

HERE'S LUCK

STEPHEN FRENCH WHITMAN

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HERE'S LUCK

A Social Footnote

BY

STEPHEN FRENCH WHITMAN



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MOLIÈRE

PART I

SASSOTTI'S SISTER

I

I shall be forsworn, which is a great argument of falsehood, if I love. — SHAKESPEARE.

“Who should you want slammed off, Gerald?”

The girl advanced slowly, with her undulous step, out of the gloom whence she had cast those half mocking, half uneasy words. The shaded lamp, above the carved desk beside which the two men were sitting, illumined at last her young, curving body, her white throat and painted lips. The shadows enclosed like a mask her large eyes so strange that they seemed unique in a world full of women’s eyes. Her hair, floating about her small head, tawny like the hair of Lucrezia Borgia, her namesake, was ready to burst into flame at the touch of light. She laid her fingertips upon the back of a chair and Gerald Arkel saw that the emerald ring, which he had given her for her birthday, was now on the third finger of her left hand. His thin, well-bred face did not change, though he felt as if a noose had suddenly been tightened around his chest.

Her brother Nicholas — — the celebrated Nick Sassotti — — was pouring two glasses of Riesling. He looked up with a contraction of his opaquely blond face.

“You better stop reading them books,” he told her dryly. “Sure, Gerry wants the King of China put on the spot, like they say, because he invented chop-suey.”

In the midst of his perfect immobility, Nick Sassotti left his hand flash out, snake-like, behind her, to give her a spank. Without moving, looking fixedly at Gerald Arkel, she muttered, “President of China.” She had gone through high school; she read the *Literary Digest* and had on her bedside-table a book of etiquette. She intended to be a lady. Her brother was proud of her.

Gerald Arkel wondered what would happen if Nick Sassotti learned the truth.

She took the chair that Vito had occupied before dinner while receiving Nick’s instructions about bringing in the trucks. With one of those swift, fluid movements that were a family trait, she was sitting so close to Gerald that he seemed to feel the inexhaustible warmth dissembled by her pale, calm face. He smelled her powder, Morny’s “Belle Guerrière”; there was a

box of it in his dressing-room in the flat across the city, together with a score of other fragrant or gay things that gave her pleasure.

Lucrezia took a cigarette from the silver box on the desk; Gerald struck a match. She held his brown hand steady with her white young hand, which was as cold as the shining emerald. Her full breast, leaning forward, stretched the dull-blue silk that was its only support. In the midst of his sense of being far from his real life, far from safety, he had a moment of mournful hunger for this fragrant throat that was not the throat he loved. He drew away, his face still impassive, his heart heavy with frustration.

“Has Vito gone out for him?” she asked her brother. “Who have you got that much of a grudge against, Gerald?”

“Vito’s out to meet the McCoy,” Nick Sassotti answered, with an air of extinguished humor. “What kind of an agency do you think I’m running now?”

She pounced upon her brother’s glass, drank the wine from it, returned it to him with the words:

“I guess you haven’t forgotten you owe Gerald a little service of almost any kind.”

Yes, Gerald Arkel thought, if it had not been for that night six months ago he would be far from this gratitude and this love. He recalled the dark street, lined with wholesale-houses, through which he had taken a short-cut. He had hardly noticed the car speeding ahead; but he had stopped his own car when men had appeared on each sidewalk behind a flicker of pistols. The car ahead had crashed into a wall. One man had emerged from it, as lithe and quick as a wildcat, his bare head glinting like tarnished gold in the starlight, his hand spitting deep golden fire. The others had run toward him; Gerald’s spirit had gone out to their lonely enemy waiting so debonairly in the middle of the street. He had sent his car humming forward through the fusillade turned instantly upon him and, thrusting out his left arm, had caught up, had swept away into safety with a wrench of his muscles, the celebrated Nick Sassotti.

“Why,” Gerald asked her with a smile, “should I want somebody slammed off?”

“It might be you were in love and not getting anywhere,” retorted the pale girl with the blazing hair and proud little high-bridged nose. She uttered a laugh, apparently of amusement.

Nick Sassotti, his blond, handsome face as serene as a mask, split a lightning-like glance between them. To his sister he said kindly:

“You been sort of goofy for two-three months, Lu. The other day I catch you having in an old dame to tell your fortune. You go round like you was walking in your sleep. Then you start riding people. You made a grouch out of Vito with your picking on him and here you are after Gerry with the melodrama. Listen, if your nerves are shot like that you better go see a doctor.”

He looked straight at her beautiful face, which had turned paler, the lips violently red, the tawny eyes startling in their sick intensity. She glanced down; her lips twisted and she said:

“What’s it to me? Except when you’re a gentleman and in the clear, why not stay there? I heard him say — —”

“Yeah. You’re hearing things now.” Nick Sassotti took the fresh cigarette from her hand and threw it into the shadows. “You got to cut down on this smoking, too,” he told her, slapping her hand with an almost imperceptible gesture. “I bet you’re up to four packs a day.”

His eyes seemed turned at the same instant toward her and toward the doorway. A man entered, small and dapper, his Sicilian face touched from below by the lamplight.

“Rooney’s here,” he said.

Nick Sassotti took a roll of banknotes from his trousers-pocket, stripped off two thousands and gave them to the Sicilian. He refilled Gerald’s glass and his own with Riesling, then pushed his glass toward his sister.

“It’s a tonic,” he remarked. “The both of you ain’t looking too good these days. Vito was saying only a couple days ago, ‘Gerry ain’t looking so good.’”

Gerald Arkel reflected on Vito’s interest. That dashing lieutenant of Nick Sassotti’s was not fond of Gerald. Perhaps, at Gerald’s appearance in this atmosphere, Vito’s and Lucrezia’s relationship had been more amiable? Gerald seemed to remember having had a different first impression of it; but now he could not be sure. In retrospect, nothing was clear except the stupefying fact of his having encountered the girl.

Despite that fact — — her existence as a nearly perfect counterfeit of his ideal — — he would hardly have reached these depths of falseness if she had not offered herself. It was his distressing secret that, though she loved him,

he, infatuated with the woman she resembled, could never quite love her. "In love," she had said, "and not getting anywhere." Had she begun to suspect that for him she was only the means toward a never-attained illusion?

He sipped his wine, began to talk of Italy, which neither the brother nor the sister had seen. They loved that land, the source of their vividness and their passionate will to life, like a heaven that they would some day know. Certain words of power that had passed from that heaven over the earth always made them solemn from pleasure. So Gerald began to say in Italian one of Boccaccio's sonnets to the Virgin; but when he came to the lines — —

I hope in thee as always; take of me
This full and reverent love I feel for thee — —

his voice failed and there was a silence.

The Sicilian appeared in the doorway.

"Car's here, chief."

Nick Sassotti was on his feet. For a moment he looked down at this lean, brown-faced young man, from the other side of the city, to whom he owed his life. His gaze passed to the emerald gorgeous on the third finger of Lucrezia's left hand; he made a slight grimace, as if at some inner twinge.

"Take care of yourselves, you kids," he said and was gone from the room. The feet of his body-guard tramped down the hall after his noiseless feet. Gerald thought, "He knows everything except the reason." And presently he added to himself, "He won't like it if I part from her now."

Lucrezia took a cigarette. She suggested, with a smouldering glance at him, "I know how you suffer from this furniture. Let's try mine."

They left Nick Sassotti's garishly oriental "study." They traversed the hall, went upstairs past a bent and withered woman clad in black. They entered Lucrezia's green sitting-room. She set some parchment lamp-shades aglow, then sank down on a chaise-longue. The room was thick with "Belle Guerrière."

"Shut the door, Gerald."

He glanced into the bedroom, saw on the bedside-table a photograph of himself in a large frame of tooled leather. There were piles of books on the floor, fresh from the box; he picked one up, then dropped it, a volume of the Harvard Classics. She was saying, her tawny, sick eyes fixed on his:

"There's some one else."

He crossed the room to her.

“And what excuse have you, of all girls, to say that?”

“You’ve never been mine,” she said. “Not your self, not your spirit. You’ve been like—how shall I say—a person who isn’t really there, going through the pretense of being in love with me. Your real self hasn’t been with me except maybe once or twice, by accident it seemed like, to show me what you could be before you went away again. I don’t know where you are, who you’re with, the real you; but it’s sure you’re not with me.”

“Do you think I’m unfaithful, then?”

“How can I tell?” She bowed her head that was splendid from the light behind her.

“Well, my dear, I’m not, on my honor.”

She shot upward at him a look of bitter humor, then lowered her long lashes heavy with blond mascaro, leaving that word between them. He turned away to stare at the shut door, beyond which he heard, creaking past, one of those old, black-clad dependents of the house, whose minds were sealed from this land by their helplessness before its language and by their prayers. He thought of the habitual life below, the messengers let in and out, the conferences of quiet men, the sense of supple efficiency, of triumphant cynicism, of accumulating wealth, that was the air of this place. He wanted to be free from it now.

Abruptly he spread his cards, as it were, before her startled eyes.

“You know my life over there, my incurable habits of thought, all the apparent trifles that would combine to crush your spirits. Even your beauty and your charm— —”

“Wouldn’t fix the fact that I’m Nick Sassotti’s sister, who pulled you in, first, by throwing herself at your head— — Yes, I understand all that. Did you think I expected to like it on your side of town?”

“Then what should I do? Leave my side of town and come to yours?”

She flinched; a wave of blood effaced her pallor. With a shrug of self-contempt she said:

“Italy! I thought that’d be far enough away for two people who cared for each other. Can you beat it? I had the notion things ought to be different

there, get something or other you might say out of the sky, like your friend Boccaccio said— —

Who dost adorn the heavens with thy bright glowing,
Thy star above the sea the home-way showing— —

A lot of boloney,” she laughed. “I’d better get busy and grow up. You can’t make some one love you with Italy any more than with a habeas corpus.”

“Oh, Lord!” he said, shaken by her distracted smile, trying to lift her up and thinking of another face that he had never seen changed by emotion. “Surely, somehow— —”

She whipped her hands away.

“Sure, when Nick is the King of China.”

There was a scratching on the door and an old voice croaking, “Lucrezia? Il telefono da giù.” The pale girl glided to her phone, listened awhile, with fixed eyes that slowly turned dark, then said, “No, I’ll tell him myself. You keep on rolling.”

She jiggled the hook, called a number, demanded, “Get my brother.” Her eyes were shut; the emerald shone beside her startled face in the sweet aura of the perfume that Gerald had persuaded her to wear. Her eyes opened wide.

“Nick? Vito’s out in the county, a spot called Mayville, with two drivers shot up. One truck’s back in a ditch on top of the Zarziulo boy. . . . He says from the size of the hoist it looks like Frank’s come to life. . . . No, Vito only lost the one; but he says he pushed the rest through somebody’s army. . . . I told him to keep coming, of course. . . . All right, what’s his number? . . . Watch your step now. Goodbye.”

She stared at Gerald till her second call was answered.

“Let me speak to Tony Fava. Lucrezia Sassotti. . . . Tony Fava? This is from my brother. Meet him at the Chalet with everybody you can pick up in a hurry and don’t turn it into a parade. And listen, if any of Frank Pagliuca’s old hoods are loafing around, we don’t like them any more; so use your judgment.”

For some moments after hanging up she sat quite still. Then she made the sound, “Whew!” and pressed her left hand beneath her bosom.

“So happy days are here again,” she uttered, as if out of breath, and gave Gerald a hard smile. “Nick Sassotti’s sister in person. You want somebody

slammed off? Get your application in early. And take your shadow off that window,” she cried in a breaking voice.

“As bad as that?” Gerald asked.

“If they climb on the roofs across the street, any man’s shadow’ll be good enough for them. I wish you’d go home.”

“And leave you with those old women?”

“What do you think would happen to me, a fate worse than death? We’re in the Twentieth Century now, sweetheart.” Her eyes took on a look of savage malice. “Wouldn’t it be swell if all this had happened four or five hundred years ago in Italy— —the noble Sassotti family and their war with the noble Frank Pagliucas! How good would I have seemed to you then?”

She brushed aside his protesting exclamation with a flash of the emerald, went into her bedroom, returned with a Mauser pistol.

“Put this in your pocket. Remember you can get ten shots out of it. If somebody crowds you while you’re leaving this street, cut loose on him. If that turns out to be a mistake, we’ll fix it.”

She crushed the weapon into his hand.

“I assure you, old girl, that I don’t intend to shoot any of the noble Pagliucas tonight or later.”

“You keep it, or I’ll throw it out of the window after you.”

A creaking passed along the corridor. Lucrezia opened the door.

“Who is it, Zia Anna?”

“Il Siciliano,” wheezed the old, tired voice.

“What did he come back for?”

She went down the corridor. “No, stay here,” she said to Gerald. He followed her. The lower hall was dark; they stood at a loss, with the nearly extinguished glimmer of Venetian glass overhead. Something abnormal in this unexpected quiet and emptiness drew them together, so that he felt her vitality as if in an electric contact. Then they saw a golden thread beneath the door of Nick Sassotti’s “study.”

He turned the knob. She tried to snatch him back from the gush of light. The small and dapper Sicilian whirled around from the open wall-safe; black steel was in his fist. Gerald shot him through the forehead. The mean face, turning non-committal, as if obediently keeping the secret imparted by that

tongue of flame, dived forward into the peach-and-azure plush of Nick Sassotti's best rug. With a sensation of nausea, Gerald slammed and locked the door on the prone body now too much like that of a nattily dressed small boy.

Lucrezia Sassotti, her teeth against Gerald's shoulder, her finger-nails digging into the muscles of his arms, sobbed, "How can I give you up?"

II

And if she did not hate him deadly, she would love him dearly.

—SHAKESPEARE.

