

*A Man
Had Tall Sons*

BY MARTHA OSTENSO

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A MAN HAD TALL SONS

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THE WHITE REEF

THE STONE FIELD

THE MANDRAKE ROOT

LOVE PASSED THIS WAY

O RIVER, REMEMBER!

MILK ROUTE

THE SUNSET TREE

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Had Tall Sons*

BY MARTHA OSTENSO

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FOR MY HUSBAND, DOUGLAS LEADER DURKIN,
without whose constant help
I could not have written this book

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

A MAN HAD TALL SONS

*M*ARK DARR was alone on the farm—alone except for Mrs. Jensen, the neighbor woman who had come over to prepare the supper. His father and his two brothers had gone into Minter for the wedding, on this azure day in early September.

He knew, of course, why they had gone without him. He knew why he was always left to look after the place when the others went to town. It was not because he was the youngest of the three sons, though they sometimes used that as an excuse when they could think of nothing else. He was only twenty-two, but he was almost as tall as John, almost as tall as Matt, and he was stronger than either.

But there was a walled difference between them and him—a delicate wall, scarcely more than a veil—of seeing, hearing, smelling, touching, even speaking, which his father and his brothers were too bluntly made to penetrate. At dawn, at dusk, or at bright noon—at any flowing hour, Mark might pause suddenly in whatever he was doing and glance away, from the corner of his eye, to a cloud where something sweetly beckoning rode, or sharpen his nostrils toward the swamp, or listen raptly to the whispering of a blade of grass.

At home it didn't matter so much, for they were used to it, but when there were strangers about it seemed to embarrass them. Mark understood and was content. He did not want to go to the village anyhow. Especially today.

Before leaving, his father had asked him to move the bureau and its mirror from the bedroom upstairs and replace them with the new furniture that stood crated in the yard beside the house.

“You can do that while we're gone, Mark,” his father had said. “Put the old stuff in the lumber shed and we'll send it up to the Indian reservation one of these days. And see to it that you don't scratch the new pieces hauling them upstairs and setting them in place.”

The change could just as well have been made this morning, of course, when they were putting in the new bed, and when Matt and John could have lent a hand to make the task less awkward. But Mark had offered no protest. He would rather move the furniture than invent excuses for not going to the wedding.

At that moment, he was standing in front of the mirror that had been his mother's, in the bedroom she had shared with his father until less than a year ago. He picked up a comb from the bureau top and ran it through his thick, dark hair, parting it straight down the middle in the way his mother had liked it. His brother Matt had always teased him about that, but he had stubbornly refused to change it while his mother was alive. Even now there was something of her present in this room, as though the mirror, having borne her image through so many years, still held a part of her living spirit and was loath to give it up.

Presently he set the comb aside and strode to the window. "A bald sky with not a hair of rain in it," he remarked softly. "Happy the bride the sun shines on!"

His mother once told him that it had rained without letup on her wedding day. Would she have been any happier, he wondered, if the sun had shone all day?

It was shining now on the rich blooms in the dahlia bed that lay between the house and the stately row of Lombardy poplars his Grandfather Pribble had planted a lifetime ago. The poplars had been Mark's special care since his early boyhood. His mother had taught him the rudiments of tree surgery long before she herself had undergone a surgery that brought no cure.

"The trees are yours, Mark," she urged just before the end. "Care for them—and the flowers. Don't forget the dahlias."

No, he would not forget them.

He looked westward, beyond the poplars to the tilled prairie fields, and beyond them to the little village of Minter, less than four miles distant and marked by a single church spire that stood against the blue of the September sky. Just about now, he thought, the wedding party would be arriving for the ceremony.

He strode across the room to the south window with its view of the small lake that lay below the knoll on which the Darr house stood. The lake was scarcely large enough to merit a name, though Grandfather Pribble had christened it Agate Lake in honor, doubtless, of his only daughter—his only child. To Mark's thinking, he might have been a bit more forthright and named it Lake Agatha while he was about it. Perhaps he had, and usage had

abbreviated it to its present form. At any rate it was a good name and a fitting one, Mark conceded, especially on a day like this when it lay so calm and almost milky under a thin veil of autumn haze.

Beyond the little lake, a field of golden stubble stretched as far as the highway that ran west toward Minter, and eastward to the county seat of Cleone, a scant ten miles distant. It was along that highway they had borne the body of Mark's mother nearly a year ago. Mark had gone with them that day, under a chill, overcast October sky. And it was along that same highway his father and brothers would be driving today with the woman who was coming to take his mother's place.

They would have to drive first to Cleone to fetch Elizabeth Valentine—who was called Bess—from her boardinghouse, thence back west to Minter for the wedding in the little church with which his father had been affiliated for years. How, Mark wondered idly, would the small, reddish-blond woman who was less than half his father's age, be gowned for the nuptials? His mother's bridal dress, which had been securely stored in a cedar chest, was fashioned of white crepe de Chine, and at her request she had been buried in it. Mark moved the chest from the corner of the room into the hall.

He brushed his shirt sleeve across his eyes and turned from the window. Slowly, and with characteristic deliberateness, he removed the screws that held the mirror in place and set it carefully aside. Then he shifted the bureau from room to hallway, down the back stairs, through the door, across the kitchen, and finally out of the house and into the yard. A few minutes later, he brought the mirror down and laid it on the ground. With an axe he ripped the thin crating from the new furniture, tore away the coarse paper-and-burlap wrapping, and piled it all together in the middle of the yard. He stood for a moment studying the new furniture, the tall chest of drawers and the dressing table with its triple mirror. They were made of highly polished maple. His mother had never owned a dressing table in her life.

On his trips back and forth through the kitchen, no words passed between him and Mrs. Jensen. Even when she left her work to open the door for him, she kept her eyes averted. Guri Jensen had loved Agatha Darr and had been with her in her failing hours. What, Mark wondered, had her thoughts been during these past few days while she had been doing a thorough housecleaning for the bride's coming?

He was about to lift the new chest of drawers and lug it into the house when he bethought himself. For a moment his eyes lingered on the old bureau that was destined now to fill a corner in some hut in the north woods.

With a sudden impulse he seized his axe and swung it in his powerful hands until the bureau was no more than a heap of splinters on the ground at his feet. When he had tossed the pieces on the pile of discarded crating, he brought a can of kerosene from the house, splashed the oil over the paper, and placed the mirror face up to the smiling sky on top of the pile. He struck a match, and immediately the heap out-blazed the radiance of that smiling sky.

“Funeral pyre!” he said to himself as tears blurred his eyes. “Oh, ma, ma!”

He looked away and saw that Mrs. Jensen was standing at the kitchen window, her apron pressed to her mouth. Then he stared at the mirror. It had slid to one side, free of the flames, and except for a film that did not seem like smoke, it was reflecting tranquilly the pure beauty of the heavens.

He picked it up and carried it away to the lumber shed where he hid it far back in a corner behind the old bed that had been placed there earlier in the day. There was nothing to do now but haul the new furniture up into the bedroom that would be occupied tonight by his father and the woman he was bringing home with him.

When everything was in place, Mark stood back from the triple-mirrored dressing table. It was the first tangible symbol of the change that was coming to the place he had always known as home. So be it! He raked his dark hair with his fingers and smoothed it down with the flat of his hand so that it lay without part of any kind.

He would have to wait now—wait out what was left of an afternoon that already seemed an eternity of waiting. There was no rigid measuring of time, it seemed. A day might pass as if it were no more than an hour. An hour could be forever. He went down once more to take a look at the fire in the yard, and after he had drawn the embers together returned to the house. In his own room next the kitchen, he took his violin from its shelf above his bed.

His mother had once had a reed organ—a gift from Grandfather Pribble on his daughter’s fifteenth birthday—which she had cherished down through the years though she had never advanced beyond playing it by ear. But one afternoon when Mark was twelve, she had taken him to Minter to have his shoes mended. When old Hans Schacht, the shoemaker, had done his stitching, he reached for his fiddle on the wall beside his work bench and played a half dozen German airs while Mark listened raptly, the smell of leather and wax sweet in the room. A week later, the reed organ was taken to a dealer in Cleone and Mark found himself the proud possessor of a new

violin. From the old cobbler he learned the rudiments of fingering and bowing and the art of reading music from the printed page. For two years then he had gone to a tutor in Cleone, but of late he had taken to playing mostly by ear, harkening to radio and phonograph records and choosing whatever pleased his fancy.

Seated on the edge of his bed, he spent a moment tuning the strings and trying them under his bow. Then, moved by some perverse sense of the ridiculous, he went into the opening bars of the wedding march from *Lohengrin*. He broke off abruptly with a coarse rasping of his bow and laid the violin back on the shelf.

Restless, he went to the kitchen where Mrs. Jensen was basting the chickens, her thin cheeks flushed from the oven's heat. She pushed the roasting pan back into the oven and closed the door.

"They're browning nice," she said, wiping her face with a corner of her apron. "I made the cake before I came over, and I think it's real pretty. Margot will do the frosting when she gets home from school."

Mark glanced at the kitchen clock. "She ought to be along any minute."

"I hope so. She wants to set the table for me. This is her first wedding party, you know."

Mark's lips curled. "Wedding party!"

Mrs. Jensen sighed heavily. "Mark, you mustn't talk like that. From all I hear, your new ma is a very nice young woman. I hope you'll get along with her."

"Hoping is an empty business," Mark said, his eyes fixed steadily before him. "Things go their own way." Then he smiled sardonically. "One stone is laid upon another—and a wall is built."

Back in the yard again, he saw that the smoke from the fire hung low along the ground, spreading its thin blanket toward the farm buildings and the edge of the pasture where the milch cows stood drowsing at the watering trough.

Eastward from the knoll lay the rich alfalfa field ready to be shorn of its late crop. Northward spread the fields that had been stripped of their harvests of wheat, oats, and rye, and were now resting from their season's fulfillment. It was all Darr land, more than three hundred acres of fertile soil that had seldom failed to yield its bounty since Grandfather Pribble first broke its virgin sod sixty-five years ago.

Beyond the northernmost fields gloomed beautifully a region which Mark had long thought of as his own private domain—a swamp and a peat bog, and across from them the dense firs that clothed a gentle upland. Near

the swamp stood the old log cabin that had been built by Grandfather Pribble when he first settled in the district. It was on Mark's twelfth birthday that he and his mother had planted the peat bog with roots of mint that yielded the tangy foliage Mark himself reaped every autumn and delivered to the still in Cleone. It would be ready for harvesting any day now. Tomorrow, perhaps, he would walk out and take another look at it. He might even spend an hour or two wandering through the woodland, gathering to himself the sound and the furtive silence of it, moods that he knew so well because they were so much his own. Already, among the sky-pointing acres of poplar, birch, oak, elm, and wild plum and cherry, there were hints of the brilliance yet to come in a revel of autumn colors. Why did people die so pale and leaves so bright?

The school bus, trailing a swirl of dust, came up the county road and paused at the Darr entrance. A moment later, Margot Jensen emerged from the shade of the Lombardies and came limping toward him. Her left leg had been crippled by polio when she was five, and now, at fifteen, she resorted to a kind of hopping on her right foot when she was in a hurry. Mark met her beside the flower garden where the late dahlias were heavy with bloom.

She all but fell against him, laughing as she shook the cornsilk hair from her eyes.

"Oh, Mark, I wrote a poem this afternoon!" She fumbled excitedly in her book bag and came up with a copybook which she held toward him. "Here—you can read it if you promise not to laugh."

Mark read silently:

The Littlest Star

*Far, far up in the purple sky,
I saw the littlest star of all.
And while I watched it, so white and high,
Like thin, sad music I heard it call:
"The big stars think me of little worth,
So I'll fly down and be something on earth!"
Then—a silver streak through the infinite air,
And lo, the littlest star wasn't there!
But I came in the dawn, the grass silver with dew,
And there the littlest star-flower grew!*

Mark smiled down into the eager, expectant eyes of the girl. "Put it with your others."

“Don’t you like it?”

“Maybe it’s your best,” he said tentatively, “but you’ll write more.”

Margot sighed as she put the copybook back in her bag. “Sometimes I think I’ll never write another. And sometimes—like today—I feel I could write a hundred!”

They walked together toward the house and Margot went in by the back door. Mark lingered where the driveway swung around to the front of the house, then gave a deep-throated call that brought the black tomcat, Lancelot, from the cellarway to angle about his feet, arching his back and purring to have his tail pulled. Galahad, the pet crow Mark had taught to talk, flapped down from his perch in a shade oak and with a raucous chuckle settled on his shoulder where he folded his wings with a guttural, “Hello, hello!” Up from the shore of the lake, where he had been indolently watching muskrats in the blue water-light of the sun, ambled the old dog Dante, half-blind from age and sundry encounters with skunks.

Mark pulled the dog’s ears gently. “Did you know we’re going to have a strange woman in the house?” he asked.

Three loud blasts of a horn sounded from the county road and Galahad rose with a derisive, “Caw, caw!” and flapped back to his perch in the oak. There he jerked his head and snapped his beak angrily, muttered throatily for a moment, then cried, “Get out, get out!” The tomcat dashed for the cellarway, and old Dante pricked up his deaf ears and lifted his nose to sniff the air, his rheumy eyes turned in the direction from which the sound had come.

Mark went to the kitchen and looked in on Margot and her mother. “They’re here,” he announced.

“Yes,” Mrs. Jensen said, flustered. “Go out front and meet them, Mark. And don’t forget to bid your new ma welcome.”

He started to say something, thought better of it, and walked slowly toward the front of the house.

*I*N the rear seat of the gray Ford, Luke Darr, fifty-two, sat with his twenty-five-year-old bride who until an hour ago had been Bess Valentine of Cleone. His sons John and Matt—twenty-six and twenty-four—sat in front, the elder at the wheel. They were big boys, inches over six feet—dwarfing their father’s five-feet-eight—having taken after their mother Agatha, who had been tall and rugged in frame, though they favored their father in coloring and good looks. Only Mark, the youngest, whom they had left at home, was swarthy as their mother had been, with creek-brown eyes.

With the muscular breadth of his shoulders, his erect back, his handsomely regular features, Luke Darr had little to complain of in his appearance. His thick blond hair, only slightly sun-faded, his good teeth and clear, gray-blue eyes belied his years. When people remarked upon it, he proudly attributed his youthfulness to “clean Christian living, clean Christian thinking.” Luke Darr was a devout man.

The discrepancy in size between himself and his towering sons might have been a less irritating discomfort to him through the years had he been blessed with a daughter, fair like himself and petite, a child who would cling to him, look up to him. But Nature in her cynical disregard for her creatures had cheated him there.

On this day, however, Luke Darr had seemed mystically to have added to his stature. He had felt—he had actually *looked*—inches taller than his five-feet-eight when he walked from the church door to the waiting car, his little bride on his arm. Even now he was sitting very erect and well forward in his seat, as if to demonstrate that he was almost a head taller than his new wife, who sat upright beside him to avoid crushing the sheaf of snapdragons and roses she held close to the breast of her blue chiffon gown.

For the past three miles along the paved highway out of Minter, Luke’s pulse had quickened by the moment. They were nearing home. They were nearing the time when the mysterious alchemy that was working within him would reach out and touch the life of everyone about him. That was what

marriage to a woman like Bess Valentine could do for a man. It was like a rebirth, a springing into life of something that had lain, restless and impatient, for years within the inviolable crypt of his secret ego.

Perhaps the Reverend Bly had sensed something of the sort when he talked to Luke while they were signing the register in the pastor's study after the ceremony.

"This marks a new beginning for you, Brother Darr, a new life—an opportunity that few men are privileged to embrace. May God grant that you make the best of it. And may His blessing rest upon you and your charming bride. The future is in His hands."

"In His hands—and mine, Brother Bly," Luke said, thinking to bring the pastor's solemn words a mite closer to reality.

As he spoke, he laid an envelope on the desk, in which he had discreetly folded two ten-dollar bills, and offered his arm to the smiling Bess.

Now, with a nod toward the clump of pin oak that stood in a corner where the county road led northward from the highway, he leaned toward the car window.

"Well, here we are, Bess," he said, palm outstretched. "Our land begins . . ."

Our land! Strange how the habit of years held its grip on a man.

It had once been Eben Pribble's land. Even now the place was sometimes referred to as the Pribble Farm, though nearly thirty years had passed since the old pioneer met his death in a tornado that leveled the barn into which he had fled for shelter. Nearly twenty-eight years had passed since Luke Darr, by virtue of his marriage to Agatha Pribble, had come to till the fields the girl had inherited.

Luke had been an agent for a cream separator company when he first met Agatha, and had been quick to appraise the benefits of such a union. Or so it was whispered among the covetous. True, she had been older than he by almost five years, and noticeably taller, but such details were of small concern to a man with a shrewd eye to the future. Nor had the marriage been without its measure of sentiment, whatever the neighbors might have thought at the time. As a kind of monument to the girl's father, whom he greatly admired, Luke had built, mainly with his own hands, a cyclone cellar that fortunately had served no other purpose than to provide winter storage for produce from the vegetable garden. Besides, far from looking upon his newly won affluence as a sinecure, he had worked with all the energy of his body, year in and year out, so that the Pribble farm had become the county's

pride. In addition, he had brought three stalwart sons into the world. He had done all that could be asked of any man.

Our land! It was true that after their marriage Agatha had never referred to the farm as *hers*. It had always been *ours*. But work as he might, and did, Luke had never succeeded in developing any real sense of proprietorship in the land. Down the years he had felt himself somewhat less a man every time he had to go to his wife on a question that had in any way to do with the placid acres upon which he lavished his vigor that they might bear fruit.

When she lay dying, Agatha had said, “The land is yours now, Luke—all yours and yours alone. But of course you will be fair to our sons.”

Had she perhaps probed his spirit more deeply than he guessed? Had she, even in her faltering hours, striven to project her innocently dominant will beyond the grave? Perhaps bland and complacent self-approval would have better described that will of Agatha’s. She had loved him, he knew that. Rather a homely girl, she had been flattered by the solicitude he had shown her after her father’s death—and finally by his proposal of marriage.

As for their sons, it was she who had guided their upbringing from the first. The two eldest had taken courses in agricultural school. When Mark, the youngest, had refused to go, she had pointed out that he could gather enough from books and from nature to fit him for the life he would lead. The books, of course, would be of her own selecting, and her own hands would help lift the veil from the mysteries of nature.

The procedure had not been to Luke’s liking. He himself had once been ambitious to enter the Christian ministry. Only his need for money to pay his way through the seminary had driven him to traveling about the country in an effort to sell cream separators to the farmers. And while he had spent all his spare hours with books, especially such books as shed light upon the eternal truths of the Bible, he knew how painfully inadequate his training had been. It was quite possible, admittedly, that Mark would benefit little from a formal education, being so different from other boys of his age. But Agatha had closed her eyes to that difference from the very first. In fact, when he was rejected for military training, she had protested angrily that the grounds upon which he had been excused were utterly ridiculous. The tears she might have wept for John and Matt when they left home, each in his turn, to sweat it out in camp, had all been shed for Mark, who remained on the farm.

In short, to say that Agatha had given him sons would be little more than a manner of speaking. She had given him sons and had taken them away. They had always been *her* sons, never his. True, in the relatively small

matter of naming and christening them, she had been lightly agreeable. Luke told her that he himself had been named Luke after the engineer of the train on which his father was a brakeman at the time. She had had a mild inclination to call their firstborn Eben, for her father, but soon agreed that John was a fine, strong name—and later so likewise were Matthew and Mark.

The presence of Bess beside him in the car brought a surge of hope from the depths of his being. He would have children of his *own* now, with Bess the mother. He might even have a golden-haired daughter who would climb his knees and circle his neck with soft, loving arms . . .

Our land, he thought again as the car turned into the county road. Well, it was *his* land now. Agatha had raised him to the enviable position of landed proprietor by the simple expedient of dying.

Bess leaned toward him, her blue eyes half-closed in a smile. “I haven’t forgotten, dear. Your land starts there at that clump of pin oak in the corner—you pointed it out to me the first time you drove me out to see the farm.” There was mischievous reproach in her manner as she added, “When you took me home that night—it was there you kissed me for the first time. Don’t you remember?”

He took one of her soft, seemingly boneless hands between his own. Did he remember!

Although the little village of Minter was only a few miles from the Darr farm, Luke had always gone to the county seat of Cleone when he had any important business in hand. It was a thriving center that offered all the advantages of a young metropolis.

In Cleone, Luke had been in the habit of taking his lunch at the Oxcart Café, long the favorite eating place among the older and more serious-minded of the local farmers. The younger men, Luke’s sons among them, frequented a place known as the Grotto, where there was an up-to-date, gaily appointed bar and cocktail lounge.

It was at the Oxcart that Luke had first beheld Bess Valentine with her aster-blue eyes and large bun of never-cut red-gold hair serving as waitress. Bess had been married to a man by the name of Bert Stone, a hardware salesman for a firm in Minneapolis with a branch office in Cleone. After a little more than two years, he had died of a kidney infection following an attack of measles. Left with only an insurance policy of fifteen hundred dollars and a pair of gold cuff links, Bess had resumed her maiden name—certainly to be preferred above Stone—and had gone to work in the café on Front Street.

Had Fred Swale, the proprietor of the Oxcart, suggested to Bess that Luke Darr should be treated to something more than the merely polite service accorded the rank and file of his patrons? Luke shrank from thinking so. He was reputedly well-to-do and had long been accustomed to the trifling favors that are proffered men of means. But he had known Fred Swale for years and had never observed him truckling to anybody. To Fred, a customer was a customer, and entitled to equal treatment in the Oxcart.

Still, Luke felt, the second or third time Bess served him, there must be some way of accounting for the fact that only the choicest cuts of meat were placed before him. An extra helping of dessert—his coffee cup no sooner drained than Bess was beside him to fill it again. Why? The question hung in his mind for several weeks before it occurred to him that perhaps the young woman simply liked him for his good looks and was taking her own way of showing it. The fact that they had both been so recently bereft of their mates—a fact that somehow, and with due solemnity, had been conveyed by each to the other—was enough in itself to form a bond of sympathy between them. And when, out of sheer gratitude—nothing more!—Luke invited her to go with him to a drive-in movie some miles north of town, her smile of acceptance was warming to his heart. On that occasion, he was pleased to discover that she did not smoke. Women in cars on both sides of them were lighting cigarettes when Bess said, “I had an aunt once who set fire to her bed while she was smoking, and I had to put it out to save her life. I was only sixteen at the time, but it made such an impression on me that I’ve never smoked.”

A week later, when Pastor Bly opened a series of revival meetings in Minter, Luke felt that he was doing nothing more than serving the Lord when he suggested taking Bess to one of the meetings. Pastor Bly had brought in a lanky itinerant evangelist whose exhortations frequently left his frenzied hearers groveling in the aisles under the power of the Spirit. Luke was not surprised when Bess, the religious fervor having mounted to a dizzying pitch, suddenly clutched his hand, her eyes swimming with tears.

As if to aid and abet Luke, the evangelist burst into song, his little flock of worshippers joining him:

*Oh, He walks with me and He talks with me,
And He tells me I am His own;
And the joys we share as we tarry there
None other has ever known.*

Bess swung about and pressed her cheek against the tensed muscles of Luke's upper arm.

It had been a moving experience for him. So moving, indeed, that he had almost confessed to Bess on their way back to Cleone that in his younger days he had longed to dedicate his life to preaching the Word. Some instinct of caution prevented his admitting that lost dream to her at the moment. Sometime later, perhaps . . .

Stout of heart and lifted in spirit, he had bidden Bess good night at her boardinghouse with a tenderness that remained with him all the way home and far into the night as he lay awake in his bed.

It was with a feeling of justifiable pride that he asked Bess to drive out with him one evening in early August and view his handsome fields that reposed ready for harvest.

Along the way, simply and with no hint of self-pity, she told him the story of her childhood. Her parents had owned a small grocery store in Davenport, Iowa. Her father was also a self-taught hypnotist of some local fame, and when a small circus came to town he joined a sideshow and went touring the land, leaving his wife to struggle along with the grocery store alone. Bess, an only child, was ten at the time. Valentine the Great was clawed to death by a tiger he was sure he could hypnotize. When Bess was sixteen her mother died of leukemia, and Bess went to live with her father's sister who ran a boardinghouse in Denver.

As she unfolded the years of her girlhood, years of slavery to a dissolute aunt who kept her out of school while she sat in her room with one or another of her lodgers and drank herself into insensibility, Luke's throat tightened with tears. It was this aunt whom Bess had rescued from her burning bed, this aunt who had laughed when the boarders sought to make free with the young girl. And Bess had grown up to hate men—until Bert Stone, the hardware salesman, came along and wanted to marry her and take her with him to Minnesota where a new and better position had been offered him by the sales manager of his firm.

"I packed up and left that very night," Bess told him with a catch in her voice. "Maybe I did wrong—I know I never really loved Bert—but I was twenty-two then and I'd have done anything to get away from my aunt. Besides, I liked Bert a lot—he was nice to me, and kind. He had deep brown eyes and curly dark hair. And when we came to Cleone I wanted to settle down and make a home so we could live like decent people. And we could have done it, too, on the money he was making."

But it was not to be. After only a few months she found out that the kind and gentle Bert was set against having children and that much of the money he earned was being squandered on drink and at the card table on Saturday nights. When she upbraided him he became even more shiftless and lazy—perhaps in defense, she was never quite sure—until he was on the point of losing his position with the company. Then he fell ill and took to bed.

“And when he died,” Bess admitted, “I felt as though a load had been lifted off my shoulders. I guess it’s an awful thing to say—but I was almost glad.”

Luke was startled, not so much by her words as by a fleeting, rueful thought of his own in regard to Agatha. His regret at her passing, sincere as it was, had been tempered by a certain sense of relief. He had been far from inconsolable. He thrust the thought sharply from him now and said reprovingly, “You shouldn’t say such a thing, my girl. It’s against all nature.”

“I shouldn’t have said it, I know,” Bess sighed, and tossed her golden head. “But sometimes things can change a person’s nature. That’s life, I guess.”

There was something almost hard about the way she spoke, but Luke understood why it should be so. The girl had suffered more than her due. The years had left their scars. He longed to speak a word of healing that would soothe her wounded heart.

“Have you ever prayed about it?” he asked earnestly, and felt very close to her as he spoke.

“I suppose I have—in my own way,” she replied. “Maybe I’m just a sinner, but I haven’t done much praying about anything since I lost my mother. It seemed so useless after that.”

“‘More things are wrought by prayer than this world dreams of,’ ” he cited. “We are lost without it.”

At last they stood together on the knoll beside the house and gazed out upon the fields as gilded as Bess’s hair glimmering in the twilight. With a gesture that thrilled Luke, the girl stretched her arms toward the fields as if she would draw them to her breast and hold them there.

“It’s beautiful!” she breathed, then looked at him and laughed tremulously. “If I ever marry again my husband will be a farmer.”

A wave of such emotion as he had never before experienced swept over Luke then. In a trice, despite her bitter conflict with life, she had become united spiritually, yes, physically, with the ripening beauty of his fields, vibrant as the living earth, voluptuously dreamful as the rounded uplands

that lay waiting for the coming of night. A stray recollection of some lines from Holy Writ—were they from the Song of Solomon?—touched his heart with a new meaning: *Let my beloved come into his garden, and eat his pleasant fruits.* The words had been written in other times and of other lands—the woman beside him was of the here and now. But truth is eternally the same. A woman's deepest need is to be loved, a man's inexorable destiny to fill that need. No taint of flesh sullied Luke's thoughts of Bess at that moment, but as he took her arm and turned away with her, he observed with satisfaction that she had to tilt back her head a bit to look up into his eyes.

He took her about the place then, through the well-tended cow barn with its modern equipment, its flowing water, its electric lighting, its capacious storage. She admired the two great draft horses and the pair of saddle horses that stood in the corral. He opened the door to the long, low shed where he kept his tractors, his seeder and his reaper, his spreader and tedder—all the mechanical aids that afforded comparative ease on a well-run American farm.

"There's still plenty of work to do around a farm," he observed complacently, "but we're generations away from the days of the pioneer. We have time to live. We have our telephones and our radios, and one of these days I'll put in a television set so we can *see* what's going on in the world outside. Look at the light on that silo!"

The aluminum roof of the silo shone proudly in the light from the lowering sun.

"It's beautiful," Bess whispered on a breath. "Everything is beautiful! And your house?"

Luke felt an awkward twinge. While they were standing beside the house, he had glanced in at the window and had seen John and Matt sitting over a game of cribbage and listening to the radio. Mark had been nowhere in sight, but from the open window of his room the strains of his violin came softly to blend with the evening. Luke had told her of his sons, of course, but somewhat sketchily, contriving in an indulgent, fatherly fashion to make them seem younger than they were. But in this idyllic hour, when the sap of youth was springing within him again, he inwardly revolted at the thought of Agatha's sons intruding.

"We could go and look in," he said reluctantly, "but the boys are there and—"

"I can meet them some other time," Bess smiled up at him. "Just now—let's keep this evening for ourselves."

There, he thought, his heart in giddied rapture, she had read his mind, his very soul!

It was on their way back to Cleone that evening that he had paused and pointed to the clump of pin oak that marked the southwest corner of the Darr acres. Remember? How could he forget the look of admiration Bess turned on him, the soft warmth of the hand she gave him—and the yielding of her vivid young body as she leaned toward him and offered her lips in their first kiss!

John gave three long blasts on the horn, and now they were entering the driveway that led to the front of the house.

“We’re home, Bess!” Luke announced, a note of jubilation in his voice.

Her smile was radiant. “Home is where the heart is, dear!”

Luke sniffed the air briefly. “I smell smoke,” he said, and his eyes quickly swept the cluster of farm buildings beyond the house. His fear of fire—fire and high wind—amounted to an obsession.

“Mark must have been raking up a bit,” John observed as they came in sight of a pile of embers smouldering in the yard, a live glow deep in the center.

As they approached the house, however, Matt looked closely at the charred bits of wood that lay in a jagged circle about the smoking ashes. “My God, the kid has gone and made a fire out of ma’s old bureau!”

John’s knee nudged him sharply.

Luke jerked his head toward the open car window and frowned. “What —” He checked himself, but for an instant he was so confused by anger that he sat rigid. It was beyond belief—a good bureau and mirror that he had planned to send by way of Pastor Bly to the needy Indians on the reservation up north! The boy was an utter fool! Yet to upbraid him now would do nothing but cast a shadow on his bride’s homecoming.

Then Matt was opening the car door and offering his hand to Bess. Perhaps it was because she was a bit off balance in holding her bridal bouquet, but somehow the long, carefully manicured nail of her little finger caught on Matt’s class ring. The nail was torn to the quick, and with a grimace of pain Bess thrust the finger into her mouth.

Matt stood back, aghast. “Hell, what a clumsy ox I am!”

Bess laughed. “Don’t think anything of it, Matt. It was too long, anyhow!”

Luke had not seen the incident. He came from the other side of the car, removed his new brown hat, and gave Bess his arm.

“Why, there’s Mark to welcome us!” Bess exclaimed as she looked up and saw Mark holding the porch door open for them. “How nice!”

“Better keep an eye on that fire out there,” Luke ordered as he came to the doorstep. “Things are dry, and a little gust of wind would be enough to . . .”

But Mark was already on his way toward the back of the house. It was at least gratifying, Luke thought, to see the boy move so promptly at his bidding. Ordinarily he was slow and deliberate, often to an exasperating degree. On occasion, however, he could be unexpectedly alert, measuring his pace to his shifting moods.

“Why, Luke—aren’t you going to carry me over the threshold?” Bess asked as she hesitated, smiling archly.

For the moment, Luke’s eyes had been following Mark, but he turned quickly and drew Bess toward the door. It was a foolish business altogether, he reflected, but he stooped and lifted her in his arms. She was light and yielding and the firm clasp of her fingers on the back of his neck was suddenly so exciting that he held her close as he stepped through the doorway.

From behind him came a soft chuckle he knew to be Matt’s. “Don’t drop her, pa, now that you’ve got her this far.”

Bess laughed as Luke set her on her feet again. Mrs. Jensen, in a clean starched apron, had come from the kitchen, her face agitated to a smile.

“Welcome, bride and groom!” she greeted them with such brightness that Luke winced.

Matt came in lugging two large suitcases. “Here’s your wedding finery, Mrs. Darr.”

Bess blushed and giggled. “Oh, Matt—*Mrs. Darr!*”

Luke squared his shoulders with pleasure at the fondly shy look in the eyes of his bride. “Might as well get used to it, my girl,” he smiled, and reached for the suitcases. “I’ll take these up to the room and let you start unpacking. You’re going to be here for quite a stay.”

He laughed suddenly—an explosive, boyish laugh that was one of his most endearing traits.

“Supper will be ready before long,” Mrs. Jensen said. “Margot is setting the table.”

Matt grinned from the doorway. “Don’t rush things, pa. You’ve got the whole winter ahead of you.”

“Mind your talk, boy!” Luke warned him, then proceeded valiantly up the stairs, Bess following him.

THE table was lustrous with white linen and polished silver and glass that shone softly in the light from the red candles Margot had insisted upon using despite her mother's doubts.

"I don't know—Luke Darr is a strange man. He never did fancy having things prettied up."

"But this is a wedding feast, mother," Margot argued. Her imagination dwelt for a moment on the picture she had conjured up of a magic setting so beautiful that she clasped her hands in pure delight. "It's—it's like living in the ancient days—in a castle—and I'm the serving maid to the knight and his lady."

Guri Jensen smiled. Sometimes the girl's phantasies disturbed her. Frail of body as she was, this living in a dream world was poor preparation for a life in which she would have to face cold reality. Still, "Have it your way, Margot," she conceded. "If he doesn't like it, all he has to do is say so. You can take them away if he says anything, and use the wall lights."

Would it occur to him, Guri wondered, that everything resplendent on that table had once been Agatha's? The candles didn't mean so much. They had been laid away in a drawer against the possible failure of lights during a storm. They were a practical provision, not meant for decoration except at Christmas, when their use was condoned because of the religious symbolism. But the gleaming silver, the delicate glassware, collected by Agatha to appease her own hunger for the beautiful—even the great sheaf of dahlias that served as a centerpiece and had been culled from the garden plot that Agatha had tended through the years—all had been the pride of a woman whose place would now be taken by a stranger. Would Luke remember, and perhaps pause in this hour of his new beginning? He was not without heart, after all. Guri would never forget the night she had come seeking help when little Margot was so cruelly stricken ten years ago.

She had naturally, as one mother to another, appealed to Agatha first, but Luke had generously responded. Nor had he spoken of it since, even though more than half the money was still owing. And with her husband Magnus arthritic, dependent upon what hired help he could afford, there was no telling when or how the debt would be finally discharged.

No, Luke was not without heart. On the other hand, when he gave, the receiver became the debtor, assuming a burden that never eased until the last dollar was repaid. With Agatha, giving was as simple as breathing. That was the difference.

Guri looked from the kitchen window toward the big barn where the boys would now be finishing the evening chores. Then she saw Luke and his vivid-haired bride strolling beside the garden where they had gone to await the call to supper. She could not help smiling as she observed how he guided Bess with a gentle hand at her elbow, an attention Agatha had never received within Guri's memory. But then, it was really Agatha's hand that had guided Luke. With a sigh mingled of vague hope and equally vague apprehension, Guri wondered where the hand of Bess Valentine would lead through the future.

No such doubts troubled the mind of Luke Darr as he took his place at the head of the table. For just a fleeting moment, his memory carried him back to the first time he had sat down to the same table with Agatha. They had been alone then and had sat on either side of the table, facing each other, with no thought of precedence. There had been no "head" or "foot" to the table that night. That order came into being only with the arrival of the children. Tonight, Bess would sit beside him, on his right, a slight concession on this occasion. It was their wedding feast, after all. Tomorrow, she would move to the foot of the table, where Guri Jensen sat now, nearest the kitchen.

He waited briefly, then lifted his hand for silence and bowed his head to ask the blessing.

"Lord and Giver of all good things, we thank Thee for what Thou hast been pleased to provide for us, Thy humble servants. Grant Thy blessing upon this household and cleanse our hearts of all unrighteousness. Amen!"

He spread his napkin, smiled at Bess, and glanced about the table. All this nonsense of lighted candles and shining silver and polished glass, brought out of hiding by Guri Jensen—how people without means of their own loved display!—would disappear tomorrow when the family routine would be restored to normal. Luke was amazed that there could be so much of it tucked cunningly away in the house. The thought irked him. What other

secrets, he wondered, had Agatha taken with her to the grave? He drew his upper lip against his teeth and twitched his nose in the way he was wont to do when he was confronted with a problem that embarrassed him.

Bess laid a hand affectionately on his arm. “Why do you do that, dear?” she asked.

Luke blinked. “What am I doing?”

Her smile was apologetic. “Oh, it’s really nothing, dear. It’s just a funny way you have of doing something with—with your nose. I’ve seen you do it before. It’s like—like something was tickling it.”

Matt, seated beside her, chuckled. “Pa’s been doing that all his life, Bess. Pay no attention to it. Ma used to say his mother must have been scared by a rabbit when she was carrying him.”

“Matt!” John rebuked him sharply from across the table.

Matt eyed his elder brother with a grin. “Well, cripes, I was only trying to tell—”

“Skip it!”

Guri Jensen, without looking up from her plate, spoke in a gently persuasive tone: “Go on eating, now!”

Luke lifted a furtive glance toward his second son. Somewhere along the way Matt had strayed grievously. At the state school of agriculture he had muddled through his courses, never more than a step ahead of complete failure. It was not because he lacked ability. He was simply uninterested. In the fields and about the farm, the boy could do the work of two men when he set his mind to it. He was powerful of body and had worsted many an antagonist in the brawls that frequently followed the Saturday night dances. Handsome, arrogant, devil-may-care, in his reckless way he often drove Luke to the point of desperation.

The boy’s mother had been of little help. Having few religious convictions of her own, she had never tried to imbue her sons with any deep sense of moral rectitude. When Matt came home from town, however late the hour, he was sure to find her sitting up, waiting to help him to bed, perhaps with a glass of hot milk. Nor was his drinking the only problem.

There had been that affair, for example, in which Matt had become involved with a little hussy in Cleone, just after he had come back from his military training two summers ago. Luke had not heard of it until a year later, after the girl had taken to living with a brush farmer up north, whom she subsequently married. You would think a man might feel some shame over what he had done. But not Matt. All he did was laugh and hint that he might drive up north one day and see for himself how the girl was faring,

and learn whether the issue of his loins had turned out to be a lusty boy with the frame of a Darr, or just another little trollop with the likeness of her mother. John had given him a talking-to about it one night when the two were finishing their chores in the barn. They had no idea their father was within earshot at the time, almost stunned by what he had overheard. Luke would have taken Matt to task for it, but he knew he would only be laughed at for his pains. There was little in life that wasn't funny to Matt.

On the other hand, it might be better, Luke thought, if his eldest son John could learn to laugh more easily. A little laughter now and then made the burden lighter. But John, even as a boy at school, had always faced life seriously. Steady, hard-working, he had acquitted himself well in whatever he undertook. The day he returned from camp, he had walked into the house with only a brief, though cheerful, greeting, gone to his room, tossed his duffle aside, and hurried off immediately to inspect the field where he had been experimenting with a new variety of rust-resistant wheat that had been tended by his brothers during his absence. More than anyone else, he had acted as a curb on Matt's brash spirits, reining him in with a firm and patient hand. Luke had never suffered a troubled moment where John was concerned.

As for his youngest son—there was no way of accounting for Mark. Strangely enough—perhaps it was not strange, since he was one of her children—Agatha had never admitted seeing anything wrong with the boy. She saw nothing unnatural in his rapt staring into distance, his lips moving soundlessly, his whole mind and body held as in some kind of spell. Though he had been denied the schooling the others had had, he was possessed of an insatiable appetite for reading, especially poetry—everything, in fact, except the Holy Scriptures, which he turned to only now and then and laid aside without reverence, often with a meaningless smile on his lips.

Yet he would stand out in the dawn or in the moonlight and gaze at the sky as if he were communing with some private God of his own. Infinitely patient and slow to anger, he never showed violence except when a sudden storm broke over the countryside. Then some inner and senseless fury seemed to seize him and drive him to lash about wildly as if he were one with the raging elements. It was frightening, but the boy's fury always passed with the storm's lessening. He was quiet enough now, Luke thought as he watched him picking at his food as if he resented it, never lifting his eyes from his plate except when the girl Margot limped in from the kitchen to glance across the table and assure herself that nothing was wanting. Just now she was standing behind Mark, her hands on the back of his chair. There was a relationship there that made Luke uneasy every time he thought

of the two—Mark, the silent one who lived with his own thoughts, and Margot, the chattering, bird-like creature who was really a little pagan at heart.

Guri Jensen looked toward her daughter. “Margot, bring the wine.”

Luke’s face clouded. “Wine?”

“Just a bottle of my own raspberry,” Guri explained. “A wedding is no wedding without a little wine to bring it luck.”

Luke’s eyes followed Margot as she went from place to place, decanting the wine carefully with the air of one performing a ritual. Well, there could be no great harm in it, he supposed. After all, there had been the miracle at Cana. He permitted his own glass to be filled, and sat twirling it slowly, his upper lip twitching doubtfully.

“To the bride!” John said, standing and holding his glass so that the soft candle glow quickened a tiny crimson flame in the heart of the wine.

They drank the toast then, looking toward Bess who sat smiling demurely with downcast eyes. With everyone’s attention upon her, no one noticed that Mark left his wine untouched.

Presently Margot came from the kitchen carrying the white-frosted cake which she set between Luke and his bride.

“There’s a ring hidden in it,” Guri cautioned them. “I had to use my own, so don’t anybody swallow it. I want it back.”

“If I swallow it I’ll buy you a new one,” John promised, and Luke took the knife Margot gave him and set the point in the cake’s center, smiling self-consciously.

“Wait, dear,” Bess checked him with a mock frown. “You—there’s a way to do it. Let me show you.” She took the knife and poised it above the cake. “Now, you put your hand on mine.”

Luke, smirking sheepishly, followed her instructions. Such a lot of fol-de-rol over a simple thing like cutting a cake! When it was divided, Margot set a piece at each plate, reserving a last portion for herself which she took to the kitchen.

She had just come back to the dining room when Matt bellowed, “Damn!” He dug the ring from his mouth and laid it on the table in front of Guri Jensen. “There’s your darned old ring! I came near busting a tooth on it!”

Luke gave forth with a burst of laughter. “It *would* be you, Matt!”

Guri picked up the ring and wiped it with her napkin before putting it back on her finger. “You know what it means, don’t you? You’ll be the next

one to get married.”

“Oh, yes!” Bess squealed. “Who’s the lucky girl, Matt?”

“No marriage bells for me!” Matt said airily. “Though I might shack up with a nice young squaw I saw once on the reservation up north—long, copper-colored hair and a skin like a ripe peach . . .”

A sudden blast of horns came from the driveway and immediately the air was shaken by the clatter of tin pans and the jangling of cow-bells.

Luke sat back. “What’s that?”

But Matt had jumped to his feet and was already on his way to the door. “Shivaree!”

Luke’s face went pale. “They’re not coming into the house!”

As he moved to get from his chair, Bess seized his arm. “Don’t go out, dear. Let the boys take care of it.”

“This is my house!” Luke reminded her brusquely.

“Stay where you are, pa,” John said quietly. “We’ll handle them. They don’t mean any harm. Come on, Mark.”

Through the deepening dusk three cars approached the front of the house with a deafening clamor as Matt opened the porch door and stepped into the glare of headlights. From the first car three men got down, steadied themselves for a moment, then came reeling toward Matt where he stood with his back to the closed door.

“Where do you think you guys are going?” he challenged them.

“Ain’t you goin’ to ask us in, Matt?” one of them whined with a giggle. “We want to drink to the bride and groom!”

“Stay where you are,” Matt replied. “Nobody’s going into the house tonight.”

“Who says we’re not?”

Matt recognized the voice. He probably knew every man among them—farmers, neighbors, townsmen, perhaps a dozen in all—but he had challenged them and he meant to stand his ground.

“You heard me, Ed Wheeler,” he retorted. “Get back in your cars and get the hell out of here!”

The yard sprang suddenly to life as car doors were flung open and obscure figures came floundering toward him through the shadows. Behind him, the porch door opened and John and Mark were beside him to meet the first charge.

“Just stick together,” Matt said to his brothers. “We can handle them. They’re all too potted to know what they’re doing.”

Even so, under the sheer weight of numbers the three boys were forced back until they stood in a tight knot guarding the door. Laughing, Matt struck out right and left, scarcely heeding the victims who sprawled at his feet. John moved more cautiously, showing no pleasure in what he did, sparing his blows, using his open hands in powerful thrusts that sent his befuddled assailants staggering backward until they went down of their own clumsiness. Mark, silent and with no sign of emotion, remained rooted in one spot, mechanically clubbing any head that came within reach.

It was all over in a few minutes. The frustrated visitors gathered themselves together and drew back, muttering in defeat.

“Hell,” Matt said, “this is no fight. Let’s cut it out before somebody gets hurt.”

“And let them come into the house?” John asked.

“All they want is a drink.”

“Where are they going to find a drink around here?”

“I’ve got a fifth cached away in the garage,” Matt admitted. “It ought to be good for one round anyhow.”

John peered out at the men in the yard. “Well, you go ahead and Mark and I will get back in. But keep them away from the house. Pa doesn’t want any part of them. Just get rid of them as soon as you can.”

“Don’t worry, brother. I’ll take care of it.”

“And look,” John added sharply, “I don’t want you coming into the house plastered. For God’s sake, let’s keep things under control for once. Come on, Mark.”

He went into the house, Mark following him. At the door to the living room he paused, his gaze widening. In one corner the three women stood huddled together against the wall. On a chair in front of the fireplace, Luke sat grim-faced, his hands gripping a shot-gun that lay across his knees.

John wanted to laugh. Instead, he stepped across the room, snatched the gun from his father’s hands, broke it open and ejected the shells on the floor.

“For the love of God, pa, what’s come over you?”

“I have a right to defend what’s my own,” Luke spluttered.

John set the gun back in its accustomed place on the rack above the fireplace.

“You mean to tell me you’d commit murder on your wedding night?”

“No—no!” Bess protested, coming from the corner to stand beside Luke. “He wouldn’t have done that. He was just trying to protect us from—”

“From what, for God’s sake?” John turned on her. “He has three sons to protect anything that needs protecting around here. Come on—the party’s over. Let’s clear the table and get back to normal.”

Without a word, Guri and Margot began picking up the dishes. Mark, who had remained standing in the hall, joined them in the kitchen and in a moment the after-dinner routine was progressing as if nothing out of the common had interrupted it.

“Wouldn’t you like a cup of coffee, dear?” Bess asked, laying an arm across Luke’s shoulders.

“No.”

“Maybe you ought to go and lie down,” she suggested anxiously. “All this excitement after eating—”

“Leave me be!” Luke rasped. “I’ll take care of myself.”

John had lighted a cigarette, his face half-averted from his father, but now he glanced about again in consternation. What in the world had come over Luke? Never before had he threatened such violent action, however great might have been the provocation.

“Look, pa,” John said, “those fellows didn’t mean any harm to anybody.”

But Luke was not listening. He got to his feet and turned to Bess. “Forgive me, my dear,” he said, and stroked her hair with a still trembling hand.

He went into the hall, his shoulders very straight, and mounted the stairs. Bess did not move from beside Luke’s chair. She leaned toward it now, one hand on her breast, the other lying across the back of the chair where the light from the wall beside the fireplace fell upon it, the pink fingers tapered to carefully tended, smoothly polished nails. John could not help thinking that he had once seen his mother’s hand in that very spot, gripping the back of the chair, the skin mottled and weathered, the knuckles knotted, the nails so clean but blunt and scarred from toil.

“You’d better go on up and look in on him, don’t you think?” said John, feeling awkward.

“I’ll go—of course. But I’d like to say something before I go.”

“Well?”

“I think you were unkind,” she said falteringly. “All that talk about murder, I mean. He doesn’t deserve it. Your father is a *good* man. He was

only doing what he thought was his duty.”

“Frankly, Bess, I don’t know what he thought he was doing. I do know it was a damned silly thing, any way you want to look at it. Most of those guys were neighbors of ours. We didn’t have to have pa’s help in looking after them.”

“You talk as if your father was of little account in this family.”

John raised an eyebrow and smiled at her. “That’s something you wouldn’t understand even if I tried to tell you.”

She seemed on the point of making a reply, then checked herself and abruptly started across the room. John watched her go into the hall, and listened until he heard the door close on the big bedroom upstairs. Then he stooped and picked up the two shells that lay on the floor in front of the fireplace.

THE DARRS habitually began their day at six-thirty in the morning—earlier during the busy seasons of sowing and harvesting. The morning after the wedding was no exception. When John came down, Mark was already in the kitchen making breakfast, a duty he had assumed the day his mother became bedridden and had borne ever since. This morning it was almost as if the boy was unaware that another woman had come to take her place.

Luke, too, appeared at once, sniffing the aroma from the thick slab of ham sizzling on the oven grill.

“Smells good, son,” he said, rubbing his hands together briskly as he approached the stove. “How’s the coffee coming?”

Luke always had a first cup of coffee before sitting down to breakfast—black and strong, without cream or sugar.

Mark set out a cup and filled it from the bubbling percolator. Even Luke, John thought to himself, was trying to make it appear that this morning was in no way different from any other of the past year. He was overplaying it a little, perhaps, with an emphasis of cheer that was not usual with him before his first cup of coffee. Still, he might be forgiven for that. A man would be a lost soul indeed who came from his marriage bed to greet the new day with a scowl on his face.

Looking at him now, John thought back upon what Bess had said to him in the living room last night. Perhaps she had been right. Perhaps he had been unkind—thoughtless, at least. It might have been better if he had let the incident pass without comment. Bess had been quick to sense the feeling of defeat in Luke. She had witnessed, too, the touching bravado with which he had marshaled the forces of his pride and marched off to his room upstairs. And she had come properly to the defense of the man she had just wed. The whole affair was regrettable, to say the least. It might even lead to awkward situations later on, in which they would find a house divided against itself. Well, they would face that when the time came.

It was evident that Luke at any rate was anticipating no such division in the Darr household. He brought a saucer from the cupboard and placed the steaming cup of coffee upon it. John raised an enquiring eyebrow. His father with a *saucer* under his first cup of morning coffee?

"I'm taking this up to Bess," Luke said. "Where is Matt, by the way?"

"He was getting up when I left the room," John said. "He'll be down in a minute."

He had been reluctant to rouse Matt, whom he had seen late last night stumbling into the room they shared and throwing himself on his bed without undressing. John had pulled off his outer clothes and tossed a cover over him.

"This is no time to be lying in," said Luke. "We've got to finish off that field of alfalfa today." He went into the hall and called, "Matt—Matt!"

Matt's voice rumbled from above. "I'm coming. Keep your shirt on!"

Back in the kitchen, Luke went to the refrigerator and brought out a bottle of cream. He rummaged in a cupboard drawer until he found a clean napkin. When he had placed everything on a tray, he carried it upstairs. He was back immediately, as if he feared any delay might appear unseemly.

"Is Bess feeling under the weather this morning?" John asked, quite innocently.

"Not at all," Luke said. "She's feeling fine." He poured himself a cup of coffee and carried it to the table. "I made her stay in bed this morning. I trust that's all right with the rest of you?"

Well, here we go again, thought John. It was always over some such trifle that their early morning quarrels began.

"Why shouldn't it be all right?" he replied without belligerence. "I wasn't finding fault, pa."

Luke was suddenly conciliatory. "I know, my boy. Just let me have my coffee before we do any talking. After breakfast we can talk, eh?"

He lifted his cup again just as Matt's deep, true baritone came roaring down the staircase:

*Hallelujah, I'm a bum,
Hallelujah, bum again!
Hallelujah, give us a hand-out
To revive us again!*

In the kitchen doorway he gave them a waggling salute of two fingers with his thumb thrust against his ear. He had done his best to make himself

presentable. He had shaved and washed thoroughly, and his thick blond hair lay smoothly brushed over his ruggedly handsome head. But all his care had done little to conceal the bloodshot eyes and the nervously taut corners of his mouth. He took a quick glance about the kitchen.

"I thought I'd be the last one down," he said solemnly. "Has the blushing bride vanished into space?"

John gave him a look before his father could retort, and said, "Come on, let's eat. Bess will be down soon. Dish it up, Mark."

"All my sprucing up goes for nothing, then," Matt observed as he sat down at the table. "I was counting on making an impression on the young Mrs. Darr."

Mark set the platter of fried eggs and ham before them and went back to the stove to fetch a bowl of fried potatoes. Quiet settled upon all four as they helped themselves to the food. The Darrs rarely talked much during a meal, particularly during breakfast. And perhaps John was the only one who sensed anything in the quiet that prevailed this morning, anything ominous. He tried to shake off as unreasonable the thought that the living, breathing presence of Bess Valentine in the household had anything to do with it.

From moment to moment as he ate, he glanced at the others, hoping against hope that no ill-timed comment would shatter the thin surface beneath which, he felt, lurked the threat of an upheaval. Mark, he knew, would not be the one to say anything. But Matt was growing more and more restless as the meal went on. First restless, then irascible, as if he were looking for someone to differ with, then openly hostile—John knew only too well the stages by which his brother progressed until he finally fulfilled his perverse desire of setting everybody at odds. For once, however, Matt seemed to be holding himself in check. He said nothing, picked at his food as if the very sight of it was an affront to him, then gulped his coffee and got up from the table.

"Don't hurry away, Matt," Luke spoke up. "Sit down a minute. I had Bess stay in bed this morning so we'd have a chance to talk by ourselves."

Without a word, Matt slumped into his chair and dug a crumpled pack of cigarettes from his shirt pocket, struck a match, inhaled deeply and sent a cloud of blue smoke ceilingward, then looked at his father.

"Okay, let's get it over with. I want to get out."

Luke leisurely poured himself a third cup of coffee and pushed his cup away. "It is written, 'A man cannot live by bread alone,' " he began.

He was making his approach in his usual devious way, John reflected—beginning far out and moving in by degrees until he finally came up with

what he really wanted to say.

Matt's lips curled in a sardonic grin. "It is also written, 'Better marry than burn.' " He flicked the ash from his cigarette. "I'm all for it myself."

Luke paused for only a moment, then went on, his voice heavy with restraint. "I have taken to myself a wife—a strong young woman who will be able to do for us—a good young woman who will set an example for the rest of us, I hope. We need such a woman in this house. I want you to respect her as I do. And I want you all to help her feel that this is her home as well as ours. From now on we are to be one family, living and working together with God's blessing." He glanced from one to another of his sons. "Is that understood among you?"

Matt smiled as he reached over and laid a hand on his father's shoulder. "You didn't have to make a speech about it, pa. You wanted a woman and you went out and got yourself what you wanted. We all understand. In fact, we're a little ahead of you. We'll treat Bess like a queen—just so she doesn't start giving us the old stepmother treatment. We're not used to taking orders around here." He laughed and set himself to get up. "Is that all?"

Luke's nose twitched uneasily. "Not quite all, my boy." His eyes bore down upon his son. "Matt," he said, "you were drinking again last night."

Here it comes, John groaned inwardly. Though there had always been more wrangling between Luke and Matt than between any other members of the family, nobody had ever had any doubts as to where his father's deepest affections lay. Matt had always had a way with his father when it came to coaxing him out of the fits of near despondency that frequently plagued him—for reasons that were never clear to anyone else. But a little cajolery, a sly bit of flattery on Matt's part, and Luke would end up laughing at his own troubles.

On the matter of Matt's drinking, however, Luke was obdurate. No wheedling on the boy's part would avail him there, and Matt never tried it. Instead, he met his father's protests with a menacing truculence that forced Luke to retreat, leaving the problem only more aggravated.

Matt returned Luke's glare now without flinching. "I had a few drinks last night, yes. So what?"

"Is that all you have to say for yourself?" Luke asked.

"I had to get rid of that gang last night and I—"

"Don't tell me why," Luke interrupted. "I don't want to hear it." For a moment he sat struggling against his rising anger. When he spoke again, his voice was almost weary. "My boy, we have had trouble about this before. I have done all I can to show you the error of your ways. I have tried to reason

with you. I have prayed for you night after night. It has done no good. For the last time—the last time, hear me—I’m asking you to give up this cursed habit. Do you understand, Matt!”

Matt looked at his father, a little sadly perhaps, but with unfeigned contempt. “Yes, I understand. It’s just too bad you haven’t got the sense to know you’re wasting your time praying for me. I don’t want your prayers. And I don’t like anybody telling me what I can or can’t do. I’ll work that out for myself.”

“Break it up!” John said. “You’re both acting like fools.”

“Right, brother, as usual,” Matt muttered, and went out to begin the day’s work.

Luke sank back into his chair, breathing harshly as he gripped the edge of the table with knotted fingers. “God forgive him!” he prayed, his chin trembling.

“You ought to know better than trying to talk with him after a night out,” John said. “It doesn’t get either of you anywhere.”

“But I won’t stand it, I tell you!” Luke declared.

“It’s a little late to start laying down the law now,” John observed. “If you had done something about it three or four years ago—”

Luke turned on him. “What could I have done about it three or four years ago? His mother stood between us—”

“Fool’s talk!”

“She’s standing between us today!” Luke blazed.

John moved toward the door. “We’d better get out of here before we start saying things we’ll both be sorry for.”

But Luke was not through. It was as if he had rehearsed it all to himself during the night. His eyes turned upon Mark, who was busy over the breakfast dishes piled in the sink.

“And you, Mark—didn’t I tell you I wanted to send that old furniture up to the reservation?”

Mark ran more hot water into the dishpan before he replied. “It was ma’s bureau.”

“I see. What did you do with the mirror?”

“I put it away—in the shed.”

“But you *had* to burn the bureau?” Luke waited, but the boy made no reply.

Whereas, a moment ago, Luke had striven to keep his anger under control when he talked to Matt, now he seemed to be doing his best to rouse it against his youngest son. From where he stood, John could see the pulse throbbing in his father's temple.

"I heard you sawing away on that fiddle of yours last night, after you came back from walking Guri and the girl home. Last spring I made a rule about that, do you remember? You're not to touch that infernal thing after the rest of us are in bed!"

"Matt was still out," Mark replied, unruffled, and set a plate carefully on the drainboard.

Luke rocked back and forth on his chair, clenching his hands as he glared at his son. It was no use, he decided. There was no way of getting to Mark. The boy was halfwitted, with all the shrewd evasiveness of his kind.

He labored up from his chair and took his old work hat from its hook beside the door. "Well, let's get out, John. You come along when you finish up here and get the milking done, Mark—unless you want to stay around the house today and help out. There's not much left to do on that alfalfa anyhow."

"Aren't you going to look in on Bess before you leave?" John ventured to ask.

"I'll come back for that," said Luke as they went out together.

In the yard, Luke paused beside the small heap of ashes left from Mark's fire of the day before. With the toe of his shoe he moved the bits of charred wood aside, looking for any sign of a live ember.

"Dead!" he said contentedly, then scanned the skies where there was no shadow of a cloud. "Looks like another good day."

In the barnyard Matt had already moved the light truck from its shelter and sat at the wheel waiting for them. As they came up he thrust his head from the cab window.

"No call for you to turn out, pa," he shouted over the chattering of the motor. "John and I can look after this little job. Take the day off and spend it in the bosom of your family."

Luke, spiritually and physically cleansed now by his hour of rage, could not help grinning. Matt and his rowdy jokes. Nothing ever rankled long with Matt.

"Well, now," Luke said, "maybe I ought to. Bess and I have a few things to talk over."

"I'll bet you have!" Matt laughed. "We'll be in at noon to sample her cooking. Hop in, Johnny-boy, and let's get going." He winked at his father. "No hard feelings, pa?"

Luke waved him away and watched the truck drive off, then turned and walked briskly back to the house. On the way, he met Mark going to the barn, a milking pail in either hand.

"Hurry it along, Mark," he said. "I may have things for you to do."

"You can't hurry a cow," Mark replied without humor.

Bess was coming from the foot of the stairs when Luke met her. She was clad in a soft woolen robe of green, snugly drawn in at the waist by a corded belt that matched the color of her hair. Gilded house slippers adorned her feet.

"So there you are!" Luke greeted her, awkwardly conscious that he was blushing like a youth as he moved back a step to gaze at her.

Bess came and put her arms about his neck, then roguishly nipped his ear with her small white teeth. A wave of—was it sinful?—delight swept over him.

"I'll go up and change," he said, giving her a hurried kiss. "We're going to have the day all to ourselves."

"That's nice, dear. Where are the boys?"

"Out working." He started up the stairs. When he came back he was dressed in a tan shirt and rust-brown trousers.

"I'm in here, Luke," Bess called to him from the dining room.

In the center of the table stood the vase of dahlias from the night before, the heavy blooms sagging on their long stems. Before her, Bess had spread a white napkin and set it with a blue breakfast plate and matching cup and saucer. A second cup and saucer stood to one side. Bess was sipping from a glass of orange juice.

"It didn't take you long to find your way around, I see," Luke said approvingly as he drew a chair to the table.

She put out a hand to touch him. "You married a waitress, Mr. Darr," she smiled at him. "I should know my way around a kitchen. If you just sit still, now, I'll bring fresh coffee. It ought to be ready."

He bounced to his feet, but Bess was ahead of him. As she vanished into the kitchen, he sat down and looked at the deep-hued dahlias glowing softly in the morning light. One bloom was a deep purple, almost blue at the center. By careful selection and crossing, Agatha had striven for years to produce a true blue dahlia. Well, she had failed in that, at least, he thought,

though she had come miraculously close to succeeding. That one bloom there, for instance—but why should he be thinking of that now? Everywhere he turned this morning, it seemed, he was confronted by something that reminded him of Agatha. At the moment of his waking, it had been the wallpaper in the bedroom. In his lashing out at Matt, it had been Agatha's shadow that stood between him and his son. Even Mark had reminded him that it was his mother's bureau he had burned, as if that explained and justified everything. And now—Agatha's dahlias.

But Bess was back with the coffee and a plate of freshly buttered toast which she set on the table within Luke's reach.

"Did I hear someone quarreling in the kitchen this morning?" she asked as she poured the coffee.

"Quarreling?"

"Oh, I thought I heard angry voices and I was afraid—"

Luke laughed airily. "You're not used to living with families, Bess. Boys have to argue about something or they wouldn't be boys. Especially over breakfast."

"I hope it didn't have anything to do with me," Bess said hesitantly.

"With you? Certainly not. Why should it?"

"I don't know, but—well, my coming in like this—they're such wonderful boys and I'll do all I can to make them love me, but it's a big change for them, dear, and it'll take them a while to get used to it."

The clouded difficulty in her voice nettled him. "Bess," he said firmly, "don't start out by imagining trouble for yourself. There's nothing wrong with your coming here. You're my wife, under God and the laws of man. That's all you need to think about. That's all you need to care. I'll look after the rest of it myself. Is that clear to you?"

The sudden crispness in his voice startled her. "Why—yes, dear."

