

MISCHIEF

Charlotte Armstrong

Good Housekeeping Magazine 1950

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MISCHIEF

by

Charlotte Armstrong

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Mischief

MR. PETER O. JONES, the young editor and publisher of the *Brennerton Star-Gazette*, was standing in a bathroom in a hotel in New York, scrubbing his nails.

His wife, Ruth, in her long petticoats, was sitting before the dressing table in their room, having resolved to be as perfectly, as exquisitely groomed as ever a woman was in the world.

It was The Night!

Over the basic formula of the hotel's furnishings they had spread the froth of their preparations in jolly disorder. Ruth's rose-colored evening dress hung on the closet door. Peter's rummaged suitcase stood open. Powder and ashes had spilled gloriously on the flowered carpet. All the lights were blazing.

All the lights were blazing in Bunny's room, too, the adjoining room, exactly like this one, except left was right and maroon was blue.

Bunny O. Jones was seven. All three had "O" as a middle initial. Ruth's name had been Olsen, and Peter was delighted with the coincidence. People named Jones, he claimed, had to do something. In her blue robe, she hunched on the foot of Ruth's bed, one bunny slipper stepping on the toe of the other.

Peter, in his undershirt and dress trousers, turned at the bathroom door. "Ladies and gentlemen—" He began to pantomime, clowning for Bunny.

Ruth turned to watch the little girl's face ripple and twinkle as it always did before the giggle came out. Bunny's dark hair was smoothed back into two fat braids. Ruth's heart felt as if something squeezed it, quickly, and as quickly let it go.

When Peter bowed to make-believe applause, Bunny let go of her ankles to clap, lost her balance, and toppled over, giggling.

"You see!" said Peter, poking the blue bundle on the bed in a ticklish spot. "I'm going to mow them down!"

"Peter," Ruth said, "do you know what you're going to say to those people at the convention?"

“Oh, sure, I know what I’m going to say, in a way. I don’t know exactly how I’m going to put it, if that’s what you mean.”

“Oh, Peter—” She didn’t see how anyone could do such a thing as make a speech, stand before so large a group as would be at this convention.

“Don’t get me wrong,” Peter said. “I’m terrified.” His eyes said, Be with me, Ruthie. She knew her own tense partisanship was necessary to him. She knew the honor, the ordeal, and the triumph that was coming would be as much hers as his.

Ah, yes, it was The Night!

“What time is it, honey?”

“Quarter after six.” Their eyes met briefly: hers with a flicker of worry, and his with quick, dark reassurance.

He picked up his dress shirt. “Which one of you two dames wants to button me up?” he asked.

“Me!” squealed Bunny. So Peter sat on the hard rim of the footboard. “Daddy, why does your shirt pretend it buttons in the front?”

“Civilization. Tradition in the front, business in the back. How are you doing?”

“Okay,” said Bunny with a puff of effort. She never questioned Peter’s polysyllables.

“Peter,” Ruth said, “I hope you know what I think of your sister Betty.”

“I couldn’t print it.”

Ruth felt again the shock of Betty’s high and somewhat affected voice on the phone that afternoon. She had said, “I’m *terribly* sorry. But this is so important. I’m *sure* you can get somebody.” Ruth had mumbled something, hung up, and turned her anguished face to Peter. And he had hushed her and, at once, fixed everything, of course. But Ruth’s anger still rankled—part anger, part fear. That silly little chit, Betty Jones!

“I don’t see how she could welsh like that on her promise to us,” she muttered aloud. “Do you?”

“Hold still, Daddy,” Bunny begged.

“Excuse it, pet. Look, Ruthie. Sis takes herself awfully hard as the career girl. Someday—” Their eyes met, and the gleam in Peter’s was satisfactory. “Besides,” he went on, “I don’t suppose she thinks this convention amounts to much. Corn-fed gathering of country editors.”

“There you are!” said Ruth indignantly. “There *you* sit, seeing her point of view. But can she see ours? Night of the banquet, and your speech, and it was all arranged weeks ago! What if we couldn’t have got anybody?”

“Silly to be bitter. And don’t fret, Cinderella, you shall go to the ball,” Peter said.

RUTH blinked. He was right—it was silly to be bitter. She kicked off her mules and bent to reach for her evening shoes, feeling the soft brush of her hair on her bare shoulders. “Oh, dem golden slippers,” Peter sang softly, and Ruth saw Bunny’s solemn eyes peek around his shoulder. For the audience, she arched her pretty feet and put them slowly, ceremoniously, into the golden slippers.

Bunny said, in a practical voice, “Is my sitter coming pretty soon?”

Peter pinched the toes in the furry slippers. “Pretty soon. And you’re going to go to sleep in your room with two beds, one for each pigtail. And what are you going to do when you wake up tomorrow morning?”

“Telephone,” said Bunny.

“And say?”

“Room service.”

“And then?”

“This is Miss Bunny O. Jones.”

“In room—”

“Room eight nineteen. I want my breakfast, please. My daddy, Mr. Peter O. Jones, ordered it last night.”

“And when the man knocks on the door?”

“I’ll unlock the door and run quick back to my bed.”

“That’s right. The key’s in your door. And then they’ll bring in a wagon.”

“I don’t believe it,” said Bunny, but she was smiling.

“Oh, you don’t. Well, you’ll see!”

“Peter,” Ruth said suddenly, “do you believe in the elevator man? Do you believe in his niece? Is she coming?”

“Certainly,” Peter said. He had begun the struggle with his collar. “Why would he say so?”

“I don’t know.” For Ruth, the room was rocking. The bright box it was had become dreamlike. And the city over which it hung was fabulous.

“He said she’d be glad to. First I spoke to one of the maids, that awfully nice-looking woman, the one who was so friendly. But she had a date. Eddie overheard and he offered. Imagine, hon. He’s been running the same elevator for fourteen years. You know which one he is, don’t you?”

“I guess—”

“Lives up in the Bronx. Speaks fondly of his wife. Must be a nice woman. This girl—they seem to have taken her in, out of the goodness of their hearts, since his brother died.” Peter slowly shook his head. “Fourteen years, up and down. Wonder what he gets a week. His niece comes from the Middle West, has experience, he says. I suppose a little extra means something in a setup like that.”

Ruth sighed. Her momentary feeling that it was all a myth was blown away. The little man who ran the elevator was real, of course—a human being, with a life, a wife, a budget. With brothers and sisters, like everybody else, and a niece to oblige. It was just like home, after all. You needed somebody. You asked around. People were people, and they passed the word and obliged one another, and that was the way it was all over the world. She smiled and reached out her hand.

“Oh, boy!” said her husband. “Comes the twelve-dollar smell!”

“Twelve dollars and fifty cents, don’t forget.” Ruth took the tiny stopper out of her perfume bottle, touched her shoulders with the precious stuff.

Peter bent over and sniffed. He said in her ear, “Would a couple of symmetrical toothmarks look good?”

She saw herself, laughing, in the glass, and Peter’s dark keen face against her hair.

“Let me smell,” Bunny demanded.

So Ruth crossed the room, turned the plump little paw, touched the back of it with the perfume.

“Dee-licious!” said Bunny, sniffing as her daddy had done.

Ruth looked down at the white part in the dark hair. All of a sudden she saw their two connecting rooms, the two bright boxes on the inner rim of this eighth floor, suspended above the boiling city. And the rising noise surrounded them like smoke, and her heart was squeezed again. And she thought, We couldn’t have left her two thousand miles away—but we shouldn’t have brought her—but we couldn’t have left her.

THE HOTEL NELSON was neither large nor small, neither cheap nor costly. In every way it took the middle road. Even the elevators, although they ran smoothly, did so with a modest speed.

Eddie Munro stopped for a light at the eighth floor. A young man got on. They sank downward in silence.

Out of the corners of their eyes, they typed each other. Eddie saw the easy grace of a tall body, the arrogant carriage of the high head, the sharp cut of the good-looking nose, the gray eyes, long-lashed and almost beautiful in that hard-boned young face, but very cool and asking for nothing.

His name was Jed Towers. It was his last night in New York. He had a dinner date.

Jed Towers saw just a little man, with his shoulders pulled back from his narrow chest. With a gray face. With pale hair that never had any color to lose, lying long and lank over the bald part. With pale eyes that blinked often.

The car stopped smoothly at the main floor. Jed put his key on the desk without interrupting the long, fluid strides taking him to the outside, to the city, to the evening.

Eddie nervously glanced around the quiet lobby. He said to the starter, "Gotta make a phone call. Will you watch it?" . . .

"Yeah, Eddie?" said his wife.

"She leave?"

"She went, yeah, sure."

"How long ago?"

"In plenty of time," his wife said. Everything she said carried the overtone, Don't worry, Eddie.

"Listen, Marie, I think maybe I should stay around after I'm off. Folks might be late. Some kind of big shindig, the man said. Okay?"

"Sure."

"I think I oughta stay and bring her home, don't you?"

"Good idea, Eddie."

"You do think the whole idea's a good idea, Marie?"

"Sure it is, Eddie."

“Well—uh—” He didn’t want to let go of the wire, leading to Marie and her voice saying, “Sure.”

“Say, Eddie, I think maybe I’ll go to the show. That picture we didn’t think we’d better take *her* to. You know?”

“Oh, yeah. Go ahead.”

“I’ll be home long before you and Nell, probably.”

“Sure. Sure.”

“It’ll be okay,” she told him. (Don’t worry, Eddie.)

He went back to the elevator. His eyes were directed toward the revolving door, across the depth of the lobby. He threw back his shoulders, trying to stand erect, to look confident.

IN room 817, Ruth slipped the rose-colored taffeta frivolity off its hanger and expertly lowered it past her shining hair. Peter’s strong fingers zipped the back of the gown. Ruth made a curtsy to the audience.

“She looks like a princess,” Peter said judiciously, “don’t you think?”

“Zactly,” said the audience solemnly.

Ruth kissed the back of the audience’s neck. “And now!” she cried.

“Ah *ha!*” Peter made fending, clear-the-decks motions with both hands. He took up his ridiculous garment. Ruth skipped to hold it for him. Peter wiggled into it.

“You said it was *tails!*” said the audience in high, sweet scorn.

“You don’t think so?” said Peter. He put both hands under the back of the coat and marched up and down with a Groucho Marx kind of crouch, flapping his tails.

The audience was convulsed. It rolled over in a helpless, giggling heap. Bunny wasn’t a pretty little girl, Ruth thought, but how beautiful she was when she laughed. How irresistible!

The long, sweet, mock-solemn ceremony of dressing for The Night crescendoed in hilarity.

Somebody knocked gently on the door.

Something squeezed Ruth’s heart, quickly, and as quickly let it go, so that it staggered.

“Mr. Jones, here we are, sir.” Eddie’s bright, blinking eyes and the thrust of his neck made him look like a mouse at the door.

“Oh, yes, Eddie. Right on time.”

“This here’s my niece, Nell Munro. Nell?” Eddie came in, too.

“How do you do, Nell?” Peter said.

Ruth moved toward them, the gracious young matron. All the gaiety had gone out of the room. “Good evening, Nell,” she said. “It was nice of you to come on such short notice. Had you very far?”

“Don’t take long on the subway,” Eddie said. His Adam’s apple jumped. “She came right straight down.” He seemed proud of this.

THE girl, Nell, said nothing. She looked to be nineteen or twenty. She stood demurely, with her ankles tight together. Her shoes were shabby black pumps with medium heels. Her head was bent, her lashes lowered. Her hair, cut short, was blonde and nicely waved. She wore a navy-blue coat, conservatively cut. Her hands were folded on a black handbag, and Ruth was pleased to see that her nails were bare. Then she hooted at herself, for, after all, her own nails were a glossy rose, the shade of her frock. Still—

“Won’t you take off your coat, Nell?”

Eddie said, “Take off your coat, Nell. Go ahead.”

The girl wore a neat, dark silk dress. She held the coat on her arm, as if she didn’t know what to do with it.

“Just put it here, won’t you?” Ruth purred. “I supposed you’ve sat with children before, Nell?”

“She did, back in Indiana,” said Eddie. “Not around here so much. She only came East about six months ago. My brother’s girl.”

“And do you like it here, Nell?”

“She likes it fine,” said Eddie.

Is the girl mute? Ruth wondered. Eddie’s interposing chatter was nervous, as if it covered something lumpish and obstinate in his niece.

Eddie said, “What I wanted to say, I’ll be here in the hotel. So if you folks are going to be late, you don’t need to worry. What I mean, I can take Nell home.”

Peter looked up, said, “That’s mighty nice of you.” Ruth heard his surprised pleasure. The job of taking the sitter home is one of the meanest chores that

falls to the lot of the married male.

Ruth said, pushing brightly at the sluggishness of things, “Nell, this is Bunny, and, Bunny, this is Nell.”

“Hello,” said Bunny.

“Hello,” the girl said. Her voice was low and colorless, but at least it worked. She had spoken at last.

“My wife, see,” Eddie said, “took a notion to go to the show, so I might’s well wait around.” Swallowing made a commotion in his skinny neck. “We was thinking it might be a real nice idea for Nell. There’s a lot of guests bring their children.”

He showed no sign of going back to his elevator. An anxious little man. Terribly concerned to do the right thing. The conscientious kind.

“Suppose we show Nell your room, Bun.” Ruth led them. “I thought you could sit in here, Nell, in our room, where you can be more comfortable.”

Bunny had marched ahead of them into 819. Now she put one leg possessively on the edge of one of the beds.

“Perhaps she ought to turn in quite soon now,” Ruth said gently. “Perhaps you’d read her a story? If you don’t mind.”

“No, ma’am,” Nell said passively.

It *was* like pushing, pushing something heavy. Ruth said, with a bright smile, “Suppose you see if Nell would like some candy.” Bunny got the box, offered it, as Ruth had taught her, with a gracious little bend of her small body. Nell said, “Thanks a lot.” And snatched. Ruth felt her heart lighten. Surely that was nice of her. No grown person could care that much for candy. That greedy quickness must have been exaggerated for the child’s sake.

“Bunny’s bathroom is over there, of course.” Feeling easier, Ruth turned off the lights, leaving on only the lamp between the beds. “And this door—” she waved at the exit from 819 to the corridor—“is locked, of course. Now, Bunny’s to have one more piece of candy and then she’s to brush her teeth and have her story.” She touched the little girl’s munching cheek.

Eddie’s high voice said clearly, “Well—uh—probably I’ll look in on Nell once in a while, if that’s all right with you folks.”

“Surely.” Peter picked up his wallet. “Well, thanks very much.”

“No, sir.” Eddie backed away from the dollar bill. “No, I’m glad to do it, sir. It’s such a good idea for Nell. Fifty cents an hour. That’s the arrangement. Nell’s mighty glad to have a chance to earn a little something. So—” he looked

rather defiantly past Peter—"you folks go on out and have a good evening. Uh—good night. Have a good time now, Mr. and Mrs. Jones." His hand hovered in a kind of admonishing gesture. It fell. At last he was gone.

"Okay, Ruth?" Peter said impatiently.

"In a minute. Nell?" Summoned, the girl moved. "Peter, do you mind looking up the number, where we are going to be? We'll just leave it by the phone in here, Nell. You must remember to ask for Peter O. Jones. Don't forget the O. It takes so long to comb out the Joneses otherwise." She laughed.

Nell said, without humor, "Yes, ma'am."

RUTH turned off the lights in 817, leaving lighted only the standing lamp over the big chair and the little lamp between the beds. "And if you'd like something to read, there are all these magazines. And please help yourself to the candy. And if you get drowsy, you must lie down in here. And—" she lowered her voice discreetly—"perhaps you had better use this bathroom. Now, is there anything I've forgotten?"

She stood in all her finery, her brow creased just a little, feeling unsatisfied. The girl had said so little. Yet, what could she say? Something, thought Ruth impatiently, some small thing volunteered—*anything* to show she's taking hold. "Can you think of anything else?" she prodded.

The girl's head was not bent any more. She had high cheekbones, and her eyes were a trifle aslant. The eyes were blue. There was too much blue in them, as if the seeing center were too small, the band of color wider than it needed to be. Her chin was small and pointed, and her mouth was tiny. She wasn't bad-looking, Ruth thought with surprise. In fact, she might have been stunning, in an odd, provocative way. Even her figure was good under that ill-fitting dress, now that she was standing more erect.

"I guess you've thought of everything," Nell said. The tiny mouth seemed to let itself go into a reluctant, a grudging smile.

Ruth watched her. For just a flash she wondered if, in that perfectly flat sentence, there had been some mischief lying low.

But Peter moved, full of energy. "There's the number, Nell, on this paper." He tapped the slip on the phone table. He started briskly for the closet.

Bunny stood in the doorway between the connecting rooms.

"Pop into bed, baby. And Nell will read," Ruth said. Standing in the shadows, she watched them obey: Bunny peeled off her robe, climbed into bed,

and pulled up the covers; the girl seated herself on the edge of the bed, where the light haloed her hair.

Suddenly Bunny took charge. “Read me about Jenny and the twins.” She pitched her book at the girl.

“Okay,” Nell said meekly.

Ruth turned away. She bustled, putting things into her evening bag. Her heart was beating a little fast.

PETER stood silently, with his overcoat on, her velvet wrap over his arm. She looked up at him, wordlessly asked, Is it all right? Wordlessly, he answered, Sure. What can happen? The wrap was soft and cool on her bare arms.

“Eddie’s got his eye on them,” Peter whispered. And she saw, at once, that this was true. Eddie was responsible. Eddie had worked here fourteen years. Eddie was conscientious to a fault. It was Eddie they were hiring, really. He’d have his anxious eye on them.

The girl was reading. Her voice was low and monotonous. One word followed another, without phrasing. She read like a child.

“All cozy?” said Ruth lightly. “Good night, Bunny.” Her light kiss skidded on the warm little brow.

Peter said, “Don’t forget about your breakfast. So long, honey bun.”

The girl watched them go. As they crossed room 817, Ruth heard her voice begin again, ploddingly.

Not all of Ruth went through the door to the corridor. Part remained and tasted the flat, dim place from which she had gone. After all the lights and the love and the laughter, how was it for Bunny? Hadn’t all the fun departed too abruptly? A part of Ruth lay, in advance of time, in the strange dark. Heard the strange city snarling below. Knew only a stranger’s hired meekness was near when something in the night should cry. She thought, I cannot go.

Peter put his finger on her shoulder. Her thoughts made her tremble. She knew what Peter wanted. And he was right. Of course he was right. A woman, wife and mother, always both, is sometimes rightfully more one than the other. And the balance must be just and even. Tonight, Peter’s partner, friend, lover, and loyal support (and his date for the evening, too)—tonight, Ruth was going to the ball.

So, by her will, she pulled herself together. (Bunny was seven. Bunny would sleep.) She drew the tardy part of herself toward her body until she was

all there, standing by the elevators, dressed for the party. She looked up at Peter and showed him she was whole.

It was The Night.

JED TOWERS called for his date at her family's apartment on East Thirty-Sixth Street. Her name was Lyn Lesley, and she was more than just a date. She had achieved a certain ascendancy on Jed's list. In fact, she was right on top. Lyn was small, dark, with a cute nose and a way of looking out of the corners of her eyes that was not sly or flirtatious but simply merry.

He'd known her a year or more, but not until these two weeks of free time between jobs had he seen her so constantly. This had happened easily. It was very smooth and easy to slide from "See you tomorrow?" to "What shall we do tomorrow?" But tomorrow Jed was off to the Coast, where he'd be pinned down a while in a new job. Tonight, their last night, might be decisive.

Maybe it wasn't their last night together—but their last night apart. Jed didn't know. He wasn't stalling. He just didn't know.

They were not in evening clothes. Lyn wore a fuzzy blue coat with big pockets and big buttons, and a little blue cap on the back of her head. They decided to walk. They didn't know where they were going. They drifted toward the deepest glow in the sky. They might go to a show.

On Thirty-Ninth Street, a block west of Fifth, a beggar accosted them, whining to the girl.

She stood still, impelled to compassion, her face turned up confidently.