“No, Mr. Gerald,” the butler smiled, with a glance at the hall-clock that had just chimed eleven, “Mrs. Quellan is still reading in the library. But you’ve missed Mr. Townshend, sir; he’s gone home with quite a nasty cold.” They traversed the hall paved with black-and-white marble. At the doorway of the library, the butler announced, in an indulgent tone:

“It’s Mr. Arkel, madam.”

Rita Quellan, staring up from a volume of Proust, exclaimed:

“Well, I must say, Gerald, you do run in early for breakfast.”

“It isn’t bacon and eggs that bother me when I think of you,” he replied, dropping into a chair.

The light from a reading-lamp shone on her ruddy hair. Her tawny eyes regarded him with sympathetic derision. There came from her bosom, white like freshly sculptured marble above the edge of her dull-blue evening dress, the fragrance of “Belle Guerrière.” On the third finger of her left hand he saw the pink pearl that should have been an emerald.

Of course, there were all those gestures, vocal intonations, moods of the eyes and the lips— —a thousand subtle elements produced in this soft air — —which composed her difference for him. Besides, she was a shade less tall, less strong, perhaps less vital, but in compensation more complex. It was as if her tissues had been made intensely aware of life’s last sensuous possibilities, in this safety full of leisure for luxurious and fastidious experiment.

She had been in Europe a long while. Returning with a Paris divorce, she had promptly engaged herself to Rufus Townshend. From abroad had come rumors of sprightly behavior; at home, it appeared, butter wouldn’t melt in her mouth. Yet recently it had seemed to Gerald that if Rufus were not about, she might turn to him.

In this air of his own world, remote from the vibrations of lawless enterprise, he remembered with embarrassment his questioning Nick Sassotti, “just to know,” about the technique of abolishing a human nuisance.

“Spokes tells me Rufus has a cold. I’m sorry.”

“He’s so careless of his health,” she said. “Mix yourself a Scotch-and-soda, Gerald. I sent him home to bed and gave him the most complete instructions.”

“How,” Gerald pondered, “can she see anything worth wanting in that blighter? Is utter dullness the mainstay of the art of love? Are buck teeth invincible?” He filled a glass with more whisky than soda. He set the glass down empty.

“We were talking about this bootleggers’ war,” Rita Quellan remarked, rearranging herself so as to sit on her feet.

“Is there one?”

“Poor Gerald. The newspapers are full of it. Five of them, fortunately, have been killed in a week.”

“Why fortunately? How do you expect to have this Scotch I’m drinking unless chaps get to work on the problem? And how are you going to prevent competition now and then? It’s we who make the business worth competing for, by the way. Mind my having another?”

He mixed himself a heavy drink, nodded toward the uncurtained French windows, which faced the dark flower-garden, and concluded:

“We get the benefits without the risks. Here’s the stuff they’re fighting about. If we were across the city on the other end of the deal, with those windows as they are, somebody might take a bang at me from out there.”

Rita, her eyes bright, looked at him fixedly. She retorted:

“Gerald, I will not have you talk immoral nonsense. Those men are savages.”

“They’re admirable,” he rejoined, setting down the empty glass, “in their merely medieval eagerness to attain their ends. There’s a lesson in it for all who falter effete in their purpose.”

“For you?”

“Especially for me.”

“Heavens!” she said, slapping her palms upon the arms of her chair, “are you planning to make love to me at this time of night, Gerald?”

“Why, I’m making love to you now,” he said, kneeling before her. He embraced her; he looked into her mocking face, so like that other face, so

different from it. And suddenly he felt unable to speak another word, as if, though his arms were at last around her, it was she who had become the counterfeit perfumed with “Belle Guerrière.”

He whispered in dismay, “Rita, Rita,” and laid his cheek upon her breast. He remained motionless, as one might try to divine the earth’s sterility or richness, in some long-sought country, by the feeling of it, pressed against it. Had he tarried too long on the journey; had he passed through lands that had confused his sense of truth?

“Rita, Rita,” he uttered again, in soft consternation.

She did not stir. Her bosom sustained his head as if without the breath of life, except that it was warm and soft and fragrant. A long minute passed in the room lighted only by the lamp beside her; stillness was everywhere, in the house, in the garden beyond the black and glossy windows, in the city, in the whole world. He seemed to sleep on her bosom at the end of a futile search.

He tightened his arms around her, pressed his lips to her throat, felt nothing. But she who had seemed lifeless now stirred and trembled.

The lamp had gone out. In the darkness, she lifted his face toward her invisible face. She made a sound that was half laugh and half sob as she drew his lips to hers.

He heard a distant, sharp cry, like that of a creature in a trap.

There was a tinkle of glass, a crackling of wood. He saw beyond the French windows, in the black garden, a flashing of orange light, one flash close upon another. He leaped up, seized Rita in his arms, lifted her through the darkness into a corner of the room. The glass of the windows split and tinkled; the walls were full of snapping sounds.

When there was silence, he recalled the uproar of a pistol in the hollow of the night.

He carried Rita Quellan out into the hall and set her upon her feet. “What is it?” she kept asking. “Did something blow up? Is the house on fire, Gerald?” Her voice was thin and clear; she was breathing rapidly; she sparkled with a sharpened beauty. His cheek was still warm from her bosom and his lips bore the taste of her lip-paint. He saw in motion, as if galvanized by those incomprehensible impressions, her body, in its dull-blue satin, that had finally become alive at his kiss. But now she appealed to him as though to a passerby, “Can’t you go in there and bring out some of those pictures?”

Oh, Spokes!” she exclaimed to the butler, who came pulling on his coat, “the library’s on fire. Get an extinguisher — —”

“You keep out of the library, Spokes,” Gerald Arkel warned him.

“But is it on fire, sir?”

“No, somebody’s been shooting bullets into it.”

“That wasn’t somebody shooting?” Rita protested, becoming motionless. “For heaven’s sake why?”

“Wouldn’t it be fine to know?”

His left arm was numb; he could feel blood trickling down it. He shoved his left hand with difficulty into the side-pocket of his dinner-coat.

“Shooting into my library? No, Gerald, it’s too much to expect me to have that kind of friends.” She was laughing unsteadily. “Not even Rufus, as madly as he loves me. Besides, he’s home in bed covered with mustard-ointment.”

Gerald pushed her into a chair with his right hand, then called:

“Spokes! Where the devil have you gone to? Get a drink for Mrs. Quellan. And one for me.”

“At once, sir,” the butler said, appearing around the black-and-white marble staircase. “I was only going to telephone the police.”

“See here, Rita,” asked Gerald, overcoming a touch of dizziness, “do we really need the police, the press and whatnot, because somebody with a gun got into the wrong garden?”

“You’re quite right.” She was already so calm that she hardly needed the long drink with which the butler came running. “You have, if I may say so, Gerald, an intelligent and even sprightly mind. In fact,” she added, looking up at him steadily over the fizzing glass, “a sustaining mind. Do you know, my friend, all my life, through some fatality, with everybody that I’ve got mixed up with, I’ve been the sturdy oak. I’ve so often said to myself, if only for a change I could be the clinging vine.”

“Hear, hear,” Gerald murmured. He saw a blackness gather around her bright face and felt for a moment like pitching into her lap. It seemed to him that his pocket was full of blood.

The front-door, at the end of the hall, resounded from some blows. The butler went to peer through the iron-filagreed glass. “It’s the patrolman,

madam,” he said heartily, swinging open the door. A young policeman entered.

“Anybody hurt in here?” After a look at Rita Quellan, he removed his cap. “The shots was fired in this house— —”

“In the garden behind the house,” Gerald corrected him. “If you can tell us whose sense of humor it is, we’ll knight you on the spot. That room there ought to be worth looking at, if you’re interested in the end-effects of bombardments.”

“You hurt?” The young patrolman looked keenly into Gerald’s face.

“I am damnably annoyed and more than a little scared,” Gerald told him, trying to glue his feet to the black-and-white pavement. He said to himself, “This is nonsense; I’ve got no more than a scratch.” He convinced himself that he had stopped bleeding into his pocket. Raising his glass, assuming what he hoped was a tipsy smile, he suggested, “Have a drink, officer. Spokes, get the officer a horn of spirits and we’ll quaff a toast to the mysterious stranger.”

The young policeman shook his head.

“I got to turn this matter in, Mrs. Quellan. Some parties fired off ten shots; that’s too many to make it a joke. Where’s the phone?”

“Show him the phone, Spokes,” said Rita Quellan, in an unnaturally clear voice. Her gaze swerved from Gerald’s feet.

The moment that they were alone, she darted out of her chair, touched his left sleeve, stared at her blood-smeared palm. Whipping the handkerchief from his breast-pocket, she knelt down and effaced from the pavement a splash of blood. “You’re always right,” she said distractedly. “If we must have scandals, let’s have private ones.” She was pulling him toward the staircase. “But you’re not going to bleed to death,” she gasped, dragging him by the right hand up half a dozen steps. “Standing around bleeding to death sans peur et sans reproche! Oh, darling, did it go clean through your arm?”

“Took some skin off,” he panted, finding it a task to climb the marble staircase with the wrought-iron balustrade.

“I’ll cure it, darling. I’ll make you well and happy.”

In her bedroom, she slipped off his coat and waistcoat, cut from his shirt the scarlet sleeve, gave a wail when she saw the groove that had half severed his triceps. Dribbling gore, he walked into the bathroom and sat down on the

edge of the tub. He had a spell of faintness, then observed that Rita and her maid were making his arm sting with iodine. The maid hissed, "Mais c'est affreux, madame!" "Ah, yes," said Gerald in French, "I'm a big wounded now."

"You're hopeless," Rita exclaimed, winding gauze around his arm. Then she muttered, kissing his cheek, "As if you ought to be."

They led him into the bedroom and made him lie down on a sofa. He accepted a cigarette. The maid at last departed, after hanging his coat and waistcoat before a freshly lighted fire. The bedroom was charming, orange and yellow and russet, full of small precious objects, the bookshelves lustrous with the bindings of books in French, English and Italian. Rita sat on the edge of the sofa, holding his hand. She had, again, the full loveliness of his dreams.

"I never saw your bedroom before."

"There must always be a first time, darling."

"I must apologize for drooping and languishing about in it like a perfect ass."

She smiled at him with misty eyes.

"You've lost a lot of blood. You really bleed magnificently, darling. Presently you are going home in a taxi and having a doctor who understands the Oath of Hippocrates."

"I'd much rather stay here."

"I'd much rather have you; but policemen are apt to be cynics."

"Yes, now the house is probably like a railway-station, full of people transporting clues. Yes, it's not a contributory atmosphere."

"Oh, darling, I'm so thankful for you; I've always felt that love ought to be gay."

The butler knocked on the door. The police would like to ask Mrs. Quellan and Mr. Arkel the customary questions.

Rita and Gerald slowly descended the marble staircase together. He knew that under his tan he was very pale, but reflected that one chap has as good a right as another to look anæmic. The washed blackness of his dinner-jacket on the left side was hardly noticeable now that the cloth was drying. Sharp eyes, however, were watching their descent. Gerald saw that some of

these men, in uniform and in plain-clothes, were higher in rank than the case would seem to have called for.

A patrolman opened the front-door. A burly man, in a captain's uniform, whose face was familiar to Gerald, came in as if he had been hurrying.

Rita paused on the lowest step.

"Spokes, set out some whisky and brandy in the dining-room. And a box of Coronas."

Rita, Gerald and four police-officials arranged themselves around the table in the Louis Seize dining-room. The policemen were possibly oppressed by the chaste splendor about them, if not by the social celebrity of their hostess. The captain who had arrived in a hurry stared at Rita with bewilderment in his protruding eyes. An old inspector said:

"This is just routine, ma'am. All we want is the lay of things when the shots was fired."

"Mr. Arkel can tell you more clearly than I," she confessed. "He had the presence of mind to rush me out of the room."

"Mr. Arkel is your fiancy, ma'am?"

"Yes," said Rita Quellan.

Gerald gazed without visible interest at his glass. The policemen all looked at him intently.

His head began to ache as he gave his impressions. He and Mrs. Quellan had been talking. He had heard glass breaking, had turned out the reading-lamp, had carried Mrs. Quellan into the hall. While speaking, he realized that the captain who had come in a hurry was Rooney, of Nick Sassotti's precinct. He raised his eyes toward the frog-like eyes of that officer and concluded, with a cold smile:

"Whoever he was, he was a rotten shot."

The four policemen had been sitting solidly, their hands around their glasses, their faces stiff, as if waiting for something unpleasant. Now they all moved, to drink, to flick ashes. The old inspector smirked:

"That depends on what he was aiming at. He broke a bottle of Scotch, smashed a plaque, like, in the mantelpiece and put a hole through the face of a saint in one of them paintings — —"

“My Mantegna!” cried Rita. “Oh, Gerald, he shot St. John in my very Mantegna!”

Gerald made no response. His head and arm were throbbing; his eyes felt scratchy. He reflected that so many policemen should have found the small foot-prints in the garden, the .30-calibre shells thrown from the ten-shot pistol, some hint of the Cadillac roadster that had come and gone. Rooney was here merely to listen. Before his arrival the word had been passed to the rest, the alibi arranged. “All the same, Nick must be boiling,” Gerald thought, “with this loose in the station-houses.” He looked morosely at the jolly old inspector, who was saying:

“A woozy friend, with a lot aboard, might think that scaring you folks was a good number. Haven’t you got some woozy friends, Mr. Arkel?”

“Loads of them,” Gerald retorted. “It’s the sort of thing I love to do myself. Will you call me a taxi, Spokes? I’m going to leave my car in your driveway, Rita; ask your man in the morning to find out what the deuce ails it.”

Captain Rooney waited for Gerald on the sidewalk. In the voice of an old friend, he imparted:

“Boy! when I walked in there you could of sapped me wid a stick of macaroni. Why don’t you take a little trip? Right now you ain’t looking so good.”