"And speaking of change," he went on, "of course there will be changes. The house, now—is there anything you'd like to have done to the place before cold weather sets in?"

"I can't think of anything just now," she said. "My goodness, Luke, I've hardly had time to look the house over. Maybe after I've been here a week or two—"

"In a week or two I'll be busy with the fall work," he told her. "If we're going to do anything on the house we've got to do it now." He turned toward the living room. "That old carpet, for instance—and the chairs and the couch. They're not fit to live with."

"It all costs money," Bess reminded him.

With a twist of his head and in a tone that was meant to be jocular, he demanded, "Did you think you were marrying a pauper when you married me?"

"You know darned well I married you for your money, darling!" she retorted.

They laughed together, and after a moment he got up and stood beside her chair, put a finger under her chin and tilted her head back until he could look into her eyes.

"You'll never know," he whispered, "what a new life you've given me."

"And you've given me," she replied gravely. "I'll have a chance now to have what I never had before—children of my own and a decent home to raise them in. Every woman wants that."

Luke stroked her hair, and the softness of his voice was a caress. "Yes, you told me before how disappointed you were. You will give me children to love, God willing, and I'll give you the kind of home you'll be proud to raise them in. Now—look around the house and see what changes you'd like to have made."

With a feeling of deep reverence he pressed his lips to her shining hair. But Bess—ah, did she misconstrue the reverence he felt?—was on her feet at once, her arms tight about his neck. "Oh, Luke, you're so good to me!" She kissed him, her soft body pressing urgently against his. He thrust her gently away, struggling inwardly against the all but overpowering nearness of her.

"We were talking about the changes you might want to make in the house," he said, a little unevenly.

Bess looked away, regaining her composure. "Yes, dear. If you really want to start, would it be all right with you if we began by changing the wallpaper in our bedroom? I was looking at it this morning and it's—well, I'd like something more modern and plain."

"We'll get at it right away," he said eagerly. There again was joyous proof that in soul and sense they were mystically one! "Have you ever done any papering?"

She smiled. "Not much, I'm afraid. I'll probably need a little help with it."

"You'll have all the help you need, my girl. You can have Mark anytime you need him to help you—anywhere about the house. He's very handy in his way."

“That’s fine.”

“We’ll hop into town right now and look over what they have on hand. You can pick out what you want and we’ll get at it right away. Go up and change into something while I bring the car around.”

“I’ll be ready in a jiff,” Bess sang out as she hurried toward the stairs.

Luke watched her go, then leaned over the table and lifted the sheaf of dahlias from their vase and carried them through the kitchen and out the back door. Beside the cellarway stood a garbage can with clamped-down cover. He jerked the cover free and thrust the dahlias into the can. Then he pressed the cover down firmly and went off to fetch the car from the garage.

THE milking done, Mark had turned the cows out to pasture and was closing the gate when his father backed the car out of the garage and halted it in the driveway.

“Mark, come here a minute, boy.”

Mark sauntered over, brushing back a lock of his dark hair as he came to the side of the car, his jaws moving in their slight, exasperating rhythm as if he were chewing on a blade of grass.

“Bess and I are going into town for a little shopping,” Luke said, sharply clipping his words. “We won’t be back till afternoon. Can you look after the boys’ lunch when they come in?”

“I’ve done it before,” Mark observed, his gaze drifting away toward nothing in particular.

“We’ll be back in time to make supper,” Luke added, and drove off toward the house. One of these days, he vowed, he’d get at that boy’s indifference to what went on around him. All his daydreaming, his eternal thumbing over those books of poetry he kept in his room, his rasping on that fiddle of his—it was enough to addle the wits of anyone. Besides, it was a waste of time. No God-fearing man would abide it!

And being a God-fearing man, he would not abide it, he resolved as he drew up before the front porch and snapped off the ignition. He jumped out and slammed the door behind him.

From the foot of the stairway he called up to Bess. “Are you ready?”

“Just about,” Bess replied from above. “Is there something wrong, dear?”

“Nothing’s wrong. Why?”

“You sound kind of cross, that’s all. I’ll be down in a minute.”

Luke felt suddenly vexed at himself. He had always taken pride in his slowness to anger, except on such rare occasions as this morning when he

had talked to Matt. And it was righteous anger that had filled him then. As a rule, he was careful never to display anger in the presence of others. During his years with Agatha, when there was no one around to bear the brunt of it, he had often given way to helpless rage over something or other that had obstructed him. Had Agatha but known the countless times, toiling in the fields or lying dutifully beside her in bed, he had seethed inwardly against her because of some cherished plan of his own that she had slyly frustrated!

With an effort he brought his voice down almost to a murmur. “Take your time, my little girl. There’s no hurry.”

He went to the hall closet and took down his new brown hat. When he put it on, he stood for a moment eyeing the tan sports jacket he had bought in Cleone a week ago as a modest concession to the fact that he was about to become a bridegroom. It had been a foolish extravagance, a spineless truckling to human vanity. But the occasion had merited something of the kind, and even the Bible condoned the wearing of fine raiment in a man about to take the marriage vows. A small addition to his meager wardrobe, moreover, was not to be viewed as a wayward step in a man as devout as he. He could exercise humility in a hundred other ways to make up for it. Besides, he had done it for Bess, not for himself.

When he had donned the jacket, he did not pause to study his reflection in the glass that paneled the closet door. That would have been vanity indeed! He turned away promptly and walked out to the car.

As he seated himself again behind the wheel, thoughts of Mark swarmed upon him once more, like insidious pests that had been waiting to plague him the moment he returned.

His spirits mounted, however, when he saw Bess coming from the house and stepping lightly toward the car. She wore a light gray suit with a pale green scarf about her neck, and a smart turban of both colors braided about her head. Luke’s face cleared briskly. What was it Pastor Bly had said? Something about an opportunity few men were privileged to embrace—those were his very words, and Luke had not been more gratefully conscious of their meaning than he was now as he swung the car door open to let her in beside him.

“Here comes the bride!” he intoned gaily, in a voice as true in pitch as if he were singing one of his beloved hymns.

“And a very proud bride, too,” Bess smiled as she nestled close and pressed her cheek against his shoulder. “I think we make a very handsome couple, Mr. Darr. Don’t you? I love that jacket you’re wearing, dear.”

“A man has to dress the part, and it looks as if I’ll have to step lively to keep up with you.” He started the car. “Well, girl, the day is ours. We’ll eat in town, and Mark’ll look after lunch when the boys come in.”

Bess was silent until they emerged from the driveway upon the county road.

“Mark is a strange boy, isn’t he?” she asked as the car gathered speed. “He never spoke a word all during dinner last night. Is he always like that at meals?”

Mark again, thought Luke, and answered her guardedly. “He’s strange, yes, but you’ll get used to him. The boy isn’t much of a talker, I know. He seems to live in a different world. He reads too much, for one thing. Sometimes—God alone knows what his thoughts are! But he’s harmless. We just leave him to his own ways.” The car slowed as they came to the paved highway. “We get along better that way.”

“I suppose I should, too, then,” Bess said pensively. “But—I don’t know—I always feel queer when people won’t talk. They scare me.”

Mark, meanwhile, went about his chores without hurry or confusion, except for a puzzling feeling that had been with him ever since he left the house after doing the breakfast dishes. It was a vague sense of shifting away from center, as if everything about him were beginning to move unaccountably toward a new and as yet undetermined pattern—he could think of it in no other way. The feeling was not so much within himself. Rather it was almost as if it arose from the very ground on which he walked, and moved upward through him until his brain began to reel. He had had the same feeling before, especially when a storm was threatening. He glanced up at the cloudless sky, then leaned against the barn doorway and nursed his head between his hands until the vertigo passed.

He shook his head vigorously at last and stepped out to look toward the alfalfa flat where his brothers were working under the bright morning sun. His eyes were steady now, the ground solid under his feet. Yesterday he had promised himself a look at his mint meadow. There would be time yet to walk down there and back before getting the noon meal on the table. Meanwhile, there was the cream to separate; the cans to be scoured and filled and hauled down to the roadside to await the arrival of the milk truck; the trough back of the barn to be filled with skim milk for the hogs, mangers to fill—fill, fill, fill! The word rang through his head as he hurried through his chores. When he got back to the house it was not yet ten o’clock.

He put milk out for the cat, tossed a handful of chopped beef to the crow, and set out a plate of scraps beside the back door for old, half-blind Dante. He was ready to go.

Northward through the pasture, across a field of golden stubble, and down the slope toward the swamp where the reeds stood brittle and yellow in the mire, strode Mark, enveloped in memories, wreathed by the past when he and his mother had first set out the plants of mint and he had quoted some lines from Tennyson. As always when he approached the forbidding bog, the lines came to him now:

*I hate the dreadful hollow behind the little wood;
The fields on the hill above are dabbled with blood-red heath;
And Echo there, whatever is asked her, answers, "Death!"*

But no longer did the dark hollow hold its frightening mien for him. He had been only a boy then, with a boy's dark fancy. The years since had made the place his own, a serene and mood-provoking spot that stirred with secret music under every passing breeze.

He skirted the swamp eastward and came to his mint meadow. Kneeling on the peat-cushioned soil, he stretched out a hand to caress the scented, briskly-green leaves and bent to listen to their breathing. He plucked a leaf from its stem, laid it gently between his tongue and his teeth, and tried the aromatic tang of it.

"You're ready," he said. "You don't know it, but tomorrow I'm going to cut you down and cart you away to the still, where your brothers went last year and the year before, and the year before that. That's the way of things."

He glanced across the meadow to the skyward thrust of the evergreen woods, that somber and almost impregnable citadel where in his boyhood had lurked creatures unknown to earth. Then he edged the swamp till he came to the old cabin Grandfather Pribble had built when he first came to the district to loose his driving energies upon the virgin soil. Here, too, some of the tall Norways and white pines still stood. Mark's mother had been born within the cabin walls, and had lived there until the prosperous years had made it possible to build on the southward knoll.

He strolled around the cabin, surveying its still sturdy structure, its small windows still intact except for a broken pane here and there, its stout door sagging now on rusted hinges, its deep-eaved roof from which only a few pine shakes had been ripped away by the winds. Luke, probably from sentiment, had kept the place in repair during the early years of his marriage to Eben Pribble's daughter, and had made it a temporary storehouse for bags

of grain from the thresher, but of late it had stood unused and deserted. Still, old Eben had builded well, Mark thought as he pushed open the creaking door and looked in upon the single room that had served all the purposes of living in those far-off days. A few panes of glass, a little work on the roof, a set of new hinges for the door, some weathertight chinking between the logs, a new floor—and the place would be quite habitable again. The old well had caved in long ago, but water was no problem in a country dotted with lakes and springs beyond counting. He could do it all himself, Mark was confident, if ever the need came.

With an upward glance he took his time from the sun, then entered the tall evergreen timber behind the cabin. The silent, gold-shot gloom of the trees embraced him. A Norway pine brushed his shoulders as though of its own accord, and Mark paused to peer along its reddish bole toward its pyramidal head. An eagle, perched on a topmost branch, looked down at him, beak aside.

“Hello, Goldy!” Mark called, and waved his hand.

The bird swept down, curvetted on wide wings close to him, then soared off into his limitless domain of the sky.

Mark sat down upon the pine needles and hugged his knees. Here and there, on fallen logs, moss clung, green and silvered over or iridescently twinkling. There were biscuit-brown fungi, too, little umbrella things that might shelter Japanese fairies, as Margot would say if she were there to see them. Below the slope, on the marsh’s rim, a clump of willows was a-swing with red-winged blackbirds bowing their farewell as they made ready for their long journey to the south . . .

Presently, with another glance at the sun, Mark got up and went back to the farmhouse.

They were going to have a good dinner, Bess reflected as she hurried about preparing the evening meal. Her first night as mistress in the Darr kitchen would bring no complaints of scanty food, at least. She had decided that when she and Luke were together in the market that afternoon. Thick, tender steaks smothered in onions with a complement of fresh vegetables, pickles, and olives and spicy relishes—nothing was lacking. There would be four hungry men to feed, and Bess had been feeding hungry men for the greater part of her life. Tonight she would be feeding *her* men, of course. That made a difference. It made her feel like singing, though she had little gift for melody and had never been able to carry a tune beyond a wavering bar or two at best. Still, she hummed to herself as she worked, keeping her

voice low even though no one was within hearing. The boys were at work, and Luke had gone off to the garage with the car and had remained puttering about the barnyard.

They had come back from town later than they had planned—such a time had been spent choosing the wallpaper for their bedroom!—and Bess had let Luke carry the things in from the car while she went upstairs to change to a housedress. The afternoon had been hot for September, and with a thought to her own comfort she had loosed her long hair, given it a few brisk strokes with the brush, and tied it with a ribbon at the nape of her neck to let it hang in a bright cascade that fell almost to her waist.

They came together from the barnyard, Matt a pace or two ahead of his brothers, Luke bringing up the rear. Matt burst into the kitchen, his nostrils flaring to the scent of frying onions.

“Queen of the pots and pans!” he hailed her. “Reign forever, as long as you fill the air with amber!”

“Ambrosia,” Mark prompted him as he stepped through the doorway.

“Right, professor,” said Matt. “Every time I try to think of that word I come up with *ambergris*!”

“Did you ever take a whiff of ambergris?” John asked, wrinkling his nose. “From what I’ve read—”

But Matt had stepped behind Bess and taken a long skein of her hair in his hands. “The crowning glory!” he exclaimed, lacing his fingers through it. “You’ll have to get it cut, Bess. You have no idea what long hair does to a savage like me!”

With a complacent smile Luke said, “She’ll not have it cut while I’m alive to prevent it.”

“I certainly won’t,” Bess laughed, blushing prettily at all the attention. “Now you boys—get upstairs and wash for dinner—supper, I mean.”

When Bess and Luke were alone in the kitchen he stepped to the sink and held his hands under the running faucet.

“Maybe it would be just as well if you didn’t wear your hair down around the house,” he said, as if musing to himself.

Bess gave him a puzzled look. “You mean—because of what Matt said just now?”

Luke looked at her with an amused twinkle in his eyes as he dried his hands on the kitchen towel. “Don’t listen to Matt’s chaff. He doesn’t even hear it himself.”

“If you’d rather I didn’t wear my hair this way—”

“Don’t take on about it, girl. It was just an idea of mine. If you feel more comfortable—”

“I do. You can’t imagine what it’s like having a lot of hair piled on your neck, especially on a hot day when you’re working over a stove.”

“I haven’t,” Luke chuckled, and ran a hand over his head. “And I don’t think it would be becoming in a serious-minded man like myself. Do you?”

“You could braid it,” Bess suggested, smiling as she put a hand behind her head and drew her hair over one shoulder. “I’ve often thought of cutting it, especially when I was waiting on tables in the heat and all. But I—well, I’ve always been kind of vain about my hair.”

She looked at him as if in wistful apology, and he took her hands in his. “No, no! You must never cut it. I wouldn’t stand for that. But—I guess I’m just old-fashioned, Bess. In our own room or when there’s nobody around, there’d be nothing wrong with your wearing your hair any way you like, my dear. Do you see what I mean?” He patted her shoulder and looked down at her.

“Of course I do, Luke. I just never thought of it like that before.”

“Well, forget I ever mentioned it,” he said as he turned away.

But Bess would not forget. Had he put his wishes in the form of a command, he couldn’t have been more explicit. As soon as the food was ready for the table, she went quietly to the room upstairs and gathered her hair into a tight knot at the back of her head.

The meal was devoured hastily, with only a word or two now and then when Luke or one of the boys asked that something be passed. Once or twice Bess ventured a remark that drew only a garbled response or none at all.

“For goodness’ sake!” she broke out at last. “Doesn’t anybody ever say anything at the table in this house?”

John leaned back from his plate and drew his napkin over his lips. “Sorry, Bess. We could at least say something about the good supper you’ve put up for us. We’re so used to our own cooking that we just eat and get it over with.”

Matt pushed his plate away and braced his hands against the table. “Cripes, we’re nothing but a bunch of guzzling animals! We need somebody around here like you, Bess. You’re a whopping good cook and I hope you keep it up. But you might try a hand at civilizing us a little while you’re at it. Only—don’t make it too sudden, for Pete’s sake!”

Luke beamed. His moments of concern about how Bess and his boys would get along together vanished in the conviction that they were all starting out splendidly. Splendidly, indeed!

“What did you do in town today?” John asked, smiling at this new acquirement of loquacity.

“We spent most of our time trying to decide on the new wallpaper for our bedroom,” Bess said. “We finally settled on a pale green, with a narrow gold-figured border to go around the top. I think it will look real pretty.”

“Bess wants to fix the house up a bit,” Luke explained. “We thought we’d start with our room.”

“Papering a room can be quite a job,” John said. “Why don’t you get a couple of men out from town to handle it?”

“We brought the paper home with us,” Luke said. “We thought we’d get at it right away—tomorrow. There’s no telling when we could get paperhangers to do it. Mark will be able to help us.”

Mark sat stiffly. “I’m cutting the mint tomorrow,” he said.

For a moment Luke was silent. Was the boy just showing his unwillingness to help, or was he in one of his perverse moods again? Was he still sulking after their talk at breakfast this morning? Or was he merely making an excuse to get out of doing something he didn’t like?

“Is the mint ready for cutting?” Luke asked evenly.

“It’s ready,” Mark said.

“When did you look at it?”

“Today.”

“I see. Well, go ahead and get it cut. We’ll find help with the papering.”

He would bear with the boy until he became more biddable. Perhaps it would be better in the long run to take John’s suggestion and bring a couple of men out from town. A few days’ delay wouldn’t matter, after all. On the other hand, these hired workers fleeced you for every turn they made, even charging for the time they spent coming and going. Imagine a farmer charging for the time it took him to haul his hogs to market! The farmer paid his own way and always had. Well, he’d talk it over with Bess.

They talked it over a couple of hours later when they were getting ready for bed. Downstairs, the evening chores disposed of, John and Matt were sitting over a game of cribbage and listening to the radio. Mark had gone to his room—to read his everlasting poetry, no doubt.

Luke had measured the walls and made an estimate of the number of rolls of paper it would take to cover them.

"I was away short on my guess today," he said finally. "We'll need at least two more rolls, maybe three if we allow for a little waste here and there. I don't see how I could have been so far off."

"We'll have plenty to start with anyhow," Bess said. "It's too bad we can't get at it right away, like we planned."

Luke rolled up his tape measure and set it aside. "I'm as anxious to get at it as you are, Bess," he told her, a note of impatience sharpening his words. "I was counting on Mark, but I should have known better. He can't be counted on for anything. If he gets a notion in his head, nothing can budge him. The truth is, he doesn't want to paper the room at all. I could tell that by looking at him."

"But he does have to cut his mint, doesn't he?"

"He says so, and I've never stood in his way over his precious mint patch. But it's just like him to have some excuse ready when I've got a job for him to do. He has always done what he likes around here. Well, he's going to change his ways if I know anything."

Bess looked at him, perplexed. "Why, Luke—you're getting angry, dear."

"I'm losing patience with that boy."

"Well, dear, don't let it upset you. And don't be too hard on Mark. I haven't seen very much of him, but he seems rather a sensitive boy to me."

"Sensitive? When you get to know him better—"

The sound of Mark's violin came up to them. Luke stood and listened, his brows darkening. The first few notes were tentative, a muted stroking of the strings to see that they were in tune. He's testing me, Luke thought with kindling anger. He's testing *me*, not the strings. All at once the bow swept in a long-drawn, bold chord and Mark began to play *The Kerry Dancers*, a plaintive yet paganly wild air that Luke, for some reason, had always abominated. This was no mere testing. It was a deliberate flout. He sprang to the door and threw it open.

"John—Matt! Put a stop to that cursed racket down there! If the fool wants to play his fiddle, let him take it to the barn!" He closed the door and waited until the sound of the violin ceased. Bess turned in her chair at the dressing table, her hair tumbling loose about her shoulders.

Luke paused for a moment, his back toward the door, then moved across the room until he stood above her. He drew a deep breath, but his voice was still distraught as he spoke. "You may as well say it as think it, my girl. You think I'm a bit of a tyrant, don't you?"

“N-no, dear, not exactly. A little harsh, maybe. What I was really thinking was—how would you feel if Mark took you at your word, if he really went to the barn every time he wanted to play his violin?”

“Let him. But it won’t come to that. He has plenty of time to play it when I’m not around to hear it.”

“Do you hate it that much?”

“I loathe it,” he told her, and went to the window where he stood looking out, his back toward her. “Bess,” he said at last, turning to her, “you’ll have to be patient with me. If we had come here alone to begin life together it would have been simple for both of us. But you’ve come into a family that has lived under the same roof for a long time. It isn’t going to be easy for you, my dear. There’ll be a lot of things you won’t be able to understand at first. Like this business of Mark scraping that violin of his, for instance.”

“But why do you hate it so much, dear? I think it’s kind of nice to have someone—”

“That’s just what I mean, Bess. You don’t understand it. You can’t. Even if I told you, you still wouldn’t understand. Besides, it would bring up a lot of other things I’m doing my best to forget. Don’t you think it would be better for us—for you and me especially—if you just paid no attention to how I handle the boys? They’re *my* problem, after all.” He left the window and came to stand behind her again. Bess caught his reflection in the glass of her dressing table. His lips were drawn across his teeth in the semblance of a smile. “Don’t you think so, my sweet?” he persisted.

She laid her brush aside and bowed her head. “I suppose so,” she said.

He ran his fingers down the full length of her hair, caressing it. “I’m sure you do. And now—let’s get to bed. There’s work to do tomorrow.”

DURING the days that followed—warm, sunny September days—Luke gave himself with doubled energy to preparing against the onset of winter. He seemed bent upon proving to his sons that he could still accomplish as much in a day as any of them. There was nothing new to that. He had always boasted he could outdo the best of them, day in and day out over a period long enough to make comparison valid. Mark was slow; John was never done with his experimenting, applying methods he had studied at school; and Matt worked in explosive spurts that usually petered out before the job was finished. But “over the long haul,” as Luke himself so often put it, he could “show his heels” to every last one of them. And with God’s help he would continue to do so for years to come!

Matt was the only one to protest. After a week of ceaseless driving, and on a morning when he was last down to breakfast and found his father already getting up from the table, he said, “What’s the rush, pa? For cryin’ out loud, you’ve been on our backs for days! What’s all the hurry about?”

Luke was reaching for his hat. “Maybe you’d rather wait till we have to dig ourselves out of the snow. I’m not trying to kill you off. But there’s work to do, Matt.” And he went on to enumerate the seasonal tasks that faced them—fences to mend, sheds to repair, fertilizer to spread, fields to plow, garden truck to get out of the ground and put away for the winter—a host of smaller tasks that would keep them all busy as long as the good weather held.

“We’ve never been caught yet,” Matt grumbled as he sat down at the table.

“We don’t want to be caught this year either,” Luke said.

Bess set a platter of freshly fried bacon and eggs in front of Matt. “I keep telling your father he’s working too hard. He comes to bed tired out every night.”

“See what I mean?” Matt pointed out. “Cripes, pa, you’re supposed to be on your honeymoon. Maybe in California!”

That was certainly hitting home, Luke thought, beginning to bristle. He was determined that no one, especially Matt, should be encouraged to think for one moment that his marriage to Bess Valentine had turned his mind away from the business at hand. That quip of Matt’s about spending the day in the bosom of his family had been enough. There would be no more of such impudence.

As usual, John went about his work without complaining. And Mark had been giving all his time to harvesting and marketing his mint, except for the hours of his morning and evening chores. The cutting done, he had hauled his crop to the still in Cleone and had got his money for it. That much Luke knew without asking any questions. Now the boy should be free to help Bess with the papering of the bedroom. Yet every morning, as soon as his chores were out of the way, he went off to spend his day at the swamp. What was he doing down there all by himself?

Luke knew better than to accost the boy directly. Only the devious approach would work with Mark. With a show of tinkering over a tractor that stood in the barnyard, he waited until his son emerged from the cow barn carrying the skim milk to the hogs.

Luke looked up. “Well, Mark, you’ve got rid of your mint crop, eh?”

“There’s nothing left of it,” Mark told him.

“That’s good. How was the yield?”

“Pretty good.”

“And the market?”

“Good enough.”

“You got your money for it, Mark?”

“They paid me.”

“In cash, I hope?”

“In cash.”

What Luke really wanted to know was how much the crop had brought at the still. Other years, Agatha had always told him, with some pride in the boy’s effort, although neither she nor Luke ever claimed a dollar of the income from the bog. It had never been large enough anyhow to warrant discussion, and most of it was spent on books and music and like trifles during the winter.

“Well,” said Luke, “that’s fine.” Still curious, he thought to gain a bit of information indirectly. “You’ll have a few hundred dollars of your own to

tide you over the winter. If you run short, of course—”

“I’ll have enough.”

Luke realized he was making no headway. He shouldn’t have tried. He changed the subject abruptly. “Maybe you’ll have time now to help me out on the papering job. I’ve been sort of waiting for you.”

Mark’s gaze wandered across the fields. “I have work down at the swamp.”

“What’s to be done down there?” Luke demanded.

Mark’s jaws began to move in the chewing motion that always exasperated his father. “Work,” he said shortly, and sauntered off with his pails of milk.

Luke watched him go, then went back to his purposeless tinkering while he waited for John and Matt to come from the house.

“Let’s get crackin’!” Matt said, and vaulted into the seat on the tractor, where he burst into song: *O Susanna!*

Luke stepped back and glanced toward the barns where Mark was moving about in his slow, deliberate fashion. “What in the name of all time do you suppose that boy’s doing down at the swamp these days?” he broke out. “He could make himself useful about the house, if nothing else, while we’re in the fields.”

Matt laughed. “He’s getting ready to hibernate, pa. I was over that way yesterday and saw him puttering around the old cabin. Looks like he’s fixing it up. Maybe he’s thinking of getting married. Could be you’ve started something around here, pa. It might get to be a habit.”

“Leave him alone,” said John. “He’ll snap out of it one of these days.”

But Mark showed no sign of “snapping out of it.” The next day sounds of hammering echoed from the swamp. On the following day he drove the pick-up to Minter and went directly to the swamp when he returned. There was more hammering, and the sound of a saw ripping its way through lumber which, Luke discovered later, had been taken from the shed in the yard.

The suspense at last became more than Luke could bear. On an afternoon when he was plowing in a field that lay eastward from the mint meadow, champing on his own thoughts and growing more restive with every turn of the furrow, he finally leaped down from the tractor and strode off toward a clump of willows that stood on the edge of the reed-filled marsh. From this ambush he peered out and saw Mark walking with measured steps in front of the old cabin, eyes on the ground as if he were looking for something he

had lost. He was not alone. Two or three steps ahead of him the girl Margot paced like a sleepwalker, her arms stretched rigidly before her.

From where Luke crouched, he could not see the crotched willow branch she held in her hands, but he knew it was there. He had watched this business of water-dowsing before and had always regarded it with a skeptical eye. Witchcraft nonsense! he declared whenever Margot's father tried to argue the point with him. Magnus Jensen owned a small well-digging rig and had brought water to many a desperate farmer who had failed to find it by methods of his own. With his own eyes Luke had seen it done—had seen water flow from the very spot to which Margot had been led by her witching willow. The performance had always revolted and fascinated him.

As he watched her now, the girl hesitated for a moment, took another step forward, then jumped aside with a little squeal and flung the willow branch away. Laughing, Mark caught her in his arms, then stepped to the place where Margot had ended her search and drove a stake into the ground. Promptly they turned away then and went back to the cabin.

Luke left his hiding place at once, walked quickly along the edge of the swamp, then stole quietly around the side of the cabin until he stood in front. Their backs toward him, Mark and the girl were standing on the doorstep, gazing toward the hillside where the sumacs were wine-red in the autumn sunlight.

"What's going on here?" he asked, his voice hollow, almost breathless.

Margot jerked about, one hand at her throat. "Oh, Mr. Darr—you scared the wits out of me!"

At her nervous laugh, Luke stepped toward the doorway. "I said, what's going on here?"

"Come in and see," Mark invited, and turned into the cabin. "We've been fixing it up."

"Are you digging a well out there?" Luke asked as he followed them through the doorway.

"A man must have water to live," said Mark evenly.

"Live? You're going to live here?"

"I could."

"What's got into you, my boy?" For a moment Luke's voice was almost entreating. "Isn't my house good enough for you?"

"I can't live there," Mark said with grave patience. "Here I can have music when night comes—and no one to send me to the barn when I want to

play my violin. Here we can read and talk together.”

“Talk—together?”

There was no entreaty in Luke’s voice now. He looked about him at the mended windows, the shelves for books, the newly laid floor—and Agatha’s old bed standing against one wall, the mirror hanging opposite, above a shelf. On the shelf was a framed photograph of Mark’s mother. In one amazed glance he took it all in, then confronted them with steely, narrowed eyes.

“What are you two up to here?”

There was no mistaking his meaning. It was plain in the words he spoke, in the look he gave them, in the accusing forward thrust of his shoulders. Margot shrank back, one hand groping behind her as if to find Mark. But Mark stepped in front of her to stand within reach of his father. Then, without a word, he placed both hands under Luke’s arms, lifted him bodily from the floor, and carried him outside. There he set him on his feet and stepped back, barring the doorway with his broad shoulders.

Luke looked at his son for a moment, then shook his head sadly. “God help you, my boy!” he breathed fervently as he turned away.

He glanced once to where his tractor stood idle in the half plowed field, then started homeward. With a brief backward look as he trudged heavily through the stubble he saw Margot limping slowly away from the cabin, her bag of school books swinging at her side, her face lifted toward the westering sun.

That night, Luke lay awake long after Bess had fallen asleep beside him. His encounter with Mark had disturbed him deeply. Had he perhaps been too stern with the boy when he found him alone at the cabin with Margot Jensen? The two had been inseparable ever since Margot was able to walk after the illness that had left her crippled. At first, Luke had looked upon the relationship with warm approval. Mark, a mere boy at the time, had shown a tenderness and devotion more healing in their effect than all the treatments the doctors could devise. But children grow up—the girl was fifteen now, and Mark had turned twenty-two in July. It was a treacherous time of life for both of them. The Tempter lay ever in wait to trap the innocent. The only way to deal with evil was to scotch it in the root.

He lay rigid on the bed, not daring to waken Bess. She must not know what was troubling him. Had he not warned her against meddling in any problem that concerned himself and his sons? He would act alone, as he saw fit, looking to God for strength to carry him through. Bess might comfort him when he was in the need of comforting. Her presence beside him, the

warm solace of her arms about him, the mere sound of her voice were all the comfort he needed. What he wanted now was strength, not comfort. Strength—and more strength! And with that prayer in his heart, he finally fell asleep.

It seemed like an answer to prayer when, the next afternoon, Pastor Bly hailed him where he was plowing in the south field bordering the highway. That morning, he had decided to work the south field rather than return to the land adjoining the swamp, where the sounds of Mark's activity would be a constant threat to his peace of mind.

Pastor Bly parked his car beside the highway and came to lean over the fence near the corner of the field where the pin oaks stood, their leaves red and brittle but clinging still in defiance of the season.

Luke got down from his tractor and went forward with outstretched hand. "It's good to see you, Pastor Bly!"

"I was making a few calls," the good man said, "and thought I'd drop by and see how you were faring. What a blessing this weather is to us all, especially to our friends on the land. I see you are taking full advantage of it, Brother Darr."

"Another week like this and we'll be ready for the snow," said Luke. "We need rain, though. We need it bad."

"It'll come, it'll come," promised Pastor Bly with the authority of one who had lived most of his life in intimate touch with the Source of all things. "Or we'll have a plentiful snowfall," he added, as if to offset possible error in his prophecy. "I'm a firm believer in the theory that weather runs in cycles. An unusually dry spell, such as this, is bound to be followed by a prolonged period of precipitation. Nature maintains her balance in everything."

Luke's eyes scanned the cloudless sky. "I hope you're right," he smiled. "But Mother Nature does some mighty strange things, Pastor Bly."

"She has her moods, yes—like the rest of us, I suppose. H-m-m—we missed you at service last Sabbath. I trust there's no illness in the family?"

"No. We rested at home, after a week of working early and late," Luke explained.

A knot of guilt and resentment entered Luke. He had no taste for searching questions, even when they came from his pastor. "The wife and I drove into Cleone for the evening service."

Pastor Bly wagged an accusing finger. "You must not turn your back upon our humble little mission in Minter, Brother Darr. You are one of our

stalwart pillars there, you know. As a matter of fact, I have something I'd like to talk over with you, if you can spare a few minutes from your work. Could we, ah—could we sit down together somewhere, perhaps? I find these pastoral visits take more out of me than they used to. I'm getting old, I'm afraid.”

Luke glanced toward the clump of pin oaks. “Come inside,” he invited. He pressed the lower strand of barbed wire under one foot and lifted the strand above it while Pastor Bly crawled cautiously between the two. “We'll sit over there under the scrub oak,” he said, and led the way.

They were very much of a height as they walked together toward the corner, though Luke was much the more rugged of the two, and the younger by at least ten years. But what Pastor Bly lacked in sinew and bone he more than made up in the earnestness with which he plodded toward the place Luke had indicated.

“I'll come to the point at once,” he said as soon as they were seated. “There is about to be a vacancy on our church board. Brother Thomas, who has been with us for a number of years, is moving to California with his wife. His sons and daughters are all married, of course, and are doing very well on their own. Brother Thomas is already in his late seventies and feels it is time for him to withdraw from active participation in the affairs of the community. We shall miss him. On the other hand, his going will open the way for a younger man—not too young, of course, but a man still vigorous and with a forward-looking spirit. I have talked it over with a few of the board members and the feeling seems to be strongly in favor of inviting you to fill the vacancy when Brother Thomas leaves.”

“Do you know when he is going?”

“Very soon, I understand. Possibly in a couple of weeks or so. That would give us about three months before the annual meeting of the congregation in January, when your appointment would be confirmed officially.”

A lengthy silence followed between them while Luke's mind carried him back over the years he had been a member of the church in Minter. He had often wondered why his name had never come up when a place of honor in the management of church affairs had to be filled. There had been covetousness in that, he admitted to himself, and yet—

He mustered his courage. “Pastor Bly,” he said, determined to face the issue squarely, “I have been a member of your congregation for a good many years, as you know. I have contributed as often—and as much—as I

was able. Isn't it strange that I have never been consulted on how the money was being spent?"

"What you say is true, Brother Darr, much as I regret it—and much as others have regretted it too, if I may say so. But I think I can explain it—and in a way I hope you will understand. Our little church is a community of souls. We work together and strive against division of any kind. The wives of the men on our board have all been members of our church. For reasons of her own, no doubt, the late Mrs. Darr—a very excellent woman, as we all know—was never persuaded to join us."

"She was a headstrong woman," Luke said, almost fiercely. "A remarkable woman, mind you, but too strong-minded and willful for her own good."

"I don't wish to disparage you in any way," Pastor Bly went on, with a mollifying smile. "It took a man like yourself to accomplish what you have done to this place."

"She could have done it herself," Luke declared.

"Scarcely, I think. But be that as it may, brother, a man, however strong, achieves his best only when he has the full-hearted encouragement of the woman beside him. I do not wish to offend, but I am persuaded that in the past you did not have that encouragement. Others, I may say, have shared my feelings in that respect. A pastor, Brother Darr, is in a unique position when it comes to gauging the temper that prevails in his community. He has his finger on the public pulse, so to speak. I am more than happy to say that the feeling toward you has altered considerably of late. We have all been aware of a growing strength in you, as if—I find it hard to put into words. Suffice it to say that two of our most influential members have asked me to approach you with a view to your filling the vacancy that will be left when Brother Thomas goes to California."

"Which two?" Luke asked bluntly. He was not yielding to flattery now, after all the years he had gone unrecognized. Still, it would be reassuring to know that Bly's "influential members" were men of weight in the community.

"I see no reason why you shouldn't know who they are," Pastor Bly said hesitantly. "One of them is our banker, Mr. Kellogg, and the other is our lumber dealer—"

"Tom Reed?"

Pastor Bly nodded. "You see—both are men of substance who have had long experience in dealing with men. It should come to you with satisfaction, I'm sure, that they have asked me to—"

"It does, it does," Luke assured him. "I find it quite heartening, in fact. I'll have to think it over for a few days, of course. After all, Bess is not a church member, either."

"I've thought of that. But I'm sure, with a little guidance from you, she can be persuaded to join us. She has impressed me as the sort of woman who might easily be led into the fold. She came willingly enough, I have no doubt, when you led her to the altar where you made her your wife."

Luke smiled. "That was a little different."

"Before that, I recall, she was present with you at the revival services that Reverend Manley conducted last summer. And by the way, Brother Manley is going to spend a fortnight with us during the coming spring, if his commitments make it possible."

"I'm glad to hear that," said Luke, getting to his feet. "You can count on me for all the help I can give you. And I'll talk over the board business with my wife."

"Good. And how is Mrs. Darr? I should apologize for not enquiring—"

"Oh, she's fine, just fine," Luke said cheerfully. "I'll tell her you were asking about her."

"Do, please. And the next time you're both in Minter, I'd like you to drive your wife around to look at my garden of zinnias. I have been cultivating a new giant variety with singular success this year. I have some prime blooms to show her."

"I'll tell her about it," Luke promised. "But these are busy days for us, Pastor Bly. Working for a family like ours is a heavy load for one woman. Bess hasn't much time for running around. I've been thinking of getting a girl to come in to help with the housework, but good help is hard to come by nowadays."

"Well, now, I heard about someone just the other day," said Pastor Bly, pressing a hand to his brow as he tried to remember the name. "Let me see—yes, yes, Mrs. Bly mentioned a girl just last week. Sam Hunter's daughter—you must know the Hunters. They have a farm six miles south of the village."

"I've known Sam for years. We don't see much of each other. We haven't much in common, though he's a good farmer. But I thought his girls were all married."

"The youngest—Sally, I think her name is—has been teaching country school for the past couple of years, my wife tells me, but she's tired of chalk dust and wants a place with a respectable farm family not too far from her home. Mrs. Bly tells me she's a fine, upstanding girl."

Being the daughter of Sam Hunter, Luke thought to himself, was scarcely to be regarded as a recommendation. Sam had worked hard, no doubt, had raised three daughters and seen them through school, and was looked upon as one of the more prosperous farmers in the district. But he scoffed openly at religion, became fluently profane when drinking, and seemed to prefer the company of the ungodly. Still, it would be unjust to assume that a daughter would of necessity bear the taint of her father's vices. And the pastor's wife had apparently favored the girl strongly.

"Well, you might have her call me—or come up and talk to us," Luke suggested. "If she's to Bess's liking—"

"I'll have my wife telephone the Hunters tonight," Bly said promptly as he moved away. "And we'll be looking for you at Sunday service, brother."

AND so it came about that Sally Hunter, twenty-three, joined the Darr household on Wednesday of the following week. The arrangements had all been made by telephone, with the help of Pastor Bly's wife as intermediary.

John had spent the afternoon with his father and Matt, putting away the last of the silage, and was on his way to the house for a shower and a change to fresh clothes when Sam Hunter's car stopped in the driveway and Sally emerged from it. She was immaculate in a tan linen suit, white blouse, and small white hat. She was tall and deep-bosomed, her smooth, slender limbs belying an almost masculine strength that gave her a bearing of serene self-confidence. Her broadish nose carried a few freckles between her wide-set hazel eyes, her mouth curved rich over large, strong teeth. She had the creamy, silken skin of the chestnut haired.

John remembered her as one of the younger kids in the Minter school, he a lofty eighteen about to enter agricultural college, she a leggy, freckled brat of fifteen. Since then he could not recall having seen her. Still, unmindful of the barn muck encrusted upon him, he stretched forth his hand and smiled as if they were old friends.

"Hi, there! What happened to the pigtails?"

She laughed and took his hand. "They went out about the same time you changed to a crew cut."

Sam Hunter got down from the car. "I'm damned if you don't look bigger every time I see you!" he declared as he shook hands with John.

"You're no runt yourself," John grinned. "Come on into the house, folks."

"Where's Luke?" Sam asked, taking a couple of suitcases from the back of the car and setting them on the ground.

"He and Matt are finishing off a load—here they come now. But come along and meet Bess." John picked up the suitcases.

"I got me a new hired man last week," Sam Hunter said, "and I've got to pick him up in town and take him to the farm."

"Can't you stop in for a minute, dad?" Sally urged. "Your man can wait—and that glass of beer won't go flat."

But Luke came up before Sam could argue the point. While the two older men exchanged greetings, John turned to Sally. "I'll go ahead with your bags anyhow. I've got to clean up a bit."

"Good, healthy dirt!" she smiled, and John walked off toward the house.

"Jee-rusalem!" he said to himself as he went to his room to make himself presentable for supper. "Sally Hunter—that homely little squirt! Who'd have thought it!"

He was shaving before the bathroom mirror when Matt bounded up the stairs and stuck his sweaty face in the doorway.

"Hot dawg! Did you see what I saw?"

John drew his razor down one cheek and paused. "I saw her first, junior."

"So what?"

John turned on his brother, his expression serious in spite of the lather. "Look—just lay off Sally Hunter, eh? She looks like a decent kid."

"You can't hang a guy for dreaming," Matt said, and hurried away to get out of his work clothes. "*Drifting and dreaming . . .*" he sang blithely, and John thought, who could help loving that guy?

John finished shaving and after a shower scoured his nails and even brushed his teeth.

Two days later, before leaving for Cleone where he had business to attend to, Luke suggested that Bess and Sally might begin papering the walls in the bedroom. It would be one way, he thought, to discover the Hunter girl's usefulness. On his way to the garage, he encountered Mark intent upon his chores.

"The girls are going to work on the papering today," he told the boy. "I'd like you to give them a hand with it when you're through here. It shouldn't take more than a day to do the job."

Mark seemed to meditate for a moment, his jaws working, his gaze distant. Then, without a word of response, he resumed his work, leaving his father to stare after him in blank amazement.

One delay after another kept Luke in town until mid-afternoon. When he finally returned, he found Bess and Sally at work in the bedroom. Mark was nowhere in sight. The two girls were sitting on the floor, streamers of paper curling about them. They were both helpless with mirth as he entered the room.

“Oh, Luke, dear—we can’t do it!” Bess gasped. “We’ve done our best, but—just look!”

Luke scanned the walls and the floor, then burst into laughter. “Where’s Mark?” he asked finally. “I told him he was to give you a hand with this.”

“Well, he didn’t,” Bess said. “I guess he was busy.”

“This kind of a job needs experienced men if you want to have it done right, Mr. Darr,” Sally ventured. “I’ve never tried it before and I really don’t know how to begin.”

“Let it go,” Luke said with a wave of his hand. “I’ll get a couple of men out from town. Clean up the mess and come downstairs.”

Bess followed him to the living room, leaving Sally to restore the bedroom to some semblance of order.

“Luke, dear,” she said, staying him with a hand on his arm, “I didn’t want to tell you in front of Sally, but Mark took all his belongings from his room while you were away and carried them to his cabin beside the swamp.”

Bess was mystified and troubled, but Luke made light of it. “It’s just one of his crazy notions,” he said. “Pay no attention to it.”

He went to take a look at Mark’s room, nevertheless. Books, violin, phonograph, records—everything was gone. The room was bare except for the single bed and the small dresser. Luke swallowed hard against the choking sensation in his throat. What could be more forlorn than the sight of a room deserted? This was not at all what he had hoped for. He and his sons had had their differences, naturally, but they had lived with them, managed somehow to forget them. They had never loved him as he might have wished, but they had never broken away from him. They had been one family, under one roof, in spite of everything.

In the spring when Mark was ten, his mother had kept him home from school for several days because of a cold. On a bright morning when he seemed well enough, she had permitted him out of doors, and he had disappeared. He had been wont to make solitary excursions into the woods now and then, though never for more than two or three hours at a time. It was when he failed to show up for the mid-day meal that Agatha began to feel concern. She had gone out to the county road where she walked up and

down, calling his name but hearing no response save the echo of her own voice.

By mid-afternoon she became alarmed, recalling stories in the newspapers of boys who had wandered off by themselves and had never been seen alive again. She went to the field where Luke was seeding and demanded that he leave his work and help her search the woods and the margin of the swamp. It was all to no avail. When John and Matt came home from school, the search continued over ever widening circles as long as there was light to see. Over a hurried supper—it was already nine o'clock—they decided to notify the police in Cleone and enlist the neighboring farmers in combing the countryside for some sign of the missing boy.

They were getting up from the table when Mark came in through the kitchen, tears streaming down his cheeks, and rushed to his mother. She gathered him up in her lap, crooning over him as his story came out in almost incoherent sobs. He had simply decided to run away from home—it was spring and everywhere the great world had been beckoning and luring him until he could no longer resist. He had walked south to the railway, where he had hurried along, past familiar fields with their dewy fragrance of freshly turned furrows, past the village of Minter, and beyond to where the vast prairies lay before him in endless solitude. And just when he thought he had put his old world forever behind him, a meadow lark winged up on song directly before his eyes. The lark seemed to have come from the fields he had left—oh, so long ago! He had turned homeward then, footsore and hungry and stricken with longing for home.

Well, Mark was still a boy, for all his twenty-two years, for all his powerfully built frame and towering stature. He was running away from home again. But he would be back, only this time he would not find a frantic mother to coddle him and listen to his story.

Luke looked once more about the empty room, fingered the knob of the door, reluctant to close it, delaying that finality. At last he stepped out, closing the door firmly.

Here, Mark mused, where the brittle reeds in the swamp leaned before the wind, where the goldenrod mutely bore its tarnish on the hillside, where the dawns and the twilights were clamorous with wild fowl flying—here and here only was home.

He had converted the cabin to his liking. He had lined the walls with beaverboard, covered the floor with braided rag mats that had been his mother's, hung the windows with bright curtains that Margot and her mother

had made for him. On the bed was one of his mother's piece quilts—the Star of Bethlehem—for which she had won first prize at the county fair some twenty years ago. In a corner stood a washstand furnished with a basin and a water pitcher which he filled from time to time at the well Magnus Jensen had drilled on the spot Margot's dowsing-rod had found. From the lumber shed he had recovered an old kitchen table which Margot had painted a bright yellow in keeping with the flower design on the curtains. Finally he had set up an oil-burning heater and a small kerosene cook stove. With a cupboard and dishes, a few pots and pans, a couple of kitchen chairs and a kerosene lamp, there was little lacking—and little left of the money he had received from his harvest of mint.

His greatest pride, however, was his mother's mirror. On a shelf beneath it, he had placed a half dozen large crimson dahlias in a pitcher, their beauty doubled by reflection. They were the last blooms of the season. The time was at hand now when he must spade the plants from the garden and store their precious tubers away for the winter. Beside the dahlias stood the framed photograph of his mother. He had his books and violin and such other effects as belonged especially to him. On the table stood a vase of bittersweet and maple leaves that Margot had brought on her way home from school. Now, in the greenish afterglow of the evening, an eerie luminousness filled the place, a velvety breathing life that seemed to flow from the dahlias and their drooping leaves.

With a quiet as though meant for beings in the repose of thought, he stepped to his shelf of books and reverently touched one after the other.

There were his poets, Browning, Tennyson, Whitman. There were the naturalists, *The Portable Thoreau*, Fabre's *The Life and Love of the Insect*, Donald Culross Peattie's *A Gathering of Birds*, and W. H. Hudson's *Green Mansions*, mystical as the heart is mystical.

His hand lingered once more upon Thoreau, who had played the flute. Well, he, Mark Darr, played the violin, perhaps not as well as Thoreau had played the flute, but with as keen a call to beauty.

He lit a cigarette and went to the doorway. He had been standing there for only a moment when a soft chirping like a sleepy birdnote came from a willow clump at the edge of the swamp. He leaned an ear to catch it, and suddenly it became low, chuckling laughter, and Margot sprang out and ran toward him.

"I thought you'd never come! I waited for the longest time. Didn't you hear me? I was a bird—calling you. See—like this." She pursed her lips and made a thin, sad little note scarcely louder than a whisper.

Mark grinned at her. "What kind of a bird is that?"

"I've been practicing," Margot said, and shyly lowered her eyes. "I thought—after the book—you might know."

Mark frowned at his own stupidity. "Of course. I do know. But you surprised me, Margot. You've just finished reading *Green Mansions*. So now you are—"

She brightened in an upflung delight of her slender hands. "Of course you knew, Mark! I'm *Rima*!"

Then her laughter dismissed her seriousness, and she handed him a paper bag filled with fresh-baked cookies.

"Mother sent me over with these for you," she said.

He opened the bag and looked in. "Right from the oven!" he observed. "Come inside and we'll sample them."

"They're all for you. And I have to hurry right back. Let's sit for just a minute here on the doorstep."

When they were seated she looked up at the sky. "'Star white, star bright—first star I've seen tonight,' " she murmured. "Do you see it?"

"I see it."

She leaned forward and peered intently toward the dense region of wooded mystery that rose high from the swamp's edge. "The forest is bright with watching eyes," she whispered, and Mark was caught back in a twist of something like pain to his boyhood when he might have said something like that himself, had he known how.

He glanced at her almost resentfully. She was the only girl he had ever really known, and it was only of late that he had awakened to any true awareness of her. He had never thought of her as anything more than a child. But the change had come, the awesome miracle of their growing up that set them apart from each other at the same time that it drew them together with a troubling urgency.

Every meeting now was a time of rediscovery. He felt it now as he sat beside her and looked at her eyes as variable a blue as the northern fjords from which her father and mother had come, at her hair as fine-spun as sunlit thistledown.

"Evening is best of all," she said, drawing her arms close about her. "The day lifts you far above the world—the night holds you down on it. But evening lets you go wherever you feel like going."

"Where do you want to go to now?" Mark asked.

“Anywhere—everywhere—nowhere!” She sighed happily. “I’m where I want to be. I feel as if I’ve just come back from somewhere—somewhere a long way off.”

“Where have you been?”

“I don’t know. Thinking does that to me sometimes. I think and think until I’m lost and don’t know where I am. Don’t you ever feel like that?”

“You shouldn’t think so much.”

“I can’t help it. All day I’ve been wondering about—Mark, what *is* God?”

“God is a word.”

“That’s no answer. God must be *something*.”

“God is everything.”

“Is that star up there—is that God?”

“A little bit of Him, I guess.”

“Am I a part of Him? And you?”

“A very little bit.”

“And mice and snakes and trees and stones—and just everything? You put them all together, and that’s God?”

He smiled distantly. “There’s music—and poetry—and there’s love.”

“And what about hate and wars and being sick and maybe dying?”

It was just like her to ask unanswerable questions, he thought to himself. “You’ve been having a hard time of it today, haven’t you?” he temporized.

“I get so mixed up when I try to think about it all by myself.”

“We all do.”

“And then, there’s eternity,” Margot went on. “I started to think about it today, and it seemed to whirl up and up until I couldn’t stand it another minute. A person could go crazy just thinking about it.”

“There’s *now* to think about. Isn’t that enough?”

“But *now* goes on forever.”

“Now *is* forever.”

“Now—is—forever,” she repeated slowly, her brows knitting in bewilderment. “Oh, I give up! Anyhow I’ve got to go home.”

She started to rise but Mark laid a hand on her arm. “Don’t move. Look!”

A raccoon had crept from the underbrush only a few feet away and was sitting upright, his masked face toward them, testing the human scent in

their direction.

“Oh, Mark, he wants to come to us!” Margot whispered.

“Not yet. This is only the third time I’ve seen him.” He put a hand behind him and took two cookies from the paper bag he had set just inside the doorway. He spoke softly and tossed the cookies toward the raccoon. Eagerly the animal snatched one up and made off with it.

Mark laughed. “He’ll be back. Maybe not tonight, but we’re going to be friends before he hides out for the winter.”

For at least a minute Margot sat in silence, her eyes intent upon the clump of underbrush behind which the raccoon had vanished. Finally with a quivering breath she got to her feet.

“Walk me home—part of the way, anyhow. Mother will be looking for me.”

There had never been any real doubt in Luke Darr’s mind concerning the invitation to become a member of the church board. He had made his decision, in fact, within the very hour of Pastor Bly’s appeal. But for ten days now he had kept his decision to himself. He had made no mention of it even to Bess. He had taken her to church with him on the Sunday following Bly’s visit, and had talked with the preacher as usual on the way out, but he had adroitly kept the talk away from anything having to do with church affairs. There was a perverse satisfaction in refusing to commit himself in any way that would betray eagerness on his own part. They had withheld the honor for years—they could now await his pleasure. Besides, the waiting had given him time to steady himself, to recover from the feeling of elation that had seized him that afternoon under the pin oaks with Pastor Bly.

Still, a seat on the church board was not to be taken lightly. It was by such steps that a man rises to fulfilment. True, it was a small church in a small village, but a man is measured by the place he holds in his own community, however small it may be. There was no telling, moreover, what it might lead to ultimately. It all depended upon what use a man made of his opportunity. He had been giving considerable thought to that, in fact. Night after night, immediately after dinner, he had closed himself in the small room across the hall from the living room, where he invariably went when beset by any problem that called for earnest thought. It was a mere cubicle of a room that contained a small couch, a couple of chairs, and a desk where he kept his papers and records in order and a Bible that lay within easy reach. It was there he had gone so often during his life with Agatha, when he felt the need of restoring his faith in himself. It was there he knelt so often in

secret prayer when his faith in God was in need of strengthening. And it was there one night, less than a week ago, that he had made a decision that was to prove the driving incentive in his life for months to come.

It had been a startling experience. He had closed the door and lain down on the couch in the evening half-light for a few minutes of relaxation after his day in the fields. He had had no thought of sleeping, but the soft light was soothing and before long the voices that reached him from beyond the door became muffled, merely brushing his senses as he lay with his eyes closed, letting his thoughts wander at will. With some amusement he recalled that Pastor Bly had indicated a fear that Luke and his new wife might be turning their backs loftily upon the humble little mission in Minter. The good man had spoken almost apologetically, and for no reason at all, so far as Luke himself was concerned. Hadn't Jesus preached by the roadside, on the side of the mountain, on the seashore? And had He apologized? Now that he thought of it, even Bess had hinted—oh, it was no more than a hint!—that she would prefer attending Sunday service in Cleone, where the church was a more impressive structure, more in keeping with the dignity of worship.

And then it came upon Luke like the breaking of a great light. *And I will build a tabernacle*—the words were written in fire against the darkness of the room. He sprang from his couch and turned on the light above his desk. For more than an hour he sat reading his Bible, poring over the Epistles of his favorite apostle, Paul of Tarsus. For days thereafter he went about like a man who had seen a vision, holding his bold project to his heart, seeing his new church rise before his very eyes, its shining steeple lifting toward the infinite blue. Pastor Bly had declared the need of a younger, more vigorous, forward-looking man to bring new life to the work they were doing in the congregation at Minter. Well, they would have it in Luke Darr!

But—one step at a time, he cautioned himself. He would talk to Bess first and enlist her sympathy and help. He had put that off long enough. Tomorrow would be Sunday again. He would take Pastor Bly aside after the service and tell him he was ready to fill the vacancy as soon as Brother Thomas retired.

They had prepared for bed, and Bess sat at her dressing table in her green woolen robe, brushing her hair. Luke walked about the room, a flannel bathrobe over his nightshirt and soft bedroom slippers on his feet. He had resisted all of Bess's attempts to have him wear pajamas—it would be too much like going to bed with your clothes on. When she had asked with some mirth where in the world he was able to buy nightshirts these days, he had felt himself reddening, and on the spur of the moment had told a small lie:

there was an old store in Cleone that still carried nightshirts in stock for farmers. He could not tell her that Agatha had “run them up” on her sewing machine, and although he had been troubled by the impropriety of bedding down in them with a new wife, his frugality had finally decided the issue for him.

“Luke, dear,” Bess said without a pause in the long, even strokes of her hairbrush, “when are we going to get this papering done? I don’t want to hurry you, but we can’t leave the room looking as if a tornado had gone through it.”

“I’ll get it done right away, my dear,” he promised, and halted in his pacing to peer from the window. It was dark outside, but his eyes looked down upon Agatha’s dahlia garden, faintly visible in a light that fell from the living room window below. “By the way, there’s something you might do for me.”

“Yes?”

“I wish you’d take the garden fork tomorrow—well, no, tomorrow is Sunday—but first thing Monday, then. I want you to dig those dahlia plants out of the ground before the frost comes.”

“I thought Mark always took care of the garden,” Bess said.

“No matter. Get Sally to help you, if you like. But dig them out and get rid of them.”

“Aren’t you supposed to store them away for the winter? I don’t know how to go about it.”

He swung toward her. “Never mind storing them away. Dig them out and pile them where the sun will get at them. When they’re dried out we’ll burn them.”

“But Luke—all those beautiful flowers!”

He sighed, averting his face from her, his fingers twisting the lapels of his bathrobe. “I never liked them. We’ll put something else in next year. Something with more—perfume.”

Bess thoughtfully regarded him, and then said, “Yes, peonies, perhaps. I’ll get at the dahlias first thing on Monday.”

Luke paced the length of the room, then planted himself squarely in the middle of the floor. “There’s something I must tell you about, Bess. Can you put that brush away and listen to me for a minute?”

She gave a final sweep of the brush and set it aside. “What is it, Luke? You look so—so stern. Are you cross about something?”

“Not at all, my girl. I’m just serious. Listen to me. When Pastor Bly stopped by the other day, he invited me to become a member of his church board.”

“Well, that was nice, Luke. I mean, I suppose it’s nice. I don’t know anything about such things. But why didn’t you let me know about it at the time?”

“I wanted a few days to think it over by myself.”

“Are you going to accept?”

Luke cleared his throat portentously. “That depends. Have you ever given any thought to joining the church, Bess?”

“Why—I haven’t thought much about it. Do you want me to join?”

“The wives of the board members are all members of the church. It’s only right that they should be.”

“But Luke, dear—it’s such a serious thing. I’m not sure that I’m ready for it.”

“That’s just the point, Bess. I’ve been hoping you’d say something—show some sign that you’d like to join me in worshipping God, now that we are one in the flesh. Night after night you have seen me on my knees beside our bed. You have never knelt with me in prayer. It has worried me.”

“Is it necessary for a person to get down on his knees to pray, Luke? I used to pray plenty when I was living with my aunt. And in my heart I have been praying for you and me and everybody around us. Do you think God can’t hear me, just because I’m not on my knees?”

“You believe in Him? You fear God?”

“Oh, Luke, I never could understand what that means! I’m not *afraid* of God, if that’s what you mean. I respect Him—I honor Him—and I suppose I love Him in my own way. Why shouldn’t I?”

“Your own way, as you call it, isn’t enough, Bess. There is a way of salvation and the Bible has made it clear for all to understand. You must repent of your sins and accept Jesus as your Saviour. It’s as simple as that.”

Bess got up slowly from her chair and went to stretch herself out on the bed. For a moment she lay staring at the ceiling. “You make it sound so simple, dear,” she said at last. “And maybe it is. But—I don’t know. I’m not a *bad* woman. I don’t know of any sins I’ve committed that I ought to repent. I wasn’t raised in the church, but I like to go once in a while because it always makes me feel better. Especially when it’s like the one in Cleone. But the one in Minter—it’s so old-feeling and backwoodsy, so—I don’t know. I can’t feel at home in it.”

He yearned to tell her of his vision. Now would be the time for it. But no, he would speak of it to no one until it had shaped itself toward fulfilment.

And so, “‘He that humbleth himself shall be exalted,’ ” he quoted and drew his robe snugly about his shoulders.

Bess stretched herself languidly while she covered a yawn with her hand. “Oh, Luke dear, I’m tired of talking. I’ll join your church if you want me to—I mean if it will help you. But please give my feet a little massage, like you did the other night. It’s so relaxing. Just twenty strokes—that’s all I’ll ask.”

That she should ask such a small indulgence from him filled him with gratitude. He recalled Agatha’s soaking and paring her corns—no, no, he refused to think of that! He sat down on the edge of the bed and began rubbing her feet gently between his work-hardened hands, kneading, pressing and stroking—then caressing. It was a pleasing task that became exciting as his hands crept to her ankles, then to the smoothly rounded flesh above them. There he came to a modest halt, stood up and cast his robe aside, turned off the light and lay down beside her.

Since it was Sunday morning, they lay late. It was almost eight when Luke finally got up and left Bess to enjoy her few minutes of what she called her beauty-sleep. After he had taken a shower and dressed, he looked from the window and saw the garden fork standing upright, its tines buried in the newly turned soil where only yesterday the dahlia stalks had stood browning in the autumn sun. Not a stalk was left standing. At the far end of the garden, Mark was stooping over a bulging gunny-sack. With an easy swing of his arms he threw the sack over his shoulder and strode away toward the cabin beside the swamp, the aged, half-blind Dante at his heels.

Luke jerked about, away from the window. “Get up!” he ordered as he stepped to the bedside and shook Bess by the shoulder. “Get out of bed!”

She opened her eyes and stretched her arms, yawning. “Oh, I was having the nicest dream!”

“This is no time for dreaming,” he said and spun about out of the room.

Bess sat up in astonishment and blinked after him, wondering in a tangle of dismay if she had married a man who was really two—a man who could veer within a few hours from one of warmth and love to one who left her completely baffled, shut out.

In her bare feet she ran to the window and caught a glimpse of Mark plodding northward, a gunny-sack slung over his shoulder. And in the garden immediately below the window stood Luke, kicking like a child in a tantrum at the upturned earth where the dahlias had been.

PASTOR BLY had chosen his text from Isaiah: *Shall the clay say to him that fashioneth it, What makest thou?*

“In these days of confusion in our troubled world, it is not given to mortal man to understand the purposes of God. His ways are clothed in mystery. But there is a divine plan, even though at times His ways are inscrutable . . .”

Luke Darr’s mind began to lose the thread of the good man’s discourse. The pew in which he and Bess sat together was uncomfortable, the altar before them was draped in faded red, the pulpit was shabby and worn, the walls enclosing them were dusty dull, even the pastor’s voice seemed pale and colorless. Only the sunlight slanting through the unwashed windows bore testimony to the glory of God.

But there was indeed a divine plan behind it all, and Luke was growing in confidence that he was part of it. Yes, he had wasted the best years of his life. How well he knew it! Had he resisted temptation in the first place, had he had the courage to follow his convictions and dedicate himself to the task of saving men’s souls, even though he had gone hungry because of it, he would have been a different man today. He would have been a tireless toiler in the Master’s vineyard, a flaming torch in the desert darkness of a sinful world.

But the wasted years were behind him now. Already the ledger of his spirit was beginning to show gains. The Lord had given him a wife whom he could love as never, except in his wildest dreams, had he thought of loving any woman. They might have their little differences—what marriage was without them?—but she harbored no resentment afterward. And her response to his love was so complete that he was confident he would not have to wait long for her announcement that she was to become a mother.

He might have handled that affair of the dahlia bed differently, he thought now as he fought back the drowsiness induced by Pastor Bly’s

feathery accents, but how could he have explained to Bess that the very sight of it was a bitter reminder of the years of defeat he had suffered at the hands of the woman who had tended it? How could he have made her understand what it meant for him to see Mark walking off with the sack over his shoulder, casual as Fate itself, to preserve the roots for planting another year?