Jed's fingers bit her arm. "Sorry." He dragged her along. "Just a racket," he said in her ear. The man's muttering faded in their wake.

She was dragging her feet. "How do you know?" she asked.

"Know what?" He was surprised. "Oh, for Lord's sake, Lyn, grow up! That old beetle's probably got more in the bank than we'll ever see."

"You can't know that," she said stubbornly.

He stopped walking, astonished. Vaguely, he realized that his brusque decision back there may have broken something in her mood, some enchantment. He said, "Of course I can't know it, but the chances are I'm right. Skip it, shall we?" She walked along only slightly more willingly. "But you'd have fallen for it, eh? Softie!"

"On the chance he really needed help," she said in a low voice, "I'd have risked a quarter."

“Don’t be like that.” Jed laughed at her. “Sentimental Sue!” He gently pulled her toward a restaurant. “This all right?” Jed had been there before. The food was good. He wasn’t guessing. He was sorry the mood had been broken. It was his instinct to change the setting, and use the difference and food and drink to bring back whatever had been between them.

They went into the restaurant, were led to a table, and ordered dinner.

Lyn kept her eyes down. When their appetizers came, she said, “I’m not sentimental, Jed. It isn’t that.”

“No?” He wished she’d skip it. He himself was finished with that trivial moment. “Drink your tomato juice, honey.” He smiled at her. When Jed smiled in affectionate attention, it pulled on the heart of the beholder. Jed did not know that; but he knew, of course, that what he offered was not often rejected.

But Lyn said wanly, “I can’t see how it would have hurt. Two bits. Or even a dime.”

“For Lord’s sake, Lyn, let’s not fight about it.”

“No.” She pushed her glass to and fro on the cloth, and she smiled. “But you do expect the worst of people, don’t you, Jed? I’ve—noticed.”

“Certainly.” He grinned. “You darn’ well better, so far as I can see.” He offered her his certainty with careless cheer.

She took a sip of the juice, set down the glass, and looked across the room. “I don’t think I care for cheap cynicism,” she said.

“Cheap?” he exploded. Women were the limit! What a thing to come out with, just like that! He realized he must have hurt her. But he also knew he hadn’t meant to. “For Lord’s sake!” he said. “That’s about the most expensive piece of education I ever got myself. I’d hate to tell you what I had to pay for it.” He was still genuinely astonished.

“You don’t believe—” she began, and her lips were trembling.

“Don’t believe!” he scoffed. “Listen, what I believe or what you believe makes no particular difference to the way things are. It just happens I don’t like to be fooled, and I’ve got to the point where I don’t even enjoy fooling myself.” She flicked her lashes. “This,” he said soberly, “is a pretty lousy world.”

“Is it?” Lyn said.

He was annoyed. “If you haven’t noticed that, you’re unintelligent.”

“And what do you do about it?”

“Mind your own business. Take care of yourself, because you can be darn’ sure nobody else will. Lyn, for the love of Mike, let it go, will you? Anybody

who thinks he can save the world isn't weaned yet.”

“If everybody figured the way you do—” she began.

“You like the sunshine kids?” he challenged. “The dreamy boys? The old stars in the eyes?”

“Stop it!”

“**O**KAY,” he said. “So I’m not going to water myself down and play pat-a-cake with you.” He checked his anger. He offered, again, his smile.

“I don’t want you to,” she said. “I’m interested in what you think about things.”

“But you don’t think much of my way of thinking?”

She turned her head.

“Well—” He shrugged. “I’m sorry, honey, but one thing that smells in this lousy world is the lip service to sweetness and light.” At least I’m honest, his eyes were saying. I’m telling you. “Look, I didn’t expect an inquiry into my philosophy of life. I thought this was a date—you know, for fun.”

Her lips parted.

“Like to go to a show?” he said lightly.

She said, “In such a lousy world, what do you expect?”

“Oh, the love of a good woman,” he answered lightly. He saw her face whiten. He’d hurt her again, when all he wanted was to get lightly off the subject. “Aw, Lyn, please. What are we yapping about?”

“Coffee now?” inquired the waiter.

“Coffee, honey?” Jed put his hand on hers.

He thought if he could kiss her, hard, right now, it would be a fine thing.

BUNNY listened politely to the story. When Mommy read, the story seemed more interesting. But she sat quietly against her pillow, her stuffed dog under her arm, until the voice stopped. Then Nell looked at her. “I better go to sleep now,” Bunny said, “I guess.”

“Okay.” The mattress moved, the spring changed shape, as Nell stood up.

“I can turn off my light,” Bunny said kindly.

“Okay then,” Nell said. She put the book on the other bed and walked away. She picked up the candy box, looked once over her shoulder, and went through the door.

Bunny snapped off the light, watched the pattern of shadows establish itself. She wondered if the window was open. Nell hadn’t looked to see. The room was stuffy and hot. Bunny wasn’t quite sure she knew how to work the Venetian blind. She lay still quite a long time, but it didn’t feel right to go to sleep not knowing whether the window was open. She sneaked out of bed and felt the bristles of the carpet. She fumbled with the thin ropes, and after a while there was a soft rattle and the slats changed. The window *was* open. It was all right. Bunny climbed back under the blankets. The air smelled dusty just the same, and the pillow didn’t smell like her pillow at home. Bunny pushed her nose into it and lay still.

Nell set the door between the rooms at an angle that almost closed it. Then she stood absolutely still, tipping her head as if to listen.

Nell put the candy box on a bed and walked with a silent, gliding step to the windows and raised the blind. The court was too narrow to see very far, up or down. Across the court there was only one lighted window. The blind on that window was up a third of the way, and she could see the middle section of a woman, seated at a desk. A black-and-white belt marked a thick waist on a black dress. There was nothing else to see. Not many people at the Hotel Nelson spent their evenings in.

Nell pivoted, stood still. She did not stand long. Although her feet remained in the same flower of the carpet pattern, they began to dance. The heels lifted and fell fractions of an inch as her weight shifted. Her hips rolled slightly. Her fingers were the most active part of her body in this dance. They made noiseless snaps and quick, restless writhings of their own. Her chin was high, and her head, swaying with the tiny movements of her body, wove the pattern of a wreath in the silent air. Meanwhile, Nell’s eyes, wide open, darted as she danced.

In a little while, the feet danced off the one flower. Nell swooped over Peter’s suitcase. Her hand impiously scooped up its contents. Handkerchiefs and ties flew like sand from a beach castle. There were some letters and a Manila folder on the bottom. The girl snatched them, and all the paper slid in a limp curve. She yanked the letters from the clip. They didn’t interest her for long. All the paper dropped from her hands, as if it were merely paper, with no other meaning. With one finger, she flipped the lid of the suitcase, and it fell.

She took three long steps and pivoted with one leg outstretched, like a dancer’s. She sat, with an effect of landing there by sheer accident, on the bench in front of the dressing table. She rummaged through Ruth’s box of jewelry.

There were three bracelets, and Nell clasped them all on her left arm. There were two brooches, and she pinned one above the other. There were a string of beads, and Ruth's three-strand pearls, and a silver locket on a silver chain. Nell fastened them around her neck. She put on a pair of tiny turquoise-and-silver earrings. She solemnly looked at herself in the shadowy glass. Slowly, she began to take everything off again. When the table top was scattered with most of the things, Nell lost interest in them. She still wore the earrings.

She turned, very slowly, and kicked off her black pumps. Ruth's aquamarine mules with the marabou cuffs were standing neatly under the dressing table. Nell put her feet into them. She rose and walked around the room, watching her feet. Then she seemed to forget and moved about as easily as if the mules had long been her own.

She ate three pieces of candy, slowly. Then she sat down on the bench again and picked up Ruth's perfume. She tipped the bottle on her forefinger and dabbed the forefinger behind her ears. She held the forefinger under her nostrils and inhaled dreamily. The little bottle dropped out of her left hand, lay on its side. The liquid began to seep out among the jewelry. (The twelve dollars that had been Peter's, the fifty cents that had been Bunny's, last Mother's Day.)

NELL noticed it finally. Her face did not change. She picked up Ruth's hairbrush, dipped it in the spilled perfume, and brushed her tawny hair back from her ears. Now her face took on another look. Now the shape of it—the sharp taper to the chin, the subtle slant of the eyes—became older, sleeker, reptilian. She drew the hairbrush once around her throat.

She rose and walked between the beds, turned, and let herself fall on the bed to the left of the telephone.

Then she sat up, propped her back with pillows, and opened the fat phone book. She lifted her left hand and dropped it on the fine print. Where her left forefinger fell, she gouged a nick in the paper with her nail. She picked up the phone, asked sweetly for the number.

"Yes?" A man's voice came out of the city somewhere, hooked and caught at the end of the wire.

"Guess who," Nell said in a soft, high soprano.

"Margaret, where are—"

"Oh, no! Not Margaret!"

"Who is this?" said the voice irritably. "I'm not in the mood—"

"By the way, who is Margaret?"

“Margaret is my wife,” said the voice stiffly. “What’s the idea?”

“Ha!”

“Who is this?”

“Virginia,” crooned Nell. “Don’t you remember me?”

“I think you have the wrong number,” the voice said, sounding very old and tired, and the man hung up.

Nell turned a few pages and gave another number.

“Hello?” A woman this time.

“Hello. Oh, hello. Is Mr. Bennet there?”

“No, he’s not. I’m sorry.” Brightly, she added, “This is *Mrs.* Bennet.”

“Oh,” Nell said.

“Can I take a message?” the woman said, somewhat less cordially.

“Oh, dear,” simpered Nell. “You see, this is Mr. Bennet’s secretary—”

“Mr. Bennet has no secretary that I know of.”

“Oh,” said Nell. “Oh, dear me! Are you sure?”

“Who is this?” The voice began to sound as if the face were red. “Will you give me your name, please?”

“Why, no,” said Nell flatly, and then she giggled.

The phone slammed shut at the other end. On Nell’s face danced a look of delighted malice. She stretched. She called the operator again. “Long distance.”

At the switchboard, Rochelle Parker dealt with the barrage of calls from 817 for a long time without much comment, even to herself. She got in on part of a wrangle with the long-distance operator, over the existence of an exchange in Chicago.

“Jeepers,” Rochelle said to herself. It crossed her mind that she might say a word to Pat Perrin, the house detective. Probably, she thought, they were drinking up there. People had a few and went on telephone jags sometimes.

She decided it was none of her business. What went over the wire wasn’t disturbing the sacred peace of the Hotel Nelson. If 817 began to do that, somebody else would catch on.

And the telephone bill would be part of the hangover. Oh, boy, she thought, and grinned. Then 817 suddenly quit calling.

The phone book had fallen off the bed. Nell rolled over on her stomach and looked at it lying on the carpet.

ATALL man looks best in tails, they say. Although Peter O. Jones was not terribly tall, Ruth thought that he looked wonderful. She saw no man there who looked more distinguished than he.

She saw herself, too, in the mirrored walls of the passage to the ballroom, and she began to walk as if she were beautiful.

Her hand pressed the black cloth of Peter's left sleeve. Here they stood, at the portal. Black-and-white men, multicolored ladies, flowers, tables and chairs like polka dots over the floor, but the long white bar of the speaker's table dominated.

"Peter O. Jones," her husband said very quietly to somebody. A black back bent. They went toward the speaker's table, and Ruth could see their path opening, and the turning faces marked it as if flowers were being thrown under their feet.

Somebody stepped in their way, held out his hand. "Peter O. Jones?" he said joyfully. Soon they were in a cluster. Peter had the nicest way about him. So many people knew who he was. Ruth struggled to remain balanced, to link names to faces. It was confusing! It was glorious!

JED and Lyn were still sitting in the restaurant. They'd finished dinner but had no ambition to stir themselves, to go to a show. They were caught in the need to settle something. Now Jed shared Lyn's feeling that it was important. Both of them were hanging onto their tempers.

"What I know," he said, "is that the Lord ain't Santa Claus. You have them mixed, honey. Santa Claus, sure, he'll open his pack if you've been a good girl. I don't think it's the same."

"You don't believe in it at all," she said wearily.

"I don't nag myself about it." He shrugged.

"All I'm trying to say, Jed—" she was making an effort to be sweet—"is just this. Call it soft, call it anything you want, but I'd have *liked* it if you had given that old man a coin. What would it matter if he really needed it or not? It would have been good for *us*."

"Aw, that's junk, Lyn. Pure junk."

"It isn't junk."

His dammed-up irritation slipped out. “It’s ridiculous!”

Her eyes flashed. “I’m glad to know you think I’m ridiculous.”

“Maybe it’s a good idea to know these things,” he agreed coldly. “You called me a cheap cynic, remember? It’s no chore of mine, Lyn—” he fought to sound reasonable—“to contribute to the income of a perfect stranger who’s done nothing for me.”

“It’s not a question of your responsibility. It’s your charity.”

“Nuts to that kind of charity.”

“Suppose *you* needed food, or a place to—”

“Then I’d go beg from organized charities that recognize the so-called helpless and, incidentally, check up on it to see if it is real. *I’d* never expect a stranger on the street to shell out for me. Why should he? Why should he believe me?”

“People have to believe.”

“Why?”

“Why anything then?” she blazed. “What are you living for?”

“Of all the idiotic—”

“I think you’d better take me home.”

Their voices came to a dead stop.

“Why?” he said finally, his eyes glittering.

“Because this isn’t fun.”

“Why should I take you home?” he said, smoldering. “Ask some kind stranger.”

She stared. She said, “You’re quite right. I’ll be leaving now.”

“Lyn—”

“Yes?” she said icily, standing at the table.

“If you go—”

“Why shouldn’t I? You’re not entertaining me. Nothing’s for free, you say.”

“If you go—”

“Jed, I don’t want to.” She was yielding.

“Then for Lord’s sake,” he said irritably, assuming it was all over, “sit down and quit talking like a little dope.”

Her sidewise glance was not at all merry. “Good night,” she said quietly.

He settled in the chair, took a cigarette out of the package. “Got your mad money? Here.” He threw a five-dollar bill on the table.

He could feel her impulse to hit him. Then he thought she’d cry.

But she walked away.

He sat staring at the messy table. Of all the lousy dates! He was furious. He advanced to being outraged. His last night in this town. Last date! And she walked out on him.

For what? He oversimplified: because he didn’t give that mangy old deadbeat a quarter! He sat in the restaurant and let anger become a solid lump. After a while he paid the check and put on his coat. Outside, he looked east, then west. Lyn wasn’t in sight.

He began to walk fast, hands dug in his coat pockets. He supposed gloomily it was a good thing he’d found out what kind of stuff passed for thought in her head. So, cross *her* off the list. Yeah. Couldn’t she concede he’d learned a few things, had to have a core of conviction that was, at least, honestly come by? No, she couldn’t. So she walked away.

But Towers would have a date tonight just the same. His little book (with the list) was at the hotel. He swung north. He could put his hand on it. His pride began to get involved. Towers would have a date on his last night!

JED slammed through the revolving door of the hotel. He stood, towering, teetering, smoldering, at the desk, waiting for his key. He went up to the eighth floor, unlocked his door, put on his light, flung off his coat, in one swift surge of entering.

He got a glass from the bathroom and dipped into his bag for a bottle of rye. He could think of nobody on his list who’d do him good. And the preliminaries—he was in no mood for them. Call any girl this time of night, and you could hear her little brain buzzing: Oh, will I look unpopular if I admit I’m not busy? Phony. Everything was pretty phony.

(Not Lyn. She was just too naive to live.)

He looked at the telephone. Call her and apologize? But what was there to apologize for? He’d said only things he believed. They’d only start arguing again. And nobody walked out on Towers twice!

The blind on his window was raised. He realized that he stood as one on a lighted stage. It felt, too, as if someone’s eyes were on him. He moved toward the window.

Towers looked directly across the narrow, deep well into a lighted bank of windows. The room across the court hung in the night. The scene had no depth. It was lighted by a lamp near the windows. The light fell on a female figure. She was dressed in some kind of flowing bluish or greenish thing. She seemed to be sitting in the window, probably on the flat top of the long radiator cover. She seemed to be looking down at a point on her right leg, just above the knee—a garter or something? Her right foot rested on the radiator top. The nicely shaped leg was bent, framed and exhibited.

She was not looking out, not looking at him. But he was absolutely certain she had been. He stood still, watching her, making no further move to pull down his blind. He was absolutely certain she knew he was there.

She slowly moved her right palm down the curve of her calf. Her head turned. She looked across at him. He did not move.

Neither did she. Her hand rested on her ankle. Her garment remained as it was, flowing away from the pretty knee.

There was something so perfectly blunt about the two of them, posed as they were, each in his bright box, suspended, aware. It was as if a shouted Well? crossed the court between them.

Jed felt himself grin. The anger that hummed in his veins changed pitch, went a fraction higher. What was this?

The girl put both hands behind her, bent her body to lean back on the stiff support of both her arms, kept looking out at him. There was something direct about it, and it suited his mood.

Jed was familiar with the floor plan of the hotel. He felt pretty sure he knew what the number of that room must be. He put down his bottle, signaled with eight fingers, then one finger, then seven fingers.

She sat up and turned so that her knee slid down. Her head tilted as if to say, What do you mean?

He raised the bottle in his left hand, pointed at it, at her, at himself.

Her head fell back in laughter.

He put down the bottle, pantomimed himself at a telephone. Her head turned, and she looked behind her where the phone must be.

Jed backed away from the window. He picked up his phone. He said to the girl, “Eight seventeen, please.”

Downstairs, as Rochelle made the connection, a thought no clearer than the word *Huh?* crossed her mind fleetingly. Pursuing it, she remembered. Oh, yes,

817 was the one who put through all the calls a while ago. What now? She heard a man's voice say, "Well?" It was blunt and a trifle mocking.

Jed could see the girl answering her phone. "Hi," he said over the wire.

She made a soft sound, like a chuckle. "Hello."

"Would you like a drink?"

"I might," she said.

"If I walk around, will you open the door?"

"I might."

"It's a long walk," he said.

He had the impression that she would have teased him, but he saw her head turn. Some sound that she could hear but he could not. She said, in a different mood and a different tempo, "Wait a few minutes?"

"This is an impulse," Jed said frankly. "It might not last."

"Five minutes," she said, sounding eager and conspiratorial. "There's somebody at the door." Then she said, "Oh, please—" very softly, and very softly hung up.

HE saw her lower the blind, but she tripped it, so he could still see into the room. When the visitor came in, Jed could identify the hotel livery.

Bellhop, or something. Oh, well. His anger was no longer so solid. It came and went, ebbed and flowed. When it pulsed high, he felt reckless and in a mood to smash. When it ebbed low, he felt a little bit blank and tired. But the beat was urgent. It seemed necessary to do something.

Eddie said, "Little girl went to sleep all right, did she? You sure you're all right, Nell?"

"Umhum," Nell murmured. She'd fallen into the maroon chair. Her lids fell, as if they were heavy over her eyes. Her face was smooth and seemed sleepy.

"What you got on? Nell!" Eddie's voice was thin and careful.

Nell was wearing Ruth's negligee and a string of pearls, with matching earrings, from the jewel box. "I'm not hurting anything," she answered.

Eddie's flitting eye caught the top of the dressing table and the condition it was in. His gold-flecked teeth bit his pale lip. He moved closer to the dressing table. After a while, he said in a low voice, "You shouldn't monkey with other people's stuff, Nell. Really, you shouldn't."

“I’m not hurting anything,” she repeated, and her voice was more truculent than before.

Eddie gnawed his lip. He rescued the perfume bottle and replaced the stopper. Almost furtively, his fingers began to neaten the tumble of jewelry. He began to talk softly, coaxingly.

“It’s kind of an easy job, though, isn’t it, Nell? Just to sit for a few hours in a nice room like this. And just think, you get paid for it. You like it, don’t you?”

“Oh, sure,” she said drowsily.

“Nell, you—better take off that negligee—and the slippers. Honest. I don’t think Mrs. Jones would like that.”

“Umhum,” she murmured. “Sure I will, Uncle Eddie.” She lifted her eyes and smiled at him.