“Oh,” Gerald replied, “Nick told me that last week.”

“Yeah. People notice it when people ain’t looking so good. Think it over. You could start this minute.”

Gerald snorted:

“He mad at me? He sending the marksmen over?”

Rooney stuck a match in his mouth, squinted down at the tip of it, reached forward to set Gerald straight when he swayed out of balance.

“Well,” the captain pondered, “what do you think you can do and have um crazy about you?”

“If he comes around,” said Gerald, almost keeling over as he approached the taxi, “I’ve lost my temper too.” He stuck his head out of the taxi-window, focused his gaze on the captain, tried to snap his fingers and shouted, “Get on the phone and tell him that if I can pop a little boy whose

folks come from Sicily, I can pop a big boy whose folks come from Milano.”

“Oh, that was you, hey?” Captain Rooney replied.

“Any time!” Gerald promised, flung back upon the nape of his neck as the taxi jerked forward.

He sat up, peered through the rear-window, saw a Ford following. He was furious from resentment, alcohol, pain and fever. He was shocked by his remembrance of Lucrezia Sassotti’s cry in the dark garden; but he wanted to beat her for showering lead around Rita. The two became one woman. It was Lucrezia, with the large pink pearl on her finger, who was binding up his arm in the green sitting-room across the town. “I’ll make you well and happy, darling,” she was saying.

Rita. The right hour at last, Rufus out of the way, some Dutch courage, an unplanned novelty of approach. Women were beyond prediction, revealed suddenly through a perverse surrender to the unexpected and unknown. But why had his dream seemed to fade when he had embraced it at last? Why had it grown clear again when she had sat holding his hand? She’d said, “I’ve always thought that love ought to be gay.” She’d told them, “My fiancé,” without a wobble. What was he in for, an affair or a marriage?

He closed his burning eyes against the vision of Lucrezia Sassotti walking down the aisle on the arm of Rufus Townshend, pausing at the pew where he stood bleeding, saying, in Rita’s public voice, “Our little passade has been very nice, very jolly — —”

The Ford was still following the taxi.

“Look here,” Gerald demanded of the taxi-driver, “how have they time to play with me tonight? Isn’t this the night they spring the gag on noble old Frank Pagliuca?”

“I just got in town, boss.”

The taxi had reached Gerald’s house. He saw the Ford that had followed him stop before the drug store on the corner. He unlocked the door of his flat, caromed off the wall of the corridor, went into the living-room, switched on the lights, waited for whatever might happen. He was alone in the place. He remarked, with a groggy sneer, “Efficiency,” when the telephone rang before he laid down his hat. Picking up the hand-set, he heard the quiet voice of Nick Sassotti:

“I’m on my way over there.”

Gerald barked into the mouthpiece:

“Come and get it.”

III

I wonder that thou, being (as thou sayest thou art) born under Saturn, goest about to apply a moral medicine to a mortifying mischief.—SHAKESPEARE.

When he had rung once, Nick Sassotti noiselessly opened the door with the key that he had taken from his sister. He shut the door behind him, walked down the corridor as softly as a cat, stood on the threshold of the bright living-room. His opaquely blond face was empty under his dark felt hat. His eyes looked as lifeless as eyes of yellowish glass.

Gerald Arkel returned that stare from the couch on which he lay propped up by cushions. Under a bathrobe, his left arm was bandaged against his body. Whatever the doctor had given him had done him good.

“You took your time,” he said. “I fell asleep waiting for you.”

Nick Sassotti looked at the wood-paneled walls, the furniture upholstered with golden or brownish brocade. He saw the etchings on the panels, the bust of a laughing child by Donatello on the radio. Between the long windows that stood open to a little balcony and the soft night, on a buhl table, in a vase of Capodimonte, some roses were languishing, because Lucrezia had not been here since day before yesterday. Now her brother stared at these things that were a part of her life, that retained the smoothness of her touch and were lustrous from her many glances at them.

He seemed lonely, motionless in his admirable dark suit, surrounded by this slightly faded richness, trying to take it all in.

Some one, Gerald reflected, would be waiting outside the door. There would be others in the vestibule downstairs, a car-load across the street. So the celebrated Nick Sassotti would be traveling in war-times such as these — —no carelessness as on that night when Gerald, obeying a fatal interior command, had come to his aid.

Nick Sassotti mused:

“You drilled Frank’s stool for me and you left him making a mess of my best rug. You pulled me out one time when they had me good and you done this to my sister. Every second thing you do is the bad news. I wouldn’t take a cigarette off of you for fear you’d set me on fire with the match. I’m sick of watching you draw your breath.”

“Then why don’t you go home?”

A low voice called down the corridor:

“Okay, chief?”

“Shut that door and keep it shut,” Nick Sassotti said, without moving. He continued, staring at Gerald, “I’ll go home in just five minutes.” He gave a glance at his platinum wrist-watch: it was one o’clock in the morning. “This is a busy night for me; but I’m taking time out for you now because I don’t know where I’ll be tomorrow. I’m looking to get this settled first.”

“Lucrezia knew you were coming?”

“She knows I’m here. The last thing she says to me was that she won’t have no peace of mind until you’re dead.”

He sat down in a chair, laid his small and sinewy hands upon his knees, studied Gerald with the shallow look of a panther studying a man through the bars of a cage. His immobility was full of coiled force, to be released, if not here, upon those other enemies with whom he was to have an accounting tonight.

“Well, Nick, you must have known about Lucrezia and me a month or more ago.”

“Not all of it. Not that Lu wasn’t nothing to you but the fall-guy. I figured you was both in love with each other, like they say,” he went on quietly. His forehead beneath his hat-brim began to glisten with sweat. “I couldn’t miss it she was seeing you on the outside. I knew it was going to be a tough dose for you to make it right, you over here and all.” His glance shot around the room, then returned to Gerald’s face. “But I thought you would. I liked you and I had you wrong.”

Gerald swung his feet to the floor, sat up and rested his head on his hand.

“I suppose I couldn’t explain it,” he said. “I honestly don’t know this minute which I care for most. Sometimes it seems to me that they’re different phases of each other, that the one I’m with should have the other’s qualities added to hers in order to be complete. I know that’s a dreadfully conceited thing to say, Nick. As if I deserved any one more nearly complete than Lucrezia, than either of those two lovely women. If only there’d been just one of them in the world. Maybe I could make myself clear if the doctor hadn’t given me a shot fit for a horse.”

Nick Sassotti observed, “Ain’t that dandy,” and studied the dark head bowed, as if drowsing, before him. In the silence, the curtains at the

windows, on each side of the languishing roses, rustled softly in the night breeze.

“Listen, don’t go to sleep on me.”

“All right, old chap,” Gerald said, rearing his exhausted face. “You apparently want me to marry her; but she wants her peace of mind in quite another way. How does that make sense?”

There, he remembered, in the dining-room partly visible between those brownish hangings, she had sat with him on her last birthday, her desire to marry him very clear at last. It was she who had chosen the adventure of dining here with Gerald for the first time, at the table, shining with “family silver,” on which two male automatons had served the dinner brought in from the Royale. How dazzling she had been in her evening frock made by some unsuspecting Frenchman for Nick Sassotti’s sister.

The colorless voice explained:

“I’m the head of my family. What I say goes. Lu’ll marry you because I’ll tell her to. All she’ll need to see of your face is when you and her are standing in front of the judge. I’ll attend to the divorce, if I don’t stop something tonight. If I stop something, I can sure trust Lu to handle it herself, now that she’s got your number.”

“I can’t imagine anything fairer,” Gerald sighed.

He could stay awake only when he expected to be killed; it was all settled now and he wanted to go to sleep. She would doubtless end by marrying Vito, her brother’s dashing lieutenant.

“Is that Vito out in the hall?”

“And I’ve had to hold him off of you like I was holding a bulldog. It was him that tailed you and put you in the middle with us. What he’ll do to you later on I don’t know or care.” He rose. “Get an overcoat to cover that sling.”

“Why?” Gerald asked, without moving.

Nick Sassotti produced a folded paper.

“Here’s the license I found that she got a month ago. The judge is there by this time.”

Gerald became wide awake from rage. Shot-gunning him into the marriage he had accepted, dragging him out past Vito like a puppy on a leash! He stood straight, aimed at Nick Sassotti’s chin, said, “So you’re not

taking my promise?” His left arm fast to his side threw his punch out of line; he hit the other on the neck and knocked him, with his hat off, into the chair.

Nick Sassotti bounced back like an acrobat alighting on his toes at the end of a trick.

Behind him, between the brown curtains at the dining-room doorway, a figure appeared and disappeared, to a sound as if of a window-shade flying up. A voice remarked, “From Frank.” Gerald heard the swing-door between dining-room and pantry give a swish. Some smoke curled between the brown curtains.

Nick Sassotti sent Gerald an inadequate look of reproof. He took a step forward, laid his hands on Gerald’s shoulders and slowly lowered upon Gerald’s chest his moist brow, his dull-gold head. So he stood like a man in a Biblical picture that Gerald had seen in his childhood. Nick Sassotti was whispering:

“You crazy clown, you’re in a fine jam now.”

“I didn’t do it, Nick. He shot from behind you through a silencer.”

After a time, the other said faintly:

“Watch out for him.”

“He’s gone.”

“He done enough. Lay me down. I got no legs.” He murmured, as his head rolled back amid the cushions of the couch, “What a break for Lu.”

“But I do want to marry her, Nick.”

“You won’t get no chance. You’re up against Vito now. Hey, where are you?”

“I’m right here, phoning the doctor.”

“Yeah?” His voice was hardly audible. “Is he right?”

Nick Sassotti went to sleep.

Gerald glanced toward the dining-room, then toward the corridor leading to the outer door, which had evidently been unlatched. He laid his hand upon the telephone and started when it rang. He heard Rita Quellan exclaim:

“I knew it, darling! I was sure you’d not gone to bed as you were told. I got in touch with Dr. Marriet; I insisted on knowing the truth. Good heavens, darling, don’t you realize how badly you’re hurt? What in the world are you doing?”

“Just puttering about,” Gerald answered hopelessly, staring at Nick Sassotti’s unconscious face.

“He said you wouldn’t even have a nurse.”

“I’ve got one now. He’s asleep.”

“Your nurse asleep and you puttering about! Oh, darling, you’re delirious. I’m dressing and coming over.”

“Don’t do it. I’ve got a lot of men on my hands, men all over the place.”

“Darling, you’ve simply gone mad!”

Replacing the instrument, he saw, in the doorway of the corridor, Lucrezia Sassotti.

Gerald had a moment of hallucination; he thought he had been talking into the phone to Rita Quellan while she had been talking to him from the doorway. But this apparition wore a small black hat and black dress. This pale face, with unpainted lips, with smudges from blond mascaro melted and wiped away, could never have been Rita’s face. It had a fierce clarity that informed him, once for all, how unlike those two women were who had seemed so much alike.

She saw her brother, went to him, knelt beside him with her swift grace. Her fingers on his pulse, she stared at his wax-like serenity in amazement.

“Is he dying?”

“I don’t know. There was only one shot, through those curtains.”

“You didn’t do it?” she cried.

Gerald spoke a number into the telephone. “Dr. Marriet? Gerald Arkel. I’m desperately sorry; I have another case for you. A serious one this time. . . . Yes. . . . Thanks.” He dropped into the nearest chair, let his head roll back, closed his eyes. He lay as quiet as Nick Sassotti, all limp except for his stiffly bandaged arm.

“He may need an emergency-packing — —”

“Not likely,” said Gerald with an effort. “The wound’s in his back; he’s lying on it. I wouldn’t fool with it before the doctor comes.”

Lucrezia caught one of Nick Sassotti’s hands in hers. She kissed it with a smile of grief, held it against her cheek. She was sitting on the floor, sidewise, her face yearning toward that similar face which was like a reflection of her beauty in turbid water. Serene from utter exhaustion, Gerald

admired her back drooping exquisitely under the sheen of her dress. He became aware that all the movement of the night had not carried away from her the perfume “Belle Guerrière,” the obbligato to that egregious double symphony in his heart.

“Will he hurry, do you think?”

She retrieved the marriage-license from the floor, tried to fan the unconscious face, then began distractedly to twist the paper with her hands.

“Don’t get that all mussed up,” Gerald said.

She saw what it was. Her eyes blank, she tore it to pieces. She understood now what had happened here tonight. Her shocked face turned scarlet.

“So that’s what he wanted,” she uttered, “and that’s why you shot him in the back?” She leaped up, her face homicidal. “Vito!” she called.

“When I came home, I couldn’t even find a— —” The telephone began to ring. Gerald lifted the hand-set and dropped it to the floor. A faint tinkling issued from the receiver, the chatter of Rita Quellan’s voice. Gerald got his foot on the cord and ripped it loose; the voice ceased in the midst of a phrase. “Couldn’t even find a cap-pistol,” he continued. “If I’d found my gun, it wouldn’t have been loaded. Some chap, while Nick and I were having it out, showed between those curtains and snapped a quick one. As he faded away, he said it was from Frank.”

“From Frank!”

“Maybe,” remarked Vito, the debonair lieutenant, moving forward from the doorway.

His cheeks were brick-red; his black moustache appeared to be pasted on his face; his eyes were small and icy. Compact and neat, with his hard hat tipped, with his hands on his blue serge lapels, he stopped six feet from Gerald. Behind him, in the doorway, stood a short, bandy-legged fellow in his thirties, a foolish-looking green hat perched over his stubby features. Gerald knew him by sight as Willie Something-or-other, an expert machine-rifle man.

This creature cast one worried glance at Nick Sassotti, then turned his face toward Lucrezia like a sympathetic dog.

She went to Vito and said:

“It could happen. They’ve been following Nick for a week.”