His thoughts turned upon Mark. Running off to live by himself in the cabin beside the swamp had nothing to do with Bess. He was sure of that. It was that cursed violin of his that had been to blame for his leaving the house. A silly business, altogether, and one he had no intention of discussing with Bess. Besides, Mark would be back as soon as his rebellious spirit had cooled. After all, the boy was on hand morning and night to do his chores and was promptly in his place at the table when it came time to eat.

Most of all, he was pleased with Matt. How that boy had changed since the morning his father had declared himself on the matter of drinking! There had been a few hours of anxiety a couple of weeks ago when Matt had gone off to town without so much as announcing his departure. But he had been home before midnight and Luke had left his bed to accost him as soon as he came upstairs. The boy was quite sober.

“Did I wake you, pa?”

“It’s all right, Matt. I heard a noise and I just came out to see what it was.”

“I’m the noise, pa. Go back to bed. This isn’t Washington’s birthday, but I cannot tell a lie. I had two drinks in town and came home. I’m a good boy, pa.”

Well, that was Matt. Luke didn’t approve of the two drinks, but it was better than he had feared. He could be patient.

John, of course, was no problem. He had been casting sheep’s eyes at Sally Hunter ever since she came to the house. They had walked out together and gone riding through the achingly wild brilliance of the autumn woods and fields glinting their omen of another season’s close. They would make a sturdy couple, those two, Luke thought, even though Sam Hunter was scarcely the kind of man he would have chosen for his son’s father-in-law.

Bess nudged him as Pastor Bly was announcing the closing hymn. He stood up and sang lustily, then bowed his head while the congregation received the benediction. As they moved into the aisle, he laid a gently restraining hand upon Bess’s arm.

“Let the others go ahead,” he whispered. “I want to have a word with Pastor Bly on the way out.”

In a few moments they were shaking hands with Bly and complimenting him on his fine sermon, though Luke would have been hard pressed to recall any part of it beyond the first few words.

“Thank you, thank you,” Pastor Bly beamed. “My message seems to have been well received this morning. I have had many kind words from my friends. It’s very encouraging. By the way, Brother Darr, our good Brother Thomas is leaving for California next week—not this coming week, I mean, but the week following. I’ve been hoping to hear from you concerning—”

“I have my answer ready, Brother Bly,” Luke interrupted. “I’m ready to serve in any way I can.”

“Good, good! I was quite sure, of course, that you’d accept the call.”

“My wife and I have talked it over,” Luke went on, “and you’ll be glad to know that she has been persuaded to join us. We are of one mind on it.”

Pastor Bly took Bess’s two hands warmly in his own. “God bless you, my dear, God bless you! And now—we are planning a little farewell supper for Brother Thomas and his wife. I trust you will both be on hand.”

“When?” Luke asked.

“The details have not been worked out yet, but we’d like to hold it on the night before he leaves, if possible. I’ll make the announcement at next Sunday’s services.”

“You can count on us,” Luke assured him. “We’ll be there.”

Not only did he and Bess grace the occasion with their presence—Bess had dressed becomingly and was the immediate center of curious attention on the part of all the women present—but Luke had responded to Pastor Bly’s request to speak a few appropriate words bidding Godspeed to Brother Thomas and his wife. He had spoken well, and he knew it—so well, in fact, that he had been praised by the pastor and by many members of the congregation.

He was proud as they drove home in their car, proud of himself and proud of Bess. “Did you see how those women flocked about you tonight? I was the happiest man there.” A car raced past them and turned in at the Blue Moon, the dance hall just off the highway. “Fools!” Luke observed irritably.

But Bess was undisturbed. “Women always flock about a bride,” she said. “But you, Luke—I had no idea you could make such a nice speech. You were wonderful! You should have been a preacher.”

"I know it," he admitted wistfully. How many times, alone at work on his land, had he stood proclaiming the gospel of redemption to the wind-swept fields!

"And when you talked about roses growing in the desert," Bess added, "it was just like poetry."

Luke was shocked. "My poor Bess! *And the desert shall rejoice and blossom as the rose.*"

"Yes, that was it."

"Isaiah, thirty-five, one," Luke said patiently.

"Oh, dear, there is so much I don't know," Bess sighed.

There was, indeed, he thought to himself. She did not know—could not have dreamed—what was in his mind when he had stood in his place at the table and spoken those inspired words of the prophet. No one knew—no one but himself. He alone among them all saw the spiritual desert that was Minter. To him alone had come the vision of its blossoming.

It would take money, of course, a lot of money, but with God's help the money would be forthcoming. The district was prosperous, in spite of recent setbacks in the farm markets. Mentally he made a list of the farmers who were church members and adherents, setting against each the amount they might reasonably be expected to contribute to the building of a new church. The list was reassuring, tentative though it was. There were a few villagers, too, who might be called upon for sizable donations—Kellogg, the banker; Tom Reed, the lumber dealer; old Mrs. Namm, who must have tucked away a tidy bit from the motel she ran in conjunction with her restaurant, The Hearth. All were church members. Besides, there were men like Gilbertson, the druggist, and Lindstrom, the grocer—good citizens even though they were not affiliated with any church. In his present mood, though he winced at the thought of it, Luke saw no reason why they should overlook a man like Hugo Brazell, the proprietor of the only liquor store and bar in Minter. Heaven knew he had taken enough money out of the pockets of his misguided patrons.

Luke reckoned up his own resources and measured them squarely against the need. He had a substantial cash reserve on deposit in the bank in Cleone, in addition to government bonds that had accumulated over the years when farmers had profited from a world at war. Besides, there were certain small interest-bearing loans that would be available if he found it necessary to call them in. There was that money, too, that Agatha had turned over to the Jensens in their time of need when little Margot was stricken. There had never been any thought of drawing interest from that loan, and no

understanding as to when it should be paid. Still, it might be a good time to have a quiet talk with Magnus Jensen one of these days and find out just how the matter stood between them.

In the kitchen, Bess and Sally were washing the supper dishes. They had less to do than usual, since John and Matt had driven to the southern part of the state for a few days of pheasant shooting, and Mark had chosen to eat by himself in the cabin. The two girls and Luke had eaten early, and Luke had gone directly from the table to his little room off the hall where he had shut himself in, secure against disturbance.

The sunset was fading in a clear sky of red and saffron and gold, a veil of color that hung as a backdrop for the Lombardy poplars majestic in their autumn garb.

"Let's take a walk down and visit Mark when we're through here," Sally suggested. "We haven't gone near him since he got his place fixed up."

"Might as well," Bess agreed. "Luke has been sticking in that office of his every night lately."

"What's he so busy at?"

"It's all a mystery to me. I never know what he's thinking." As she spoke, Bess looked from the window and saw Luke hurrying down the drive, past the flower garden, and on toward the county road. "Why, there he is now. I didn't hear him go out. Where do you suppose he's going, all by himself?"

Sally glanced out. "Visiting, probably."

"He might have asked me to go with him. He hasn't taken me to visit a neighbor since I came to the house."

"The Jensens are the only near ones." Sally gave an instant's thought to that. It *was* rather odd of him to be running off without a word. "Maybe he's got a girl friend waiting for him somewhere up the road."

"I know you're just kidding, but I'd trust Luke anywhere."

"Of course. You really think a lot of him, don't you?"

"Why shouldn't I? He has made me happier than I've ever been in my life. Isn't that enough for any woman?"

"I suppose it is. Being in love can make a person very miserable sometimes. I think you're lucky to feel the way you do about it."

"How do you mean, lucky?"

“Oh, I was just thinking—if some other man had come along—somebody much younger and—” Sally checked herself. *For heaven’s sake, what am I saying?*

“How should I know? It just didn’t happen to me. I’ve never been in love that way. Besides, it was Luke who came along—and I’m glad he did. He’s kind—and he’s *good*.”

“Of course he is, Bess!”

“Sometimes I wish he wasn’t *quite* so good, maybe. When we disagree on anything, I always end up feeling I’m in the wrong and he’s in the right.”

Sally restrained a smile. “That’s very interesting. From what I’ve heard people say, it was just the other way around between him and Agatha.”

“What was she like, Sally? I’ve been wanting to ask you, but I haven’t had the nerve.”

Sally dried her hands briskly on the kitchen towel and glanced from the window. “We can talk about that some other time, Bess. If we’re going to visit Mark we’d better get started. It’ll be dark before we know it.”

They could hear Mark’s violin as they picked their way across the pasture and along the edge of the plowed field toward the swamp. From the open doorway of the cabin a pale yellow glow of lamplight rayed across the ground. It was not until they were within hailing distance that the music stopped and they heard Mark’s voice.

Bess held back. “He isn’t talking to himself, is he?” she whispered.

Sally took her by the arm. “What if he is? He’s not going to bite you. You’re not scared?”

“Not exactly, but—there’s something kind of creepy about Mark.”

Just then they heard Margot Jensen’s light treble of laughter. “Margot is with him,” Sally urged. “Come on.” They were still a few steps from the doorway when she called, “Hello, the house!”

It was an old pioneer greeting and it brought Margot hopping quickly to the door, where she stood peering out into the dusk, her hair a gossamer nimbus against the lamplight. A deep-throated and sleepy “Hello, hello!” and a dry beak-snapping divulged the presence of Mark’s pet crow on its perch beside the doorway.

“Sally!” Margot piped in happy surprise.

“Are you at home to visitors?” Sally asked as she came to the doorstep.

“It’s Sally—and Mrs. Darr,” Margot announced over her shoulder. “They’ve come to see us, Mark.”

They went in, casting their eyes about them, and Sally exclaiming, "It's lovely! A perfect little dream house. And here I've been feeling sorry for you, Mark. Why, I'd like to live here myself."

"Hear that, Mark!" Margot said gleefully. "Sally likes our house. I told you she would."

Mark had risen from his chair and was standing behind it, his violin under one arm. He was smiling his fixed smile, but he said nothing.

"I think it's real cute," Bess said. "And to think he did it all by himself!"

"I helped, Mrs. Darr," Margot said.

"Oh, I didn't mean to leave you out of it, dear," Bess apologized. "And couldn't you call me Bess, just for a change? It's much more friendly, and we've known each other long enough, haven't we?"

"I don't mind," Margot replied. "Mother thought it wouldn't be very polite, but if you want me to—"

"I do. 'Mrs. Darr' makes me feel like an old married woman." She stepped over to look more closely at a crimson dahlia that stood in a vase on the shelf in front of the mirror. The color had faded a little so that it looked almost artificial. She touched it lightly with her fingertips. "Why, it's real!" At the same instant she saw the framed photograph of a middle-aged woman, gaunt of jaw, large of features, with deep-set dark eyes and curiously tender mouth. The picture was eased up beside the dahlia with what looked like birch twigs. The picture must be—Bess felt a swift, unreasonable tightening in her throat for that woman who had been Luke's wife. She scarcely heard Margot's reply when she turned around.

"My mother did that. She puts flowers into a box of fine sand until they're dried out. She had to keep that one buried for almost a month. Little flowers—like violets—don't take nearly so long. Asters are easiest. They dry out almost by themselves."

"Well, isn't that clever!" Bess said. "I never would have thought of anything like that myself."

She looked about for a place to sit down.

"We haven't many chairs," Margot said, twisting her fingers. "But maybe we'll have more when—"

"Come on, Bess," Sally put in. "Sit down beside me here. I don't go for that old superstition about sitting on a bed bringing bad luck. Sit down."

But Mark shoved his chair quickly toward Bess before she could take her place beside Sally.

“Oh, thanks, Mark,” she smiled, and sat down. “We won’t be staying long anyhow. We just wanted to have a look at your place—and well, it’s simply lovely!”

“We heard you playing on our way down here, Mark,” Sally said. “Won’t you play something for us—just one little piece?”

For a moment Mark stood blankly staring out through the doorway, his lower jaw mutely at work. Slowly then he marched across the room and laid his violin away in its case.

“Maybe some other time,” he said.

Margot lifted her head in an attitude of listening. “Oh, they’re here, Mark!” she exclaimed softly, and limped toward the door.

“Are you expecting more visitors?” Sally asked.

“Sh! They come every night.” Margot hurried to the cupboard and brought a pan of fish and table scraps, while Mark filled a bowl from a water pail beside the stove. They set the food and water just outside the door, and Margot called, “Here, rackies!”

Sally and Bess went to stand beside the door. Two full-grown raccoons were already there, and after a moment three young ones filed out from the undergrowth shadows and fell to, daintily washing each morsel before eating it, and then looking up with quizzical jerkings of their sharp little snouts. Margot squatted on the doorstep and offered crusts of bread to the older ones, who came to take it from her fingers, accepting it in their own nimble hands and sitting upright while they ate it.

“How adorable!” Bess whispered.

“They wear masks,” Margot told her, “pretending they are robbers. We have skunks, too. They wear black velvet court trains trimmed with ermine, don’t they, Mark?”

Mark nodded and gave her a brief patronizing smile.

“We call the big rackies Joke and Jonquil. We haven’t named the young ones yet.”

Among the three kittens there was a squealing squabble over the food and a furry melée until the portly elders sent their children scurrying home. Margot shrieked with laughter.

Back in the cabin again, Bess suggested it was time they were going. “Luke ought to be home by now, and he’ll be wondering what has become of us.”

“That wouldn’t do him any harm,” Sally observed. “But maybe we’d better leave.”

“I must go home too,” Margot said. “I just came over with some scraps for the rackies. Oh, dear, it’s dark already. I’ll go along with you, if you’re going anyhow. I’m not afraid of the dark, but mother always wants me home before. It’s almost time for moonrise, though.”

“I’ll go with you,” Mark said.

The four of them walked together as far as the corner of the plowed field. There Mark and Margot went on westward toward the road, while Sally and Bess skirted the field.

“Wasn’t it funny how Margot talked about the cabin as if it was hers as much as Mark’s?” Bess remarked.

“Well, she must have helped a lot with the curtains and things.”

“Maybe they’re planning to get married someday,” Bess said, but her laugh was thin and Sally sensed that her thoughts were not on Mark and Margot. “That was Mark’s mother, wasn’t it—that picture beside the dahlia?”

“Yes.”

“Why don’t you want to tell me about her?”

“What makes you think I don’t want to?”

“Just the way you acted when I asked you in the kitchen, before we left.”

“Well, maybe I did shy away from it. The woman is dead, Bess. You’re Luke’s wife now. What good would it do to talk about her?”

“I don’t see what harm it would do.”

“You saw her picture on the shelf.”

“A person can’t tell anything from a picture.”

Sally glanced across the field to the east, where the moon was orbiting up from red to gold. “Well, I never knew her really. I used to see her once in a while—in Minter. She was a big, homely woman, but she had beautiful eyes.”

Luke had found Magnus and Guri Jensen at home.

“You come without your wife?” Magnus asked as soon as the greetings were exchanged.

“Oh, I just walked over for a minute,” Luke said. “She was busy in the kitchen when I left.”

“Well, come in and sit down,” Guri invited. “I’ll get coffee.”

The two men went to the dining room and sat at the table.

“Your harvest was good this year, Magnus?” Luke began, and looked about him at the meagerly furnished room.

“Yah, it was a good harvest, Luke. But the farmer makes no money today. Also, I can’t do my work like I used to. I must pay for help—and such help it is! And such wages they are asking! Tcha!”

“It’s true, Magnus. The young men nowadays would rather work behind a bar than do an honest turn on the farm. I thank God I have sons of my own to help carry the load. And I keep my health. It must be hard for a man like yourself.”

Magnus glanced down at his twisted hands and then with a wincing effort of his wryly shaped left shoulder sat proudly erect. “Yah, but I do not complain. We bear what we must bear, and we keep body and soul together.”

Guri came from the kitchen with two steaming cups of coffee. “And how is the young Mrs. Darr?” she asked as she set the cups on the table.

“Fine, just fine!” Luke assured her. “I got a girl to help her with the housework.”

“So Margot was telling me. The young Hunter girl, who was a teacher.”

“Yes, and a very good girl she is. Not afraid of work, and she and Bess get along fine together, almost like sisters.”

“Well, that’s nice. I’ve been intending to get over for a visit, but—”

“We all work too hard for visiting,” Magnus put in. “It will be easier now, and might be we can get over soon. I seen your new wife far up on the hill the day I was over to Mark’s place, but I have not met her yet.”

“Well, you two go on with your talk,” Guri said, turning away toward the kitchen. “I have some mending to do.”

“You put in a well for Mark, I understand,” Luke said as soon as Guri was out of the room.

“Yah, it was nothing,” Magnus deprecated. “One hour only and we have a good flow. Twelve, thirteen feet was all. And good spring water it is.”

“I hope he paid you for the work.”

“It was nothing, I say. I did it for the boy.”

“I won’t have any of that, Magnus,” Luke objected. “We pay our way.”

“Leave it, leave it,” Magnus insisted.

“Then count it off against that little loan we made you a few years back, when Margot was sick.”

“No, Luke, no. Guri has charged off a little for her work in your house. We agreed to that. But this is different, Luke.”

“Never mind, I’ll see it’s done.” Luke glanced toward the kitchen where Guri sat with her basket of mending, then lowered his voice. “By the way, how much do you figure is still owing on that loan? I haven’t bothered to keep a record of it myself.”

Magnus Jensen shifted uneasily in his chair. “Too much, Luke, that I know. You were very good to us, you and Agatha. I should have paid it back long ago, but—”

“Nonsense! We never thought of it as a loan, really. I’ve always looked on little Margot as if she was my own child. If I never get a penny more of it, I’ll get along. And I won’t hold it against you, either. It just popped into my mind, and I was curious to know where we stand—in round figures, that’s all.”

“I keep no round figures,” Magnus replied. “I can tell you exact if I look in my book.”

“Oh, bother your book!” Luke said with a large wave of his hand. “All I wanted was a general idea.”

“Something over four hundred dollars yet.”

Luke appeared surprised. “That much?”

“Yah, that much it is. But if you need it, Luke, I could might be get the bank to—”

“I wouldn’t think of it. I’m sorry I mentioned it. Forget all about it. Like you say—you put in a well for Mark, we did what we could for Margot. By the way, where is the girl? I don’t want to go home without saying hello to her.”

As Luke asked the question, Guri came in from the kitchen and set her basket of mending aside.

“She went over to see Mark right after supper,” she said, “But if you’re not in a hurry, she ought to be back any minute now. She took a few table scraps over to some pet coons that have been coming to the cabin lately.”

“Margot and Mark!” Magnus smiled. “They are a great pair, the two of them.”

“A great pair indeed,” Luke echoed. “It’s hard to realize they’re growing up.”

“It happens,” Magnus observed.

“Sometimes I wonder if it’s wise to let Margot run back and forth the way she’s doing.”

“Ah, they have been together, running forth and back for years,” Magnus reminded him.

“Yes, of course.”

Guri thoughtfully smoothed back her graying hair, and her voice sharpened slightly as she asked, “Is there anything wrong with it?”

“No, I suppose not.”

“But you think there is,” Guri persisted. “Don’t you trust Margot, or is it your boy you’re afraid of?”

Luke’s nose had a moment’s spell of nervousness. “Now, Guri, you know better than that. I trust Margot even more than I trust my own sons. But they all need a little guidance when they’re growing.”

“We’re giving Margot the best guidance we know how,” Guri said. “I don’t forbid her doing what she wants to do. I had too much of that kind of bringing up when I was her age. She knows what’s right and what’s wrong. She doesn’t go to see Mark on school nights. She has her home work to do. But beyond that . . .”

“Guri, Guri!” Luke pleaded. “I didn’t mean anything by what I said. Margot has always been a good child. She’s still a good child. It would break my heart if anything happened to her.”

There had been something sour about the visit, Luke reflected as he walked homeward, although he had not meant it to be so. Still, there were things that had to be talked over, however unpleasant they might be. It was just as well to let Magnus know that the loan had not been forgotten. Agatha would never have mentioned it, of course, but Agatha had nothing to do with it now. Furthermore, he had no intention of revealing to Bess what was strictly his own affair. Belatedly but profoundly, he was learning that a man, to be himself, must keep his own counsel on a great many things. He must walk alone.

As he made the turn from the Jensens’ lane into the county road, a hunter’s moon had risen in burnished majesty beyond the grove of poplars. A tinkle of laughter came from the left and he paused to look along the dappled roadway. Two figures, one tall and straight, the other small and limping came into view, then halted where the moonlight was a golden flood pouring through a wide space among the trees.

What he beheld then was so strange, so disturbing, that he could scarcely credit his senses. The two figures, quite separate from each other, raised their arms to the moon and chanted in unison, “The moon, the stars, the earth and all its creatures—for these we thank the All-God!”

With a shaken feeling that he had witnessed some pagan ritual not meant for Christian eyes, Luke Darr stole unseen through the shadows and hurried down the driveway to his own house.

AUTUMN loitered in rare warmth. It was not until late October that the clouds showed promise of the rain for which the farmers had been praying for the past month.

Beneath a slaty, threatening sky, Sally and Bess were harvesting the squash and the pumpkins, the great cabbages, the root vegetables and potatoes, and piling them into bushel baskets that Mark carried off to the cyclone cellar beside the pasture. They had been at it since breakfast, squatting on their blue-jeaned haunches to tug at carrots, or standing to wield forks on the hills of potatoes, laughing and talking in the manner of two country wenches who shared the joy of contact with the soil.

They were in a lusty mood as they turned up freakishly misshapen vegetables and dubbed them according to their fancy. This one was Mussolini, that one Ichabod Crane. An over-sized, rotund cabbage Sally christened Ignatius Ringtossel, and for a fleshy, overripe squash Bess came up with Maggie Rotpulp.

“Well, honestly, look at this, Bess!” Sally laughed, and held up a crotched carrot, grotesquely equipped. “What shall we call him?”

Bess regarded it with an earnest frown. “Pastor Bly, of course!”

“You’re flattering the pastor, Bess,” Sally said and both broke into boisterous laughter.

“Gosh, it’s good to be kids again for a little while,” Bess said as Mark brought his wheelbarrow for another load. “This takes me back to the last time I helped my mother in our little garden down in Iowa.” She looked up at the sky. “It began to snow before we were through and she said, ‘These snowflakes could be for me—on my grave.’ Why do old people—oh, she wasn’t so old either—but why do they say things like that? I was sixteen at the time, but it scared the wits out of me. Anyhow, she was right. She died just a few weeks later. Do you suppose she sort of knew it was coming?”

Sally looked down at the garden gloves on her hands. “How could she?”

"I don't know. But I often have funny feelings too." Bess swung about and looked behind her. "I've had a feeling ever since we came out and started working here in the garden—a feeling that Mark's mother was watching us."

Sally's flesh crept, and then she felt the first snowflake on her cheek. "It's starting to snow," she said. "Come on, we've done enough for today."

But when they got to their feet, Bess stood for a moment looking about her in bewilderment, taking a step first in one direction, then in another.

Good Lord, Sally thought to herself, *she looks as if she's thinking of running away somewhere!* Aloud, she said, "I'm getting chilly. Let's get in."

But there was no true snowfall after all. The skies cleared and a sharp frost came with the following dawn, with rime individualizing to stardom lowly weeds and twigs, and a glitter of ice on the cattle troughs. A day later, the lazy, earth-cherishing sun proclaimed Indian Summer.

"Now that the work's all done this fall," said Luke to Bess in jovial spirits, "let's go to town and spend a little of our hard-earned money. We have to get the new carpet for the living room, and we can look around for a new couch and a couple of chairs while we're at it. Maybe take in a movie, if you feel like it."

"I'd love it," Bess said. "But the paperhangers—won't they be here one of these days?"

"Day after tomorrow, they said. That'll give us a couple of days to fool around in town. The boys can take care of what's left to do around the place."

Luke had never seemed so young to Bess as he did during those days. He frolicked about in the furniture stores, joked with the salesmen, actually flirted with the girls who came to wait on them, refused to haggle over prices, and finally selected a carpet of a gray-and-rose pattern, the price of which drew a protest from Bess.

"It's simply beautiful, dear, but all that money for a rug! Don't you think we ought to look at something a little less expensive?"

"The best isn't good enough," Luke said, chucking her under the chin, and went off to inspect a smoking stand that had caught his eye in passing. "That's the very thing for Matt's birthday—he'll be twenty-five next week. Hold this and the rug," he said to the attentive salesman. "I'll have one of my boys drive in and pick them up early in the week."

On their second day in town, Luke had business of his own to attend to and Bess went shopping alone. In a department store where a fall clearance sale was in progress, her eyes fell upon a pair of toreador pants, rose pink

with black and silver braid trimming down the sides. Luke would love her in those! She looked at the price tag and was so amazed that she bought them at once. Such a bargain!

They met for lunch, took in a western movie, treated themselves to a malted milk shake in a nearby drug store, and were ready to start for home.

"This has been the loveliest day we've had in weeks," Bess said as she nestled beside him in the car.

"It's been fun," Luke said. "We'll have to do it oftener. And we will!"

When they arrived home, Sally told them that the paperhangers had come and were already at work on the walls of the bedroom.

"I wasn't expecting them until tomorrow," Luke said, and hurried upstairs where he found the men measuring the walls and jotting down figures in a small notebook.

"Don't get scared, Mr. Darr," the younger of the two men said, folding his measuring rule. "We just finished a job over at Scully's and we thought we'd drop in on the way back to town and get set for tomorrow morning."

"Sort of casing the joint," the man with the notebook said with a laugh.

"That's all right," Luke told them. "Go right ahead. I'll have my wife come up and tell you what she wants done. We have the paper ready, so you can get right at it in the morning."

In the kitchen he found Bess telling Sally all about their day in town.

"Run up and talk to the men, Bess. Show them the paper we bought and give them any instructions you may have in mind. I've got to go out and see what the boys have been doing while we were in town."

He left the house at once and Bess picked up a couple of parcels she had placed on the table.

"And look what I found at a sale in Breen's," she said to Sally. "They were such a bargain I couldn't resist them. You wouldn't have, either!"

She broke the package and held the toreador pants before her. "Aren't they cute?"

"I'll know better when you put them on."

"I'll change right here," Bess said and began to remove her outer clothing. Presently she was clad in a mannish shirtwaist and the toreador pants that clung closely about her waist and hips. "There—how do you like them?"

"As you say, Bess, they're really cute. But aren't they a bit snug?"

"They can be let out," Bess said, running her hands down her hips. "It was the only pair I liked that was anywhere near my size."

The back door opened suddenly and Matt stepped into the kitchen and went to the sink. "A mighty thirst has come upon me," he groaned, running a glassful of water from the faucet, "and nothing in this godforsaken house but H₂O to kill it. What I wouldn't give right now for a cold glass—" He looked at Bess. "Hey, what the hell! Is this a bullfight?"

Bess pirouetted in the middle of the floor. "Don't you like them? I got them today—at a bargain!"

"Baby, on you they'd be a bargain at any price." He stepped toward her and slapped her on a rounded hip. "Kid, you're getting to be a real hazard around here."

He drained his glass and went to the door. "Back to the old rock pile again," he said and waved his hand.

"Well, honestly," Bess said indignantly. "I should have kicked his bottom for him."

"At the risk of splitting the pants?" Sally laughed.

"Anyhow, *I* like them," Bess said, and went away to offer her instructions to the men upstairs.

Luke was in the kitchen when she finally came back, the two workmen with her.

"It's all set, Mr. Darr," one of them said. "We'll be out first thing in the morning."

"We'll be ready for you," Luke replied, staring at the floor, a thumb and forefinger clamped upon his nose. When the men left, he turned upon Bess. "Where in the name of heaven did you get those—those pants?" he demanded.

"Why, Luke, I bought them this afternoon. They were on sale at—"

"And you paraded yourself in front of strangers—like that?"

"I didn't parade myself, and they weren't quite strangers. One of them used to come in at Swale's . . ."

"As if that matters!" Luke retorted. "Get them off, and don't let me see you in them again!"

He went to the sink to wash his hands and Bess walked slowly away into the hall and up the stairs, while Sally stood biting her lips as she watched Bess go. Luke turned about with a glare and whipped the hand towel from its rack. "Is supper about ready?" he asked.

"Just about—as soon as the family is ready to sit down," Sally told him.

Luke went off to the living room where he composed himself to read the afternoon paper he had brought from town. But in a few minutes it dawned

on him that Bess had not come back downstairs. He laid his paper aside, went into the hall, and paused at the foot of the stairs.

“Bess!”

There was no answer. He hurried up the stairs and opened the door to their bedroom. Bess lay on the bed, wrapped in her green robe, her face buried in the pillows.

“Bess, what’s the matter?”

She did not lift her head. “Go away!”

He closed the door softly behind him and went to lean over her. “Bess, girl, you’ve been crying! You’re not angry because I told you not to—”

She sprang up and sat on the edge of the bed. “I don’t care about the darned pants! But I won’t have you ordering me around as if I was a child.”

He did his best to smile. “Well, now—you don’t have to go into tantrums over a little thing like that. I didn’t mean to bark at you, but after all . . .”

“It isn’t a little thing,” Bess said between her teeth. “I didn’t come here to be treated like a five-year-old. You’ve done it before—that warm day when I let my hair hang down. That was just once. But you’re doing it all the time—with me—with the boys—with everybody! Hasn’t anybody the right to live unless they live exactly the way you want them to? Just because we’re all younger than you . . .”

She checked herself. That was the one thing she had resolved never to speak of.

Luke stepped away from her. “I know,” he said, and there was hurt in his voice. “I’m not young any more. I’m old enough to have been your father. But you knew that before you married me. We both knew it. And still . . .”

Bess buried her face in her hands. “Oh, Luke, Luke—I didn’t mean that—I don’t mean it! I was mad and I wanted to hurt you, that’s all. But I didn’t mean it, and I’m sorry I said it. You’ve been so good to me—you were so sweet and—so different in town today. I was proud of you, and I’m proud I married you, no matter what you think!”

His heart softened toward her. He wanted to go to her and take her in his arms, but he thrust the impulse sternly aside. This was no time for weakness. He went to the window and looked out, his hands clasped behind his back. He would have to use tact in this, he decided—a little self-reproach, perhaps, without humbling himself too much.

He went back and seated himself on a chair near the bed, his hands rubbing his knees. “I’m proud to have you for my wife, Bess,” he said. “Let’s do nothing to spoil that. I’m sorry I hurt your feelings.”

At his plaintive smile she reached out and took one of his hands. “Oh, Luke . . .”

“But,” he continued with renewed vigor, “it’s true that I’m older than you. I’ve had a little more experience with life. But I need your help, Bess. We have to work together. On the other hand, I happen to be head of this house, and when I think something isn’t right . . .”

Bess caught her hand away from his. “All right, I’ll never wear the darned things again,” she flared.

“I wasn’t talking just about the pants,” he said, and could hardly resist the temptation to laugh at her. “What I mean is—oh, come on, Bess! This is childish.” He got up and put an arm about her shoulders. “Get yourself dressed. Sally will have supper on by the time we get down.”

She shook him off and sprang up to look into the mirror of her dressing table. “I’m not going down. I look a sight!”

“Don’t be ridiculous! Of course you’re going down.”

“I’m not! You can tell them I’ve got a headache—tell them anything you like. But I’m not going down there looking like this, with my eyes all red and my face all puffed up. I don’t feel like eating, anyhow. I’m not hungry.”

“Well—” He hesitated, looking at her in sheer bewilderment. Women never grow up, he thought to himself. They grow old, but they never grow up.

He turned away and left the room.

Three days later the first real snowfall came. It began snowing early in the afternoon, so that when Margot Jensen got down from the school bus on her way home it had spread a clean white blanket over the countryside. She stood and watched the yellow bus lumber away, its ruby tail lights blinking more and more faintly until they finally disappeared and she was alone.

You could feel so utterly, so thrillingly alone in falling snow. It was closer even than darkness. At night there were always deeper shadows against the dark—a huddling house, a looming barn, cattle drowsing beneath the spreading branches of a tree—half-seen, but there, if you opened your eyes wide and waited long enough. But here in the falling snow the world was closed away.

This morning she had noticed a strawstack that had been left by the threshers in a field beside the lane. It was no longer there, it was hidden away in silence. Snow-covered by now, it was a huge, misshapen igloo in a field turned wasteland by the encroaching season, and she was the solitary

wanderer looking for shelter from the wind and the bitter cold. Only, there was no wind and no bitter cold. The great snowflakes floated down in moth-whispers and the air was still and sweet. She could be the stealthy hunter scouring the woodland for furry creatures who leaped or bellied low in haste for cover, terrified by her coming, not knowing that her very heartbeat was one with their own. Or she was the hungry waif in a city street, peering into lighted windows beyond which there was warmth for others but none for her, or gazing into the faces of passers-by where there was no warmth for anybody. Or she was a bride in—oh, in some magic, far-off land, and she was walking under great showers of rose-petals, tall and straight and . . .

No, she would never walk tall and straight. She seldom gave thought to herself as a cripple. Only once in a while, and then it came to her sharp as a knife-thrust, searing as fire, bringing tears of anger rather than of self-pity. It was something she never talked about to anyone—except to Mark, and not often even to him. Mark knew without being told.

She would have gone to see Mark on her way home from school. It was the kind of day to be with him, to watch the snow fluttering down from the gray veil of the sky, to sit and talk or sit in silence, sharing the warmth of their togetherness. But her mother had insisted on her coming straight home. Even her father had spoken up—for no reason at all. He usually left such things to her mother. But they had both been acting strangely of late. It was almost as if they thought it improper for her to see Mark, except when he came to see her.

Oh, Mark, Mark—and our little house by the swamp!

They had given Matt a birthday dinner with candles and a cake Sally Hunter had baked for the occasion. There had been gifts from them all, a cigarette lighter from Sally, a smoking stand from his father and Bess, a carton of his favorite cigarettes from Mark, a pullover sweater from John.

He had no intention, when he drove into town that evening after the meal, of staying more than an hour or so, celebrating his twenty-fifth birthday with a couple of drinks and a visit with friends, and getting back to the farm well before midnight. John and Sally were to have gone with him, but just as they were about to leave, the manager of a feed company that had been watching with interest John's experiments with a new variety of wheat telephoned from Cleone, asking if he might come out to the farm for a while before heading back to the city.

Matt was now sitting at the bar in The Grotto, musing over his first drink. His friends hadn't turned up yet, but they would. He thought back

appreciatively upon his birthday dinner—Sally’s cake had been perfection, his father had led in singing *Happy Birthday to You*, and Bess had bravely tried to follow in her off-key soprano. He gazed down into his glass and thought that the amber of it was about the shade of Bess’s hair.

He had given no more than a passing glance at the young woman who sat on the stool next his, swirling her drink and looking abstractedly into the mirror behind the bar. When she spoke, he was not startled. She had a gentle voice that matched the gentleness of her softly glowing green eyes.

“I’ve seen you about town,” she said. “You’re Matt Darr, aren’t you?”

“That’s right. You look familiar. You—you are . . .”

“Don’t try to guess. I don’t go out much. I’m Margaret Flann—and tonight I’m on the town.”

“A sort of special occasion?” Matt asked.

“But definitely. Two years ago tonight Jim was killed in a truck crash on the highway. Jim was my husband.”

“Well, sure—Jim Flann. I remember him. Jim was a nice guy. Too bad—Margaret.”

“Sure—that’s what they all say. Too bad, Margaret. As if that made it all right.”

“I know. Nothing makes it all right. But what can anybody say in a situation like that? They mean it, but what the hell, they can’t change it!”

“Okay, so they can’t change it. I know that. So I’m out on the town tonight. Let me buy you a drink.”

Matt smiled at her. She was rather plain looking, but her eyes were warm, her cheeks bore only a suggestion of make-up, her lips were full and soft. Her light-brown hair was smoothly cropped about a graceful neck, her shoulders wide and sturdy, her breasts firm under a revealing tan blouse. With the gray woolen skirt and jacket she wore no jewelry except a gold band on the ring finger of her left hand. She was thoroughly *clean*—that was it, Matt reflected as he looked at her. She was not forward, not brash—just pleasant and companionable.

“You know,” he said after a moment, “I’m going to let you buy me that drink.”

“Why not! I thought for a second that you were going to turn me down.”

“Ordinarily, I would have. But I’m doing a little quiet celebrating myself tonight. This happens to be my birthday.”

“Really? How old are you? Or shouldn’t I ask?”

Matt grinned at her. "I'm twenty-five. How old are you? Or shouldn't I ask?"

"That's fair enough," she replied. "I'll be thirty-one next month. Now—let's have that drink."

"You hold down a job here in town?" Matt asked when the drinks were set before them.

"I'm a saleswoman in Connie's dress shop at present. But I'm leaving next week. I'm going out to the coast where the winters aren't so cold. I have a sister out there."

"We won't be seeing you around town, then?"

"Not after next week."

"That's no way to treat a guy," Matt said. "We get together over a drink or two, and then you blow!"

"We can enjoy the drink, can't we?"

That was how it began. As he drove home the next morning, he thought—if a guy could only see the end from the beginning. Not that it would change anything beyond taking some of the zest out of living. The end was already in the beginning, but it was best not to know it. Who would have guessed, when he sat down to his first drink at The Grotto bar, that he would spend the night with Margaret Flann? What good would it do the human race to know that its course was inevitable, unalterable?

The sun was well up when he drove into the farmyard. He left the car in the driveway and entered the house by way of the kitchen. He found the family sitting at breakfast in the dining room.

"The prodigal has returned!" he greeted them with a show of heartiness.

There was no immediate response, and Matt looked at his father who sat scowling at the head of the table. Luke set his coffee cup down and moved his chair back.

"Where have you been, Matt?" he asked, his voice admirably controlled.

"I've been in Cleone, pa," Matt replied. "I told you last night where I was going, didn't I?"

"You didn't tell me you were going to spend the whole night in Cleone."

"I didn't know I was. I thought I'd be back before midnight."

"Did you have an accident?"

"No—not exactly."

"Not exactly? What do you mean by that?"

"A few things happened unexpectedly—that's all."

“You got drunk—is that it?”

“No, that’s not it. I had a couple of drinks, but I didn’t get drunk. Do I look it?”

Luke’s voice rose. “Don’t beat about the bush, Matt. Where did you spend the night?”

Matt drew a hand over his as yet unshaven face. “You really want to know, pa?”

“Answer me!” Luke commanded.

“A young widow did me the honor of inviting me to share her bed with her. But don’t ask me her name, because I won’t tell you. A man has some rights, even in this house. Now—I could do with a cup of coffee, if there’s anything left in the pot.”

He started toward the table, but Luke sprang from his chair, hands upraised as if to strike. Matt regarded him incredulously. “You wouldn’t try that, would you?” he said, a flicker of amusement curling his lips.

“You’re no son of mine!” Luke raged. “A drunkard—a fornicator—a blackguard—shaming the name you bear—disgracing the mother that bore you!”

“It would have been better if she had dropped me,” Matt said, grimly casual.

“How do you dare show your face in this house after spending the night with a—a harlot?”

“She’s no harlot,” Matt said. “She’s a lonely woman, and a decent one. And I dare show my face in this house because I’m not ashamed, and this is my home, the only home I’ve got.”

“This is *my* house!” Luke stormed.

“Who made it yours?” Matt taunted him. “Maybe you’d like me to get the hell out altogether and stay out. But don’t get any foolish ideas like that, little man. This is where I belong, and this is where I’m staying.”

Luke was trembling from head to foot. He lifted himself on his toes to bring his face closer to Matt’s. “Don’t darken my doors again when you’ve been drinking. I have been patient with you, but this is the end. If you must act like a beast, don’t come into my house. Do you hear me? Go to the beasts, where you belong—sleep with the beasts—eat with them. Do what you like, but don’t show your face in my house. That’s final!”

He turned away, strode through the living room and crossed the hall to his little den. When they heard the door close, Sally got up from the table.

“Sit down, Matt,” she said almost in a whisper. “I’ll have some fresh coffee in a minute.”

“What a goddam fool you are!” John said as soon as Sally had gone.

“What the hell’s eating *you* now?” Matt retorted as he took his accustomed place at the table.

“Did you have to *tell* where you spent the night?”

“He asked me, didn’t he?”

“You could have stayed in a hotel or—”

“But I didn’t—and I’m not a liar.”

“Please, boys, let’s not have any more trouble this morning,” Bess spoke up. “I can’t stand it!”

“Okay,” John said, and went into the kitchen.

“You’re a bad, bad boy,” Bess said to Matt. “I had a birthday present of my own for you, but I’m not sure you deserve it.” Her eyes twinkled as she spoke.

“I thought that smoker was as much yours as—”

“It wasn’t. Your father picked that out in town the other day. I wanted to give you something more personal.”

“I don’t deserve anything,” Matt said, “and I’m not asking anything from anybody.”

“I know you’re not. Just the same—I’ll go up now and get it. I’d have given it to you last night, but you left in such a hurry.” On her way across the living room she paused and looked back. “You’ve got to promise you’ll wear them.”

“I’ll wear anything. But I warn you—I don’t go in for loud socks.”

“Buy your own socks!”

She hurried up to the bedroom and opened a small drawer in her dressing table. A moment later she was on her way back to the dining room. In her hand she held a small box that contained a pair of gold cuff links.

*T*HANKSGIVING at the Darr farm was to be strictly a family affair. On Wednesday afternoon, Sam Hunter drove up to take Sally home for the holiday. Her two married sisters and their husbands were coming to spend the day with the Hunter family, bringing their children with them for the feast. Sally had done everything possible by way of preparing for the holiday dinner so that Bess would have little to do beyond putting the turkey and the pumpkin pies into the oven and serving the meal when the family came to the table. She was all but ready to leave when her father drove into the yard.

Luke met him at the door. "It's good to see you, Sam," he said, and offered his hand. "You're looking sound and healthy."

"Like yourself, Luke," Sam Hunter replied heartily. "We may be putting the years behind us, but we can still show our heels to a lot of these young upstarts who think they have the world by the tail on a down-hill pull."

He was a big man, lean and broad-shouldered, with a wide, generous mouth and happy-smiling eyes. He was somewhat older than Luke, but since he had never taken himself too seriously his air was jauntily young.

Luke chuckled. "We still know a few things they don't, eh, Sam?" he said and winked with a little sidewise tilt of his head.

"I'd like to go back and learn it all over again, just the same. How's the missus, Luke?"

"Fine, fine! Come on in and see for yourself."

"I'm not fixing to stay, if that girl of mine is ready."

As they stepped into the living room, Bess and Sally came from the kitchen, Bess with an outstretched hand which Sam Hunter ignored as he threw his arms about her and gave her a resounding kiss.

"I don't often get a chance to kiss a good-looking woman these days," he said. "They all seem to think I've forgotten how."

Bess laughed, blushing. "You haven't forgotten, Mr. Hunter."

Luke grinned, pride mounting in him. “All you need is a little practice, Sam.”

“Pappy,” Sally said with mock rebuke, “you stopped in Minter on the way over.”

“Sure I did. I had a couple of beers with old Mike Dabney.”

“I thought so. Well, sit down. I’ll be ready in a few minutes.”

Bess went off with Sally and the two men settled themselves for a chat.

“What’s this I hear about you being put on the church board in Minter?” Sam asked, lighting a cigar.

Luke was startled to an elated flush. The news had already got around, then! “Well,” he said, modestly deprecating, “the Thomases are moving to California, and that left a vacancy to fill. So . . .”

“It’s about time. Frank Thomas is an old mossback. And the others aren’t much better. Kellogg and Reed have been running that proposition for years. They’ve been suffering from dry rot, the whole caboodle of them. They need a man like you to put a little life into ’em.”

“They’ve been a bit set in their ways,” Luke conceded, inwardly preening himself. “Still, they’ve been doing the best they know how, I suppose.”

“Well, it’s none of my business. I’m on the outside.”

“You could put yourself on the inside, Sam,” Luke ventured.

“Me!” Sam’s face broadened to a grin. “I’m an old reprobate, Luke. I’m no churchgoer, as you know. I couldn’t live up to it. I like to take a drink now and then when I meet up with a friend in town. It’s an easy way to talk about the crops and the weather and the markets and so on. I just don’t see any harm in it.”

“A lot of men are like you—good men, too,” Luke admitted grudgingly. “But I’m afraid I can’t see eye to eye with you on that.”

“Well, it’s not only that, Luke. I’d give up my glass of beer in a minute if I thought it would do anybody any good. But I can’t see myself having anything to do with an institution as dead as your church in Minter has been for years.”

“The Spirit of God is still alive, even there,” Luke argued.

“In that church? Luke, I’ll tell you something. I never drive past that old barn—especially at night—that I don’t feel like getting out of my car and setting a match to it. I wouldn’t keep chickens in it.”

Luke replied guardedly. “The Man of Nazareth had no place to lay His head.”

“Right! But old Pastor Bly is no Man of Nazareth. You expect me to sit in a pew and listen to the kind of balderdash that man dishes out every Sunday? Do you think we’re all on our way to hell if we don’t have his stamp of approval on our passports? I can’t buy that kind of gospel, Luke. I’d rather take my chances with God Almighty!”

“You think we’re all on our way to heaven, then?” Luke challenged.

“I don’t know anything about heaven. But if it’s all reserved for people like old man Bly, I don’t want to go there. I’d get damned tired of it in no time.”

“Well, now, Sam,” Luke said, gravely amiable, “don’t be too hard on Pastor Bly. He may be a bit old-fashioned, but he preaches the Word of God as he understands it.”

“The man doesn’t understand anything, Luke. Hell, if he had anything for people like me—and a lot of others I could name—we’d stop and listen to him on a street corner! We wouldn’t need a church.”

Luke was warming to the argument, but Sally came into the room, dressed and ready to leave.

“All set, dad. I’ve talked to John, and he’ll drive down and pick me up tomorrow night, if that’s all right with you, Mr. Darr.”

Luke glanced up at the rosy shine of her, the brilliance of her hazel eyes. “Certainly it’s all right, Sally,” he said, and went to the door with her father. “It’s been good talking to you, Sam. We ought to get together oftener.”

“We ought to, that’s a fact. I like to talk. They tell me I’m wrong about almost everything, but—I like to talk anyhow.”

Sam Hunter wasn’t wrong about everything, Luke reflected as he watched the car drive away. He was a good, solid citizen, whose name had been mentioned repeatedly in local political circles, though he had consistently rejected every offer of public office. Still, if the right kind of pressure were brought to bear on him, if he were approached in the right way . . .

At the supper table that night, Matt remarked upon the new rug and the new furniture that graced the living room. He was pleased with the change, but he recalled the old story of the woman who bought new furniture for the old house, only to discover that a new house was necessary to match the furniture. When she moved into the new house, she discovered that she needed a new husband to match the house.

“You’d better watch your step, pa,” he warned solemnly. “First thing you know, you’ll be moving in with Mark.”

Luke gave him a preoccupied look, his mind remote from anything so preposterous as Matt's dire predictions. He was thinking of something Sam Hunter had said during their friendly argument that afternoon. Maybe Sam's idea was not too far astray. Pastor Bly might indeed be out of place in the shining new tabernacle of Luke's dreams.

And with only a faint sense of disloyalty to the gentle old preacher, he carried the thought with him that night when he went to bed.

Dinner had been set for two o'clock. Precisely on the hour, Bess looked from the window and saw Mark ambling across the pasture on his way toward the house. At some distance behind him, old Dante followed, his gait heavy and unhurried, like a creature weighed down with self-pity. It was not until Mark came into the barnyard that Bess saw the crow perched on his shoulder.

It reminded her of something she had seen in an old picture book when she was a child. There was an eeriness about it, however, that gave her a qualm as Mark approached the house. Why had he resisted her every effort to be friendly? Outwardly he had shown no hostility toward her, but there was no way of guessing what went on behind those dark, inscrutable eyes of his.

She looked up nervously as the door opened and Mark stepped into the kitchen, appreciatively sniffing the redolence of roast turkey and pumpkin pie fresh from the oven. He had left the crow outside, thank heaven!

"Happy Thanksgiving, Mark!"

His only response was an unintelligible grunt and Bess began whipping the mashed potatoes. He stepped over beside her and took the whipping ladle from her hands. As he beat the potatoes to a smooth, creamy lightness, he looked at the brown-roasted turkey still in its pan on top of the oven, and the pumpkin pie beside it covered with a deep froth of meringue dotted with amber beads of nectar.

"You did all this yourself?" he asked.

He was really talking to her! Encouraged, she smiled at him. "Not quite," she admitted. "Sally did most of it yesterday before she left."

"Last year it was Guri Jensen," Mark said. "Before that it was always my mother. She didn't need any help."

Not too thinly veiled, that accusation, but Bess chose to ignore it. "You loved your mother very much, didn't you?" she asked.

"She was my mother."

"I'd like to have a son of my own who would love me just because I was his mother," Bess said gently.

She was in the act of lifting the turkey from the roasting pan and setting it on a platter, but Mark reached and took the large fork from her. "I'll do that."

"Well, it *is* pretty heavy, at that. Here, I'll hold the pan steady."

It was a simple task, but Bess felt an almost giddy satisfaction in the knowledge that they were working together.

"There are other reasons," Mark said as he set the golden bird on its platter.

"Other reasons for what, Mark?" she asked, confused for the moment.

"For loving a mother."

"Oh—of course there are. I loved my mother more than anyone in the world. When she died, I thought I'd never get over it. I don't think I have, even now."

Mark looked at the floor. "It's a lonesome thing," he said heavily. "But we get over it—or find a way to live with it."

"I suppose so," Bess sighed, and brushed a hand over her moist brow. "It seems easier for some people than for others."

"Like pa."

The two words fell from his lips so casually, so lightly that it took her a moment to grasp their meaning. She looked up to meet his coolly smiling brown eyes and a quiver of vague fear passed over her body.

"Oh, Mark," she said at last, "you mustn't feel like that about your father! I'm sure he hasn't forgotten."

As she spoke, Luke's brisk tread sounded from the hall. He came into the kitchen, his face beaming at the sight of Mark. "Happy Thanksgiving, my boy! I see you're helping Bess prepare the feast."

Mark made no response, but Bess saw his whole countenance freeze as he turned away to stare out the window. That boy really hates his father, she thought, and saw her hands tremble as she lifted a spoonful of flour from the canister.

"Mark, please," she said quickly, "would you mind going in and telling the boys to get ready for dinner. I'll have it on the table as soon as I've made the gravy."

Luke frowned as Mark left the kitchen. "He seems to be having one of his bad days again," he observed.

Bess stirred the flour in the roasting pan. “Oh, I don’t think so, dear. We were having a very nice talk just before you came in.”

“What about?”

“Oh, just things. It’s the first time he has really said anything to me since I came to the house.”

“Well, maybe that’s a good sign. If we could only get him to say something once in a while. If he’d only—”

“You might start putting things on the table,” Bess suggested. “Everything’s ready.”

When they were all seated, Luke bowed his head reverently. “. . . and for what we are about to receive make us truly thankful. Amen.”

He picked up the carving knife, then paused and glanced about the table, his face alight. He had much to be thankful for indeed—a bountiful harvest, robust health, a family united at the festal board. Peace and serenity lay warmly about them, despite the differences that had so recently threatened them. Bess was her own sweet self again—their quarrel over the pink pants had been a silly thing anyhow. The affair involving Matt and that strumpet in Cleone was more serious, but Luke refused to think of it. All he felt was pity for him since he could not see the error of his ways. As he looked at him now he breathed a silent prayer for his wayward son.

“Let’s eat!” Matt said abruptly.

Luke smiled at him. “Always thinking of the inner man, aren’t you, Matt? Well . . .”

He began to separate the thigh and drumstick from the turkey, then paused and ran his thumb along the knife’s edge. “Could I have the steel, Bess?” he asked. “This knife needs a little touching up.”

“I tried to sharpen it before I brought it in,” Bess said as she got up from the table.

When she returned with the steel, Luke drew the knife expertly across it. “No woman can sharpen a knife,” he smiled at her.

“I never liked doing it,” Bess admitted.

“On the other hand,” Luke proclaimed, “no mere man can put up a dinner like this, my dear. You like the white meat, don’t you?”

“Yes—and lots of Sally’s good dressing.”

“You’re going to fetch Sally, John?” Luke asked as he proceeded with his carving.

“That was the idea,” John said, “unless you want to use the car. We can still phone her if . . .”

“No, no,” Luke protested. “We’ll stay home and listen to the radio. You don’t want to go anywhere tonight, do you, Bess?”

“I’ve had enough running around for one day,” Bess replied. “And my favorite program comes on Thursday nights.”

“How about taking me along for the ride?” Matt suggested. “If I’m not in the way, brother?”

John grinned. “I’m not urging you, exactly, but come along. There’s plenty of room.”

It was almost eight o’clock before they left the house. Matt was already in the driver’s seat before John got to the garage.

“You want to steer?” John asked.

“I don’t trust anybody to get me where I want to go on a dark night,” Matt said.

“Okay, Matterhorn!” It was an old nickname that belonged to their school days. “Just stay on the road.”

The night was starlit, without a moon, the air almost balmy. John settled himself comfortably in his seat and closed his eyes. He did not open them again until the car came to an unexpected stop and he awoke to the sound of music and the sight of lights blinking through the car windows. It took him a moment to realize they had halted in front of the Blue Moon. Matt had opened the door and was getting out of the car.

“Take over, Jonathan. I’ll wait here till you get back.”

“So this is where you wanted to go on a dark night?”

“Pick me up on your way home,” Matt called back as he closed the door and picked his way between the cars parked in front of the roadhouse.

Damn it, John said to himself, there he goes! He threw the door open and set one foot on the ground. But it was senseless to go after him now. It would only lead to an argument—maybe something worse. He moved behind the steering wheel, shifted the gears and raced away. He slackened his pace only a little as he drove through Minter, then stepped it up again as he left the lights of the village behind him and started down the six miles of blacktop roadway that lay between Minter and the Hunter farm. When he was still a mile away he lifted his foot from the accelerator and let the car drift to a moderate speed. What could be more foolish than racing his head

off in the hope of keeping his brother from making a fool of himself? That was something Matt would eventually have to square with himself. Nobody could do it for him.

He found Sally waiting for him in a house riotous with children who should have been in bed an hour ago.

“What a relief to get out of that house!” Sally said as she got into the seat beside him. “How my sisters could have brought such a bunch of little roughnecks into the world . . .”

“When you get kids of your own, they’ll be little angels, I suppose,” John said, starting the car.

“It makes a difference,” Sally admitted. She lit a cigarette which she placed between his lips, then lit one for herself and relaxed contentedly. “It’s a lovely night, so warm and full of stars. Must you drive so fast?”

“I left Matt at the Blue Moon,” John said, slowing the car. “I promised to pick him up.”

“He won’t run away.”

“It isn’t safe to leave that guy on the loose.”

“Are you going to baby him for the rest of his life?”

“I don’t want him to have another run-in with pa, that’s all. One more set-to like that morning after his birthday, and something’s going to crack.”

“Have it your way, then. I was looking forward to a quiet little drive back to the farm tonight, after a whole day of bedlam at home.”

“I’d been looking forward to something like that myself,” John said.

Beside the road, just ahead of them, a huge oak stood limned against the starlit sky. John let the car drift to a halt beneath the half-denuded branches.

“I didn’t ask you to *stop*,” Sally laughed.

“I know you didn’t. That’s my idea. I’ve got to find out something about you, and I think this is as good a place as any.”

“Well?”

“I want to find out how long a guy has to know a girl like you before he can kiss her.”

“That depends upon the guy.”

“I’m talking about me.”

“That’s nice,” Sally said primly. “It takes me back to the Minter school, when you were just *it*, and I was only . . .”

John laughed. “Sure, you were that skinny, freckle-faced brat . . .”

"I was that homely little kid who used to lie awake nights thinking about you. And I was the girl in high school who used to look for you on the street in Minter every summer when you came home for the holidays."

"I was supposed to know about that?"

"And I was the student who came home from teachers' college at Thanksgiving, and went to the Blue Moon where you and Matt were dancing with a couple of girls from Cleone, never seeing me."

"Honest, Sally? Why haven't you told me this before?"

"A girl has her pride," Sally said lightly, and then he saw the mischievous up-flutter of her lashes. "Anyhow, I was just reminding you of how long you have known me."

"Well, that ought to be long enough," John said, and leaned toward her until her face was lifted to his.

No word passed between them as he drew her close and discovered the deep warmth of her lips. He clung to her until she forced him away, her strong hands braced against his shoulders.

"There, Johnny," she said, her voice calm and unshaken. "We'd better be going now."

It vexed him that she should be so cool and detached while he sat trembling at the nearness of her.

"Just like that!" he said, half-angrily.

She smiled and took his face between her hands. Her breath was sweet against his lips. "You don't know much about me, Johnny. You don't know what kind of a woman you have on your hands. One more kiss like that—" She turned from him abruptly and sat gazing down the starlit road. "Let's go and pick up Matt."

In the Blue Moon Matt was nowhere in sight. John and Sally threaded their way through the dancing couples to an unoccupied booth against the wall.

"Let's sit down and wait," John said. "Would you like a beer?"

"Thanks."

When the beer was brought, John kept glancing about the crowded hall.

"I still don't know why you're so concerned about Matt," Sally said. "He's old enough now to . . ."

"He's a damned fool!" John said. "When there's liquor around, he doesn't know when to stop."

"There must be a reason for it," Sally argued. "I don't believe anybody gets drunk just because he loves the taste of the stuff."

"I've heard all the highbrow answers," John said irritably. "Maybe you have a new one?"

"I think he does it for spite. Matt hates his father."

"Don't be ridiculous! Matt has always been pa's favorite in the family. And he can handle the old man better than I can. What you're saying doesn't make sense. Matt just loves his booze. It's as simple as that."

"Well, let's not fight about it, Johnny," Sally said, and laid her hand in firm warmth over his. "How about dancing with me?"

It was during their second dance that John saw Matt come reeling in at the door. He was not quite staggering. Matt never staggered. He stood looking about him, swaying from side to side, grinning foolishly and lifting a hand now and then in greeting to friends who hailed him from every side.

"There he is!" John said, and stepped quickly away from Sally.

She followed him anxiously until the two brothers were face to face. "John, please!" she whispered.

But John had seized Matt by the arm. "Okay, Buster, let's get going."

Matt's blithe grin wavered toward Sally. "Hi, Sally! Want to dance?"

"We've been waiting for you," John said. "We're going."

"All set, Jonathan! Follow the leader."

Surprisingly, Matt offered no resistance. In the back seat of the car he slumped down.

"All right, so I'm drunk," he muttered. "So I say, what the hell!"

He was asleep before they reached the farm. The house was dark when they turned into the driveway and drove to the garage.

"You'd better go on in," John said to Sally. "I'll look after him."

"Couldn't I help?"

"There's nothing you can do. I'll walk him around till he gets his feet under him. And don't wake up pa if you can help it."

She got out of the car and John waited until he saw the light go on in her room. Then he got down and opened the rear door to look at Matt. He was snoring peacefully and for a moment John considered leaving him where he was to sleep it off. But that would only make matters worse. He'd waken in the middle of the night and go blundering into the house to bring Luke down on him in a rage.

He reached in and shook Matt by the shoulder. "Come on, guy, we're home!"

Matt jerked the hand off and went back to snoring.

“Wake up, wake up! I’m not going to stand here all night.” John shook him again, roughly.

Matt grumbled and raised his head. “Let me sleep.”

“You can’t sleep here. Come on, I’ll get you to bed.”

He took one of Matt’s arms and pulled him toward the open door. Matt wrenched himself free. “Don’t get tough,” he mumbled. “I’ll go when I’m damn good and ready.”

“I ought to beat your head off,” John said, losing his patience.

Matt began to laugh to himself. He shook his head vigorously and ran his hands over his eyes. “Remember the last time you tried that, brother?”

John remembered. They had been in high school at the time and had quarreled on the way home over a little charmer in John’s class who had secretly pledged herself to them both. Words had led to blows that left them bloodied and exhausted and with no advantage to either. They had promised their mother never to fight again.

“I remember,” John said, his patience returning as he saw that Matt was emerging from his stupor. “But right now I’ve got to get you to bed.”

He offered a hand to help Matt from the car, but Matt brushed it aside. “I’ll do this on my own.”

He managed to crawl from the car and finally stood beside John, steadying himself with a hand on the door. “Brother,” he said with careful emphasis, “am I drunk!”

“Let’s walk around for a while and take the air,” John urged.

Matt grinned crookedly. “Some old grandmother thought that one up. What I need now is sleep—lots of sleep—and I’ll come up fresh as a daisy—ready to go out and do it all over again. Jeez, what a damn fool I am!”

“Maybe you’re beginning to get wise to yourself.”

Matt took his hand from the car door and stood swaying for a moment before venturing to take a step. “I’ve got to get some sleep,” he said thickly.

“Come on, then. I’ll give you a hand.”

“I don’t need your help.”

“You can’t make it yourself.”

“I’ll make it all right.” He moved away from the car, out of the garage, and turned toward the barn.

“The house is over this way,” John said.

Matt paused and looked at him. “I know where the house is. Didn’t you hear the old man tell me to go sleep with the beasts next time I came home

plastered? Well, by God, I'm going to sleep with the beasts!"

John followed him to the barn. There was nothing else he could do. And perhaps it was the best course, after all. The night was warm and an improvised bed of clean, fragrant hay would be no great hardship. The cows had not yet been turned in for wintering and there would be nothing to disturb his sleep.

They stepped into the barn and John turned on the ceiling lights. "All right, boy, if this is the way you want it."

"This is the way I want it," Matt muttered.

Against the far wall, John piled fresh hay thickly on the floor and leveled it with his hands. Over it he placed a woolen horse blanket and stood back. "Hop in, Buster," he invited, and Matt wove his way across the floor and grinned as he looked down at the blanket.

"Now I lay me," he said, and flopped down heavily.

As John brought another blanket to cover him, the old tomcat ambled out from one of the stalls and brushed his whiskers softly against Matt's face. Matt opened his eyes.

"Lancelot—come here, you old black bastard!" he said and circled the cat with his arm. "Okay, cover us up, Johnny-boy!"

John spread the blanket over them, turned out the lights, and went up to the house.

The next morning John woke with a start. He had intended to be up before anyone else in the house, and already there were sounds of activity in the kitchen. He dressed himself quickly and was hurrying toward the stairway when his father's voice called from the big bedroom.

"Is that you, Matt?"

"No, it's me," John answered as he went to his father's door. It was wide open and Luke was still in bed, alone.

"Oh, it's you, John. It sounded like Matt—all that rushing around as if the house was on fire."

"Taking it easy for a change?" John asked, anxious to avoid any talk about Matt. "You're not sick?"

Luke's smile was self-deprecatory. "Nothing but my own foolishness. That dinner yesterday—I ate twice as much as I should have. Sinning against the flesh, my boy. A man has to pay for his sins, you know. My

stomach kept me awake half the night. I heard you come in but I was too cranky to get up. You all got back safely?"

"Sure. I overslept, but the others are already up and at it."

"You brought Sally back?"

"I think she was glad to leave. The kids were running wild in the Hunter house."