He was enormously encouraged and pleased. “That’s right,” he cried. “Take them off, Nell, and put them where they were, so she won’t know. You want to get more jobs like this. Don’t you see, Nell? So easy. And you can do what you want with the money. You can buy some slippers like those for *yourself*, Nell.”

She turned her cheek to the chair.

EDDIE wished he knew how Marie talked to her. Because Nell was good when Marie was around, real quiet and good.

“Tell you what I’ll do,” he said heartily. “When I get off duty, I’ll bring you up a Coke. Okay?”

“I’m sleepy,” she murmured.

“Well, nap a little bit. That’s a good idea.” He said in a nervous rush, “And you ought to apologize for spilling the perfume—as soon as she comes back.”

Nell’s lids went up slowly until her eyes were very wide. “It was an accident,” she said, an octave higher than before. Her whole body had tightened.

“I know. I know,” Eddie said quickly. “Of course it was an accident. I believe you, Nell. Sure it was. The only thing I mean is, it’s a good idea to say so, real soon, before she notices. Anybody can have an accident like that. She won’t blame you.”

Nell said nothing.

“It’ll be all right,” Eddie said comfortingly. “Now, you just—just take it easy a little bit. I’ll be back.” He looked nervously behind him. “I gotta go. But

you're all right, aren't you?" He swallowed. "Please, Nell," he said in a thin, pleading voice, "don't get into no more mischief with their things."

"I'm not doing anything," she said sullenly. But when he sighed and paused in his progress toward the door, she said quickly, "I'm sorry, Uncle Eddie. You know I get—restless." Her hands moved to the earrings. "I'll take them off."

Immediately, he was pleased. "Sure, I know you get restless. I know you don't mean anything. The thing is, we could work up a kind of little business here. If you'd just—if you like it."

"I do like it," she said. An earring lay in her hand.

The little man's face reddened with his delight. "Good girl! That's swell! And it's a date, now. I'll bring the Cokes." And so he withdrew, pointed little face going last, like a mouse drawing back into its hole.

Nell waited for the door to close. She put the earring back on her ear lobe. She went to the blind, and it rattled up under her hands.

Jed was standing in the middle of his room, his weight even on both feet, looking across at her rather belligerently.

She flung up both hands until her arms were in a dancer's high curve, and she whirled backward from the window. Jed stood still. And the girl stood still, looking over her shoulder.

In a second, Jed put the bottle in his pocket and his finger on the light switch. His light went out.

Nell pawed, disturbing the order Eddie had created, and she snatched at Ruth's spare coral lipstick.

JED's impulse had been flickering, like a candle in a draft. He put the bottle in his pocket for the necessary little drink that one takes while he looks the situation over. He locked his door and put the key in his pocket. He heard the elevator gate closing, so he waited for the faint hum of its departure before he went around the corner to his right and passed the elevators and turned right again.

His mood was cautious when he tapped on the door marked 817.

She was not very tall, not very old, not bad-looking, either. But he couldn't type her. Not a curly blonde. Not a sleek blonde. Her face, tilted to look at him, was a triangle, and the eyes were set harlequin-wise. Jed's nostrils moved. She reeked, the whole room reeked, of perfume. She opened the door wider. He took a step into the room, and the door closed behind him, as if she had fanned him into this perfumed place. He quickly glanced around the room.

“What’s in the bottle?” she asked.

He showed her the label. He said mechanically, “Too nice a night to drink alone.” His cool gray stare examined her.

Her blue eyes examined his. Again he was fascinated by the sense of blunt encounter. This wasn’t a type he knew.

She turned, tripping a little on the aquamarine hem of the negligee. She said, “Won’t you sit down?” He wasn’t sure whether she used a cliché or mocked one.

He set the bottle on the desk and walked past it, going warily to the big maroon chair. “Nice of you to let me come over,” he said perfunctorily. His eye caught certain signs, and he was not pleased. Obviously, this room was shared by a man.

She walked over a bed on her knees and then, with complete dignity, stood between the two beds. It was an odd effect, as if she assumed that of course she must have walked around the bed like a lady. She put her hands on the phone. “We must have some ice,” she said grandly.

“Fine.”

“Ginger ale?”

The name on the envelope caught in the hasp of the suitcase was “Jones.” “Whatever you like, Mrs. Jones,” Jed said.

Her body stiffened. Then her dark lashes swept down. Into the phone she said, “Please send ice and ginger ale to Mrs. Jones in eight seventeen.”

Jed guessed she was being some movie star or other. But they’d cut a line out of the picture. She forgot to ask for room service.

When she hung up, her whole face changed. “I’m not Mrs. Jones,” she told him with sly delight. “Mrs. Jones went out.”

Jed looked mildly interrogative.

“This isn’t my room,” she chuckled.

He thought to himself that this was no worse a dodge than any. “That’s funny. The room over there isn’t *my* room, either. Coincidence?” He leaned back, grinning.

“Mr. and Mrs. Jones went out.”

“The fellow whose room I was in went out, too,” said Jed, still grinning. “He’s got a date.” He felt anger pulse in his neck and jaw. “Lucky guy. Or is he? Or am I?”

She sat down on the bed. “I’m going to South America tomorrow,” she remarked lightly.

“I’m off to Europe,” he lied cheerfully. He didn’t believe a word she’d said so far.

“Mr. Jones is my brother,” said the girl. “I hate him. I hate all my relatives. They won’t let me do anything. They don’t want me to have dates.” She looked both dreamy and sullen.

Jed began to believe some of this. Something was real about it. “Shall we make it a date?” he suggested. “Would you like to go dancing?”

HE saw her quick desire to go, and her recollection of some reason why not—the jump of a flame and its quick quenching. “I haven’t any evening clothes,” she said. “Mrs. Jones had a beautiful evening dress.”

“Your—sister-in-law?”

“And a velvet wrap. You can’t buy that for fifty cents an hour.”

Jed couldn’t make any sense of what she was saying. A rap on the door cut into his puzzling. Boy with the ice. Jed got up and turned his back, annoyed by the notion that he ought not let himself be seen in here.

Still, a hotel, in its official consciousness, usually knew by some nervous sympathy what went on within its walls. It pounced or it did not pounce. But it knew. Probably he wasn’t fooling anybody.

“Sign, miss?” the boy mumbled.

The girl was at a complete loss. She had never seen this in the movies. She didn’t know anything about signing a check.

Jed turned around. “Better let me get it, honey.” He fumbled for money. “What time did your brother go out?” he asked her over his shoulder.

She said nothing.

“Do *you* know?” Jed watched the boy’s worldly young eyes. “Notice a couple in evening clothes. She wore an evening wrap.”

“Mr. and Mrs. Jones?” the boy said smoothly. “Yeah, they left quite a long while ago.”

“How long will they be?” Jed asked the girl.

She shrugged. “Some shindig.”

The boy took his tip and departed, whistling.

The boy, whose name was Jimmy Reese, went down the corridor jauntily. Eddie's elevator picked him up. They eyed each other with a kind of professional contempt.

The guy in 817 belonged in 831. This, Jimmy knew. Who that girl was, Jimmy did not know. So she was Jones sister, for all he knew. He didn't know she had anything to do with Eddie. He looked up at the grillwork. He didn't think 831 was looking for Jones in there, though. Jimmy kept a lot of amusing things to himself.

Eddie didn't know that Jimmy had just been to 817. He'd listened hard at the eighth floor. All seemed quiet.

So they sank down, professionally aloof, exchanging no comments, no gossip, no information.

JED, fixing drinks, thought it over. Mr. and Mrs. Jones *had* gone out. Who was this girl? "You got a name?" he asked gently.

"Nell." She told him so absent-mindedly that he believed it was true.

Nevertheless, he lied, saying, "I'm John." He handed her a glass.

She took a deep swallow, looked up, and laughed at him. "You don't know what to think about me. You're nervous. You're funny."

He let it ride. He went over and fixed the blind. Then he sat next to her on the bed. "Where are you from, Nell?"

"California."

"What part?"

"All of it."

"You can't be. California's too big."

"It's not so big."

"San Francisco?"

"Sometimes."

"Tulsa?" he said.

"There, too," she answered serenely. She was rolling this stuff off the top of her head, not even bothering to make sense.

"Where is Tulsa?" he asked, suddenly suspicious.

"In California."

“Nell,” he said amiably, “you’re a liar.”

“Oh, well,” she said, suddenly soft as a kitten, leaning against his arm. “You’re lying to me, too.”

He took her chin in his left hand, turned her face and searched it, and his pulse jumped, recognizing the cockeyed honesty there. You’re a liar. I’m a liar. Well? There was something perfectly fresh about that look.

She was not a type he knew.

“Well?” he said aloud. He bent his head to kiss her.

The taste of her lips was very close when a ripple went down his spine. He turned Nell’s quietly waiting face with his hand. He looked behind him.

There was a little girl, with dark pigtails, barefooted, in pajamas. She was watching them silently.

A wild animal could have startled him no more.

The shock seemed to lift him into the air. He croaked, “Seems to be an audience.” He had pushed Nell to her own balance. He had pivoted without straightening his knees. He was suddenly sitting on the other bed, reaching for his glass.

Jed, going about his business, brushed by the children in the world without making any contact. They were out of his orbit. Events that had artificially aged him also had knocked awry the continuity of his own memories. It seemed a long, long time ago that he himself had been a child. Acquainted with few young parents, Jed didn’t know any children as friends. He would have mentioned “a bunch of kids” as he would comment on “a flock of chickens” or “a hill of ants.”

This little girl, with her dark eyes in an angular face, wasn’t a pretty little girl.

Nell was in a crouch, leaning on her arms. “Get back in there,” she said viciously.

“I want—”

Nell went across the bed on her knees. “Go on. Get back in there and go to sleep.” Her fingers clawed the little shoulders.

Nobody spoke to Bunny O. Jones in such a fashion. Nobody came crawling at her like a big, angry crab. Bunny was severely startled. She began to cry.

“And shut up!” said Nell.

“Yours?” said Jed coolly.

“She’s not mine,” Nell said angrily. “She belongs to the Joneses.”

“Oh, your niece?”

Nell laughed.

“You’ve got my mommy’s things on,” Bunny wailed.

“Shut—”

“Just a minute.” Jed rose. He was very tall next to Bunny O. Jones. “What’s your name?” He felt awkward, speaking to this mite, and was impelled to speak louder, as one does to someone who may not readily understand the language.

“I’m Bunny O. Jones.” She twisted in Nell’s harsh hands.

“Let go of her, Nell. This isn’t your aunt, is it?”

“What are you asking *her* for? She’s not supposed to be in *here*.”

“Suppose you shut up a minute,” Jed said.

“She’s my sitter,” sobbed Bunny.

“Oh, for Lord’s sake.” Jed put down his glass and settled his jacket around him with angry shoulder movements. Now he knew what he had got into.

Nell’s hands were off the child, but not far off.

“I don’t like you,” sobbed Bunny.

“I don’t like you either, you little snoop.”

One did *not* speak to these strange little creatures in such terms. Jed knew at least that much. He said, “Nobody’s going to hurt you, Bunny. Don’t cry.”

BUT she kept crying. She shrank away from Nell. And Nell contrived to loom closer and closer, so that the child was menaced and pursued and sought to escape, although the chase was neither swift nor far but done in tiny pulses of the foot on the carpet.

“Why don’t you ask her what she wants?” Jed said.

“She wants to snoop,” said Nell.

But it was clear to Jed that the little girl hadn’t snooped for snooping’s sake. He barred Nell’s path with his arm, and her throat came against it. “No,” he insisted. “There was something. What was it, Bunny? What did you want?”

“It’s too hot,” Bunny wept. “I want my radiator off.”

“You might have asked,” Jed said scornfully to Nell. “It’s simple enough.”

He strode through the communicating door, which, for all his caution, he had not noticed to be open. He found a valve. He noticed the exit to the corridor from here, from 819, and the key in the lock.

But the crying child and the girl, again pursuing her in that gliding, stepless way, were in the room with him.

“It’s okay now,” Jed said. “Better get back to bed.”

“*She’ll* get back to bed.”

Bunny ran. She rolled into the bed-clothes. She burrowed as if to hide. She was still crying.

Jed stalked into 817, making directly for the bottle. He had a notion to snatch the glass, drain it, pick up the bottle, cross the room, and fade away. But he was angry. He was furious for having been stupid. He was embarrassed and humiliated. A baby sitter!

He wanted this Nell to know he was angry. He freshened the drink in the glass.

As Nell, on his heels, entered 817 and closed the door firmly behind her, he snarled, “Were you going to pay me my two bits an hour?”

“What?” She spoke as if she hadn’t quite heard. Her face was serene. She drifted toward the mirror. She touched her hair. It was as if, now that the door was closed, it might never have opened.

But, beyond the wall, Bunny was crying bitterly.

“Why didn’t you tell me there was a kid in there?” Jed said furiously.

“I didn’t know she was going to come in here,” Nell said.

JED looked at her. For the first time, something nudged him, something said the word inside his head. The word is easy to say. But it is not so easy to believe.

She walked to where he stood, by the desk, which had become the bar.

He’d had cats press themselves around his shoes and ankles.

Nell fitted herself into the hollow of his shoulder and turned up her blind face. She was back where she’d been when so rudely interrupted. She was waiting to take up where they had left off. Jed stood still, bitter enough to stand still in unresponsive contempt.

The little kid was crying—a tearing, breaking, terrible sound.

Nell's head rested against him. He grabbed her shoulder. "Don't you hear that?" He shook her.

"Hmmm?" She was smiling. She enjoyed being shaken. So he let go of her. "You're mad at me. I don't see why you're mad at me, Johnnie! I haven't done anything."

"Well—" Jed said. He put the stopper in the bottle of liquor and kept it in his hand. He was ready to go.

"Don't go," Nell said rather shrilly. "It's all right now, isn't it? She's gone."

"Gone!" The sound of the child, crying in the next room, was preying on Jed's nerves. It was too irregular even to be a background noise. It pierced. It carried him with it into its anguish. "Can't you hear that?"

"That? She'll go to sleep."

"She will?"

Nell shrugged. She lifted the long silk negligee, so that it didn't drag. "Can't I have another drink?"

Jed didn't know anything about kids. But he didn't need to know anything. Just listening told him. The sound of this crying had to stop.

"Does it bother you?" the girl said rather casually, holding out her glass for a refill.

"It bothers heck out of me," Jed said roughly. "She's scared. Why did you have to jump at her like a wildcat?" He poured whisky into her glass, hardly aware he was doing so.

She looked sullen. "I didn't mean to scare her."

"She startled *me*. But you knew she was in there. You're supposed to be taking care of her, aren't you? Listen—" He was listening all the time. "You better get her to stop that."

"When she gets tired—"

"You want the whole hotel up here?"

"No." She looked alarmed.

"Then *do* something." He stalked toward an ash tray, walking between the beds.

"If I go in there, you'll sneak out," Nell said flatly.

The thought was crossing Jed's mind as she spoke. He put the whisky beside the phone. "I don't have to sneak out, you know," he said cuttingly. "I

can walk out just about any time. I won't stay here and listen to that."

"If she stops crying, will you stay?"

"I doubt it."

Her blue eyes had too much blue.

"This is no business of mine, remember," Jed said, slashing the air with a flat hand. "Nothing to do with me. But why don't you try being a little bit nice?"

"Nice?"

"Don't smirk at *me*. Nice to the kid in there. Are you stupid?"

"This is a date, isn't it?" she said.

But Jed was thinking how that little throat must ache. He growled, "Get her quiet. Get her happy. Go on."

"If I do—"

"If you do," he said rather desperately, "well, maybe we can have a quiet little drink before I go."

The girl turned, put down her glass, went to the door, and opened it quietly. She moved obediently. She vanished in the darkness.

"**I**'M AFRAID," LYN said, "Mr. Towers must have gone out again. His room doesn't answer."

"I can only say I didn't see him, miss." The man behind the desk at the Nelson wasn't terribly interested.

"But you did see him come in a little while ago?"

"Yes, I did. A message?" he suggested politely. She was a cute girl. She seemed distressed.

"Yes, I could leave a note."

He used a pencil to point the way to a writing desk in the lobby.

"Yes, I see. Thank you."

Lyn sat at the desk. She shifted the chair slightly, so she could keep an eye on anyone entering the Hotel Nelson from the street.

She thought Jed must have gone out again, perhaps through the bar. She hoped he wasn't, even now, upsetting her family. This was something she had

to work out for herself. The family tended to side too blindly with her. But I can be wrong, she thought, not far from tears.

No, she couldn't go home quite yet. She'd stay free for a while, as long as a date might have lasted. Because this was important. Anyhow, she didn't think Jed would go to her apartment. It would be capitulation. He—wasn't that type.

Was she the type, then, to hang around? All right, she thought stubbornly, I *won't* be the huffy-female type who, right or wrong, sits and waits for the male to come with his hat in his hand. Oh, nobody was a type. This was Jed and Lyn, and this had to be worked out on the basis that they were unique. And it had to be worked out now.

Wherever he was, he'd come back here. He hadn't checked out. It was all so childish—she could at least say that much.

“Dear Jed,” she wrote. “It was all so childish, and I don't want you to go West thinking that I—”

Am I doing this, she wondered, because I'm vain? How could such bitter words have been spoken between them? Because she'd been riding a romantic crest of expectation and been dragged rudely off it? No, no. That was a huffy thought, a fear to *seem* vain. She *had* known that Jed was fond of her. She'd had reason to expect him to say so, or say more. Never mind that inside-out kind of vanity.

She tore the sheet and wrote again: “Dear Jed, I've been trying to find you, because—” A tear fell and the ink blurred, and she thought, Oh, no, not this! Wouldn't he be amused!

Would he? Lyn sat a long time with her hands quiet on the desk. It was true. She was in love with Jed Towers. It was true she had thought he might ask her to marry him tonight. And it was also true she'd have said “Yes.” And they had quarreled.

But it was *not* true that she thought him a cheap cynic. He was—wary. Yes, he was. And he talked cynically. Part of it was simple reporting, what he saw around him. Part of it was—defensive, or something like that. But it was talk. People don't always know what they are. They talk *at* themselves a lot. She thought, But I can really be tough. If I believe, then I must do, or all *I* said was only talk.

So—Lyn worked it out, painfully—it was also true that she had been the one to walk away and cut off communication, and she didn't (she'd always *said*) believe in that. Very well. It was important.

And what could she put on a piece of paper? If only he'd come. People crossed the lobby, none of them he. Tomorrow, that plane— Maybe he'd call

her. No, the plane went so early. All her thoughts were splintering.

She took up the pen again. “Dear Jed, I can’t let you go—” But you can’t keep him, Lyn. He isn’t that type. It was too late. She ought to go home. What can I say to him? she wondered. What can I do?

GET out of here, Towers. Get out fast. And forget it. Jed paid no heed to his inner voice. Under the verbalized thought ran uneasy pictures. What if the child were to cry a long time? How was he in a position to be the indignant guest, to protest, to do anything about it? Nell, the baby sitter, had already made a complete fool of Towers. He looked into his glass and contemplated this state of affairs.

When Nell came back, carrying the child, he knew she didn’t trust him not to sneak away. He was not entirely displeased. He wanted to watch her quiet the child.

“Nothing to be scared about,” Nell said impatiently. “Now, don’t start to cry any more. Shall I read you another story?”

“No,” Bunny said. She wasn’t quite crying at the moment, but she was shaken by an aftermath of shuddering. It was a reaction not subject to her control.

Nell set her down on her bare feet. Three strangely assorted people looked rather helplessly at one another.

“You know, *you* nearly scared the life out of me,” Jed said to the child in a friendly tone. “And Nell, too. That’s why Nell was cross.”

“She was—too cross,” Bunny said.

“That she was,” he agreed grimly.

“You okay now?” Nell’s voice was edgy. “You’re not going to cry any more?”

Bunny wasn’t sure enough to say. Her eyes turned from Jed to Nell.

“You ought to be asleep, I guess,” Jed said awkwardly. “How old are you?”

“Seven.”

What was it like to be seven? Jed couldn’t remember. The drinks were beginning to blur his concern a little. He began to find these events less shattering, as if his ego went somewhere and lay down.