Vito drew her aside. He stood with his left arm around her waist, smiling frostily.

“You want to take the word of this two-timer?” he asked her. “How would he stop so sudden playing sour? You had ten chances at him and you only chipped him. Now I’ll fix him for you good.”

“And what about my brother?”

The reckless lieutenant of Nick Sassotti—the exasperated suitor of Lucrezia—sullenly took thought. “Lookit,” exclaimed the bandy-legged fellow in the doorway, “you bump him now and the place is full of folks all over Nick.” He spoke in a chirping voice, holding up his chin as if to shake the words out. Gerald, leaning against the chair-back, beamed at him.

“Button your face, Willie.” With a glance at his watch, Vito sneered, “Just at the right time, ain’t it? We’ll never have them set up for us like this again. All on account of the boy-friend.”

Lucrezia Sassotti walked free from Vito’s arm, went to peer into her brother’s tranquil face, then whirled around to ask:

“Who’s downstairs besides McGinnis?”

“Leo’s out in the car.”

“Go get Leo for me, Willie,” she commanded. “Fast.”

The creature in the green hat vanished.

Her eyes fixed, she walked to and fro, lightly balanced on her feet, blindly turning when she reached a wall, like a beautiful and glossy animal pacing to dangerous thoughts. Gerald wandered into the dining-room, returned with a bottle of whisky, pulled the cork with his teeth.

“Have a snort, Vito?”

Vito snarled at him, his small moustache to one side.

A gangling young man, with a purple, caved-in nose, entered, looked instantly at everybody, including Nick Sassotti, then halted with his eyes turned up, as though anxious to see no more. Lucrezia went to him swiftly.

“Leo, you’re staying here. This gentleman,” she said, with an untranslatable turn of her eye toward Gerald, “will keep you company. Don’t take one drink. Watch the windows; lock up front and back and only open for the doctor. His name is Marriet. Repair this telephone-cord. I’ll be phoning in.”

The tall youth answered, as if he had a cold in the head:

“Don’t worry, Miss Sassotti.”

She kissed the face amid the cushions, then painfully compressed her lips.

“Let’s go, Vito.”

“Listen, Lu, you ain’t going into no party of that shape and size.”

“No?” She stood before him like a figure with invisible wings, her head high in its little black hat, her face, some freckles revealed on the cheekbones, quivering from ferocity. She laughed, with her mouth distorted, “You think I’d let Frank Pagliuca do this and not square it with him myself?”

“Listen, Lu, I ain’t going to let you— —”

“Button your own face,” she flung at him. “I’m running you the rest of this night.”

“And leave him laughing?” said Vito.

She gave Gerald the impact of her grief, her hatred, her hunger for revenge.

“Would you like to come along,” she jeered, “and know everything about me? I’d love it.”

In the corridor, Gerald shed his bathrobe and hung an overcoat around his shoulders. Before the house, he climbed into the rear seat of Lucrezia Sassotti’s roadster. With Vito beside her, she sent the car like a projectile through the darkness.

IV

My masters, are you mad? or what are you? —SHAKESPEARE.

Tony Fava, an abnormally wide little man, with a beak like a macaw and a lot of gray hair in his ears, explained:

“Here’s the lay-out, Miss Sassotti. I’m telling it to you like you would be my own daughter.” He began to draw a map on the dirty wooden table-top. “Here’s the highway. Here’s this house on it, where we’re setting — —”

Leaning against the wall, Gerald thought of men in dented armor about to attack a hill-town.

The truck-farmer’s front room was overcrowded. In one corner, under the wall-telephone through which they had tried to flash a warning, the truck-farmer and his two sons lay on the floor, bound with clothes-line. In another corner, four men were fitting the stocks to four Thompson shoulder-guns. A young Irishman, dressed as a taxi-driver, was clamping a fuse with his teeth upon a percussion-cap, above a suitcase open on a chair and half full of dynamite sticks. On a wall hung a yellowish lithograph of Nero watching some gladiators, with the words underneath, in Italian, “The Imperial Monster Gluts His Cruelty on Human Flesh— — The Vermuth of Fontana & Company is Magical for the Digestion.” Gerald made up his mind to steal it.

“From here, see, it’s a quarter-mile maybe to the house.”

“What’s behind the house?” asked Lucrezia Sassotti.

“Woods,” Tony Fava said. “They won’t be able to climb out that way; but we’ll have a tommy there in case.”

Vito, sitting on the other side of Lucrezia, remarked:

“It’s for us to say what we put there. This is still Nick’s party and Miss Sassotti and me are acting for him.”

“I am acting for him,” said Lucrezia.

The wall of men around the table did not stir. All the faces, indistinct in a zone of smoke, some youthful and nearly winsome, some maturely truculent, remained intent upon Lucrezia. She sat in the glare of the table-lamp, strange from her beauty and her smart attire, composed in the midst of the crude warriors who enveloped her with their force. She was Sassotti’s

sister, to most of them, until tonight, a fable. She was acting for him by the authority of blood, by the likeness of her implacable look to his. It was only her presence, perhaps, that held these mercenaries to her brother's purpose.

"There's a dirt road up to the house," Tony Fava continued, with Calabrian deliberation. He drew a line on the table, made a square at the end of it, set a dot before the square. "Here's a little what-you-call-em— — gabinetto di verdura. Uh-huh, a summer-house. Twenty years I'm here and I don't speak it yet. They'll have a look-out in there and another on the roof of the porcha."

"What they doing up there now?" Vito inquired.

"Still drinking and raising fun." Tony Fava blew his beak and said, "Some party, Miss Sassotti. Noises like a lot of lions. By Jimminy! I was up to listen and I catch myself wanting to join in."

Nobody smiled; but no pleasantry was intended. Tony Fava was famous for having no sense of humor.

A voice called from the doorway:

"Here's Ruby."

Men made room for a thin, blonde girl in white, her face ghastly under two pink spots, her lips drawn back from her teeth in a horrible jaunty smile. She saw Lucrezia and her eyes shone with despairing hatred.

"You going to talk to her?" murmured Vito.

Lucrezia shook her head.

"Listen, Ruby," Vito said to the blonde girl. "You got Smittie's call at twelve o'clock, didn't you? He's left; but you don't know he ain't there, see? You drive right up in the taxi— —"

"Smittie's nothing but a rat to put me on this one," the blonde girl uttered, in a shaky voice.

"You drive up, you hear me? You carry in the suitcase yourself. When you're in, you don't stop; you grin and stall them and go right back to the coats and hats. Don't let nobody take the suitcase; leave it inside the coat-room and beat it out back for the trees. If somebody looks funny, jump around out there before you run and holler, 'Come and catch me.' Remember the dress, you gees, to pass her through."

"And when does the suitcase go off?"

“Forget it, kid. We never make mistakes.”

“Yeah?” The girl gave a choking laugh, swung her thin shoulders with a wretched bravado and cried, “Well, I guess it’s that or something else. Money sure comes harder and harder.”

Lucrezia lowered her eyes.

“Take her out and get her ready,” said Vito. “Lu, we’re set to go.”

Lucrezia did not rise. “I don’t like this,” she exclaimed at last. “I won’t have that girl blown up.”

Half a dozen voices said eagerly, “She’ll be fine, Miss Sassotti.” Tony Fava protested:

“Why, Miss Sassotti! That girlie’s going to have a shot of hop and do it like nobody’s business. Why, that girlie’s going to be safe like she was at Mass in a churcha.”

“If she don’t go,” Vito pointed out, “we’ll have plenty losses before we clean them.” Winking at the taxi-driver, he said, “Put another minute on that fuse.” There was a scuffling of feet. The room was less crowded. The gunners, with canvas bags full of machine-rifle drums slung from their left shoulders, were also slipping clips of twenty into their pockets. The bandy-legged gunner with the green hat came to stand by Lucrezia. He looked up at her with the grin of a good dog.

“You tell me,” he chirped, “and I’ll do it. You’re strictly the chief with me.”

She went out into the air. Vito and the bandy-legged fellow followed her and Gerald followed them.

The yard behind the farm-house was full of cars, of men moving without lights. Voices spoke to one another quietly, as if afraid of being heard from the house far off on the hill. Some one called out boldly, “Where’s Miss ——” A dozen hissed at him. Tony Fava appeared before her out of the darkness and suggested, “How about I take my boys around in back and you lay out your boys in front?” “Do that,” she said. Men began to move away. The night was cool and sweet; a great chorus of insects swelled out of the distance; the sky was thick with stars. Perhaps it was merely the uncanny silence, the endless blank space, of the country that made them all so quiet.

Vito was talking with a man in the deeper shadow of a shed. Gerald felt, less than he saw, the man’s gaze turning to him, then heard the exclamation, unexpectedly distinct:

“Not me. Do it yourself.”

Lucrezia said softly to the bandy-legged gunner:

“Don’t get lost, Willie.”

Vito came to her; they spoke in undertones. He broke out with the words, “I’m telling you there’s five minutes of fuse; it only takes half that to drive there.” They called the young Irishman to them. Vito asked him:

“Has she had it?”

“Sure. She’s getting to be a big girl.”

“Watch the summer-house,” Vito told the bandy-legged man, “but wait for the dyna.”

“Whatever she tells me,” said Willie throatily.

At last, everybody was in motion: a vague line ascended an easy grade covered with timothy. Vito passed behind them, saying repeatedly, “Lay down when you can read the sign.” He ran back to the left. Lucrezia, Gerald and Willie were on the right.

They heard a faint clamor of music and of howling.

Before them appeared a two-story building with a cupola. A veranda stretched along the front. All the shutters were closed. On a sign the length of the house one could read at last, by the starlight, “Fanny’s Fairview Inn.”

Lucrezia sank down upon Willie’s coat, Gerald upon his own. Willie lay on his chest in the wet grass holding the Thompson-gun upright, the butt planted in the ground. The two hand-grips under the barrel made Gerald think of the handles of a scythe.

Straight ahead, beyond some bushes, was the summer-house.

“Are you enjoying yourself?” Lucrezia said quietly, turning her dim face toward Gerald.

“It’s at least instructive.”

“Ah, that’s what I told you,” her mocking undertone went on. “You didn’t expect I’d send a drugged girl on such a trip.”

“One death instead of more,” he murmured. “Besides, she must often have said to herself, ‘I wish I were— —or was— —dead.’ You may be the divine answer to that wish.”

In the summer-house, the enemy's look-out let a match flare for an instant while he lighted a cigarette.

"Yes, you're divine tonight," Gerald continued more drowsily. "Aphrodite, by some delightful anomaly, casting the thunderbolts of Zeus. Take off your hat, Aphrodite Sassotti, and let me see if your hair can flame by starlight. I haven't seen you in a dewy field, on the soft earth itself, in air that never knew the city. I mean, that never knew no city."

He swayed from the waist, caught himself by embracing her, kissed her shadowy lips. Then, lying back, he flung his unwounded arm across his eyes and sank into the more precious embrace of inanity.

"Here she comes," chirped Willie softly. He fitted a clip of twenty cartridges into place in front of his trigger-guard.

The taxi, its head-lights aflash, was roaring up the dirt road.

"I could stop her," Lucrezia breathed.

"Don't envy her transfiguration," Gerald answered, without stirring. "But at this moment she's even more august than you, my dear, more fatal and adorable. The *dea ex machina*."

The taxi sped past. It picked up with its head-lights a mass of cars parked before the tavern. It stopped with a squawk of its horn. The front door opened. A frail shape, leaning sidewise from the suitcase, staggered up the steps, was absorbed into a yellowish blur of figures. The door slammed darkly. The taxi rushed down the road.

A thumping and braying of a jazz-band mingled with the chorus of insects.

Lucrezia, her face in her hands, was muttering:

"I'm tired of it. I'm tired of the need of fighting like a beast for what you've gained. How we've spoiled this beautiful night; how we've spoiled life. I never saw her before. Like a doll that we'd wound up and made to walk into a furnace."

"She'll get away, perhaps," said Gerald. "They've made her cunning like a snake."

She leaned down, pulled his arm aside, peered into his face.

"Your eyes are wet for her!"

"For you," he whispered.

She gave a smothered cry. He caught her hand and said:

“How can it be helped? If the warfare in this business were legalized; if Nick were the Northern Electric and Frank the Southern Electric— I explained all that to some one tonight. Ah, yes, to Rita.”

At that word, Lucrezia stopped staring toward the tavern.

“I did my best to kill her, too.”

A voice called from the summer-house:

“Who are you? Speak up.”

Gerald sat erect. The earth moved beneath him in one piece. He saw a great, dark-red sheet of fire spread out behind the tavern, with a crash that sounded muffled yet seemed loud enough to fill the world. The cupola was gone. The shutters on the right had disappeared. The lights winked, went out, burned again. The tavern stood shocked into silence, its front intact.

A man came leaping down from the summer-house.

“Hey,” he was gasping. “Hey, what’s the big idea?”

Willie, stretched out in the grass, sent one shot at him. The man sailed through the air and plowed up the ground with his face. Far to the left, Vito was crying:

“Come on, you gees! Into your dance!”

The shadowy line moved forward.

“Why on earth don’t you wait here?” Gerald asked. “You can’t do anything up there.”

Lucrezia Sassotti, ignoring him, trudged on in her smart little hat and lustrous dress, her skirts, stockings and slippers drenched with dew. “Willie,” she said, “pass the word along that I don’t want them shooting in among those women.”

A man fired from the roof of the veranda. To the left, in the dark meadow, a machine-rifle clattered at him. The line dashed forward, took cover, among the cars, so close that they could see movement through the chinks in the shutters. There came to them from the rear of the house, where the dynamite had exploded, two or three pistol-shots, then the ripping reply of Tony Fava’s gunner.

Some one behind a car shouted:

“Whoo-hoo! Frank! We’re passing the dames out.”