"And Matt?"

John braced himself. He was glad he had had the foresight to rumple Matt's bed thoroughly before leaving the room.

"He's up and out—probably helping Mark with the chores."

"Good. Well, I'll be up in a minute. I can't lie here all day."

"Take your time, pa," John said. "There's nothing to do. It'll do you good to stay in bed all day if you feel like it."

He hurried down to the kitchen where Bess and Sally were busy getting breakfast.

"Any sign of Matt yet?" he asked.

Bess gave him an enquiring look. "Isn't he still in bed?"

"Didn't you bring him in last night?" Sally asked.

"Hell, no! He got one of his crazy ideas and slept all night in the barn."

"Oh, no!" Bess exclaimed. "What in the world—"

"He had a little too much to drink," Sally told her.

Bess sighed. "Poor Matt! Sleeping in a barn!"

"Look—get me a pot of black coffee and I'll take it out to him," John said.

"I'll take it," Bess said promptly. "You sit down and have your breakfast while it's hot."

She poured steaming coffee into a pitcher, heedless to John's protests, and was out of the house as if on wings. She found Matt sitting up on his blanket, his head buried in his hands.

"Matt, poor boy! I've brought you some coffee."

He looked up. "Well, if it isn't my golden-haired fairy godmother, bearing nectar from the gods!"

She handed him the pitcher and stood by while he drank from it. "I'd have brought it out sooner if I'd known you were here. What a thing to do, Matt—sleeping in a barn!"

He took another drink from the pitcher and lowered it between his knees, his hands clasping it. "Bess, I went and got myself properly boiled last night."

"Shame on you!"

He drank off what was left of the coffee and handed her the empty pitcher. "You're an angel of mercy—thanks!"

"Hurry in to breakfast now," Bess said. "You'll feel a lot better when you've had something to eat."

As she turned away, an irresistible impulse seized Matt. Almost without thinking, he reached out and caught her by the ankle. She struggled briefly, dropped the pitcher, and fell beside him on the bed of hay.

"Matt—Matt! What in the world are you doing?"

"Not a damned thing, baby," he laughed. "But even with a hangover I can't resist a nicely turned ankle."

"But if somebody came—Matt, let me up!"

She scrambled to her feet and at that moment Mark's shadow darkened the doorway. He glanced in and went away, intent upon his morning chores. Bess picked up the pitcher and hurried out of the door and back to the house.

Matt got up stiffly and was dousing his head and neck under a stream of cold water from a faucet set in the wall when Mark came back and began to make ready for the morning's milking.

"Good morning, Junior!"

Mark merely cleared his throat and went on with his work. Matt watched him for a moment. What had he seen there when he paused so briefly in the doorway? And what was he thinking now?

"Look, kid," he said at last, deciding the bold approach was best even with Mark, "don't you get any wrong ideas about what you saw going on here a minute ago. It was only a bit of horseplay on my part. Bess brought coffee out to me and I—"

"I saw nothing," Mark said, and went out to fetch the cows.

At the pasture gate he stood and observed with delight the upper blue-gold pasture of mist the sun had created above the earth. His narrowed eyes widened as he saw a strange thing far down, just above the eastern horizon. It was like a torch aflame on a church steeple.

*I*N the second week in December, Luke attended his first meeting of the church board in Minter. The final meeting of each year was always an informal affair, and latterly had been held in a small alcove off the dining room in the village's only restaurant, whose proprietor was the shrewd and capable widow, Mrs. Namm.

The place enjoyed more than local fame, not only because of its excellent food but because of the huge fireplace that provided warmth and cheer on a wintry night for truck drivers and travelers passing through the village. The fireplace was the handiwork of Olaf Erickson, the local stonemason, who had gathered varicolored rocks from neighboring fields and hillsides to create a thing of massive beauty which he proudly referred to as his masterpiece. There were few to dispute his claim. Because of the fireplace the restaurant was called The Hearth.

Though Luke had known all the members of the board for years, it was one thing to greet a man when you met him at church or on the street, and quite another to sit down at a table with him and accept your share of responsibility for every decision that was made.

Kellogg, the banker, was in his sixties, the oldest man in the group, both in years and in length of service on the board. Tom Reed, the lumber dealer, and a widower, could probably put his hand on more ready money than any of them, although Eric Helgeson's holdings of farm properties were reputed to be so substantial that Kellogg had contrived to find him a place on the board of directors of the bank. None was wealthy, but together they formed a tight little triumvirate that shaped the civic life of the community. It was these three, in fact, who years ago had rejected the demands of the church council and had placed the Minter congregation on an independent basis. These were the men he would have to enlist, Luke knew, if he were to bring his dream to fulfilment. For a moment the old sense of his own inadequacy haunted him as he seated himself at the table and looked about him with an appraising eye—but only for a moment. He told himself that he had God on

his side, and even Kellogg and Reed and Helgeson would have to reckon eventually with the power of the Holy Spirit. In the end, too, they would have to reckon with Luke Darr, he reflected as he braced himself like a man preparing to attack.

The first eye he caught was that of Eric Helgeson, a narrow, satiric eye, twinkling through cigarette smoke. He looked amused, Luke thought. But Helgeson was not amused. He felt like laughing because he was sad. These men were met here to plan the affairs of a humble little church in a humble little town—and Luke Darr, the new board member, had a glazed expression in his eyes as if he had just been elected President of the United States. He saw Luke's eyes shift to the great fireplace, visible from where they sat.

"Our friend Erickson is an artist," Helgeson said. "No one but a real artist could have done a job like that. It's a pity we have so little use for a man like . . ."

But Pastor Bly stood up in his place at one end of the table and tapped the side of his water glass lightly with a teaspoon. "Let us bow our heads and give thanks," he said, and began asking a blessing on the food.

When he had said "Amen!" he remained standing, tapped his water glass again, and smiled. "Before I sit down, gentlemen—and before I place our evening's proceedings in the capable hands of our chairman, Brother Kellogg, I should like to extend the hand of fellowship to the proposed new member of our board. He needs no introduction, I know, but I feel it fitting to give him a welcome on this, the occasion of his first meeting with us. Brother Darr—welcome!"

There was a brief and seemingly round of applause, in response to which Luke stood up, bowed stiffly to Pastor Bly, forced himself to smile, and abruptly sat down. The food was brought in, and Eric Helgeson turned to Luke.

"Glad to have you with us, Darr."

"I'm glad to be here," Luke replied, his hand trembling visibly as he dipped his spoon into the soup. "I hope you won't expect too much of me until I have time to get into the swing of things."

"There isn't much to it," Helgeson reassured him. "We have no big problems here—and no big program. We could do with a few more church members and a little more revenue. We come up with a small deficit every year, but a few of us get together and take care of it. We leave everything else to Pastor Bly."

"A congregation should be able and willing to pay its way without calling on three or four of its members to carry the load," Luke ventured.

Helgeson laughed. "You're right, of course—in a sense. If your farm doesn't pay its way, you sell it and move somewhere else. If a man can't live on what he gets out of his business, he goes at something else. But religion, Darr, isn't a business. It doesn't produce anything. It's—it's really a sort of a pastime to most people."

Luke was aghast. "A pastime? The church is a place of amusement?"

"Oh, don't get me wrong," Helgeson protested. "I believe in religion. I wouldn't be sitting on a church board if I didn't. Life wouldn't be complete without religion. A town wouldn't be complete without a church . . ."

But Luke Darr was only half listening. Across the table from him Tom Reed, the lumber dealer, was arguing with one of the lesser members of the board who was suggesting a program of extensive repairs on the church building—a new roof, a fresh coat of paint on the outside, a coat of varnish on the inside walls, the pews, the pulpit.

"And we ought to have the aisles carpeted again. And the altar—"

"These things run into money," Reed reminded the man. "Who's going to pay for it?"

"You're quite right, Brother Reed," Pastor Bly put in. "It would be impossible to do all Brother Morris suggests. But we can do something—a little, perhaps, to make the Lord's house more attractive to the men and women who gather there for worship. I have no doubt it will receive full consideration at the proper time."

When the meal was over, the treasurer presented his annual report disclosing the usual deficit. After a brief discussion, the report was formally accepted and Pastor Bly was called upon to inform the board concerning the projected visit of the evangelist, Reverend Manley, whose meetings during the recent summer had so kindled the spirit of the community that many had been brought into the fold. Unfortunately, Pastor Bly reported, the good Brother Manley had found that his commitments were so heavy that he would be unable to return to Minter, but had strongly urged favorable consideration of a certain Reverend Amos Strong, who was not only an outstanding evangelist, but was also possessed of the gift of healing by faith, having cured the sick and the lame and sent them on their way as witnesses to his miraculous power.

There was sharp division of opinion on the wisdom of inviting the healer. Reed was flatly opposed to it, Helgeson smiled cynically, Kellogg remained noncommittal as becoming a chairman. In the end, however, a vote was taken and the whole matter was placed in the hands of the pastor with instructions to write to the Reverend Strong and be ready with a report at the

first regular session of the board after New Year's. It was to be understood, however, that the evangelist should accept a minimum guarantee for his services and depend upon voluntary contributions for the bulk of his fee.

It had been a sorry spectacle, Luke brooded, in view of what he had in his own mind. As he drove homeward, his vision of a beautiful church seemed to pale before the gray wintry mists rising from the hollows. In time, he knew, it would fade completely unless something were done to give it substance. God sends the vision, but Man builds the temple. The time had come for action.

There was a man in the city, Virgil Archer by name, a somewhat legendary figure who had been raised on a farm a few miles south of Cleone and had left it to become one of the best known architects in the state. A talk with Archer now, and—ah, yes, a little Christmas outing for Bess at the same time—what could be more timely!

He began to sing as he turned from the highway and drove homeward down the county road.

Snow had been falling intermittently during the week and the city was alive with the spirit of Christmas. The main thoroughfares were ablaze with lights strung in great festoons of green boughs beneath which cars with gleaming headlights coursed in a gay cavalcade through the veil of falling snow. Muffled shoppers jostled their way, their arms clutching parcels bright with seasonal significance, or stood at shop windows filled with gifts to tempt the buyer beyond his means. On every corner, a bearded and red-garbed Santa Claus shook his tinkling bell and urged the passers-by to "keep the pot boiling." Merry Christmas! Chimes sounding from a church tower, voices from loud-speakers carolling *Holy Night* and *God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen!* Horns blasting from snarled traffic; a youngster, exhausted from sheer excitement as much as from following his gift-seeking mother from counter to counter, from store to store, wailing his protests above the deep-chested laughter of the huge mechanical Santa Claus bowing and slapping his thighs eternally in the corner window of a department store; men's voices hailing cabs that sped by unheeding; tireless teenagers pelting one another with showers of confetti; middle-aged matrons leaning heavily against window ledges too narrow for comfort; thin whistling from popcorn-vending machines; a blind man white-caning his way through the hurrying mob, shaking his tray of cheap pencils, his face turned upward to the falling snow. Merry Christmas, Merry Christmas!

Luke Darr and his wife got down from their car in front of the midtown hotel and gave their luggage to the uniformed doorman who promised to take care of the car and called for one of his bellhops. Luke followed the boy into the hotel and presented himself at the desk with a vague feeling of disquiet. He never felt at home in the city—too many people crowding him, too much rushing about to no apparent purpose, too much distrust among people, as was evidenced now by the lingering look the young upstart behind the desk fixed upon Bess, who stood beside Luke as he prepared to sign the register. Should he write “Mr. and Mrs. Luke Darr,” or “Luke Darr and wife?” Confused and petulant in the suspicion that the desk clerk was far from convinced that they were really man and wife, Luke wrote his scrawl hastily on the card and hurried away to follow the boy and their luggage to the elevator.

When they were alone in their room, the door closed, Bess threw her arms about her husband.

“Isn’t it exciting, dear?” she exclaimed, and kissed him warmly. “It’s almost like eloping!”

“What it almost really is,” said Luke, glancing at his watch, “is time for supper.”

Her laugh at his witticism was rewarding. Then she asked, “Is there time for me to take a nice hot bath?”

“Go ahead,” Luke said, his magnanimity restored. “We have time for everything. We’re down here for a little holiday. Whatever you feel like doing—that’s what we’ll do.”

While she was busy with her bath, Luke searched through the telephone directory until he found the name he was looking for—Archer, Coulter and Archer—jotted down the number and the address, then put the directory away and proceeded to make himself presentable for dinner.

They were ushered to an obscure corner table where the lights were dim and the sound of dinner music was subdued. It was exactly to Luke’s liking. He did not want to be conspicuous. The size of the menu card was almost as frightening as the cost of the varied items. But he had come prepared. Something more important than mere money hung upon the occasion. He was paying hostage to youth.

“I think I’ll have the saddle of mink under glass,” Bess said sedately, “with truffles steeped in champagne.”

Luke blinked at her as she raised her napkin to smother a laugh. “You’d better have that steak,” he suggested, and grinned happily. “I wouldn’t recommend mink.”

Bess examined the card. "Five-fifty! Don't be ridiculous, dear. We can have steak anytime, at home. I'm having the broiled lake trout."

"I'll have it too," said Luke, and the waiter made his ambassadorial approach.

"By the way," Luke remarked while they waited for their food, "I think I'll let you look around by yourself in the morning. I have a little business of my own to attend to before I can do any Christmas shopping."

"All right, dear. It's so long since I've been on a shopping spree by myself, it'll be fun."

Luke had never met Virgil Archer, though the man's name was virtually a byword in and about Cleone. Years ago he had drawn plans for a library building in an eastern city and had won an award in a competition sponsored by a group of wealthy donors in search of something that would adequately symbolize the blossoming of what they called "American culture." Finding the climate inclement to his creative genius—he was barely thirty at the time—he had taken the award money and gone off to Mexico and Yucatan. Two years later he had returned with designs so bizarre and revolutionary that he was regarded with suspicion by prospective clients even while he intrigued them with his daring.

His commissions were few and far between. Finally, much against his desire, he was forced to enter into a partnership with Philip Coulter, a man of practical mind who looked upon architecture as a means of earning a living. Together for nearly thirty years now, they had prospered and had been able to take Virgil Archer's son into the firm on his graduation from the university. Young Archer had little in common with his father. He might more appropriately have been the son of Philip Coulter. But Virgil Archer had scarcely changed with the years. He still cherished his American Dream, hopeless as he knew it to be. He still sat in his richly appointed office, his chair swiveled away from his desk, his hands locked behind his head of shaggy white hair, his eyes carrying him out above the smirched rooftops of the clamorous city and beyond to the serene stretches of the prairies he remembered.

This was the man, then, to whom Luke Darr had resolved to take his own small dream. He had not telephoned to arrange an appointment. He was leaving that to fate. If Virgil was in his office when he arrived, it would augur well for his enterprise. It was a little game he sometimes played with himself when a momentous decision hung in the balance. It was like tossing

a coin with Destiny. In a sense, it was like tempting God to reveal His will, but Luke never thought of it in terms so grossly irreverent.

He had left Bess sitting up in bed, dawdling over the breakfast he had ordered brought to the room. He had enquired at the desk as to how he could reach the office building that housed the firm of Archer, Coulter and Archer. It was only a short distance from the hotel, the sun was shining and the air was brisk and bracing for a morning walk.

The streets were noisily crowded, there was haste and hurry in the very air he breathed. He did not like it. He would be glad to be back on his own farm and feel the earth under his feet again, where everything was fixed in its familiar pattern, where there were few imponderables except the weather's fickle moods, no masked faces that thwarted every effort to probe the thoughts that lay behind them. He was no part of this—he would never be!

Presently he found himself standing before the wide-arched entrance to a structure that towered high above its neighbors. He summoned his courage and stepped into the lobby with a twinge of misgiving that fate might be playing him for a fool. He studied the directory on the wall, and finally got into the elevator.

Fate smiled on him. The receptionist took his name, pushed a button on her desk, spoke briefly into the mouthpiece, and told Luke that Mr. Archer would see him at once.

"Third door on the left, Mr. Darr," she directed him impersonally.

He opened the door and entered a spacious room. On one side stood a broad and highly polished table of dark walnut that held two telephones, a leather-bound green blotter, and a pair of shallow walnut trays. The man who sat tilted back in the chair was in his sixties, white-haired, smooth-faced, and of pleasing countenance.

"Mr. Archer?" Luke said, clearing his throat.

"That's right."

"My name is Darr—Luke Darr."

"Yes, Mr. Darr." He waved a hand toward a comfortable leather-upholstered chair, and Luke removed his coat, sat down, set his hat on the floor beside him, and crossed his knees.

"Is there something I can do for you?" Archer asked.

Luke smiled, modestly tentative. "It's probably not worth wasting your time over, Mr. Archer, but I have something in mind that I'd like to talk to you about. You see, I'm from up Cleone way and I thought you . . ."

"Cleone? Let's see—Darr, Darr—haven't I met you before somewhere?"

"I don't think so," Luke said. "Up there we all know about you, of course, but I—"

"I might almost call Cleone my home town," Archer said. "I was born on a farm just south of there, you know. Are you in business there, Mr. Darr?"

"I run a farm about ten miles west of town."

"Let's see—that must be somewhere near the old Pribble place. It's still there, I suppose."

"I'm on it," Luke informed him proudly.

So the old Pribble farm was still there, Archer reflected as he eyed his visitor shrewdly—and would be as long as Luke Darr was alive to hold it down. "By Jove!" he said suddenly, jerking himself erect in his chair. "I've got it now. You're the—you married old Eben's daughter, didn't you?"

"That's right."

"I knew I'd heard the name before somewhere. I rarely forget a name. I believe I could even recall the name of your wife if I thought a minute."

"It was Agatha," Luke told him, "but she—she's no longer living. She passed away last year."

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that, Mr. Darr."

"It was a great loss," Luke said with feeling, "but I married again—last September—a young woman from Cleone."

A man of decision, apparently, Virgil Archer thought drily. He was on the point of offering a word of congratulation, then changed his mind. He leaned back in his chair and clasped his fingers behind his head. "I drove past your place last August on my way home from a fishing trip. In fact I had lunch in your little village of Minter." He smiled reminiscently. "Poor old Minter! It hasn't changed much in fifty years, has it?"

"Not much, I'm afraid," Luke admitted.

"Oh, I don't mean to speak disparagingly of your little town, Mr. Darr," Archer said quickly. "In fact, it moved me to pity when I drove through it. Cleone has managed to capture the trade—everywhere in this country the small towns are being smothered by places like Cleone. That's what comes of our free enterprise, I suppose. But all my sympathies are with the little hamlets that survive somehow and keep their integrity in spite of their more successful neighbors. The small villages still have their pride, Mr. Darr, and I salute them. There is more of the true America in such places than in all the great cities of our country."

Elation shone in Luke's eyes. "I have never thought of it in just that way," he commented, "but I can see what you mean."

Virgil Archer sat forward and leaned across the table toward Luke, his eyes alight. "Do you know what I was thinking as I drove through Minter last August, Mr. Darr? If some way could be found to rebuild a town like that, make it express the America we love and honor, shape it to a symbol of what we are and what we mean to become—a symbol of man's reaching toward the sublime and the beautiful . . ." Good Lord, he thought, how pontifical I'm getting in the presence of this simple farmer!

"It would take a lot of time and a lot of money," Luke said, a bewildered look on his face.

"One could begin," continued Archer. "A new school, a new library . . ."

"Or a new church," Luke added, and swallowed hard.

"Or a new church, yes. Why not?"

"I—as a matter of fact, Mr. Archer, that's the very thing I have come to see you about. I wanted to talk to you about a new church I have in mind, to replace the one we now have in Minter."

"Incredible!" Archer exclaimed. "Here I sit dreaming about the impossible, and you people in a whistle-stop village come up with a project for a new church that . . ."

"I ought to tell you at once, before we go any farther, Mr. Archer," Luke interrupted, shifting uneasily in his chair, "the Minter people aren't on this, not yet. It is my own idea so far. I have just lately been made a member of the church board and I haven't had a chance to discuss it with anybody. I don't intend to discuss it with anybody until I have my plans laid and am convinced we can carry them through. I want to have everything in shape so that I can lay it before the board and say, 'There it is, and this is how it can be done!' Until that time comes, I'd like to keep this whole business between ourselves, if that's all right with you, Mr. Archer."

The architect did not reply at once. The more he thought about it, the more mystified he became. This man Darr seemed a sensible, practical sort, outwardly at least. To gain time, he reached for a leather box on the table, flipped back the lid and held it toward Luke. "Will you have a cigarette?"

"No, thanks, Mr. Archer. I don't smoke."

Archer's gray eyes twinkled narrowly for an instant as he said, "You're wise. It's a stupid habit." And he touched his lighter to his own cigarette.

As if he sensed what was going on in Archer's mind, Luke bent to take his hat. "I know you're a busy man," he said, "and I came here on my own,

without making any appointment with you. I have no right to take up your time with . . .”

“Don’t be hasty, my friend,” Archer checked him. “It just happens that you hit me on a day when I have practically nothing on my hands. I have all the time in the world. Forgive me if I seem to be a little hesitant, maybe a little slow to grasp the meaning of what you have just told me. Naturally, I’d like to know more about this before I commit myself either way. To use your own words, Mr. Darr, even a new church will take a little money and a little time.”

“I understand that. Ours is a community church, Mr. Archer—without affiliation of any kind. We broke away from the parent body several years ago. Today we are independent, but we are by no means penniless. We are fairly prosperous as a community. The money is there, and if religion means anything to the people of Minter and the district surrounding it, this will give them a chance to prove it. I don’t mean to carry the whole burden myself. But with good organization there will be no difficulty about raising the necessary funds. I’m convinced of that.”

“Well, now, you probably have a few specifications in mind. Seating capacity, for example. We usually begin with that as a basis and draw our plans accordingly.” The architect was still playing for time.

“Well, it will be small, naturally. Our church community isn’t large, as you know. The church we have at present will scarcely seat more than a hundred people. I had something a bit larger in mind—room for a hundred and twenty-five, maybe a little more. We could change that as we go along, I suppose.”

“Not very much, I’m afraid, once the work begins. For the present, however, all I want is a general idea. I’d like to know what limits I have to set myself when I begin drawing my plans. Have you thought of when you might want to start building?”

“The sooner, the better,” Luke said. “It shouldn’t take long to find out how far I can go.”

“A man with an idea can go a long way, Mr. Darr. Faith can move mountains—when it’s backed up with hard work.” He was committing himself more than he should, perhaps, but this man from Cleone—no, from Minter—was possessed of a vision, and that was something Virgil Archer understood. On the other hand, if Luke Darr turned out to be another crackpot—oh, how many of those he had heard unfold their fantastic schemes!—Philip Coulter would laugh his head off when he discovered how his partner had been taken in.

"I have the necessary faith," Luke assured him, "and I am ready to work. If things work out right, I'd like to get it under way by spring."

Archer crushed out his cigarette and leaned back in his chair, yielding to a whim. "I have been impressed on my travels," he began, as though irrelevantly, "by the temples of ancient civilizations—sun-worshipers and such. They all began as ideas, nothing more—ideas conceived in the hearts of simple men who went to work with their hands and had none of our modern machines to help them. You have come to me with scarcely more than an idea, but I'm interested—very interested. I'd like to go along with you and see how it works out. It might be fun, at that. I'll tell you what I'll do, Mr. Darr. I'll drive up that way one of these days, if the weather holds off a bit, and look the place over again. You won't have to know I'm there. I can look around for a couple of hours and nobody will be any the wiser. I may come away with a few ideas of my own. When I come back, I'll make some rough sketches and write you. We'll get together then and talk it over. How's that?"

"That's fine, Mr. Archer. There's just one thing before I go. I'll have to figure your fees in as part of the cost of construction. Would you mind telling me—"

"Our fees here are the usual six per cent of the cost, Mr. Darr. That's customary. But I'm going into this on my own. I'd rather have my partners know nothing about it. Besides, this is Christmas. We've had a very good year. I'd like to make you a little gift, if you'll be good enough to accept it. Count my services, whatever they may be, as a modest contribution to your building fund."

His smile was urbane and Luke was embarrassed. "That's very generous of you, Mr. Archer. But the laborer is worthy of his hire, you know."

"The man who said that, Mr. Darr, asked nothing for *His* services."

When Luke stepped into the street again, he was a changed man. He had come from the presence of a man whose reach so far exceeded his grasp—now, where did that thought come from, unless it was something his boy Mark had quoted from one of his books?—that he seemed to live in a kind of heaven of his own. The crowds were no longer oppressive. The noise and the hurry were on a lower plane, above which he was borne like a free spirit. Misgivings, doubts, fears vanished as if they had never existed. Nothing was impossible! The way now was onward and upward, never faltering, never stumbling.

On his way back to the hotel he paused on a street corner and dug into his pocket for all the coins he had with him, then poured them into the pot that swung on its tripod beside the curb. The man in Christmas garb tinkled his bell vigorously and said, "God bless you!"

"God bless *you*!" Luke responded with a sudden gust of laughter that startled the bewhiskered Santa, and added, "And a Merry Christmas!"

He burst into his room to discover that Bess had already gone out to begin her Christmas shopping. He glanced at his watch. He had been away longer than he realized. There was nothing to do now but sit down and wait for her return.

From a small desk in the corner of the room he took a sheet of paper. He would have to revise his figures upward, he realized, if he were to come anywhere close to building the kind of church Virgil Archer would undoubtedly suggest when his plans were made. Presently he sat back and glanced down the column of figures, a finger pressed firmly against his upper lip. It was all right to believe that faith could move mountains, but one would be wise to consider the size of the mountain. All that talk about rebuilding a town like Minter, of course, was mere stuff and nonsense. Still, it was a measure of the man's vision, and for the moment Luke had been carried away, bemused. Now that he had had time to think it over, he was aware that he and Virgil Archer would have to move a long way toward each other before they found common ground on which to stand.

He had left the door ajar for Bess, and he was in the act of tearing up his page of notes when she rushed into the room.

"Oh, you're here, dear!" She tossed her brightly wrapped parcels on the bed and threw her arms about him. "Darling, this is the nicest Christmas I've ever had!"

Her eyes were a blue mist as he stooped to kiss her. "That's the way I want it," he said with a happy throb of pride.

"Did you get your business done?"

Luke dropped the fragments of paper into the wastebasket and walked to the window. "I saw the man I wanted to see. And I talked with him." He turned and looked at her. How much could he tell her about his visit with Virgil Archer? How much would she understand? "Bess," he said solemnly, "I've just spent an hour with the greatest man I've ever met."

"How wonderful, dear! You must tell me about it. But first—I want to show you something I bought for myself. I know you'll think I'm terribly extravagant, but I just couldn't resist them. Look—aren't they simply adorable?"

She had torn the wrapping from a box, and stood before him now almost breathless with excitement. In her hands she held a pair of silver slippers.

THE DECEMBER sun had risen on a jeweled earth. The snow lay amethyst in the hollows, shone emerald and opal on the glittering facets of the swamp, and diamond decked the harvest-shorn fields.

Here on the hillside it spread a soft white blanket underfoot and clung to the shelves of pines like clusters of newly washed wool. For the past hour, Mark and Margot had searched the woods for a tree that would be just right for the corner of the Darr living room.

Suddenly Margot leaned down and traced a finger lightly over the track of a snowshoe rabbit, and then more lightly over the lacework venture of a mouse from its hole beneath a fallen log. Her finger hovered above more inarticulate, more delicate impressions of life recently written upon the white snow symbol of death. A hawk's wing, barely skimming, perhaps.

"They are the runes of the little people," she told Mark as she straightened again.

They walked on and stood together—Mark in his heavy red-and-black-checked mackinaw, Margot in her red woolen snow suit—and gave an appraising look to the tree they had found. It was a graceful, full-plumed cone of green, compact and sturdy, topped by a small whorl and spike of recent growth that bristled in the sunlight.

Mark lifted his axe. "This is the one."

"Wait, Mark!" Margot whispered. She put a red-mittened hand to one ear and turned her head. "Listen!"

He listened, his breathing held. "Do you hear something?"

"The silence," Margot said at last. "It's like being in a church."

Mark's grin was deprecating. "Not very much. There's no preacher—and no people thinking about sin. I like this better."

"I mean—an empty church." She looked at the tree again and sighed. "It's so beautiful! Must we cut it down? Why not pick another—some scraggly, ugly, crooked . . ."

“The crooked one might want to live too,” he said.

Her quick breath seemed to catch in her throat. “Yes—it would. Why can’t everything in the world be perfect?”

“Then nothing would be perfect.”

Holding the lower branches aside with his body, Mark swung his axe. At the first stroke the snow showered down over his head and shoulders, and Margot broke into laughter.

“You look like a snow man!”

He shook himself to shed the snow and wiped his hand over his face. Another swing of the blade on the opposite side of the bole, and the tree leaned slowly. A third blow brought it down with a soft whoosh in the snow. Mark stepped back and glanced down the side of the hill.

“Get around there and take hold,” he said. “We’ll drag it down to the truck.”

He could have lifted the tree easily and carried it away on his shoulder. But Margot had come out to “help” him. Together they dragged it down to where the pick-up stood at the bottom of the hill. When it was loaded, they climbed into the seat and Mark started the engine.

“Our science teacher said the craziest thing in class the other day,” Margot said as they sat and waited for the engine to warm up. “He said that when a tree crashes in the woods there’s no sound unless there’s somebody there to hear it. I told him I didn’t believe it. The sound *must* be there whether we hear it or not.”

Mark chuckled. “A deaf man wouldn’t think so.”

Margot turned up her nose. “That’s no answer!”

He leaned over the wheel to shift the gears. “Maybe not,” he said as the car moved slowly into the road. “And with all the sound and fury there is in the world these days, maybe there is no answer—to anything.”

He had spoken as if to himself, but Margot was pointing excitedly to her right where a five-point buck and his doe stood motionless in the sunlight, as if cast in bronze.

When the tree was set up in the living room, it was discovered that the trimmings stored away from former years were so shabby and inadequate that John decided to drive into Cleone to buy what was needed.

“We might as well do it right while we’re at it,” Luke observed while they were eating their mid-day meal. “Let’s make this a real Christmas!”

John had never seen his father in a gay holiday mood. The reason was not far to seek. This was to be Bess's Christmas, her first as mistress of the Darr household. And why not? he thought as he drove toward town. Bess was all right. She had done her best to engender a pleasant family spirit, and had made a place for herself where many another woman might have failed dismally. Even Mark was beginning to show signs of accepting her, a noteworthy achievement in itself. But that was nothing compared to her gift for bending just enough to Luke's whims and rigid demands to keep the old man happy. It was a large order for a young woman who was only half the age of the man she had married. Yes, Bess deserved a real Christmas!

With only two days left before the holiday, Cleone was crowded with Christmas shoppers. John finally found parking space in an alley and hurried off to the bank for money to take care of his purchases. He stepped in from the street just as Magnus Jensen, on his way out of the bank, had his hand on the door.

"Hi, Magnus—Merry Christmas!"

Magnus lifted his head stiffly and smiled as his eyes met John's. "Yah, John! And the same to you."

"How are you and Guri? We haven't been seeing much of you lately."

"No. We stay home pretty much. Guri, she's okay, but I don't feel so good these days. My neck—it ain't easy to hold my head up—and my back, I guess she goes bad on me too. But I move around just the same. Pretty soon maybe I don't stand up any more—but then I crawl, eh?"

There was little mirth in his laugh, but John laid a hand on his shoulder. "They'll never get you down, Magnus, not a stubborn old Norsky like you."

"Yah, well I stand up so long as I can."

"Say, how about you and Guri dropping in on us, New Year's Day? We're throwing a party at the house—just for the neighbors. Come on over and meet everybody."

"That would be good," Magnus replied hesitantly. "I talk to Guri about it." He put his hand to the door. "She's waiting for me now. I better go."

"We'll be looking for you, New Year's—anytime in the afternoon. And give my best to Guri."

John watched him as he went out and disappeared into the street. He had told Magnus that they'd never get him down, but he knew better. It was not only his bowed head and his bent back—that damned arthritis was vicious!—but something had gone from those blue eyes that used to sparkle in spite of the aches and pains from which he was seldom free. Poor old Magnus was losing the fight.

While he stood in line, awaiting his turn at the teller's window, John looked across to where Clive Olmstead, the bank manager, sat smugly at his desk, his chair tilted back, his arms folded across his chest. He smiled and lifted his hand in greeting and John responded in kind. Then the woman in front of him moved away, tucking her money into her billfold.

He was halfway to the door when Olmstead called to him and beckoned him to the railing beside the manager's desk.

"Don't walk off without giving me a chance to offer you the season's greetings," said the banker, extending his hand.

"Nice job you've got here," John said, "sitting in your big chair and grinning at the rest of us rushing like mad to get rid of our hard-earned shekels."

The banker's laugh was a thin chuckle. "You think I should be happy sitting here watching all these people draining the bank of its last dollar to buy toys for their kids to smash as soon as they get them?"

"Why not? The dollars will all be back here again tomorrow or the day after."

Olmstead leaned forward and took a large envelope from a pile on his desk. "Here, take one of our new calendars along with you."

"Thanks," John said. "You're reserving these for your best customers, I suppose?"

"Oh, definitely."

"I didn't see Magnus Jensen carrying one," John remarked caustically. He could not shake off the feeling his chance meeting with Magnus had left.

The banker was a man of medium height, with only a fringe of gray hair circling his head, and a pair of wary gray eyes that peered out from beneath bushy brows.

"That was an oversight," he said, then lowered his voice cautiously. "I saw you talking to Magnus at the door just now."

"He's our closest neighbor."

"Yes, I know. He seems to be having a hard time making a go of it—or am I wrong?"

"The man isn't well," John pointed out. "He was doing all right before his arthritis caught up with him. But lately—well, he's getting by, but that's about all. Why?"

"Well—I was just wondering. The fact is—this is very confidential, John—and I have no right to talk about it, I realize . . ."

"Is there something wrong with Magnus?" John interrupted.

“He came to talk to me, just before you got here. He wanted to arrange a small loan.”

“You mean he’s broke?”

“He has had a small checking account with us for years. He still has. It has never been very substantial, but he has managed to keep it going. No, he’s not broke. But he appears to have run into difficulty. It seems he has a small debt he wants to discharge and he needs a little help.”

“Well, hell, he didn’t have to come to you for it! We could have let him have enough to tide him over a few months. If this debt he talks about isn’t too heavy, I’m sure pa would go on his note till he gets squared around again. If it’s anywhere within reason—”

“Oh, it doesn’t really amount to anything. All he wants is three or four hundred dollars. The trouble is, he has nothing to offer in the way of security except his farm, and you know the banks got out of the land business years ago.”

“Well, I’ll drop over and have a talk with Magnus tomorrow and see if there isn’t some way . . .”

“I don’t think that would help much, John,” the banker interrupted. “You see, this obligation of his—it’s money, it seems, that he has owed for years to your father.”

John was aghast. “To my father? Well, of all the cockeyed ideas I ever heard of! Magnus Jensen doesn’t owe my old man a nickel, and never did. You’re sure you’ve got this thing straight?”

“I’m just telling you what Magnus told me, John. That’s all I have to go on. I wouldn’t have brought it up—I *shouldn’t* have brought it up—I don’t make a habit of discussing one customer’s business with another’s. But I was really sorry I couldn’t do anything for him, and when I saw you talking to him at the door, there . . .”

“Wait, now—just a minute,” John said suddenly. “Something just dawned on me.” He turned away, then halted. “Look—keep this whole thing between ourselves. And I mean *ourselves*. Don’t even mention it to pa when he comes in. I’ll talk to you about it myself, next time I’m in town.”

He left at once, and Olmstead stood scratching his head until John was out of sight. Then he went back to his comfortable chair and folded his arms across his chest.

Luke Darr stood smiling happily in the doorway of the living room. He had an almost voluptuous sense of being embraced by the Christmas spirit.

The tree in the corner was being hung with strings of lights, blue and red and gold, tiny stars that twinkled bravely against the darkness that lurked within the drooping branches of the tree so freshly felled.

They were all about him now, all except John who had gone to town to fetch trimmings to supplement what they had been able to rummage out of the attic. As he looked at it now, Luke thought they might have done with what they had. But youth demanded a surfeit of everything, it seemed. Matt in particular had protested:

“Why have a tree look like a woman with only half her clothes on?”

Bess had greeted the remark with an arch smile and Luke could almost read what she was thinking but was too modest to express openly. Well, let them have their way. Let this be a Christmas for Bess to remember.

Mark, in one of his rare companionable moods—they were not so rare these days as they had been formerly—was tinkering with the lights. Matt was hanging baubles, throwing away those that were broken or faded, using only those whose bright coloring had withstood the years. Even Sally was helping with suggestions as she went back and forth between living room and kitchen, where Bess, in spite of the nasty cold she had picked up on their visit to the city, was busy giving Margot a home permanent. From the radio came a chorus of young voices:

*Noel—Noel—Noel—Noel—
Born is the King of Israel!*

It was a time for rejoicing—why did Luke’s eyes suddenly mist over as he stood and listened to the jubilant strains that filled the room now? He turned away quickly and crossed the hall to the sanctuary of his little office.

He had been lying on the couch for only a few minutes when the door opened and John looked in.

“Aren’t you feeling well, pa?”

Luke sat up. “Never felt better in my life, son. Come on in and close the door.”

“The racket’s getting on your nerves, eh?”

Luke smiled. “Don’t try making an old man of me before my time. I enjoy the racket. No—I just got to thinking all to myself out there. I don’t know what there is about Christmas to make a man feel sad. It ought to be the happiest time of the year, but—I don’t know—I just had a feeling I’d like to be alone for a few minutes.”

“I’ll get out, then.”

"No, no, don't go. Turn on the light there and sit down. Did you see anybody in town?"

"A couple of thousand people in an awful hurry to get rid of their money. I ran into Magnus Jensen at the bank."

"And how is Magnus feeling these days?"

"Not too sharp, I'm afraid. He isn't looking good at all. As a matter of fact, that's why I came in to talk to you."

"Oh?"

"When did you see Magnus last, pa?"

"Let's see—it was when you and Matt were away on your hunting trip, I think. I walked over one night and paid him a little visit, just to see how he was getting along."

"Did he seem hard up?"

"Well, he wasn't complaining. Of course he isn't making any money out of that place of his, but they're not starving. Did he say anything that—"

"No, *he* didn't. But Olmstead called me over when I was on my way out of the bank. He told me Magnus had been trying to borrow a few hundred dollars on his farm."

"Really? I had no idea he was in as bad shape as that."

"He didn't want the money to buy groceries," John said, watching his father closely.

"What, then?"

John thought for a moment before replying. "When you went to see Magnus that night, you didn't say anything to him about that money you and ma let him have when Margot was sick?"

"We talked about a lot of things. It seems to me Magnus did mention it, but . . ."

"You didn't ask him for the money?"

"Certainly not! What put that in your head?"

"Olmstead tells me Magnus wanted the money to clean up a loan he got from you several years ago. The only thing I could think of, naturally, was the time you and ma helped him out—"

"What did you tell Olmstead?"

"I told him there was a mistake somewhere. I didn't tell him anything about Margot. I didn't want him to get the idea we were coming down on Magnus for—well, for blood money. It wouldn't be right. I'm sure ma never intended . . ."

Luke was on his feet at once. “Now, just a minute, my boy. I have no idea what your mother intended. I didn’t go to Magnus Jensen to ask him for money—and I didn’t ask him for it. What’s more, I don’t intend to. Still, a debt is a debt, however you may look at it, and an honest man doesn’t forget money he owes his neighbor.”

“It looks as if Magnus hasn’t forgotten it,” John said. “Olmstead turned him down, of course.”

“It’s a good thing he did. I’d hate to see poor old Magnus being forced to meet payments on a note when he has barely enough to live on. You know, it’s nearly ten years since we let him have that money. And in all that time we’ve never said a word to him about it. He has paid what he could when he could. Could anybody be more lenient than that?”

“No—and that’s the way I want to keep it,” John said.

“I think you can leave it with me,” Luke smiled and put a hand on John’s shoulder. “We were glad we were able to help them out when they were in trouble. Come to think of it, when Magnus brought it up that night, I told him it wouldn’t matter if he never paid back another dollar of it.”

“That’s exactly the way I feel about it, pa,” John said, “and I wasn’t trying to butt into your affairs when I came in here to ask about it. I just wanted to get straight on it, that’s all.”

For a moment Luke had feared that their talk might build up to an unpleasant rift between them. But they were back on even ground again. “There’s nothing you and I can’t talk over between us, my boy. We’ve always done it, haven’t we?”

“Pretty much, I guess.” John looked through the window at the deepening darkness. “I’d better get out and help finish up the tree. By the way, I asked Magnus to bring Guri along to the party on New Year’s Day.”

“Good! I intended to send word over to them myself as soon as we got Christmas out of the way.”

“Well, it’s taken care of now,” John said and left the room.

For long minutes Luke sat with discomfort mulling over what John had told him. It was that fool Olmstead, of course, who was primarily to blame. What right had he to call John aside and talk over a situation that involved no one but Magnus Jensen and Luke Darr? True, it was a family matter, in a sense—or had been, at least—but that did not absolve Olmstead.

John was right in coming to him at once. There was no telling what might have come of it if the boy had gone round for days nursing a secret resentment. The resentment had been there, all right. Luke had sensed it the moment John had spoken of his chance meeting with Magnus. It was in his

voice, his manner, the way in which he began his questioning. His reference to “blood money”—there had been more than a hint of accusation behind that, if Luke had cared to take offense at the words.

He was glad now that he hadn’t. After all, he had demanded nothing of Magnus Jensen. He could swear to that with a clear conscience. On the other hand, he might have demanded payment of the money and still have been within his rights. But he hadn’t. Perhaps he had planted a seed of awareness in Magnus’ mind. But if the man had let it grow until he felt himself forced to seek a loan from the bank he was a fool, a proud, stubborn fool!

Well, it was settled now and he would think no more about it. His only disturbing thought, as he turned off the light above his desk and went to the door, was that John, the mainstay, the son upon whom he had relied more and more with the passing years, had made so much of it, with tense questioning. It was almost as if Agatha herself had come back to remind him of his duty to a neighbor.

In the hall he paused and glanced toward the dining room, where Sally was already setting the supper table. The boys had completed their work on the tree and were sitting about, their cigarettes glowing in the semidarkness that was relieved only by the lights from the tree and the fire blazing in the fireplace. The radio was turned low:

*O come, all ye faithful,
Joyful and triumphant,
O come ye, O come ye, to Bethlehem!*

Matt raised a hand. “Be of good cheer, pa! For unto us a child is born—to save us all from Satan’s power, and all that. Come in and toast your shins.”

Luke’s brows darkened. Did the boy have no reverence for anything? “Where’s Bess?” he asked, looking about the room.

“She went upstairs to lie down,” Matt said.

Luke climbed the stairs and entered the room to find Bess lying on the bed, a comforter drawn over her.

“Is your cold worse?” he asked, and laid a hand on her forehead.

“I don’t think so. I just felt tired after doing Margot’s hair. I thought I’d lie down for a few minutes before supper.”

“Margot went home?”

“Mark took her home—half an hour ago at least.”

"I hoped to catch her before she left. I wanted to send word with her to ask her father and mother to drop over on New Year's."

"I mentioned it to Margot myself."

"It doesn't matter. John saw Magnus in town and invited him and Guri. I just thought it would look better if the invitation came from me rather than from one of the boys."

"You and John had quite a long talk, didn't you?"

"A few minutes, that's all."

"It must have been important. John looked so serious when he came out."

"It wasn't important," Luke assured her. "John always looks serious."

"Don't you think the tree is pretty?"

"Very."

"You don't sound very cheerful."

"Aren't you going to get ready for supper?" Luke asked. "Sally is setting the table."

Bess threw the comforter aside and sat up on the edge of the bed. "I should be helping her, I suppose. But—I don't know—I just don't feel up to it."

"Look here," Luke said, "you're sick. Why don't you admit it? I'd better call old Doc Benton and have him out to look you over."

"Don't be silly! I don't need a doctor."

"Well, get into bed and stay there till you're over it."

Bess smiled wanly. "That might take me several months."

"Several months? What are you talking about?"

"I've been feeling sort of queasy in the mornings lately. Ever since we came back from the city."

"You don't mean—"

"I'm not sure yet, dear. Maybe it's just this cold of mine that's delaying things."

Luke sat down beside her and drew her gently into his arms. "Bess—my little girl—my wife!" There were tears in his eyes as he kissed her, holding her close and running his fingers through her hair. "Unto us a child," he breathed, then checked himself as he remembered Matt's profane remark in the living room.

"Don't let your hopes run away with you," Bess cautioned him, releasing herself from his arms. "I'm not at all sure. I—there's a chance, that's all. I

wouldn't have said anything about it, but you looked so gloomy when you came just now, I thought it might cheer you up if I told you. I know how you've been hoping we'd have a child of our own."

"Haven't you?"

"Of course, dear. I'm a woman, after all."

He leaned toward her and kissed her warmly. "A wonderful woman, Bess!"

"Don't be disappointed if it turns out to be only a false alarm. It's only a chance, you know."

"We'll find out," Luke said, his voice vibrant. "We'll drive into town next week and see Doc Benton."

"I don't think he'd be able to tell—so soon, I mean. We'll wait a while. If nothing happens, I'll know without having a doctor tell me."

Luke got up and began walking about the room, all but dancing. "You've made me the happiest man in the world, Bess!" he declared. "I know more about these things than you do." He was on the point of telling her about Agatha, but checked himself in time. Any reference to Agatha now would be indelicate, to say the least.

"We won't say anything about it till we find out for sure," Bess said. "There'd be time enough . . ."

"Whatever you like, girl," said Luke, waving his hands. "But there's no doubt about it in my mind. It's God's answer to my prayers."

Bess laughed. "Do you really think God had much to do with it?"

Luke made a pretense of eyeing her sternly. "God is the creator of all things—we are but his instrument! Don't forget that, my girl!"

Bess was taken aback, clenched her hands and started to speak, when Luke with his deep laugh caught her into his arms.

THE humble little lake below the knoll wore a crystal brilliance beneath the moon. The new snow that had come in time to provide a white Christmas had tattered out during the mild sunny days that followed, sending rills of water down the slopes to lower levels where the clear frosty nights had worked their mirror-magic. Agate Lake had never been more deserving of the name old Grandfather Pribble had given it.

At the lake's edge, John had made a small fire, more for the added cheer it provided than for any protection against the cold, since the night was merely crisp with scarcely a breeze to ruffle it. There was no sound except the sharp ring of steel spurning the ice as John and Sally glided on their skates—that and their own young laughter when some attempted exhibition of skill failed to come off according to plan.

“Oh, let's go and sit for a while,” Sally panted finally.

“Don't tell me you're tired!”

“My ankles are getting wobbly.”

“So you want to go back to the house! You're a quitter!”

“I am not! Shut up. Let's poke up the fire over there and sit for a few minutes.”

Sally spread the blanket they had brought from the house, while John piled fresh wood on the embers of the fire.

“There, now, let 'er blaze!”

They sat down and drew the blanket about their knees to watch the flames grow.

“This is better than sitting in the house, don't you think?” Sally asked.

“It's cozier,” said John, moving close to her and putting an arm about her waist.

“Why is it we scarcely ever have an hour alone together?” Sally asked seriously. “You'd think living in the same house day after day . . .”

“Living in the same house day after day has nothing to do with it. People living miles apart seem to get together whenever they want to.”

“Don’t you want to?”

“You know it isn’t that. Sure I want to. But this is a crazy family you’ve got yourself mixed up in, Sally.”

“Crazier than other families?”

“Well, maybe. I don’t know much about other families. Before ma died, we were pretty much like any other family. She was the center—she was in charge of things. A family needs somebody to run it, like a business or anything else.”

“You’ve still got your father.”

“You’ve been around here long enough to know he hasn’t got what it takes. He just doesn’t know how to go about it. When the land fell to him, after ma died, he evidently thought that was all he needed to make a man of him. It takes more.”

“Dad seems to think it has helped,” Sally observed.

“Sure—an outsider might think so,” John went on. “He got himself elected to the church board, didn’t he? And he may land something else next year or the year after. But I’m talking about the family. First of all, he marries Bess Valentine. Well, that’s all right. I like Bess, and I think she’s doing a good job in the house. But he never would have married her if he hadn’t thought he could bully her—and he’s been getting away with it. I can understand why a man who has been held down for most of his life by one woman might want to marry another who would knuckle under to him for a change. But Bess is no fool. One of these days she’s going to make up her mind that she isn’t having any more of it.”

“Oh, I think you’re just imagining things,” Sally protested. “Bess seems to me perfectly happy with it all.”

“I may be wrong, of course. What I’m getting at is that a man doesn’t have to bully his wife to prove he’s a man. He doesn’t have to bully anybody. What good did it do him to kick Mark out of the house? All right, Mark isn’t like the rest of us. We know that. But ma knew how to handle him. What if Mark should blow his top one of these days when pa takes a notion to ride him about something? The kid might just twist the old man’s neck, and that would be that!”

“Oh, no, John—please!”

“Or take a look at Matt. Sure, he gets himself potted once in a while, so what? I don’t like it, but if he’s left alone he’ll grow out of it, if he has the

sense I think he has. And that affair he had with some woman he met in town, the night of his birthday—you know as much about that as I do. That kind of thing is going on all the time. And who cares? I don't think Matt would ever raise a hand to pa, he wouldn't stoop to that. But Matt may just get damned fed up with the old man's righteousness one of these days and simply pack up and get out for good."

"I still don't see what all this has to do with you and me," Sally argued. "All I said was that we never seem to have an hour we can call our own."

"Right now, I'm trying to hold the family together. I think it's important. Hell, maybe it isn't, but if I let down . . ."

"The roof blows off, is that it?"

"Frankly, that's the way I feel about it."

"Frankly, I don't," Sally retorted.

"You've got a better idea?"

"You have your own life to take care of. Do you never think of that?"

"I think of it often, but—well, if ma was still alive I might . . ."

"I see." Sally sat hugging her knees for a moment in silence. "You know, Johnny," she said at last, "*you're* the only real problem in this situation. You're letting yourself—oh, what's the use! We could talk all night about it and get nowhere."

"So I'm through talking," John said. "Let's take another spin on the ice before we go in."

Sally suddenly put her head on his shoulder. "I'd rather have you kiss me first."

He drew his arm more closely about her and smiled down at her. "Is this part of the treatment?"

"Could be."

Their lips met, and for a long time they clung to each other in vibrant abandon before John drew away from her. "You're really quite a chunk of woman," he said, and laughed unsteadily.

"I'm just an animal—a plain, hungry, uninhibited animal, Johnny. That's something you'll have to remember."

"You may have a chance to prove that someday," John told her.

"Is that your way of proposing to me?" she asked.

"Hah, I might have known there was a catch to it," he laughed.

"There's no catch to it. I just like to have everything in order."

“Well, it’s against my better judgment,” said John elaborately, “but since you put it that way, I suppose this is as good a time as any. If you consider me worthy, will you marry me, Miss Hunter?”

“I will, indeed, Mr. Darr,” Sally said demurely. “When?”

“Just a minute now—don’t rush me. I’d marry you tomorrow if I could. But these things take time.”

“I’d marry you tonight, darn it!” Sally whispered.

He gathered her close again, and she came to him with all the full urgency of her strong young body.

He struggled away from her at last. “Damn it, Sally, I can’t stand much more of this. Let’s get going.”

“Not yet, Johnny. Don’t push me away. Just hold me a little while longer. We’re all alone here and nobody . . .”

“Sally, this is crazy!” John muttered, the sweet, hot torment of her breath against his cheek. “We’re losing our heads!”

“I know it.”

“Okay—let’s take a breather on this. We’ll both feel better if we do.”

Sally sighed deeply. “Maybe. But I warn you—I’m not going to wait forever.”

John brushed the blanket aside and stood in front of her. “You won’t have to,” he promised. “Let’s skate.”

Although Luke kept to himself the precious secret Bess had confided to him, his overweening pride became manifest to everyone in the household. It was manifest to the guests who came streaming into the house on New Year’s Day, though no one would have guessed the reason.

Beyond a few telephone calls no invitations had gone out, but word had somehow got around that Luke Darr was holding “open house,” and more than twice the expected number of visitors had arrived—neighbors, yes, but some of them so remote that Luke had not encountered them in more than a year except for a casual meeting in town where he had responded to their greeting without being able to recall their names.

For Sally and Bess it had meant hours of diligent preparation—there were enough sandwiches and cakes and pies to feed half the county. Gallons of coffee had been brewed and John and Matt had brought cases of soft drinks to dispense as they were called for. Matt would have had a few cases

of beer on hand, and even John had argued that a farmer wouldn't consider he had been at a party unless he could have his beer.

But Luke had been obdurate. "I won't have it in the house. If they want their beer, let them go somewhere else for it."

There the matter had ended, and Luke was blind to the fact that many of the men lingered in the barnyard where Matt met them, and were reluctant to come to the house when their wives summoned them.

And the children! They were everywhere, chasing each other about the house, squabbling among themselves, waging their battles without a restraining hand from their mothers. Luke had bought gifts for them all, stacking the floor beneath the tree with bags of candy and nuts, and for each a cheap toy of tin or plastic gaily colored to delight the eyes of a child. There were times when he had to cover his ears with his hands to shut out the din, though he laughed at himself when he did so. He was the host, he was the giver, and the spirit of holiday still lived, even though Christmas was already a week old.

As the afternoon wore on, however, his feeling of elation began to fade. Between the moment of greeting his guests at the door and that indefinite time yet to come when he would stand at the same door and bid them goodbye, he might as well have been anywhere else in the world. No one seemed aware of his existence.

He ventured into the kitchen where a clutter of farmwives chattered over their coffee and cake while Sally was busy making more sandwiches and brewing still more coffee, and John, an apron tied about his middle, sloshed cups and saucers in the sink and stacked them on the table.

"Can I do anything to help here?" Luke asked, knowing even as he spoke what the answer would be.

"No," John said. "Everything's under control here. Stay out of the kitchen."

He went to the dining room where Bess sat at the table filling cups and replenishing plates. He bent over and put an arm about her.

"Are you all right?" The intimate portent of the question, hushed, surged warmly over him.

"Yes, yes—I'm all right, dear." There was a trace of impatience in her voice. "Just don't bother me now. I'm busy."

He wandered back to the living room, where a group of men had crowded into a corner to munch their sandwiches while they debated the farmers' plight in a time of rising costs and declining prices for farm products. He might have put in a word of his own had he been given a voice

in the argument and had there not been too many others intent on airing their immediate grievances. Luke had strong convictions concerning the problem, but when he leaned toward the center of the group and cleared his throat to speak, a hand was thrust in front of him.

“Let Dave have his say. He’s all cockeyed on it, but he’s got the floor.” The man didn’t even look at Luke as he spoke.

Well, he was merely the host, he thought to himself as he moved away to the other end of the room and got down on his hands and knees where a half dozen youngsters were snatching at each other’s toys and appeared on the verge of a pitched battle.

“Here, here, what’s all this about? What’s the trouble? Look, let me show you a game we can all play together.”

For a brief moment they paused to scowl belligerently, then one boy hurled his toy straight at Luke’s head and ran off howling to look for his mother. The others turned away and left him squatting ridiculously on the floor.

He was relieved when the front door opened and Sam Hunter and his wife came into the hall. He heaved himself to his feet and went to greet them.

“Happy New Year, Sam! Happy New Year, Mrs. Hunter! I’m glad you were able to make it. I was just about ready to give you up.”

Sam Hunter stood for a moment and looked about him. “We must have come to the wrong place,” he grinned. “What kind of a joint are you running here, Luke?”

Luke’s laugh broke above the clamor. “It’s pretty bad, isn’t it? The youngsters especially.”

“Don’t talk to me about youngsters,” Sam said. “We had a houseful at Thanksgiving, and again at Christmas. Thank God, it’s over for another year. I’m getting too old for it, Luke. I can’t take it any more.”

Mrs. Hunter, large and comfortable-looking, smiled with tolerance. “You forget what your own youngsters were like.”

“They get worse with every generation,” Sam declared.

“At least, you won’t have to worry about the next,” Mrs. Hunter chaffed him as she turned away. “You two go on with your talk and I’ll do a little visiting with the neighbor women. We can’t stay more than a few minutes.”

Sam took a cigar from his pocket and nipped the end off between his teeth as he watched his wife pick her way through the crowded room.

"I think you're a little hard on children, Sam," Luke said mildly. "A lot depends on who the parents are, don't you think?"

"I'm not kicking," Sam said. "Our three girls have turned out all right. But I'm damned if I'd bring another kid into the world with all the . . ."

He checked himself abruptly, remembering Bess.

"You might as well say it as think it," Luke said.

"I was thinking only of my own grandchildren and what's ahead of them, Luke," Sam explained quickly in an effort to cover his own embarrassment.

"I was thinking of something a little closer to home," Luke said, bringing the tips of his fingers together and smiling. "It probably won't come as much of a surprise to you."

"Nothing surprises me much any more, Luke. Are you going to have an addition to the family?"

Luke laughed outright. How could a blundering guess hit two targets so squarely at once? "In a sense you're right, Sam," he all but giggled, "though you're not thinking of the same thing I am. I have a suspicion I'm going to have a daughter before long."

"Well, the odds are about even, I'd say," Sam grinned. "What makes you so sure of it?"

Luke chuckled. "I've got eyes in my head, Sam," he announced finally. "I've been watching John and Sally for more than a month now. If they don't pretty soon announce their intentions to get married, I miss my guess. Those two are getting serious, Sam, if I know the signs when I see them."

"Mm-m-m! Well, I don't mind admitting I've been wondering a little about it myself. Sally talked a lot about John when she was home for Thanksgiving. And Christmas, she couldn't talk about anything else. I had an idea there was something in the wind. They've said nothing about it, I suppose?"

"Nothing. I'm just telling you what it looks like to me."

"Well, there isn't much you or I can do about it, Luke. If they make up their minds to go ahead, we can't stop them."

"Would you want to?" Luke asked.

"Hell, no! John's a fine boy. I just happen to like Matt a little more, but that's neither here nor there. John is steady. He'll make a good husband for any woman."

"And there isn't a better girl alive than Sally," said Luke. "They'll make a fine couple."

Sam flicked the ash from his cigar. "There's just one thing, Luke. If John comes to me about it, I'm going to tell him to go ahead and get it over with. I don't go for these long engagements. They can lead to—well, to complications, if you get what I mean."

"You don't have to worry on that point, Sam. They've got sense."

"Sense hasn't a damn thing to do with it when a couple of full-blooded youngsters like John and Sally live together under the same roof as they're doing. I wouldn't have trusted myself when I was their age. When they want to get married, let them get married, and no fooling around!"

"They'd want a place to live," Luke temporized.

"Well, now, that's no great problem, Luke. If they need a little help to get started, you and I can get together on that, surely. I'm ready to do my part. Sally's the only one I have left."

Confused thoughts began piling up in Luke's mind. There were certain difficulties to helping John in any substantial way such as Sam undoubtedly had in mind—difficulties the nature of which he could not discuss with anyone at present, unless it were Virgil Archer.

"We'll do what we can, of course," he conceded. "We can think of that when we come to it."

"Sure! There's lots of time. The kids have their whole lives ahead of them." Sam glanced at his watch. "I'd better get in there and say hello to some of the folks before Dora turns up to tell me it's time to go home. We can talk about this later."

Sam went off, elbowing his way through a swirling crush of figures dancing to an ear-splitting blare of music from the radio. Matt had brought his friends into the house and the air shook with the laughter of the women and wild yipping of their stomping partners. This, Luke thought, was not the way he had planned it, but there was nothing he could do about it now—the party had got completely beyond his control.

He edged his way toward a niche between the Christmas tree and the fireplace where Mark sat, his face stolidly remote, a fire extinguisher propped against the wall beside him. Margot sat on the floor at his feet, one arm resting across his knee.

"You're looking very pretty today," Luke said, bending to stroke the silken blonde curls. "Your father and mother weren't able to come?"

"Daddy's arthritis is bad again," Margot explained.

"Oh, I'm sorry."

He looked about him. In a distant corner of the room, John and Sally were dancing together, their feet barely moving to the music, a soundless brilliance on their lips. In the center of the room Bess danced with a young farmer whose eyes, Luke thought, were a bit too bright, but Matt suddenly cut in and whirled her away in reckless disregard for the dancers who grudgingly gave way as they swept past. What a picture they made together—Matt's fair hair above her head of red-gold, his strong arms guiding her while she clung smiling, her silver-slippered feet flirting in the light from the blazing fireplace! Luke's eyes followed them down the length of the floor and out into the hall, away from the press of the crowded room. If he had his youth to live over again, he decided without any feeling of guilt, he would dance—dance to the glory of God, vanquishing Evil through Joy!

The spirit of holiday was infecting him again. There was no resisting it. Doubts and misgivings were vanishing miraculously. He went skipping out to mingle with the dancing couples, greeting them all again with a feeling that his first words of welcome that day had lacked the warmth he intended. He bounced among them, his face beaming as they called to him above the merrymaking.

"Hi, Luke! Happy New Year!"

"Grab yourself a partner, Luke! Let joy be unrefined!"

"Where's the little woman, Luke? You sure know how to pick 'em!"

Time-worn, rustic humor that warmed Luke's heart as he moved among them. In the dining room he paused beside a young woman who sat by herself, crumpling a handkerchief nervously in her lap. She was scarcely more than a girl, he thought as he bent over her.

"I should know you," he said in half-apology, "but I have a hard time with names."

She smiled and wiped her brow with her handkerchief. "I'm Cathy Haines—Ted Haines' wife," she told him. "I used to be Cathy Roberts—before I married Ted."

"One of Will Roberts' girls! Now I remember. But the last time I saw you you were in pigtails. And you're married?"

"Since the first week in November."

"So young a bride—and you're not dancing?"

"I tried it, but it's so awfully warm," she said almost wearily. It was only then that he realized the girl was pregnant—too obviously for one who had been married only since the first week of November. Embarrassment swept over him. When he looked at her face again she was blushing.

"It is warm," he agreed, fumbling for words. Impulsively he put an arm about her shoulders. "God bless you, child!"

Cathy's eyes brimmed with tears, and as he turned away Luke's throat tightened with pity for the young and the innocent thus led from the path of virtue. He almost bumped into Matt.

"I think you ought to go up and look in on Bess, pa. She's gone to your bedroom."

"What's wrong with her?" Luke asked in alarm.

"She turned her ankle halfway up the stairs."

"Did she fall?"

"I got to her before she reached the bottom, but she took a couple of hard bumps before I caught her. I don't think she hurt herself much, but you'd better go up and have a look anyhow."

Luke found Bess sitting on the edge of the bed, both hands clasped about her ankle.

"Bess, you hurt yourself!"

"It's just my silly ankle," she said, grimacing. "It turns on me once in a while. One of my slippers caught on a step and I lost my balance."

He laid his fingers on the already swollen joint. "You must do something with that. You've got a nasty sprain there. Let me put an elastic bandage . . ."

She brushed his hand aside. "It's nothing to worry about." She got up and limped off toward the bathroom. "Go on back and look after your party. I'll be down in a few minutes."