“I’m too hot,” said Bunny. “I’m all sticky.”

“Come over here then.” Nell went to the windows. “We’ll let some cool air blow on you. Then you’ll be cooler. Then you can go back to sleep.” She nodded wisely. She pulled up the blind and raised the sash.

Jed jumped quickly out of the line of vision through those windows. His back felt for the headboard. He poured another drink. The ice was on the other side of the room. So, no ice. Because he wouldn’t cross in front of the windows.

“See the lady, Bunny?”

Sob and shudder answered.

“I see a man down there. He’s playing cards.”

Jed’s warm drink was nauseating.

“I think,” Nell went on, “there’s a kitten under the table.”

“What—table?”

“Down there. The card table.”

“I don’t see—”

“Maybe it isn’t a kitten. But it looks like a kitten.”

“I’ve got a cat,” Bunny said. “Is the kitten stripe-ed?”

MISS EVA BALLEW wrote on the hotel stationery, in a flowing script: “Seems to be a child crying in this hotel, and I am so distracted. I hope you can understand what I am writing. My dear, this trip has really . . .”

She paused. The child had stopped crying. Thank goodness, thought Miss Ballew. But now the night seemed hollow. She ducked her head enough to glance out the window.

She resumed her writing: “. . . been a treat for all us teachers.”

She put down her pen suddenly and ducked again to look out the window, across the dark well of the court. . . .

“I don’t see any kitten,” Bunny said, “at all.” Her pigtails hung down in front, swinging.

“Well, you’re not looking,” Nell said softly. “But you won’t cry any more, will you?”

Jed glanced at the bowl of ice. He rose. Why did she have to put the blind up? Dare he cross over?

When he turned his head to look over his shoulder, the question left his mind. It seemed to him, definitely, that something was wrong. Bunny was

kneeling on that radiator top. And Nell sat beside her. Nell's hand was flat on the little rump in the muslin pajamas.

Her hand was flat!

And there was some wild throbbing in this room.

Miss Eva Ballew, peering out, cried, "No!" Then, whimpering, "Oh, no! Please!"

The back of Jed's neck prickled. He began to move, silently, with the speed and grace of the young and strong.

"Way down under the table?" Bunny asked.

"Way down," crooned Nell. "Way, way down. Are you going to be quiet, I wonder?"

Bunny screamed.

Jed, with his fingers tight around the little brown ankle, caught her forward pitch with one arm and said, on a rush of breath, "Excuse me. Shouldn't lean out like that, for Lord's sake. I *had* to grab."

Nell's face turned. She looked drowsy and unstartled. "What?" she murmured. "What's the matter?"

JED could feel twitches the whole length of the arm that held Bunny. He squeezed her as gently as he could manage. "I'm sorry, honey, if I scared you. Trouble is, you scared *me* again."

Bunny, having screamed once in her surprise, did not begin to cry. Her big dark eyes seemed to turn inward and keep some wisdom of her own.

Jed said, "You're chilly. You're shivering. Aren't you sleepy now?"

Bunny nodded. She wiggled out of his arm. Her feet hit the carpet. She looked at him gravely. "I can go to bed myself," said Bunny O. Jones.

Miss Ballew straightened her cramped body. Her heart still lurched with that hair-trigger onset of the physical sickness of fear. What was going *on* over there? She'd heard the man say, "Put that blind down!"

So, it was to be secret, and it was male, and it was, perhaps, evil? She focused on her letter. "And even in this wicked city," she wrote, at last, too shakily. . . .

"Put that blind down!"

Nell was still sitting by the window, still looking dreamy. She stretched to obey, and Jed thought there was something snakelike in the smooth uncoiling of her arching back.

He stood at the door of 819. Everything was dim and quiet in there. So he closed the door, gently.

Bunny's rigid neck muscles let go a little. Her head began to dent the pillow. Her hand reached for the little stuffed dog and tucked it under her stiff chin. Her throat moved against the fluffy toy, in a great and difficult swallow.

Jed swung around. You're nuts, Towers, he said to himself angrily. Nobody shoves kids out of eighth-story windows so they won't cry any more! The mere idea made his hair curl. Where had he got it?

He began to fish ice out of the bowl. It crossed the level of his mind where slang was not the language that there was something wild about total immersion in the present tense. What if the restraint of the future didn't exist? What if you never said to yourself, "I'd better not"?

He looked at the girl. She was leaning beside him, watching the ice drop into her glass, with a look of placid pleasure. "You've had more than me," she stated.

"That's right," Jed said. He didn't bother to put ice into his own glass, after all. He wasn't going to have any more liquor, not for a while.

He couldn't get rid of the shimmer on his nerves of narrowly missed horror. Nuts, Towers. Forget it. Nobody's going to have an idea like that one. She just wasn't thinking about what she was doing.

"I guess I wasn't thinking," Nell said, with a delicate shrug.

"Are you a mind reader? That's a couple of times you've said what I had in my mouth, practically."

She didn't answer.

If there *was* such a thing as telepathy, it would work both ways. If she could catch an idea out of his mind, then he might catch one of hers. Couldn't he? *Hadn't he?* Listen, Towers, don't be any nuttier than you have to be! Mind reading! Fold your tent. Fade away from this room.

But he was hunting for comfort. He remembered something. He said, "So you couldn't go dancing with me on account of the kid?" (You did feel responsible?)

"Uncle Eddie's on the elevator. He'd have caught me going out," she said placidly.

“Your uncle? Uncle Eddie runs an elevator? In this hotel?”

“Yes.”

“Maybe he got you the job, eh?”

“Yeah,” she said with weary scorn. “My wonderful job.”

“You don’t like it?”

“What’s there to like?” she said. And he saw the answer come into her head. He saw it! He *read* it! There’s you, though, Nell was thinking.

He closed his eyes and shook his head. None of that. But he considered, and on the whole he thought he felt relieved. The future tense had operated. She had thought ahead of her to Eddie on the elevator.

His mind skipped to his own future. Tomorrow morning on the airplane. By tomorrow night, a continent away. He was looking back, saying to somebody, “And *what* a sitter! What a dame she turned out to be! Nutty as a fruitcake!”

“Well,” he said, “Nell, I’ll tell you. It might have been fun. We’ll never know. Bottoms up, and then good-bye.” He grinned.

Her eyes were too blue. Strange eyes.

“You’re not going,” she said, with no rising inflection. It wasn’t even a protest. She just said this as if it were so.

THE unwritten law that links green peas to roast chicken had not been flouted tonight. Peter pointed with his fork and winked. He wasn’t really eating.

Ruth couldn’t eat, either. They picked and pretended. Nobody was there for nourishment. The food marched by, in sedate order, with no surprises, so that nothing about it should interrupt the real business of the banquet. Be seen, buzz, bow. Preen yourself, flatter your neighbor.

But now they were having coffee—the end of the line. Peter’s conversation slowly lessening.

Ruth’s nerves tightened, just as his did. She let a little ice cream melt in her dry mouth.

Every once in a while, the buzzing and the bending-to-chat got a little unreal for Ruth—whenever Bunny came into her mind. It was distressing that her vision of Bunny in her bed was shaky. Bunny, she told herself, making words, as if the words had power, was sound asleep. As sound asleep as if she were in her bed at home. Oh, Bunny was real! Warm and beloved, Bunny was

there. But those hotel rooms, those formulas, did not wrap her with the safe sense of being home.

“I’d like to call the hotel pretty soon,” she murmured to Peter. “Where are the phones?”

“I saw them as we came through,” Peter said. “Around the corner, past those mirrors.” He dabbled in his ice cream. The toastmaster pushed his chair away from the table.

Not now! No time, now! Ruth would call afterward. After the man had said whatever he was going to say. Later than that, for soon it would be Peter’s turn!

It would be good to call, later, with this tension gone. Oh, yes, it would be much better.

There was no doubt that Bunny was sound asleep, anyway. Ruth must now lift her chin and turn her head and listen sweetly to the Speaker of the Evening. (Oh, what was he going to say! Oh, *Peter!*)

Bunny was seven and surely had fallen sound asleep by this time.

The toastmaster rose. Ruth patted her cold hands, in tune with the crowd. “I am happy,” the man said, “to be here.” Who cares how happy they are? Always so *happy!* Peter had turned slightly in his chair, as if this were fascinating, but no concern of his, of course.

“And I am particularly glad,” the man said. They were always so *glad!*

Ruth smiled faintly and let her fingers play with her water glass. She must display the perfect confidence she felt, that, under her pounding heart, lay so truly sure.

JED fended her off, and it was balm to do so. It was sweet revenge on the whole female race who had loused up his evening. He laughed at her. He had her by the elbows, at arm’s length. “It’s not that automatic, toots,” he said. “I know. There’s a school of thought that says it is. But make a note, why don’t you? There is such a thing as being choosy.”

Her rage made him laugh, and he relaxed against the headboard. “The time, the place, and the girl,” he mocked. “*I’ll* choose them all.”

She looked ready to screech. But then her face closed down, again took on a sleepy look. She leaned heavily on his hands, limply, now, with all her weight.

“So I’ll say good-bye, Nell,” he snapped, watching her suspiciously.

The wild thing about her that, he knew now, had attracted him in the first place, and then made him uneasy, was getting entangled with her will. She

wasn't sleepy. Oh, no! Now he knew that the dreamy look was, on her, a dangerous sign.

He sat up, thrust her away, with stiff forearms. He was a little sorry for having indulged himself in that laughter. He wondered just how he was going to get out of here without a row. He said, "I'm really sorry, but I've got to go. Some other time, Nell."

Her pupils traveled to the right corners of her eyes.

Then, he heard it, too. A discreet tapping on the door of room 817.

Oh, oh! Exit Towers! Jed muttered, "I'll get out the other way, through the kid's room."

"No." She spoke no louder than he. "You won't." The words were clear and stubborn on her small mouth.

The tapping was gently repeated. It would persist. It was patient.

Nell's face lighted in malice. "I'll say you pushed in here. Say you're—after me."

Jed's eyes flickered. She would, too. For the sheer, wild mischief of it! And, if she did, the benefit of the doubt rests with the female.

"You wait," she said. "I know who it is."

Their almost soundless conversation was taking place in an uncanny depth of silence. The city bayed at the feet of the building, but here, high, they spoke without voices in a soundless place. Someone kept tapping on the door, in gentle hope.

"Who?" Jed was rigid in alarm.

"It's Uncle Eddie. I can get rid of him."

"I can get out." Jed gestured. His eyes were somber.

"No." She knew her wild will held him.

"What then?" He ground his teeth and stared at her.

"In there. Be quiet." She intended him to hide in the bathroom.

He rose slowly, letting her go. He could knock her aside. He could get swiftly into the kid's room.

And she could yell.

Jed stalled by picking up the bottle and hiding it in his pocket. Quickly, she put his glass into his hand. She was pushing, guiding.

The tapping faltered. “Nell?” someone said a trifle anxiously.

Nell said, “Who’s there?” Her eyes were watching Jed, and her face rippled. She would just as soon cause trouble.

“It’s Uncle Ed. You all right?”

Nell’s brows spoke to Jed. Twitted him with it. *Well?* they asked. *Am I?*

He growled, voice muted in the bottom of his throat. “Okay. Make it snappy.” He went into the bathroom and pushed the door behind him, not quite tight.

“Gee, I’m sorry, Uncle Eddie. I guess I must have been asleep,” he heard her say.

Towers stood in the bathroom and cursed Towers in his mind. What’d she have—a hex on him? Of all the lousy situations. He looked at his watch. He said to himself, “Let Uncle Eddie get away and I am gone. Brother, will I be gone.”

You picked up dames, sure. On a train. Maybe in a bar. Sometimes a thing like that turned out not bad. If it was sour, you blew. You got out, fast.

How come Towers was hiding behind a door?

He sat on the edge of the tub, to wait, rehearsing in his mind his swift passage out and away. . . .

Lyn turned away from the phones. No answer.

I will smoke another cigarette, one more. I will wait until ten more people come in from the street, ten more. I can write a better letter. I can try.

EDDIE looked at his niece, in the negligee. He said, “I brought the Cokes.” Disappointment made his voice bleak. He went toward the desk and looked down at the tray, the bowl of melting ice, and Nell’s glass. “What’s this?” An inch and a half of rye and ginger ale remained in the glass.

Nell said, “I got thirsty. Let me wash that out.” She took the glass out of his meek hand. “I ordered ginger ale,” she said defiantly to his troubled eyes. “Mrs. Jones said I could.”

“That was nice of her,” Eddie said.

“Want a piece of candy?” Nell said brightly over her shoulder. “She said I could help myself.”

“I don’t believe I care for any,” Eddie said. “Thanks.” His bleak stare went around the room.

Nell pushed in the bathroom door. She went to the washbasin and rinsed the glass.

NOT even in the mirror did her eyes meet Jed's. Not a sign that she even knew he was there. Jed felt his blood rage. It was an abuse of power. A little grin, a hint that they conspired to fool this Eddie, would have eased the thing. But, oh, no! She'd forced him into this ignominy and now she let him stew in it. He ground his teeth.

Eddie said, "Little girl sleeping? I see you closed her door."

Nell left the bathroom, pulling its door behind her. She would have closed that, but Jed threw his strength on the inner knob, and they tugged secretly, silently, and she lost.

"Could you hear if she cried?" Eddie asked.

"The light bothered her," Nell lied calmly.

"Now she's sleeping, though, it won't bother her." Eddie, gentle on the knob, released the catch. "I think Mrs. Jones would rather it was a little bit open, Nell."

"Okay," she said indifferently.

"And it's getting later. It would be better if you took Mrs. Jones' clothes off, Nell." Eddie's Adam's apple betrayed his hurt, although his voice was careful.

"I meant to. I was kinda comfortable."

Eddie brightened. "Sure you meant to, Nell." He fiddled with an opener. "Why don't you do it now, though?"

"All right, Uncle Eddie." She sat docilely, slipped her feet out of the mules, scrambled for her own black pumps, put them on. She took off the earrings and pearls, slowly, put them into the jewel box. Her fingers began to pick up other things, tidying them.

Eddie brightened with his lightening heart. "That's right! Good girl!"

She turned her bent head, smiled at him. Her hands worked at the sash of Ruth's gown. Nell said, sounding modest and shy, "I'll just step into the closet."

Her Uncle Eddie took a long, relieved pull on his Coke bottle.

She came out of the closet in her own rumpled dark dress. It had been a heap on the closet floor for some time. But now Nell made elaborate motions of finicky care as she hung the negligee on a hanger. "There," she said, "is that all right, Uncle Eddie?"

He beamed at her. “That’s fine, Nell. Mightn’t be so very long before they get back, you know.”

“We’d better drink our Cokes,” she said mildly. “It might look better if I was alone in here. Do you think?”

“You’re right,” he said. “It *would* be better if they find everything quiet and you on the job, eh? Well, here you are. You know,” he blurted, “why I want you to take a nice little job like this?”

“I know, Uncle Eddie.” She was all meekness. She showed no signs of impatience.

He took a swig. “It’s because I believe in you, Nell. And Aunt Marie does, too.” His blink was contradicting the courage in his voice. “I think you’d rather be here with us than back in Indiana.”

“Oh, I would,” she murmured.

“If the insurance company would have paid on the house and furniture—but, as it is, there’s nothing left. So you’d be on some kind of charity. I wouldn’t like that for Denny’s girl.”

“No,” she said.

“You know I haven’t got much money,” he went on. “You can see why it’s a good thing if you can—kinda get over this trouble pretty soon.”

“I’m okay,” she said without force.

“You’re *better*. That’s sure. You certainly are a lot better.”

She was looking at him with that blind blue abstraction she sometimes had. “Why can’t we make them pay?”

“I don’t know how we can,” said Eddie uneasily. “You see, they claim, because the fire was *set*—”

“It was an accident.” Her voice went higher.

“It was. It was. That’s what they said in the court, yes. It was an accident.”

Suddenly her face was calm, her glance cold. “So why don’t they pay?”

“Well, the insurance company, they figured— Nell, I think it’s best to kinda forget about that. Might take a lawyer and quite a lot of money. I think the best thing is to forget about that and try and get started again. How’s the Coke?”

“It’s good,” she said meekly.

“You just needed somebody to stand back of you,” he said. “Me and Marie knew that, Nell, at the time. And we do stand back of you. *I* can understand just

why it is you get kinda restless streaks.”

“You’ve been good, Uncle Eddie.” Her lips barely moved.

HE looked very happy. “I can see how it is,” he said eagerly. “After such a terrible experience, a lot of little things seem pretty *little*. That’s the way it is, isn’t it, Nell?” The little man was yearning to understand and be understood.

She nodded.

He said softly, “You want to remember, Nell, your father and mother don’t blame you. You mustn’t ever think that they would. They know you wouldn’t ever have done anything bad, Nell, not to *them*. And if they could talk to you —”

“I don’t want to think about them,” she said in a perfect monotone. “I don’t want to think about them.”

“No, no,” said Eddie quickly. “But I been trying to tell you one thing, Nell. The doctor said it would be good if you’d know, and here we’re so quiet and all—maybe I can say it. Me and your Aunt Marie, we stand back of you. We don’t doubt, for one minute, you set the fire. We don’t doubt, for one minute, you set the fire walking in your sleep that night.”

He watched her face. Her lashes flickered. “That’s what the court said,” she remarked lightly.

“But—but don’t cry,” he whispered—to the tearless blue of her eyes.

“I’m not going to cry, Uncle Eddie.” She turned her empty glass in her fingers. She put it down.

Eddie blinked the tears out of his eyes. That Julia his brother married, something about her he never had liked. But surely she’d never been mean to Nell. There could be no *reason*. She was still shocked, poor Nell. She *couldn’t* cry. She’d cry, someday.

“Tasted pretty good, didn’t it?” he said cheerily. . . .

Jed controlled his rage. He’d got into this jam by getting senselessly angry, and it was about time Towers used the brains he was born with. He settled coldly to wait this out. He could hear their voices, and a part of his brain recorded the words.

But, at the same time, he was reviewing, in part, the way he had come. It had come back to him—the year he was seven. By then, he mused, the boy was

all adjusted to the family. He knew what the rules of conduct were, as his mother and father had taught them.

But he was also stepping out into a world his parents did not know. School, the gang. Warm security at home and one toe in the cold waters of the outer world.

Pretty soon, he remembered, the boy began to pick up the stuff that isn't down in the home rules. The ways and the means, the exchanges of influences, the worming one's way, the self-interest of everybody, and how to use *this* for himself. Through high school and part of college, through the war and the bitter tutoring of the peace. Sharper lessons all the time. Lessons in the possible.

So now, here's Towers. A young man out to "make his fortune," as they used to say in the old stories, when he was seven. Out to make his fortune without a dream in his eye. Wangled himself a darned good job on the Coast. Young man on the way up, and gangway for him! Old enough to begin to think, if only obliquely, that he might take a wife.

So Lyn was on his mind, eh? A dream there? He pushed her image away.

Here was Towers, skipping the whole middle of the country tomorrow, letting it flow under his plane, not planning to stop and see the family. Why? Oh, business, he'd said. They understood. Not wishing to stop and hear the blind love speaking, pretending he was seven?

Well, he thought, people probably settled on a pattern that worked for them, and there they stayed. And if his pattern was shaping up a little differently, no use arguing. He supposed you accepted something sooner or later and put the blinders on and just kept them on and didn't look any more.

But when you're young, and scrambling in the marketplace, you have to watch out. That is, take a hard look at the way the world operates. You didn't want to be pushed around.

Oh, Towers was a wise one, all right, sitting on the bathtub, behind the door. He knew the score.

His jaw was tight. Definitely a detour, this little expedition. Get on your way, Towers!

Still talking, this Uncle Eddie? Still yammering in there?

“So I thought,” Eddie said, “the best idea is for you to start out easy. The thing is, Nell—” he expounded his creed—“you do something for somebody else and you do a good job. So they're glad to pay you for it. Then you're earning. You'll get into the idea. You'll get over being so restless.”