A deep voice demanded through a shutter:

“What about these musicians?”

The fellow behind the car made the noise called the razzberry. Laughter ran along the line. A wag said mincingly, “Don’t dress up in no pinafore, Frank; we’d spot you sure.” The air was tainted by burning cloth and wood. One could hear people coughing in the house.

The door opened and the women came out.

They crowded down the steps, shrinking together, some crying, some laughing in drunken hysteria. They were brilliant from tinted tulle or cloth-of-silver, aglitter with white beads or sequins. In the light of the open doorway, they looked grotesque from the paint standing out on their cheeks. The men behind the cars whistled, made kissing noises, said to them, “Hello, Lucille. Hello, May. How about tomorrow?” The women passed through the line, then ran down the hillside into the deep darkness. Gerald counted thirty of them. Last of all, a buxom, middle-aged woman, with bleached hair, came out holding up a girl who was wounded in the shoulder. The door closed behind her. She paused on the steps to shout:

“You dirty bums! We’ll sure get you for this!”

A voice retorted:

“There won’t be nobody left to get us, Fanny.”

The woman and the injured girl slowly walked downhill. Vito spoke:

“Chuck it, Bugs.”

A boy stepped out from shelter, wound himself up like a pitcher, hurled a grenade at the door. The line of men leaped forward.

The first pair went in hard, their machine-rifles, held low, winking out two almost continuous flames. Indoors, there was a bang like a regiment firing as one; the two gunners dived into a wall of smoke that rushed to meet them. Vito’s derby and compact shoulders surged up against the light. “Step on it!” he bawled. He disappeared through the breach where the door had been, borne in on the roar and trample of a wedge of men.

“For Nick, this time,” said Lucrezia, in a choking voice, and put her hand over her mouth.

Men streamed along the veranda on each side, firing through shutters, smashing unshuttered windows. They crawled in over the sills and, in rooms suddenly darkened, began to utter, between the pistol-shots, “Sassotti!

Sassotti!" They were like the men in armor, fighting in blackness, calling their battle-cry so as not to be killed by friends. A young voice was screaming, "Listen! Have a heart!" In a room close to the ruined doorway, a figure loomed in the window-frame and leveled an arm at the watchers on the grass. The bullet whipped past Gerald's ear.

"Say, cut that out," called Willie, jumping in front of Lucrezia. The figure in the window vanished. Gerald said:

"That was old Vito. The lad can do two things at once."

Lucrezia, Gerald and Willie withdrew into the deeper shadows. Some of Tony Fava's men, who had come around the house, were waiting there to shoot down anybody who escaped. They cast their voices across the wet timothy, "That's right, Miss Sassotti: you want to watch out for them tramps." A man motionless nearby, like a statue planted in the grass, said to Willie, "What you doing with that tommy? Holding it back for the Fourth?"

"Another crack off of you," said the bandy-legged gunner, "and I'll see you outside."

A tall, bony man was coming toward them slowly, swaying, from the corner of the house. Above him, the night was taking on a ruddiness from the fire behind the roof. He stumbled toward them with a placid persistence, to halt before Lucrezia Sassotti. One could see his eyes, deep in their sockets, contemplating her dreamily.

Willie snicked the automatic-catch of his shoulder-gun. The tall, bony man still gazed at Lucrezia.

It was as if he had some message to give her, kindly, related to her welfare. It was as if he could not speak it yet because of the banging and yelling of men taking one another's lives. While he was waiting, with that gentle and promising look, for the noise to cease, he began to fall forward, long, straight, unprotected by his arms, dead before he hit the ground.

"That was Frank," said Willie.

Lucrezia took a few steps farther into the gloom. She laid her hand upon Gerald's shoulder, her forehead upon her hand. "Oh," she sighed, "to go somewhere and be somebody else!"

"They'd have carried it through anyway," Gerald said. "Vito could have carried it through."

"Vito." She shook her head resting against her hand. "And I've made you kill a man yourself."

“That was just a question of him or me.”

“Like this was just a question of Nick or Frank.”

Men were jumping out of the upper windows and rolling off the roof of the veranda. From the meadow, Tony Fava’s people hurried in at them. Gerald drew Lucrezia still farther from the tavern. Willie followed at their heels.

“What makes you do that?” she asked Gerald. “You feel dreadful, don’t you?”

“I don’t feel so hot.”

His wounded arm gave great throbs to the rapid beating of his heart. He felt like the shell of a man, with nothing inside that burning shell of pain. He had lost his overcoat somewhere: so he burned in his shirt, in the arm bandaged against his body, in his dizzy head.

“You ought to be lying down.”

“So Rita was telling me.”

The roof had caught fire. Now men were pouring out of the house, coughing, lighting cigarettes, carrying limp bodies toward the cars of the vanquished, to take them down to the truck-farm. A voice shouted above the whirring of the flames, “Hey, Louie! I found that kid hiding out in Fanny’s trunk.” There was some laughter. Bottles passed from hand to hand. A fellow with a silver saxophone remarked, “Them dames must be wandering round all over the map.” Men began to squeal, “Oh, May! Oh, Vivian! Come ride home with papa!”

Lucrezia Sassotti shuddered.

“If Nick gets well— —”

Gerald, feeling maudlin, assured her:

“He’ll be preserved for many surprising deeds, all done with the family charm. No, Nick will hardly renounce his belief that war is the best argumentum ad hominem. You and he are alike in a lot of things; but you differ in this— —he finds himself complete; you’re always becoming. I don’t know what you’ll become; but, as Willie would put it, you will be strictly okay.”

“At least, nobody shall ever get hurt through me again.”

The last of Tony Fava's party trudged around the house under a shower of sparks. Every one was in sight, every one was looking, when, in the radiance of the conflagration, Vito walked through the timothy toward Lucrezia and Gerald. He was fitting a fresh clip into his pistol.

"All over," he said, with his frosty smile, "except one little matter."

His brick-red cheeks were covered with sweat; but his small moustache had not been disarranged. He was as neat as ever in his blue serge suit; but an exultant insanity brimmed his eyes. He set the pistol in his palm and announced to Gerald:

"I mean you. Lu tried; Nick tried; now I'll do it, you big — —"

"Willie!" cried Lucrezia Sassotti.

The bandy-legged gunner in the foolish hat shot from the hip before Vito could lift his pistol. The stream of bullets broke Vito as if he were a mannikin doubling at the middle in a fog of smoke. The last half of the clipful sprayed him as he lay in the grass. Willie snapped on another clip of twenty. Everything that he had done had been too quick for the eye.

The crowd of men seemed to reach them by a miracle of transposition. They stood staring from Vito's body to Willie, from Willie to Lucrezia. Tony Fava wagged his beak in paternal reproach.

"Well, Miss Sassotti! Nick won't lika this part much." He turned to Willie. "Ain't you ashamed of yourself, doing that to Vito!"

Willie put up his chin, made his throat shake and warbled:

"He was always the bunk with me."

"Be still, both of you," Lucrezia blazed at them. "You think Nick would have let him shoot anybody with an arm in a sling? It's you that I'm ashamed of, Tony Fava. You certainly have your nerve with you, too. Who's chief here tonight?"

"You," said Willie quickly.

"Go on, the lot of you," she commanded. "Clean up your mess and chase yourselves out of here."

The house on fire cast its light upon her face, made her darkly ruddy all over, gave her a violent glamour. Men smiled at her across the body of Vito, seeing her as a dream made real — —loveliness mingled with peril, death fused with delight. They turned away from her reluctantly. One or two sent

back the words, “Aw, don’t be sore, Miss Sassotti.” They began to run toward the cars baking before the house in the heat of the fire.

Lucrezia, Gerald and Willie went down to the dark yard behind the truck-farm.

She worked her roadster out into the highway. Gerald sat beside her. Willie sat in back, the Thompson-gun on his knees.

They came to an all-night lunch-room by the road, went in to telephone. Willie ordered three hamburgers, begging the counter-man not to cook them into no soles for a shoe. The counter-man leaned forward to look at the machine-rifle lying across two stools. He inquired:

“Are you a hunter, mister?”

“And how. And a cup of the java.”

Gerald was drinking cold sarsaparilla by the phone on the wall. He would empty a bottle, pick up the dangling receiver, listen, then pick up another bottle from the floor. He would not let Lucrezia touch the phone. She put her hand to his forehead and began to weep. “You’re just burning up,” she quavered. “You’re going to drop any minute. Where did I hit you? Did it cut an artery?”

“I’m swell. This stuff makes me feel simply god-like. Get me some more. Try for some delicious lemon-soda. Hello! Who’s this talking, old Leo?”

“Tell him he missed it,” suggested Willie.

Leo, still speaking as if he had a cold in the head, imparted that Nick Sassotti was now in Dr. Marriet’s hospital. The chances were a good fifty-fifty. Rooney had dropped in to take Dr. Marriet’s report. “Everything’s jake on that end,” Leo continued. “A dame’s been calling up every five minutes all night asking if you’re back.”

“If she calls again, I’ve sailed for Italy.” He said to Lucrezia, “Nick’s all right. That won’t even get in the papers.”

“Yes, he’ll live and you’ll die!”

“Say,” Leo’s voice inquired, “how did the party come out?”

“Why, it was a great success, except—well, Leo, to be perfectly candid, Vito’s no longer with us.”

Leo was silent. At last he said:

“Ain’t that awful. Then he’ll never be able to break my nose no more.”

Gerald had a vague impression of refusing to leave till he had told the counter-man about a picture, which he had in the car, of Nero magically digesting his dinner with the Vermuth of Fontana. He said, “I intend to bequeath it to my son, who also will have a flaming beard— — ahenobarbus. Paid for? Are you paying my bills now, young Aphrodite of the Flaming Tresses?” He pondered this scandal as Lucrezia and Willie dragged him out between them.

He was in the speeding roadster beside Lucrezia, with his cheek on her shoulder. The sky was close to dawn.

“I’ll make you well,” she muttered defiantly.

“And happy,” he added for her. He rubbed his cheek against her shoulder, which still smelled of “Belle Guerrière.” “I’m going to get you another perfume, dearest,” he managed to say. He moved her right hand from the wheel, let himself slip, transferred his cheek to her breast. “Cripes!” he whispered, “how nice.” This, he knew at last, was the bosom when life had shot one up. Italy— — An old villa— — Babies playing with pop-guns— — Lucrezia making her hair flame in the starlight— —

PART II

SASSOTTI'S LADY-FRIEND

I

We are more medieval than the Eighteenth Century; not only more inquisitive or more susceptible to the strange and to the rare.

—NIETZSCHE.

Nick Sassotti, seated beside the carved desk in the room that he called his “study,” was talking with Sheridan Durand, the eminent criminal-lawyer. Nick sat perfectly still, the desk-light illuminating one side of his handsome, yellowish face and making his hair glint like tarnished gold. His amber-colored eyes were turned toward the spot, now immaculate, on the costly rug from Persia, where a man had once been allowed to lie all night after being shot through the forehead. This time Nick had thought of that piece of carelessness because Sheridan Durand had inquired:

“Are your sister and her husband still in Rome?”

“They moved to a place called Frascati on account of the kid.”

He took out his wallet, produced a snapshot print and remarked, with a laugh that dissembled a savage pride:

“They named him little Nickie.”

Sheridan Durand, lean, hawk-faced, foppishly dressed in far too young a style, examined the picture with the eyes that had magnetized many juries. Nick Sassotti’s sister was standing on a terrace, with the baby in her arms, against a background of mountains.

“Great maternal tableau,” said Sheridan Durand, who had found the world too full of beautiful ladies to consider marriage. “It’s nice there, Nick. Don’t you ever want to make the trip?”

“Oh, I’d like to give it a look,” the other admitted, carefully stowing the print away in his wallet. “But not for no length of time. What would I do with myself? If they wanted to keep me in Italy they should start Prohibition.”

He turned to the telephone on the desk, called a number, inquired:

“Has Bennie got there? . . . Tell him, when he comes in, I’ve sent the boys down to the Cassel Street plant and it’s all to go to the back of the ground floor.”

“Scotch?” said Sheridan Durand.

“Just forty-five thousand gallons European alcohol.”

The guard in the hall, a young man named Leo, was exercising his cigarette-cough. Nick Sassotti, who heard and saw everything within the radius of human perception, knew that Leo was sitting on the sofa under the stairs, probably looking at the Venetian glass chandelier suspended from the frescoed ceiling.

On the staircase, no doubt, ascending or descending, would be one of the old black-clad women that Nick had imported from Italy—the poor relations of his mother and his father, the drab adorers of his sister Lucrezia.

He had shown them the picture of the baby. They had peered at it in a doddering state of joy, croaking nonsense in the Milanese dialect; but he knew that they were not yet satisfied. When they climbed the stairs to bed, when they descended to the region of risottos and spaghetti-sauces, they were praying that he, too, would marry and have children.

“Well,” said Sheridan Durand, “don’t let that big Polack hear of any alcohol, if he’s really worked himself up to bother you.”

Nick Sassotti poured Riesling into two glasses and pushed the silver cigarette-box toward his guest.

“There’s always somebody working up to the idea that he can bother me. Summer before last it was Frank. Well, Frank’s gone; so this year it’s what they call Big Joe Klopick. He’s over there with a lot of cheap cookers turning it out for him and he finds there’s people to drink it and his luck goes to his head. He gets a mob of punks around him that I wouldn’t let stick labels and they hear somewheres they’re an army.”

“The risk is that they’ll think they are,” said Sheridan Durand.

“That’s what their ward boss thinks they are. He sees them scaring out the little independents and he thinks they can come over here and scare the voters with us. My ward’ll be full of them till after this recall-election. Joe Klopick knows the trouble I had fixing the holler when we settled up with Frank. He thinks I don’t even want to shoot fire-crackers no more.”