"I'll wait here," he said. "The party can get along without me."

He doubted that she had heard him, he thought as he went to stare from the window into the darkness. Something in her manner, in her voice, disturbed him now as he waited for her to come back into the room. Was she hiding something from him? Two cars stood in the driveway below, their headlights searching the snow-mottled ground, ruby vapor-puffs swirling in the rear. His guests were beginning to leave. Well, let them go. He was concerned with something more than standing at the door to wish them Godspeed.

The first car was already moving away when Bess came into the room. "Go on down, *please!*" she pleaded impatiently and set a bottle of liniment and a roll of bandage on the night table beside the bed. "I can take care of this myself."

He gave her a searching look. "You're not feeling right, are you? Aside from your ankle, I mean."

"I'm tired, that's all. I've had all I can stand for one day. I'm going to stay here until you get rid of the crowd."

"Well, all right," he said. "I just hope nothing has happened. A fall like that—in your condition . . ."

"Oh, for God's sake! I wasn't in any *condition*, as you call it."

He stared at her for a moment before he spoke. "What are you saying?"

"Luke, dear," she replied tolerantly, "I told you I wasn't sure, didn't I? I shouldn't have said anything about it till I knew. Now I know."

He stood over her, his face gone suddenly ashen, his chin trembling. "Don't lie to me!" he said harshly. "You were going to give me what I've been praying for, and you knew it!"

Bess leaned away from him, frightened. "Are you insane?"

"You knew it!" he repeated, his voice rising. "*I* knew it. What the devil prompted you to go prancing around the room like a mad woman when you knew—"

"Luke, Luke!" Bess begged. "Please believe me. It wasn't that. I'm trying to tell you—"

"And those damned slippers you—you . . ."

His voice broke. He was beside himself. Ghost fingers seemed to clutch at his throat and tears started to his eyes. He turned away to pace the length of the room and came back to stand again before the window where he peered out upon the indifferent sweep of night.

After a long silence Bess's voice came to him. "Do you know what you are doing to me? Or do you care?"

He jerked away from the window and faced her. "Do you know what you have done to *me*? And do *you* care?"

"I care far more than you could ever care for anything but yourself, Luke," she said in a voice from which all feeling seemed to have vanished. "I married you because I wanted to live like a human being. I thought you were human. I realize now that you're not. You married me because you wanted a wife you could walk over—and bear children to you. If I don't give you the child you want, I'm no good. Isn't that it? Well, maybe I *am* no good. But I'm not just one of the prize animals on your farm, Luke. I'm not just a *thing*—a thing to be bred and turned out to pasture. I'm a woman and I still have a little pride left in me. I've wanted children of my own as much

as any woman alive, but right now I don't give a damn if I never have a child—yours or anybody else's!"

Luke covered his face with his hands. "God forgive you!"

"Leave God out of this! What I'm talking about is something between you and me—nobody else. And I'm telling you now—I'm not going to stay in a house where I . . ."

Matt's voice came from the foot of the stairs. "Pa—get down here. The gang's breaking up. Come on!"

Luke hesitated, his upper lip drawn tight to stay the twitching of his nose.

But Bess was on her feet. "Don't stand there. Get out!"

When the door had closed behind him, she flung herself across the bed and wept.

BESS heard the voices as though they were faintly chiming links of a silver chain drawn slowly through deep water . . .

She was eight years old again and was visiting her grandfather's farm in Iowa, where she had gone to spend the Easter vacation. At midnight she had stolen out of the farmhouse and had gone to the barn to look at the newly born foal her grandfather had promised would be hers. The dark spring rain was needled with sleet, and little Bess Valentine was clad only in her nightgown. She groped her way to the stall where she knew the mare Daisy and her foal were, and leaned down in the dark to listen for warm breathing and perhaps suckling. All she heard was an anxious whinny, and after that a pawing of the mare's hooves. In terror she stretched out her hand to touch the foal, and then she knew. She had chosen a name for the newborn, a lovely name for a filly—Rosalind—but Rosalind was dead. Horror-stricken, she stumbled back into the house and roused her grandparents. Two days later, the doctor told them Bess had pneumonia . . .

The silver deep-water chain continued its muted music and Bess strove to distinguish one link from another.

"There is considerable congestion," said an unfamiliar link. "I'd suggest the hospital if these shots don't bring improvement during the next twenty-four hours."

"But how could it happen so—so all of a sudden?" That was Luke's voice. "Yesterday—at the party—she seemed all right. She's had a touch of cold hanging on for a couple of weeks, but it didn't seem to bother her much."

The doctor motioned toward the door and Luke followed him into the hall.

"Has your wife ever had pneumonia?" Doctor Benton asked as soon as they were alone.

"Pneumonia? Is it as serious as that?"

"It's something we have to keep in mind in cases like this. The patient's history—"

"I can't help you on that," Luke said. "After all I haven't known her very long, but she hasn't said anything about ever having pneumonia."

"I don't want to alarm you unduly," Benton said, "but your wife's condition is not good. The suddenness of the attack, the heavy congestion overnight, the temperature she's running—some people are more susceptible to pulmonary disorders than others, of course, and previous attacks may have something to do with it. They're apt to be more vulnerable when . . ."

"I hope it's nothing like that."

"Well, we ought to know in a day or two. Many patients get over it as suddenly as they get it. There's a lot we don't know about what we call the common cold. I have patients who never seem to be bothered by colds except after an emotional upset of some kind—apparently healthy one day, they have a violent disturbance over something, and the next day they come up with all the symptoms of a bad cold. Fortunately we have found new ways of relieving the discomforts, but we still have to wait for old Mother Nature to work the cure. Well, see that she gets the medication I have set out for her and phone me tomorrow around noon."

"There's nothing else we can do?"

"Give her every chance to rest—lots of sleep, and as little disturbance as possible. She should have a room by herself for a few days, if that can be arranged."

"I sat up with her all last night," Luke said, "but I'll take the room downstairs tonight."

They started toward the head of the stairway just as Sally appeared, a bowl of steaming broth in her hands. The doctor glanced at the broth and nodded approval.

"Let her have all the liquid nourishment she'll take—hot," he said, and continued his way downstairs, Luke following him.

When they were outside the house, the doctor got into his car immediately, leaving the door open. For a moment he sat in silence without starting the engine.

"I'm a little puzzled about one thing," he said finally.

"What is it?" Luke asked anxiously.

"Mrs. Darr isn't as cooperative as she might be," the doctor observed. "She knows she's sick. She knows we're trying to help her get well. But she lay there as if she didn't care whether she gets well or not. When I spoke to

her, she acted as if she hadn't heard me—or muttered something I could hardly make out. She was like somebody in a dream. And yet, she's not delirious. Was she like that before I got here?"

"She slept all night," Luke said, "and I slept most of the morning, so there wasn't much chance to talk."

"Well, maybe she'll be different next time I come to see her." The doctor leaned to close the door. "Phone me when you need me—give me a call tomorrow morning anyhow and let me know how she's feeling. Get back into the house now before you pick up a bug."

Sally set the bowl on the night table beside the bed. "Are you awake, Bess?"

Bess opened her eyes. "Oh, it's you!"

"I've brought you some good hot soup. Shall I prop you up on your pillows?"

Bess yawned and stretched her arms. "I'm still half asleep." Her voice was thick, her words labored. "What time is it?"

"After three—in the afternoon. Maybe I shouldn't have wakened you. But you ought to have a little nourishment. You haven't eaten anything to speak of since yesterday morning. You can go back to sleep again after you've had your broth. Here, sit up a little and I'll fix your pillows."

Bess drew herself up and leaned forward in the bed. "I heard you come in, but I was afraid it was *them* again."

"Them? Oh, you mean Luke and the doctor. There, now, lean back and make yourself comfy."

"What were they doing here?"

Sally looked at her in amazement. "Bess, dear, you're sick. We had Doctor Benton come out to look at you."

Bess's lips twisted in a half-smile. "So—I'm sick. Do I have to have a doctor come all the way out from town to tell me when I'm sick?"

Sally handed her the steaming bowl. "Don't you think he might help you get over your cold?"

"I've had colds before," Bess said petulantly, "worse colds than this one—and I've got over them. I've had colds ever since I was a little girl. I know what to expect. I run a temperature like a baby—I go kind of dippy for a day or so—and then I come out of it. I know more about it than the doctors do."

"I'm sure you do," Sally humored her. "But dig into that broth before it gets cold."

Bess dipped her spoon and sampled the broth. "It tastes good."

"Just what the doctor ordered," Sally said blithely.

"It's good for a cold—very good for a cold—nothing better for a cold!" Bess threw her head back and laughed emptily. Sally stared at her. "What's the matter with you, Bess?"

"Why don't you ask the doctor? Doctors know everything. What's the matter with me? What's the matter with everybody in this house? What's the matter with the whole God-damned world?"

Sally was frightened. "I don't know, dear," she said soothingly as she fought back the feeling of alarm that was creeping over her. "Drink the rest of your broth."

Bess toyed with her spoon, her mouth tightening again into that odd hook of a smile. "The world is sick, but the doctor can't do anything about it," she muttered hoarsely. "This house is sick, but he can't cure it. I'm sick, but he doesn't even know what's wrong with me."

Sally sighed. "Do you know?"

"Sure—I know. But I'm not telling. I'm not telling anybody." Bess drank off the last of the broth and handed the empty bowl to Sally. "That was good—just as good as we used to serve at the Oxcart. Do you suppose I could get my old job back if I asked Fred Swale?"

"I don't see why not," Sally said as she turned toward the door. The one thing she wanted now was to get out of the room. "I'll go down now and get along with my work. I'll send Luke up to sit with you."

"I don't want to see him."

Sally paused with her hand on the knob. "Well . . ." She shrugged her shoulders and opened the door. "Try to get a little more sleep now."

"I've been asleep all my life," Bess said, and lay back against her pillows. "Sally—thank you for—your nursing."

John followed Sally into the kitchen. "How is she?" he asked.

Sally set the bowl in the sink and ran the water. "I don't know what to think. She's pretty sick, that's all."

John's look was troubled. "Pa says Doc Benton is scared of pneumonia."

"There's something more serious than that wrong with her," Sally said.

"Like what?"

"If I knew, I'd tell you. But I don't know." Sally hesitated. "Where's your father?"

"He's shut himself up in that coon's nest he calls his office. He may be sleeping, for all I know, but if you want to talk to him—"

"No, no—let him sleep."

"What's on your mind?"

Sally turned to face him. "Bess is carrying on like a crazy woman. The way she talks—the things she says—"

John put an arm about her. "Look, kid, you're all in a dither over nothing. Slow down and talk sense. How about a cup of coffee?"

"I need it. Heat it up and give me a cigarette."

In a moment they were seated at the kitchen table and John said, "Well, let's have it."

Sally took a sip from her cup and set it down. "I don't know whether she meant all she said or whether she was just putting on a show for my benefit, but she went on like a mad woman, cursing the world and the house and everybody in it as if she . . ."

"That doesn't sound much like Bess."

"You weren't there, you didn't hear her, but she scared the living daylights out of me and I had to get out of the room."

John grinned. "I didn't think you'd get scared by anybody like Bess. What scared you?"

"Have you never been scared without knowing why?"

"When I'm scared, I go out and find out what it is I'm scared of. Mostly, it's nothing."

"But there's something eerie about this—something I can't put into words. You don't believe in ghosts, and I don't, but there are ghosts in this house and I don't want to live with them. I want to get out and go somewhere . . ."

"Take it easy, now. We can't get along here without you, and you know it."

"You got along without me before I came."

"We're not going back to that again. Anyhow, we're not getting anywhere. Can't you tell me anything Bess said that . . ."

"For one thing, she asked me if I thought she could get her old job back at the restaurant."

“So that’s it? They’ve been having another squabble over something. Now that I think of it, pa has been acting kind of funny ever since he came down to breakfast this morning. I told you Bess would be kicking over the traces one of these days. Maybe she has called the old man’s bluff at last. Maybe that’s why he’s sitting all by himself in that cubbyhole, with the door closed, when he ought to be up sitting with her.”

“She doesn’t want him to sit with her. She doesn’t want to see him. She said so when I was leaving the room. Maybe if you or Matt went up . . .”

“Nothing doing. We’re not going to get mixed up in any husband-and-wife spat. If they want to sulk for a couple of days, let them sulk. Maybe it’ll do them both good. It won’t do pa any harm, I know that.”

Sally drained her cup and set it aside. “Well, I’ve got to get started on supper. I know one thing—I’ve seen them in what you call husband-and-wife spats before, but they were nothing like this.”

“She’s sick, don’t forget that. She’s running a high temperature, and if she’s raving a little . . .”

“No,” Sally said, getting up from the table, “this isn’t anything as simple as that. I’ve seen people with temperatures, and I know how they act.”

“Well, let it ride for a couple of days. And don’t go packing up and walking out on us just because you’re scared of the dark. Just remember—when you go, I go with you.”

“The sooner, the better,” Sally said.

Luke Darr was in his den, but he was not sleeping, as John had suggested. He was on his knees beside his chair, his Bible open before him. He was not reading—it was already dark in the room and he had not turned on the light. And he was not praying—audibly, at least—though his lips moved now and then in silent pleading. He was merely humbling himself before the Lord, patiently waiting for the struggle to subside in the triumph of spirit over flesh.

Too close still was the memory of what had happened between him and Bess last night. Only last night? Already it seemed an age since he had listened to her scathing denouncement. All night he had sat watching over her, doing his best to convince himself that their quarrel was nothing more than a sudden flare of anger on both sides—on his because of his bitter disappointment, on hers because of what had happened to her. Besides, Bess had been ailing more than she was willing to admit. He knew that before he had summoned Doctor Benton, and Benton had confirmed his fears.

But there was more to it than that. Had it been that Bess was incapable of bearing a child to any man, he might have resigned himself to fate. But her outspoken rebellion against God's command to be fruitful and multiply—that was blasphemy. In the sight of God, then, he was justified, and Bess a willful sinner. Their union had been in accordance with God's law. They were made one in the flesh when they spoke their vows. One in the flesh, yes, but worlds apart in the spirit.

As he knelt, struggling for guidance, the outer darkness closing about him, an inner light grew slowly. Again it was almost like a vision unfolding, a voice speaking: *Forego the flesh and let the spirit prevail!*

"I will, I will!" he breathed.

Purge the heart of all carnal desire!

"I do, I do!" he said aloud.

Self-denial on his part would ultimately convince Bess that his love for her was more than she thought. In time, she would relent, they would become one in spirit, and she would come to him at last in all the fullness of surrender that was the very essence of the Creator's plan.

He uttered a prayer of thankfulness and got up from his knees. He stood for a moment in the darkness before he turned on the light and set his Bible back in its wonted place upon the desk. He was serene, but without elation. He felt again as he had at the New Year's party when he had wandered about in a vain search for a place where he belonged. In all the house there was not one to whom he could go and reveal the gentle miracle of change that had come to him while he was kneeling before his chair in the gathering darkness. Not one, he told himself. Not even Bess, for whom he prayed with his every breath.

He stepped to the window and peered out into the clouded darkness. For more years than he could recall, sometime in January or February, he had been forced to take to his bed with a severe attack of grippe. They called it influenza nowadays, but the symptoms were the same. Agatha used to tell him he brought the attacks on because he feared and expected them. Utter nonsense, of course! Still, he was haunted by the suspicion that his old enemy was merely lying in wait, biding his time. He turned to his desk and took a small atomizer from a bottom drawer. He threw his head back and sprayed his throat thoroughly with a bitter concoction he had got from a druggist in Cleone.

The clutter of papers on his desk reminded him again of certain misgivings that had lately beset him concerning his dream of a new church for Minter. He had not lost faith in his belief that he had been called upon to

raise a lasting monument to the glory of God. But it was time the project was getting under way. The delay was beginning to weigh heavily. If he could only talk again with Virgil Archer! He bowed his head and prayed silently for a new awakening of faith in himself, then sprayed his throat again and turned off the light above his desk.

As he stepped into the hall, Sally's voice came to him from the dining room, where she was setting the table.

"I was just about to call you," she sang out. "Supper is about ready to put on."

"Good!" he said, making his voice cheerful. "I'll just go up and look in on Bess and be right down."

He climbed the stairs and opened the door quietly. There was no light in the room, so he stood for a moment and listened. Bess was breathing evenly, but she made no move. He closed the door noiselessly and tiptoed down the stairs.

They were already gathering toward the table.

"How is she?" Matt asked as Luke approached.

"Sound asleep, and that's good. The more sleep she can get now, the better." He glanced about. "Mark hasn't come in yet?"

"He told me this morning he was having supper with the Jensens," Sally said.

"That makes us a small family tonight," Luke observed as he drew his chair into place. "Only four at the table."

Mark Darr had walked across the fields in the early twilight, his feet following no path over the wind-crusted snow, his eyes seeking no landmark to guide him toward the Jensen farmhouse. He needed none. A cold, gray half-light remained and the way was so familiar he could have closed his eyes and found it. Still, he had left a lamp burning in his cabin as a beacon for his return later under the starless skies. He might have carried a lantern with him, but he scorned its use. He had groped his way through darkness all his life and had somehow managed to keep his feet on the trail.

Now, after the supper of tender chicken and plump dumplings Guri Jensen had prepared because she knew how well Mark favored them, he sat in a big chair in the living room, the light by his shoulder flooding the pages of the book he held open on his knees. Magnus Jensen had gone to lie down immediately after supper, the table had been cleared, the dishes washed and put away, and Guri sat nearby, intent upon mending her husband's socks.

Margot had drawn a cushion and sat on the floor at Mark's feet while he read aloud from the book of Browning's poems she had given him at Christmas.

It was a strange gift from one so young, he had thought when she gave it to him. So much that was incomprehensible to her, so much that even he had never been able to understand, although his own copy, acquired years before, was dog-eared from long hours of pondering over its lines. But Margot had reminded him of the day in spring when she was not yet reconciled to her lameness and he had sought to quiet her complaining by reciting the song of Pippa, the little girl of the silk mills:

*The year's at the spring,
The day's at the morn;
Morning's at seven;
The hillside's dew-pearled;
The lark's on the wing,
The snail's on the thorn;
God's in His heaven—
All's right with the world!*

"I understood that, even then," she replied when he questioned her about the gift. "Is it necessary to understand everything a poet writes?"

"Maybe not," he admitted.

"If Robert Browning had never written anything else, I'd love him for that—and because you sang it to me that day."

"Sang it?"

"When you read poetry, it's always like singing."

There was a measure of truth in that, Mark reflected. When he read poetry he always felt as if he were singing. Even when he read it to himself.

And so, with Margot at his feet and her mother listening while she netted the woolen thread back and forth over a worn spot in the heel of her husband's sock, Mark had read the first part of *Pippa Passes*, to the tragic fate of Ottima and her paramour Sebald.

"It is not a pretty story," Guri remarked when he came to the end of his reading.

"Oh, mother!" Margot protested. "It's a beautiful story. Isn't it beautiful that one little girl singing one little song could do so much to . . ."

"That part of it I like, yes," her mother said, "but . . ."

“But that’s all there is to it,” Margot declared, hugging her knees close. “Read some more, Mark.”

The book fell open on *My Last Duchess*, and Mark read it slowly, conjuring up a little of the heartless Duke’s presence as he spoke the lines.

“If I had been the duchess, I’d have poisoned him!” Margot said, her chin on her knees.

“I don’t understand why a poet has to write about such horrid people,” Guri said, taking her glasses from her eyes.

“But the duchess was beautiful, mother,” Margot pointed out.

Mark smiled to himself. Nevertheless, he read them the story of the Pied Piper and a few of the lighter lyrics before he finally closed the book.

“It’s time I was getting back,” he said, and moved to rise from his chair.

But Margot laid a restraining hand on his knee. “Read the one about Porphyria first. Then you can go.”

Mark’s jaw moved in doubt. “I don’t think your mother would like that one.”

“But it’s so nice and creepy, kind of scary—like a ghost story,” Margot argued. “I like it.”

Mark glanced toward Guri.

“Oh, read it to her, Mark. We had ghost stories in Norway when I was Margot’s age. I don’t think they did us any harm. I used to go to bed and pull the covers over my head in the dark, but I always wanted to hear another one. Go ahead and read it.”

He opened the book again and began reading *Porphyria’s Lover*.

*The rain set early in tonight,
The sullen wind was soon awake;
It tore the elm-tops down for spite
And did its worst to vex the lake.
I listened with heart fit to break
When glided in Porphyria . . .
. . . All her hair
In one long yellow string I wound
Three times her little throat around
And strangled her. No pain felt she,
I am quite sure she felt no pain.
And all night long we have not stirred,
And yet God has not said a word.*

Mark closed his book and got up. "That's all for tonight," he said.

"Well, I should think so," Guri said. "We've been living in a crazy world ever since you opened that book. Next time you come over, Mark, bring your violin and play for us. I like that better."

Margot sprang up from her cushion on the floor. "I'm going to walk down the lane with Mark," she announced, shaking the short blonde hair back from her brows.

"Margot! It's black dark outside," her mother reminded her.

"I'm not afraid of the dark," Margot laughed.

"But there's a raw wind blowing."

"I love the wind. And I'll put on my heavy coat."

"Well—wear your woolen scarf over your head—and don't go beyond the county road. Mind, now—you should be in your bed by this time."

"I'll send her back," Mark promised.

In the lane they walked slowly, arm in arm, Mark matching his stride patiently to her limping gait. Black darkness enclosed them and the wind was a low sighing in the woods.

They had gone only half way to the county road when Margot halted abruptly. "Listen," she said and stood with breath held, still clinging to Mark's arm.

He listened for a moment. "I hear nothing but the wind in the trees."

"Just a whisper of wind," Margot said. "It should be a wild wind on a night like this—a wild wind tearing the elm-tops down for spite."

Mark laughed uneasily. "You'll have to settle for oaks around here," he told her.

"Let it be oak-tops, then. Porphyria wouldn't care."

Mark felt a skin-crawling. "I think you'd better get back to the house and into bed. You've had a little too much of Browning for one night."

"Yes, I'll go. You talk to me as if I'm only a kid. I wonder how long it will be before you find out I'm not."

Mark moved his lower jaw stiffly. "I've known that for quite a while."

"Then why have you never kissed me?"

Her arms went about him suddenly, her body trembling against his. Mark's arms were on her shoulders, pressing her gently away. She shook her head impetuously and the scarf fell from her hair and lay soft over his fingers.

"You're losing your scarf," he told her.

She drew even closer, with a kind of desperation, and lifted herself until her head lay against his shoulder. “I don’t care. Wrap it around my neck, but don’t push me away from you.”

Mark placed the scarf snugly about her throat.

“Tighter—tighter,” she said. “Tighter—like . . .”

Her voice faded to a mere whisper and then her mouth was hard against his, her sharp little teeth biting into his lips.

He thrust her violently away and held her at arm’s length. “Margot—Margot—don’t ever do that again! A time may come—”

But she had torn herself away from him with a sob and was hurrying off through the darkness toward the house. He followed her to where the lane opened into the yard. There he stood until he saw the door open and a beam of light fall across the snow-covered ground. At the sound of the door’s closing, he turned away and started back toward his cabin beside the swamp.

VIRGIL ARCHER sat alone at his table in the dining car, on his way to Seattle where he was to address a meeting of the American Institute of Architects. There was a single red rose in the vase on his table and it made him think again, in piercing resentment, of the untimely death of his wife ten years ago. Alice had loved roses. Well, she had given him a son, a good, sturdy boy, a good architect unhampered by the idiotic dreams that bemused the father. Virgil Archer crumbled a roll, dipped it into his soup by way of flouting what was accepted as good table manners, ate it, and glanced from the window.

Out there—ah, yes, what could you expect on the prairies in mid-January? Outside there, beside the speeding train, barely discernible in the light from his window, were whirligigs of snow mingled with the dust of topsoil from the plowed fields that held in their frozen embrace all the living hopes of the men who were the real architects of America. What did it matter that they had no thought of design in the thing they were building? After all, what thought of design had directed the living creatures who, countless eons ago, groped their way from the sea to fashion a world? Yet who was to say it was not there? It was in the very nature of things. Banish the idea of design in the universe, and you cast out the Master Architect.

Beyond the swirling snow, beyond the immediate darkness, there were lights in small farmhouses. Life was there, and warmth, and love's persistent urging. Suddenly Virgil Archer bethought himself: "I can't be far from that little village of Minter—where a farmer wants to build a church."

He had not forgotten Luke Darr, that staunch, purposeful man who had come to see him just before Christmas. He had not forgotten the look in his eyes, the look of a man wholly dedicated, a man almost possessed—a little mad, perhaps, in the sense that all men are when they stand ready to sacrifice everything to a cherished hope. Virgil Archer was no stranger to it himself. During the past week, indeed, he had given more thought to Luke Darr's church than he had to anything else. He had made a half dozen

sketches and hidden them away in a drawer to await a few days of more hospitable weather before driving up to Minter and looking the ground over. He had been working on a little plan of his own, moreover, that might help to lift the burden of paying for the project when it was finally completed. He would hold back on that, however, until he had another talk with Luke Darr. As soon as he got back from Seattle next week he would start working on it.

At that very moment, while Virgil Archer sat musing over a red rose, Luke Darr sat at his own table, his two sons, Matt and John, on either side of him, while they talked over a second cup of coffee. Supper had been early, and Sally had taken a tray upstairs to Bess who had been prevailed upon to remain in bed for another couple of days to insure complete recovery from her bout with pneumonia. It had been a stubborn struggle—ten days of constant hoping and praying on Luke’s part, anxious waiting and watching on the part of the others in the household. Three days ago, however, the crisis had passed and Bess was already begging to leave her bed and at least walk around the room. But Doctor Benton had been stern—she would stay in bed until he gave her permission to get up. Her obstinate refusal to go to the hospital had almost angered him.

It had been a time of trial, Luke reflected, but it had not been without its measure of compensation. Nothing could unite a family more than an anxiety in which they all shared. John had been patient through it all, ready to do anything he could to ease the burden. Sally had been tireless, running the household as if it were her own. Matt had held his rebellious impulses under restraint, driving back and forth to town at the slightest need, eagerly taking his turn at the bedside during the long nights when Bess’s life seemed to hang in the balance. Even Mark had lingered about the house, helping Sally in the kitchen, sitting late into the night before he trudged off to his cabin. They had been one family through it all, and Bess was at last on the way to full recovery. Please God, they would remain one family through the months to come!

Perhaps it was the feeling of relief, now that Bess was on her way back to health again, that prompted Matt to ask a question that had no direct relation to Bess.

“What would you have done, pa, if Bess hadn’t made it? It was nip and tuck there for a couple of days.”

“What would I have done?” Luke said, sipping his coffee and giving himself a moment to think. “God help me, I don’t know.”

“Would you have started looking around for another wife?” Matt persisted.

Luke’s eyes pierced him. “My boy, what a question!”

“When ma died,” Matt went on, “you didn’t waste any time finding yourself another woman.”

Luke flicked his nose with a forefinger. “We needed someone to look after things here after your mother was taken from us.”

“We still would, if anything happened to Bess.”

“What pleasure do you get out of borrowing trouble—when you should be thankful with the rest of us that nothing did happen?”

“I am thankful, pa,” Matt replied, “but I’ve been doing a little thinking on the side. Maybe that’s not such a good idea, but I’m twenty-five now and I’m beginning to wonder about a lot of things.”

“What, for example?”

“Well, suppose it had been you instead of Bess? And suppose you had popped off all of a sudden and left us to settle up your affairs? Where would we begin?”

“Don’t fret yourself about my ‘popping off,’ as you call it, my boy. I’m good for a few years yet—the best years of my life, I hope.”

“We hope so, pa, but—well, it could happen. It could happen to any of us. It wouldn’t matter so much if it was one of *us*. But if you snuffed out all of a sudden—”

“Will you tell me just what you’re getting at, Matt?” Luke interrupted.

“Well, John and I have been talking it over and we both feel things around here should be put in some sort of order, just in case.”

“Don’t you think it might have been better if you had both come to me so we could talk it over together, all of us?”

“Isn’t that what we’re doing?” Matt asked.

“I don’t like your tone of voice, Matt,” Luke said.

“Well cripes, what—”

“Hold it, you two,” John put in. “We’ll get farther if we don’t start blowing off. Sure, pa. Matt and I have been talking things over. Why not? It’s time we had a few things sort of straightened out. And now that we’re together, it’s as good a time as any. For one thing, pa, have you ever made a will?”

“I’ve never had anything to leave before.”

“You have now,” John said, “and that’s what we’re worried about. We’ve all worked together to make this place what it is. And it’s worth something. If anything happened to you, we don’t want to have to hire a lawyer to go into the courts to get what we’re entitled to.”

“I see. Very well, I’ll take care of it next time I’m in town. Does that satisfy you?”

“Not quite,” Matt persisted. “We’d like to know before-hand just where we come in on the deal.”

“I think you can leave that to me,” Luke said, doing his best to remain calm. He had a sense that he was being crowded.

“This isn’t just a matter of what we’d have to do if you died suddenly,” John went on. “Suppose Matt or I had plans of our own?”

“Plans of your own?”

“We’re not kids any longer, pa. One of these days we’ll have to think of starting a life of our own. We’ll be wanting to get married, for example.”

“Are you thinking of getting married?” Luke asked.

“I didn’t intend to bring it up right now, but—”

Luke smiled. “It’s Sally?”

“Who else?”

“I can’t think of a finer girl, John,” Luke assured him. “Have you set the date?”

“The sooner the better,” John told him. “Right away, if we can arrange it.”

Luke sat twirling his thumbs for a moment. “Well, now—this is going to take a little thinking over. I hope it won’t mean you’ll be leaving me and starting up on your own somewhere else?”

“That would take money,” John reminded him.

“Yes, it would. That’s why we ought to take a little time to think it over. We shouldn’t rush into it.”

“And what if I took it into my head to shack up with some good-looking gal between now and spring plowing?” Matt put in.

Luke gave a low chuckle. “Not you, Matt! I can’t imagine you getting serious over any woman. Still, there’s something in what you say. If I make a change for John, I’d have to be ready to do the same for you. It’s only fair. And then, there’s Mark, poor boy—”

“Why not?” Matt challenged. “We’re all of age and we’re all entitled to our share of whatever there is.”

“You want to see the family break up and scatter to the four winds? And how much do you think there’d be in it for you if we did? You’re talking nonsense, my boy.”

“I don’t want to see any family break-up,” Matt protested. “But the way we’ve been operating around here is cockeyed. Nobody knows where he stands or what he’s got—or whether he has anything at all. We think we ought to know.”

John spoke up before his father could reply. “Look, pa, it isn’t just a question of my marrying Sally Hunter. It’s the whole set-up we’re talking about. For years we’ve been going along without any idea of where we stand. When we wanted a little money for anything, we’ve always gone to you or ma and asked for it. You never refused to let us have what we needed. We’re not kicking about that. We always got it when it was there—and it has always been there. But things have changed. We can’t set up a life of our own and have to come to you everytime we want to spend a buck.”

“I agree with you, John. Especially when a man takes a wife, he ought to be on his own. But when you tell me you want to get married right away—”

“That’s as much Sally’s idea as it is mine,” John said. “She doesn’t want to wait, and neither do I.”

Luke eyed his son narrowly. “Have you some reason for hurrying into this?”

“Reason? Sally and I have decided to get married and we don’t see any point in putting it off. Isn’t that reason enough?”

“Yes, yes—if that’s all there is to it. It’s just this—well, this ‘right away’ business . . .” Luke let his voice fall. Far from making any accusation, he was loth even to harbor a suspicion. “If you’re in trouble . . .”

“We don’t *have* to get married, if that’s what you mean,” John retorted stonily.

Luke breathed relief. “I’m sure of that, John. Still, a man can’t know everything about his sons. You and Sally have been alone a lot—riding out, back and forth—under the same roof here while Bess and I were in the city . . .”

“Skip it, for crise-sake!” Matt burst out, getting up from his chair. “What difference does it make to anybody?”

“Yes, let’s skip it,” John agreed. “I don’t want to say things I’d be sorry for afterward. Matt and I wanted to state our case, and we’ve done it. The rest is up to you, pa.”

He got up and followed Matt into the living room, where Matt turned on the radio and sat down to listen to the evening news.

“You can’t win, Jonathan,” he said. “I’m a bad boy and I get hell. You’re a good boy but nobody trusts you. I go out and get what I want, and you sit around the house and get nothing. So where’s the percentage?”

For a long time, Luke sat by himself, mulling over what his sons had said—what they had demanded, in fact. This plunging into marriage was a risky business, even with a girl like Sally. It might be a good thing to have a talk with Sam Hunter, even though Sam had already expressed himself as opposing long engagements. And Matt had complicated it even more. Just when he felt that the family might at last have drawn together, just when he thought he might give his thoughts and energies full play so that his plans for the new church might begin to take definite form, all his reckonings were going astray. Another couple of months, and it would be spring. Time was growing short for what he would have to do before he could face another season’s work with an easy mind.

Stacking the cups and saucers, he carried them to the kitchen just as Sally came down with Bess’s tray and set it on the table beside the sink. When he observed with pleasure that Bess seemed to have eaten everything, Sally agreed, refraining to add that Bess had grimaced as she forced the food down. She told Luke that Bess had asked her to brush her hair for a few minutes, since it was falling out after her fever.

“That was nice of you, Sally. It’s just her little vanity, poor girl,” Luke said, starting toward the room that had once been Mark’s, the room he had occupied since Bess’s illness. “If she’s worried about her hair we’ll have her up and around again in no time.”

Sally did not voice her vague, uneasy doubt. But ten days later, when Bess was still keeping wanly to her room, reading mystery stories and complaining of a strange weakness, Sally said to John, “I don’t think she’s malingering. It’s something deeper than that. She refuses to have the doctor again, and Luke can’t force her to see him! Funny, too, isn’t it, how Luke keeps cheerfully saying all she needs is rest?”

John looked glum. “Yes, it is funny!”

That was the day Virgil Archer telephoned the farm in mid-afternoon, calling from a hotel in Cleone, eager to talk to Luke as soon as possible. In

ten minutes Luke was on his way to town, the household puzzled by his abrupt departure.

“Come in, come in, Mr. Darr!” Archer greeted him heartily at the door of his room. “It’s good to see you again.”

“I was beginning to think you had forgotten all about me,” Luke said as he entered.

“Not quite,” Archer smiled, closing the door. “On the contrary, I’ve had you very much on my mind. I’d have come up sooner, but the weather hasn’t been very helpful. Besides, I had a trip to make to the West coast. But take off your coat and sit down.”

Luke seated himself while Archer hung his overcoat in a closet.

“Perhaps you can stay and have dinner with me,” the architect suggested.

“Well, thanks, but when I left home I didn’t say anything about where I was going or when I’d be back. They’ll probably be expecting me for supper.”

“We can telephone them, of course. To tell you the truth, my friend, I don’t think you’re going to make it in time to eat with the family. We have a lot of talking to do.”

Archer crossed the room and sat down in a large chair beside a table on which stood a bottle and a pitcher of ice. “It may be a little early for a sundowner,” he remarked, “but maybe you’d join me in a drink?”

For a moment, Luke hesitated. All his better instincts rose in protest. But Virgil Archer’s manner seemed to transform the act of taking a drink into something like a ritual.

“I do not drink,” he said curtly, virtue prevailing. “But go ahead and help yourself.”

Archer plunked ice into a glass, poured a stout drink, and added charged water until it bubbled and foamed to the brim.

“You know,” he said, lifting his glass and looking at it, “I’ve never been quite sure whether I liked the stuff or not. I don’t care for the taste of it—and it has probably done a lot of harm in the world.”

“No doubt of that,” Luke said firmly.

“Still, it has its virtues. After a couple of drinks I always feel a little closer to my fellow man.”

“The world could do with a little more fellowship,” Luke conceded, though he felt a vague discomfort as he watched the architect swallow half his drink before he set the glass down on the table beside him.

“Well, now,” said Archer as he leaned back at ease in his chair. “I’d like to ask you a few questions before we get down to the main business, Mr. Darr.”

“Ask me anything,” Luke replied.

“You and I are considering a little project that—so far, at least—is known only to ourselves. Am I right?”

“Unless you have told someone about it.”

“I haven’t. And I think you can see for yourself that it makes for a rather peculiar situation. If you were a very wealthy man, Mr. Darr, who had decided to make this church a gift to your community—the community in which you have lived for the greater part of your life—I’d have no trouble understanding it. I’ve had a little experience in that field. But you haven’t that kind of money, of course.”

“Far from it,” Luke admitted readily. “I’m prepared to give all I can, but I’ll need a lot of help—maybe more than I can get. I don’t know. I’ve been a little worried about that side of it.”

“Naturally. We’ll talk about that later. Meanwhile, I’d like to know how the idea came to you in the first place. What makes you want to do this?”

“We’ve needed a new church building in Minter for years,” Luke said. “The one we have is falling apart.”

“Yes, yes, I know. I’ve seen it. I had a good look at it when I came up yesterday afternoon, and again this morning. It’s in bad shape. But a proposal such as this usually comes from a group of men who have talked it over for several months and have chosen a committee and canvassed the congregation—all that sort of thing, you know. But here you are alone. You came to my office at Christmas and laid your proposition before me—without anyone’s support—with no one behind it but yourself, apparently. It’s just a little unusual, isn’t it?”

“It is, but that’s the way I wanted it.”

“And you expected me to take it seriously.”

“I *hoped* you’d listen to me,” Luke said.

“And I did listen to you. That’s the amazing thing about it. Do you realize that the world is full of crackpots who dream up schemes all the way from harnessing the lightning to run a factory to building a lighthouse in the middle of a wheatfield? How was I to know you weren’t one of them? How am I to know now?”

“I’m a religious man, Mr. Archer,” Luke said, lifting his chin. “If that makes me a crackpot . . .”

“Not at all, not at all,” the architect said quickly. “On the other hand, if you’re going to tell me that the new church is to be built as a testimony to your faith in the Almighty God who has done so much for you and all the other prosperous farmers in the district, Mr. Darr, I’m forced to tell you frankly that I don’t believe it.”

“Is it so hard to believe?” Luke asked.

Archer took a drink from his glass and set it back on the table. “For one thing, my friend, I have heard it before—many times. For another—I have yet to find a man or a woman ready to make so great a sacrifice purely for the glory of God. Invariably, there has been a vastly different motive behind their cherished projects. Such motives, I admit, are not a part of an architect’s concern. It’s his business to accept or reject the commission, purely on its own merits and act accordingly. In this case, however, the conditions are different. In a sense, if I decide to go on with what you are proposing, we become partners. I will become involved morally, my feeling of responsibility will go far beyond the mere task of drawing up a plan and seeing to it that my plan is followed by the builders. In other words, I have my own reasons for wanting to know what’s really behind your idea of building a new church in Minter.”

It was a long time, a time of painful soul-searching, before Luke was able to reply. Even then, he had to muster all his courage before he could speak. When he finally did summon his voice, there was a quaver in it, and the words came falteringly.

“This is not—not going to be easy for me, Mr. Archer.”

Sensing embarrassment in Luke’s manner, the architect poured himself another drink and relaxed in his chair. “We have plenty of time, Mr. Darr. Just go ahead and I’ll be glad to listen.”

“When I was a young man,” Luke began, “I felt I had a call to become a servant of the Lord. I had hopes of becoming an ordained minister in His church. But I came from a poor family and I took a job selling cream separators to raise the money for my training. On my rounds, I called at the Pribble farm and got to know Agatha, old Eben’s daughter. When he was killed in a tornado that swept his place, Agatha became an orphan.”

“And you married her,” Archer put in.

“I did. It seemed like a good thing to do at the time. And I can’t say that I ever regretted it. She was a good woman in her way. I had three sons by her.”

“I vaguely remember her,” Archer said. “She was dark—a big, strong girl, as I recall.”

“Too strong for me,” Luke continued. “The land was hers—the boys were hers—I was hers—for twenty-eight years! She died a year ago last fall and I came into the land that had been hers from her father. For the first time in my life I felt like a free man. I had substance. I was still in the prime of life. It was as if the Lord was offering me a second chance to become the man I might have been. No man wants to admit that he has failed in life, Mr. Archer. You understand that.”

Archer’s smile was tolerant. “I’m not altogether without perception, Mr. Darr,” he observed in his urbane voice.

“Last September I took myself another wife,” Luke went on. “I began another life. I have many good years ahead of me still. I’ll have children who will honor their father as well as their mother. I’ll be looked up to by my neighbors. I’ll build a monument to the glory of God that will . . .”

“Not to the glory of God,” Archer interjected.

Luke felt an inner sinking of spirit. “Yes—to the glory of God!” he insisted. “What else?”

“To your own glory, of course,” said Archer.

Luke bowed his head and covered his face with his hands. “Oh, no!”

“It’s nothing to be ashamed of. On the contrary, when a man ceases to seek the honor and respect of his neighbors, he ceases to be a man.”

“But without faith . . .” Luke began.

Archer raised a hand. “I’m not asking you to give up your faith. Keep it—strengthen it—but realize from now on that faith alone will not build your church. It’s going to take work—damned hard work and lots of it—to do the job. I’d like to show you a few sketches I’ve made.”

He reached for a briefcase beside his chair and drew out a folder which he opened as he got up and stepped toward the bed. There, one by one, he spread a dozen sketches expertly penned and lightly brushed in delicate watercolor tints.

Luke left his chair and stood beside the architect. For a long time he gazed at Virgil Archer’s handiwork. Finally he drew back a step, his eyes still upon the drawings.

“These are—churches?” he asked in utter bewilderment.

Archer smiled. “These are churches,” he said, “*my* churches. I was prepared to have you reject them. They have been rejected before. But they are the result of years of travel and study in Latin America. Some minor modifications might be made to bring them into line with your requirements, but in a general way they represent the sort of thing I want to do.”

Luke's upper lip was plaguing him. He flicked a rough finger across his nose, swept a hand over his hair, and stood for a moment gazing at the sketches. Then he shook his head doubtfully.

"They might be all right in one of your Latin American countries," he said, "but this is the United States—and I want to build my church in—in Minter!"

"I'm aware of that, Mr. Darr. I could take you to a small village in Yucatan, a village no larger than Minter, with people who have known nothing but poverty all their lives, and I could show you a church there that lovers of beauty travel thousands of miles just to look at. The designer's name has long been forgotten, but his work has made him immortal."

The man's words had a strange effect upon Luke. For a few moments he lived in a world of sheer fantasy in which reality and its stern demands had no place. It was a world above and beyond him, but he found himself reaching toward it, all but grasping the unattainable, like a man peering through darkness to the farthest star.

"It's a little beyond me, I'm afraid," he confessed reluctantly. "I was hoping you'd show me something a little less—I don't quite know how to say it."

"Let me show you something else, then," Archer said, and went back to his briefcase. He brought up a single sheet of paper and returned to the bed. "I did this last night—after I came back from Minter." He laid the drawing on the bed and stood back a step. "There you are, my friend. Reject it and you reject me. I refuse to make any further compromise."

Luke looked at the drawing. It was only a rough pencil sketch, plain and unadorned by any wash of color. Less bizarre than the others, it was sturdy, bold and earthy. It was still far from the thing he had envisioned in his dreams.

"This is better," he admitted grudgingly, "but it would take a lot of money to build . . ."

"It will take far more than Minter can afford, if you go about it in the usual way," said Archer. "But we're not going about it in the usual way. I have a plan, Mr. Darr. Sit down and I'll tell you about it."

Luke went back to his chair and the architect poured himself another drink. When he had sampled it he relaxed in his chair and looked at Luke.

"I had dinner last night in that little restaurant in Minter."

"The Hearth?"

“That’s it. A very good dinner, too, by the way. But the thing that interested me most was the fireplace.”

“We’re very proud of it,” Luke said.

“You have every right to be. I understand it was built by a stonemason who lives in the village—out of stone that was picked up here and there in the neighborhood.”

“It was.”

“Have you any idea what it would have cost to build that fireplace if it had been done in the usual way—under a contract involving designer’s fees, cost of furnishing materials, workmen’s wages and all that sort of thing?”

“I have no idea,” Luke admitted, “but it would be considerable, no doubt.”

“Far more than a modest restaurant like the Hearth could even think of paying, my friend. Perhaps you can see what I’m coming to. You want to build a church. You have the bulk of your material right under your feet. You have a master stonemason to supervise the construction. All you have to do is pick up the material and haul it to the building site, give this craftsman the plans, and let him go ahead. You don’t even have to look for the timber you need. It’s all around you. And you have more labor available than you can use. Your only problem is getting all this together on a voluntary basis and putting it to work.”

“That might be a big problem,” Luke said doubtfully.

“Problems are for solving, Mr. Darr. This is a community church—let the community build it. You’ll not only have a church, but you’ll have a congregation such as you never dreamed of having, and a civic pride beyond your fondest hopes. I’ve seen it happen and I know it can be done.”

It was almost midnight before Luke set out for home, his head literally reeling as he tried to knit together the various strands of Virgil Archer’s planning and shape them into one piece.

Suddenly, he felt as though he were in a quivering envelope of guilt. In his excitement at Archer’s telephone call he had rushed into town, his ambitious dream about his new church shutting even Bess out of his thoughts. He had been pretending to himself that she must have *rest*, up there in the bedroom where he had known her love. Yet he knew better. She was avoiding him—perhaps she even hated him now. Still, he assured himself stoutly, he had convinced the family that what Bess needed was *rest*, and he had protected his pride by doing so. Pride? Well, there were various sorts of pride.

On the seat beside him lay the folder containing all the drawings the architect had shown him. Their very presence made him wince inwardly as he thought of the puny speculations that had occupied his mind during weeks of fruitless pondering. At the dinner table, Archer had cited case after case in which public schools, churches, libraries, recreation centers, even bridges had been erected by communities that had little to offer beyond their own wholehearted cooperation and their determination to see it through. Many a small project had met with failure, moreover, he had observed casually, where a bolder one would have been crowned with success.

Well, he would be bold! Those fellows in Minter—Kellogg and Reed and Helgeson, for example—would soon wake up to the fact that Luke Darr was something more than the little man who worked the Pribble farm.

Late that night he had a frightening dream. His new church was nearing completion, its towering steeple was in place, still studded with the scaffolding the builders had used. The street below was crowded with villagers, men and women who stood staring upward in the bright sunlight. A circle of small girls sat on the ground nearby, their hands poised in childish ritual as they chanted:

*Here's the church,
And—here's the steeple;
Open the doors—
And here's the people!*

It was a day of celebration, and the people had gathered to witness the time-honored ritual of planting a flag at the topmost point of the new structure. Then suddenly it dawned upon Luke that to him had been given the honor of setting the flag in place. The mere thought of attempting such a thing sickened him. But the flag was in his hand, Pastor Bly and all the members of the board were beside him, and the crowd was waiting. He set his foot upon the bottom rung of the first ladder and began his climb.

“Just keep looking up, Brother Darr,” Pastor Bly encouraged him. “Don’t look down.”

When he reached the top of the first ladder, he peered upward—four more ladders to go! By sheer strength of will he managed to climb the next two, trying each rung cautiously before trusting it under his weight. *Keep looking up—don’t look down!* Knees trembling, he came at last to a mere foothold on the scaffolding and paused, while his eyes measured the length of the final climb to the needlelike pinnacle that was his goal. The steeple was swaying in the wind—he was sure of it.

“I won’t do it—I can’t!” he declared. “I’d be a fool to try it!”

A shout came up to him from the crowded street. Were they warning him? Were they urging him to complete his climb? He had to know. Hands gripping the sides of the ladder, he ventured to look down. The steeple swayed dizzily, his hands lost their hold, he screamed once, and began falling, falling . . .

When he finally awoke, he was sitting on the side of the bed, his heart throbbing, his body trembling violently. It was some time before he could bring his mind clearly to bear on where he was and what had actually happened. He was in Mark’s room, of course, sitting on Mark’s bed. He clasped his head between his hands. He had had a nightmare, a bad one, a little too real this time, he thought to himself, hoping his terrified scream had not awakened anyone else. For a minute or so he sat listening. When no sound came from the upper part of the house, he lay down and drew the covers over him.

He wondered what would happen to a man in a nightmare like that if he didn’t wake up before he hit the ground. He might even die—and no one would ever guess what had killed him.

LUKE DARR was no believer in dreams as forecasters of things to come. It was childish to suppose that an upset stomach could move the curtain aside and reveal the future to the mind of a man asleep. He had eaten too well, perhaps, of the dinner Virgil Archer had provided and sheer excitement had done the rest. The nightmare had been a horrible experience, so real and so frightening that he had been unable to get back to sleep again until dawn was gray at the window beside his bed. Had he had the comforting presence of Bess close to him, it might have been different. It *would* have been different. Some part of a man remains forever a child, who runs to his mother's arms to smother his fears. Even the reassuring strength of Agatha would have helped. But he had been alone. God Himself had seemed far away.

He lay late in bed. It was almost nine before he got up and began to dress. As he put on his clothes he was aware of the first stirrings in the household. It had always been so, he reflected—if for any reason he failed to put in an appearance at a decent hour, the rest of them took advantage of it. There was no reason why they should all be up and doing at the usual hour, of course. There was little to do except the few chores that Mark still attended to with the unruffled regularity of an automaton. But lying in bed after six in the morning was demoralizing, even when there was nothing to do. Let them find something to do—let them make it!

He was at the table at last, his first cup of coffee before him while the others ate heartily of their breakfast. Bess in her wonted place at the other end of the table was a pleasant surprise.

"It's good to have you with us again, my dear," he said, and smiled toward her. "We've missed you. You must be feeling much stronger."

"Very much, thank you," Bess replied. "I couldn't stand lying around the room another day."

There was reserve in the way they greeted each other. Luke felt it and hoped it would not be too evident to the others. Her illness had left her pale and drawn, he noticed, but that was to be expected.

“You’ve had a bad time of it, Bess, but take it easy for a few days and you’ll be as good as ever.”

He sipped his coffee and sat back in his chair, thinking how the past weeks had come between them so that they were almost like polite strangers.

“You got home late last night, pa,” Matt observed in his usual bantering tone.

“Yes, my boy,” Luke replied crisply, “but I *did* get home.”

Matt grinned. “And cold sober?”

“I’m in no mood for idle talk,” said Luke.

“I was just wondering,” Matt persisted. “You look like a man with a hangover this morning.”

“Cut it out,” John rebuked him.

“Well, cripes, can’t a guy open his mouth around here anymore?”

The meal proceeded in silence after that. Luke had his second cup of coffee and nibbled at a slice of toast. Then he got up abruptly and left the table. He was halfway across the living room when John called after him. “You haven’t eaten anything, pa!”

Luke turned. “I know what I’ve eaten, my boy. I’ve had enough.”

He crossed the hall to his office. When the door closed behind him, Sally spoke in a voice that was just above a whisper. “I’ll take something in to him later. He doesn’t seem to be feeling well this morning.”

“Matt ought to know by this time that he can’t . . .” John began, but Matt struck the table angrily with his fist.

“God damn it, I’m fed up with being told what I can’t do in this house. If I come home late I have to sneak in. If I’ve had a couple of drinks in town I get hell for it. If I say something at the breakfast table I’m told to shut my bloody mouth!”

“Take it easy,” John cautioned gently.

“Take it easy, my neck! I’m fed up. I’m fed up with the whole goddam family!”

He got up and stalked through the kitchen and out of the house. After a moment, Sally rose and began clearing the table.

“You’d better go out and talk to him, John,” she suggested.

“Leave him alone. I don’t know what’s got into the guy lately.”

Bess had been sitting in stony silence, pushing toast crumbs into a little pile beside her plate. “I can’t say that I blame him very much,” she observed without lifting her eyes.

John looked at her. “What do you mean by that?”

With her little finger she brushed the crumbs into her palm and deposited them on her plate as she murmured, “Matt’s just lonely—that’s what I mean.”

John’s lips angled in a half-smile. “Lonely? That’s certainly a new twist on it for me. That guy has more friends than anybody I know.”

“They’re not friends. They’ll hang around him as long as he can buy drinks for them. If the time ever comes . . .”

“Maybe that’s the way he wants it.”

“He doesn’t. I know he doesn’t. I’ve talked a lot with him in the past couple of weeks, while he sat up with me in my room. Not that he ever came right out with it, but if he had somebody he could love—somebody who really loved him . . .”

“A woman, of course. That’s a woman’s answer to everything. Well, why doesn’t he find one? It’s a cinch he won’t get anywhere sitting around the house day in, day out. It’s enough to drive him nuts.”

“Spending a winter in this house is enough to drive anybody nuts.”

“Well! It didn’t take you long to find that out,” John retorted. “And the winter is only half over.”

Across his words broke the mounting rumble of the car speeding from the garage. Bess clutched the edge of the table and jumped to her feet. “That’s Matt—stop him! Stop him!”

John went to the window as the car shot past in a cloud of swirling vapor and powdered snow. “The damned fool—racing a frozen engine before it has a chance to warm up!”

“Why didn’t you stop him?” Bess demanded.

He jerked away from the window. “Stop him—how? And why in hell should I, even if I could?”

“One of these days he’ll go away like that, and he won’t come back.”

What was wrong with the woman? She was standing beside her chair, the picture of misery, her fingers clutching the edge of the table. Her cheeks had suddenly lost the little color they had had.

“Look,” John said, his voice more compassionate, “you’d better go and lie down. Stretch out on the living room couch there and cover yourself.” He

stepped into the living room and arranged the cushions on the couch. “Come on, lie down here and be comfortable.”

She hesitated for a moment, then walked slowly toward the couch. “This is just silly. I’m feeling all right,” she said as she assumed a stiff posture against the cushions.

“I’ll have Sally find something to throw over you,” he said, moving away. “We don’t want to have an invalid on our hands.”

When he met Sally in the kitchen, he said, “Jeez, that woman is crazy!”

She looked at him with her clear hazel eyes level and strangely dark. “I’m not so sure about that, but I know she’s going to drive some of the rest of us crazy.”

He saw her lovely mouth working nervously across her teeth. “Hey, what’s happening to *you* now?”

She threw herself across his breast and clung to him as he put his arms about her. Then, with an angry toss of her head she reached up and kissed him firmly on the mouth. “Nothing is happening to me—except I just had the heebie jeebies for a little while at breakfast and I haven’t quite got over them. Luke acting so funny—and then Matt—and now Bess.” Finally she looked up at him with a serene smile. “Whatever it is, Johnny, you and I will stay out of it. We won’t let anything come between us, will we?”

“Between *us*?” he echoed. “Don’t be silly! Forget it now. I told Bess I’d have you get a blanket or something to put over her.”

“There’s a beautiful afghan in the cedar chest in the upstairs hall. I’ll get that for her.”

“Thanks, Sally,” John said and went to where his heavy woolen jacket and fur-trimmed cap hung beside the door. “I’ve got to catch Mark before he goes back to his cabin. I was counting on Matt to help me get out a couple of loads of fence posts today, but I’ll use Mark.”

“Matt will probably be back in an hour or two,” Sally said.

“He’ll be back when he gets here. I’m not going to wait for him. First thing we know we’ll be snowed in. This weather can’t last forever.”

In the upper hall, Sally found the afghan buried in the cedar chest beneath other blankets. It was delicately crocheted in blocks of wool, the design one of stars and flowers, and in the lower right-hand corner were the initials “A.P.D.” and the date, “Jan. 18, 1950.”

Gently she carried the afghan downstairs to Bess.

“Are you asleep, Bess?” she whispered, leaning over the golden head buried in the cushions.

Bess turned sharply. "I wish I had been. I wish I could go to sleep for the rest of my life."

Sally laughed. "No, you don't. Think of all you'd be missing for the rest of your life. Here—I've brought you a cover."

With an idle glance at the afghan, Bess said, "Oh, that. Yes, I saw it in the cedar chest. Her handiwork was perfect, wasn't it? Thanks, Sally. I'm warm enough, but you might toss it over my feet. Will you do one more thing for me? Please go up and get the hand mirror and comb off my dressing table."

In a few moments Sally was back with the mirror and comb and sat opposite while Bess peered closely at herself and ran her fingers distractedly through her hair.

"My God, what a mess I am!" she moaned.

"What do you expect?" Sally asked lightly. "You can't go through a battle with pneumonia and come out of it looking like a young bride. But you'll get over it if you give yourself a chance."

"What do you know about what I've been through?"

"Well, I've been with you ever since you got sick. I ought to know something about it."

"You don't. Nobody knows—nobody but me."

"Oh, stop pitying yourself, Bess! You're talking the way you did when the fever first hit you. Don't start that again."

"And you thought I was crazy, didn't you? You thought I was raving. Well, I wasn't. And I'm not raving now." Bess drew the comb through her hair and stared at it. "Just look at that comb! I won't have a hair left in my head in another month."

"Get yourself a wig," Sally retorted, only half amused.

"I'd rather die."

"Oh, you're so damned vain!"

"A woman has to have something," Bess argued. "Even poor old Bert used to love to have me sit on the floor while he combed and brushed it and put it into braids."

"Bert? Oh—your first husband, of course."

"And one day, before you came, Sally, Matt ran his hand through my hair and . . ."

"He would," Sally remarked, but then frowned at her own levity. Bess, however, had not appeared to notice, as she lifted her mirror and studied her reflection.

“And my eyes—just look at them! They look like two holes in a skull. My father used to tell me I had hypnotic eyes. He studied hypnotism, you know—and died in a circus trying to hypnotize a tiger. Did you ever think I had hypnotic eyes?”

“For God’s sake, cut it out, Bess. I wouldn’t know a hypnotic eye from a peeled onion. Besides, I’ve got work to do in the kitchen. You relax, now!”

As she started away, the telephone rang in the hall. She went to answer it, then, “It’s for Luke,” she said and walked down the hall to knock on the door of Luke’s den. “The telephone,” she said to his response, “—it’s for you.”

Bess set her mirror and comb on the floor and hid her face in the pillows while Luke spoke over the telephone. It was only a moment before he hung up and came into the living room.

“That was Pastor Bly,” he said. “He was asking about you. He’s coming out to pay us a call this afternoon.”

“You asked him to come?”

“He said he was coming, and I told him we’d be glad to see him.”

“I won’t see him. I’ll go up to my room. I’ll lock the door if I have to, but I won’t see him.”

Luke drew a chair and sat down. “He was here twice while you were sick. You didn’t object then.”

“I was sick. I didn’t have the strength to tell him to get out and take his prayers with him.”

“Bess, my dear girl, what has happened to you? What *is* happening to you?”

“If I don’t want to see your Pastor Bly—if I can’t stand his praying over me—does that mean something has happened to me?”

“‘The prayer of a righteous man availeth much,’ ” Luke cited fervently. “Even when Doctor Benton told me he had little hope of your getting better, I never gave up my faith. And God answered my prayers, didn’t he? You must believe that.”

“You want me to believe that faith saved me?”

“It has saved others, Bess. Faith can work miracles when everything else . . .”

“Faith, faith, faith!” Bess whimpered, covering her face in her hands. “I don’t want to hear any more about *Faith*! Go away and let me be.”

Luke got up and stood over her. “My poor Bess!”

He leaned down and drew the afghan over her, then started back as he saw the initials on the coverlet. Why should he be given another reminder of Agatha at this particular moment, and directly over Bess's fragile body? His indignation at the circumstance, he thought incoherently, was righteous. But he laid his hand softly and briefly on Bess's hair, and went to the kitchen.

"Bess is far from well, I'm afraid," he said to Sally as he closed the door behind him. "She shouldn't have come downstairs this morning."

"All she needs is rest," Sally said. "If she'd only be quiet for a couple of days—"

"She doesn't seem to realize that. Where are the boys?"

"John and Mark are out somewhere getting a load of poles. They'll be back for lunch."

"Matt went with them?"

"I think he drove into town for something," Sally replied evasively. "He'll probably be back in time for lunch—if I know Matt."

"I heard the car go," Luke said. "I hope he doesn't dawdle in town. It always worries me when he drives off by himself like that. Did he say what he was going to town for?"

"No, he just went."

"Well, look in on Bess once in a while, like a good girl. I'm going out to look over the stock. Old Cuddy hasn't been eating right lately. She's been off her feed and looking kind of droopy. I hope she isn't coming down with something. I'm counting on her giving us another fine calf this spring." He took his jacket from the wall. "By the way, that was Pastor Bly who called on the telephone. He's coming in sometime this afternoon. Maybe—a cup of tea and . . ."

"I'll have something ready," Sally assured him.

When they sat down to the mid-day meal, Matt was still absent. John and Mark, having piled their first load of poles beside the garage, were in their places at the table, hungry and eager to get back to work on their second load. Sally had prevailed upon Bess to remain on the couch, and had brought her a tray with a bowl of hot soup and a chicken sandwich.

"What took Matt to town?" Luke asked after they had been eating in silence for some minutes.

"How should I know?" John replied irritably. "He was supposed to give me a hand with getting out those poles today, but he apparently had other plans."

Luke's upper lip drew taut. "If he's drinking again, he'd better stay out of sight when he comes home. I don't want him in the house."

"We can decide about that when he gets here," John said.

"I'd go out and help you with the poles myself," Luke said, "but I'm expecting a visit from Pastor Bly."

"Mark and I can handle it," John replied. "You stay here and look after the preacher."

They were silent then for a few moments before Luke spoke up again. "What's the matter with old Cuddy, Mark? She doesn't look right to me. I hope she's not going to drop her calf before it's due."

A sound that was like laughter—laughter without any mirth in it—came from the living room, but Sally alone seemed to have heard it.

"You can't tell much about a cow," Mark observed indolently. "They won't talk."

On his way through the kitchen a few minutes later, John was halted by Sally who came from the living room, Bess's tray in her hands.

"Do you have to go for that second load this afternoon?" she asked.

"The poles won't come in by themselves, that's for damn sure," John laughed. "Why?"

Sally set the empty tray on the table. "Oh, just everything. Bess says she's going to hide out in her room while Bly is here."

"Well, get her up to the room now and tell pa she doesn't want to be disturbed. He's not going to break in on her . . ."

"And if Matt comes home before you get back—I don't know. It's hard enough to look after a woman who talks as if she was half crazy, but add a preacher and a man who has been drinking for the past three hours, and . . ."

"And pa," John laughed.

"I'm not going to stay here and take it," Sally declared. "If you go out that door I'm going with you. They can fight it out among themselves."

John grinned and put his arm about her. "Okay, kid. The hell with it. I'll go and tell Mark to lay off. I'll stick around for the afternoon." He tilted her chin and kissed her on the lips. "You sure picked a swell family to marry into."

"I haven't married into it yet," she reminded him.

It was almost four o'clock when John, watching from the kitchen window, saw the car come in from the county road. Bess was in her room. Pastor Bly was with Luke in the living room, his shabby old car parked in front of the house with a blanket over the hood.

"There's Matt now," he said. "There's another car right behind him. Something's wrong."

He hurried out, snatching his jacket from the wall on his way, and was in the barnyard when the two cars came to a halt in front of the garage. From the first car, a burly figure got down and John recognized him as Sheriff Penrose from Minter. Matt was slumped in the front seat, apparently asleep.