“You told me all this,” she said. Her ankle was swinging.

Eddie saw it and silenced himself.

“Going?” she murmured. Her head fell against the chair. She turned her cheek.

“I’ll take the Coke bottles. I don’t think the Joneses are going to be so long. Tired?”

She didn’t answer.

Eddie rose, and the bottles clinked together as he gathered them. “I’ll be in the building,” he murmured. His eyes checked over the room. Everything was in pretty good order. He took up the glass from which Nell had sipped her Coke.

Absorbed in his own thoughts, his anxieties, his endeavors, his gains and his losses, Eddie went mechanically toward the running water in the bathroom.

EVEN before he met, in the mirror, the little man’s shocked and unbelieving eyes, an appraisal of this new situation flooded through Jed’s thoughts. The jig was up, all right. He rose smoothly. The frightened eyes followed him up. But Jed was smiling. This could be handled.

The mind has an odd ability to play back, like a tape recorder, things heard and yet not quite attended to at the time. Jed knew, immediately, that Eddie could be handled.

Eddie was by no means sure of his little niece, Nell. Eddie had stuck his neck out, getting her this job. Eddie knew she was unreliable, to put it mildly. All that pitch about his belief and understanding, all that stuff was a hope and a prayer, not any conviction. Oh, yes, Eddie had taken an awful chance here, and Eddie was liable.

All Jed needed to do was use Eddie’s self-interest. Very simple. Jed would apologize. He would make it easy for the other fellow. He’d ask silence as a favor to himself. Eddie could escape by magnanimity the consequences of his own folly. Eddie would be glad to say “Good-bye.”

“So long, Nell,” Jed would say quietly. And he’d be out of it.

So Jed rose, smiling. The little man had jerked with a mouse squeak and backed toward the door, keeping a frightened face toward Jed’s tall figure in the tile-lined gloom. Jed, not to alarm him, stood quietly where he was.

But Nell was lithe lightning across Room 817. She had the standing ash tray, the heavy thing, in her wild hands. She swung it up. Jed’s lunge and Jed’s

up-raised arm missed the downswing. The thing cracked on Eddie's skull. The detachable portion of heavy glass clanged and boomed and echoed on the tile. And Jed said something hoarse and furious and snatched the thing out of her hands cruelly, and Nell jabbered some shrill syllables.

All at once, the noise was frightful.

Only Eddie made no noise. He sank down, very quietly.

There was an instant when everything was suspended. Then the phone began to ring in 817, and at the same time Bunny's voice screamed with terror in 819. And the glass part of the ash tray, rolling off a brief balance, rumbled and at last stopped rolling, unbroken.

"Now!" Jed said thickly. He squatted beside the crumpled little body.

Nell turned and walked over to the telephone, which in some freak of time had rung four times already.

"Hello?" Her voice was fuzzy.

Jed touched Eddie's temple and then his throat.

"Oh, yes, Mrs. Jones," Nell said. "I guess I must have been dozing."

There was a pulse under Jed's fingers, and he stopped holding his breath.

"She's fast asleep," Nell said blithely. (And Bunny kept screaming.) "Everything's just fine."

Jed, crouching, found himself listening to that voice. It was pretty cool. Just the faintest undertone of excitement. He could feel the child's cries pierce him, and he shuddered. He looked down at Eddie, feeling a blank dismay.

"She went right to sleep after her story, Mrs. Jones. I hope you are having a nice time."

Phone to ear, Nell pivoted to see what Jed was doing, and one stare was as blank as another. Her hand rose to hover over the mouthpiece.

The kid was frantic in there!

"Please don't feel you need to hurry, Mrs. Jones," purred Nell, "because I don't mind— What?"

Her eyes widened as her voice acted surprise. "Noise? Oh, I guess you can hear the sirens in the street." She clamped her hand on the mouthpiece. She said, through careful fingers, "They're just going by. There isn't any fire near here." She laughed. "You just have a real good time," she advised gaily. She put down the receiver.

"It's a wonder he's not dead," Jed growled. "You little fool!"

“Isn’t he?” said Nell absent-mindedly. She walked into 819.

Jed’s hand, going about the business with no conscious command from his numb brain, felt carefully of Eddie’s head. The dry hair crisped on his fingertips. He left the dismayed welter of his thoughts to pay attention here. Couldn’t tell what the damage was. Gently, he straightened the body, shifting it all the way over the threshold within the bathroom. Then reaching for the thick bath mat, he slid that gently between the tile floor and the head. He wet a towel and gently washed the forehead and the eyes.

Eddie’s breathing seemed all right. Jed thought the pulse was fairly steady. Suddenly, he lifted his own head.

Bunny was not screaming. The empty air pulsed in the sudden absence of that terrible sound.

Jed sat motionless on his heels. A trickle of sweat cut a cold thread of sensation down his neck and blurred in the fabric of his collar.

RUTH stepped out of the phone booth. “Have a real good time.” The phrase rang in her ears. Not the *mot juste* for such a night as this! This Night of Triumph! An hour to live over again, and feel the heart stop, when Peter got up from his chair. And pound proudly, because she soon knew that all these politely listening people were warming to the man who began a little bit nervously and shyly, as if to say, “Gosh, who am I?”

And then, Peter getting interested, himself, in what he was saying. Everybody feeling that. Then the thought transcending, and driving the grammar into vivid, astonishing phrases that rang just right. And finally Peter in the full power of his gift. The heads turning because they could not help it—they must hear this.

He was still excited, and he was reaping his reward now that they were pushing the tables out of the middle of the floor, and music was playing, and people stood in groups, and he in the middle of the largest group of all.

A Victory! But the reaping, the wonderful fun of this, might go on for hours.

Ruth turned her bright nails into her palms. Bunny was fast asleep. The girl had told her so. Everything was fine. The girl had said so.

But Ruth stood, trembling, in the hall of mirrors, and she knew in her bones that everything was *not* fine.

“Don’t be silly!” she gasped to her own image. “Don’t be such a *mother*! Don’t spoil it!”

Peter's head craned toward her out of the group, and she gave him a gay little signal of the hand that meant "All's well."

For it must be so.

But that hadn't sounded like the same girl. Oh, the same voice, but not the same manner. The girl on the phone, just now, was neither dull nor passive. *She wasn't stupid enough!* No, she'd been too decisive. Too—too darned *gay!*

"Don't you be so *silly!*" Ruth told herself once more. "Are you going to be mean and spoil Peter's wonderful Night, being such a hick and such a female? What's *wrong* with you?" She shook herself and walked forward.

"What's wrong? Oh, what's wrong where Bunny is?" her bones kept asking.

Peter was in full flight. Men, standing around him, were smoking with very deliberate and judicious gestures, and nodding, and breaking in to quote themselves. "As I said at lunch the other day . . ." "I was saying to Joe . . ." It seemed as if only last week they'd been thinking the same things Peter thought. They'd been telling somebody, in some fumbling fashion, what Peter had just told them so well. (Ah, sweet praise!)

"Okay, hon?" Peter was tuned in on the wave length of Ruth's bones. Often he'd heard what they were muttering. But now, when she answered smiling, "All quiet. Everything fine, Nell says," Peter didn't hear her bones proclaim, "But I don't believe it."

He squeezed her. "Ruth, this is Mr. Evans, and Mr. Childs, and Mr. Cunningham—"

"How do you do?"

"That husband of yours has a head on his shoulders and a tongue in his head, Mrs. O.—uh—Mrs. Jones. Fine talk. Fine."

"I thought so, too," said Ruth in sweet accord.

"And how old is your little girl, Mrs. Jones?"

"Bunny is seven."

"Ah, I remember Sue—" a woman said sentimentally. "A sweet age. A darling year."

Ruth had no voice for an answer.

ALL of a sudden, Jed Towers' cool purpose to depart was burned up in the flame of his raging need to tell her off. "You wildcat! Dope! What's the

idea of swatting your uncle down like that? What in heck did you think you were doing? What kind of cockeyed dream was in your stupid brain?"

He shook her. Her dress was too short. It was cut to fit a more matronly body. So she looked less sophisticated, but also older and dowdier. Her head went back, as a snake's head poises to strike, and her mouth looked venomous. Her face, with the yellowish glow to the unlined skin, was no age one could guess or imagine.

"Answer me!"

She was angry. "What's the matter with you?" she cried. "You didn't want Uncle Eddie to see you, did you?"

He could see her pupils, pinpoints in the fields of blue.

"You're the one who's a dope!" cried Nell. "You didn't want him to see you? Well? He was walking right in there."

"So you'd just as leave murder the man?"

"He's not going to die," she said scornfully. "I didn't hit him so hard."

"The heck you didn't! You hit him as hard as you darn well could. Just luck that you didn't—"

"Did you want to be seen?" she hissed.

"So you did *me* a favor? Don't do me any more." He flung her to one side of him, holding both her wrists in one hand. It crossed his mind that time was sifting by. It began to look as if no one had sounded an alarm to authority. He yanked her along as he went to peer through the window blinds. The dame across the court was just standing there. He could see her hands on the back of that chair. He swung Nell back into the center of the room.

"I thought you didn't want to be seen in here," Nell said.

He looked at her. "Just a point," he said dryly. "The little man had a perfect right to walk in there if he wanted to." Nothing happened to her face, no change of expression. "Didn't think of that, eh? I suppose," he mocked, "you 'just weren't thinking.'"

"I thought you didn't want him to see you."

"So you shut his eyes. That's logical. That's great!" Jed wanted to slap her, hit her, more than he had ever wanted to hit anyone smaller than he was. He took his hands off her as if she would soil them. "Okay. Where did it get you?"

She didn't seem to follow.

“I was going. Remember? I’m still going. I’m going faster and farther, if that’s possible. And don’t think you can frame me with any lying yarn,” he stormed. “I’ll be gone—” he snapped his fingers—“like smoke! You don’t know who I am, where I came from, or where I’m going to be. And you’ll never see me again in this world, Nelly girl. You might as well have let your Uncle Eddie show me out! Do you get that?”

She said nothing. But she moved to put herself between him and the door.

He laughed. “Listen, you never had a chance to keep me here since I found out you were a baby sitter. Not a chance.”

“Why not?” she said.

“Say I’m allergic,” Jed said shortly, “and skip it. I’ve got nothing against kids.” His hand chopped the air nervously. “That’s got nothing to do with it.” He didn’t like this line. He shifted quickly. “Start thinking about yourself, and think fast, Nell. How *you’re* going to get out of the jam you got yourself into.”

“I’ll get out of it,” she murmured.

HE didn’t hear. He was listening for something else. “It’s awfully quiet in the kid’s room,” he muttered.

“She’s all right,” said Nell carelessly. Her lids seemed to swell at the outer corners of her eyes.

“What did you tell her?”

“I told her there was nothing to be scared of. Somebody just fell down.” Suddenly Nell laughed, showing her teeth.

“How true,” Jed said thoughtfully. Anger churned inside him, but he had an uneasy feeling that he had better not indulge in so simple a response. He stepped around one of the beds and looked in the bathroom. “Eddie’s going to be missed, you know. Naturally, you didn’t think of that.”

“He won’t be missed,” she said indifferently. “He’s off duty.” She sat on the bed and put her ankles together and looked at her feet. Then she went over to the dressing table and found the string of pearls, with the matching earrings, in the jewel box. She put them on and posed in front of the mirror. Turning toward Jed, she smiled up at him. “Take me dancing?” she said coquettishly.

“Dancing!” he shouted.

“Uncle Eddie’s not on the elevator now.” She seemed to think she was explaining something.

He wanted to say, "I'd just as soon take a cobra dancing." But he said, "And who sits with the baby?"

"It's a dumb job," she said.

His lips parted, closed, parted. He sat down, facing her. It seemed important to try reason out against unreason. It seemed necessary to try. "You're in a mess," he said rather patiently. "Don't you know that?"

"What mess?" She was sulky.

"You bop this guy, this Uncle Eddie. Okay. Now what's going to happen? Look ahead a little bit. The Joneses come home from the party. There's a body in the bathroom. What are you going to say?"

"It's only Uncle Eddie," she murmured.

JED put his head in his hands. He meant to make a semi-humorous exaggeration of the gesture, but it fooled him. He was holding his head in earnest. "Listen carefully," he said. "What's *going* to happen? Future tense. Consequences. You ever heard of them?"

"Uncle Eddie isn't going to say it was *me* who hit him."

He had to admit that he himself had reasoned along this line. For a moment he was stopped. "Okay," he resumed patiently. "So Eddie won't tell on you. Then what is the story? What *did* knock him out? Who?"

"I can say you did it," she answered placidly.

"*After I'm gone*, you'll say it!" He was furious.

"Unless we're out dancing."

He stood up. This time he spit it out of his mouth. "I'd just as soon take a cobra dancing."

"You asked me when you first came into this room."

"*Then*," he snapped. "That was before I knew what I was getting into. Now I retract, believe me." He paced. "Why don't you *think*? That's what I can't understand. You swat him down without a brain in your head working. Can't you imagine what's *going* to happen? What's wrong with you, anyhow? How come you act the way you do?" He looked at her coldly. "I think you're insane."

It's easy to say. The words fall off the tongue. This was the first time Jed had ever said it in perfect sincerity.

Her neck lifted, as if it uncoiled. She said a few ugly words. Then she was screeching and clawing at him, and her shrill refrain was “No, I’m not! Take it back!”

He handled her, but it wasn’t easy. He got her in a locking hold, and he shut her mouth with his hand. “Cut it out! You’ll scare the kid. You’ll have cops in here.”

“Take it back!”

“Okay. Okay. I take it back. If that does you any good. So you’re a model of foresight and wisdom. So anything! So cut it out!”

She cut it out. She seemed satisfied. It was necessary to her that the word not be used—the word “insane.” But it was a matter of words. The words “I take it back” were just as potent. And that, thought Jed grimly, is insane.

He felt chilled. He did not want this to be true. She was a crazy kid—a wild kid, in the slang sense. But only in the vernacular. She was mixed up, and she didn’t know how to stop and think. He told himself that was it. But he felt sad and chilly. He didn’t know what to do.

Warily, he let her go. He said vaguely, “Why should we fight? Makes too much noise.” He listened. There was no sound from the child’s room. “Good thing *she* didn’t begin to howl again. I can’t take any more of that.”

“I know.” A flicker of contempt crossed Nell’s face. “I understand about the future,” she muttered.

“I—I talk too much sometimes.” He was trying to be careful. “The thing I need—Finish the bottle with me?” He took it out of his pocket. “Aw, what’s a glass?” He tipped the bottle.

She took it from him with both hands. The notion of drinking out of the bottle seemed to delight her.

He said, “Say, where did the Joneses go?”

“Why?” Her voice was as careless as his.

“I was wondering how late— Was it the theatre? Or a party someplace?” He feigned relaxing.

She still had the bottle in both hands. She walked between the beds and sat near the head of one of them. “I don’t know,” she said vaguely.

“Shindig, eh? That sounds like a party. Somebody’s apartment?”

“Your turn.” She gave him the bottle. Her face was full of mischief. She said, “I understand about the future. Everybody does.”

“I guess so,” Jed said.

She walked between the beds to the table where the phone was and took a slip of paper from it. She began to pleat it in her fingers. “You think I’m stupid?” she asked, looking sidewise.

“Everybody’s stupid, sometimes. Looks kind of stupid of the Joneses not to say where they’d be. What if the kid got sick or something?”

“Oh?” Nell said brightly. “You mean they should have thought ahead? About the future?”

“Did I say something about the future, ever?” He grinned. He was thinking, I got under her skin.

NELL idly tore the paper into bits, let the bits fall on the carpet. Too late, Jed saw them fall. He received, in a telepathic flash, the news. He knew what had been on the paper, why she had torn it, how she had foxed him. The paper would have told him where he could get in touch with the Joneses.

He was chagrined. He kept himself from showing it. He said, and perhaps this was the result of the damped-down anger, “Say, what was this about a fire?”

“Fire?” She seemed willing to talk about fire if that’s what he wanted to talk about.

“I got a little bit of what your Uncle Eddie was saying.”

“Oh, that.”

“Was it your house that burned? Your parents?” She didn’t answer. “Upset you, Nell?”

“That’s what they say,” she said demurely.

“Who?”

“Oh, doctors. Uncle Eddie. Aunt Marie.”

“Some small town, was it?”

“It wasn’t big.” She curled up her legs.

Small, all right, Jed thought to himself, if they let this one loose. Probably Eddie showed up ready and willing and anxious to take her far, far away. Probably the town would just as soon not face up to it. Nell wouldn’t be any of the town’s business far, far away.

“So that fire in your house was an accident,” he said, making a statement. “Well, I’ll tell you something. The future’s one thing you got to look out for. The past—is another. Because the past adds up.”

She frowned.

“This accident. Your father and mother both died in it?”

“It was an accident.” He heard the jump of her voice to a higher pitch. It reminded him of that screeching tantrum. It warned, Danger!

“Well,” he drawled, “it’s a funny thing. You take one accident—why, that’s too bad.” He tried to fix her gaze, but it was all blueness. “But you take *two* accidents. Right away, the first accident doesn’t look so much *like* an accident any more.”

Her face went blank—either because he’d hit her with an idea or because she didn’t know what he meant.

“Good thing to keep in mind,” he said lazily.

She said, “They didn’t do anything to me.” Her face was sullen. But Jed felt a sick wave of absolute knowledge.

He watched her. He said, as quietly and steadily as he could, “What I’m saying—things like that have a way of piling up. It adds. One and one make more than two. They make questions.”

She didn’t move.

He thought, I got it over. And the bottle was empty. He got up and decided to leave quietly.

MISS EVA BALLEW, whose hotel room was across the court from the Joneses’, believed in many things. One of them was duty. She walked toward the telephone. One of them was justice. She walked back to the chair.

But, however strong her beliefs and her conscience, Miss Ballew was a physical coward. She realized that she had been prodded too many times and she was taking too long—much, much too long—to make up her mind what she ought to do.

Sometimes, if you take time to decide, the need to do anything passes of itself. Miss Ballew reproached herself with bitter shame, and she walked toward the phone. But— She walked to the chair. Justice! Very well.

She went to the dresser and got her purse, not to be naked without it. She left the room and, flogging herself, marched around the hollow square of the

eighth floor. . . .

Nell hadn't moved. Jed said, "So long." He felt a little pulse of compassion for her, who was lost and had no inner compass to find the way again.

Somebody knocked on the door of 817.

Nell was up, lynx-eyed.

"Oh, no," said Jed softly. "Not again!" He hurried to the doorway that led into the kid's room.

Miss Ballew rapped again. Because she was afraid, she did her best to be angry. Did they think that they could lie low?

The door opened only a few inches. A chain held it there. A girl, not very old, looked at her with blue, blue eyes. "What do you want?"

"My name is Eva Ballew. My room is across the court on this floor." Miss Ballew's words were as neat and orderly as herself. She tended to begin at the beginning.

The girl seemed to listen, but not to hear—almost as if she were listening for something else.

"Before I call the manager," said Miss Ballew more boldly, to command attention, "I think it only fair to ask whether you can explain."

"Explain what?"

"What is going on in these rooms?"

"I don't know what you mean." The girl was staring at the caller.

"There is a child," said Miss Ballew coldly.

"I'm taking care of her."

Miss Ballew's mouth was grim. "Yes, so I imagined. Is there, or was there, a man in here?"

"A man?"

Miss Ballew longed to cry, "Pay attention, please!" "I saw the man," she announced sharply.

"Listen, you can't—"

"The child," cut in Miss Ballew, "has been crying in a most distressing manner, twice. And I have witnessed certain rather strange scenes over here."

"Who are you?" Nell asked.

“I AM someone who will call downstairs if I don’t get an explanation,” said Miss Ballew dictatorially. “In the first place,” she went on, beginning at the beginning, in her orderly fashion, “a while ago you were at the window with the child?”

“Yes, yes,” said Nell impatiently. “Why should you—”

“Because,” snapped Miss Ballew, “it seemed to me that the little girl very nearly fell out the window.”

“Well, she didn’t,” said Nell. “While you were at your snooping, you must have noticed that.”