“Yes, it would be inadvisable,” the eminent criminal-lawyer dryly offered as his opinion.

Nick Sassotti calmly blew some smoke out of his nose. “Why not get after Joe Klopick through the City Hall,” he suggested. “Your friend O’Connla might ask them reformers, in a speech, why they’re trying the

strong-arm stuff over here, with all their bushwa about square politics. Don't let Joe ride me too hard, Sherry, unless you want to clean up after me."

Sheridan Durand made an emphatic gesture of refusal.

"You'd go bigger in court this year with a pansy-eyed wife and a lot of tiny children."

"Fix that up for me, too, will you?" The phone rang. Nick Sassotti listened, then said, "Stop arguing with me, Bennie. Put it all just where I told you. Call up Rooney and tell him I want coppers on that warehouse front and back. Have one can at Schmidt and Beardsley's when they open in the morning and tell them to report the test personal to me." He hung up and concluded, "You know. Muscling in on our voters is only the front of Joe's act. The poor Pojay's mouth is watering over my business."

"Oh, well, Nick, he can't have it."

"But sooner or later I got to prove it to him. Let's hold that back awhile."

The lawyer was staring at his host like an artist planning a portrait. Framed by the flagrant orientalism of the "study," Nick Sassotti sat like a lithe, blond condottiere out of the Middle Ages, somewhat coarsened by warfare, disguised in excellently chosen modern clothes. His face was coldly handsome; his yellow eyes seemed to have no thought behind them. His thick hair was cut short and dressed with a quinine tonic. The finger-nails of his small and powerful hands were manicured without polish. He affronted the current fashion by wearing in his tie a large black pearl.

"Ever hear of Mrs. Townshend?" the guest innocently asked. "Her name used to be Rita Quellan. She wants to meet you."

Nick Sassotti gave his legal adviser a frigid look.

"What for?"

"Well, good Lord! because you're a celebrity, I suppose. Not that you wouldn't disappoint her; she's expecting you to be a sort of orang-outang dressed up in a checkered suit. She's one of those charming but restless women always looking for novelty, excitement—"

The aging beau smiled with a reminiscent air, as if trying to give the impression that he knew a good deal about the lady's temperament. But men seldom deceived Nick Sassotti.

"Yeah?" he said, staring at Sheridan Durand with unwinking eyes. "So you're an old friend of hers. How many times is this she's been married?"

“Only the third time, Nick.”

“She’s almost hustling, ain’t she? My mother and my father got married when they was kids in Milano and I buried them here in the same vault. I guess my father used to take a chance sometimes; but he was always glad to get home. You couldn’t of split them two apart with an axe. That’s the way it ought to be. Give her my regrets and tell her she’ll be all right after a good cry.”

“Yes, she’ll be disappointed.”

“Ain’t that a shame. What should I do with that kind of people? They make me sick long-distance.”

A silver clock shaped like a mosque, on the mantel above the coal fire, struck half-past eleven.

“How’d you like to drop in at the Imperial?” Sheridan Durand suggested.

“Why not. We might find a drink there,” said Nick Sassotti, without any facial evidence of humor.

He rose, crossed the room with the quick yet apparently deliberate grace of felines, held the door open for his guest. A short, bandy-legged man in his thirties appeared with the overcoats and hats. Leo, the tall youth, unfolded himself from the sofa under the staircase. When he put on a yellow cap, Nick Sassotti looked at him.

“Take that thing off,” he said, “and find yourself a hat. What do you think you are now, a skiboo in a moving-picture?”

The bandy-legged man stayed behind. The others went down to a Cadillac touring-car. The swarthy driver awoke as Nick and Durand climbed into the tonneau. Two strangers passed along the sidewalk; when they were a few yards away, one of them said, “Ba-a-a-a!” Leo, who was closing the door of the tonneau from the outside, turned toward the strangers and shook a blackjack from his sleeve into his hand.

“Leave them be,” Nick Sassotti said, “and get in here.”

Some men were loitering across the street.

“The Imperial, Angelo.” The car went in second to forty-five miles an hour. “You see, Sherry, how it’s shaping up. He’s going to be sticking out his chin at me until I sock it.”

“I’d better get busy with O’Connla,” the eminent lawyer said.

“Tomorrow. Ain’t this a night. Look at the moon in them clouds. I wonder do they get it like that in Italy.” He chuckled, “I bet little Nickie’s awake and shouting for his breakfast.”

“You ought to have some of your own, Nick.”

“Don’t be silly.”

He fell silent. A desire had returned to him for sons made in his image. At the same time, he would wish them to be equipped with certain qualities that he had found no chance to acquire. Nick Sassotti wanted his sons to go everywhere, to get away with everything, above all to overwhelm those silly women, like peacocks, in the unknown world of fashion. He did not ask himself why he desired this so fiercely, as if it would be a revenge for offenses that had never been committed. But he could not have those remorselessly triumphant sons till he found the woman worthy to be their mother.

The car stopped below a canopy of glass and gilded iron.

The brass plates on each side of the doorway were inscribed, “Imperial Café,” and underneath, “F. Xavier Mulqueen.” In the white-and-gold lobby stood a big, gray-haired man in a dinner-coat, with an over-developed chest and a face like a pink boulder. Nick Sassotti clapped him on the arm.

“Hello, champ,” he said. “Nice little business tonight.”

He flashed one glance over the French-looking restaurant, perceived all the patrons, all the waiters, all the musicians. Lights dimmed; saxophones moaned; the wall-mirrors seemed to reflect a multitude of dancers.

“Anybody in the red room?”

“Plenty,” said Xavier Mulqueen, with the voice of a man talking in a hogshead. “How about the recall-election now, Nick? Will them Polish scoundrels push us around?”

Nick grinned and went on with Sheridan Durand to the red room.

The circular table was surrounded by a dozen persons— —newspapermen and politicians, a gambler and a boxer, three ladies of the musical-comedy stage. One saw bottles of champagne and plates of oyster-shells. Before a little man in a wig lay a sheaf of American Tel. and Tel. bonds too bulky to go into a pocket. The Sunday editor of the *Sphere* and Blanche de Vinne, the dancer, made room for Nick between them. The dancer kissed the black pearl in his tie, then, confessing that she was worn out, laid her head upon his chest. She murmured:

“Your suspender-buckle must be encrusted with jewels of price, Mr. Sassotti, the way it is hurting my ear.”

“Then take your ear in your hand,” he answered pleasantly, “and jump in an ocean with it.”

He felt at home in the red room. He liked these people, so easy to know and so apt to bedeck their thoughts with a whimsical charm. He looked down at the dark curls spread out against his coat. The dancer had a sweet and simple perfume; she was as hard as nails from constant exercise. He asked the Sunday editor out of the side of his mouth:

“She with you?”

“Not at all. Help yourself.”

“Oh, Mr. Sassotti,” the dancer whispered, “pardon me, but I overheard your secret, unless there’s a ventriloquist in the house.”

He did not deign to reply.

The little man in the wig wanted to make an election-bet with the boxer. The Association of Bankers and Merchants, he announced, was infallibly going to purify the town. This recalled to Nick’s mind the presumptuous Joe Klopick who, though the Bankers and Merchants, of course, would indignantly disown him, had the momentary distinction of proceeding under the banner of reform. Frowning at the little man, he remarked:

“Maybe you’d like to bet them bonds with me.”

“No, I wouldn’t,” the little man said emphatically. “These bonds belong to my wife.”

“Why don’t you take them home, then, before you get yourself stewed and give them to a taxi-driver? Look what you’re drinking.” Nick Sassotti pointed at the bottle of whisky before the little man. “Who give you that rat-poison? Don’t you know the fella that makes it leaves it full of di-ethyl phthalate?”

He had recognized the label with which Big Joe Klopick was signing his counterfeits of Scotch.

A man and a woman stood in the doorway of the red room. The man was fairly young, serious-looking, with a homely face and buck teeth; he wore a tail-coat and a gardenia. His bashful eyes turned toward Sheridan Durand, who jumped up and said effusively:

“Well! do come in.”

The woman did not move. She stood looking across the table at Nick Sassotti, as if waiting for him to rise. He sat still, patting the shoulder of the dancer, whose dark head drowsed on his breast, and saying to himself, "So Sherry framed me."

He knew that this was Rita Townshend, who had been Rita Quellan.

She came into the room at last, a slowly moving figure of brightness. She seated herself in the Sunday editor's chair. Nick Sassotti, turning his head on the pivot of his neck, let his expressionless eyes examine her.

He had heard that she resembled Lucrezia. He denied to himself that there was any likeness.

She did not look real to him. Her hair nowadays whitened with henna, her skin covered with a snowy paste, made her tawny eyes and pale-red lip-paint unnaturally distinct. Her features were arrogant, yet hinted at wit and emotion. Any one but Nick would have admitted her beauty. He irritably observed, above the wrap that she had let fall behind her, the pallor of her bosom emerging from the low-cut dress of faint-vermilion shot with silver threads. He was annoyed by her perfume, "La Fille du Roi Pausole." He saw on her left hand, below her wedding ring, a pink pearl as large as his black one; noting that she wore no other ornaments, he told himself, "Yeah. Tonight she's slumming."

Rita Townshend smiled at him.

"I've just been hearing the 'Gioielli della Madonna,'" she said, in a low, rich voice. "That's an opera you know well, I fancy," she added fluently in Italian. "I always feel afterward that I've spent the evening really between the Via Roma and the Corso Garibaldi."

"I speak English," said Nick Sassotti quietly.

The dancer lifted her head, gazed at Rita Townshend in bewilderment, then, sitting erect, put her curls to rights. She found her hat and pulled it over her head. "Well, Mr. Sassotti, sir," she murmured, producing her vanity-case, "it's been very nice to meet you so informally, hasn't it, though?"

"You set there," he instructed her, "till I see you to your front-door."

This time Rita Townshend smiled at the dancer.

"Aren't you Blanche de Vinne? I've been enjoying you so much. I don't think there's anybody on the stage who can do the things you do." She immediately ignored the girl, to ask Nick Sassotti, "And how is dear Gerald?"

I hear they're in Italy and have a splendid baby. I hope they named him after you. You don't know how long I've been on pins and needles to meet you."

"Is that a fact," said Nick, with a tired air.

He had to admire her aplomb, her manner of assuming that they had something in common, especially her disregard of that episode, in the past, which must have shocked and humiliated her. He perceived that this woman had the talent for creating with an impudent swiftness the effect of intimacy.

Her husband, Rufus Townshend, was talking with Sheridan Durand. Nick would have described him as a "goody-goody" and, where his wife was concerned, perhaps a "chump." Nick Sassotti emptied his champagne-glass and vouchsafed:

"Well, you seen me. Now perhaps you can sleep nights."

Morosely he watched her laugh. Her lightly painted lips parted, to reveal her white teeth, her pink mouth and tongue. Her throat swelled with her laughter; a small ripple seemed to descend into the hollow of her breast. She shone with the whiteness of enamel, with the pinkness of her moist mouth, with the pallid gold of her hair and the glint of her golden eyes. Her laughter shook loose a fragrance half from her perfume and half from her warm self.

"Are you always like this, Nicholas? You simply must dine with me not later than tomorrow night. Think, Nicholas, we're almost relatives!"

"Don't call me that again."

"Nick, then. Will you, for me, Nick?"

"No."

He saw Leo insert his head into the room, then his gangling body. The young man diffidently circled the table, leaned over Nick Sassotti and reported:

"Willie phoned. He hears something out on the steps, takes a peek through the little window and what do you know? Them Polacks have hung crape on the door-bell."

"Wouldn't that wait till I got home?" Nick witheringly inquired. He turned his glassy eyes to Rita Townshend. "I live over on the edge of Little Italy, Rita," he said, with ironical consideration. "There's always kids playing tricks; they get Willie and Leo mad—"

"Was that a gun-man?" Rita Townshend interrupted eagerly. "Oh, Nick, do say he was a gun-man."

“What’s a gun-man?” demanded Nick Sassotti in disgust. “You been reading them books.” He looked down at her hand on his arm, then wearily explained, “That’s the only place you find gun-men, putting parties what they call on the spot and everything.”

There were a few distant thuds, like a man hammering nails. The company stopped talking. After some moments, Xavier Mulqueen opened the door, his boulder-like face bright-red. He gazed at Nick Sassotti.

Nick went out with him quickly through the restaurant. On the sidewalk, policemen were holding a crowd back from the touring-car. The swarthy driver sat calmly in his place. On the tonneau-cushions, in the attitude of a financier being conveyed to the bank, Leo reclined, with a bullet through his heart. Xavier Mulqueen rumbled:

“They went by fast and cut loose when your boy got in. I guess they thought he was you.”

The cloak-room girl ran out with Nick’s overcoat and hat. He jumped in beside Leo and said:

“Come on, one of you coppers.” He saw on the sidewalk the dancer and Rita and Rufus Townshend. He called to the dancer, “Good-night, sister,” and ignored the others. He addressed the driver, “Precinct Station, Angelo.” He was doing Leo the honor of turning in his body himself, before attending to his own affairs.

II

To flee ennui by any means is no less vulgar than to work at anything.—NIETZSCHE.

The butler, appearing in the doorway of the drawing-room, his face fatigued from the strain of the evening, asked Mrs. Townshend if there would be anything else. She told him, "No. Go to bed, Spokes. We'll let Mr. Sassotti out."

When the butler had gone, there was for Rita Townshend's house an uncommonly long silence.

Once more Nick Sassotti scrutinized the large Louis Seize room— —the Deux-Sèvres vases, full of white roses, on the consoles, the almost invaluable Watteau and Fragonard on the walls of pale brocade, the crystal chinoiseries over the marble fire-place. The Aubusson carpet, with its faintly tinted garlands, was a bothersome contrast to Nick's vivid rugs. But the whole room troubled him because it was lacking in any note of strength. It occurred to him that Lucrezia would be apt to admire all this and that he might be wrong in finding it wishy-washy.