Penrose's greeting was affable. "Hi, John! How's the boy?"

"What's the matter?" John asked anxiously.

The sheriff grinned. "Nothing much. Nothing at all, in fact. I just brought Matt home. He didn't think he could make it on his own."

"*He* didn't think so?"

"That's right. He's been in Hugo's place most of the day. I happened to drop in there and he asked me to drive him home. So—I drove him home. That's all there is to it, John."

"He didn't do anything—I mean, there's no charge against him?"

Penrose laughed. "Hell, no! Matt has never caused us any trouble, you know that. He just wanted to get back home safe and he knew he wasn't in shape to drive. Just get him into the house and put him to bed. He'll be okay by morning."

"Well, thanks," John said, and stepped around to the other side of the car. He threw the door open and shook Matt by the shoulder. "Wake up, you clown!"

Matt squirmed and opened his eyes. His grin was maddening. "Okay, Jonathan, take it easy."

"Come on, get out of the car," John ordered.

"Slow and easy does it," Matt said. "I'm in a very delicate condition, brother."

John helped him clamber down from the car. "Well, thanks, Joe," he said to the sheriff. "It was damned decent of you to go to all the trouble."

"No trouble at all, John. I had Ed Jarvis follow us in my car."

"I'll buy you a drink next time I'm in town," Matt said thickly.

Penrose smiled and started toward his own car. "I'll be seeing you."

When the car had left, John took Matt by the arm. "Let's get in."

Matt laughed. "Back to the cow barn for me!"

"You're coming into the house," John said. "And listen—I don't want to hear a yap out of you when you get in. Just keep quiet, understand? No matter what."

“Not a yap,” Matt promised and started off, weaving a little as John gripped his arm to steady him. But at that moment Matt spied Pastor Bly’s old Chevrolet in the driveway. “Ha! The pahson’s cah!” he waved dramatically toward it.

“Shut up!” said John. “You’re going up the back stairway to bed.”

Matt amiably permitted himself to be conducted to the kitchen, where Sally met them.

“Where’s pa?” John asked.

“They’re still in the living room,” she told him.

“Okay, come on, Buster, up this way!”

They had reached the bottom of the kitchen stairs when Luke called from the living room. “Is that you, John?”

“Yes, pa.”

“Can’t you step in and say hello to Pastor Bly? He’ll be leaving in a minute.”

“I’ll be there in a shake.”

John had let go of Matt’s arm, and now Matt stepped back into the kitchen and began to sing loudly in his baritone:

*Oh, Pastor Bly has saved my soul, parley-vous,
Oh, Pastor Bly has saved my soul, parley-vous;
Oh, Pastor Bly has saved my soul,
Yes, he has in a pig’s . . .*

John swung around from the dining room doorway and clapped a hand over Matt’s mouth as he pushed him toward the stairs.

“What’s this?” Luke had come into view and stood gazing at his sons.

John threw his hands out in a gesture of despair. “You can see for yourself, can’t you?”

“Just what I thought,” Luke said, his voice controlled out of deference to Pastor Bly. “Didn’t I tell you I didn’t want that boy in the house when he . . .”

John stepped away from the stairs and confronted his father. “Yes, you told me,” he said evenly and without particular emphasis. “But I brought Matt into the house. He’s here now and he’s going to stay. I’m taking him up to bed, and I’m not going to have any goddam argument about it! Just go back and sit down. I’ll take care of this.”

He went back to the stairway, and Luke faltered back to the living room. He sat down heavily in the chair he had left shortly before, and stared at his feet.

“God help me!” he breathed. “That you should have to witness such a . . .”

“I’ve never had a son of my own, Brother Darr,” the pastor put in stoutly. “We all have our cross to bear, but we have our faith to sustain us.” As he spoke he got up from his chair. “I’d better be getting along, I’m afraid. I’d hoped to pay my respects to your good wife. But she needs all the rest she can get right now, of course. I’m very happy to know that she’s recovering satisfactorily. You will give her my best regards. And you won’t forget the special meeting of the board one week from tonight?”

“I won’t forget,” Luke assured him as they went toward the door. “In fact, I have a little matter of my own I’d like to bring to the board’s attention, if there’s time.”

“If it is important, Brother Darr, we’ll make time.”

Bly looked at Luke as though he would welcome a little more light on the subject, but Luke merely smiled as he opened the door and followed his guest toward the blanketed car.

“I won’t waste the board’s time on something I didn’t think important, Pastor Bly,” he laughed, his cheerful humor restored by main force.

It was not easy, however, to maintain his cheerfulness during the week that followed. The family was constantly on his mind. He had the uncomfortable feeling of having grasped something only to find that it was slowly trickling away between his fingers. The uneasy suspicion grew that things were going on behind his back to which everyone in the household was party except himself. The source of his feeling was not easy to find. Mark was less communicative than ever. He was seldom in his place at mealtime, preferring to eat by himself in his cabin. But that could be explained by the fact that he was disturbed over old Cuddy, though he never spoke of the cow except in response to a direct question. Besides, that was Mark’s way, and Luke was used to it. Matt, moreover, was his normal self again, light-hearted, expansive, disarming in his seeming assumption that living could be fun if you refused to worry about it. John was unwontedly preoccupied, as was Sally, but that might be expected of two young people in love.

And all the time, of course, the answer lay before his very eyes. *A house divided against itself cannot stand.* When the division is between man and wife, there is no hope. For weeks now, ever since the onset of Bess's illness, he had slept alone in the room that had once been Mark's. He still slept there, though Bess's recovery was now assured. It was time he returned to his rightful place beside her. He had committed himself to a period of self-denial, but with no intention that it should be permanent. Bess was blossoming into health now and taking her place in the household routine, and yet by no word or gesture did she indicate that she was ready to have him share her bed. No hint from him, no shy approach, drew any encouragement from the woman he loved, the woman who was his wife in the sight of God and man. His sons must have guessed—ah, they *knew!*—and were drawing back from the crumbling structure of his union with Bess Valentine. It was preposterous, of course. It could not go on.

It was with a disturbing sense of his inadequacy, therefore, that he drove into Minter to attend the special meeting of the church board that had been called to complete preparations for the impending visit of the evangelist, Amos Strong. What a different man he might have been, he reflected, had he come from a home where he was the confident head, master of his own small world. Had he even carried with him the fresh memory of a night with Bess!

"I am only half the man I could be," he thought miserably as he got down from his car in front of the church.

They were all there, and waiting for him, when he walked into the church basement where the meeting was to be held. Banker Kellogg was already in his chair at the head of the table, eager to get on with the evening's business.

"If everybody's ready, let's get started," Kellogg suggested crisply.

He struck the table with the flat of his hand as a signal for them to come to order. Luke laid his coat and hat aside and found a chair next to Tom Reed, the lumber dealer. He laid the folder containing Virgil Archer's sketches on the table before him and sat down.

"The invocation, please," Kellogg said, a little less crisply, but still in a voice that betrayed his impatience to get the meeting under way.

Luke bowed his head with a feeling that he had chosen a poor time to speak of his new project. The banker had the capacity of setting the mood of any group over which he presided. Tonight he was obviously prepared to spend as little time as possible on the business they had met to consider.

That done, he would ask promptly for an adjournment, and the evening would be over.

Luke was on tenterhooks as he listened to Pastor Bly outline the plans for the upcoming revival, making his plea for a concerted effort on the part of all the members of the board to make the meetings a blessing for the whole community as well as for the church itself. Kellogg sat silent throughout the discussion that followed, and spoke only after the last man had had his say.

Then he straightened pompously and looked about the table. "You all know where I stand on this proposal to have a so-called faith healer use our church and our town to stage his circus. I was against it from the first and I'm still against it. I will not support it in any way. I shall not contribute to its expenses. I shall not attend any of the services. However, you have voted for it, and there is nothing I can do about it. If, because of the stand I have taken on the matter, you feel that the time has come for me to step down as your chairman, I am prepared to yield to your wishes at once—tonight."

Murmurs of protest grew at once to a chorus of "No, no!" and Pastor Bly got up quickly, his hands held above them as if in benediction.

"Brethren, brethren!" he pleaded, and waited for quiet before he turned to address the chair. "I am sure I speak for the board as a whole, Brother Kellogg, and for each member individually when I say we need your leadership and guidance in the future as we have in the past. You may disagree with us concerning our invitation to Brother Strong, but we cannot allow any such difference of opinion to impair the unity that has existed among us here for so many years." His words drew a round of applause, and Pastor Bly beamed. "You may take that applause as a vote of confidence, Brother Kellogg," he said with a bow toward the banker before sitting down.

Kellogg looked about the table again, his face lighting to a smile. "Thank you," he said, then with feigned belligerence, "But—I'm still agin it!" and drew a laugh that dispelled the tension. "If there is no further discussion on the subject," he concluded, "a motion to adjourn is now in order."

Luke's heart sank. He had come late to the meeting, but surely Bly had not forgotten. On the other hand, perhaps it would be just as well if he had. Another time might find them more responsive to what he had to say. He picked up the folder containing Archer's sketches and moved back from the table. Then he noticed that the pastor was leaning close to Kellogg. The banker glanced at a small memorandum pad that lay in front of him and nodded his head.

“One moment, please—before we adjourn. I understand our good friend, Brother Darr, has something he’d like to say to us before we leave. This meeting, as you know, was called especially to discuss preparations for the visit of Reverend Strong. It is scarcely the time or the place to introduce new business that might more properly be held over to our next regular meeting, but if there is no dissenting voice, I think we may give Brother Darr the floor for the next five minutes. Are there any objections?”

There was none, and Luke got slowly to his feet with an inner gnawing of anxiety. Five minutes in which to expound a project he had been working on for weeks! Once on his feet, however, the inner gnawing ceased abruptly. A spirit of elation suffused him, lifted him out of himself, raised him above the faces that were turned toward him, bore him upward as if on wings until the tangible world about him became little more than a shadow. Power from an inexhaustible source flowed through him and possessed him utterly so that every part of his being was aflame.

“I’m afraid it will take me more than five minutes, Mr. Chairman,” he said, his voice steady and vibrant with self-confidence. “But I’ll take as little time as I can. What I have in mind . . .”

It was amazing how much ground one could cover in five minutes. After his frank proposal that they should take steps immediately toward replacing the existing church building with one more in keeping with the dignity of the mission to which they were all dedicated, he spoke of the vision that had come to him in the quiet of his own home and how it had led him to visit the famous architect whose name was familiar to them all. He had time even to tell them, in general terms, how the project could be carried out without any considerable outlay of money, and concluded with an impassioned plea that they take his proposal under consideration at the earliest possible moment in order to get construction under way with the coming of spring.

His speech was received in silence. As he sat down, a couple of the men cleared their throats roughly, as if in embarrassment, but that was all. Pastor Bly’s countenance bore a gray cast, masking his thoughts. Banker Kellogg tore away the top page of his memorandum pad and crumpled it noisily, smiling to himself.

“Brother Darr,” he said with a chuckle, “when we congratulated ourselves on the opportunity of bringing new blood into our group, we had no idea you would arrive with a bomb hidden in your pocket.”

Tom Reed, sitting next to Luke, spoke up, “Now that he has exploded it, Mr. Chairman, I can’t see that it has done any damage. A few of you may be suffering from shock, but I’m not.”

“Be that as it may,” Kellogg said, “if we go any farther with this now, we’ll be here all night. Not only is the whole business out of order, but I’m not prepared to spend the rest of the night cooped up in a church basement. Are we ready to adjourn?”

“I move to adjourn,” Tom Reed said at once, then leaned toward Luke. “Let me have a look at those Archer drawings you mentioned.” Luke pushed the folder toward him. “Good Lord, man, you’re not thinking of anything like this?” he said, studying the sketch that lay on top.

“Scarcely,” Luke replied. “There’s one on the bottom . . .”

Reed drew the bottom sketch out and laid it on top of the others. “This one isn’t so bad,” he commented. “It’s still crazy, but . . .”

“We don’t have to adopt Archer’s plans,” Luke said. “We can talk to some other architect, after all.”

“H’m, yes. Would you mind if I took these home with me? I’d like to look them over for a day or two.”

“Take them,” Luke urged. “I’m in no hurry for them and I’m sure Mr. Archer won’t ask for them until we take some action on them.”

As he thought it over on his way home, Luke began to feel that perhaps he had done well after all to bring his proposal before the board when he did. He had startled them, there was no doubt of that, but they would give more thought to it now than if he had moved discreetly. Besides, though he had been granted only a miserly five minutes, he had spoken well. He had expressed himself with conviction and they had listened to him. Kellogg had tried to dismiss it all as a joke, but nobody laughed. Tom Reed had taken care of that. He had even asked to take the sketches with him for further study. In short, Luke had started something. With God’s help he would carry it through.

OLD DANTE had failed greatly during the winter. His dark-brown muzzle was white-threaded, his once proud black plume of a tail sagged in seedy fashion, and even though Mark washed him regularly with a special deodorant soap and rubbed him vigorously, he smelled of doom. But the most heartbreaking thing to Mark was his standing, snout upthrust, staring into a blue space of sky he could scarcely see. The dog's keen nose would quiver at scents alluring to his memory, and he would amble rheumatically off in vague directions so that Mark had to catch him and lead him back into the cabin.

It was during the last week in March that Mark came back one mid-afternoon to find the door wide open and the crow chattering angrily from his perch.

"Get out, get out!" Galahad croaked, ruffling his dry feathers.

"Who opened the door?" Mark said. "It's freezing in here."

He had taught the dog to lift the latch and open the door himself when he wanted to go out, but of late the old fellow had forgotten the knack or had lost his ambition as his strength waned.

"Dante!"

There was no answering whimper. Mark went out, searching and calling about the swamp where the gold of the afternoon sun lay across the dark-pocked snow. At last, on the western edge of the swamp, he came upon fresh tracks across the field that led in the direction of the Jensen farm. He followed the tracks through the woods to within a half dozen paces of the county road, and there Dante lay, his muzzle on his paws, his glazed eyes open and dreaming straight ahead, his tail stretched valiant and stiff behind him.

"Dante!"

The name was a hollow sound among the trees, a sound that held only a brief moment and then faded into the winter silence. Mark nudged him

gently with his toe, then turned away and walked out to the road.

A few minutes later he knocked on the Jensens' door. Margot's mother opened it. "Mark! Come on in."

"Is Margot home from school yet?"

"Just a few minutes ago."

"Will you let her come with me?" Mark asked.

"Why—I set her doing her homework, but—is there something wrong, Mark?"

"Dante is dead."

Mrs. Jensen caught her breath. "Mark!"

"He got out of the cabin when I was away this afternoon. I think he was coming over to visit Margot, but he didn't make it. I followed his tracks and found him lying under a tree close to the road out there."

"Oh, the poor old fellow! Well, come in and I'll call Margot."

The girl said very little when Mark told her why he had come. It was as if a word spoken now would break the barrier behind which her tears were waiting. She was silent, too, as Mark led the way down the lane and out upon the county road.

There Margot halted and looked down at a bank of snow that had been pushed up by the snowplow. "See, Mark, the snowfleas are still here." The snow was peppered with tiny insects that seemed to be only black dust until they were disturbed into an infinitesimal leap of life. "That means we're going to have a late spring, doesn't it?"

"If you believe in signs," Mark commented drily, and continued his way along the road.

When his footprints in the snow marked the spot where he had come out of the woods, he paused until Margot came up with him.

"In here," he said, and led the way.

In a moment they stood together beside the dark shape on the snow-covered ground. Margot gripped Mark's arm with shaking fingers.

"He should have lived to smell spring again," she said, and suddenly lost the struggle with her tears.

Mark put an arm about her and held her until the convulsive trembling of her body quieted.

"Okay, kid, we have work to do," he said at last, and bent to lift the dog in his arms.

At the cabin, Mark laid Dante tenderly on the ground beside the door. “Get inside,” he said to Margot. He followed her into the cabin and turned the oil-heater up. Then he took the lamp down from its shelf, set it on the table and lighted it. “You stay here and read something,” he said, “while I go out and get everything ready. I’ll come back and get you.”

He picked up his axe from beside the door and went out. For more than half an hour he worked, hauling well-seasoned pine and birch poles from the pile in his yard, cutting them into lengths suited to his purpose, and carrying them down into the center of the swamp where he heaped them together in a shapely pyre. When it was complete, he carried the dog down and laid him in place. Then he went back to the cabin.

He filled an empty coffee can with kerosene and glanced at Margot. “It’s all set,” he said.

As they emerged from the cabin, the western sky bore a wild rack of clouds torn by the setting sun. Mark stepped down into the swamp and walked slowly to the pyre, Margot following him in silence. He spilled the oil at the base of the pile where he had laid a handful of dry branches, and touched it off with a lighted match. The flames leaped quickly, the smoke billowed up in a dark cloud, and Mark stepped back to stand beside Margot.

“If I were God,” she said, “I’d make a heaven for dogs.”

They stood until the fire fluttered down and there was little left but embers glowing against the approaching darkness.

“Let’s get inside,” Mark said, taking the girl’s arm. “It’s getting too cold for you out here.”

But Margot slipped from his grasp and dropped to her knees. “May he find spring everlasting—and a meadow wide as the sky! And may there be flowers as thick as the stars! Amen!”

A voice spoke behind them. “What’s going on here?”

Mark turned and saw his father standing where the light from the dying fire cast a soft glow over his face. He was breathing heavily, as if he had been running. In his eyes there was a look of anxiety rather than of anger.

“It’s a funeral for Dante, pa,” Mark said quietly. “He died this afternoon—over there in the woods.”

“I saw the flames from the barnyard and I came as fast as I could. I was afraid it was the cabin. So poor old Dante is gone. I’m sorry, Mark. But he was getting too old to be anything but a burden to himself. He’s better off dead. But what was Margot doing there on her knees?”

A smile kindled for a moment in Mark's eyes as he folded his arms and stared at his father. "She was praying old Dante's soul into heaven, I think."

"Into heaven?"

"A dog's heaven."

Luke looked at Margot. "A dog's heaven, child?"

"Is there anything wrong with that?" Mark challenged.

"It's a heathenish performance!" Luke declared.

"A dog wouldn't think so," Mark retorted evenly and again took Margot's arm. "Come in and get warm before I take you home," he urged. "Your mother will be wondering what has happened to you."

They walked off together, and Luke stood gazing after them until they disappeared into the cabin. When the door closed finally, he glanced once at the fire, then made his way slowly up the slope from the swamp to the path that had been beaten by Mark and old Dante through countless goings and comings between the cabin and the farm buildings. And as he set his feet in the path, there came to him the first tentative notes of Mark's violin—deep, searching notes that finally wove themselves into a lament of the boy's own improvising.

Dawn was just beginning when Luke rose from his bed the next morning and groped his way into the kitchen where he turned on the light and stood looking about him as if he were not quite sure of where he was or why he had left his room. It was not that he was still half asleep. He had lain awake, in fact, most of the night. Though he had gone to bed at the usual hour and had done his best to sleep, the instant he closed his eyes there leaped before him the image of the fire in the swamp, Mark standing with folded arms and Margot Jensen on her knees intent upon some profane ritual as shocking as it was meaningless. He had fought against sleep then, fearing that sleep would only leave him vulnerable to another devastating dream in which consuming flames would entrap him with no means of escape. Matt had once declared, "There ought to be a special place for you when you die, pa. Saint Peter won't know what to do with you. If he sends you to heaven, you'll fall before you're halfway up the steps. And you're so scared of fire you'd be no candidate for hell."

What Matt didn't know—what none of them knew—was that even in this life there are heights one cannot scale alone, just as there are flames one cannot quench.

He had fallen into a deep sleep at last, a sleep mercifully free of disturbing dreams, and had awakened only at the first hint of dawn at the window beside his bed. Instantly he was sharply alert. There would be no more sleep for him now unless he could do something to induce it. Doctor Benton had given Bess a small bottle of sleeping pills to quiet her when she was restless. They were on a shelf in the wall cabinet in the bathroom, but the thought of drugging himself to sleep revolted him. Still, perhaps a glass of warm milk might help.

He poured milk into a small pan and was heating it when Matt appeared from the hall, a woolen dressing gown thrown over his pajamas.

“What’s up, pa? You’re not sick, are you?”

“No, my boy, just wakeful. I thought I’d warm up a little milk and see if ___”

“Well, you don’t have to stand around in your nightshirt. It’s cold down here. Where’s your bathrobe?”

“In the room, but I don’t need it.”

Matt was gone at once and came back with the bathrobe. “Here, get into this. You look like a bloody ghost in that old nightshirt.”

Luke turned his back and held out his arms, a warm feeling of intimacy suffusing him as Matt draped the robe about his shoulders.

“I hope I didn’t waken you, Matt?”

“I was only half asleep. I heard you pattering around and I thought I’d come down and have a look. Sit down there and I’ll pour your milk.” He lifted the pan from the stove. “I think I’ll have a slurp of this myself. There’s plenty here for both of us.”

“Have you been lying awake too?” Luke asked.

“Oh, I have fits of it now and then, especially in the winter when there’s nothing much to do. But it’s nothing. When we get going again in the spring I’ll sleep like a log.”

Luke took a sip from his glass and set it down. “What goes on in your mind when you’re lying awake, Matt?”

Matt lit a cigarette and grinned. “What does any healthy young guy think about when he lies awake nights?”

“It’s a long time since I was your age,” Luke observed.

“Not so long that you’ve forgotten,” Matt chuckled. “I have a damned good hunch you’ve been wondering why you were lying alone in that crummy room of Mark’s when you should be in your own bed upstairs, with your wife beside you.”

Luke took another swallow of milk and set his glass back on the table. "I hardly think that's a subject for a father to talk about with his son," he remarked uncomfortably and flicked a finger across his nose.

"Okay, pa. You asked a question and I tried to answer it, that's all. But look—Bess isn't my mother. Don't you see how that makes a difference? If she was my mother, I wouldn't have the crust to talk about it. It wouldn't be decent."

"I see. You don't respect Bess as you respected your mother?"

"It has nothing to do with respect, pa. I respect Bess. After all, you married her, and she was doing all right around here till she got sick. I've never said a word against her, but Bess is just another woman, that's all."

"Bess is my wife," Luke reminded him.

"Sure, sure, I know. Let's just skip it. There's no sense in our getting into a hassle over it. It's none of my business, anyhow." Matt drained his glass and carried it to the sink. "You know, that warm milk really does the trick. I'm getting sleepy. Why don't you go on up to your own bed? You'd sleep better."

"I can't disturb Bess so early in the morning," Luke replied. "But don't worry about me, Matt. I'll be all right."

"Have it your way," Matt muttered. "But I'm damned if I'd let a wife of mine shut the door on me. You're too bloody gentle with her."

Maybe the boy was right, Luke reflected as he got into bed and drew the covers over himself. Maybe he'd been too gentle all his life—with his sons, with Agatha, with everyone. Oh, there were times when he had turned on them in anger, but his outbursts invariably left him feeling depleted. He had prayed about it, but to little avail. He would rise from his knees, his anger dissipated, but without any pervading sense of calm sustaining him. How different it had been with Agatha! From every altercation she had emerged, serene and confident, to pursue her course to whatever she had sought. There was a factor there that had always evaded him.

It evaded him now as he thought of Bess asleep upstairs, her door closed against him. She was by no means another Agatha. But she was another woman, and she would use her own means to humble him unless he did something about it.

When it was afternoon, he assembled the few articles he had carried downstairs during Bess's illness. She would be going to Minter for another scalp treatment at the beauty shop. In her absence, he would take his things up to the big room and leave them there. With Matt's words still lingering in his mind, he had thought of boldly moving everything upstairs before Bess

left for Minter. But that might lead to a “scene” between them, with the whole family as witnesses. He could not face that. A man had his pride, after all. Let Bess come home to find him established in his rightful place. If it became necessary, he would declare himself, but he would do it without bluster, without anger, without rancor of any kind. He would be gentle but he would be firm.

It fell to Matt to take Bess into Minter. The week before, John and Sally had taken her to town and left her at the beauty shop while they drove on to the Hunter farm to spend a couple of hours with Sally’s parents. But today Bess had been forced to accept a late appointment. Fanny Lamar, who had worked for several years in a shop in Cleone before striking out on her own, had come to Minter less than a year ago, but already her services were in such demand that she frequently found it necessary to lengthen her hours to accommodate her clients. Women who had known her in Cleone—and Bess Valentine had been one of them—drove all the way to Minter rather than experiment with some operator they did not know. And so it was six o’clock before Matt, with Bess beside him, drove away from the Darr farm.

People in Minter and Cleone and in other places for miles about discussed the violently beautiful sunset before the blizzard struck on that March evening. The setting sun was a descending fiery orb wreathed by violet, emerald, and smoked opal. There was a hideous beauty about it—the newspapers said the next morning—after some still-unidentified people had been found frozen to death or asphyxiated in their stalled cars.

“I’m sorry I had to drag you away from the table just to drive me into town,” Bess said apologetically as they came out on the driveway.

“I ate enough to last me till morning,” Matt assured her.

“Well, I won’t be bothering anybody much more. I think this will be my last treatment.”

“It’s no bother to me. It gives me a good excuse to get out of the house. That place has been like a damn morgue ever since you got sick at New Year’s.”

“I hope you’re not blaming me for that? Could I help getting sick?”

“Who said anything about blaming you? I know you couldn’t help getting sick. But you’re all over it now, and things haven’t changed so you’d notice it. Is there something wrong between you and the old man?”

“Like what?”

“How should I know? I was just wondering, that’s all. The two of you don’t seem to be hitting it off like you did when you started out.”

After a moment’s hesitation, Bess replied. “There are some things people just don’t talk about.”

“That’s right. Excuse me for butting in.”

To the northwest a solid mass of black cloud stretched upward from the horizon, blanketing the twilight. Matt turned on the headlights. Under the yellow gleam thin wraiths of snow swept across the pavement.

“Looks like we might be in for a spell of squaw winter,” he observed.

“Oh, I hope not! I’ve had all the winter I can stand for one year.”

They drove past the Blue Moon, where a single lighted window at the rear marked the living quarters of old Mike Dabney, the caretaker who looked after the place during the winter months. One of these nights, Matt thought to himself, he would fetch a few bottles of beer and visit the old fellow, maybe play him a few games of cribbage.

Presently, on the wind-swept road ahead, the car lights picked up the figure of a man making his way toward the village on foot.

“Hey—that’s old Mike!” Matt exclaimed, and let the car drift until it came alongside the old watchman. “Turn your window down,” he said to Bess, and leaned in front of her. “Want a lift into town, Mike?”

The old man halted. “Walkin’ ain’t bad.”

“Riding is better,” Matt said and reached to open the door. “Hop in.”

Mike approached the open door and looked in. “Oh, it’s you, Matt! Well now, as you say, ridin’ *is* better.”

When they were under way again, Matt said, “How come you’re hoofing it into town, Mike? That old jalopy of yours broken down again?”

“Froze up tighter’n a barrelhead. I built a fire under her this afternoon and worked for two hours but I couldn’t get a cough out of her. I thought I’d just walk into town and get Ole to come out tomorrow and get her started.”

“Why didn’t you phone him?”

“Phone him, you say? And what d’ye think I’d be doin’ with a telephone? The boss had it turned off before he left for the south. It’s a luxury, he says, and luxuries don’t come to the likes of me.”

“The damned skinflint!” Matt said.

“Well, now, he ain’t so bad but what he might be worse. I get my check when it’s due, and I spend it how I like, though that’s no great problem. Still an’ all, I wouldn’t be on my way to the village now if it wasn’t for gettin’ it

in the mail yesterday. Ride or walk, I says to myself, I'm goin' to have me a couple o' drinks and try somebody else's cookin' for a change."

"I've had my supper," Matt said, "but I'll join you in a drink or two. I'll have some time to kill while I'm waiting for—oh, this is my stepmother, Mike. I didn't think to tell you. Bess, this is Mike Dabney."

"Pleased to meet you, Mike," said Bess.

"The new missus, eh? I heard about the weddin' last fall, of course, and I'm honored to meet you, ma'am."

"I'm taking her in to the beauty shop for repairs," Matt said.

"You are, now? The light ain't all it might be, but from what I can see of you, ma'am, I wouldn't think there's a great deal to be done."

"You're a flatterer, Mr. Dabney," Bess laughed.

"Go easy on that stuff, Mike," Matt said as they turned from the highway and headed down the main street of the village. "She's hard enough to live with as it is."

He parked the car in front of the barber shop, at the rear of which Fanny Lamar catered to the beauty demands of the women folk of Minter and the surrounding district.

"I'll call you around seven-thirty, Bess," Matt said. "Will that give you enough time?"

"I think so. Call me anyhow and I'll let you know."

She hurried away and Matt took Mike Dabney by the arm. "Let's go, Mike. You should have an appetizer before you eat."

Hugo's bar was a place to drink, little more. There were no chairs upholstered in padded leather, no chrome trimmings, no baffling arrangement of mirrors, no subdued lighting to create the illusion of privacy. There was a row of booths along one wall where a man might sit with his wife or a few of his friends over a glass of beer, but the majority of Hugo's customers preferred to lean against the bar where they could rub elbows with their neighbors and stand on an even footing with all. There were no class distinctions in Hugo's place of business. A man who could order his drink and pay for it was as good as the man next him, and deserving of the same service.

In fact, the first man Matt recognized when he stepped in with Mike Dabney was Sam Hunter, who stood at the far end of the bar, a half-empty

glass before him, and talked with a young man who ran a filling station on the outskirts of town.

Matt drew old Mike along with him and laid a hand on Sam's shoulder. "Working up a headache for the morning, Sam?"

The farmer looked over his shoulder. "Matt! What are you doing in town? You ought to be home tucking yourself into bed. Don't you know there's a storm heading this way?"

"So what? I'm here on a mission of mercy. I had to drive Bess in for a scalp treatment at the beauty shop."

"She's still doctoring that hair of hers?"

"This is the last trip, she says. Anyhow, I've got to stick around till she's through. I picked up Mike here on the way in. You know Mike Dabney, of course?"

"Mike and I are old friends," said Sam. "Step in here, Mike, and I'll buy you a drink."

"I'm buying this one," Matt said, and laid his wallet on the bar. "And I'm dealing you in on it, Sam. Knock off what you've got there and make room for a fresh one."

"Look, young fella, I've had my quota for the day. I'm on my second, and when I've had it, I've had it. The trouble with you young bucks . . ."

"Don't worry about us young bucks," Matt put in. "We'll still be around when you old bucks are six feet under. We're the only hope of the future. Now, cut out the palaver and have a drink with me."

Sam smiled. "Well, I'll get hell when I go home anyhow," he temporized. "Just one, now. Dora is holding supper for me."

"Okay. Lord, you guys with wives!"

"You'll be coming round to it one of these days, boy. If I had another daughter . . ."

"If she was anything like Sally, I might go for it," Matt said. "There's a swell gal."

"John's a good boy, too," Sam said. "The way it started out, I thought they'd be married by this time. What's holding them up, do you suppose?"

"God knows! At first I thought it was John. He's so damned cautious. But lately—I don't know. I have a feeling Sally is the one who's holding back."

"You know, I've been wondering about that ever since they were down at the house last week. It wasn't anything she said but—I just got the feeling it was cooling off between them. What's the matter?"

“Search me, Sam. That house of ours hasn’t been exactly a hotbed for a budding romance lately. Things between Bess and pa have been in a deep-freeze ever since the first of the year. But hell, let’s skip it, Sam. There’s nothing we can do about it. What brought you into town so late in the day?”

“I’ve been in most of the afternoon. I’m thinking of putting in a few improvements around the place and I’ve been talking over plans and estimates with Tom Reed. And that reminds me, what’s this I hear about Luke wanting to build a new church?”

“A new church? This is the first I’ve heard about it. Where did you get it?”

“Why, Tom Reed was talking about it this afternoon. It seems your father had an architect in Minneapolis draw up some plans. Tom showed me the sketches in his office this afternoon. They looked pretty cockeyed to me, but Tom seemed to like them. And you know Tom. If he likes something well enough he’ll bull it through one way or another.”

“But who’s going to pay for it?”

“Tom could just about swing it himself, as far as that goes. He’s taken a lot of money out of this neighborhood and this might just be a way for him to put it back in. If he needs any help, he can put a little pressure on a few like Kellogg and Helgeson. The three of them could buy this town tomorrow and still have enough left over to build a half dozen churches.” Sam drained his glass quickly and glanced at his watch. “Well, I’ve got to get moving, Matt. It’s past seven. Thanks for the drink, and tell Luke I’ll drive up one of these days—”

“Just a second, Sam,” Matt said, putting out a restraining hand. “Did I understand you to say that this new church idea started with pa?”

“The way Tom Reed talked, that’s where it started. Of course, I may be all wrong, but . . .”

“No, you’re not wrong,” Matt said. “You’re just too damned right!”

“Well, give my best to the family, eh? I’ve got to hit the road. So long, Matt.”

He left at once and Matt ordered a second drink which he carried to a booth, seating himself with a glance around the room to see what had become of Mike Dabney. The old man had already joined three of his cronies at a table in the rear where they were gravely intent over a game of pinochle.

For a moment Matt watched the tiny bubbles rising in his glass, then swept his cap from his head and laid it on the bench beside him. He sampled his drink and ran his hand slowly over his hair, smoothing it into place. *A*

new church! he thought. The news Sam Hunter had so lightly divulged was disturbing in a way that Sam could never have guessed. He thought back over the days and nights his father had spent behind the closed door of that ridiculous little sanctuary of his across the hall from the living room. He couldn't have spent all that time on his knees or poring over the Scriptures, as John had so naïvely suggested one day when he and John were wondering about it. And it couldn't have had anything to do with the business of the farm. There wasn't enough book work running a farm that couldn't be disposed of in a couple of days at most. And then, there had been Luke's air of preoccupation even when he sat at the table. He had been worried over Bess's illness, of course, but that crisis had passed long ago. Bess was as well now as she had been on the day Luke brought her home as a bride. If anything, she seemed even more provocative than she had been on her wedding day. Luke, on the other hand, was as withdrawn, as uncommunicative as Mark could be at his worst. What was wrong with him? And what had come between him and Bess that she should close her door against him? Matt had tried to find the answer in the early hours of dawn this morning when he had talked with his father over a glass of warm milk in the kitchen. He had tried again this evening when he put the question direct to Bess on the way to town. He had got nowhere with either of them. The trouble with asking questions was that you usually had your own answer ready before you asked, and nine times out of ten your answer was right. This time, however, Matt suspected he had been wrong. Hell, if a man wanted to go to bed with his wife, what was there to stop him? He had only to get mad enough to kick the door in, if necessary—and Luke was quite capable of that, as Matt knew.

No, it was not as simple as that. It was something in Luke himself. Matt had been very young when he first began to wonder why his mother and father had ever married at all. If there had been any romantic affection between them, they had never shown it, outwardly at least. They had rarely shown anything more, in fact, than a kind of agreeable tolerance toward each other. Whatever warmth of heart his mother possessed—and it had been considerable—she had lavished upon her sons. Toward the man she had married she showed little more than an amiable condescension. As a growing boy Matt had often entertained a prurient curiosity as to how two such people ever achieved the intimacy that was a natural prelude to bringing three children into the world.

It was inevitable, perhaps, that Agatha's sons, tended with much the same devotion she gave her beloved dahlias, should grow up to look upon their father with equal condescension, if not actual disdain. Matt could not

remember when he had ever been proud of his father. He could not remember when he had even thought of him as important. It was not merely that he lacked the physical stature of his sons. For that matter, the old man could outwork them, outlast them, and could accomplish more in a day than any of them. No, it was something different, some inner lack that evaded measurement. Had he ever stood his ground against Agatha, had he ever told her to go to hell, that would have been something the boys might have been proud of. Instead, he had always shut himself away in that damned office of his and fought it out with God. If that was what religion did for a man, Matt had no use for it. Still, it took all kinds of people to make a world, and when religion offered a man the one hope he had left in living, who had the right to say anything against it? Without hope a man might as well be dead. Hell, without hope he *was* dead! Luke's reliance on the Almighty might seem to Matt like a confession of weakness, but he would cheerfully have beaten to a pulp anyone who tried to interfere with the old man's praying.

It came to him suddenly now—his drink, scarcely touched, standing on the table before him—that he had been blunderingly, all but tragically in error when he had declared that his father's marriage to Bess Valentine had been nothing more than a desire on the part of a middle-aged man to mate with a woman young enough to have been his daughter. It went deeper than that. The mating had been no more than a symbol. Behind it lay a whole lifetime of baffling defeat and unfulfilled purpose. It was easy enough for Sam Hunter to announce that Luke Darr had started a movement toward building a new church in Minter. What Sam did not know was that somewhere a little man was finally trying to justify himself in the eyes of his small world, that the tiny spark of his being had suddenly burst into life, that he had tended it, prayed about it, fanned the flame of it until it had become an all-consuming fire within him. A lump rose in Matt's throat. God, what pathetic creatures had inherited the earth, to walk a little while with their eyes upon the stars and turn their gaze too soon upon the ground that held their feet!

He looked at the glass standing before him. Drink it, he said to himself—drink it and call for another and another. Forget the whole bloody mess mankind had inherited!

As he placed his fingers about the glass, the telephone at the end of the bar rang and Hugo, answering it, told him that Bess was ready to leave for home.

He got up at once and was halfway to the door when Hugo called after him. "Aren't you going to finish your drink, Matt?"

"The hell with it!" Matt said and went out.

AT the farm, the first intimation that a storm was imminent had come from Mark, who was finishing his evening chores. Immediately after Matt and Bess drove off to Minter, John had gone out to help Mark bed the stock down for the night. As he stepped from the house he paused for a moment to admire the savage beauty of the sunset. He called to Sally, who was busy in the kitchen.

“Sally—Sally—take a look out at the sky!”

“Just a minute.” Then, presently, “Oh, that’s frightening, John!”

“Go hide your head then,” he laughed and continued his way to the barn.

He found Mark forking hay into the mangers. “Have you seen the sunset?” he asked as he stepped into the barn. “It’s worth looking at. Go on, I’ll take care of this.”

The boy went to the window in the west wall and glanced out. He stood for only a minute, then turned and ran out of the barn. John stepped from the stall and watched him as he paused in the middle of the yard, jerked his cap from his head and turned his face toward the flame-tortured sky. Slowly he lifted his arms high above him, and his long, lithe body began swaying from side to side, his voice rising in a weird and melancholy chant that was like some unintelligible pagan ritual.

The performance was nothing new to John. He had seen it before—in the harvest field when a sudden storm was about to break, in the haying season when lightning-charged clouds rose above the horizon, in the time of spring planting when twisting winds swept the surface soil into the air and carried it along with an aimless grace till it collapsed in the hollows or against the ramparts of tree-clad hills. They had learned never to interfere with the boy while the spell was working on him. They always went on with their work as if nothing unusual was happening. John went back to forking the hay into the mangers. When he looked out again, Mark was already

halfway to his cabin, covering the ground in long, rapid strides, ready at any moment to break into a run.

“Batten down the hatches!” John said when he came back into the house. “There’s a blizzard on the way.”

“What makes you think that?” Luke asked from his chair in front of the fireplace.

“Mark’s throwing one of his fits. He took a look at the sunset and bolted for his cabin as if the devil was on his tail.”

“I wouldn’t put much stock in that,” Luke remarked. “The sun went down clear.”

“Yes, but I don’t like the look of it much,” John said. “It made a good picture, but it was pretty wild.”

“Well, a foot of new snow would help,” Luke observed contentedly and spread the morning paper on his knees. “We haven’t had enough this winter to lay the dust for seeding.”

“Did Bess and Matt say anything about what time they’d be getting back?” John asked.

“It takes Bess a while for her hair, but you’re not worrying about them, are you?”

John cocked his ear toward the sudden rattle of the storm windows, and without giving his father a reply went to look out.

“One of those fast ones,” he remarked. “It’s already snowing and blowing, though it’s not dark yet.”

“Well, then, you might bring in a few more logs for the fire, John. There’s nothing like a nice cheerful fire to come home to.”

John gave Luke a narrow glance. Was the old man pretending to fear nothing, or was he merely being smug? He went out and brought in more logs, Sally helping him.

Sally, by the fireplace, was leaning against John’s knees when Luke said, “You’d better turn the radio on for the news, John.”

It was eight o’clock. “. . . a violent storm is sweeping in from the north and is due to cover the whole state before midnight. Driving is already hazardous in the northern sections and travelers are urged to seek shelter and stay off the highways until the storm blows itself out.”

Luke started up from his chair. “They should have been home by this time!” he exclaimed.

“Now, pa!” John soothed him. “It’s only eight. They left just after supper, and you said yourself it takes Bess a time to get her hair treatment.”

“They should have seen the storm coming! I hope Matt hasn’t gone and . . .”

John turned off the radio. “Matt doesn’t get drunk every time he goes to town!” he flared suddenly.

“I know, my boy,” Luke said placatingly. “Still, he can’t always be counted on, and that’s the trouble.”

That was the trouble, John admitted to himself, though this was not the time to talk about it. “He’s got Bess to look after,” he reminded his father.

“Yes, but they should have got here before this.”

“If they started out,” John said. “They might have waited in town, knowing the storm was coming.”

“If they’re waiting in town, Matt would telephone us.” As he spoke, the telephone rang in the hall. “That must be him now.”

John jumped to answer the call. But the voice that spoke was Sam Hunter’s. “I just called to see if Matt and Bess made it before the storm hit them.”

“They haven’t got here yet, Sam,” John told him. “We’re looking for them any minute. You saw Matt in town?”

“Oh, we had a drink together at Hugo’s, but I told him he’d better get going. I got in before the big blow hit us, but I didn’t make it by much.”

“Was Matt—all right when you left him?”

“Sure. I wouldn’t worry about Matt if I were you. He’s probably still in town, and I hope he stays there. Give me a ring when you hear from him, eh?”

“I’ll do that, Sam. And thanks for calling. Do you want to say hello to Sally?”

“Put her on.”

John called Sally and turned away as she began talking to her father.

“That was Sam Hunter,” he said to Luke, who was now pacing the living room. The snow lanced against the windows as sharply as hail.

“I heard. What did he want?”

“He met Matt in town and wanted to know if he had got home yet.”

“He’s still in Minter—hanging round that hell-hole . . .”

“I hope he is,” John put in irascibly. “He’d be better there than on the road. I’ll call Hugo.”

Sally came from the hall. “Dad’s worried about Matt.”

“So am I,” John whispered as he brushed past her and jerked the telephone receiver from its hook. After an agonizing delay, Hugo’s voice spoke.

“Hello, Hugo, this is John Darr,” John said. “Is Matt there?”

“He was here, John, but he left—oh, well over an hour ago. I think he was on his way home. He ought to be there before this.”

“Was he sober?”

“He had one drink with Sam Hunter, that’s all. He was okay when he left here.”

“Well, thanks, Hugo,” John said and replaced the receiver.

Luke paused in his pacing as John came back into the living room. “He wasn’t there?”

“He left for home over an hour ago.”

“They can’t be far away then,” Luke said. “Something may have happened to the car and they may be walking the rest of the way home. Get the truck out, John, and we’ll look for them. Come on, I’ll go with you.”

“You stay where you are, pa,” John said. “I’ll go and have a look.”

“John, you’re not going out alone in this!” Sally cried.

“I can’t sit here and do nothing,” John said. “We’ve got to find them.”

He hurried to the kitchen, Sally following him. He glanced at the clock as he got into his winter jacket. It was already past nine.

“I wish I could go with you,” Sally said, her fingers tremulous against her lips.

“I wish you could, but you can’t. You stay here and look after pa. And don’t worry about me. I’ll be back.”

He drew on his overshoes, pulled his cap down over his ears, switched on the outside lights, and went out. He was no more than half way to the garage when he realized he had come on a fool’s errand. He was already plunging through knee-deep drifts, leaning into a north wind that contested every foot of the way. He reached the garage finally, and stood with his back against the door. It was madness to think of getting anywhere in a truck. It would be impossible even to get the truck out of the garage. The horses? Nonsense! With a paralyzing sense of defeat he started back to the house.

As he stepped into the kitchen, his father came from the living room. “You’re back already? Did you find them?”

“Find them? I didn’t even get the truck out of the garage. You have no idea what it’s like out there.”

"I don't care what it's like. If you won't go, I'll go myself."

"You're not leaving the house," John told him. "You wouldn't last ten minutes in that wind."

"What are we going to do?"

"I don't know, pa. I'm counting on Matt, that's all. He wouldn't be so dumb as to let himself get stuck on the way home. He'd run for shelter somewhere, and take Bess with him. We've got to believe that."

As he spoke, there came a pounding at the door. "There they are now!" Luke cried and sprang to open the door.

But the door flew wide and Mark all but fell forward into the kitchen. For a moment he stood, white-faced and trembling, gasping for breath and blinking his eyes against the light. He closed the door and turned to look at them. "Where's Matt?" he asked, his voice terror-stricken.

"He hasn't come home yet," John said quietly. "We've been waiting for him but . . ."

Mark wheeled and put his hand to the door. "I've got to find him."

John threw him back and stood between him and the door. "Don't be a damn fool, Mark!"

The boy stared in rigid amazement. "Matt's my brother!"

"He's mine, too," John reminded him, "and so are you. And I'm not going to let you out of the house tonight. You'd freeze to death before you got to the highway."

Mark looked at him, his jaws moving convulsively. "Would that matter?" he asked finally.

"It would matter to me," John said. "If it would do any good, I'd let you go. I'd go with you. But we can't do a damn thing about it, don't you see that? Besides, Matt's doing all he can right now. We've just got to believe he'll find a way out of it. Now, go in and sit down. Make us a pot of coffee, Sally."

They drank their coffee in front of the fireplace, but for John there was no warmth, no cheer that could free him from the chilling grip of his own thinking. Time and time again he told himself that he had done right in refusing to let his father and Mark venture out of the house. He had done the only thing he could do. And yet, deep down in his heart, a feeling of guilt smothered every effort he made to justify what he had done. What would Matt have done, he wondered, had he been at home and one of his brothers had been out there pitted against hopeless odds? Matt was reckless, made of heroic stuff. John was the dependable one, the family mainstay. Even as a

school boy he had been aware of it—sometimes secretly proud of it, in fact. He felt no pride in it now, only a dull sense of his own inadequacy that was in no way lightened by the looks his father and Mark turned upon him now and then over their coffee cups.

He set his own cup aside and went to the kitchen. There he switched on the lights of the yard and opened the door. The air was a malignant turmoil of whirling snow, the wind a battering force that shook the house to its foundations. He closed the door against it and turned to find Sally standing behind him.

He switched the yard lights off and shook his head. “I haven’t got what it takes. I guess I’m a coward at heart.”

She threw her arms about him. “Darling, don’t talk like that! Somebody has to be sane around here. Come on back to the living room and wait. The wind may go down as suddenly as it started.”

As they entered the living room, there was only a moment during which John saw Mark slumped down at one end of the couch and his father on his knees in front of his chair—and then, abruptly, the lights went out and they were in darkness except for the radiance from the blazing fire.

Luke got to his feet at once and stood staring about in bewilderment, rubbing his eyes as if he were wakening from sleep. Mark bounded from the couch and began running about the room, flailing his arms and muttering incoherently. When he finally bolted toward the kitchen, John seized him with both arms and held him.

“Mark, Mark! Cut it out, for God’s sake!”

“Let me go!”

“I won’t let you go till you cut this out,” John said, in some doubt as to whether he could hold his brother long enough to get him under control. If the boy really decided to fight it out there was no telling what the end would be. He was strong, he was agile, and the madness that possessed him could give him an added strength that would make him dangerous. John summoned all the power of his arms and held his brother locked against him.

“Mark,” Luke pleaded in a tired voice, “it doesn’t do any good to carry on like this. Be quiet, in heaven’s name!”

Mark gave one final lurch to free himself, then relaxed pitifully and began a low whimpering that tore at John’s heart.

“Mark,” he said gently, “things are bad enough without making them any worse. Look, boy, the power is off, the lights are out, and the furnace is

dead. Let's get enough wood in to keep the fireplace going or we'll freeze to death before morning."

"But Matt . . ." Mark began.

"We can't do anything for Matt now. Come on, we'll get the wood in."

By the time they had piled the wood beside the fireplace, Sally had already set out lighted candles and placed a lamp on the dining room table. They sat for almost half an hour, gazing into the fire and listening to the wind.

"We're not doing any good sitting around like this," John said finally. "We've got to get out as soon as this blows over, or as soon as there's enough daylight to see by. We'd all be better off with a little sleep before we start out. Take your old room, Mark. Pa has been sleeping there since Bess took sick, but he can go to his own room tonight. I'll stretch out on the couch here and look after the fire."

"It might be best," Luke conceded. "A little rest, even if we don't sleep. It's in God's hands now. We can only trust Him."

"If you really believe that, pa," John said, "you'll be able to sleep."

"I believe it, son. And maybe I'll sleep a little. I'll try anyhow. I put in a restless night last night."

"Shove off, then, all of you," John urged, and tossed a couple of logs on the fire.

It wasn't at all what he had looked forward to, Luke thought as he went into the hall and began fumbling his way with the candle up the stairs. But it had its small compensations. Mark would be back in his own room again—how often Luke had prayed for that!—and he himself would be restored to his rightful place without having to declare himself. The ways of the Almighty were ever mysterious, but the world was His and God's children were subject to His will. With the safe return of Bess and Matt, they would be a family again. He could not doubt their safe return. His faith was firm.

Whatever inscrutable faith sustained Mark as he wandered about the living room, he gave no further sign of opposing his older brother's wishes. God of the storm or God of the serene summer evening, it was the same God to him. Bloom and blight were nothing more than opposite sides of the coin that Nature had minted. Our birth might be "a sleep and a forgetting," but what more—or what less—was death? He had felt that on the day his mother died, and it had sustained him. It had even comforted him in that dark hour of his rebellion against what seemed purposeless waste in a world without order or design. Growth and decay, living and dying, day and night

and the wondrous rhythm of the seasons' turning—all were parts of the eternal symphony of being.

Without a word, he ceased his wandering about the living room and walked away to his old room at the end of the hall, next to the kitchen.

"Poor Mark!" Sally breathed, watching him go. "I wish I knew what he's thinking."

"It wouldn't do you any good if you did," John observed dryly. "Right now, I want you to think of getting upstairs to bed. You've got to be up at the crack of dawn and have breakfast on before we start out."

She sat down on the couch and smiled up at him. "Don't start ordering me about, Johnny-boy. I'm not sleepy and I'm not even tired. I'll have breakfast on before you're ready to eat it. Come over here and sit down beside me. I can see you're worried sick."

He sat close to her and put an arm about her shoulders. She yielded to his embrace and the gentle pressure of her body was warmly reassuring. It was a tantalizing invitation to forget the feeling of hopeless inadequacy that had plagued him for the past hour.

"Well?"

She looked up at him and ran a finger lightly down his cheek. "Don't worry, darling. Matt's safe, wherever he is. I feel sure he is."

"But you don't know what it's like outside. You haven't been out in it."

She nestled close against him. "When I was a little girl—oh, not so little, either—I used to love a storm, especially when it brought snow. I used to carry a blanket outside and sit under a tree. I had two dogs who loved to sit with me. We used to sit for hours sometimes, and it was wonderful, it was exciting. I've never got over it. A storm is still the most exciting thing in the world."

"When you're not out in it," John said.

"I'd love to be out in it right now—with you."

John's laugh was forced. "Get a blanket and let's go, then."

"For two cents I would," she said, snuggling closer, "but I like it better here."

"This is a mite too cozy—for both of us," he said and kissed her hungrily before pushing her away. "There—up to bed, kid! And that's an order. I'm ready to turn in. When you get upstairs, throw me down my pajamas and a blanket. Take a candle with you."

She got up reluctantly and shielding the flame with her hand moved slowly toward the stairs. He removed his shoes and had begun to undress

when he heard his pajamas fall to the floor in the hall.

“And the blanket?” he called up to her.

“Yes—just a minute.”

When he was ready for bed he threw a pine knot on the fire, blew out the lamp and snuffed the candles. Then he sat down on the couch and waited for Sally to throw his blanket down. How Matt would love this, he brooded, watching the flame-tongues licking greedily at the knot of pine. For some reason Matt had always seemed to get more out of living than anyone he had ever known. Even the simplest things delighted him—the first crocus in spring, the first breath of a full-fledged morning in summer, the first touch of crimson in the autumn woods, the first snowflake of winter. They had had their fights as schoolboys, they had had their quarrels as young men, but now, all at once, his love for his younger brother flowed over him like an engulfing tide. The thought of going on without him was intolerable. Without Matt’s laughter in the house, without his clowning and his ribald singing . . .

He got up from the couch and went into the hall to look for his blanket. It was not there. Instead, Sally was halfway down the stairs, the blanket wrapped about her as she tiptoed noiselessly from step to step.

“Go back and lie down,” she whispered when she came to the bottom step. “I’ll cover you.”

“Are you nuts?” he said, and reached for the blanket.

She drew back and evaded his outstretched hand. “Maybe—just a little,” she said, her voice unsteady. “Blame it on the storm, if you like.”

He turned away and went back to the couch. When he had stretched himself out, she took the blanket from about her and spread it over him. Suddenly she stooped and pressed her lips against his. After a moment she stood up and looked at him. She shook her shoulders and her woolen bathrobe fell to the floor. The soft light from the fireplace limned the smooth lines of her body within the fabric of her pale blue nightgown. Promptly she turned back the blanket and slipped in beside him. There was no hesitancy, no faltering. She drew the blanket about her and took him in her arms.

By the time Matt and Bess reached the highway on the outskirts of Minter, the air was a-swirl with fine snow particles whipped by a wind that seemed to be blowing from all directions at once.

Bess drew her fur coat snugly about her and moved closer to Matt. “This is cozy!” she said, her shoulder nudging his softly.

“It’ll be really cozy if we get stuck and have to walk half way home,” he said with a glance at the fuel gauge.

“We’ll be home in ten minutes,” Bess said comfortably, “so don’t try to scare me.”

Matt peered through the windshield. The snow spiraling crazily under the headlights created the illusion of a roadway swinging from side to side with every shift of the wind. The trees on either side of the road were obliterated by impenetrable darkness, leaving no guide except the occasional marker that carried the route number or cautioned the driver to keep to the right.

Before long Matt was fighting the steering wheel to keep the car on the road. “Damn it,” he said, slowing the car, “we should have stayed in town till this blew over.”

“We couldn’t very well have stayed in town,” Bess said. “There isn’t a place in Minter—”

“I’d rather sit up all night in Hugo’s bar than find ourselves stranded on the highway in the middle of a blizzard.”

“We’re not going to be stranded in the middle of a blizzard,” Bess said confidently.

A sign at the side of the road bore the single word slow, and Matt breathed more easily. He knew where he was, at least. Just ahead, the highway swung sharply to the left, around the edge of a large slough, then up again to the straight reach that ran past the Blue Moon and onward to Cleone.

He took the long curve slowly, shifting to second gear, and found his way more by sheer instinct than anything else. Bess began fidgeting in the seat beside him.

“It’s getting worse, Matt,” she said nervously. “We can scarcely see the road.”

“I’ve driven this road a thousand times, and often enough when I was too drunk to see anything. Just sit tight, kid, and leave it to me.”

It was then that it hit them. Something like a solid wall hurled itself against the car and Matt had all he could do to stay on the road. Driving snow shuttered the headlights to a faint yellow glow that carried only a few feet ahead of the car.

“Well, I’ll be a son-of-a-bitch!” Matt said finally. “We’re not going to make it.”

“We’d better turn around and go back to town,” Bess said in an overbright voice.

“By this time it’s just as bad behind us as it is ahead.” Matt leaned close to the windshield and peered into the mounting storm. “If we can get as far as the Blue Moon, we can stay there until the worst blows over. We’d have shelter, at least.”

The car crawled forward. No longer was the wind a capricious, fitful thing plucking at them from all sides at once. It was a demon of inexorable purpose loosed upon a cowering world. Scarcely a minute had passed when the car lurched to a halt, its front buried deep in a barrier of snow. Twice Matt backed away and raced forward in the hope of breaking through, only to have a rear wheel spin maddeningly without gaining a foot of headway.

“Well, this is it,” he said, leaning back in his seat, his hands still gripping the steering wheel.

“Do you mean we . . .”

“I mean we can’t go forward, we can’t go back, we can’t even turn around. The car can’t move. We’re strictly on our own. There’s only one thing left to do and that is hoof it to the Blue Moon. Open the glove compartment and get out the flashlight.”

Bess handed him the flashlight and he turned it on and off a couple of times to test the beam. “Okay,” he said. “Turn up your collar and wrap your coat around you as tight as you can.” He opened the door beside him and held it against the thrust of the wind. Then he stepped down from the car and stood knee-deep in the snow. “Slide over here and I’ll give you a hand-out.”

Bess moved to the end of the seat and put one foot through the open door, then hesitated. “Is it far?” she asked.

“We’re practically there. Maybe a couple of hundred feet or so. I’m only guessing, of course, but we’ll find out in a minute. Do you think you can make it?”

“Of course I can make it—if you can.”

“Come on. Save the big talk till we get there.”

She stepped down, clinging to his arm. The snow-laden wind stung her cheeks, choked her, sucked the breath from her lungs, but her hands clutched Matt while he reached in and turned off the ignition.

“All set?” he asked her.

“I—guess—so.”

He turned off the lights and slammed the door. “Let’s go. And take it easy—one step at a time.”

“Just a minute, Matt.”

She stood battling an engulfing fear. The darkness was unbelievable. Did Matt know what he was doing? There had been that Armistice Day blizzard some years ago in which scores of men had died—men who had been as aware of the hazards they faced as Matt himself was now, men as young and as strong who had nevertheless been trapped until death came to them. Wouldn't they be safer in the car? Her hand, grasping his arm, began to shake uncontrollably. He turned on his flashlight, but its beam was no more than a pale glow against the wild white murk. He held it close to her face and looked at her.

“Hey, get hold of yourself!” he said roughly. “You’ve got to tie into it now.”

Tie into it! her heart echoed as their eyes met in a terrifying stare of something acknowledged—something that had been biding its time long, yes long.

She shook her shoulders, clenched her teeth. “All right, I’m ready.”

If there was a God at all, and she believed there was, even though he was not the kind of God that Luke Darr knelt to every night—He would not permit two young lives such as hers and Matt’s to be snuffed out before they knew what it meant to live. She had not won her way back from a critical illness to glowing health only to freeze to death on a wind-swept prairie. There had been times during her convalescence when she wished she had never emerged from that dreamful state when to die seemed easier than to go on living. But those were the days when she had been only half alive. It was different now. She was alive again, vibrantly alive. Despite the desperate and revealing locking of her eyes with Matt’s, life would go on, and she would be part of it.

Her hands on Matt’s shoulders, she followed him as his feet felt for the edge of the concrete pavement that was his only guide through the darkness. At intervals they paused for breath, backs to the wind, bodies pressed close for whatever comfort they could find in each other. When she felt that she could go no farther—she had stumbled twice and her bad ankle was beginning to throb—Matt halted abruptly and held her in his arms.

“Hang on!” he shouted above the roar of the wind, then shook his fist at the surrounding murk. “Howl, you bastard! We’ve got you licked!”

He drew Bess with him across the shoulder of the road and started down the low grade where the snow had piled deep. Suddenly she pitched forward and lay full length on the drift. Matt dragged her to her feet and lifted her in his arms. He floundered about until he reached the front wall of the building,

then felt his way to a corner and around to the back. There he set Bess on her feet and tried the door. It was unlocked.

“Old Mike is mighty accommodating,” he said when they were safely inside. “Goes off to town and leaves his door open and the light on. Even the heater is going. Get your coat off and warm up. God, how I could use a drink right now!”

Bess shook the snow from her coat and hung it over a chair. “I’m frozen stiff,” she said, her teeth chattering as she stepped close to the heater.

“You’ve got a whole night to thaw out,” Matt told her, and threw his overcoat aside. “We’re here for the duration.” He drew a chair for her. “Sit down and relax—and just try to think how lucky we are.”

“If it hadn’t been for you . . .”

“Don’t start telling me I saved your life,” Matt barked. “I had to save my own, didn’t I?”

He walked about the single room that comprised Mike Dabney’s living quarters. It was little more than a large kitchen, and was used as such during the summer season, with a gas range at one end and spacious cupboards lining the walls. At the other end stood a deep-freeze unit and an oversize refrigerator. Against a side wall was a narrow bed neatly made, its blankets tucked in and a plump pillow at either end, to make it look like a couch. Between the bed and the square boxlike heater stood a table spread with a checkered cloth.

“It isn’t exactly the Waldorf,” Matt grinned, “but it’s not bad—not bad at all for an old bachelor. We’re going to be real snug here.”

“What about Mike?”

“He’s probably getting himself gloriously drunk about now. But Hugo will look after him for the night. It won’t be the first time.”

“They’re going to be worried sick at the farm,” Bess said.

“Worry won’t kill them, just so they don’t start out looking for us. And they won’t try that with John there.” He opened the refrigerator door as he spoke. “Hey, look what we’ve got here! A loaf of bread, butter, bacon, jam, cheese—we can set up housekeeping any time, kid.”

There came a mewling sound from under the bed, and a long-bodied yellow cat with hanging teats emerged and came toward him, her green eyes a hungry enquiry. “Well, what do you know!” Matt laughed and lifted one edge of the mattress. “We’re in business, Bess! Four kittens with their eyes barely open—and hungry as bobcats, I’ll bet you. Look in one of those cupboards back there and see what there is for a nursing mother.”

Bess got up and opened a cupboard beside the gas range. “How about some evaporated milk? There’s a can of it here, already opened. Or no—here’s a can of cat food. And how would you like a cup of tea? There’s a package . . .”

“Swell!” Matt said heartily. “Look—I’ll feed the cat while you make the tea. Okay?”

Presently they were seated opposite each other at the small table, sipping their tea while the cat arched round their ankles, purring her gratitude. Matt finally stopped to stroke her, then brushed her away.

“Go and feed your family,” he said sharply, and watched her slink away to her place under the bed.

“She was just trying to thank you for feeding her,” Bess said, faintly reproving.

“Don’t kid yourself,” Matt retorted. “A cat has no gratitude. She was hungry and I fed her. Now she’s comfortable and that’s all she cares about.”

“But she did go away to feed her kittens,” Bess argued. “Was that just selfishness?”

“Call it anything you like. Say it’s instinct, but do you know what instinct is? A lot of people think that when they have found a name for something they know all about it.” He looked up and met her fixed gaze, saw the dark-gold lashes swept back from the white lids. “What are you looking at me like that for?” he demanded.

She tossed her head with a gay laugh. “You’re so funny! A few minutes ago we were fighting for our lives, and now you’re all worked up about cats and instinct—and I don’t know what. The only thing I can think about is that we’re both alive when we might be out there freezing to death in the snow.”

“I suppose I should be on my knees thanking God for . . .”