Miss Ballew bridled but stood her ground. “Snooping or not, I wish to see the child.”

“See her?”

For the first time, Miss Ballew felt that her words were heeded. “Yes, see her for myself.”

“You’ve got a crust!”

“Nevertheless, if I do *not* see her, I intend to call the authorities.” So much for rudeness, Miss Ballew’s eyebrows remarked.

“I don’t know what’s the *matter!*” Nell said in whining exasperation. “What do you want to see her for? She’s sleeping. What are you talking about?”

“Why did she scream so dreadfully? Come now, stop evading, young woman.”

“What?”

“I think you’d better let me in.”

“*You* listen,” Nell said. “You’re a stranger. How can I let a stranger in? How do I know—”

“You don’t,” agreed Miss Ballew, “but unless I see her for myself, the manager or the detective here *must.*”

“What business is it of yours? I don’t understand—”

“Are you afraid to let me see her?”

“I’m not afraid,” said Nell shrilly. “But I’m not supposed to.” She tried to close the door, but Miss Ballew quickly pushed her hand against it and held it open as far as the chain would allow it to go.

“Now, see here. I am a schoolteacher. You ought to be able to tell that I am a responsible person.”

“You’re trying to cause trouble.”

“On the contrary. I could have called downstairs directly. I felt, however, that it was not fair to cause trouble, as you say, if there is no reason. There may be some simple explanation, and if the child is perfectly all right and asleep, then there is no occasion for any trouble at all. Is that clear?”

“What would her mother say if I let any old person—”

“What would her mother say about your entertaining a man?” In the same tone, Miss Ballew would have said “about your smoking opium.”

“He’s gone.” The girl’s eyes flickered toward the right. “And she *is* all right.”

“I beg your pardon if I seem to insist, but after what I saw—”

“Saw?”

“Perhaps you don’t know that the Venetian blind was so adjusted that I *could* see.”

“See where?” Nell demanded.

“Into the child’s room.”

“It’s dark in there,” Nell said stupidly, perhaps a little drowsily.

“Not quite. There was a very little light, perhaps through the connecting door.”

“Light?”

“And the child did stop her screaming rather abruptly,” said Miss Ballew.

Nell’s glance slipped sideways. “What did you see?” she asked.

RUTH was only half listening to the voices in the ballroom. At the newspaper convention she was attending with her husband, who was the main speaker of the evening, few people had met before. They’d come from all over the country, and the wives had no basis for gossip. And as they weren’t even sure who one another’s husbands were (except Ruth’s, of course), they didn’t even have the fun of ranking one another. Except Ruth. She could have been preening herself, for no woman had missed her rose-colored presence at the speaker’s elbow. But her heart wasn’t in it.

There was a faint superstitious element, too, a fear that if she got to thinking herself too darned smart, something awful could happen. She felt, absurdly or not, as if she rode the narrow edge of danger; as if, by standing here among

these party-painted women, she was taking a risk. She said, “Yes, indeed” again, and again the sense of danger fluttered her heart.

Peter strode out of his group and snatched her. Their steps moved together to the music. “What’s the matter, hon?”

Ruth looked up with clouded eyes. “I thought I had you fooled.”

“Oh, no. Worried about Bunny?”

She slid her hand higher on his sleeve. “Probably it’s just because I’m a hick and this great big town scares me. Listen, Peter, even if I don’t always act it, I am a grown woman. Let me do something. Let me take a cab over to the hotel and see. I’ll be perfectly all right, and I’ll come straight back and dance till dawn. And I won’t *spoil* it.”

“We could leave now,” he said.

“But—the fun!”

He grinned, admitting the fun. “Man from Chicago I’d like to have a few words with—”

“Then do. Please.”

“Got cab fare?” He would let her go. Peter wouldn’t *make* her spoil it. He danced with her to the mirrored exit, squeezed her, let her go, and gave her a five-dollar bill. “Don’t trust any handsome strangers with all this moolah, baby.”

Ruth thought, I don’t trust that stranger, that girl. That’s what’s wrong.

He looked at his watch and said rather seriously, “It shouldn’t take you long to get across town at this hour.”

Somebody said, “Oh, Jones—”

Ruth smiled at him. She left the scene. She felt, at once, much better.

A doorman hailed a cab for her. In the outer night, in the streets, were many people. Millions of people, thought Ruth, not only here but millions of other places, too, who never heard and never will hear of me. She thought, For each of us—me and every one of them—how few are anything but strangers.

JED stood in the dark. He heard Miss Ballew introduce herself and knew at once this was the old biddy from across the way.

He wondered if he were going to be able to get past the two of them without an uproar. Maybe Nell would let her in 817. But if not— He rehearsed his exit

from Room 819 in his mind. And he meant exit. Total exit. There were worse things in the world than sitting the night out at the airport.

He knew the stairway was just beyond the elevators. Well, he could move fast, Towers could, on his long legs. In his mind, he placed all the stuff in his room. Where to snatch this and that. There was little to snatch. He could be in and out of that room, he thought, in a matter of seconds, and exit, bag and baggage. Then let her screech her lies.

He had little doubt she'd cook up some lies, all right. If necessary. Or even just if it seemed like fun at the moment. Or if she was mad at him. And, he thought, she is—unless he had knocked an idea of caution into her head. Of course, he'd been thinking of the kid. He'd been trying to get into Nell's head the undesirability of harming the kid.

Damn it, Towers had to get out of this! A fine mess! Assault, maybe, on account of Eddie. Benefit of the doubt on Nell's side. For long enough to make it a mess. And Eddie tempted to say something hit him—but he doesn't know what. That would be the easiest thing for Eddie to say, wouldn't it?

So there's Towers, in a jam. Jail, bail, telegrams. Would his high-powered new job in California wait quietly for some judge to let him loose?

Nuts! He ground his teeth. Trouble would breed trouble. He had to get *out* of here. The kid and the sitter never *were* any business of his. If the parents didn't know any better— Probably didn't give a darn what happened to the kid, he thought angrily. Off to a shindig, all dressed up. Probably painting the town. Why should Towers care? Also, if Eddie stuck *his* neck out and got bashed in the head for it, what was that to Towers?

He still stood, just inside Room 819, still listening. He didn't know what he was waiting for. That old biddy had her teeth in it now. Listen to her. "I wish to see the child." Icicles hanging off every word. Sounded like a stubborn old lady.

He took a soft step. He'd better get going. He'd have to steam himself up to some fast footwork. Once out of this hotel, he thought, let them whistle for the wind! He was never here. He'd be far away, one in millions. Gone, like smoke. No one would ever know a thing about this.

The kid was asleep, and the old lady out there was going to raise a row. She was the type to do it. Let it work out that way. Why should he duplicate what she was already going to do?

He might drop a word at the desk on his way out. From his own room, he could have heard a commotion in 817. Just as well tip off the hotel. Then Nell couldn't stall.

He rehearsed his route to the corridor. He strained to remember the exact location of the other door in the kid's room. In the not absolute darkness he could tell where the twin beds jutted. In the tense and somehow hollow shell of these four walls he was aware of the small hump under the covers on the far bed.

The little kid must be sound asleep. Funny she didn't wake up during that wrestling match. He supposed that a child slept hard. A good thing. A lot safer if the little kid just kept quiet.

He could hear the cadence of argument out there. Towers had better be away before it broke into some kind of action. He took a few steps into Room 819. Afar, he could hear the city crying, its noise tossing and falling like foam on the sea—as restless, as indifferent, as varied, and as constant. And he saw himself, a chip, thrown, blown, attracted to another chip, to swirl, to separate—to grow arms and be, not a chip, but a swimmer, and push away.

What d'you mean, Towers, *safer* if the kid just kept quiet? You said to yourself, *safer*. Wait a minute. She's okay, isn't she? Nothing's going to happen to the kid.

Use your head, he thought irritably. The old biddy outside will keep Nell busy. He, Jed, could tip off the hotel—somehow—and do it without letting himself in for this mess. That's right. *Look out for yourself, Towers. Nobody else will.* It came back to him in his own words—a guide, a touchstone.

She'd be okay. He'd be out of it. Never see these strangers again.

THERE was a sharp rustle, a sudden change of shape. Eye and ear caught these evidences in the still gloom, and Jed's thoughts flashed like frightened fish in the bowl of his brain. Oh, no! The kid mustn't wake, cry out. Not now! Not yet!

He didn't breathe—and one of those fish flashes through his head told him she must have been dreaming. Something in a dream scared her for a minute, caused the sharp, convulsive move of the little body in the bed. It had been no drowsy turning in simple sleep. And yet not awakening, either. For Bunny did not move again, and she didn't cry. She dreamed. Jed nodded to himself. And he went, softly, across Room 819 to the other door, and his hand was on the key.

With the wall, the top of the door made a triangle, gaping slowly wider, like an alligator's mouth, and then snapped shut—but softly, as if it were a shadow beast with no teeth to click.

Bunny wasn't asleep. Somebody had come and stood still in the room for such a long time that a force inside of Bunny bounced her—all of a sudden. But

now she was all alone again.

Bunny couldn't cry. Her mouth was gagged with a stocking tied around her head. Bunny couldn't move very much, either, bound as she was, ankles and wrists.

“I SAW,” said Miss Ballew in her precise fashion, “the child, as I suppose, sitting up in the bed and a figure approach and appear to struggle with her. The cries then stopped most abruptly. So you see, I require,” she said hastily, “some explanation. What, actually, were you doing?”

Nell looked sleepy.

“Answer me,” said Miss Ballew angrily. “If it wasn't you, who was it?”

“You said you *saw*.” There was a hint of impudence in the girl's face, something saucy that must be crushed at once.

Miss Ballew said, “I certainly did see *someone*, doing *something*, which has very much alarmed me. I would advise you, young woman, to take me to that child at once.”

A door to her left opened and closed very fast. A man was in the corridor and had passed rapidly behind Miss Ballew, almost before she could turn her head. Moving with long, gliding steps, he vanished around the corner. Miss Ballew staggered. It had been so swift, so furtive. “Who was that?” She felt weak.

The girl looked as if she could hop with rage, as if she would begin to bounce. “Oh. Oh,” she said, and buried her face in her hands. “Oh, I was so scared! Oh, thank you! You've saved me!” Nell unfastened the chain and opened the door.

“What?”

“That—man!” said Nell, leaning against the doorframe.

“Why, he must have come out of—out of the child's room!”

“Yes. Yes,” cried Nell. “Now do you see? He was in there all the time. He said if I didn't get rid of you— Oh!”

“Oh, dear,” said Miss Ballew faintly.

“He said he would—” Nell's body pressed on the doorframe as if in anguish.

Miss Ballew rocked on her feet and reached for the wall.

“He just forced himself in here. He was so wild!” Nell cried. “And strong. I didn’t know what to do!”

Silence beat in the corridor while Miss Ballew fought with her wish to fall down. One heard of, one read of, and all one’s life one feared—the ruthless, predatory male.

“But he is getting away!” moaned Miss Ballew. For, in the midst of her horror, she heard the yawn of the door to the fire stairs and the hiss-hush of its closing. This, she felt, was outrageous. That such things could happen in a respectable hotel—and go unpunished! The anger was starch to her spine. She hustled past the girl into the room. She threw her stout form on the bed and reached for the telephone.

Downstairs, Rochelle Parker, the telephone operator, shifted a candy expertly into the pouch of her cheek. “Yes?”

“This is Miss Ballew,” said the agitated voice. “I’m in eight seventeen. A man has just fled from here.”

“*What* did he do, madame?”

“Fled. Ran. He ran away.” Miss Ballew was often forced to translate her remarks. “He was up to no good.” She tried to be basic. “Get him!” cried Eva Ballew. “He must answer for it. He must face his accuser and be brought to book.”

“Just a moment, *please*,” said Rochelle. She pressed the button that would discreetly summon Pat Perrin to a phone. Almost at once, she plugged him in. “Eight seventeen’s on, Pat.”

“Yeah, what is it?”

“There was a man in here,” said Miss Ballew. It was as if she said “African lion.” “He is trying to get away, right now.”

“What did he look like?”

“What did he look like?” cried the teacher to the motionless girl.

The girl’s lips opened, and her tongue slipped to moisten them. “He—had red hair.”

“Red hair!” Miss Ballew’s voice both informed Perrin and doubted the information, for this had not been her impression.

“Very dark red,” said Nell. “Brown eyes, freckles.”

“Dark red, brown eyes, freckles, and tall. I saw that. And I think a gray suit.”

“Brownish,” Nell said, “and a blue shirt.”

“Well, some light color. And a blue shirt. And he took the stairs—not two minutes ago. You had best—”

“We’ll see,” said Perrin. “He intruded, you say?”

“He did indeed,” cried Miss Ballew in ringing tones. It was the very word.

“I’ll see if we can pick him up,” said Pat Perrin, sounding competent and unruffled. He hung up at once.

Miss Ballew rolled a bit and sat up. She was trembling. “This really—” she gasped. “What did happen?”

THE girl, who had closed the door, went around the bed and sat on the other bed. Her eyes were a trifle aslant and an odd blue. She clasped her hands in her lap.

“You poor thing,” Miss Ballew said. “I don’t know your name.”

“Nell.”

“I am Eva Ballew,” said that lady warmly. “I suppose you were under such strain. I thought your manner was odd.”

“You don’t know,” said Nell wanly, and Miss Ballew’s heart fluttered alarmingly. “He was in there, and he said he’d listen, and if I dared—”

“Simply terrible!” murmured the teacher. “How ever did he get in here?”

“Oh, he knocked, and of course I went to see who it was.” Nell twisted her hands.

“Didn’t you scream?” It was Miss Ballew’s conviction that a woman always screamed.

“But he said—said he was a friend of the people’s. I didn’t know.”

“No, of course you couldn’t know. Tsk. Tsk. Do you think he had been drinking?”

“Oh, he was!” cried Nell. “Look!” She seemed very young and lithe as she reached for the whisky bottle. The cheap dress twisted tight to her body. Miss Ballew felt a shiver, rather a delicious one, along her nerves. She gazed, horrified, at the bottle’s emptiness.

“And then,” said Nell, “Bunny—that’s the little girl—she woke up.” Nell put her face in her hands. She dropped the bottle on the floor to do so. Miss

Ballew's mind swirled. So odd. Poor thing, so upset, to do such a disorderly thing.

"Now, now," she soothed. "It's all over now." And then, fearfully, she said, "Isn't it? Nothing—"

Nell shook her head vigorously.

"Well—" said Miss Ballew feebly. Her heart raced. She felt unwell.

"Anyhow," said Nell moodily, "he only tried to kiss me once. He just kept drinking and drinking."

"You should have screamed," Miss Ballew said, trancelike.

"I was so scared. I thought maybe, when Bunny cried so loud, someone might notice."

Miss Ballew felt herself flushing guiltily.

"And she didn't really 'almost fall,'" Nell said with sudden indignation. "He thought I was trying to, you know, get somebody's attention out the window like that. So he dragged her away."

"Oh, dear." Miss Ballew thought how wise one is never to believe too hastily in what one thinks one sees. "And when she began to scream so later? Why was that, my dear?"

Nell looked wildly around her, threw herself on the bed, face down, and shook with sobs.

Miss Ballew thought, Someone must soon come. She herself was really not in any condition to deal with this any further. It was shameful, but she felt as weak as a kitten.

"She got scared and began to cry," sobbed Nell. "It made him wild. He said she had to stop that noise." The head slipped, the face turned, the wet lashes lifted.

Miss Ballew lay against the headboard, and her rather long countenance was whitening. "Then it was *he*—in her room?"

"You saw—" the girl challenged.

"Yes, I saw. But it was too dark. I couldn't clearly see. Oh, my dear, if he has harmed the child!"

"Oh, he didn't *hurt* her," Nell said, and suddenly she sat up again. "He just made her stop crying." A little smile—pitiful, it might have been—worked on her face. "And there wasn't anything I could do, because he locked me in the closet."

“Incredible.” The teacher’s lips were stiff.

Nell looked at her solemnly. “You know,” she said, “I think he was insane.”

Miss Ballew said, “Could you get me a glass of water? I really am afraid I am having—rather a reaction.” She closed her eyes.

Insanity was obviously the explanation. For things so wild and wanton, insanity was the definition, really.

In the dim bathroom of 817, on the cold floor, Eddie stirred. He moved his right arm, moved as one moves in sleep. He turned a little to his left side. Then he lay still.

THE hotel detective, Pat Perrin, crossed the lobby, moving quietly. He opened the door to the fire stairs. He discounted, from long practice, ninety percent of what he had just heard; but he stood and listened. Any sound would come booming down to him.

And so it did. Someone was on those bare stairs. So much was confirmed. He waited quietly. He wore a gun.

Jed realized the echoing clatter of his descent. Nimble, he brought himself up against a door, stopped the second or two it took to rearrange his own rhythm, stepped steadily out to the sixth-floor corridor.

As he crossed the carpet toward the elevators, a man joined him. The man pressed the down button and, superhumanly, Jed did not. It occurred to him, freakishly, that he had left a blue tie and a good pair of socks. Without fidgeting, he watched the dial, as the other man was doing.

Disinterested strangers, they stepped on in silent sequence as the elevator obeyed the call. And in silent sequence they stepped out on the ground floor. Jed walked to the desk. His gait deceived—his trunk and shoulders showed no effort, but his long legs drove hard against the floor and bore him more swiftly than they seemed to do.

He said crisply, “Checking out. Towers.”

“Certainly, Mr. Towers,” the desk clerk said.

“Mind making it quick?” Friendly and crisp but not too urgent. “Just got hold of a cancellation. I can get out of here tonight if I make it down to the station.” Jed looked at the clock in the woodwork behind the man’s head. He made himself stand still.

PAT PERRIN knew the stairway was now empty. He grabbed a boy and posted him near the stair exit. He grabbed another to watch the entrance to the bar. He himself had a brief word with an elevator boy. Then his skilled eyes ran down every man in sight. "Tall. Light suit." He weaved among the chairs.

"You figure," Jed was asking pleasantly, "about twenty-five minutes to Penn Station?"

"That's close, sir. Might do it. Here we are." The clerk took an envelope from a box and presented this, too. A note from Lyn. Lyn Lesley. He stuffed it into his coat pocket. (No time for her now.) He took out his wallet.

Perrin's eyes checked Jed's tall figure in the gray suit. *Dark* hair, *no* freckles, *white* shirt. He walked past Jed, his eyes skimming.

Jed put back his wallet, picked up his bag. He was the same as out; the clerk already counted him for gone.

But Jed put his palm noiselessly on the blotter, and the clerk looked up. "You'd better," said Jed, speaking slowly and emphatically to be understood and heeded in this, the first and only time he would say it, "send someone to Room eight seventeen right away. Trouble. There's a little girl. If you know where Mr. and Mrs. Jones went, call them. It's their kid."

He turned and went, in that same smooth, deceptive, very rapid gait, in the shortest line to the revolving door and through it without a check. Then he stood in the open night, and he was out of it.

Pat Perrin knew someone had got off the stairway. Whether he rode down was a question. Now Perrin peered through to the street, saw tall, dark, and handsome, in the white shirt, harmlessly pausing to light a cigarette. He crooked a finger to the doorman, said a word or two, turned, looped on his own tracks, and went back through the lobby. He saw Milner at the desk lift a startled hand as if to beckon. He signaled with his own, Busy. (No time for him now.) And he continued through the lobby.

Jed shook his match to put out the flame. All right. So he'd established Towers had nerves of iron. And what now? Cab? Bus? Subway? To the airport? His thoughts were jumpy.

A cab swerved toward the curb and stopped right in front of him. He stepped aside. As the domelight went on, he could see her. Young woman, blonde, attractive, in party clothes.

He stood with his bag at his feet and blew out smoke. Here was a cab, and in it he could be gone—like smoke. He half turned his head. He looked

(because he was in some way forced to look) behind him at the checkered facade, the tall bulk, the flat and secretive face of the Hotel Nelson.