"Have another brandy-and-soda," suggested Rufus Townshend, who had not dressed for dinner.

"The brandy's okay; but I don't drink much of the hard stuff."

Nick Sassotti occupied a gilded chair before the fire-place, in a position from which he could see both doors. The curtained windows at his back did not trouble him. On that side of the house, the touring-car was waiting, with men in it who had laid on the floor of the tonneau, under the rugs, some Winchester riot-guns.

After studying Rufus Townshend's homely and earnest face, Nick Sassotti said patiently:

"I'm trying to wise you up to what you're doing over here. You're one of the bankers— —anyways you're a vice-president in the Metropolitan First, where I keep my own loose change— —and you and your folks are out to reform the town. You tell somebody and he tells somebody and my ward is full of hoods going from house to house, bearing down on the stores, standing round the special-registration tables looking hard. I don't like it; so they think it would go better if I had an accident. That would only be what the papers call a blow-off in the liquor business. Your Bankers and

Merchants ain't in on it themselves; but they're taking a pop at me, all the same, like they had it in their own hand."

Rufus Townshend showed his teeth in an embarrassed smile.

"My dear fellow," he protested, "the Bankers and Merchants won't stand for such politics. I shall take that man—Klopick?—up with them tomorrow."

"Don't bother. I'll manage. I was just showing you why I come to dinner with a car-load of my friends."

He glanced at his platinum wrist-watch. It was half-past eleven.

"You mustn't go yet," Rita Townshend said. "I want to ask you all sorts of questions, Nick." She turned to her husband. "Why don't you go to bed, Rufie? You look very tired. Nick, you can't imagine the work he has to do every day—conferences, committees, heaven knows whatnot."

"Yeah?" said Nick Sassotti.

Townshend's face brightened. He stood up without argument, gingerly shook hands with his guest, gave his wife a pat on the arm and disappeared. Rita, on her Louis Seize sofa, tucked her feet under her.

"Isn't this nice?" she murmured.

"How so?"

"Have you ever paid a woman a compliment?"

The pale gold of her hair seemed to emphasize the almost wistful mockery of her gaze. Her figure, at once vigorous and tapering, was twisted sidewise in the simple evening dress of nearly extinguished smoky-red. Nick liked red; but the reds that Rita wore seemed to be fading away. On her admirable left arm, pushed up from the wrist, was a bracelet of rubies like a circle of dark fire.

Nick Sassotti stared at her. He wondered what she was after. Sheridan Durand had said she was eager for excitement. What kind of excitement did she want? Nick would have liked to know why she had married that "chump" who'd been sent upstairs to bed. It was certain, he decided, that Rufus Townshend wasn't the man for her. She looked like she might be fun, if you could stand the chatter.

"You got any children?" he asked.

"I'm frightfully sorry, Nick, but I don't seem to have."

“Been married three times and nothing to show for it. What’s the idea? How’s the world going to go on?”

“Why should it?” she suggested.

He scowled at her and said, “You’d have them if I was married to you, or I’d break your neck.”

“One thing that makes me mad about you, Nick, is that you’re so dangerous.”

“Who, me?” He laughed shortly, his face like a handsome mask momentarily changing shape. “Nobody never got in trouble with me that watched their step. But why start explaining things to you? You ain’t even found out what you’re alive for. Thanks for the pleasant evening.”

He rose. She slipped from the sofa, came to him in her perfume, looked at him with her tawny eyes turning dark. Her hand went up from her side, as if to touch him. She muttered:

“I don’t want you to go.”

“Listen, Rita, I’m a business man. I got to get back and see what’s going on.” He reached forward with his left arm, pulled her close to him, took her head in his right hand, gave her a long kiss. Ignoring her gasp, he announced, as though nothing had happened, “I got conferences, too.”

She looked down at the garlands in the carpet, her lips parted, her shoulders drooping. She said, in a faint voice:

“Then let me go and sit with you while you do your conferring. Please, Nick.”

He watched her lowered head, bright like the palest gold; being blond himself, he had always preferred brunettes. He had a moment of curious buoyancy that seemed hardly related to her. A bitter quality in his humor made him relish the thought of showing her, after this, his house, his atmosphere, his life. He said:

“Get on your things.”

She went down to the car muffled in a fur wrap. He followed with the latch-key in his pocket. Glancing at two lighted windows on the second floor, he reflected:

“That’s the kind of a fella, I guess, whatever story she tells is the sworn affidavit with him.”

Men silently made room for Rita in the tonneau. The car rushed away through the darkness. She sat holding Nick's hand, her slipper-soles resting on the shot-guns. After a few miles of silence, he suggested:

“Here, put on my gloves.”

They went faster and faster. In a quiet boulevard, an angry motorcycle-policeman overhauled them, took a look at the swarthy driver, veered away. They came to the shabby street in which stood the solid old house, four stories high, incongruous from its worn gentility.

The bandy-legged man opened the door to them. Light flooded the hall from the Venetian luster. Four men were sitting on the staircase, three on the sofa below; in a florid parlor to the left, some more surrounded a crap-game. A boy came up from the basement, calling, “Hey, Willie! I fixed it. It was in the recoil.” When they saw Rita Townshend, the men in the hall doffed their hats.

Nick Sassotti led her back to his “study.”

He pulled the light-cord above the desk, so that the garish room was half displayed. Passing behind her, he yanked the fur wrap from her back, then pointed to a deep chair.

“Set down,” he said. “You want a glass of wine? Now don't bother me.”

Rita, her eyes darker than ever from excitement, relaxed her body in the chair. She shone at Nick, with the desk-light on her face, like a woman transfigured by a new intensity of life. Her eyes were full of wit and tenderness; her lips were refashioned both by recklessness and apprehension. She said cautiously:

“You'd look marvelous, Nick, with a moustache.”

He bent his brows above the telephone.

“Let me talk to Mr. O. Just tell him Nick. . . . Mr. O? Well, mister, when are you going to get up that pool? I can't hold it forever. . . . Forty-five thousand large, on Schmidt and Beardsley's guarantee, at what it cost me, with transportation and storage. . . . Why, because I got my hands full with Joe. And because if I do you a turn, maybe some day you'll do me one. . . . Then give me a ring tomorrow.”

The bandy-legged man opened the door, stared over Rita's head, announced, in a throaty chirp:

“Tony Fava.”

“Show him in.”

That short, abnormally wide Italian, with grizzled hair, beaked nose and indigo rings around his eyes, walked in rapidly with his hat on. He saw Rita, stopped as if a traffic-signal had gone up, snatched off his hat and pressed it against his abdomen. Obeying a wave of Nick’s hand, he sat down on the edge of a chair without ceasing to stare at the ruby bracelet.

“Mr. Durand got home?” Nick inquired of the phone.

Looking blankly at Rita, he moved his mouth sideways. “Your boyfriend,” he told her. He held out two fingers pressed together. “Just like that, you and him, he tells me. . . . Hello, Sherry. . . . You sure done fine downtown: Joe’s jumping around like he was full of the junk. Listen, that oil-can you seen down there is thinking of taking the European goods for an investment. Talk it up and get in on it. I’ll pay whatever you spend.”

Turning around to the grizzled Italian, he inquired:

“How’s your little girl?”

“Not so good, Nick.”

“What’s the doctor say?”

“He don’t think she’s going to make the grade.”

“Bad. How’s the old lady taking it?”

“Well, you know, Nick. She’s lost five. She’s always the same: she goes to the church and she prays. But I guess Carlotta’s the pet with her, too. Excuse me, lady.”

He began to cry noiselessly into his hat.

“See, Rita,” said Nick Sassotti quickly, “this is Mr. Fava that owns the Gran Vittoria Café and the Eytalian-American Food Products. Any time you want some Lacrima Christi, Barolo, Barbera, Orvieto— —”

“And Strega cordial,” Tony Fava snuffed.

“Who’d drink it?” Without apology to Rita, he took his small colleague into the curtained bay-window and said in an undertone, “I’m angling something that might maybe do for Joe Klopick. I wouldn’t mind if he histed that European white; but he can’t do it while I got coppers front and back on the plant. Well, supposing, when I switch my guards inside the plant, I should happen to put in a stool of Joe’s, with you and Monk to keep him company. All of a sudden, you get sick off of something you et for

dinner. Monk has to take you home. There's the stool in there alone. He would chew the rag with the coppers; only they've said, 'This is the bunk,' and gone somewheres to get warm. 'What a break,' the stool says to himself and calls up Joe."

"Who's the stool?" asked Tony Fava.

"I'm pretty sure it's Rudolph."

"I don't think it, Nick. If they got one with us, we would know it from ours with them."

"I got an idea Joe might be smart enough to keep his stool to himself. That's how we'll rib it, anyways, and see. The night before election."

Tony Fava scratched his head. Contemplating that grotesque face, Nick recalled his fondness for Tony's family. Funny, how the girls were going to be good-lookers, especially Beatrice — — "Bice." There would still be four of them if little Carlotta died. Nick would have liked to make poor old Tony smile tonight; but Tony had no sense of humor.

"Anyways, I'll sure keep it strictly under my nose," Tony Fava said.

Nick tried the absurdity:

"You might let a few reporters in on it, so's I could grab a little public sympathy."

After considering this jest, Tony Fava solemnly rejoined:

"Joe's histers might not get it that they was just reporters."

Nick Sassotti gave it up. "Don't bother about no publicity," he said kindly. "Here, buy something pretty for Carlotta. Tell her I'll be seeing her tomorrow. Bice all right?"

"Sure, Nick, Bice's fine. She win a prize last week off of the sisters in the convent. Goodabye, lady."

He made Rita an operatic bow and walked out quickly.

There was a silence. The mosque-shaped clock on the mantel struck midnight. Nick Sassotti was wondering what to do with this woman whose perfume filled the room, whose presence seemed to warm the house. He had a horror of weakness, a contempt for sentimental feeling, a doubt that romance existed. All his love-affairs had been sternly conducted; all his women had ended by dashing themselves in desperation against his egotism. This woman was different.

There had been a disquieting beauty in her submission, like something perceived on a stage, foreign or ideal. At her kiss, he had seemed to touch the complexity of a whole unknown world. She might bring him the antithesis of contentment; yet he saw himself in danger of yielding to her strangeness, of being, perhaps, eluded by all of her except her physical self. But what more should there be to ask for?

“Well, how do you feel over here?” he inquired, with a somber jocoseness.

“I like it,” she said gently, her shining gaze on his. “I feel as if I were watching Cesare Borgia getting ready for Sinigaglia.”

He let that one pass. He stood up with a supple movement and approached her. There was a knock on the door.

“All right.”

The bandy-legged man opened the door and said:

“Now they got Whitey. Want to see him?”

Another man led into the room a good-looking boy whose pale-gold hair matched Rita’s. His face, too, was pallid and his eyes were sleepy. The men helped him to a chair. He sat with his hands on his knees, pomaded and well-dressed, looking with a shame-faced air at Nick Sassotti. He spoke weakly:

“I’m coming out of the drug store when a couple of them step up and say, ‘Take this to him with our very best wishes.’”

Nick, standing with his back to Rita, unbuttoned and threw back the boy’s waistcoat, lifted shirt and undershirt, contemplated two slowly bleeding holes. He pulled down the shirt and buttoned the waistcoat.

“You’re going to the hospital where I was and you’re going to have the same doctor.”

“Don’t kid me, chief,” the boy answered, with a foolish smile, “these are through the stummick.”

He collapsed. The two men carried him out. Nick shut and locked the door. He turned aside from Rita, who sat rigid on the edge of her chair.

“Is he badly hurt?” she faltered.

“He’ll live forty-eight hours. The last twelve hours he’ll be unconscious.” Suddenly Nick’s face became legible. He began a gesture

with his fist clenched, then dropped his arm and again made his face a mask. He took a cigarette from the silver box and lighted it, passed it to Rita and lighted another for himself. "Too bad they won't leave me alone," he said. "A little more and that Polack'll get his wish."

"And maybe," she cried, "you'll be shot just as that poor boy was!"

He wondered if a son of hers would be a coward.

Then he thought of the European alcohol that he wanted to sell to O'Connell and his gang in the City Hall, so that Joe Klopick could steal it without knowing it had been sold. How well he could play the rest of that tune with Joe. He was tempting the City Hall people with an almost laughable bargain. Everything depended on whether they could hear so generous an offer above the chattering of their teeth. Of course, they were all scared stiff: there was nothing like the threat of a recall for panicking a municipal government. He would have to depend on Sheridan Durand to bring them around at precisely the proper time.

"Why, in heaven's name," Rita burst out, "don't you go to the police about that creature?"

"Because I'm supposed to be my own police."

"You mean to say if your men are killed, you can't appeal to the law?"

"I can appeal to my own. I can be the judge and I can execute the sentence. You're in a different world now, Rita, with different ways of doing things. The law you're talking about is for them that don't live outside it. I'm outside it because I'm in the liquor business. I'm supposed to take my own risks and make my own arrangements. If I didn't, in twenty-four hours I'd have a fine name for being yellow."

"Very well, Nick, if you won't, I will. Tomorrow morning I shall speak to Mr. Chase and Mr. Cortinett of the Bankers and Merchants—"

"You keep your face shut. When I need dames to pull me out, I'll write you a letter."

The phone rang. He sat down at the desk, heard the voice of Rufus Townshend:

"Is this Mr. Sassotti?"

"Check."

"This is Mr. Townshend. I say, when you started home, Mrs. Townshend was here, of course?"

“Certainly.”

“I don’t suppose, by any chance, she went out when you did, to take a little drive in the air? She isn’t in the house.”

“Is that right. Why don’t you take another look around?”