His words were cut short by the crashing of a window at the front of the dance hall. He hurried to the door that led from the kitchen to the large inner room, unlocked it and pressed the switch beside it, flooding the place with light. Wind-borne snow swept in from the shattered window, swirling over the floor. He ran and piled tables and chairs across the gap, but the snow found its way past the barrier and rose in eerie shapes that waltzed before the wind. Matt turned and went back into the kitchen.

“The hell with it!” he said as he switched off the lights in the dance hall and closed the door securely. “Let them dance in the dark. It’s more fun anyhow.”

Bess was standing before the gas range, refilling their cups with freshly brewed tea. “What *are* you talking about?”

Matt laughed. “The hall out there is packed with ghosts, and it isn’t even Saturday night. They must have had a wedding.”

“Are you trying to scare the wits out of me so I won’t be able to get to sleep?”

A brimming cup in each hand, she started toward the table, stumbled briefly, but managed to keep a precarious hold on the teacups. Matt reached quickly and took them from her hands. He set them on the table and Bess limped to her chair.

“What’s the matter?” he asked her.

“Oh, it’s just my darned ankle again. It started acting up a while after we left the car. But it’s nothing.”

“You haven’t sprained it?”

“No, I just wasn’t looking where I was going. It feels kind of limp, but it’ll be all right. Go ahead and drink your tea.”

Matt sat down on the edge of the bed. “Here—let me look at that ankle. If it’s swollen we ought to get a cold compress on it right away.”

“Don’t be silly,” Bess protested. “It happens all the time. I turn it and it goes limp for a while, and then I rest it and it’s all right again.”

“Put your foot up here,” Matt ordered and held out his hand.

She shifted her chair and Matt stooped and brought her foot to his knee. He removed her shoe and pressed his hand about the ankle.

“There’s no swelling,” he said after a moment, then flexed the ankle slowly. “Does that hurt?”

“No. Not a bit.”

“There’s nothing wrong with it,” he said crisply, and pushed her foot from his knee. At the abrupt gesture she glanced up at him and saw the haste of red across his cheekbones.

“I told you there was nothing wrong with it,” Bess said evenly, replacing her shoe. “Let’s drink our tea before it gets cold.”

They had no more than begun sipping their tea when the lights went out.

“Well, that’s that!” Matt said, setting his cup down. “Damn it, I might have known! I don’t suppose you noticed a lamp anywhere in your prowling around?”

“No.”

He groped his way to the old armchair where he had thrown his overcoat and dug the flashlight from one of the pockets.

“Mike must have a lamp somewhere,” he muttered as he searched the room. “But what’s left of this flashlight won’t find it. Well, we’ve got a long night ahead of us. You’d better stretch out on the bed there and pull a blanket over you.”

“Are you going to sit up all night?”

“I’ll sprawl out in old Mike’s easy chair over there in the corner. It’s a damn sight better than burrowing in a snowdrift.”

He held the fading beam for her while she placed a pillow for her head and turned down the blanket. When she was finally settled for the night, Matt adjusted the oil-heater, saw that the doors were secure, then wrapped himself in his overcoat and did what he could to make himself comfortable in Mike Dabney’s sagging armchair.

“Good night, kid,” he said finally, “and don’t start walking in your sleep.”

He spoke lightly, hoping to dispel any nervousness she might be feeling cooped up in a building that was little more than a shell. How little stood between them and certain death, Matt thought as he heard the hammering of the wind against the walls. He wouldn’t blame her for being afraid.

But a moment after he had spoken, he realized his mistake. He heard her oddly nervous laugh, throaty and tense, that ceased abruptly on a caught breath. It was not a laugh of fear.

“What’s so funny?” he asked, his body suddenly rigid.

“Oh, I don’t know. It’s all so funny. The blizzard—and you and I alone like this—and the wind howling outside—and not even a light to . . .”

“Some joke!” Matt said with an irritable heave to his shoulders. “Save your laughs till we get out of it.”

She replied in a voice that was little more than a whisper. “Have you ever really loved anybody, Matt?”

“For God’s sake, what a question! Go to sleep.”

“Well, have you?”

“I suppose I loved my mother, in a way. I never really loved anybody else—any other woman, if that’s what you mean.”

“That’s what I mean. What about that woman you spent the night with in Cleone?”

“What about her?”

“Didn’t you love her?”

“Are you nuts? She was a nice girl, a swell girl, but we both knew what we were doing. We weren’t kidding ourselves about being in love. We knew we’d never see each other again.”

“And you didn’t think you were doing wrong, did you?”

Damn it, why had he let her go on talking when he knew from the first where it was leading? He lifted his head and turned his face in her direction.

“Listen—I didn’t have a wife—and get this!—she didn’t have a husband. So . . .”

“That’s not what I mean,” Bess murmured. “Didn’t you think you were committing a sin?”

Matt laughed suddenly, a clarifying laugh with the distinct image of his father before him.

“I don’t know what sin is,” he said amiably, “and nobody has ever been able to tell me. But I do know this kind of talk isn’t going to get either of us anywhere. So be quiet and go to sleep, will you?”

Bess made no response. Matt heard her gentle sigh as she turned over on the bed.

As if she had spent herself utterly in one last desperate assault upon the world, Nature called her forces home before sunup. The wind fell as abruptly as it had risen the night before. The dawn was radiant.

The sun was rising by the time John and Mark left the house. It had taken them a little time to find the skis that had been hidden away in the cellar for years, and to make the necessary minor repairs before they could start out. But once on their way they found the going less difficult than they had expected. The snow had settled under the driving force of the wind, leaving the surface level except for dips in the roadway where the drifts had piled up.

Nevertheless, the sun had scaled the pin oaks when they finally came out upon the highway.

"I don't know how you feel," John said, "but I'm getting bushed. I guess I've lost the knack of it. How about taking a breather?"

Mark peered along the highway toward Minter. "We haven't found Matt yet."

"All right—let's go!"

They plodded along for more than a mile before Mark halted suddenly and said, "There comes the snowplow!"

John looked up. Half a mile away the machine was laboring toward them, all but obscured by the jet of snow that flew in a blurred arc to the side of the road. "They're on the job early," John observed. "Maybe they'll have some news."

They went on at a more leisurely pace until they had to turn aside to make way for the plow. The machine came to a stop beside them, and John looked up at the two men seated in the cab. Bess was sitting between them.

Before he could speak, she called down to him, her voice gay above the chattering of the engine. "Good morning! Is this the rescue party?"

For a moment John felt like wringing her neck. "This is no party," he retorted. "Where's Matt?"

The man at the wheel leaned from the cab. "We left him back there digging his car out. Just the other side of the Blue Moon. He ought to be along in half an hour or so. We're going to plow your road out and drop Mrs. Darr at the farm."

"Go ahead," John said. "We'll go and help Matt dig out." When the machine had passed, John and Mark removed their skis and stood them upright in the snow beside the road. They found Matt hard at work with his shovel, clearing the drifts away from around the car. He paused and grinned as they came up.

"You guys looking for somebody?"

"Looking for you, you damn fool," John said. "Have you been sitting here all night?"

Mark stepped forward and took the shovel from Matt. "I'll work on it," he said, and threw off his heavy jacket.

"We spent the night in Mike Dabney's posh quarters behind the Blue Moon," Matt said. "Real snug. You were worried, I suppose?"

"What do you think? I had to keep pa and Mark from breaking out to look for you. I tried to get the truck out myself, but I couldn't make it."

"Damn good thing you didn't get started," Matt said. "You'd never have got back. It was a bitch while it lasted."

"Why didn't you get the road machine to boost you out of here?" John asked, watching Mark attack the snow packed around the front of the car.

"They'd got as far as the Blue Moon before I saw them coming. I didn't want to ask them to come back and dig me out. When they offered to clear the road into the farm and let Bess off at the house, I figured I was getting a break. I wanted to let you know we were okay, and I was glad to get Bess off my hands. I hope the good Lord will never force me to spend another night alone with a red-headed woman who happens to be married to somebody else."

"Alone?"

"Old Mike was caught in town. He hasn't come home yet. As soon as we get dug out of here, I'm going back for him. After all, he put us up for the night, even if he doesn't know it. The least I can do . . ."

"All right. Here, Mark, I'll take a turn at it. Get in and start the engine, Matt. We'll be ready to move by the time you get it warmed up."

It was almost noon when they reached the farm. Luke came plunging from the house and threw his arms about Matt.

“Oh, my boy—thank God! I prayed for you, but I couldn’t help fearing I’d never see you alive again.”

Matt laughed. He had had a few drinks in town while they waited for Mike Dabney. “If I’d been drunk enough, pa, I’d have made it easily. But I was cold sober when I left town last night. That’s what licked me.”

“Don’t talk like that,” Luke begged. “Bess has told Sally and me all about it and I’m proud of you.”

“Go on in and get something to eat, Matt,” John said. “We’ll put the car away and look after the chores. You go along with him, pa. Mark and I will manage.”

Luke’s tremendous laugh exploded. “Stop treating me like an old man! I milked the cows this morning, remember. There’s work to be done here. Go ahead, Matt, Sally’s looking for you.”

Matt turned away, smiling to himself. It was good to hear his father’s laugh again. Weeks had passed since he last heard it. There seemed to be no reason for his laughing now except that he was finally relieved of the strain he had been under ever since the onset of the storm last night, but that was enough. Matt glanced back and saw him plying his shovel vigorously as he cleared a way to the garage entrance. The old boy was as full of sap as a sturdy young oak, he thought proudly. That was something they had all taken for granted, he realized now. But the years would pass too quickly, and with their passing would go the vigor that had always been Luke Darr’s pride and boast. And that was something they had not taken for granted, or had merely thought of as something that belonged to the distant future. But it took on a new meaning for Matt now as he recalled what Bess had said last night when they lay within reach of each other in the darkness, the storm raging outside. The empty-headed fool! What in hell did she want that her lawfully wedded husband could not give her? Damn women, anyhow! They just weren’t people, that’s all there was to it. Still . . .

In the kitchen, he asked, “Where’s Bess?”

“She had a big breakfast and went up to bed,” Sally told him. “After last night’s adventure . . .”

“Adventure, my neck! What adventure? It was a picnic—without mosquitoes. Only, we forgot to bring the beer.” He threw an arm roughly about her. “What’s for breakfast, sweetheart?”

“Cut out the clowning and sit down,” Sally said as she drew away from him. “How about some wheat cakes? I have the batter ready.”

“Bring on a stack,” Matt said. “I haven’t eaten a damn thing since supper last night.”

As soon as he had eaten he went to his room and stretched out on his bed. After the noon meal, Mark went off to his cabin and Luke retired to his little den and fell asleep on the couch. Bess did not stir until Sally went up to tell her that supper was ready to put on the table.

“I’ll be right down,” she said, sitting up and stretching her arms above her head, “if I can wake up. I don’t know when I ever had such a sleep. By the way, who slept here last night?”

“Why, Luke, of course. Who else? Mark was here all night and slept in his old room downstairs. I might have come up and made the bed before you came, but with all the fuss . . .”

“Don’t be silly,” Bess put in. “I’m not quite an invalid. I was just wondering, that’s all. I don’t even know why I asked. Run along down and I’ll be with you as soon as I can get my wits together.”

It was a happy family that sat down to the Darr table that night. The meal, simple and hearty as it was, might have been a feast in celebration of a long-hoped-for reunion. The lights had come on in late afternoon, but Sally had brought out candles for an extra festive touch to the table setting. The talk was mostly of the storm, of course, and of the anxiety it had brought upon them all. And though in retrospect, now that they were all safely at home, it had its humorous side as well. Even Mark laughed as he told of his brief but futile struggle to break away from John and go out alone in search of Matt and Bess.

“It wasn’t so funny,” John grumbled.

“And them sitting together in a dance hall drinking tea?” Mark said, chortling to himself as he resumed eating.

“It’s good you can laugh about it now, Mark,” Luke observed, “but as John says, it wasn’t anything to laugh about at the time. Thank God, John was here to keep us from doing anything so heedless as to dare the elements on such a night!”

“Always the old reliable!” Matt baited, and grinned across the table at his brother sitting beside Sally. “And what did you do, Jonathan, besides holding the fort and trusting to the Almighty to deliver us?”

“John spent the night on the living room couch,” Luke put in defensively. “He stood on guard—and kept the fire going so we wouldn’t freeze to death.”

“Good old Jonathan!” Matt applauded.

John was on the point of retorting to the brotherly jibe when he felt Sally’s cautioning hand on his knee.

“You saw Sally’s father in town last night, I understand,” Luke spoke up at once.

“Who told you?” Matt asked.

“He telephoned to find out if you had got home before the storm hit us. He was worried, I guess. John talked to him.”

“Sam and I had a drink together in Hugo’s,” Matt admitted. “He got out of town before we did. He was in seeing Tom Reed about some building he’s going to do on his place this summer. And that reminds me, what’s all this talk about putting up a new church in Minter?”

“What about it?” Luke asked, and flicked a finger across his nose.

Matt, eyeing his father narrowly, laughed. “Let ’er twitch, pa! You’ve been holding out on us. What are you hiding?”

Luke felt their eyes upon him. He shifted in his chair and tried to smile as he bent over his plate. “I’m not hiding anything, really,” he temporized. “I’ve been keeping it more or less to myself, I admit, until my plans begin to take shape. Surely a man has a right to dream a little without having to answer for it?”

“Sure you have, pa,” Matt went on, “but for Pete’s sake, why let other people in on it before you tell your own family about it? You knew it would get back to us sooner or later. What’s it all about anyhow?”

Briefly, Luke told them his story, from the night of his heaven-sent vision to the night he abruptly presented it at the meeting of the church board. “And that’s where it stands now,” he concluded. “I let Tom Reed have the architect’s sketches to look over until our next board meeting. He seemed to be the only one interested that night, and I—well, I thought he’d be a good man to have on my side when the question comes up for discussion at the next regular meeting of the board.”

“And when will that be?” John asked.

“Right after the special services our good brother, Amos Strong, is coming to conduct the week after next,” Luke informed him.

“Special services?” Matt looked bewildered. “Is that supposed to be a secret too? I haven’t heard about any special services.”

“If you had been in church on Sunday mornings, my boy, you would have heard about it. It’s no secret to the God-fearing men and women who

spend their Sabbaths in the house of worship. You wouldn't hear much about it, I dare say, in Hugo's tavern."

"Don't you think Hugo's is the one place the news ought to be published?" Matt suggested.

"They'll hear about it," Luke declared, and brought his open hand smartly down on the table. "There's going to be an awakening among the people, and God will make his presence known wherever sin dwells."

The spirit that had prevailed throughout the meal fell suddenly as Luke ceased speaking. There was no reviving it now, Matt decided, and held himself to blame. He should have known better than to broach the subject of the new church in Minter until he had talked it over with John. They could have gone together then and had it out with their father. And "having it out" was the only way he could think of it. The idea had sprung from Luke's mind in the first place. It was his idea and his alone. He would sacrifice anything rather than admit defeat. Luke Darr was a dedicated man who would do everything in his power to bring his vision to reality. That much, at least, Matt was moved to respect, even admire. But there were limits, after all. There were limits to what a man might do even for the glory of God. And building anything these days ran into money. If his father, moreover, had any thought of enlisting Tom Reed to help further his enterprise, he was heading for trouble. The farmer's age-old distrust of the man of trade and the banker still held a firm place in Matt's thinking. He could not resist the feeling that before his father was through with Reed and Kellogg and their like, they would skin the hide off him one way or another and hang it up to dry. Something would have to be done before the project got out of hand. To force the issue now, of course, would only raise the old man's hackles and make him more determined than ever. It would be wiser to wait until he and John could talk it over.

He glanced about the table and brought his eyes to rest upon Bess. "You haven't told them about old Mike's kittens," he said in a lame effort to restore at least some semblance of the evening's cheer.

Bess's voice actually bubbled as she told of sleeping above a mother cat and her hungry brood. "And Matt doesn't like cats, do you, Matt?" she concluded.

"Cats are okay—when they're asleep," he retorted.

The opportunity to talk with John came sooner than Matt had hoped—and largely because he himself created it. Immediately after supper, John

and Mark donned their jackets for a last-minute inspection of the barns before turning in for the night.

“Just a minute,” Matt said. “I’m going with you.”

“There’s nothing to do,” John said. “Mark and I will take a look around and close up for the night.”

But Matt was already shuffling into his jacket. “I want to get out of the house for a while before I hit the sack.”

Halfway to the barns, Matt said to Mark, “You go on down to your cabin, kid. John and I’ll put the animals to bed.” Mark paused doubtfully. “I wanted to look in on old Cuddy,” he murmured. “She’s about due.”

“We’ll examine the cow,” John said. And as Mark left them he added, “I hate to see him holing up by himself down there like a bear.”

“Never mind that,” Matt said. “I want to have a talk with you and I don’t want anybody else around.”

“Are you going mysterious on me?”

“Not a damned bit. Let’s do what we have to do around here and I’ll clear up the mystery in five minutes.”

At the end of half an hour their work was done and they sat down, Matt on a bale of hay and John on one end of the watering trough.

“Well, get it off your mind, whatever it is,” John said. “As a matter of fact, I’ve got a little business of my own to talk about when you’re through.”

“Go ahead, then. What I have to say can wait.”

“I’ve decided to get married,” John announced abruptly.

“That’s news? I thought you decided that weeks ago.”

“I’m going to get married right away.”

“Oh, that’s the angle. What do you mean by right away?”

“Just as soon as we get the spring work out of the way.”

“Something wrong?”

“No, but there’s always the possibility that something might go wrong. You can’t expect too much of . . .”

“I know. If Sally had picked me instead of you, she’d have been in trouble long before this. Where are you going to live?”

“Not in the house. I’m not going to have Sally hooked on a deal where she’ll be a hired girl for the rest of her life. I want you to go with me and make it clear to pa that we’ve got to make a settlement that will give Sally and me a way to clear out and start on our own. If you don’t want to go with me, I’ll go alone, and that wouldn’t be so good. We’ve got to come to an

understanding that will cover all of us, you and Mark as well as me. You remember we talked to him about it some time ago, but he squirmed out of it and we haven't heard anything from him since. If he tries to squirm out of it this time, Sally and I will simply walk out and take our chances."

"And that wouldn't be too good either. Okay, Jonathan, just let me know when you're ready to talk to pa and I'll be there. As a matter of fact, that leads into the business I want to talk to you about. What do you think of this new church deal the old man is trying to put over?"

"I never heard of it till you brought it up at the table tonight. I haven't had much time to think it over. It looks to me as if he's ready to put his last dollar into it."

"Sure he is. Look, John, this whole family has been on the skids ever since ma died. She may have had her faults but she held us together. Look at us now. Mark is living by himself down there beside the swamp where he'll lose whatever wits he has, sooner or later. Do you think he'd be down there now if ma was still living? Now you're all set to break loose unless pa listens to reason. Do you think ma would have stood for that? And you can bet your hat the old man isn't going to listen to reason as long as his head is full of this damned crazy idea of building a new church in Minter. I have nothing against a man going religious if he wants to—and if he can take it. But pa can't take it. He's just plain weak-minded."

"Don't be too hard on him, Matt," John said. "Sure, ma held the family together, but she held it together in *her* way. She made all the decisions around here. Religion may have something to do with this scheme of his, but not everything. Don't you think he'd like to do something just once in his life . . ."

"We've talked about that and I've thought about it. I can't help feeling sorry for him. He married Bess Valentine for the same reason—and kicked Mark out—and tried to scare me into being a good boy. All because he felt he was in the driver's seat at last. But a man in his fifties can't start throwing his weight around when he has never done it before. He didn't think Mark had the guts to do what he did and you know as well as I do that right now he'd give his right arm if he thought it would bring the boy back. And did he scare me out of having a drink when I feel like it? Sure, his new wife doesn't run his business for him. She hasn't the brains to run a chicken-house. But he gets her a hired girl who looks after the house so she doesn't have to lift a finger if she doesn't want to. And she has kept him out of her bed for the last three months."

“Hold it there, Matterhorn,” John put in. “She’s been sick for most of that time.”

“She’s not sick now, brother. You can take that from me. She’s no invalid.”

“Pa moved upstairs last night when Mark slept in his old room.”

“I hope he stays there. It’s his place, damn it! If she was my wife I’d beat her goddam head off if she locked her door against me.”

“Maybe she’d like it,” John chuckled.

“Look, John,” Matt said in conclusion, “this whole situation needs a going over from stem to stern. Mark has to be brought back here, Bess has got to be set straight on what’s expected of her, and the old man has to forget his cockeyed dream of a new church. If he was the kind of man who could swing it, I’d be behind him all the way. But he isn’t, and you know that as well as I do. Hell, he’s a farmer and a damned good one. Let him stick to his job and be proud of it. I’ll help him all I can, but I’ll be damned if I’m going to sit down and watch him scuttle a good farm to float a new church!”

Luke Darr retired early. He had not slept well during the storm and he had gained little rest from his afternoon siesta. Besides, though he scarcely let the thought crystallize in his mind, he was determined to be in his place when Bess came to bed.

He felt somewhat disgruntled over the turn the conversation had taken at the supper table. It was inevitable that the boys would hear about his plans for building the new church, and it was almost bound to be Matt who would pick up the news. It was too bad that the rumor had come to him in Hugo’s bar. Luke had hoped that he himself might be the first to mention it, perhaps at his own table where he could bring to his announcement some of the glory that had attended his vision. But it was not to be. He had delayed too long. Still, there was a degree of satisfaction to be had from the fact that Sam Hunter was the one who had spoken to Matt—and Sam had heard it from Tom Reed. It was at least gratifying to know that Reed considered the project important enough to discuss with someone else. He was obviously thinking about it. It might be a good thing to call on him before the next meeting of the board and talk it over. If Tom Reed had finally become interested, the two of them together might outline a campaign and get it under way before Kellogg could build up an effective opposition. Luke smiled to himself as he lay thinking about it. Why, he was actually becoming a politician of sorts! Much as he despised politicians, he could not deny the efficacy of their methods.

What concerned him most, however, was the mood in which Matt and John had questioned him at the supper table. Had they responded with outspoken opposition to his plans, he would have known where they stood. He would have known what he had to contend with and could have braced himself for the struggle. But they had remained noncommittal—exactly as their mother might have done—and had hurried to talk about something else. In fact, the abruptness with which Matt had asked Bess to tell about the mother cat and her kittens was significant. Had he simply heard all he wanted to hear about the church, or did he want to have time to turn the whole thing over in that active mind of his before coming to a decision? Luke was not happy as he tried to guess what that decision might be. If he could only take the boy aside and talk with him, they might come together on a plan that would be acceptable to both. But talking with Matt on any serious problem was impossible. He had tried it many times only to end up in quarreling. Well, perhaps he could talk with John. At least there would be no quarreling there.

He heard Bess's footsteps on the stairway. He listened for a moment, fearing he might note some hesitancy, some pause betraying a reluctance to face what might well prove to be a serious crisis in their life as man and wife. He listened, scarcely breathing, but detected nothing. She mounted the stairs lightly, with self-assurance in every step. He was glad he had left the door open. She would find no barrier to her coming. The dusk in which he had undressed and got into bed had deepened until it was now dark within the room. He reached toward the bedside table to turn on the light, then changed his mind. Instead, he rolled over on his side, drew the covers about his face and lay as if asleep.

He did not move when she came into the room, stepping quietly as she went to her dressing table and switched on the light above her mirror. Cautiously he opened one eye and looked at her as she sat down and glanced at her reflection in the glass. She might have been unaware of his presence in the room, but he knew better. There was a cold look in her eyes and a hard set to her mouth.

Suddenly she turned and fixed her eyes upon him for a full minute before she spoke.

“Are you awake?”

He might have feigned sleep, but the thought repelled him. Why should he resort to pretense now? He had nothing to conceal.

“Yes, I'm awake,” he said, pushing the covers away from his face. “I've been waiting for you.”

She turned away and began buffing her fingernails. “Was there anything wrong with your bed downstairs?”

“Everything was wrong with it, Bess. This is my place.”

She lifted her hand and examined her nails. “Yes,” she admitted, “it’s your place. I’m living in *your* house. We’re all living on *your* farm. And I’m *your* wife, of course. I haven’t forgotten that. But have you never thought that you can own a house and a farm, but you can’t *own* a wife?”

Luke swung his legs over the side of the bed and sat up. “Bess, I want you to listen to me for just a moment. You *are* my wife, but I don’t *own* you in the way you mean. I don’t want to.”

“It has taken you three months to find that out?”

“No, no, Bess, we belong to each other, don’t you see? That’s the way we started out and that’s the way I want it to be—always. Don’t you think you have punished me enough for what happened between us last New Year’s?”

“Who made it happen?”

“Maybe I was to blame, Bess. But surely we don’t have to go over all that again. Wouldn’t it be better if we both forgot all about what happened that night? I’m not proud of it and I don’t think you are. But we can make a new beginning. We can start all over again with our minds made up never to let anything like that happen again.”

Bess ran a comb through her hair and studied her reflection for a moment before she replied. “It’s easy to talk about a new beginning and all that. But what difference would it make? We’re still the same two people we were. Maybe we’re all wrong for each other.”

This was becoming ridiculous, Luke thought to himself. He had come prepared to counter violence with calm and robust dignity, and here they were bickering like a couple of high school youngsters in their first love affair. He got up from the bed and went to stand behind her.

“Bess, we’re talking like children. Can’t you realize how serious it is for a wife to keep her door shut against her husband for three long months? Have you no idea what that can do to a household—a home in which there are three sons who are already young men, old enough to wonder what’s going on?”

“Can you guess, Luke, how often while I was sick I told myself I would leave you and your house and your sons and all the rest of it just as soon as I felt well again?”

Luke was shocked. Still, she was getting to the heart of the matter at last. What she was saying now was no child's talk. He stifled his rising anger.

"You're feeling well enough now," he said crisply. "Do you still want to leave me?"

She turned and faced him, her eyes an icy challenge as she stared up at him. "You wanted a child. You never wanted me. I will not go on living with a man who thinks more of his cattle than he does of me—and only because his cattle bear their young every year."

"That is not true," he retorted. "I have never said it."

"You might as well have said it. You thought it."

"I have said that marriage between a man and woman was God's plan for human increase in the world He has created for us. 'Be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth'—that was God's command and we are duty bound to obey it."

"If we can," Bess put in.

"If we can. If we can't, we bow to His will."

Bess was silent for a moment. Finally she turned her face away and said, "I don't think I like your God."

Luke stepped back. "Bess, Bess! That's blasphemy!"

She sprang to her feet, her hair falling over her shoulders in a golden cascade, her eyes flaming. "If it's blasphemy, let Him strike me dead where I stand. If love means nothing more to Him than bringing children into the kind of a world He has created for us, let Him have His world. I'd rather be dead than live in it!"

Luke turned away helplessly and went back to the bed. There was no way of meeting her anger except with anger of his own, and he had sworn to himself that he would not yield to wrath. Without a word he crawled into bed and drew the covers over him. Through half-closed eyes he watched her as she slowly removed her clothes and hung them away. In the subdued light above the dressing table, her shapely shoulders were soft and alluring, her breasts—visible to him only in the mirror's reflection—were as firmly rounded as ripening fruit on the tree. He had not seen her so since the night he had gone off by himself to sleep in Mark's old room downstairs. His blood warmed now as it had on their first night together, when she had come to his embrace trembling and unashamed. What had they done to each other that they were now so far apart? Would they never again know the sweet surrender they had known on the night she had come to him as a bride?

They would never know it, he realized, until something happened to bridge the wide gulf that had opened between them. He had done what he could, by example and by precept, to win her over to the faith that was as precious to him as the air he breathed, but she had rejected it as if it were something alien to her very mind. He had cast his seed upon barren soil. Was her body—she was standing now between him and the light, slipping her nightgown over her head and letting it fall about her before she removed the last of her undergarments—was her body as sterile as her mind? She turned out the light and groped her way toward the bed.

For a moment they lay side by side, Bess lying as far from him as the width of the bed permitted, her face turned away. Hopefully—experimentally—he reached toward her and laid a hand on her shoulder. She shrugged the hand away and drew up her knees so that her back was arched against him. Luke sighed and folded his arms across his chest. In his heart he rebuked himself for having momentarily given way to carnal desire. It was as necessary to check the lusts of the flesh as to control anger.

On the other hand, he told himself that Bess's reason for turning her back upon him was childish. Comparing herself with one of his cattle was ridiculous, and she must know it as well as he did. She had somehow got the whole thing twisted in her thinking about it during her illness. She was making altogether too much of it anyhow. Naturally he was concerned about his breeding stock. What good farmer wasn't? But what did that have to do with Bess? For the past couple of weeks, for example, he had been worried about old Cuddy. Mark had been apprehensive as well. Sure, he had been worried about Bess during the time she lay in bed with fever. But what possible connection could there be between the two—unless it was conceived within the dark and mysterious recesses of a disease-ravaged mind?

It was too much for him, and his thoughts reverted again to the simpler concern he had been feeling for his prize cow now resting comfortably, he hoped, in her stall. Mark had expressed alarm only yesterday, when he came in from the barns to have his breakfast. It was fortunate she had not chosen last night to give birth to her calf during the storm.

But old Cuddy, adhering strictly to a schedule of her own making, delivered herself of twin heifers three nights later—and lived to suckle them to sturdy Holstein miniatures of herself.

THE REVEREND AMOS STRONG was not responsible for the fact that his two-week sojourn in the village of Minter should fall at a time when preparations for the spring planting were reaching their height. As his colleague, Brother Manley, had pointed out, it was only at such seasons of the year and by such brief visits that they could hope to bring the Message to the humbler districts if they were to reach them at all. Only the larger centers could sustain a prolonged harvesting of souls such as they conducted during the summer and winter months. Brother Manley himself was making his way westward by a series of brief ministrations across the southern states. They would join forces on the West Coast where they would launch their great summer campaign in July.

But whatever the roving evangelists may have thought of a two-week stopover in a minor community like Minter, to Pastor Bly the visit of the Reverend Amos Strong was the climax, the great spiritual harvest in which the fruits of his labors would be garnered and stored against the leaner weeks of his modest husbandry. As the time approached, he prepared the ground and sowed the seed with love and devotion, exhorting the members of his flock to open their hearts to receive the Pentecostal fire, the gift of the Holy Ghost. Prayer and self-denial—prayer and self-denial—those were the watchwords the good pastor implored them to accept and practice in their daily lives.

Luke Darr stood in no need of the urgent call to prayer. Prayer had been his daily habit for years. There were times when he had felt lonely as he knelt behind the closed door of his little room, when it seemed as if the world had pushed him aside, crowded him into a dark corner where there was space only for himself and the God who heard his petitions. Had he at least been able to bring his own family together at the altar it would have made a world of difference. But even that had been denied him. Agatha had never spoken out against his religious observances. She had simply stood aside, silently refusing any recognition of them, and he had never insisted. It

was not quite the same with Bess. At first he had tried to awaken her to some conviction of spiritual reality, but the woman seemed to have no understanding of such things. It was not so much that she closed the door against his pleading—she had no door to close. A pretty dress, a visit to the beauty shop, a pair of silver slippers—such things she understood.

As for self-denial, Luke had some uncomfortable misgivings. The Lord had been good to him. Bountiful harvests, able sons who had carried the burden of the seasonal labors, freedom from illness and disabilities, had won him an enviable security in a district where his less fortunate neighbors were feeling the pinch of rising costs and dwindling returns. He had not counted the cost of granting Bess her every wish when he made the house over to her liking—and to the gratification of his own pride. He had set himself to lead the way toward building a new church, an ambition that bore the taint of vanity, as Virgil Archer had forced him to admit. Moreover, whatever his motive in taking his place in bed beside Bess, self-renunciation had certainly been no part of it. There was ample room indeed to apply the rule of self-denial if he were to win his way to the spiritual purity demanded by Pastor Bly.

As soon as the roads were passable, he left his boys to look after the work on the farm and set out in his car, his Bible on the seat beside him. He drove from neighbor to neighbor, sounding the call to battle against the Evil One, reading a chapter from the Scriptures, kneeling in prayer even in the open fields where men were already busy with their spring plowing. It was a glorious experience and one from which he returned home each night jubilant and singing.

The results surpassed Luke's fondest hopes. On the Sunday night that marked the beginning of the revival, the Reverend Amos Strong was greeted by a congregation that filled every available inch of space in the little church. Folding chairs were carried up from the basement and set in the side aisles against the walls until there was barely room to move. Only the center aisle was kept clear, a tacit concession to the hazards of fire—and a provision for the march of penitent feet toward the altar.

Amos Strong was tall and spare and middle-aged, with a thick mop of dark hair, one undisciplined lock of which hung down over his brows and had to be brushed back now and then even as he sat and looked out upon the faces turned expectantly toward him. There was something almost magnificent in the gesture when it punctuated his discourse as he moved from one side of the pulpit to the other, his melodious voice lending a kind of luminosity to every word he spoke. The man himself was magnificent, Luke thought as he sat beside Bess and yielded himself to the moving power

of the voice. Even though Bess had grudgingly consented to come only out of curiosity, he sensed that she, too, was moved by the man's presence. Vicariously, Luke stood where the Reverend Amos Strong stood, it was *his* voice crying in the wilderness, "Prepare ye the way of the Lord!" He could hardly bear sitting silent and unobserved in his pew while this stranger worked his magic upon the congregation.

But Amos Strong was a veteran. He knew the value of restraint. His discourse on that first Sunday night was tantalizing in its brevity. When he had spoken for only a few minutes, he abruptly turned the evening over to a service of song. An augmented choir that had been rehearsing for the past month led one hymn after another; the evangelist, like a cheerleader, rousing his audience to greater and greater effort until the old church fairly rocked with singing. Here, at least, Luke gave a soul-satisfying account of himself. His voice rose above the mounting chorus of song, his heart exultant.

*Sing, oh, sing of my Redeemer,
And His wondrous love to me;
On the cross He sealed my pardon,
Paid the debt and made me free!*

"Sing that again, my friends!" Amos Strong cried. "Sing it from the bottom of your hearts. Let it rise to mingle with the voices of God's angels singing around the throne of Heaven. Sing—*sing—sing!*"

When the song was ended he gestured with his long arms and the congregation sat down with a sound like a small breeze moving through a forest.

"Thank you, thank you, my friends. That was an experience I shall never forget. This must be a healthy climate. I have known congregations five times the size of this, where most of them must have been suffering from laryngitis. The best they could do wouldn't flutter a cobweb in the rafters." A ripple of laughter spread over the congregation, and Amos Strong waited for it to subside. "*Sing, oh, sing of my Redeemer*—that will be our theme song for the next two weeks," he went on. "That will be your greeting when I come before you tomorrow night—it will be our closing song at the end of every service while I am with you. Take it with you as you leave for your homes tonight—keep it singing in your hearts through every day."

He strode from one end of the platform to the other, tossing his head to swing the recalcitrant black lock into place. He came to stand before the pulpit and let his eyes move slowly over the congregation. His face was serious.

“My friends,” he said, “you all know why I am here. You know what has brought me to your modest village of Minter. I am here in God’s service. I am here to offer you the precious gift of salvation. Tomorrow night I shall speak briefly to you on the subject, *Heaven, Hell, and the Hydrogen Bomb, or Jesus Christ, the Only True Shelter*. When I have spoken to you, I shall bring healing to the bodies that are sick in the flesh. Let me make myself clear on that important point of my ministry. *I am not the healer*. God alone is the healer, and God heals in many ways. I am His humble servant, His instrument. Bring your sick of soul, your sick of body, and let God heal. Amen!”

He stepped away from the pulpit and nodded to Pastor Bly, who came forward and pronounced a benediction. The choir began singing softly and the congregation moved into the aisle and out of the church.

There was no fumbling in the manner by which the Reverend Amos Strong began his mission. He was abroad on Monday morning as soon as the village was astir, eager as any salesman to display his wares, dropping in at every store and office along the street, introducing himself and stating his business without preamble. He gave the impression of a man with a precious commodity to sell—and precious little time in which to sell it. What did it matter that it was free, that God’s grace was limitless in supply, that it could be had without money and without price? It was still the most pressing need of every man, woman, and child who breathed. It was the one hope of escape from everlasting doom.

No door was closed against him that day. The surprising suddenness of his attack left no time to prepare against his coming. And Amos Strong was no respecter of persons. Banker Kellogg had no sooner seated himself before his desk in his private office than he was visited by the evangelist and looked up to find the lanky frame standing before him. He had not attended the Sunday night service, and at first he was merely curious as to who the stranger was and what his business might be. He removed his glasses and leaned back in his swivel chair.

“Good morning, sir,” he said pleasantly. “Can I be of any help to you?”

“I have come to help you, brother. My name is Amos Strong.”

Kellogg replaced his glasses and sat forward, his whole demeanor abruptly changed. “Oh, yes—yes, of course. Well, Mr. Strong, I’m afraid you have caught me at a rather busy time. Unless there is something . . .”

“I’ll not take up your time,” Amos Strong put in. “I know you are a busy man. And I am quite busy myself this morning. I have several calls to make

between now and the lunch hour, and I'm somewhat rushed for time. Brother Bly tells me you are chairman of his church board."

"That's right."

"He also gave me to understand that you have been opposed to my coming to Minter."

"That is also correct," Kellogg replied brusquely.

"May I take the liberty of asking you why?"

"Certainly, Mr. Strong. And I'll answer your question quite frankly. Had you come here simply as an evangelist, I would have offered no objection whatever. But I understand you claim to be a—a healer."

Amos Strong's smile was tolerant. "I'm afraid you have been misinformed, brother. God, through His son Jesus, is the healer. I am merely His instrument."

"You believe you can heal the sick?"

"I believe God can heal the sick, Brother Kellogg. I have seen it many times with my own eyes."

The banker ruffled some papers on his desk. "The day of miracles is past, Mr. Strong. If that kind of thing can happen today—well, I'll believe it only when *I* see it. And now, if you don't mind, there are people waiting to see me."

"God bless you, brother," said Amos Strong, and left.

A few minutes later, he strode into Hugo's place and seated himself at the bar. He took off his hat, wiped his brow, and glanced toward the two customers in the room. Two glasses of beer stood on the bar in front of them. Hugo laid his bar cloth aside, adjusted his apron, and approached, a scarcely perceptible shadow of surprise clouding his face as he stood before the evangelist. Unlike the banker, the bartender had no need to be told who his visitor was. An instinct of hospitality, perhaps, an acquired personal interest in every man who came through his doorway had long since prepared him to meet the unexpected with calm. "I take them as they come," was the kernel of his philosophy. And yet—an itinerant minister of the Gospel! Word had got around—it could be nobody else.

"Good morning, sir," he said. "It looks like we're in for a warm day for so early in the season."

"It does, indeed," Amos Strong replied. "I hope you won't mind if I sit here for a few minutes. I've been on my feet since breakfast and I'd appreciate . . ."

"Glad to have you," Hugo said heartily. "Stay as long as you like."

“Thank you, my friend. Would you be good enough to give me a glass of cold water while I sit?”

“Coming right up, sir,” Hugo responded and forthwith took a tall glass from a shelf behind the bar, dropped a couple of ice cubes into it, and filled it from a faucet.

“Thank you,” the evangelist said when the glass was set before him. “My name is Amos Strong,” he added and held out his hand.

“Yes, sir. Just call me Hugo. I’ve heard your name mentioned around here in the past couple of weeks. You’re the evangelist, ain’t you?”

Amos Strong took a deep drink and smiled. “Yes, my friend. In a sense, I suppose, that makes us competitors of a sort.”

“Well, now, Mr. Strong, that depends a little on how you look at it. If you were moving in here to open another bar, that would be what I call competition. But we’re selling two different lines of goods. I think there’s room for both of us.”

Strong laughed. “You make an interesting point there, Hugo. I ought to warn you, however, that the more I sell of my line, the less you’ll sell of yours.”

“That seems to be the general idea, of course,” Hugo admitted. “But I’d like to make one thing clear, Mr. Strong. You go ahead and sell your line with all you can give it. I won’t put anything in your way and I won’t say a word against you while you’re here—or even after you go. You’re the first man of your—your kind who has ever stepped in here and asked for a drink, even if it was only a glass of water. Will you have another, Mr. Strong?”

“Thanks, Hugo, I could use another.”

Hugo refilled the glass and set it before him. “The way I figure it, Mr. Strong,” he said with a smile, “there’s enough business here for both of us. I wish you success and I know I’ll get along without too much trouble after you leave town. But while you’re here, drop in any time your feet hurt or your throat goes dry.”

Strong drained his glass and got up from his stool. “I’d better be getting along. Thank you for the water, my friend. And if your soul begins to thirst while I’m in town, just drop in at my place of business and drink from the waters of life.”

Hugo regarded him archly. “You know—I might just do that, Mr. Strong.”

The congregations that greeted Amos Strong were as much a tribute to the evangelist's zeal in saving souls as it was to the healing power he exercised over the infirmities of the flesh. Nightly the little church was filled to overflowing long before he stepped to the pulpit to the exultant accompaniment of *Sing, oh, sing of my Redeemer!* Nightly his voice swayed believer and unbeliever alike, laid upon them all the heavy burden of guilt, roused them with the clarion promise of hope, and brought them at last into the center aisle that led to the altar. Many were stubborn, as might be expected, others merely reluctant, but all in all the harvest was gratifying. Some were cynical enough to predict that in a few short weeks most of the repentant ones would drift back to their old ways, forgetful of their resolve to lead a better life. But none could deny that Amos Strong was doing his job well. He could scarcely be held to account for the backsliders.

In the matter of his healing of the sick, however, the lines were more sharply drawn. The saving of a man's soul was something that happened within the man himself. It was a veiled magic for which none could vouch except the one who had experienced it. But when an arthritic cripple shuffled to the altar and returned a minute later singing hallelujahs and dancing his way back to his pew, what was there to say? It was true that Amos Strong emphatically disclaimed any power of his own to cure the halt, the lame, and the blind. The power came from God alone, who was omnipotent. And yet the thing that happened took place before their very eyes. They had *seen* it.

It was discussed over the beer in Hugo's place.

"Hell, there's a trick to it somewhere!"

"Yeah? Just tell me what the trick is, eh? I could use a trick like that—I could use it plenty!"

"Okay, so I don't know what the trick is. But you take old man Thorson. They say he was cured of his deafness."

"So what? He can hear as good as you or I can right now. That sounds like a cure to me."

"Yeah? Well, I'll tell you something. That old coot never was deaf. He could hear anything he wanted to hear long before this Bible-toter ever laid a hand on him. I'll bet you a beer if I asked him today for the five bucks I lent him three years ago, he'd still be as deaf as a post."

Even Doc Benton, in Cleone, became involved in the argument. With an honest effort to shed all prejudice, he took his place, along with a younger doctor, in the congregation at the beginning of the second week of Amos Strong's mission. One of the suplicants that night was a young woman

whom Benton had been treating for some time for tonic spasm of the left thigh and hip muscles.

“This I want to see,” the doctor whispered to his young friend as they watched the girl’s father carry her down the aisle in his arms.

With bated breath he listened to the evangelist go through his routine questioning, then leaned forward to watch closely as Amos Strong placed both hands upon the young woman’s head. In the background the choir sang softly while Strong called upon the Almighty to make His healing power felt.

“Put her on her feet,” he said to the father at last.

The father obeyed cautiously.

“The Lord is with us—He is *here*! His presence is a burning fire within me. You are *healed*!” He smiled at the young woman. “Tell me—how do you feel?”

“I feel wonderful!”

“Lift your left foot from the floor.” She did his bidding. “Walk along the altar and come back to me here.” Her father put out his hands, but she thrust them aside. She walked confidently away and came back to place her hands in those of Amos Strong. “Praise the Lord, praise the Lord!” the evangelist cried.

“Well, what do you think of it, Doctor Benton?” the young man asked as they drove back together to Cleone.

“You saw what I saw,” Benton said.

“I don’t believe in miracles.”

“When you’ve been practicing medicine as long as I have, young fellow, you’ll believe in lots of things you don’t believe in now. Every cure is a miracle of sorts. We prescribe medication for a patient and he gets well. Do we know why? Experience has taught us that a certain drug has a certain therapeutic effect, but the reason behind it is as much a mystery as it was a thousand years ago.”

“You think this man Strong is really on the level?”

“I’m going to suspend judgment until I see a little more of him,” Benton replied. “I’m coming out here every night while he’s in town. If it’s all sheer quackery, he’ll make a slip sooner or later—and I’ve still got a pretty good pair of eyes in my head.”

The young doctor was perplexed. “I don’t know. He has been at it for a long time, probably. He isn’t likely to make any slips. If he does, he’ll have

a way to cover up too fast for anyone to catch him. Do you suppose some kind of hypnotism might have a place in his act?"

Benton laughed. "If it has, we'd better give up writing prescriptions and learn how to hypnotize our patients. If it works, what difference does it make?"

There were no doubts in the mind of Luke Darr. Faith *healed*! It had been demonstrated. Either it was true, or a man could not believe his senses. If a man rejected the evidence he was a fool, a blind fool.

It was in this mood that he hurried across to the Jensen place immediately after dinner on Wednesday evening to talk with Magnus. On the way he chastised himself severely for having put off urging his neighbor to avail himself of the wondrous happenstance that promised deliverance from the disabling affliction from which Magnus was suffering more and more with every passing year. And Luke writhed in the knowledge of *why* he had put it off—it was the matter of that loan!

He found Magnus puttering around the barnyard and came at once to the point.

"You think this man can do it?" Magnus asked after Luke had described the miracles that had been worked nightly in the little church in Minter.

"No mere man can bring such miracles to pass," Luke said. "It is the power of the Holy Spirit working through him. Nothing is impossible to the Holy Spirit, Magnus. First, you must believe. After that all things are possible."

Magnus was thoughtful for a moment. "Yah. Might be I don't believe—the way you say it, Luke. Well, now I ask you something. Was it good that your God made my little Margot so she can't walk and run like other little girls? Was my Margot so bad she must be punished so?"

"Ah, my dear Magnus, the Lord makes His sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sends the rain on the just and the unjust."

"Yah, might be it is so. And might be the Lord could now make His sun shine on Margot, eh? Could He make her walk and run again, then I would believe. For me, I don't care. I am getting old, Luke. But Margot is young and she is good. Your God was not good when He did that to her. You think He can undo it now?"

"Yes, yes, Magnus!" Luke declared. "Bring her to the church on Friday night. Brother Strong is holding a special service for the children. Come in faith, believing it can be done."

“When it is done, Luke, I will believe. But we will come anyhow and see.”

It was as if Magnus were trying to bargain with the Almighty, Luke thought as he left the Jensen place and hurried back to dress for the Wednesday night service. Still, God in his infinite mercy would not hold that against so simple a soul as Magnus Jensen.

True to his word, Magnus was on hand for the children’s service on Friday evening, Margot and her mother beside him in the front seat of his battered old Ford. They arrived early in anticipation of the crowd that was sure to turn out for Children’s Night, and found Luke waiting for them on the church steps. Even so, it was impossible to find seats together. By a little coaxing and a stern word or two, Luke made a place for Magnus and Guri directly across the aisle from his own pew, and crowded Margot into the seat that Bess would have occupied had she come to the meeting. “I’ve seen enough,” she had said tartly. “I don’t want to see children made idiots of!” Luke had considered his silence Christian restraint.

He looked down at the girl beside him and was proud. She was dressed in white, her blonde hair flowing about her shoulders, her face alight as if from some inward glowing of happiness, her slender body a-tremble with hope and expectation. A veritable angel, Luke thought to himself and let his mind dwell upon the guilelessness and purity that only a maid of her years could know. How had he ever found it in his heart to harbor the dark suspicions that had on occasion beset him when he thought of Margot and his son Mark? He put his arm about her and drew her tenderly toward him.

“God bless you, my child!” he breathed. “Open your heart, my dear, and let the Spirit come in!”

She smiled up at him but did not speak, and at that moment the choir of children began filing into their places behind the rostrum. All were dressed in white and for a few moments a deep hush lay upon the congregation. Then, suddenly, the choir broke into the theme song:

Sing, oh, sing of my Redeemer—

and Amos Strong strode to his place behind the pulpit where he stood rocking back and forth to the hymn’s rhythm.

“I have had a vision,” he declared as soon as the song was ended. “Standing here and listening to your glorious voices, I looked up and the heavens opened above me and the clouds were rolled away. And I saw God sitting on His throne, and all about Him—as far as my eyes could reach—there were numberless hosts of children in robes of shining white singing

praises to the King of Kings. Sing that chorus again—I want to hold the vision a little longer. *Sing!*”

He stood tall, his face lifted, his eyes in steadfast gaze upon the ineffable.

“Thank you, thank you!” he said at last. “And thank God for the children—all the children of the world. God loves the children. His son Jesus loved the children when He was here upon earth. *Suffer little children to come unto me and forbid them not, for of such is the kingdom of God.* Those are the words of Jesus, the tenderest words the Son of Man ever spoke. And tonight I want to consider those precious words for just a few moments.”

His sermon was brief indeed, and couched in the simplest words. And when he had done speaking, his appeal was as brief and simple as his sermon. “This is Children’s Night,” he said at last, “and I mean to keep it so. For nearly two weeks now I have been offering the gift of salvation to the grown-ups, and if they haven’t accepted it by this time there isn’t much hope left for them. But tonight I want the children. I’m going to dispense with the long walk down the aisle to the altar. That walk was a good thing for a lot of you hardened old sinners who had to be dragged out of your seats and put on your knees to confess openly and receive Jesus in the presence of your neighbors. I say it was good for you. But I’m not asking the children to do it. While the choir sings, and while the rest of you bow your heads in prayer, I want every boy and girl within sound of my voice to stand up and raise a hand to pledge your life to Jesus.” He turned and nodded to the choir. Very softly the music stole over the congregation. “They’re getting up—lift your hands, that’s it! Oh, praise the Lord who loves you! Will you not love Him in turn? That’s it—hands going up all over the congregation. Praise the Lord!”

Luke Darr felt Margot Jensen trembling beside him. He put a hand gently to her elbow, encouraging her to get to her feet. When she stood up, he cried out, “Praise the Lord!”

“Amen!” Amos Strong responded as the choir finally came to the end of the hymn. “God is with us. I feel His presence. If you feel it, say ‘Amen!’ ”

“Amen! Amen!”

“And now, my friends in Jesus, I am going to ask God to reach down and touch the sick and the infirm who have come here to be healed in His name. Sickness is of the Devil. But God can heal. If you believe that God can heal our bodies as He has healed our souls, say ‘Amen!’ ”

From everywhere came the immediate response: “Amen! Amen!”

“God heals in many ways, my friends. He heals through medicine administered at the hands of men who are dedicated to bringing relief to the sick, He heals through surgery and even through mental suggestion. But always it is God who heals. We are only His agents. Bring the children now—down here within reach of my hand. Come!”

There was a shuffling of feet as mothers and fathers led their children into the center aisle and presented themselves at the altar. A boy of twelve, who had long been afflicted with stuttering, stammered almost unintelligibly in answering the questions the evangelist put to him, submitted himself to the long hands that were placed over his lips and on top of his head, while his mother prayed audibly, her eyes closed and her head bowed. Suddenly Amos Strong took his hands away and smiled at the boy.

“Son, you are healed! I felt the power flowing through my hands. Did you feel it?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Do you believe God has cured you?”

“Yes, sir.”

“You’ll never stammer again?”

“No, sir.”

“Turn round and face the audience. Now, repeat after me: God has healed me.”

The boy hesitated for only a second. “God has healed me.”

“I will never stutter again.”

“I will never stutter again.”

“I have taken Jesus for my Saviour—I will serve Him all my days.”

“I have taken Jesus for my Saviour—I will serve Him all my days.”

The evangelist threw his arms about the boy. “Praise the Lord, son! Mother, take him with you.”

As they left the altar to return to their places, the congregation broke into applause.

A father brought his seven-year-old daughter who had been afflicted with a clubfoot from the day she was born.

While the treatment was proceeding, Luke Darr leaned over Margot, who had not moved from her place but had sat in trancelike attention while the healer worked his magic.

“Margot, dear, aren’t you going?” he urged. “Why are you sitting here while others are being healed?”

Margot did not speak. It was as if she had not heard, so intent was she upon the little girl who was sitting on one knee of the evangelist, her distorted foot lying stretched out upon the other, while those long hands manipulated it, flexing the ankle, caressing and molding the instep as if it were made of potter's clay. When at last she was set on her feet and told to walk to the other end of the altar, Margot started forward in her seat. When the little girl came back and stood before the evangelist, her two feet planted squarely on the floor, Margot all but leaped from her seat.

"Do you want me to go with you, my dear?" Luke asked.

"No, no—I can do this myself," she said and was out into the aisle, limping and then hopping on one foot as she always did when she was in a hurry.

Luke agonized through the three or four cases that claimed Amos Strong's attention before Margot finally stood before him.

"Your name is?"

"Margot Jensen."

What a clear, singing voice, Luke thought. What confidence in the power of the healing Lord!

"You have accepted Christ as your Saviour?"

"I have, I have!"

Oh, the simple faith of a child!

"Your left leg is crippled, I see."

"I had polio when I was five years old."

"You believe God can heal you?"

"He has healed others. He can heal me."

Amos Strong looked at her for a moment. He looked with eyes full of pity. "You came alone, my child? Your parents aren't with you?"

"I wanted to come alone," Margot said. "My father and mother are here, but I want to do this by myself."

"I see. You're a brave little girl, my dear."

Old Doc Benton, sitting three rows from the front, smiled skeptically. The fellow is stalling for time, he said to himself. *Go ahead, man, do something if you can. Make that leg straight, and by God even I will believe!*

But Amos Strong was not stalling. He reached out and drew Margot toward him. He dropped to his knees before her and placed his two hands around her leg. He lowered his head and closed his eyes, and for a moment he prayed aloud.

“Jesus, a child stands before Thee. Let Thy power come down upon her—now—*now!* Heal her, Jesus, *heal* her.” He lifted his head and opened his eyes. “He is here, He is here! His grace is a great tide flowing through me.” He placed one hand on Margot’s head. “O Jesus, heal! *Heal!*” His voice broke and he began to weep. Here and there in the congregation a worshiper sobbed audibly.

Luke Darr could no longer bear watching. He bowed his head and covered his face with his hands. He prayed and wept unashamedly: “Jesus—Jesus—Jesus!”

“Now, then, my dear,” the evangelist was saying, “stand up straight—both feet on the floor. That’s it—that’s it—oh, praise be to God. Walk back to your parents—no limping, now—no limping ever again.” He leaned and kissed her on the forehead. “Go now, and God go with you, my dear.”

Margot turned quickly, her face beaming as a sudden burst of applause swept from the crowded pews. She took three or four tentative steps into the aisle, then threw her arms out before her in a gesture of ecstasy.

“Mother—Daddy!” she cried at the top of her voice as Magnus Jensen stood up and held out his arms, the tears streaming from his eyes.

“Yah, my little girl!” Magnus called to her. “Come to us now.”

With a little squeal of delight she leaped toward them—leaped and stumbled—then collapsed in a small white heap in the aisle, and lay still. No sound escaped her lips. The applause died suddenly to a hush and Amos Strong appealed to the congregation to remain quietly seated.

But Doc Benton got up at once and went to kneel over the prostrate form in the aisle. He gave no heed to the questions that were asked by those who sat nearby. Both Luke and Magnus stood over him while he made a preliminary examination.

“Be calm, Magnus,” Luke pleaded. “She will be all right. I saw her fall and hit her head against the end of the pew there. It was a bad blow—I heard it—but she’ll . . .”

Benton stood up. “This girl should be in the hospital,” he said quietly. “There is a concussion—possibly a skull fracture. We’ll have to have an X-ray before we can be sure. Lift her and carry her out to my car. Lift her carefully and move slowly. I’ll go ahead and bring the car around to the front.”

Amos Strong solemnly raised his hand. “God go with you,” he intoned.

On Sunday night, while the congregation in Minter was singing *God be with you till we meet again*, by way of bidding farewell to the Reverend Amos Strong, Margot Jensen died. The X-rays had confirmed Doctor Benton's darkest fears, and the skill of the best surgeon in the state had been of no avail.

Magnus and Guri had been at the hospital since early morning. Mark Darr had come on Saturday immediately after breakfast when he heard for the first time of what had happened the night before. He had remained throughout the day and the following night, refusing to eat, refusing to sleep, refusing even to talk. When Benton telephoned the farm at noon on Sunday to say that Margot's condition was critical, Luke and his two sons drove to town and went at once to the hospital.

They were all in the waiting room when the doctor came with the news that Margot had died without regaining consciousness since the moment of her fall.

Benton put an arm about the shoulder of Magnus Jensen. "Everything that was humanly possible . . ."

"Yah, yah, that is so," Magnus said brokenly. "It is—no time for talking. Look to Guri now."

The doctor turned to find Guri Jensen in complete collapse in her chair. He stepped from the room and called a nurse. When he had given her instructions he came back and beckoned to John and Matt.

"Lift her to the couch." He stood by while the boys carried her to the couch. "The nurse will be here in a moment." He shook his head slowly. "I've had to break the news to scores of people in my years of practice," he mused aloud. "You'd think a man would get used to it after so long a time. But I haven't. I never will. It seems harder to do now than it was the first time."

The nurse came carrying a tray that held a couple of small bottles and a cold pack. As soon as the doctor began to administer the restorative, Mark walked slowly toward the door. "Where are you going?" John asked.

"I'm going to see Margot."

John looked at the doctor. "Do you think . . ."

"Oh, it's all right. You'd better go with him."

John and Matt followed their brother down the corridor and came at last to where Margot's still form lay under a white sheet, her hands at her sides, her hair a bright sunburst upon the pillow. The three boys paused at the bedside, looking down.

John did not speak. Matt was silent for a moment, then turned his face away.

“God damn it to hell!” he rasped and drew a hand roughly across his eyes.

Mark stepped close to the bed then, leaned down and lifted the girl in his arms. He gazed long at the face, at the hair that hung like a sunlit waterfall stopped in its course.

“A small dead bird in the hands of a living man,” he said aloud. “Why should I live?”

He turned slowly, the girl’s body in his arms, and started for the door.

“Where are you going, Mark?” John asked.

“They are through with her here,” Mark replied. “They have done what they can. I’m taking Margot home.”

Matt placed himself in front of the door. “You’re not taking her anywhere, kid. Don’t be a fool. Put her back on the bed.”

Mark’s jaws worked convulsively as he eyed his brother. “You’re in our way,” he said in a voice that was scarcely more than a murmur.

Matt cast a glance at John and together they closed in upon Mark, one on either side. There was a brief struggle, but Mark was too occupied with the precious burden he carried to put up any sustained resistance.

He replaced the still form on the bed, drew the white sheet back in place, and broke into tears.

*A*PRIL, that month of shy beginnings, that time of forward-looking, that forerunner of May's candid burgeoning, unfurled its days of soft rain and warm sunshine over a grateful countryside. But where does ecstasy reside, except within each heart that feels it? All the world may sing and dance, but if one lonely soul sits apart in grieving, what matters the singing and the dancing?

For Mark Darr there was no spring. Since the day they had laid Margot away, he had kept to his cabin beside the swamp, emerging only to do his early morning and late evening chores, his eyes closed to the tender tinting of field and hillside, his ears stopped against the huddled whisperings of growing things. His violin lay untouched upon the shelf, its strings muted, its sweetness unprovoked. Only his books lay open upon his table, ready to speak to him when he bent over them and turned their pages.

On an evening of gentle rain, he got up from his table and went to stand in his doorway. The sad, hopeful music of the frogs greeted him as he stood and watched the falling rain. Margot had written something about rain falling, he recalled. He had hidden it away in one of his books. He went back to look for it. It was there, pressed between the pages of a book of poems by Robert Browning. With it was another sheet from her school notebook, and on it a single line: *Poplars crocheting their pale green bonnets!* Then he read the couplet Margot had written about the rain:

*The April rain walks on long silver stilts across the lea;
Walking toward us here—does it bring silver dreams to you and me?*

His mouth worked in hard silence over the words, then he went back to the open doorway, the two sheets of paper in his hand. At the edge of the swamp there was a glisten of silver—the tin pan Margot had used to feed the raccoons on her last visit. He walked to the edge of the swamp and dug down with his bare hands into the moist earth beneath a pine tree. There he

buried the tin and the two sheets of note paper. That done, he glanced up at the tree, the sky above it, his teeth clenched. On a branch of the pine tree above him sat Galahad, the crow, staring down at him, unmoving. He went back to the cabin, and closed the door.

During those first days of utter loneliness he spurned the house where his father and brothers lived, approaching it only for the morning and evening chores expected of him. He spurned the fields where his father and brothers worked early and late, plowing and harrowing and putting in the seed. He gave no thought to preparing his beloved mint bog, eyeing it only now and then from a distance and turning his face away as if from some haunted spot curtained by the fog. His sole concession to the season drew him to the boxes in which he had stored away his mother's dahlia tubers in a cool corner of the cabin, covered with peat moss to prevent their shriveling. At least two weeks must pass before the ground would be sufficiently mellow for their planting. The garden plot must be spaded and fed with nutrients and the soil warmed by the sun. Meanwhile he took the tubers from their boxes, laid them out on his table, sorted them carefully, and selected only the firm and healthy roots for planting when the time was right.

He began his spade work in the garden plot on the last day of April. From the kitchen window, Sally saw him approaching in a hesitant way, gazing about him in that tranced fashion she had come to know. It was the first time he had come near the house since Margot's funeral. How had he been living? She watched him, hoping he would come into the house and sit down at the table. It was mid-morning, and the men were at work in the fields. Bess was upstairs making the beds and putting the rooms in order. There would be no one to disturb him now if he wanted to eat a decent meal. For Sally had sensed that Mark's absence from the table, even at breakfast, was prompted by the feeling that somehow his father had been to blame for Margot's death. She had spoken of it to John, but he had brushed it aside.

"Don't go imagining things. The kid is in one of his bad moods, that's all. Losing Margot was a pretty bad shock, naturally. But he'll get over it. He was hard hit when ma died, but he . . ."

"I don't think he'll ever get over it, really," Sally said.

"Well, give him time. When he gets hungry enough, he'll come around."

No, Sally thought as she saw Mark veer away from the door and go directly to the small plot of moist earth beyond the corner of the house. Time might ultimately work the change, but who could guess what direction his brooding might take in that clouded world in which he moved? The boy needed help.

She went out and walked slowly toward the garden plot. His back was toward her as he pressed the fork into the soil, lifted it and turned it over.

“Mark!”

He wheeled about and stared at her. “Oh, it’s you!”

“Yes, Mark. Won’t you come in and have something to eat before you start that?”

The merest flicker of a smile warmed his dark eyes. “I’ve already started it.”

“When you’re through, then?”

“He’ll be in from the fields.”

“Oh, Mark, what difference does that make? We’d all be happy to have you eat with us again.”

“It wouldn’t make me happy,” he said indifferently, and with a glance at the sun went back to his work.