The girl from the cab, with her change in her bare hand, got out. She swept up her long skirts, aquamarine velvet over rosy silk, in one hand. Her golden slippers stepped quickly on the gray sidewalk. She passed Jed. Her gaze crossed over his face blankly, and he, blankly, watched her. They were strangers.

The cab door in front of Jed remained open. It said to him, “Well?”

He moved closer and put out a hand, ducked his head. It seemed to him that he was struck in the face by a barrier as soft as a cobweb, no more substantial than the air itself. A faint scent from the cab’s closed place. A perfume, it was, that stopped him, because it made his stomach turn over. Why, he reeked of it himself!

He barked, “Sorry.” And he slammed the door. The cab’s gears snarled at him. It went away in a huff, saying with a flounce of its back bumper, “Whyncha make up your mind, stupid?”

Jed trod his cigarette out. He felt rooted to the sidewalk, and his feet kicked at the invisible chain. All right. He would not shut himself up with that sickening odor. That’s all. He’d air himself free of it. Walk, then. Lug your bag. But get going, stupid!

MILNER, at the desk, leaned over, full of summons, but Pat Perrin was out of range. Milner’s startled eyes blinked. Towers. Eighth floor, sure enough. Something wrong in 817? Peter O. Jones, 817 and 819. Mr. Milner was annoyed as well as startled. But of course he would check.

He picked up a phone and pivoted, looking anxiously at the hands of the clock. “Give me eight seventeen, Rochelle, will you?”

Rochelle alerted. She thought, Oh, boy, something’s up! I smelled a rat up there hours ago. She was rather pleased. She hoped this was going to be interesting. She said softly, “What goes on, Mr. Milner?”

As Mr. Milner did not know, he was haughty. “If you’ll ring them, please?” He heard Rochelle ring them. He stood, holding the phone, staring at the clock, as Ruth O. Jones went rustling by behind him.

No need to stop for her key, she reflected, as Nell was there to open the door. Besides, it would take time. Her feeling of time wasting was because she’d been wishing too long to come. Only that. Why, the lobby was just the same, just the same.

Ruthie and the jitters. How Betty, Peter's sister, would laugh! Betty the city mouse. Betty the louse, who'd begged off baby sitting for them. Although why on earth I assume *she's* so darned reliable. Betty and *her* system of values. Betty who doesn't even know yet what a woman's in the world for. It was the blood tie, of course. It was the mere fact that Peter's sister could not be a stranger.

Now Ruth began (for everything upstairs would be just the same) to pick and choose among excuses. One could not say, I came because I don't trust you. No. But one could say, A pill—some special remedy brought from home. For a headache. It would do.

There was a man in a brown suit talking to the elevator boy. "I beg your pardon," Ruth said. "Is this car going up?"

"In a minute, ma'am."

She stepped in. They kept muttering together.

Ruth's foot, in the golden slipper, twitched. Oh, don't be silly! Surely a minute didn't matter!

NELL filled the glass. She twisted the faucet once or twice, on and off. Her face was sullen as she looked down at the form of the little man, Uncle Eddie, on the bathroom floor, lying as if he were normally asleep.

The skin around his eyes twitched, as if the bright light affected him. She frowned faintly, and then her whole body seemed to shrug off the problem and let it go. She snapped off the light, opened the door, pulled it after her deftly as she stepped through. "Miss Ballew?"

The schoolteacher, with her eyes closed, was reciting poetry silently. It was a trick to play on the release of the fearful substances to the blood, on the whole panicked interior chemistry.

"Oh, thank you, my dear. Really, this is so feeble of me." Her teeth chattered. The phone rang. The glass was still in Nell's hand. "I'll get it," chattered Miss Ballew and jerked around.

Nell sat down quietly. Her toes turned in, then out, almost imperceptibly. Her fingertips danced a little on the glass.

"Yes?" quavered the teacher.

"This is the desk. I've had word of some trouble."

"Trouble!" cried Miss Ballew. "Yes, *certainly!* I spoke to someone long ago! Really, by this time you ought— Didn't you stop him?"

"I beg your pardon," said the astonished voice.

“Did you or did you not stop that man?”

“Who is this, please?”

“This is Miss Eva Ballew. Now, I reported this trouble minutes ago.”

“Yes. Yes, I see, Miss Ballew,” he said. “The house detective must have taken—”

“Who are *you*, pray?”

“I’m at the desk, ma’am.”

“And do you mean to tell me you do not know! See here. Is anything at all being done?”

“The house detective evidently—”

“Evidently! Are you men or mice down there? Where is *he*?”

“He is evid—he is looking. That is, I see—”

“You are too late and too slow,” she interrupted. “You have irresponsibly allowed that ruffian to escape.”

Milner’s spine stiffened. “But is the child all right?” he demanded.

“The child? Why, yes, I believe so.”

Milner, man not mouse, was delighted to say disagreeably, “*Do you mean to tell me that you do not know?* Someone responsible will be up there at once.” He slammed down the phone. But all the same, he was relieved. Pat Perrin knew about it.

Miss Ballew hung up, and her eyes were pained. So often this physical weakness had betrayed her. She knew so well what one ought to do, but the weak flesh was such a hindrance.

“What was it?” Nell said.

“They—someone will be up. They seem confused.” She tried to shift her legs.

“He got away?”

“Evidently.” It was no use. Her legs were mush. “My dear,” she said sadly, “hadn’t you better see to the child?”

“Oh, yes,” said Nell quickly. But she rose rather slowly and tentatively. “Don’t you want the drink of water?” She didn’t seem to know what to do with it.

Miss Ballew received the glass. Now, as she realized that someone ought long ago to have gone in to the poor frightened child, she began to wonder why Nell had not gone. Nell, whose responsibility she was. It didn't ring right. First things had not come first. No, it rang wrong. Echoes of their first exchange began to come to her. Nell's odd manner. And she seemed to see in her mind's eye that the man in the corridor had no blue in his clothing.

She looked at Nell. She murmured, "It's incredible, really." The girl seemed to be waiting politely for her to go on, and perhaps she didn't understand. "It's hard to believe," translated Miss Ballew. "There seems to be no sense—not even a mad method to this man's actions. Are you sure—"

"What?"

"Are you sure you didn't encourage him?"

"I haven't done anything," Nell said, looking surprised. "I don't know what you mean."

This was an echo, too, and it rang false. "Come now, of course you know what I mean. Never mind. This is no time. See to the child, my dear. Poor baby. When the detective arrives—" Her voice faltered from its habitual tone of instruction. "I dare say, he—"

"He what?" Nell frowned faintly.

"I mean to say," said Miss Ballew, "perhaps he's seen more of this sort of thing. And, of course," she added thoughtfully, "there's the child. How old is she?"

"How old?"

"She is not an infant? She is old enough to talk?"

"Of course," said Nell wonderingly. "She's seven, I think."

"Then that is fortunate," said Miss Ballew, "for of course she will be able to corroborate your story."

Nell was just standing there, looking stupid and half-asleep.

WHAT a handicap to have so limited a vocabulary, thought the teacher. "Corroborate means to confirm," she explained, "to tell the same story, or enough to prove it, do you see?"

"And fortunate," said Nell, "means lucky." She was smiling. For a moment Miss Ballew had the distinct impression that she was dancing. Even her face had a twinkling, sparkling look. Impish, as if she'd thought of something. "I know more words than you think I do," said Nell. "And I understand the

future.” She flung up her hands. Yes, it was a dance! Miss Ballew looked on, bewildered. And then the skirt flopped and fell out of the moving arc and reversed.

The girl was leaning on her two stiff arms, her knuckles white on the footboard, her eyes very blue. “I—I wonder—” The eyeballs turned in slow fear, and the slow fear welled in Miss Ballew. “She’s—awfully quiet,” Nell said softly. “*Isn’t* she?”

Miss Ballew clutched her throat.

“Don’t you think it’s funny?”

“F-fun—” Miss Ballew waved her arm across the air.

Nell’s teeth dug into her lower lip. She walked on soft toes to that inner door. Her hand was slow on the knob, and the nerves in the teacher’s temple turned excruciatingly with it.

The door yawned. No sound emerged from 819.

“Bunny?” Nell called softly.

There was no answer.

“Bunny!” The girl’s back shook as if with a long shiver. Only quiet answered her. Her eyes rolled as she looked over her shoulder. “I’m afraid,” she whimpered.

Miss Ballew was afraid, too. She could *not* move. Her own ears knew that frightening silence was really there. “But you said he didn’t hurt—”

“He was in there afterward. After you knocked. Do you think—”

“Don’t think! Don’t even say!”

But Nell’s words fell like Fate. “Maybe he remembered she’s old enough to talk.”

“Our Father, who art in heaven,” mumbled Miss Ballew.

“It would,” said Nell, glassy-eyed, “be so easy. She’s just a little thing.”

“Go see!” screamed Miss Eva Ballew, up on her elbow but paralyzed. “For the love of heaven, girl! Go *in* there and *see!*”

LYN touched his arm. He veered away. (Iron nerves, Towers?) “Lyn!” he said.

“Didn’t they give you my note?”

She was there, and not an apparition, standing beside him and—ah, she was sweet and sane!

“Gosh, you look—” He grabbed the sleeve of her coat. “What are you doing here at this hour? You been rattling around this town *alone*? It’s too late, Lyn.”

“I’m not afraid.”

“The street’s no place—”

“I *haven’t* been—”

“I don’t care where you—”

“Oh, Jed!” she wailed. They teetered back from the brink of the same quarrel.

“I guess this is where we came in,” he murmured.

“Where I walked out.” Her eyes were not merry. But they were sweet and sane. “Jed, didn’t you read my note?”

“No, I— Not yet.” He fumbled for the envelope. He felt troubled. Not ready to meet her. She was here too soon. He held her note passively in his hand.

“It’s nothing.” She tried to take it, gently, but he refused to let it go. “I’ve been waiting and waiting. In the lobby, Jed. It was safe enough. I was just about to give up. I’ve been calling your room.”

He made no reply, no excuse, no explanation.

“I waited the longest time,” she said.

“Why, dear?” he asked gently.

Lyn’s face looked as if she were moved to tears, but she did not weep. “Because I’m sorry, Jed. I’m ashamed to have been so stubborn and ornery. I’m sure you were more in the right than I was willing to admit while I was so mad.”

“Never mind.” He slipped his arm around her. “Never mind. Never mind.” He thought, If this isn’t like her! This kind of weird, high-minded, overdone fairness, this proud dragging down of her pride.

“I couldn’t bear to have you go away to California,” she said quietly, keeping her own balance, although he embraced her, “and us mad. That’s—all about it.”

“Was I mad at you?” he said, scarcely believing it.

“Where were you going?” She put her bare fingers to her eyes.

“Oh, I—was more or less lighting out,” he said vaguely. He felt sad, very sad.

“Could we have a cup of coffee somewhere? And would you take me home? Will you make it up, Jed, before you go?”

He looked down at her. “You beat all,” he said gravely. “But you’re sweet. How come you do the way you—” He broke off. He looked up, and the stone face on the building above him had no expression.

“I called you things I don’t believe,” Lyn said in a low voice. “Is it a date?”

Something bigger than he was took him and shook him like a rat. He covered the shudder by grabbing for his suitcase. “It’s a date, Lyn.” She smiled like the rainbow.

Jed looked away. Why did he feel so troubled and sad? Here was she, stubborn little love, trying to get back where they’d been. So Towers had his date after all. Didn’t he? (Episode over. Close quotes. File and forget.) Here’s Towers in the evening with his own girl, and a honey she was, wearing that proud humility, *believing* (his heart sank because it was so heavy), trusting that he was going to match it. The night was young, and nothing was lost.

Proceed, Towers. Advance right along the line, the line you cut in your time, that goes straight, without any stupid detours, if you are smart.

“Please, Jed, let me have my note,” she begged softly.

He looked down. He put it back in his pocket. Oh, no! he thought. This we look into. “Just a minute, honey,” he went on, sounding, to his surprise, exactly as if this were what he’d planned to say from the moment she had touched his arm. “Something I want to check a minute. In here.”

She smiled. It was all right with her. He thought, What a reckless attitude *that* is! But he touched her and with tenderness pushed her toward the revolving door.

What was he going back for? Just to take a quick look around, that’s all. He thought he could tell, pretty quickly, if they’d got up there to the little kid. Surely repercussions he’d be able to feel would sift down to the lobby. Maybe no other guest could notice, or catch on at all. But surely he could tell. And rest his mind about it.

That would really close it off. Lyn would never ask. Or she’d take it if he never explained. There’d be nothing to mention, nothing even to think about, once he knew nothing was dangling. Towers could then proceed.

THE hotel now knew something was up. The news ran along its nervous system, in the minds of its own people. The guests were unaware, as the guests had been unaware of many things on other occasions. But the hotel knew.

Rochelle sat at her board. She knew. She prepared to be the spider in the middle of the web.

Milner knew, and was nervous behind his front, although his front remained as wooden and polished as the walnut desk around him. He'd had a quick word with the assistant manager, who agreed that Milner himself must go up to the eighth floor and investigate.

The bartender knew. The porter, emptying ash trays, had a faintly knowledgeable air. The bellboys knew. "Some guy got away." They veiled their watching eyes.

Perrin was almost resigned to the idea that the man had got away. No red-head-and-so-forth in the corridors, in any of the public rooms. Not in the bar's deepest recesses, not in the men's rooms. If he was registered and had a room and lurked *there*, it might take a little doing.

Perrin strode up to the desk and caught Milner. "Who've we got that's tall, red-headed, freckle-faced, light suit, blue shirt?"

"Nobody," said Milner. "Say—"

"About the trouble in eight seventeen?" the manager said.

"Yeah, a dame described this man."

"Just what did he do?"

"Intruded," said Perrin dryly.

Milner said, "It was a man who tipped me off. Is the kid all right?"

"*What* kid?"

"Little girl. Jones."

"I'd better get up there," Perrin said thoughtfully. "Nobody told me about a kid."

"That's not good, having a kid in it. I was just going."

The manager said, "Uh, keep it quiet."

Two of them swung off separately. Milner negotiated his way around the walnut embankments. Perrin met him again, near the elevators.

The elevators knew, although they whispered up and down without telling.

“Couldn’t have hurt the kid,” Perrin remarked. “All she said was that he intruded.”

“All she asked me was did we stop him,” agreed Milner. “Ran out, did he?”

“Yeah, he’s not up there now.”

“Nerves?” said Milner hopefully. Perrin shrugged. Whatever it was, they assumed it was all over except, of course, the hysterics.

An elevator whispered down. “Say, that’s Towers now.” Milner peered. “Fellow who tipped me. Thought he— Oh—”

“Oh, what?”

“He’s got the girl. She found him.” Milner relaxed.

“Eight,” said Perrin quietly and stepped on. The elevator boy moved only an eyelash. But he knew.

“Up? Up?” caroled Mrs. McMurdock. “Come, Bobo. Come, darling. Time for beddy-bye.” The little dog ran into the elevator and sniffed moistly at Perrin’s socks.

“He loves to ride,” said Mrs. McMurdock. “Doesn’t he, Bobo? Doesn’t he, boy? Yes, he does! Just loves to ride!” She did not know.

RUTH stuffed her change into her evening bag. She kept watching the blank metal door beyond which the floors were sliding by. The car sailed toward a soft landing and went into the little shuffle for the precise level of the eighth floor. She felt a perverse resistance to the necessity of shifting from one mood to another.

She stepped out. Behind her, the car lingered while the boy listened to the quality of the silence up here. It seemed to be mere silence. He looked at his lights, yanked the lever, and sailed upward.

For Ruth, the corridor was just the same. She hurried to her left.

The door of 817 looked just the same, as blank as all the other doors. Prepare to shift. Inside, the girl would be dozing and Bunny fast asleep. The mood now is hushed. It’s the mood of All’s Well. Ruth tapped gently.

At once, a much-agitated female voice cried, “Oh, yes! Come in! Oh, come in!”

Ruth’s mood leaped like lightning. Her hand leaped to the knob. She burst into the room and met the frightened eyes of a stoutish, middle-aged woman

she'd never seen in her life who was sitting, in a strained position, on Ruth's bed.

"Who are you?" cried this stranger.

But Ruth put first things first. Her gold bag fell out of her hand. Without a word, she flew, hands up, from 817 to 819. She batted the partially opened door. Eight nineteen was unlighted. Ruth aimed herself like an arrow at the light switch. She flashed around.

SHE saw Bunny's two bare feet twitching on the bed and the girl's bent back. Ruth cried out, "What's the matter?" She got one glimpse of Bunny's bound mouth and then saw the girl's face blinking at her over her shoulder, the drowsy evil in the sullen, careless glance, and she knew what the wicked hands were about to do.

Ruth simply flew at her. Her hands bit on the shoulders, and with all her might she heaved backward, to get evil *away*. She did not scream. Instead, she called out in almost a cheerful voice, "It's all right, Bunny. It's Mommy. Don't be frightened."

The shoulders rolled and slipped away from her. The girl's body turned with vicious speed. Ruth felt herself knocked backward, and the small of her back was wrenched as it slammed against the other bed. She flipped herself over quickly and slipped downward to her knees, hearing silk rip. She fastened both hands on an ankle. She crawled backward, yanking and pulling, out from the narrow place between the beds. *Get it away from Bunny*. And Nell came, hopping, tottering, kicking, and her hands clawed for Ruth's face, hunting Ruth's eyes.

Okay, thought Ruth. *All right*.

Ruth had not always been a gracious young matron, a pretty wife, a gentle mother. In her day she'd climbed many a tough tree and hung by knobby knees off ladders, with pigtails dragging. And she'd chased the other kids off rafts and over roof tops, played basketball, too, on a tough team, pulled hair and bitten and gouged with the rest, run up and down the playing fields of many schools and been banged in the shins by hockey sticks. The world of direct physical conflict, violent and painful, had not always been beyond her ken.

There was lightning in her eyes as she got her hands in that yellowish hair, and the girl screeched and fell forward, twisting, and Ruth rolled on the hard floor to get from under her.

She felt the teeth in her forearm and pain as claws ripped at her cheek. Ruth's long rosy nails went into the other's flesh, and with the sharp spurs of

her heels she slashed at the other's shins. Her own head thudded on the carpet, and hands like wires sank in her throat.

She pulled up her knee. Silk ripped, velvet tore. She put her sharp golden heel in the wildcat's stomach and straightened her leg, and Nell went sprawling. Ruth walked on her knees and dove on her, grabbed the hair, whammed the head to the floor. . . .

But the head bounced. The body in the cheap dress was taut and strong. It wasn't going to be that easy.

Ruth heard herself growl, now that her throat was free. She summoned with a cold brain old strengths, old tricks. And when they were not enough, she began to invent. She realized that she fought something wild, something that wanted to hurt, that didn't care how. Probably mad, and strong because of that perfect ruthlessness.

But Ruth was wilder than the tom-boy she used to be. She was more vicious than the girl athlete. She was Bunny's mother, and she was easily able to be absolutely ruthless in that holy cause.

She said to herself, Okay! All right. And she was not afraid. It never crossed her mind to scream. It seemed her sole and simple duty, and even her pleasure, to fight with all her body's strength and her mind's cunning. (Outside of any rules, if that was the way it was.) It did not cross her mind to wonder who would win. She sank her own strong teeth in the enemy's wrist while she tried with her mind to think just how she was going to conquer—what trick would do it—even as she was tossed and the merciless elbow was crushing her breast.

Miss Ballew managed to get her feet to the floor but was too weak in the knees to stand. She knew she would be forever haunted by remorse if she did not force herself to help. But she was not well. Her heart hurt. There was a sharp pain in her side. Her mind knew that her body was lying, and her heart pitied the body's treasonable victory as her lips prayed cravenly for someone else to come.

THE moment he was inside the lobby, Jed knew that the Hotel Nelson was aroused. He knew, too, that there had been, and still was, a search going on.

He saw that in the veiled turn of all the eyes, in the porter's stance. Looking for someone? For whom? For *him*, no doubt.

It came to him that he was taking a certain risk in the mere act of stepping back within these walls. Once more his mind played back its recorded impressions—a glimpse of the fellow in the brown suit weaving among the chairs, looking for someone. For whom, if not for Jed?

