pal crooked an elbow at him and cracked, "You can't even write English straight." The three of us laughed.

"Too early for a drink, I suppose?" I suggested hospitably.

Yes, it was, they admitted, and not while they were on duty, anyway. They each accepted a cigarette, however. The younger one, Bradford, supplied the match, conscientiously blew it out at second use and struck another.

“Well, we’ll get this over with as quickly as we can, Mr. Tucker. It’s just a formality, anyway. You knew a Hilary Robbins, didn’t you?”

“Yeah,” I said, looking straight into his eyes, “and I’ve been reading a lot about him since yesterday afternoon.”

“Know him pretty well?”

“In a business way, never socially.”

“When was the last time you saw him?”

Bradford tactfully reshaped it, when he saw me preparing to get my back up. “Had you seen anything of him lately?”

“Not for ages. Let’s see, about two years ago, I guess, was the last time. I ghosted for him, you know. He gave me an advance as a binder, and I was to share royalties. Like a fool I went ahead without insisting on a contract; I was hard up, and sort of overawed by his reputation. The publishers turned the checks over to him, and I never saw another penny. He claimed the book laid an egg, and the publishers wouldn’t let me see any of the sales sheets. I just wrote the thing off to experience, and stayed away from him from then on.”

Bradford laughed shamefacedly, scratched his head. “I heard all the words,” he admitted, “but half of them went over my head.”

I explained what ghosting was, and royalties. They got so interested they seemed to forget what had brought them there.

“He was pretty much of a sharp-shooter,” I wound up, “I found that out later. Couldn’t write a word, yet built himself up an enormous ballyhoo and got rich. Still, I don’t know of anyone that would have reason to go as far as killing him. Must have been some burglar whom he surprised— According to the *Daily Views* there was a considerable sum of money missing.”

Bradford said: “That illustrated hunk of toilet-paper always adds at least three zeros to any amount. Fifty dollars was missing. That’s what makes us doubt robbery was the motive. You see, the motive doesn’t match the method. This murder was done by an intelligent person, and intelligent people don’t kill for fifty dollars. If it had been a larger amount, yes. Or the same amount hitched to a stupidly-contrived murder, then again yes. But in this case, the two don’t balance.”

“What he means,” grinned the other one, “is it was a million-dollar-murder for a small-change stake.”

I saw them to the door. On the way out Bradford spotted a back-number of one of Wayne’s mags lying on the table, saw my name on the cover,

thumbed it interestedly. “Gee, I’d like to read something you wrote sometime,” he hinted broadly.

“Take it with you,” I said, flattered. It struck me as funny for a minute, a detective wanting to read detective-stories, but I managed to keep a straight face. “Sorry I couldn’t help you any more than I have. If I can be of any further assistance in any way, don’t hesitate to drop around again.”

I closed the door and went back to bed. “Now, if it had been me that was the murderer,” I grinned at the ceiling, “that’s just how I would have carried the thing off.”

Nothing for thirty-six hours. The phone rang at ten the following evening. “A Mr. Bradford here to see you, to return a book or something,” the girl announced superciliously, as though even she scented it was just a stall so he could come up and warm his feet.

“Send him right up,” I said cheerfully. I would have given that permission to anyone else, why not him?

He was alone. I said, “Is this official or just personal?”

“No, I’m on my own time now,” he laughed. “Excuse my busting in like this. Say, that was a swell story of yours! I was up half the night last night reading it——”

“How’d you like the part where the car’s hanging over the cliff by two wheels?”

He took a fraction of a minute to answer, sized me up. “That wasn’t in this story,” he said. But there was a question-mark hovering behind it. Well anyway, he’d beat me to the punch on that one, used his wits. But I’d heard that unspoken question-mark just the same, so I’d found out what I wanted to; he hadn’t read the story, just wanted an excuse to come back again.

“You could have kept it,” I said, “they give me complimentary copies.”

“I was hoping,” he said disarmingly, “I could trade it in for a new one.” There was something likable about the cuss at that. A writer likes to think he has his fans too.

“Have a drink,” I said.

“Don’t mind if I do.”

I fixed him a dynamite-blast, to lower his I.Q. a little; it was too high to suit me.

He sat down sort of awkwardly, legs spread apart, like a man trying to act on his best behavior. I said, “You ought to be able to provide me with good copy. You know, your own experiences——”

“Nah,” he said humbly, “you couldn’t use it. Nothing like in those mags you write for. Just routine. Report-in, report-out, go here, go there.” He took a swallow, gave me a rueful look over the top of his glass, at the strength of it, and drained it to the bottom. “Where do you get your ideas from?”