For only a moment she stood and watched him as he set his foot upon the fork, pried the soil free, and shook it loose. Then she hurried into the house. He would not be there when Luke and the boys came in for their mid-day meal. She found a wicker basket in the bottom of the cupboard, set it on the kitchen table, and lined it with a table napkin. From the pantry and the refrigerator she brought bread and half a cake she had baked the night before, part of a pork roast, butter and cream and an unopened can of coffee, a bowl of sugar and two jars of fruit she had put up just after her coming to the Darr farm more than six months ago. He would have eggs and milk from the barns that were still his own peculiar domain, and all the vegetables he wanted from the cyclone cellar. She topped everything with a few tidbits from the kitchen larder and covered it all with another napkin.

Mark finally glanced again at the sun, let his eyes wander toward the field where his father was working, then thrust the spading fork into the ground and left it standing. When he turned away and started for his cabin, Sally rushed out, the basket in her hands.

“Mark, take this with you. It’s just a few little . . .”

“I don’t need anything,” he said and drew back a step. But Sally saw that his eyes were still on the basket.

“You’ve got to eat, Mark,” she urged.

“Maybe,” he conceded, and reached out a reluctant hand. “You are good to me, Sally. I’ll take it.”

She stood and watched him walk away toward his cabin. When he was halfway across the field that lay between the barnyard and the swamp, she

went back into the house.

Bess was waiting for her in the kitchen. “What was that I saw you giving Mark?”

“Just a few things—things to eat—I packed in a picnic basket. We can’t let him starve.”

“Why can’t he eat with the rest of us?”

“He probably has his own reasons,” Sally replied.

“They’re not good reasons, whatever they are,” Bess observed.

“What makes you say that?”

“Oh, I don’t know. He scares me. It’s getting so I can’t sleep nights, thinking about him. If I had anything to say about it, I’d have him sent away before he does anything really serious.”

That night, Luke Darr attended the regular meeting of the church board in Minter. It was a foregone conclusion that his plea for a new church building would be shelved indefinitely. Somehow, he felt, he had handled the whole business in a manner least likely to reach the end he so ardently desired. For one thing, it was probably a mistake to have made such a secret of his plans, envisioning in his own mind the completed structure before a single stone was in place, before a single nail had been driven. An edifice may rise in splendor as long as it remains within the imagination that fashions it, but setting it on solid ground is not done by dreaming. Had he followed the advantage he had gained by his first announcement to the church board, he might easily have led the way to something tangible. He had shocked them that night, there was no doubt about it. He would have met opposition, of course, but he could have fought it out in the open. Nor would he have had to fight alone. Even the curiosity that Tom Reed had shown was enough to form a center around which interest in the project might have grown and widened beyond the reach even of a man like Banker Kellogg. It was by such methods that things were accomplished in this world.

But Luke had let the opportunity escape him. Not because he had been remiss, or even careless. He had felt himself called upon to give his time and his energies without stint to preparing for the visit of Amos Strong. It was ironical that now, Amos Strong having come and gone, and having left behind him an augmented church membership, any hope of kindling a new enthusiasm had faded to a mere glimmer. The people had been roused once by a man who was an expert in his calling, they had been sustained on the

heights for two weeks by his earnest exhortations, and they were ready to settle down now to their accustomed routine. They were sated.

Luke took his seat among the board members with the feeling of helplessness already gnawing at him. For reasons he could not have explained at the time, while the preliminaries were being formally disposed of, he could think of nothing but Margot Jensen and his son Mark. They remained with him throughout the regular proceedings until the moment came for the consideration of new business. It was then that Tom Reed, sitting across the table from Luke, pushed Virgil Archer's sketches toward him and prompted him with a nod.

Luke got up and looked over the men whose faces were turned to him. He began speaking, but he had no heart in it.

"You were all here when I made my proposal at our last meeting. I need not repeat it. If you have any questions to ask, I'll be glad to answer them. If not, I'd like to know whether you approve or do not approve of what I suggested at that time."

He sat down. Chairman Kellogg called immediately for a vote, the tone of his voice clearly indicative of where he stood in the matter. He asked for a show of hands, and Luke sat stolidly in his place as the hands opposing him went up—all except the hand of Tom Reed, who had refrained from voting even in the affirmative. Pastor Bly sat with hands folded and head bowed until the motion to adjourn was passed and he rose to pronounce a benediction. With a feeling of utter defeat Luke left the church and drove home.

Bess was in bed when he went to their room.

"How did your meeting go?" she asked when he had turned on the light at her dressing table.

"You're still awake?"

"I haven't been able to get to sleep."

"You're feeling all right?"

"Yes. But I haven't been sleeping well lately. I've been sort of nervous or something."

"Nervous? What about?"

"Oh, I don't know—nothing special."

Luke went and sat on the edge of the bed. "The trouble with both of us is that we're not living the way we should live. If we—"

"You haven't told me how your meeting went," she interrupted.

“It couldn’t have gone worse,” he admitted. “They were all against me. I’m licked. And I have only myself to blame.”

He looked so crestfallen that for a moment she could feel nothing but pity for him. “Of course I don’t know anything about it,” she said, “but don’t blame yourself for it. I’m sure you did all you could. You had your heart set on it and I’m sorry they were all against it. But maybe it’s all for the best.”

“There’s more to it than that, Bess,” he told her. “At the last meeting, when I laid my plans before them, I spoke with conviction. I felt as if I could lift them up to where they could see it as I saw it. I was ready to fight for what I believed should be done. Tonight there was no fight left in me. It was as if I had lost faith in myself—in everything.”

“You’ve been working too hard,” Bess said with an effort at sympathy. “You were tired before you left for the meeting.”

“A man doesn’t get tired from his daily work,” Luke said, getting up from the bed. “I’ve never known what it is to be tired from hard work. But a man has to be whole to be a man at all. A half-man is better dead.”

“I don’t know what you mean, but I suppose . . .”

“I’m the father of three sons,” Luke went on. “Two of them are still with me, working with me in the fields, eating with me at the same table. The third has gone to live by himself. He doesn’t even come into the house any more.”

“You sent him away,” Bess reminded him.

“I was wrong. I’ve wanted to go to him a thousand times and tell him I was wrong. But I’ve been too proud, too full of my own conceit to go to him. And now he has turned his back on me. Sometimes I feel as if God himself has turned his back on me.”

“I think Mark sort of blames you for what happened to Margot,” Bess said.

“I know he does. I feel it. But how can he blame me?” Luke swallowed fast, avoiding a nose twitch. “I did what I thought was best for her, and it might have been best except . . .”

“I don’t believe it. That man was a fake and it was just poor little Margot who had to suffer.”

“I know what you think,” Luke said. “And that’s just another thing that makes me less a man than I should be. I have said it before, but I’ll say it again. A house divided against itself cannot stand. If you and I were united in spirit—and in the flesh—as we should be and as God has ordained, we could both face the world together without flinching. We would be one, the

family would be one, and we would be strong. As long as you and I are divided—”

“We’ve been over all that before,” Bess put in impatiently.

“We have—but it’s still true. I can’t go on like this. What’s more, you can’t go on like this. If we can’t be man and wife as God intended, it would be better for both of us if we lived our lives apart. I’ve got to live my life and you’ve got to live yours. If we can’t live them together we’re not living at all.”

“Please, Luke, I’m tired of talking,” Bess said, turning her face away and drawing the covers over her.

Long after midnight, she slipped quietly from the bed and went to stand at the window. Luke was sleeping soundly, but she had dozed off only fitfully since he had come to bed. That strange nervousness that had kept her awake for many nights was more annoying than ever.

As she stood at the window it seemed to her that there was a curious wavering of the moonlight among the tall poplars beyond the flower plot where Mark had been spading the soil in the afternoon. Was it her overwrought imagination, or did she see a shape out there, skulking and angling toward the house? No, it was only the shadow of a tree branch cowering humanlike in a gust of wind. She went back to bed.

At breakfast, Bess told them what she had seen in the shadows among the poplars, laughing at herself for having been frightened by such childish fancies.

“It was silly, I know,” she admitted, “but it looked like something real—or somebody . . .”

“It was real, all right,” Matt declared. “What you saw was probably old grandpa Pribble’s ghost prowling around the place. I used to see him when I was a kid.”

“That’s enough of that kind of talk, Matt,” Luke chided him. “Bess has a hard enough time getting to sleep without you bringing a ghost into it.”

When they left the table, Luke stepped into the living room for a last careful look at the fire Matt had kindled in the fireplace before breakfast. He kicked a few glowing embers back from the hearth and set the screen in place. With two women alone in the house . . .

“Matt—John!” he called in sudden alarm.

The boys came quickly and found their father gazing at the wall above the mantel.

“What’s the matter, pa?” John asked.

“The gun—it’s gone!”

Matt glanced up at the wall where the gun had rested all winter on its rack. “So what?” he said quickly. “I took it into town last night to have it dinged up a bit—the lock and the spring . . .”

“You didn’t go to town last night,” Luke said. “I had the car myself.”

“I mean the night before last,” Matt corrected, hoping his father would not notice his moment of floundering. Lying did not come easily to him. “I’ll get it next time I’m in town.”

Luke’s eyes were mistrustful. “Why didn’t you mention it?”

“You were somewhere else at the time. Anyhow, what’s all the fuss about?”

“There’s no fuss,” Luke said calmly. “I was just startled for a moment. Let’s get out to the fields.”

In the barnyard, John drew Matt aside. “What’s all this routine about the gun? Did you take it to town?”

“Of course not. There’s nothing wrong with the gun—except that it isn’t where it’s meant to be.”

“You mean Mark?”

“Who else? He was the ghost Bess saw last night. I guessed that the minute she told about it. But we can’t tell pa till we get the damned thing back. Even then there’d be no point in letting him know. We’ve got to get down there tonight and make the kid hand the gun over.”

“What in hell do you suppose he has in mind?”

“Who knows? It’s nothing good, you can swear to that.”

From a short distance off came the chattering of the tractor engine. “Let’s get moving,” Luke called. “We’ve got a long day ahead of us.”

At supper that evening, Luke announced his firm intention of going down to see Mark before turning in for the night. John and Matt exchanged quick glances across the table.

“Matt and I were thinking of walking down,” John said.

“Good!” Luke said. “We’ll go together, all three of us.”

“That’s out, pa,” Matt said abruptly. “John and I have some things we want to talk over with Mark.”

“Since when have I lost the right to go where I please on my own farm?” Luke challenged.

“Now, look, pa,” Matt went on. “Let’s not get into any hassle over it. You haven’t lost the right to go anywhere you like—on your own farm or

anywhere else. We're just asking you to wait a day or so and let us have our talk first. Can't you do that?"

Luke seemed on the verge of tears. "I want my boy back, living at home with the rest of us. I want to go to him and ask him to forgive me for being so strict with him. He's my son and I want him to come home."

"We want it as much as you do, pa," John said. "We think we can do something about it if we have a chance to talk it out by ourselves, with no one else around."

"You don't want me to go with you?" Luke asked. "You don't think a father's prayers can move him?"

"A father's prayers may be all right when there's something to work on," Matt argued. "But a father's prayers won't make seed grow on a rock."

"My son Mark is no rock," Luke retorted. "He's human—with a human heart—and his father is human, with a heart that's filled with love for him. I want to tell him so. I'll go on my knees before him if I must. I want him to come home."

"You're not going down there tonight, pa, and that's final," Matt said. "My God, can't you understand? He's your son, but he's nuts. You can't tell what he's going to do. He hasn't been in this house since Margot Jensen died. Doesn't that mean anything to you? He blames you for what happened to Margot. He doesn't want to talk to you. He doesn't want to see you. Maybe he doesn't want to see us, but we'll know more about that after we've had a chance to talk to him. Your going down there now, with us, would only gum up the whole works. Stay home and let us work on him. Tomorrow night, maybe—"

"Matt is right," Bess said.

Luke moved his plate aside. "I am nothing any more," he said huskily. "Do what you like."

There was a long silence during which John and Matt finished their meal.

"Mark was working on his flower plot today," Bess said at last. "He's going to have a real nice garden this summer."

Luke cast a closed look at her and said nothing.

It was almost dark before John and Matt left the house and made their way across the field and down the slope toward the swamp.

"Do you suppose the kid's in bed already?" Matt said. "There's no light in the cabin."

"We'll look in on him anyhow," John said.

They found the door open and Matt called softly, not wanting to startle his younger brother if he should be asleep. When there was no reply, he called more loudly.

“Mark!”

They waited in the doorway, listening for the slightest response. There was a ruffling of feathers and a croaking, “Get out, get out!” and Matt started back from the door.

“Damn that bird! I’m going to wring his bloody neck one of these days.”

“There’s something not right here,” John said. “Let’s go inside and look around. Strike a match and light the lamp.”

In the light from the lamp they looked about the room. Everything was neatly in order. The bed was made, the floor swept, the table stood squarely in the middle of the room, an open book lay face down beside the lamp. There were some dahlia bulbs on the table. The tomcat, Lancelot, lay curled in the middle of the bed.

When they had assured themselves that Mark was nowhere about, they began a thorough search for the gun. There was no longer any doubt in their minds that Mark had slipped into the house under cover of the darkness and had taken the weapon from its rack above the fireplace. But where was it now and what did the boy want with it? He was no hunter. The mere thought of killing an animal had always made him sick, even as a youngster.

“He may be out after that bobcat that’s been preying on his raccoons,” John said, and the brothers agreed in relief. Matt blew out the lamp. The cat, Lancelot, followed them outdoors.

Mark Darr knew where the gun was as he stepped out from the leafing brush beside the county road. It lay comfortably cradled in the crook of his left elbow. He knew, too, what he was going to do with it. What a man does, he mused as he picked his way carefully along the dirt road, he does because he must. Who can tell why a willow gives forth its gray-green catkins in the first days of spring? Who knows why the purple crocus thrusts its furry bloom toward the sun while the snow still lies only a pace away on a sandy bank? They did what they had to do, willow and crocus. A man did what he had to do, that was all. He was on his way now to do it, driven by a force that was no longer merely a part of him. It was all of him. It possessed him completely.

When he came to where the lane led into the Jensen farm, he paused for only a moment, glanced westward along the way he had gone so often—the

way he and Margot had gone together, through sun and darkness, through rain and snow—then lifted his hand in a silent salute to a life that had been but no longer was. A short distance farther and he paused again where the driveway led to the house in which he had been born, the house in which his mother had died. Had she lived—he brushed the thought from his mind. She had not lived. She was dead—and Margot was dead.

He came at last to the highway, the same highway along which his father had brought Bess Valentine to take her place in the Darr household, the same highway he and John had followed in search of Bess and Matt the morning after the storm. The sun was bright that morning and the roadway lay straight and sure to the place where their search ended. Tonight it lay under a pale moon—straight and sure to world's end where all searching ended in limbo. But the end of the long road was the same for all. The sweetest birdsong was less than a ripple on the sea of eternal silence. Could a man's life be more?

He crossed the highway and stood at last between the ribbons of steel that were shining silver in the moonlight. Years ago he had stood as he stood now, gazing westward along the railway tracks that marked for him the way to a boy's infinite dream of the far away. He had found no end that day, because there was no end. But there was an end tonight. He could see it in the not-too-distant twinkling of the street lights in the little village of Minter. He began walking toward them slowly. There is no need for haste, once the end is in sight. Oh, he had hurried on that night of his return so many years ago. But he had had something to return to then. Food and rest and the warm embrace of his mother's arms. His boyish fear that they might all have unaccountably vanished during his long day's absence had driven him. There was no such fear now. What he was going to now had been waiting for him since the beginning of time. It would still be there.

It was almost midnight when he reached the village outskirts. In a little more than an hour all the lights in Minter would be out, the people would be in bed. Even the street lights, for the sake of economy, would be darkened, except for the few that marked the corners and intersections. He sat down on the edge of a narrow bridge that spanned a creek, and waited, the gun across his knees. It was a long wait, but he was patient. When at last the moment came, he scrambled to his feet and walked into the village.

He had no trouble finding the place for which he had set out. Even if he had not been thoroughly acquainted with the town, he would have known his way by the humble steeple that reached up in the moonlight. Along the side street on which he approached it the houses were in darkness. When he reached the church, he circled it once, trying the door and the windows.

Then he walked to the rear of the decrepit building and used the butt of the gun to bash in a basement window. He crawled through carefully and let himself down to the floor. He lighted a match and looked about him. It took only a few minutes to gather enough paper and to splinter enough dry wood from the chairs he broke with his hands to make a sizable pile in one corner. When he was ready, he struck a match and touched it to the paper. The flame caught and in a moment the wood splinters were crackling avidly. He fed the fire with everything he could find until the flames were licking the ceiling. Then he picked up his gun and hurried up the narrow stairway to the main body of the church.

Moonlight fell from the windows across the pews and lay in a pale band over the altar and pulpit. He made his way down the center aisle and seated himself a few rows from the front. He waited, it seemed, for a long time, but at last there came a rushing noise behind him and he knew the flames had mounted the stairway. In another minute the building would be a flaming torch lighting the whole village.

Already the smoke was making it hard to breathe. He coughed once and lifted the gun from his knees. He ran his fingers along the cool, smooth steel of the barrel and bowed his head. There came a sudden crashing sound like the slam of a door in a high wind. After that there was no sound except the ever-growing roar of the consuming fire.

Mark Darr had done what he had to do.

“DID you have a good talk with Mark last night?” Luke asked as soon as the boys came to breakfast the next morning.

“We didn’t see him,” John said. “He must have stepped out somewhere just before we got there. Probably went over to see the Jensens.”

“You waited long enough for him,” Luke commented. “I sat around here for nearly an hour after you left.”

“You know how Mark is, pa,” Matt said. “Spring always hits him like a disease. A night like last night would send him tramping through the woods with no idea of time. For all we know, he might have been out all night. It wouldn’t be the first time. When we got tired waiting, we came back to the house.”

“He’s a strange boy,” Luke observed absently. “Turn the radio on, Sally, and let’s get the weather report.”

The radio station in Cleone was small and unpretentious, but it dispensed local news and items of interest to listeners who lived within reach of its voice. Farmers set their dials for the early morning weather forecast before beginning their day’s work.

There was no talk at the table as the announcer promised another day of fair skies and rising temperatures, with no showers in sight for the next forty-eight hours—ideal weather for working the land.

“. . . and for perfect service to match your perfect weather, neighbors, call on your friendly dealers, the Cleone Farm Service Store, where you will find . . .”

“Is there any more coffee in the pot?” Matt asked, lifting his empty cup toward Bess.

“All you can drink,” Bess smiled as she began filling the cup. “This is a new brand we’re trying. Do you like it?”

“Coffee is coffee,” Matt replied brusquely.

Bess tossed her head. "I guess somebody got up on the wrong side of the bed this morning."

Matt was about to reply, but Luke spoke up in a startled voice as he half rose from his chair. "Listen—did you hear that? Be quiet, will you!"

The radio voice threaded the silence. ". . . but it was already beyond control before the firemen reached the scene. This morning there is nothing left but a heap of ashes to mark the place where the old church stood for so many years. Cause of the fire has not yet been determined, but already there are suspicions of incendiarism, and an immediate investigation is promised. Further details will be reported as soon as they are available. Stay tuned to your 'Neighborly Station' for the early report on world news which follows a brief interlude of recorded music."

"What's he talking about?" Bess asked. "What burned down?"

Luke's voice was impatient. "Didn't you hear? The church in Minter was burned to the ground last night."

"Oh, dear! The place we were married in!"

"The place where God's people gathered to worship," Luke said reprovingly.

"It's too bad," Sally said. "I don't see why anybody would . . ."

"It's the Lord's will!" Luke declared, his voice singularly calm. Far from betraying any shock at the news that had come to him, he was smiling as he lifted his cup and drank what remained of his coffee.

"Maybe so, pa," Matt observed. "But the Lord must have some funny ideas about how he works it out. Not that I care about what happened to the old church, but . . ."

"His ways are inscrutable," Luke said. "It is not given to us to know, nor to ask why. But you can be sure His hand is in everything we do. It has been in this ever since the night I had my vision alone there in my little room. They wouldn't listen to me when I tried to talk to them about it. Now, they'll *have* to build a new church. Maybe Kellogg and the rest of them will listen to me next time I talk to them."

"I wouldn't talk too much about it if I were you, pa," Matt suggested, lighting a cigarette. "First thing you know, they'll be asking you where you were on the night of May first."

Bess said sharply, "I can answer that."

"I've done all the talking I intend to," Luke assured them. "They can come to me now."

He seemed to expand visibly, his physical stature reaching upward as he rose from his chair. “Well—no dallying!” he said crisply as he started toward the kitchen.

Startled by an upsurge of pride in the man she had married, Bess followed him with her eyes. Only last night he had been old and defeated, groping his way through a maze of shattered hopes and dreams unfulfilled. Now he was young and strong as he had been on the day he had brought her home with him from the little church that this morning was nothing more than a heap of ashes. What mattered it that an old church had gone up in flames? Somewhere she had read something about a strange bird that rose from its own ashes stronger and more beautiful than ever. It was a silly story that bore no semblance of truth, and yet it had its meaning, if she could but grasp and hold it. Oh, what a simple creature I am! she thought humbly. A new church would never spring up miraculously from the ashes of the old. Why, of course!—she caught herself in a gleam of wonder—it was Luke Darr who had risen suddenly from the ashes of his own spirit and taken flight again! It was evident in the sound of his voice, the lift of his head, the set of his shoulders, and the resolute stride that bore him away to begin another day’s work on the land.

With the courage of revelation she got up from the table, yearning to throw her arms about him before he left the house. She paused—the length of the kitchen between them—and all but whispered, “Luke!”

In the doorway he turned and looked back at her. “When Mark comes up to do the chores, get him into the house and give him a decent breakfast, will you, Bess?”

“I’ll try—I’ll do my best, Luke.”

“Tell him his father ordered it so. And if anyone calls or telephones, just say I’m out in the fields.”

“Yes, dear,” Bess said and watched him step from the house and walk quickly away. A moment later, John and Matt followed.

The plan they had set for the day’s work sent John and Matt to the northeast corner of the farm, while their father went to the field that lay south of the house, toward the highway.

“I want you to finish off that field by nightfall,” Luke said as his sons climbed into the pick-up. “So keep at it.”

Matt smiled as he started the engine. “You won’t be able to see us for dust.”

They were off then and Luke began walking toward the south field where his tractor stood awaiting him.

“Cut across by way of the swamp,” John directed as soon as they were on their way.

“You’re worried about the kid?”

“Well, things do happen.”

“They do,” Matt said soberly. “I worried about him most of the night. He hasn’t been acting—well, he’s been acting more queer than ever since Margot died. I’m not going to feel right about it till we find him—and get that gun back.”

“And if we don’t find him—or the gun?”

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves, Jonathan.” Matt was making a brave show of treating the problem lightly, but it was impossible to conceal the deep concern he felt as the truck hurtled down the slope toward the swamp. The wheels skidded to a stop in front of the cabin and the boys leaped down, one on either side.

Matt reached the door first and threw it open. “He’s not here.”

John came to the doorway and looked quickly about the room. “He’s been away all night. Everything is the same as it was when we were here last night. The bed—the dahlia bulbs on the table—the lamp . . .”

“Now, where the hell do you suppose . . .”

“He may have spent the night over at the Jensens,” John suggested.

“Could be, but I doubt it. There’s something not right about this picture.” Matt was standing in the middle of the floor, wiping the back of his hand across his forehead. On a beam above him, Mark’s crow was shuffling sidewise, snapping his beak with dry mutterings as he cocked his head at the intruders. “Aw, shut up, you goddamn fool!” Matt barked savagely, then turned to John. “Well, where do we go from here?”

John went back to the doorway and called once: “Mark!” He did not expect a reply. “We’d better take a look outside.”

“Are you thinking the same thing I am?”

“He may have had an accident of some kind,” John said. “We’ll take a look, anyhow.”

They spent an hour scouring the ground near the cabin, the swamp and its fringe of newly leafed willow, and the hillside where the dense pines made a thorough search impossible without the help of at least another dozen men. Together they went back to where the truck stood in front of the cabin.

John eyed his brother. "Well?"

"We've got to find him, that's all," Matt said.

"We could run over and find out if the Jensens have seen him."

Matt hesitated before replying. "An idea hit me when we were up there on the hill. You'll tell me I'm crazy, but the radio announcer said there was a suspicion that somebody set that fire last night."

"Why would Mark want to pull a job like that?"

"Why wouldn't he, especially after what happened to Margot there?"

"God, I hope you're wrong. Anyhow, that wouldn't account for the gun. He wouldn't need a gun to start a fire."

"He might need it if he tried to hide out somewhere and decided he wouldn't be taken without a fight. I think we ought to get into town and see if they've found out anything. Besides, we'll have to notify the sheriff sooner or later, if the kid doesn't turn up."

John climbed in behind the wheel. "We'll drop in at the Jensens on the way."

They spent only a few minutes talking to Magnus. Mark had not been around for several days. When they got back to the county road, Matt said, "Look, there's no point in the two of us going to town. If pa sees nothing moving over there in the northeast field, he'll be over to find out what's the matter. If we're both gone, he'll start looking for us—maybe go to the cabin first thing. That wouldn't be so good. You take the truck around there and park it where he can see it from the south field. Get busy and raise all the dust you can. I'll sneak around to the garage and take the car to Minter."

"But the girls . . ."

"The hell with the girls! I'll get away without talking to them and I'll be back as soon as I can make it—by noon at the latest."

"Well, damn it all . . ." Once again—as how often in the past!—John felt himself being assigned the lesser role of waiting while his younger brother carried the main business forward. No taint of jealousy blemished his thought—how could one entertain jealousy at such a time?—but for once he could have preferred to let someone else do the waiting. Still—"Go ahead. I'll look for you around noon. Come back sober, for God's sake."

There was a sandy bank just off the highway that bordered the south field close to the spot where Pastor Bly, stopping his car that pleasant afternoon last autumn, had stepped over to the fence for a talk with Luke

Darr. Each spring, the bank, exposed to the warm sun, wore a blanket of downy purple blooms that were known locally as Mayflowers. Mark had always called them crocuses, pasqueflowers or prairie anemones, when he did not use the more botanical name he had learned in his reading.

Whatever you called them, Luke mused as he looked down at them from his seat on the tractor, they were brave and beautiful harbingers of the season. He glanced up at the sun hanging midway in its course. It would be time to eat when the end of his next northerly sweep of the field brought him within a short walk of the farmhouse. He jumped down from the tractor and crawled gingerly between the strands of barbed wire and stood at last ankle deep among the flowers. In a few minutes he had plucked a thick bouquet of blossoms that bore only a faint aroma but exuded an exciting essence of earth and sun. He hurried back to his seat on the tractor and drove toward the house.

His walk took him to the west of Agate Lake, through the Lombardy grove, and so to the back door, in a shy and strange preoccupation that kept his eyes upon the boyish bouquet in his hand. To his left was Agatha's empty dahlia bed, and he averted his glance quickly from it. He entered the kitchen to find Bess standing beside the stove, shaking a pot of potatoes over the flame. He went directly to her and offered the bouquet.

"The first flowers of spring!" he said. "I picked them for you." He smiled and gave an awkward little bow as he placed them in her hand.

Bess had turned from her work to accept the offering. "Why, Luke—I think that's real sweet of you." He stood for a moment, looking at her with a half-expectant air, but she whisked away and went to the cupboard. "I'll put them in a bowl right now," she said. "They need water."

Luke stepped to the sink and began to wash up for dinner. His face muffled in the towel, he asked finally, "Did you get Mark to come in for breakfast?"

Bess set the bowl of flowers in the sink and ran the water lightly over them. "He didn't come."

"He didn't *come*?"

"Sally and I watched for him all morning," Bess said in a troubled voice. "We kept expecting him every minute—until we had to get the dinner started."

Luke hung the towel in its place. "Well, get things on the table. I'll walk down and look in on him as soon as I've had a bite to eat." On his way to the dining room he asked, "Were there any telephone calls for me?"

Sally, who had just completed setting the table, met him in the doorway. “Pastor Bly called a little over an hour ago, but I told him you were in the fields. He said he’d call later—something about a special meeting of the church board, I think.”

Luke smiled as he seated himself at the table. “There’ll be some great scurrying around for a few days now,” he said, and rubbed his hands together. “Well, they know where they can find me when they want me. Bring on the food, Sally, and call the boys.”

“We’re having a guest for dinner,” Sally informed him. “Dad arrived just before you got here. He drove down to the barn to talk to John, but I’ll go and call them.”

“Good! It’ll be nice to have Sam with us,” Luke said. “Get them in.”

The purpose of Sam Hunter’s visit was revealed in his answer to John’s blunt question as soon as he got down from the pick-up in which he had driven in from the field.

“What brings you calling at high noon when the rest of us are sweating our hides off trying to make an honest living?”

Sam chuckled. “I get tired of sweating my hide off, and I’m fed up with trying to make an honest living out of farming. I’ve been over calling on Magnus Jensen and decided to stick around and sample some of my daughter’s good cooking for a change.”

“Anything wrong with Magnus?”

“Nothing special. He’s giving up farming, that’s all.”

“He’s quitting?”

“I got wind of it in town the other day and I wanted to find out.”

“That’s funny,” John said, perplexed. “I was talking to him just this morning. He didn’t say anything about quitting.”

“I’ve been talking to him for the last hour or so. He says he just can’t handle the job any more without help, and he can’t afford help even if he could find it.”

“I didn’t think he was looking too good when I saw him this morning.”

“The death of his little girl hit him pretty hard,” Sam said. “He doesn’t seem to care for anything much any more. He looks ten years older than the last time I saw him. You don’t have to talk with him for five minutes to see that.”

"It's been coming on him for a long time. He has a good farm, but—well, what's he going to do?"

"That's what brought me out to see him," Sam replied. "I got to thinking about it after I went to bed last night. It would be a damned shame to let him put that farm into the hands of some real estate shark who'd get rid of it for half of what it's worth."

"You're not thinking of buying it yourself?" John asked.

"Why not? I'd give him a fair price for it. He's thinking of opening up a little grocery store in Minter. He'll have enough for that, and Guri will help him run it."

"You've got enough land now, Sam. What would you want with another hundred and sixty acres—ten miles from your own place?"

"I might buy it on speculation," Sam grinned.

"Speculation! That's a laugh. How're you going to get your money out of it, with good farms a dime a dozen?"

"There might be some kinds of speculation you wouldn't know about, young fellow," Sam argued. "When are you and Sally going to get married? Or have you changed your minds?"

"You don't seem to know that daughter of yours, Sam. When Sally makes up her mind, it stays made up. She hasn't set the date yet, but we'll get around to it as soon as the spring work is out of the way."

"Well, I figure the two of you will want a place of your own as soon as you can make it. I don't see any reason why you shouldn't start out with one."

"Now, look, Sam, I—maybe I'm off base a little, but if I'm guessing right, I want you to know that I'm marrying the girl, not a farm. You don't have to . . ."

"You don't have to squirm about it, my boy," Sam put in. "I did what I could for my other daughters. Sally is the last of the brood, and I'd like to do what I can for her. That's the way I want it."

"I don't know what to say, Sam. It's just too damned much. Have you said anything about this to Sally?"

"Not a thing. I had to see Magnus first. Now that I've talked with him, the way is clear. I'd rather you talked it over with Sally. She might have other ideas about it—might want to live somewhere else. And that's all right with me. I don't stand to lose anything, either way. But get your talking over with and let me know so I can go ahead and close the deal with Magnus. By the way, where's Matt?"

“He had to go to Minter this morning, but he’ll be back any minute now,” John said. “That must have been some fire they had in town last night. The radio said . . .” Sally’s call to dinner came as he spoke. “Well, there’s Dinah blowing her horn. Let’s get in.”

“I didn’t know a thing about the fire till I drove into town,” Sam said as they started for the house. “For once, we didn’t have the radio on. The first thing I knew about it was when I saw the pile of smoking ashes where the old church stood. They were still hosing it down when I passed.”

“Do you suppose somebody set fire to it?” John asked. “The radio said there was a suspicion . . .”

“It wouldn’t surprise me. I talked with Tom Reed, and he thinks so. God knows there are plenty of people who would have done it if they thought they could get away with it. It’s just lucky it happened when it did. It might have happened some night when it was full of people.”

“It should have been condemned long ago,” John said.

“Of course it should.”

They entered the house by way of the kitchen, where Sally and Bess were busy with last-minute preparations for dinner.

“Go in and sit down,” Sally ordered. “We’ll have everything on the table right away. What’s keeping Matt?”

“He ran into town, but we don’t have to wait for him,” John temporized, and stepped to the sink to wash the dust from his hands and face.

“For a bunch of supposedly hard-working farmers,” Sally quipped, “you fellows seem to be doing a lot of running around. How come you’re taking the day off, dad?”

Sam grinned at her. “Since when does a man have to account for every hour he . . .”

But Luke called from the dining room. “Come on in, Sam. I’m already at the table.”

Sam turned away. “Let John answer your questions, girl,” he said over his shoulder. “I’ll go in and talk with Luke.”

“Mystery?” Sally asked as her father disappeared into the dining room.

“Surprise,” John smiled, the word half-smothered in his towel.

He glanced toward Bess, who was draining vegetables, too intent upon her task to pay any heed to what they were saying. Quickly and briefly he told Sally why her father had left the work on his own farm to come visiting at high noon.

When he had finished, Sally stood for a moment lost in her own thoughts. “Dad’s a swell old guy,” she said at last.

“He didn’t have to offer us a farm to prove that,” John remarked drily.

Her eyes narrowed. “Are you trying to tell me you’re going to refuse his offer?”

“That’s up to you, kid.”

“Just how is it up to me?”

“Do you want to live the rest of your life across the road from the Darrs?”

“I’d live the rest of my life across the road from anyone—if I’d be living it with you, you big lunk!”

He grinned down at her. “That just about makes me the answer to any maiden’s prayer. I didn’t think I was that good.”

“You’re not!” Sally declared. “You make me so mad I could spit. You’re so damned unromantic I sometimes wonder why I’ve been chasing after you all these years. Here we have a chance to get married right away, and you’re about as excited as a log!”

“Listen, Sally,” he said seriously, “we’re not a couple of high school kids running off to spend a night together—and getting married just to make it legal. When we get married it’s going to be for keeps. There are a few details that have to be fixed up first, and you’ll have to let me handle them in my own way. There’s one thing about a log, kid—it isn’t easy to move it once it’s set.” He stooped and kissed her. “Now, let’s get in to dinner.”

Luke had risen and was holding out his hand as Sam came into the dining room. “Glad to see you, Sam. Sit down, sit down—next to me, here. Got all your seed in?”

“I have a little more to do,” Sam said, “but I’ve got a good man helping me this year. I’m just taking a few hours off. I’ll have to get back as soon as I’ve eaten. I guess I’m getting old, Luke. I’d rather loaf than work.”

Luke laughed and flexed his arms. “We’re putting on the years, Sam, but we’re not getting *old*. I feel as young today as I did twenty years ago. And so do you, if looks count for anything. Don’t ever admit you’re old as long as you can do a good day’s work and eat a man-sized dinner. How’s Dora?”

“Hale and crotchety, as usual. She talks about aches and pains, but I don’t put any stock in it. She gets through a day’s work as fast as she ever did.”

“It’s a funny thing about women,” Luke observed. “Besides all the work they do, they have to go through the business of bearing children—and yet, they tell me, they live longer than men.”

“They’re tougher than we are, Luke,” Sam said.

“They must be,” Luke admitted as Bess came in carrying two bowls of steaming vegetables which she set on the table. “Well, get the boys in and we’ll fall to.”

“John’s here,” Bess said, “but Matt hasn’t come in yet.”

“What’s holding him up?”

“Matt had to go into Minter, but John says he’ll be right back.”

“What’s he doing in Minter?” Luke asked, his brows drawing to a frown. But Bess was on her way to the kitchen to fetch the roast.

Sam Hunter’s face crinkled in mirth. “A man can get awful dry working in the fields on a day like this.”

“There’s plenty of good water, and you don’t have to go all the way to Minter to get it,” Luke said.

“I never thought much of water as a drink,” Sam chuckled. “It’s handy to have around when you want to douse a fire, but I . . .”

“That must have been a bad fire they had in town last night,” Luke said as he began carving the roast. “We got the news over the air at breakfast.”

“John and I were talking about it on the way in just now. Whoever did it sure made a good job of it. There wasn’t a thing left but the stone foundation.”

“You think somebody set it?”

“I wouldn’t know, of course. I was telling John I dropped in on Tom Reed on my way over, and he seems to think there’s no doubt about it.”

“But who in heaven’s name would want to set fire to a church?” Luke argued. As he spoke, John and Sally came in and took their places at the table.

Sam’s smile was tolerant. “It takes all kinds of people to make a world, Luke.”

“You like your beef well done, Sam, or a little on the rare side?”

“Rare and juicy,” Sam said.

Luke laid the first slice aside. “I’ll keep this for Matt. He likes an outside cut. Perhaps you know, Sam, that I have been trying for some time to interest the board in the idea of building a new church?”

“Yes, I heard about it. Looks as if they’re stuck with it now, whether they want it or not.”

“A town has to have a church, Sam.”

“That’s exactly how Tom Reed put it when I talked to him this morning.”

“He did?”

“The very words. And if I know Tom, I’d say that you’ll have your new church ready before the next snow falls. Tom’s a fast worker. He seems to have his plans all set.”

“*His* plans?”

“That’s the impression he gave me. In fact, he said something about making it a memorial to his late wife.”

Luke slashed another slice from the roast. “Tom Reed has no plans—except the plans I had drawn up by an architect I went to see in the city when I was down there last Christmas. I showed them to Reed and let him take them home with him the night I first spoke to the board about it. And now he calls them *his* plans!”

“I may be all wrong about it, of course,” Sam said. “As I say, it’s just the impression I . . .”

“You’re not wrong,” Luke said angrily. “You’re absolutely right. I was a fool to let him have the plans to look over. He has no principles—he and Kellogg and the rest of them—they’re all alike. I left those plans with Tom Reed in good faith. I thought I’d get him to stand with me and help put it through. Instead of that . . .”

“Pa, pa,” John begged, “don’t get yourself all worked up over what Tom Reed is doing. What difference does it make whose plans they are, as long as you get your new church?”

“It makes a difference to me,” Luke retorted fiercely. “What’s more, he isn’t going to get away with it!”

Sam Hunter shrugged his shoulders and looked at Luke. “I don’t quite get this, Luke. Why should you lock horns with Tom Reed over a thing like building a new church? If I was in your place, I’d be tickled to death to let somebody else carry the load. After all, we’re farmers, Luke. Tom Reed is a builder. I’d say, let him go ahead and build. We’ll go ahead and farm.”

“I’ve heard that argument before, Sam,” Luke retorted, doing his best to speak calmly. “My sons have used it against me. But being a farmer doesn’t mean that a man has no right to lift his eyes from the ground and look above him once in a while. For the first time in my life . . .”

A car sounded in the driveway. "That's Matt now," John said and got up from the table. "I'll go out and check."

"Go," Luke said, "but don't bring him in here if he has been drinking. I've had enough for one day, without that."

John hurried out and went to the garage, where Matt was already putting the car away. He was getting out of the car when John called to him from the garage doorway. "Any news?"

Matt closed the door of the car and came toward John, swaying a little as if he had loitered too long in Hugo's bar. He steadied himself with a hand on the side of the car, and looked at John.

"Yes, I have news." He had not been drinking, John realized, even though his voice was thick and his words forced. "It isn't good."

"Mark?"

Matt looked away. "Mark is dead, John."

"Dead? Oh, no!"

"He was in the church when it burned down last night. He must have set fire to it himself."

"Are you sure? Who told you?"

"Nobody told me. And I haven't told anybody but you. When I got to town, I drove round to the church and found them raking over the hot ashes, looking for clues to how the fire started. I stayed there and helped with the digging for an hour or so. One of the boys dug out the barrel of a gun and I had a look at it. When I saw what it was, I went away without saying anything—and came home. Where's pa?"

"Eating dinner. Sam Hunter is here."

"What's he doing away from home?"

"I'll tell you all about that later," John said.

Matt's hands went to his head, his strong fingers tugging at his hair. "This is just about going to kill pa when he hears it. How are we going to tell him?"

After a silence, John said, "We don't have to tell him right away."

"He's got to be told."

"Wait till Sam leaves. We'll get pa aside and break it to him the best way we can. He must be the first to be told."

"I can't go into the house now and sit at the table as if nothing had happened," Matt said. "I couldn't do it!"

"You won't have to. We can walk over to the barns and wait for Sam to go. He won't be staying around."

"They'll be wondering what's keeping us."

John's lips twisted bitterly. "Pa warned me not to bring you into the house if you'd been drinking. That ought to take care of it."

"Christ, what a joke that is! The poor old bugger!"

They walked slowly across the barnyard, saying nothing until they opened a barn door and looked in.

"There'll be some chores to do around here," Matt said distantly.

"It'll give us something to do while we're waiting."

They went to work. Presently Matt said, "I wonder if he'll tell us this is the Lord's will too?"

"He might," John said. "After all, a man has to have something to hang on to when he gets hurt."

"Maybe. The old man takes his troubles to God. I used to take mine to ma. Mark and I had that in common anyhow."

"Oh, I think we all had. I'm glad she isn't here for this."

In silence they scoured out milking pails until they heard Sam Hunter calling to them from the yard. He was standing beside his car when they went out to him.

"Going, Sam?" John asked.

"Got to get back on the job," Sam said. "When you didn't come back to the house, I thought I'd come out and give Matt the once-over before I left."

Matt forced a reassuring grin. "Everything's under control, Sam."

"Good. Take it easy, now." Sam opened the door of his car. "By the way, John, your father got a little nosy about what brought me up here today and he finally weaseled it out of me. I told him about it and I think he liked it. Did you have a chance to mention it to Sally?"

"I told her about it. Looks like she's all for it."

"Fine! I'll go ahead right away. No sense fooling around with it."

"Well . . ." John hesitated. "I've got to straighten out a few details of my own, but I'll give you a ring in a day or two."

"Okay, my boy," Sam said, and got into his car.

"What's the big deal?" Matt asked as soon as Sam had driven away.

On the way to the house John told him what Sam Hunter had proposed.

"Well, what's holding you back?" Matt asked. "It sounds pretty good to me. That's a damned good property and you'd be doing poor old Magnus a

favor to take it off his hands.”

“We both know a man who married a woman with a farm, Matt. With all respect to the memory of Agatha Pribble, you know as well as I do what it did to Luke Darr. I’m not letting myself in for a deal like that. I’m not marrying a farm. That’s one thing that’s holding me back.”

“You’re right as hell!” Matt declared. “Though I don’t think for a minute Sam is giving his daughter a club to beat you with when . . .”

“I don’t think so either, but I’m going to be damned sure of it before I go along. The other thing is the business you and I tried to talk over with pa one night. He’s got to make a settlement that’s reasonable to everybody concerned—and that means you and me now.”

They had come to the back door. Matt paused before going in. “We’ll work it out. I’m with you all the way, Jonathan,” he said and took John’s hand in an awkward but warm clasp that held all the affection they had fostered down through the years. “It’s going to be damned lonesome not having you around the place.”

“I’ll be just across the road,” John reminded him, and set his mouth hard as he added, “Right now we’ve got to face pa and tell him about Mark.”

They found their father in the kitchen, getting ready to go back to work. He gave Matt a shrewd look, his eyes narrowing suspiciously as he probed for some sign of the boy’s defection. Finding none, he turned away.

“What took you into town at this time of the day?” he asked. “Your dinner will be cold by now.”

“We want to talk to you, pa,” John put in.

“Right now? I was going down to look in on Mark before getting back to the field. He hasn’t been up today. I’m afraid he isn’t feeling well.”

“What we have to say can’t wait, pa,” John insisted. “Can we go into your office for a minute?”

“Well, I’ve got no time to lose. But—well—all right . . .”

In the little room off the hall, the door closed, Luke sat down at his desk and looked up at his boys. He smiled as his eyes settled upon John. “Go ahead, my boy. I know already what’s on your mind. Sam and I had a talk before he left. He told me what he wants to do for you and Sally.”

“We can talk about that later, pa,” John urged.

“We can talk about it now as well as later,” Luke countered pleasantly. “I’d like to get my word in while we’re in the mood. Sam is very generous, but he’s going to find me ready to do what I can. You’ll need—”

“Pa!” Matt interrupted.

But Luke lifted a hand toward him. “Quiet, Matt! This is between John and me.” He leaned back in his chair and laced his fingers over his stomach.

The boys exchanged a quick glance and Matt said, “Go ahead. What difference does it make?”

Luke favored them with a self-satisfied smile. “That’s better. I have a feeling that you’re coming around to the idea that when a father has something to say to his sons, he has a right to say it without fear of being interrupted. It’s a good sign.”

“Oh, get on with it, pa,” Matt said with a tremendous effort at patience.

“I started to say that now that Sam has been so openhearted, you won’t find me lagging. John, you’ll need a few head of stock to start out with and a little something to put the Jensen place in shape for you and Sally to move into. Have you given any thought to what you’ll need?”

For a moment John was silent, standing with head bowed, the muscles of his jaws taut. Matt saw him close his eyes, squeezing the lids together as from some inner struggle with himself. What his older brother needed was some hardening of fiber, some stiffening of attitude to meet his father’s challenge. He reached out and gripped John’s shoulder.

“Answer him, answer him, for crissake, and get it over with!”

John looked at his father. “You insist?”

“I do, my boy,” Luke replied firmly, his whole manner exhibiting a degree of self-possession and confidence he had rarely shown. Strength without anger, he thought to himself—he was achieving it at last.

“I want nothing more than my due, pa,” John replied haltingly, then squared his shoulders. “A few weeks ago Matt and I tried to get you to make a settlement of our affairs here. That’s all I want now. And I want it done before Sally and I are married.”

“And when will that be?”

“The sooner the better. Sally would like to have it done right away.”

“I’m not going to be rushed,” Luke said, bristling.

“You’ve had weeks to do it, and you’ve done nothing,” John retorted. “I’m not going to wait any longer.”

Luke frowned. “John, I don’t like the tone of your voice. Remember, you’re talking to your father.”

“You’re talking to your son,” John said. Luke sprang from his chair, but John pushed him back. “Sit down, pa. I don’t want any more goddamn nonsense—and no more talk. Matt and I came here with some bad news for you—about Mark.”

Luke started. “Bad news—about Mark?”

Jerkily, then, Matt told his father why they had come. Luke sat, his anger suddenly dissipated, his hands folded, his upper lip twitching in the way that had always seemed comical but was now so pathetic that Matt could hardly finish his story.

“And that’s all there is to it, pa,” he said finally.

His father sat looking at him, his chin trembling, the tears welling from his eyes. Finally he stood up, his weathered hands gripping the edge of the desk beside him. Matt put out a hand to take his arm, but Luke shook the hand away.

“I can stand alone,” he said. “Just leave me here—by myself—for a little while.”

Matt moved away a step, his eyes still upon his father’s face. “Are you sure you’re all right, pa?”

“Yes, yes, I’m all right. It’s like—it’s like a part of me has died, but I’m all right. Just leave me.”

The boys went out together, closing the door gently behind them.

“You’d better eat something, Matt,” John said.

“I’m not hungry, but I’ll have something. You take care of the cows. I’ve got to get back to town right away and look after things. There’ll be questions to answer and we might as well get it over with.”

“I’ll go with you this time,” John said. “Sit down and I’ll have Sally bring something in.”

“You’d better tell the girls,” Matt said, seating himself at the table. “I don’t want to go through it again.”

THE door securely closed, Luke went to the window and looked out across the sun-drenched fields. There could be no thought of returning to work, with a mind burdened as his was now.

Turning from the window, he sat down at his desk and stared at the wall in front of him. The wall was blank except for the heavy brown paper, now faded, that Agatha had laboriously hung there more than ten years before she died. Young Mark had helped her with that task, Luke remembered now. Young Mark had helped her grow the flowers she loved, until his hands became as deft as her own and his lore had grown beyond her reach. He had helped her probe and bind the wounds of stricken trees, until he surpassed her in the gentle art of surgery. He had vied with her in naming a bird from its song, from the flash of a wing among the leaves, from a feather lying where it had fallen in the dust, until she proudly conceded herself no match for him. These things Luke had often laughed about—usually to himself. It was always amusing to see Agatha bested, especially in her own field, the teacher outdistanced by her pupil. And now young Mark was dead. *Man that is born of a woman is of few days, and full of trouble.*

But wait! Now that he thought of it—Matt's sudden announcement had shocked him so that he had been unable to think clearly about anything—how could they be sure that Mark was dead? Matt would know, of course, that the gun found among the ashes was the one that had lain so long on its rack above the fireplace. There could be little doubt about that. But who had carried it there? Hadn't Matt himself taken it to town to have it repaired? He had said so at the breakfast table yesterday morning. Did Mark, then, get it from the gunsmith? And why? What could he want with it, a boy who had never killed anything in his life? Wasn't it easier to believe that someone else—perhaps the man with whom Matt had left it—had taken it?

There was a faint ray of hope in his heart as he got up from his chair and hurried out to question Matt. He got as far as the dining room when the car, Matt at the wheel and John in the seat beside him, raced past the window

and down the driveway on its way to town. He hesitated for a moment, heard Bess and Sally moving busily in the kitchen, then stole back to his den and shut the door behind him.

He sat down again at his desk and reached for his Bible. He opened it and began thumbing the worn pages. Hope and fear battling within him, he had need of comfort. His eyes fell upon a verse he had long ago marked with a penciled line in the margin: *Every valley shall be exalted, and every hill shall be made low; and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain.* It was a promise God himself had given his people. *Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and ye that hath no money, come ye, buy, and eat; yea, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.* There was God's invitation to his people. How strange that Agatha, who would listen by the hour while Mark read from his books of poetry, had never turned to the most sublime poetry of all! And what mysterious instinct had led the boy and his mother to slake their thirst and feed their hunger elsewhere than at the storehouse of God's mercy?

There had always been something mysterious, in fact, in the relationship of those two, Luke mused now. Agatha had never betrayed any suspicion that her youngest son was in any way peculiar. Different from her other sons, yes, but in a way that was to his credit. When the boy's spirit embarked upon far journeys, when he stood at gaze beyond the world's horizons, muttering to himself and smiling as one who had been caught up in a dream ineffable and beyond human ken, Agatha had smiled too, as if she were journeying with him. It was as if they lived in another world. It was almost as if they had found another God. *Thou shalt have no other God before me.* That was the law. Promise—invitation—law—Agatha and her son had turned their backs upon it all. And yet, they had somehow found peace. It was true that Mark was stirred to violence when storms ripped the earth, but his violence always subsided with the passing of the storm. With the sun smiling again, he was at peace with all the world. Only twice had he failed to find comfort—when his mother had died, and, more recently, when Margot had been taken away. In each case, a bond of love had been shattered. Nature, whom the boy worshiped, had broken faith with him. There was no answer to death. Even the Man of Sorrows had cried out, *My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me!* Had the faith of God's only son faltered in the ninth hour? And was it reasonable to expect more of a mere man?

From beyond the closed door came the ringing of the telephone. Luke leaned back in his chair and waited until he heard a knock at the door.

“What is it?”

Sally's voice answered. "Pastor Bly is on the telephone."

"Tell him—tell him anything! I won't talk to him."

"Well . . ."

He heard her footsteps moving down the hall, and a moment later the sound of the receiver being set back on its hook. Perhaps he had been unfair, he thought, but he couldn't help it. Poor old Bly! Never having had a child of his own, what solace could he offer a man who had lost a son? There was more to it than that. For years Luke had harbored a secret contempt for the old pastor. What a puny creature to delegate himself God's agent in a sin-ridden world! Still, all men were puny, puny and pathetic—he, Luke Darr, as puny and pathetic as the rest. *What is man that thou art mindful of him; and the son of man that thou visitest him?* Was it then the destiny of man, born in sin, to struggle upward forever, knowing the struggle would end long before the goal was reached? Had the saints of old gone in vain to the deserts, leaving their altars and their sacred vestments behind them, to meet God face to face? Luke felt a trembling within him. He was on dangerous ground. He got up from his chair and unsteadily began pacing back and forth in his little room. No, no, it had not been in vain! Men had seen God. They had talked with Him. Ah, brave little world—and brave little people who dwell in it!

The sun was already westering when John and Matt came back from Minter. Seeing the car pass his window, Luke hurried out and met the boys as they were stepping from the garage.

A mere glimmer of hope still lingering, he asked, "Is there any more news?"

"Nothing much—and nothing good, pa," Matt said.

"You still think it was Mark?"

Matt drew from his pocket a brass keychain with a pocket-knife attached. "Mark's knife," he said. "It was found in the ashes. There were some other things too."

Luke looked at the knife without touching it. "The poor boy! What made him do such a thing?"

"We can only guess, pa," John said. "We'll never know."

Luke looked away as if in search of an answer to his question, then brought his eyes back suddenly to bear upon Matt. "That gun, my boy—I've been thinking about it. You told me you took it to town to have something done to it?"

“Yes. I had to say something, and it was the only thing I could think of at the moment. I was sure Mark had taken it and I didn’t want you to know.”

“You lied to me.”

“I had to. Does that matter now?”

“Maybe not. But it might have been better if you hadn’t.”

“Let’s not argue about that now,” John said. “Even if you had known, it wouldn’t have changed anything. Matt and I did everything we could.”

“Oh, I know you did. Are you going back to town after supper?”

“There’s nothing to go back for. Matt and I took care of everything this afternoon.”

Luke turned away and walked slowly toward the pasture gate.

“Where are you going, pa?” John called after him.

“I’m going to walk a little,” Luke said without looking back.

The boys watched him as he opened the gate and started off across the field toward the swamp.

“I don’t think we should let him go down there now,” John said.

“Why not? Let him go. He’s got to work this out in his own way.”

They found Sally alone in the kitchen.

“Where’s Bess?” Matt asked.

“She went up to her room about an hour ago,” Sally said. “It seemed to hit her all at once and she went to pieces. She started to cry and ran upstairs before I could speak to her. I thought I’d just leave her to herself for a while. Did you find out anything more in town this afternoon?”

Matt left John to answer her question and strode off into the hall. At the foot of the stairs he paused and called, “Bess!” To her muffled response from beyond the closed door of the bedroom, he said, “Come on down. I want to talk to you.”

He went back to the kitchen where, presently, Bess appeared, her eyes swollen from weeping, her hands busy in an attempt to arrange her tumbled hair.

“You wanted to talk to me, Matt?”

He wheeled about and looked at her. “This is no time to be throwing a fit,” he snapped. “We need your help. Pull yourself together, for crissake! Pa is on his way down to Mark’s cabin. Wash your face and put up your goddamn hair and get down there. It’s your duty, if nothing else.”

For a brief moment she looked merely puzzled. Then a sudden, violent change came upon her that brought a gasp from Sally. Bess took a step

toward Matt, her fists clenched, her blue eyes blazing with scorn.

“Don’t you talk to me about duty, Matt Darr! And don’t stand there cursing at me as if I was a thing under your feet. I’m your father’s wife, and he’s twice the man you’ll ever be. Just remember that!”

With that, she rushed out of the kitchen door, disheveled and tear-stained, leaving the others staring after her.

“You didn’t have to be so damn short with her,” John said after a moment.

“Short, hell!” Matt retorted. “Everything’s falling apart round here. Somebody’s got to take over before it’s too late. With you two fixing to pull out any day and the old man shot to hell, it looks like I’m the only one left. And if she’s going to stay, she might as well know what’s expected of her.”

“We’re all under a strain,” Sally said. “It wasn’t quite fair of Matt to bark at her the way he did, but maybe it was a good thing he did. Bess has declared herself on the side of Luke. She was on the verge of tears all afternoon—and not only because of Mark. It was because of Luke. Pity, compassion—call it anything you like—and maybe a lot of other things we don’t know about—they were all working on her till, as I told you, she went to pieces all of a sudden and ran to her room. Maybe you don’t think a person can change completely in a few hours. I do. It can happen in a minute.”

Matt looked shamefaced for an instant, his brows drawn to a frown. “Maybe I was a little rough on her,” he admitted and turned thoughtfully from the room.

Sally’s lips began to quiver and John took a stride and gathered her into his arms. “Buck up, kid!” he said. “This is going to work out in spite of everything.”

She clung closely to him and kissed his shirt. “I know. It will, darling.” She stood away from him, brushed a hand across her eyes, and glanced toward the window. “Oh, Johnny—look at that sunset!”

He turned and saw the golden shafts lancing upward through the poplars. “Looks like another good day for the farmers,” he said. Sure, he thought, as prosaic a remark as possible!

But Sally’s smile had a dream in it. “Looks like a troop of children dancing,” she said.

Luke paused for an instant on the edge of the field’s dip toward the swamp and contemplated one spear of gold that thrust itself upward,

halfway to the zenith. “Like a steeple on the Lord’s temple,” he mused, and set his feet once more toward the cabin that had been Mark’s.

Among the willows beside the swamp, the air was liquid with the song of blackbirds. Bullfrogs boomed their mating calls. Secret chitterings of hidden insects made their chorus among the reeds. Luke heard them with an ache in his heart.

He stepped through the doorway into the shadowed room and stood for a moment peering about him. *He shall return no more to his house, neither shall the place know him any more.* He moved across the floor and lighted the lamp that stood on the table. The flame grew slowly and finally shed its soft glow about the room. It lighted the bed where Mark had slept. It lay across the picture of Agatha that stood on the shelf, the ancient mirror above it. There came a brief flutter of wings and Luke jerked about in time to catch a glimpse of Mark’s pet crow as it darted from its perch and disappeared through the open doorway. Startled, he pressed a hand beneath his heart and quickly closed the door. He had all but forgotten the evil bird that had been Mark’s companion for so long. He had come here, moreover, feeling that all life had departed from the place, now that his son was gone. Besides, he had spent a whole afternoon between believing and doubting. He was frayed in spirit, tired.

He turned from the door and went back to the table. Under the light from the lamp a book lay open, face down, and beside it a scattering of dahlia bulbs that Mark had picked over before leaving the cabin for the last time. He took one of the bulbs in his fingers, pressed it gently, and set it back on the table.

He moved to the other side of the table and sat down on the chair facing it. He laid a hand on the book and drew it toward him. What thoughts had Mark carried away with him when he got up from his chair and walked away? After a long moment he turned the book over so that the open pages lay clear under the light from the lamp. Two poems were margin-pencilled. He began to read the first one slowly:

*Darest thou now O soul,
Walk out with me toward the unknown region,
Where neither ground is for the feet nor any path to follow?*

*No map there, nor guide,
Nor voice sounding, nor touch of human hand,
Nor face with blooming flesh, nor lips, nor eyes, are in that land.*

*I know it not O soul,
Nor dost thou, all is a blank before us,
All waits undream'd of in that region, that inaccessible land.*

Luke lifted his eyes from the printed page and leaned back in his chair. O Mark, Mark, poor sightless wanderer in a vast unknown, with neither hand to guide nor voice to comfort! Where was the God he sought? Where was the God that all men sought—for all *must* seek! Life at best was but a brief striving for final union with the eternal. John and Sally in their love for each other, Mark and his violin groping their way together through the darkness, Matt in his escapades grasping for any shield against his loneliness—all of them driven by an ineffable fear of being forever alone. Even Bess . . .

Bess, running down the hill, saw that the door of Mark's cabin was closed, and a formless dread caught at her breast.

"Luke, Luke!" she panted, then abruptly stood still. The western windows of the cabin were aflame.

"Oh, you fool!" she laughed hysterically. "It's only the sunset." She began to run again.

A bewildering demand, like pain, rose from within the depths of her body—something more vivid than she had ever before experienced. She stood before the cabin door, breathless, and all at once shy about knocking.

"Luke, Luke, dear!" she called out timidly.

"Bess!" he responded in a voice oddly remote.

She opened the door, and he looked up at her as she stood, motionless and silent, silhouetted against the mellow glow of the evening.

"Luke, dear," she said after a moment, "are you all right?"

He stood up and moved away from the table. "Why shouldn't I be all right?"

“Why? After this terrible thing that has happened . . .”

“Yes, it’s a terrible thing, Bess, but I—I’m strong enough to take it.”

“Maybe if I came in and sat with you for a while . . .”

His sigh, his glance, were away from her. “Not now, Bess. I’d rather . . .”

But she was already halfway across the floor. In a moment her arms were about him. “All afternoon, Luke,” she said, looking up into his face, “I’ve been so alone! It’s awful to be alone. And we don’t have to be.” Suddenly she drew her arms more closely about him. “I—I love you, Luke!”

He stood back from her, holding her by the shoulders while he searched her face in slow surprise. Then with a gentle smile he said, “I believe you, Bess. We need each other, and from now on . . .”

“Yes, yes, Luke. I don’t want to feel alone again.”

He ran his hand softly over her hair. “Never again, Bess. But just now I want you to go back and leave me here—just for a little while. Can you understand? I’ll be with you in a few minutes.”

She stood on tiptoe and kissed him quickly. “I understand, dear. I’ll go now and wait for you.”

Luke was alone again. It was the way it had to be. No one now could help him resolve the problem that had torn him apart in the solitude of his den while he sat waiting for John and Matt to come home from Minter. His thinking, begun so simply, had somehow led him out upon treacherous ground where he had been trapped unwittingly. He recalled now the inward trembling that had seized him, the warning to return to the familiar precepts that had guided him down through the years. But there was no turning back, he knew. Doubts were relentless—stubborn barriers against any return. They persisted until they became a new faith, replacing the old.

He drew the book toward him and read again the verses he had been reading before Bess came to the door. He looked back and found the name of the poet who had written the lines.

Then, “Walt Whitman, there’s something wrong here,” he said aloud. “No soul knowingly steps off blindly into a chasm of eternal night.”

It was too simple to say that we come from nothing and return to nothing. It was too simple to say that God puts out a hand at the last moment to guide the wanderer. We come from God, for all our erring we walk through life with God, and in the end go forth with God. There is no release from God.

He read the remaining lines of the poem:

*Till, when the ties loosen—
All but the ties eternal—Time and Space,
Nor darkness, gravitation, sense, nor any bounds bounding us.*

*Then we burst forth, we float,
In Time and Space O soul, prepared for them,
Equal, equipt at last (O Joy! O fruit of all!) them to fulfill, O soul.*

We burst forth—that was it! A brighter light than he had ever known broke over Luke, dispelling all darkness. He was at peace.

He put out a hand and again picked up the dahlia bulb he had cast aside. He pressed it again and found it firm and full of life straining for a new birth. He folded it warmly for a moment in his palm and seemed to feel the stir of life deep within it. The straining to be reborn was not imposed upon it from without. It was a living pulse from within. The seed was a tiny abode of God Himself. He pressed it more closely in his hand. All at once the very air about him seemed to expand, the enclosing walls to move outward and away into limitless space. Life's brief hour blended into eternity.

He opened his hand and looked long at the seed. "You will be given to the earth again," he said aloud, with a feeling that he was at last talking to a God who was very close—the God the saints had gone to the desert to seek, the God with whom his son Mark had lived, "you will be given to the earth again and you will grow in beauty!"

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.

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[The end of *A Man Had Tall Sons* by Martha Ostenso]