All the way across the lobby he could see that very suit, the same man, waiting for an elevator. The clerk to whom Jed had given warning was beside him, and all the way across the lobby, Jed knew when they spoke his name.

What was this?

They were *looking* for him, and they, for some reason, were not looking for *him*. He saw himself split in two: the object of their search and merely Towers who had just checked out. They hadn't put it together yet. They would. Right over there lounged the boy who had brought up the ice—who was, all by himself, the missing link. When would his hunting eye catch sight of Jed?

Jed guided Lyn so that she stood with her back to the elevators and he could watch. Those two men were authority. Were they *only now* going up to see what was wrong on the eighth floor? If so, they were darned late!

What was going on? Lyn stood obediently, her head thrown back to look up. She didn't know why they were standing here. She trusted there was a good reason.

He said, "Talk to me. Make some remarks, hmm?"

"You're being mighty mysterious," Lyn said lightly. "Mine not to wonder why. Me and the six hundred. Lyn, number six hundred and one."

"Keep talking."

The elevator took on its passengers—two men, one woman, and a scampering little dog.

"Nothing is quite so numbing as to be told to say something. Makes your mind a blank. Hmm. I like raspberry pie, but the seeds do get in my teeth. I'm very fond of cucumber sandwiches in the summertime. Is this better than the weather? Am I doing all right?"

"You're fine." Jed was farsighted. He could see from here the indicator moving on the dial. He knew already where the eight came. He said bitterly, "Why didn't I lock the door!"

"If I ask questions," said Lyn placidly, "I won't be making remarks, will I?"

"The door *between*," he growled. What he was saying he hardly knew.

"Oh, between. Well, that's nice. That's quite illuminating."

"If I had any brains—"

"Oh, you have, Jed. I think you have. I think it's very possible. Let's see, what's my favorite flower? At a time like this, I ought to know so I could tell you. But you take roses—"

His glance flicked down. She had her hands in the big pockets of her coat, and her back was bent in a sweet arch, and her eyes were sweet and sane and full of peace because she believed.

“You look about seven years old,” said Jed, almost angrily. And he sent his glance again to the dial.

“Oh, I don’t think so. I think I probably look about seventeen and just as if I’ve got a terrible crush on you, a bobby-sox type of crush. And you look like thunder, Jed. If I knew what the matter was, I’d try to help. But you know that, of course. Keep talking, eh? Babble. Babble. Do you care for chamber music? No, that’s a question. Well, I always say it depends.”

The hand on the dial had stopped at about four. It seemed to be stuck there. Was it out of order?

“COME, boy. Come, boy. Ah, naughty Bobo! (Loves to ride!) But this is home, boy. Biscuit? Bobo want his biscuit? Oh, what a naughty, bad doggy! Bobo! No more ride. Beddy-bye now. Come, Bobo.”

Bobo retreated to the inner corner of the elevator and sat down.

Mrs. McMurdock giggled. “So ki-yute! Little monkey! Bobo, boy! Biscuit?”

The hotel’s people stood silent. They wore small, chilly smiles, not too impatient, not too amused.

Bobo frisked between Milner’s ankles.

“Shall I pick him up, madame?” the elevator boy said most respectfully.

“No, no. He must learn,” said Mrs. McMurdock. “He’ll mind in a minute.”

The hotel’s people cleared their throats with professional patience. It wasn’t going to be very pleasant placating that woman on the eighth floor, admitting her wicked intruder had got away.

In the lobby Jimmy said, “Hey, kids, sumpin’s funny! See that fellow over there, one with the girl?”

Jed’s eyes flickered in his stony face.

“I’m partial to lemonade,” Lyn said, “with mint in it And you sure can get thirsty talking so much. Filibuster is running down, Jed. Is it all right now? Can we go?”

In Jed’s head exploded the loud *No* for an answer.

Her face changed. One second pretty and sweet and pleased with the nonsense she was able to spin; the next it had lost all that pretty animation, light, and color. He wiped the pretty peace off her face by the look he gave her.

He said quietly, "I'm a rat, Lyn. A complete rat. Go home."

"But, Jed, I've been waiting—"

"Don't wait any more. Never wait for me."

He stepped around his suitcase. He went across the lobby in a walk so smooth and fast that he seemed to float.

He knew the bellhop straightened with a start. The heck with that! He pushed on the door to the fire stairs.

Ah, God. No! He shouldn't have run out on that little kid! What kind of rat did such a thing? A rat like Towers. A complete, no-good— He was sad. He'd been sad over it a long time. So sad his heart was heavy.

A pair of socks wasn't all he had left and lost up on the eighth floor. And left forever. Gone, like smoke! A thing like that you can't retrieve. And who would know? *Towers* would know. This trip, all the way down to the lobby and out, wasn't even as good as a detour. There wasn't a way back. Rat forever.

But he went up. Went up with all the great strength of his long, powerful legs, three steps at once, then two, but pulling on the rail, around and around. Climbing the building more like a monkey than a man going upstairs.

Passed the buck. Towers! Let the old lady take care of it. Towers!

Never even thought to lock that door. Could have made sure to keep her out of there. Could have done that much. He and he *alone*. (Not Eddie. Eddie was knocked out, lying on the bathroom floor.) Towers *alone* knew what kind of sitter Nell turned out to be. The old biddy couldn't know *that*, and where was she all this while?

What Towers *alone* knew was that there would always be risk with Nell around. But a risk for somebody else, of course. For somebody else's kid. A little thing who couldn't do a thing about it. So *Towers* figured the risk to his own six feet, to his man's hide, to his—what? He couldn't remember any risk for Towers. For *nothing*, he ran out. For the sick shadow of nothing at all, he'd lost what he'd lost.

This complete revulsion was making him sick. Okay. Cut it out, Towers. Take it from here.

EIGHTH floor. There was the elevator. And there they stood, talking with the elevator boy. Questions and answers. They didn't know there was a risk. Jed rushed past.

Aw, probably Bunny was all right. Probably. Pray so, and if so—here's Towers heading right back into the middle of this jam, for nothing. He didn't know. All he knew was that he was going to make sure. He was going to burst in there, and Towers was going to stand by the little kid and the heck with everything else.

The door of 817 was wide open. The old biddy, crouching on the edge of the bed, took one look at Jed's wild figure and let out a scream to wake the dead!

But Jed was in 819 before it died. The lights were on! The child was gagged!

Nell, hair hanging over her eyes, had a knee on each side of the slim body of a woman, supine on the floor. Their hands were braced, arms against aching arms. The woman on the floor had blood on her mouth, and her breathing was shallow and difficult. But her eyes were intelligent, and they yet watched for her chance.

Jed took little Nell by the short hair of her head. He ripped her away. She came up in his grasp, screeching, and hung from his hand, limp in surprise, like a sawdust doll.

IN the corridor, Milner and Perrin saw the racing figure, and in their startled ears rang the woman's scream. Perrin got his gun in his hand as they began to run. The door of 817 was wide open.

"The man," croaked Miss Ballew. "That's the man!" Oh, she knew him. By the indescribable. By the habits of motion, the line of the back, the cock of the head.

"The *one*," she sobbed. "The same one!"

Perrin looked toward 819. He saw a tall man with a face of utter fury drag, by the hair of her head, a small blonde girl through that door. Saw him drag her around the wooden frame as if he didn't care whether she lived or died, as if he didn't care if he broke her bones. "Drop that girl! Let her go!"

Jed's head went back, and his eyes glittered down his long, straight nose. "The heck I will! You don't—"

Perrin fired.

Ruth O. Jones lifted her shoulders from the carpet and pulled her twisted rags and tatters aside to free her legs. She wiped the blood off her mouth with her arm. She walked on her knees over to Bunny's bed. She paid not the slightest attention to the gunshot as it blasted behind her.

She said in her firm contralto, "Okay, honey bun? For goodness' sake, what happened to *you*?" Her cut mouth kissed the temple lightly. Her fingers were strong and sure on those wicked knots.

Jed kept standing, because he had to keep an eye steady on Nell. She fell on the floor when he had to drop her, as if she had been a sack of meal. As soon as he was sure she lay limp, he looked at the bright blood on his right hand.

He looked at the men, tense and threatening, in his path. Then he saw his girl—Lyn—looking, as if she peered through trees in a glade, between the men's bodies, in at the strange tableau. Ah, the little fool! "Go home," he said. Then he heard it. In the other room, Bunny began to cry.

Over Jed's face passed a look of peace and thanksgiving. He turned, reeling, because he was wounded, and made for the big maroon chair. He thought he sat down in it. Perhaps it was more like falling.

"Oh, Jed!"

"But that's Towers."

"It's the same man—"

Now he was three. Or maybe only one again. No matter. There was a difference in the way a kid cried. Could you write down the difference in musical terms? he wondered. One kind of crying pierced your head. This kind didn't do that. It was a thing not unmusical to hear.

Perrin, kneeling over Nell, barked, "What did you do to this girl?"

Jed didn't feel like bothering to say.

Miss Ballew let out another yelp of pure shock. A little man in the hotel livery was standing in the bathroom door, holding his head, looking out, mouselike, at them all.

"Munro!" thundered Milner.

Eddie blinked. Silence rustled down so that they might hear his feeble voice. "I guess—Nell *musta* got into more mischief. Did she? My niece?"

"Who?"

Jed pulled himself from the mists. "Nell, the baby sitter. On the floor." He braced himself, watchfully. "Nutty as a fruitcake," he said.

But Nell only rolled, drowsily. Her arm fell aside in sleeping grace, revealing her face. Her eyes were closed, the blue gone. Her small face was perfectly serene. There was a long scratch from eye corner to jaw. It looked as if it had been painted there, as if she felt no pain. She seemed to be asleep.

Eddie tottered. "That's the way she did before," he said in awe. "After the fire, they say, she slept." He swallowed and looked around at all their set faces. "How can she sleep?" he whimpered.

"Somebody," said Jed wearily, "go see. I suppose it's Mrs. Jones. This one pretty near killed her."

Perrin got off his haunches and lurched through the door. Milner's horrified eyes sent fury where it belonged. "Munro!"

"I—kinda kept hoping she'd be all right," Eddie said. "But I guess—"

"Next time don't guess," said Jed. "Lyn, go home."

"Not now." She moved toward him, drawn. "I've got to know—"

He closed his eyes.

WHEN a fresh scream rose, Ruth's fingertips did not stop stroking the little mouth. "That's right. Just you cry. Golly, Bun, did you see me fighting?"

Wait till we tell Daddy. He missed the whole thing." Ruth held the little head warmly against her battered body. There was comfort soaking through from skin to skin. "Cry it all out, sweetheart."

"Mrs. Jones?" a man said to her. His hair seemed to be trying to stand on end.

"Go away. Hush. Please call my husband. The number is in my bag."

She stroked and murmured on. Not until she heard Peter's voice did her wounds and gashes remember pain.

"We're just fine," Ruth said quickly. "Jeepers, have we had an adventure!"

Peter's face was dead-white as he looked upon his wife and child.

"She was the crossest sitter I ever saw," Bunny said indignantly. Her arms went around her daddy's dark head where he had hidden his face against her. "She tied my mouth all up, Daddy. She certainly didn't want me to cry awful bad."

Peter stood up and looked at the stockings.

"Bound and gagged," Ruth said quietly. Her face said more.

Peter's voice trembled. "I expect she's got sick ears, Bunny."

Ruth's eyes said, I know. But it's over. Be careful.

For Bunny didn't realize what had almost happened to her, and it was better if she didn't. You mustn't scare a little girl so that all her life she carries the scar. You must try to heal what scar there is. Ruth knew, and deeply trembled to know, that someday she would leave Bunny again. And with a sitter, of course. (Although maybe never again with a total stranger.) Still, they would go gaily, and they would not permit themselves to be daunted.

Poor Peter, shaken and suffering. Peter knew all this as well as she. "Bunny's fine, and I feel fine, too," she told him. "Really. A few scratches. Did they take her away?"

"They're coming. They'll take her to a hospital," Peter added, for Bunny's sake, "because she's sick. She doesn't know how to get along with people who are well."

"Will she get better," said Bunny with a huge sniffle, "from those sick ears?"

"I don't know, pudding. They won't let her be with well people any more, unless she gets all better."

Bunny's shuddering sobs were becoming like the far murmur of the last thunder of a departing storm. "Daddy—"

"What, Bun?"

Ruth felt the head turn on her breast. "Did you have fun?"

Peter couldn't answer. But Ruth could. "Oh, Daddy made a good speech! Everybody was dressed up."

Peter observed the condition of his wife's clothing. "Those scratches, hon," he said in a minute, sounding as if half his throat were closed. "There's a doctor out there."

So the doctor came in and looked them both over.

"You know," said Ruth when he had gone, licking the antiseptic in her mouth, "I pretty nearly had her licked! I think!" She laughed. "I must look terrible, but I feel fine."

And she did. Ah, poor Peter with the retrospective horror and the wrath locked in and buttoned down. But Ruth had got rid of it by tooth and claw. She felt quite peaceful. It fulfilled, she thought, the tigress in me. "Hand me some of my things, Peter. I'm going to bed in here with Bun."

"Okay, girls."

“Maybe we’ll order hot chocolate. Shall we? Let’s!”

“In the middle of the night!” squealed Bunny, and the sweet, smooth skin of her face rippled in the warning of delight to come.

Peter O. Jones, with a smile covering (from all but his wife) the tears bleeding out of his heart, went back to 817.

EDDIE was gone, damned for a reckless fool, with all the anxious, ignorant hope he’d called his caution dust in his throat.

Milner was gone, to harmonize with the walnut downstairs.

Perrin was gone. He went with Nell.

And Nell was gone. Still seeming asleep, looking innocent and fair. Only Jed spoke to her. “So long, Nell.” She was asleep, so she didn’t reply. Yet there was a lazy lift of the lashes. (*They won’t do anything to me.*)

Nearly everyone was gone. Miss Ballew remained, sick in her soul. Jed was in the big chair again—bloody shirt loose over the vast bandage. Lyn was still there. The doctor warned once more that Jed must take a few days’ rest. Then he was gone.

“You’ll stay over, Jed, won’t you?” Lyn’s mouth was stiff.

“A couple of days.” Jed’s side was stinging like the devil now. Telegrams, he thought. Maybe he’d break his cross-country trip and stop to see the family. Felt like it, somehow. Worry them, though, if he turned up shot. “Lyn, your family’s probably worried. Why don’t you go home?”

“I will. Soon.” She didn’t look at him. She looked at her trembling hands.

Peter took Ruth’s things to her, came back, flipped up his tails, sat down, put his head in his hands. “Lord!”

Lyn said, “You’re terribly upset, of course. Shouldn’t we go, Jed?”

“Don’t go. Ruth wants to say good night. Just a minute.”

“Uh, Bunny’s all right?” asked Jed.

“Soon will be. Kids bounce back. Thank God. Drink with me?”

“I ought to go home,” said Lyn. “I don’t mean to hang around and be in the way.”

“I ought to go,” said Miss Ballew. (To be a worthless old coward, and on top of that be fooled and fail in the mind, too!) “I was of very little use.”

“Take it easy,” Peter said. “Better try to take it easy, all of us.”

Jed shifted his stiff side, reached slowly for the pocket of his coat, for the envelope. He managed to open it with one hand. It said, “Dear Jed—” And that was all.

He looked back into dim reaches of time. It would have been enough. It would have been plenty. He didn’t look at Lyn.

PETER passed drinks. “Nonsense, Miss Ballew. You need this. There.” He sat down. His brown eyes locked with Jed’s gray. “As I understand it, you told them at the desk on your way out?” Peter’s voice was light, tentative.

“I figured it wasn’t my business,” said Jed levelly. “I didn’t want to get into a mess. I figured to get away.”

Well, he hadn’t got away. He’d got shot. And Towers was a rat. The little girl was okay now. Mother, too. Nothing, thank the Lord, they couldn’t get over. So if Towers was left in his rathood, that was not too important to them any more.

Gray eyes locked with brown. “That’s the kind of rat I am, I guess,” Jed said quietly.

Miss Ballew’s lips trembled. “I was worse than no use. It was *my* fault.”

Jed’s eyes met hers. They said, I understand. They said, We sinners.

“Seems to me,” Jed drawled, “if you’re hunting for blame—if I hadn’t come over here in the first place—”

“If I hadn’t walked out—” Lyn said bleakly.

“No, Lyn.”

“You think *I’m* not doing any if-ing?” Peter said. Brown eyes met gray. “If I’d looked at the girl with half my brain. Me and my big important speech! I left it to Ruthie. Of course, she got it. In her bones, the way she sometimes does. If —”

Jed shook his head.

“Ruth knew I needed her. She—chose. Even *Ruth* can ‘if.’ Ruth says she had her licked. But I don’t know—”

“I don’t know either, sir. I couldn’t say.” Eyes locked again. “Now don’t kid me, sir,” Jed said gently. “The hotel people weren’t two steps behind me. They’d have been on time.”

And then he smiled. Because it only mattered to Towers now, and Towers could take it. He moved and made the wound hurt. It was not so bad. He didn’t

mind.

But then Lyn said, "I'm afraid." Why, she went all to pieces. She wasn't *Lyn*. She looked white and old and sick. "I'm scared to go home. That's the truth," she wailed. "I'm scared of the night. I'd g-go, but I'm afraid. I'm scared of what a f-fool I've been." She wept.

Jed winced. "And you ought to be," he said grimly. But it wasn't *Lyn*.

Ruth said, "Ssssh." She stepped out of Bunny's room, leaving the door wide open. She wore a man's woolen robe. Her battered face was serene.

Lyn choked off her whimpering.

Peter held Ruth's hand to his cheek. "Asleep?" he whispered, and she nodded. "Ruthie, would you be scared if I took this young lady home?"

"Why, no," Ruth said, smiling.

"Towers can't do it. He ought to be in bed."

Jed said, appalled, "Yes, and I'm going there. But listen, get the hotel to send somebody. Lyn can't go alone. But you can't leave Mrs. Jones, sir." She's had enough, he thought.

Ruth smiled at them all. "Don't be afraid," she said gently.

"Here we sit, with our hair turning white," murmured Peter. "'Don't be afraid,' she says."

"Well, you *dasn't!*" Ruth smiled. "Or what would become of us all?"

She wasn't long for them. She wasn't all in Room 817. She kissed Peter's brow, said her good nights. She didn't say thanks. Perhaps she forgot, or she knew. She withdrew, went back to her sleeping baby, and the door closed behind her.

THEY sat quietly. Lyn's face was pink, her eyes ashamed, her back straightened. Jed thought, I know her. I know what she's made of. And, he realized, *she* knew more about Towers, the real Towers, than anyone else on earth. Something grew here. Something known, for better, for worse. He touched her hand. She turned hers, and her icy fingers clung. "Put an ending on my letter sometime, honey?"

"How, Jed?"

"The regular ending," he said soberly. Yours truly. That was the way to end a letter.

Lyn smiled.

I'll just have to take care of her, he thought. She mustn't be afraid.

Peter said, "Yep. We ought to be scared. Ignorant optimism won't do it. But we've got *not* to be scared just the same."

"Courage," sighed Miss Ballew. She rose to say good night.

"We are strangers," Peter said darkly. "Whom do we know? Looks like we've got to learn how we can trust one another. How we can tell— Everything rests on trust between strangers. Everything else is a house of cards."

Miss Ballew went to her room, having been drinking at midnight with strangers! She was, and not from liquor, a little intoxicated—warm around the heart and a bit weepy and quite brave.

Peter came back and sat down, gazed at the two of them, moving his lips. "Darn it," cried Peter O. Jones. "I wish I'd said that!"

"Said what, Mr. Jones?"

"What I just said!" Peter answered crossly.

Lyn's eyes met Jed's and dared be a little merry. "But, Mr. Jones, you just *did*. Didn't you?"

"In my speech!" cried Peter. "*Now* I have to think of a better ending." He glared at them.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *Mischief* by Charlotte Armstrong Lewi (as Charlotte Armstrong)]