“Make ’em up out of my head.”

He just looked at me sort of awed, like a schoolboy; shook his head wonderingly.

“Anything new on the Robbins thing?”

He didn’t want to talk about that, he wanted to talk about me. “Lemme forget it for half an hour, will you?” Then pointing to a towering stack of carbons, “You mean to say you’ve written all those?”

“Every last one of them,” I assured him with mock-seriousness.

He picked the top one up. “Would I be in the way if I looked through a few of them? You go right ahead doing whatever you want, I won’t disturb you. I don’t often have a chance to do any reading.”

“Help yourself,” I invited. The Wayne story was at the bottom of the pile, as befitted its “age.”

I poured us both another drink, sat blowing lazy smoke-rings in the air. He was sort of a restful cuss to have around, at that; would have made a good roommate. I nearly forgot he was in the place with me. Once or twice he chuckled aloud at something he was reading. I winked at no one in particular, with the eye furthest away from him. He was all taken up, lost to the world. There wasn’t a sound in the room, just those two grunts of pleasure he gave, cigarette-rings, and the rustle of the pages as he flipped them. Now if this had been a man-hunt in one of those stories I wrote, there’d have been gunfire, bodies falling right and left, hell to pay in general. But there wasn’t a sound in the room. So this wasn’t a man-hunt.

After nearly an hour he suddenly came to life, as though he’d just remembered where he was. He stood up, asked what time it was. “Can you beat it?” he marveled. “I got so wrapped up reading them things, I clear forgot——! I liked that one about the guy that was tied down on the railroad tracks.”

“Yeah, I got some nice letters on that,” I admitted. I took him to the door.

“Hope I haven’t been a pest.”

“Not at all. Come back some more, any time you feel like it.” I had an idea he would, whether I asked him to or not. Well, I had no reason to mind



how often he dropped around to see me, so why should I give the impression that I did have?

After he'd gone I glanced over at the carbon-copies. He'd read three or four of the top ones, worked his way halfway down to the Wayne story. I could have taken it out of the stack, hidden it, done away with it. I smiled and shook my head slightly. To do that would be striking a false note. That'd be a stupid man's move, not a smart man's move. That'd be a guilty man's move, not an innocent man's move. That'd be a murderer's move, not a detached onlooker's move.

I'd watched him curiously just now through the lazy smoke-rings, to see if he'd been reading for the sake of reading, or reading for the sake of finding out something. He hadn't skipped pages, read hurriedly. He'd been reading for the sake of reading.

"I guess *they* have to relax sometimes too, just like anyone else," I said to myself. I'd heard it said somewhere that the good ones never do, though.

Again a lapse of twenty-four hours. In the papers, meanwhile, the Robbins case was losing ground. The tab had lost interest altogether, dropped it, there being no sex-angle it could get its teeth into. The standard-size pushed it back to the last page, there being no new developments.

About eight that evening, half an hour after I'd come back from my meal, there was a knock on the door. "He's getting pretty familiar," I said to myself, "coming right up without having himself announced." When I opened, however, it was the other one, Schuyler. Bradford wasn't with him.

"Official?" I wanted to know briefly.

"Now, no offense, Mr. Tucker. I'd just like to ask you a few routine questions about your movements Tuesday night. Just for the record, you might say."

"What does that mean, that you fellows have got your eye on me or something?" I whipped the door all the way back. "Come ahead in, if you feel that way about it!"

"Now, you're taking the wrong attitude," he tried to soap me down. "You're not the only one we're asking, we're asking everyone. We always do, in a case of this kind." Then with a sly glint in his eye, "If you prefer not to answer, that's up to you."

"That's for people that have something to cover up," I let him know angrily. "Shoot! What would you like to know?"

"Well——" He shrugged placatingly, "Just what you did with yourself that evening. No need to get sore. It's just a formality, I tell you."

“Formality or not, I don’t like the implication. All right, here. I was in my room all day, trying to write. It wouldn’t budge. You have to be a writer to know what that means. I was going slowly crazy. I went out, had my meal, and tried again when I came back. Finally I gave it up as a bad job and quit altogether. I went out again—that was about ten-thirty and took a long walk. I dropped in on a friend of mine that lives down on Seventy-second—Howell’s the name—and sat talking for about an hour. I left his place at twelve. I keep late hours, I’m not used to going to bed that early. From there I took in the midnight matinee at the Paramount, starting in at twelve, and came out when the show closed, at two. I stopped in for a cup of coffee, and sat brooding into it about my story for about an hour and a half more. By the time I got back here it was close to four. If my hours strike you as peculiar, I’ve kept more or less the same hours for years——”

Before he had a chance to say anything, the phone rang and Bradford was announced. “Send him up,” I said, and waited to watch the reaction. His face changed when he saw Schuyler. He said, “What’re you doin’ here?” without any too much friendliness.

“Checking up my movements the night Hilary Robbins was killed,” I put in.

He kept looking at Schuyler, not at me, as though this was just between the two of them. He said, “Were those your orders?”

The older dick said, “Not in so many words, maybe, but you know as well as I do——”

Bradford was starting to get sore as a pup. It was no act, either; a cord on the side of his neck, under his ear, began to throb. He said sultrily, “Why don’t you leave this man alone? We came to him originally for help in reconstructing Robbins’s background. It ends there. He hasn’t seen Robbins in two years. There’s such a thing as being too officious, Schuyler.”

What dick would have liked being told that, in the presence of an outsider? Schuyler’s eyes hardened like mica. He said half-audibly, “Am I treading on your toes, that it? Since when have you taken him under your wing? How much was it worth to you?”

Bradford took a quick step in. “What was that?” His arm hooked out and up, and the other man staggered, his shoulders hit the door with a wooden thump. “I don’t take that from any man!”

I jumped, got in between them, elbows up. “If it’s going to be that bad, take it downstairs. Not up here in my room. I’m a nervous guy,” I added with a pacifying grin. I said to Bradford, reasonably, “I don’t mind

answering your pal's questions, I've got nothing to hide." And to Schuyler, with equal reasonableness, "But you don't want to say anything like that, unless you can back it up. Leaving me out of it it seems to be a pretty lousy thing to accuse a teammate of."

"Who asked you for any of your crap?" was all I got from the latter for my pains. Schuyler stepped aside, whisked the door open behind him, turned and went out. "It won't take a minute to find out whether I've exceeded my authority or not!"

"That's right, we may as well get straightened out on this once and for all," Bradford agreed somberly. "I'm going down with you and call the old man right now."

I closed the door after them and laughed all over the room. "If I was the real murderer in this case, what a grandstand seat I'd be in now!" I chuckled. "One of them going to bat for me against the other, if that isn't the screwiest thing I ever heard of!"

That Schuyler might develop a personal grudge against me as a result of this little set-to, didn't worry me in the least. He had nothing on me, what could he do to me? Try his damndest to trip me up, or even frame me? Let him try, and see how far he got. I was practically foolproof.

As far as Bradford was concerned, most likely the insinuation would put a stop to the "social calls" he'd been paying me. That was all right with me too. He wasn't bothering me any, but I could get along just as well without them.

But it didn't. He came back again inside half an hour, alone. "Well," he promised, "you won't be annoyed like that any more. He got his wires crossed, that was all. He had no right to rush in like that, the clumsy, bungling clodhopper!"

I caught at the word. "Bungling? Why call it that? Is there some arrangement he spoiled?"

He threw both hands at me, palms out. "No arrangement concerning you, if that's what you mean," he drawled reassuringly. "Where'd you get that idea? You're outside the case entirely. I guess I used the wrong word."

I wondered if he had or not.

"Drink?" I said.

He laughed deprecatingly. "I'm turning into a regular moocher. Okay, but not so strong as last time."

So he'd noticed that, had he?

He didn't do any reading this time. Sat and jawed for a while about this and that, left after about half an hour. The Wayne story stayed exactly where it had been, at the bottom of the pile.

"If it's a build-up of some kind," I said to myself after he'd gone, "he's sure taking his time about it." But I realized that it would look peculiar on my part, to say the least, to put a stop to his calls now. If I was going to freeze him out, I should have done it from the start. Now that I'd once welcomed him, I had no justification for not continuing to do so. He was likable enough, had gotten under my skin; and to stay in character, I had to judge him strictly on a personality basis, and no other. On that basis he was acceptable, more so than many friends I'd known for years, and I had no excuse for shunning him. In short, until the shadowy case in the background that had originally brought us together was out of the way once and for all, my hands were tied, I was not a free agent insofar as he was concerned. At least, not without striking a false note.

He dropped around casually a little before six the following evening and wanted to know if I'd eaten yet. I said I'd just been about to. "Neither have I," he said, "let's eat together. If there's one thing I hate, it's putting on the feed-bag alone!"

"Same here," I agreed. "Glad you looked me up." But in the restaurant I couldn't help remarking, "You seem to have a lot of spare time on your hands."

"Nothing particularly much going on right now," he told me, passing me the bread-plate. "It seems to come in spurts."

"Well, what about this Robbins business, though? That's still on tap, isn't it?"

He grimaced absentmindedly. "That was a terrible fizzle," he said. "Less said about it the better. What looks good to you on this bill-of-fare?"

He came back to the room with me later; any friend I'd eaten with would have, unless he had another appointment, and Bradford didn't. I mixed a couple of highballs and we sprawled out. He reached backhand from where he was at the stack of carbon-copies, pulled one out. "A book of verse, a jug of wine, and thou," he grinned. "That how it goes? Guess we'll have to struggle along without thou for this evening, anyway."

He started to read, quit again in a minute. "Oops! I read this one the other night." He put it back, pulled out the one under it. I finished my drink, took the lid off my machine, started fooling around with an idea I'd just gotten.

We neither of us spoke for the next half-hour or so. Then he remarked indolently, without any undue emphasis, "Jees, this one's just like that case we're on now. Robbins, you know."

I looked up. He'd finally gotten down to the story I'd sent Wayne. I hadn't even noticed him take it out. But then they all looked alike anyway, from the outside. He wasn't looking at me, he'd thrown off the remark while he went ahead reading.

If I'd been the murderer, I would have said to myself: "Here it comes now!" at this point.

"That often happens," I answered evenly. "As a matter of fact I wrote that thing months ago, it's been kicking around here for a dog's age."

He still didn't look up, went ahead with it. "Haven't you tried to sell it?" he wanted to know.

"I sent it out again a few days ago, to try it over again. Thought maybe the coincidence would help it."

"I know you did," he said quietly.

I hadn't told him that. And now there was tension in the air at last, I could feel it. Coming from myself, most likely, for it wasn't coming from him. "How did you know I did?"

"I was examining the copy they've got down in the publisher's office today."

"You what?" I blazed. "What're you trying to do, give me a bad name down there?"

"Now take it easy, I didn't tell them who I was. I represented myself as a scout for an independent movie-concern, looking for material. I had to wade through a lot of fierce tripe before they trotted out that one of yours."

"And what'd you find out?" I flung at him.

He looked up at me for the first time. "You didn't write that story six months ago, and you know it!" he said, almost regretfully, as though he were simply trying to help my memory along.

"Then I'm a suspect?"

"I haven't said that," he said mildly, eyes on the typescript again. "You're the one's getting all excited. All I'm saying is, you didn't write this story when you say you did."

"You answer me, or get out of here!" My voice started to rise. "I've received you here as a personal friend. If you're going to take that tone with me, you can get out of here right now!"

“No, I can’t,” he said. “You can consider my being here official, if you have to.”

“You’re trespassing and you’ve got no business—— Am I a suspect or am I not?”

“No,” he said decisively, but still without getting angry. He waited a minute, then stood up and added: “You’re a certainty!” And finally, almost as though it had nothing whatever to do with what we were talking about, “And by the way, you’re under arrest.”

I kept up my end of it beautifully. “You haven’t got a leg to stand on. You don’t know what you’re talking about——”

“Tucker,” he said almost sadly, “I only wish I didn’t—for your sake. You’re too brainy a guy to finish up like this.” He swatted the script with the back of his hand. “You didn’t make this up out of your head. It jells with every detail of the Robbins killing. It’s the Robbins case, down cold! It describes Robbins’s very apartment to a T!”

“Why shouldn’t it? I used to go there often enough.”

“Yeah, but that was two years ago. The room he was killed in was painted cream until just lately, Robbins’s superintendent tells me. Two weeks ago they did it over light-green, at Robbins’s request. You’ve got it light-green in your story. You’ve got Venetian blinds in your story. They only went up two weeks ago too.”

I lit a cigarette, with a hand that didn’t shake, not in the slightest. “On the strength of my describing a room as light-green, in a story made up out of my imagination, you’re arresting me for murder? What is this, witchcraft? The middle ages?”

“I’ve got you a million ways,” he said, reaching for his hat, and handing me mine. “This isn’t a story written from your imagination, this is as good as our official report of the crime. Better. There are details in it nobody but ourselves knew, that weren’t made public at all. Such as Robbins wearing a blue polka-dot robe at the time of his death. There are even things in it that we didn’t know ourselves, in our official capacity as investigators, such as the identity of the woman whose picture stood on Robbins’s dresser. All this needs is your signature, to be a perfect confession. Let me tell you something else, just to show you how completely you’ve damned yourself. Your character’s name is Leslie Quiller, the one that got murdered in your story. But the mind is quicker than the eye or the fingers. And you were writing at white-heat. You put down Hilary Robbins’s name by mistake, three separate times, in place of the name you’d chosen for your character.

Why? Because you were seeing Robbins before you as you described how you had killed him the night before!”

I said, with hammer-blow emphasis: “I don’t care how many coincidences you dig out of it. Suppose it does describe Robbins’s apartment? Suppose his name *was* on my mind when I was writing it—six months ago—and got transferred to the paper automatically? Are *you* able to prove it was written after the murder and not before?”

“I have already,” he said. He took an enameled tin box out of his side pocket. A typewriter-ribbon box. “I picked this up in your room the first morning Schuyler and I were up here to see you. You changed ribbons in the middle of that story. The original, down at Wayne’s office, shows it plainly; I didn’t have to be a detective to spot it. It starts off faint, almost illegible; it changes abruptly to pitch-black in the middle. This is the box that new ribbon came in. That’s the ribbon-spool there, in your machine right now.”

“But not the one I wrote *that* story with,” I smiled stubbornly. “I also changed ribbons in the middle of *that* story—when I was writing it six months ago.”

“I’ve been working hard on you all week, Tucker,” he sighed, “not just lazing around reading your stories and swilling your liquor. You always get your ribbons at the same place, the firm that turns out your make machine, never anywhere else. The clerk down there knows all about you. You’re a very fussy customer. They’ve got to be fresh. They’ve got to be all-black. Your pet abomination is these half-red, half-black ones. Because your machine bounces a lot with the speed at which you work, and the tops of your capitals come out red with the vibration. He knows he’d be risking his neck to hand you a red-and-black, you’ve never bought one yet in all the years you’ve been getting them there. But the other day he slipped up in his hurry, passed you out the wrong kind by mistake. He discovered what he’d done almost as soon as you were gone, expected you back to bawl him out any minute. He told me about it.” He pointed at the unlidded machine almost negligently. “There it is there, half-red, half-black, first time you ever got stuck with one. Tucker, the capitals on your story down at Wayne’s office all shade to red at the top.”

I started to feel very cold, very sick, down at the bottom of my stomach.

He said, “This box will be Exhibit A when they try you. It’s dated in code. Like they date coffee and other things nowadays. You didn’t know that, did you? He explained it to me.” He turned it upside-down in his palm, so I could read the bottom of it.

“Bremington-Grand Portable  
red / black  
1402P

“The letter at the end stands for the month, January starting with K. You read the numerals backward to get the day of the month and the year. June 20, 1941.” He put it back in his pocket. “And Robbins was killed during the night of the 19th-20th. That’s how I know you wrote this story after, not before. And yet, not long enough after to have gotten it second-hand, either. The postmark on your manuscript-cover was 6 P.M. that day. It was only the following morning’s papers that came out with anything more than the barest details of the story.”

He closed my machine, picked it up by the handle to take it with him. “Don’t think I’m depending only on the ribbon,” he said. “There’s plenty else, but that ribbon’s the backbone of my proof. You aged your script artificially, probably by fire. But the ink was still fresh and black on it. The paper faded, but not the type. Since when? And even the paper didn’t yellow evenly around all four sides, there was a white gap where you held it by your thumb and protected it from the heat. Are you coming, Mr. Tucker? You’ve played the gentleman so far, and I respect you for it. Let’s keep it that way.”

“I’m coming,” I said. I straightened the knot of my tie, dusted my hat on my elbow, put it on. I laughed a little as I locked the room-door after us. “I’ve never written it this way, though. There’s always a burst of fireworks at the pinch.”

He said with that tricky likableness of his, that had been partly the cause of my undoing, “I guess I don’t cut much of a figure for a story-book detective. Don’t give me away.”

As we stepped out of the elevator downstairs, he carrying the typewriter, I saw a letter sticking out of my mailbox behind the hotel-desk. I could recognize Wayne’s peculiar, olive-colored office stationery even at that distance.

I was a writer to the bitter end. “That’s about that cursed story, now,” I said. “Let me see what he thinks about it. It’s cost me enough.”

“Help yourself,” he agreed.

I tore it open while he stood there watchfully beside me.

“Dear Tucker: I’m sorry but I’ve got to reject ‘Murder Self-Committed,’ even though one of the smaller movie-concerns



showed an inexplicable interest in it earlier in the week, sent a man down here to make a report on it.

“It isn’t up to your usual standard. As you know, we like to give our readers a feeling of actuality. This story is too implausible, too unlikelike. It’s one of those things that just *couldn’t* have happened.

“Sincerely,  
“Wayne.”

## TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *After-Dinner Story* by Cornell George Hopley-Woolrich (as William Irish)]