“I’ve looked everywhere and I’m very much alarmed.”

“What for? Ain’t we all grown up? Are you a nurse or something?” He gripped the telephone hard and said, “Listen, them bums was over here and drilled another of my boys. Where do you people get this stuff? How’d you like me to turn your street into a shooting-gallery?”

He slammed the instrument upon its hooks.

“Who was that?” Rita whispered.

“Friend of Big Joe Klopick’s.”

She sank back into the depths of the chair. He watched her worried lips, beautifully curving under the thin paint. He liked having never seen her making up before a vanity-glass, touching her hair, looking at herself in a mirror on a wall. He could see himself in the dim wall-mirror behind her; but it did not occur to him that his yellowish face and dull-gold hair were remarkable in combination. All his family had been handsome: his father, of Venetian ancestry, had been red-headed; his mother had been a Milanese blonde.

“How do you get on with your husband?” he inquired, sitting down on the arm of her chair.

“I think women are contemptible who complain about that sort of thing,” she answered, lowering her eyes. “You know, Nick, I can’t stay here forever and I hope I won’t have to go home through a lot of shooting.”

“It’s early yet and nobody shoots at a lady.”

“Am I a lady to you, Nick?”

He leaned down and kissed her. He heard for the first time that intonation of hers, partly a laugh, partly a sob, as she assured him:

“I was never in my life kissed so efficiently.”

“What would be the idea,” he retorted, “of doing it sloppy?”

She drew down his head, pressed his face against hers.

“Now what am I to do, Nick? I came here with you as if I’d been hypnotized. I’m sure that was Rufie on the phone. He’s always amazed at me; this time he’ll think I’ve gone crazy. Well, so I have. You do something very odd to me. Will you believe me if I tell you that I’ve never — —”

“We might get on,” he said, his voice choked from her perfume, her warmth, her enlarging value.

“You’d be cruel to me,” she murmured. “It would soon end. Nothing lasts.”

Nothing lasts. He lifted his head, reflected on that ancient maxim. He heard girls weeping, girls uttering bitter laughter, as he let himself out through the door, bearing away to safety the integrity of his spirit. He heard Tony Fava’s wife mourning over little Carlotta’s body, the earth rattling on Whitey’s coffin, the music of the Requiem Mass for his mother, who had seemed to him in his childhood an immortal tenderness. Frank had flourished for a while, then had died of half a dozen wounds before a blazing tavern; Joe Klopick, swelling it over there among his hoodlums, would die on election night. And he himself, some day, would feel the abounding life go from him, see his fame and his fortune receding into the distance before their utter dispersal. He knew a fellow who even said that in a thousand years there wouldn’t be any more United States.

“How much experience you got in this kind of thing, Rita?”

“Are you jealous already?”

“Don’t be silly. I was trying to figure how many blow-ups you been through, to be so sure nothing lasts.”

“Well, this, as you know, is my third wedding ring.”

“What about on the side?”

“Should there have been,” she evaded, “before you captured me?”

“And how come I done that?”

“Well, darling,” she said demurely, “in the first place, your looks. In the second place, your complicated charm. In the third, your history, about which there’s been a bit of talk across-town. In the fourth, your thrilling atmosphere — —”

“My atmosphere. What do you mean by that?”

“This house full of armed men — —”

“That gives you a kick, hey?”

“Of course, darling, a splendid one.”

“You like excitement. You like slumming. That’s the answer. That’s why you’re here.”

“Oh, darling, what a thing to say.”

He recalled her own “atmosphere,” of reticent splendor and subtle arrogance, with a sudden sensibility as painful as if his spirit had been flayed. He saw his life as a sort of three-ring circus combined with a wild-west show, which she was attending while figuratively eating peanuts. Standing up, he wanted never to touch her again even with the tips of his fingers. Seizing her by the wrists, he promised her his revenge with a satanic smile.

“Different is all you are to me, too, baby,” he sneered. “Just a little novelty that maybe I ain’t going to like. Ally-ooop! It’s getting late.”

She leaned back against his efforts to pull her to her feet.

“No. Let me go, Nick. You’ve spoiled everything; I couldn’t care for you now. I thought that you, at least, would be a sturdy oak and you’re just a sensitive-plant.”

He gave her a jerk that brought her with a slam against his chest. He tried to pick her up. Before he could get a proper grip on her, she wriggled to her feet and muttered:

“Apache-dance, I presume?”

There was a moment of undignified scuffling. He exerted his strength, held her motionless, glared into her eyes.

“What give you the idea,” he said, “that I’d fall for you anyways? All you are, when all’s said and done— —”

The phone rang. He dragged her to the desk, picked up the hand-set. He heard Rufus Townshend speaking and snarled:

“Go put your head in a bag.”

“That was Rufie. Oh! this is simply incredible.” More beautiful than ever in her wildness, her hair in disorder and her eyes dilated, she stared at him with tears dripping down her cheeks. “I don’t see why you have to turn into a fool,” she flared at him, “right after I compliment you. Now you’ve finished yourself with me and my mascaro is putting out my eyes; but it’s

worth it not to see your face.” She whipped the handkerchief from his breast-pocket and sobbed, “I tell you it’s putting my eyes out, you big bully, you.” She stamped twice and demanded furiously, “Now you take me home!”

He marched away from her, snatched up her wrap and threw it at her.

“Put it on. Move fast. Let’s go, before I lose my temper and spank you so’s you’ll eat your breakfast— —”

“Off the mantelpiece? I wonder if your clichés in conversation could be equalled by your clichés in love?”

She swept out through the hall with her head high and her wrap swirling about her. In the speeding car, this time, she did not hold Nick’s hand. She tapped her slipper-soles on the shot-guns, looked straight ahead and, when he mutely proffered his gloves, made her only remarks:

“No, thanks. Let me tell you that you have the temperament of a movie-star damaged by the inferiority-complex of an acrobat. And as for your darned atmosphere, I’ve seen better ones. And those are my last words to you.”

For once in his life, he held out his hand to aid a woman alighting from a car; but he forgot her latch-key. Rita Townshend did not condescend to ask him for it. She marched up to the door, gave the bell a peremptory ring. Nick Sassotti, leaning back on the tonneau-cushions, said to himself:

“Some dame, at that.”

III

Happiness means that the consciousness of power and triumph has begun to prevail.—NIETZSCHE.

Nick Sassotti was telephoning at a roll-top desk in the office of the Good Times Athletic Club. The sunny room was full of men, some smoking, some chewing gum, all listening intently. Nick Sassotti's lieutenant, Bennie Mendelssohn, wore a sentimental look on his round, youthful, rather engaging face. Bennie's brown hair had three waves across the top from a curling-iron; his finger-nails were glossy; his socks matched his tie and his tie matched his handkerchief. He was all dressed up for election day and whatever might befall.

The voice of Sheridan Durand, the eminent criminal-lawyer, came to Nick Sassotti over the wire:

"I've seen the extra. You must have been drinking something besides Riesling when you set up a newspaper-reporter."

Nick Sassotti's face was hard under his hat-brim. He sat back in the desk-chair, his legs stretched out, his patent-leather shoes encased in dark-brown spats. He had on a dark-brown suit; his shirt and tie were olive-green. On his left hand was a Greek intaglio, in chrysoberyl, heavily set in gold, which Rita Townshend had asked him to wear and while doing so to think of her.

"Get this good," he said, in an unpleasant tone. "Last evening I had the coppers pulled off the plant and switched my watchmen. To make it a natural, I put in a boy that's been strictly confidential stool for Joe Klopick. When Joe's folks come for the white, they crashed in like they heard the dinner-bell, seen two strangers, lost their head, slammed the reporter right off and put one in the stool before he could get the words out of his mouth. I was hoping they'd do more to him; but you tell me how that reporter got in there and I'll give you a cookie."

"Of course," the suave voice of Sheridan Durand rejoined, "nobody would dream of thinking you stole that property right after you'd sold it to my friends. The question is, will they think you let somebody steal it and arranged for him to get the attention of the universe from killing a newspaper-man. Permit me to express the opinion that mere instigation of murder is unfavorably regarded in many courts."

“Can the burlicue. What’s O’Connla got to say about the loss?”

“He says that stuff was paid for with sixty thousand dollars and was still in the warehouse and for you to find it and get it back in a hurry.”

“Any way I like?”

“One way or another they’ll certainly hang you some day,” said Sheridan Durand.

“With you for my lip. Have you voted yet, Sherry?”

He hung up, then turned to look at a fat police-captain, with frog-like eyes, who had entered the office. The men all said, “Hello, Cap. Hello, Captain Rooney.” Nick inquired genially:

“Got a search-warrant, Dominic? How’s Barney today?”

“Died an hour ago.”

“Tch, tch, tch. That was one nice dick. Poor old Barney and his varicose veins.”

“And them only aiming at me,” said Bennie Mendelssohn, in a soft, pleasant voice. “Mercy! what bum shots from a bus. So now they bumped a copper over here. Big Joe should be all swelled up.”

Captain Rooney sank into a chair. He sat with his heavy, withering hands in his lap, his massive shoes wide apart, his face tired and anxious. He asked:

“You going after um yourself, Nick?”

“Maybe tomorrow, if we win.”

“Keep it out of the precinct, will you, now?” the aging captain suggested. His frog-like eyes were bloodshot from sleeplessness. Nick Sassotti took from a desk-drawer an untouched bottle of whisky, filled a small, thick glass and handed it to Captain Rooney. The policeman tossed the liquor down his throat, said deeply, “Ha-a-a-ar!” and confessed, “Them extras they sent me ain’t none too many.”

“What do you hear about the voting?” Nick inquired, glancing at a pile of special-edition newspapers.

“Doubtful for the city, pretty good in the ward. They tried aready to run out the judges and clerks down at the Dutchman’s; but your Willie and some more went after them with saps. One fractured skull,” he added, holding out the thick little glass. “This whisky’s grand.”

“In case of sickness,” said Nick, pouring the liquor. “Yeah,” he assented. “It’s quiet. I got the boys scattered all over and nobody phoned in yet.” He turned to the men who filled the room, the shock-troops ready to rush, in the cars before the club, to any point of danger. “Go and smoke them ropes in the gym,” he ordered. He glanced at Bennie Mendelssohn, who remained.

“For Barney’s funeral,” Nick Sassotti explained, peeling a thousand-dollar bill from his roll and handing it to the captain. “Go somewheres and lay down, Dominic. You look like you was dead yourself.”

“I’m getting to be an old man,” Captain Rooney sighed, pushing himself up from the chair. “Thanks, Nick. I’ll buy um a few posies and give the rest to his missus.”

He went out as if his feet hurt.

Nick Sassotti, staring through Bennie Mendelssohn, thoughtfully rubbed the Greek ring. The influence of Rita Townshend, still strange, still complex, still thrilling, intruded into his preoccupation. He seemed to smell her perfume. He had too vivid an awareness of her sweet, distracted smile, her warmth and whiteness, her effect of never being wholly with him. He saw Bennie Mendelssohn looking respectfully at the pale-green chrysoberyl and wondered if all his men knew the story. Rita’s state of mind had made her indiscreet.

“Bennie, go back and take the calls off of the boys tailing Joe. Keep this quiet: I want him set for me at nine tonight. In the meantime, don’t bother me about him.”

“Okay, chief. What do we take?”

“Six cars besides mine, with the phoney license-plates. Just the riot-guns. I want the Fageols at ten to move the white back to the plant.”

“Who you suppose added the reporter,” Bennie marveled.

“Tony Fava,” Nick replied contemptuously. “Never tell that little fella no joke, unless you want to spend the rest of your life explaining. If it wasn’t for his family, I’d knock him through a couple brick walls.”

“Maybe he’s a little goofy over losing the kid,” Bennie Mendelssohn suggested, with his sentimental look.

“He’s lucky to have four more, even if they’re girls,” said Nick Sassotti, again thinking of Rita Townshend. She had not changed her ideas about motherhood.

Bennie Mendelssohn went out, but returned almost at once, to lay a throw-card on the desk before retiring for good. The throw-card bore, in scarlet ink, the legend, "Down with Crime! Down with Vice! Down with the Rule of the Guinea McGonigals!"

Nick read it, tossed it aside and remarked to the empty office:

"That's fine, Joe. Too bad you're turning in your key tonight."

He would not know whether "Big Joe" was really big until he met him as his executioner. It didn't occur to him that instead of finishing his enemy, he might be finished himself. Motionless in the bleak office decorated with photographs of boxers and front-pages from *La Vie Parisienne*, he had a premonition of triumph like a sense of divine self-sufficiency.

He saw the city, full of individuals entrusting to ballot-boxes the thoughts to which they had been artificially impelled. He perceived the people's verdict as the mandate to increase in power, to affect in new ways the next gathering of opinion. At last, the attainment of authority and wealth far beyond the chances of his present business was visible before him like a precise ideal.

In his meditation, he had the look of a freebooter, who should have been clad in dark armor, brooding over the conquest of cities.

Rita Townshend stood before him.

"Well, baby," he said quietly, "this is the biggest boner you've pulled yet."

She came forward with a sidling movement that suggested to him a little girl approaching to be punished. She had on a small hat and a frock of reddish-brown. The sables around her throat vivified the pallor of her face. Her tawny eyes looked fatigued. She was fragrant from cold air, from a spray of valley-lilies pinned under her furs, from that disturbing perfume "La Fille du Roi Pausole." When he rose, she made a face at him, put her gloved hands on his shoulders and held up her mouth to be kissed. She told him:

"I do just whatever I want to."

He gazed at her grudgingly. He thought, "That's right; she does what she wants and I let her." He had a suspicion that his impulse to dominate her was degenerating into bluster. She so variously enchanted his senses, so subtly managed his will, that sometimes he took an abnormal pleasure in

submission to her whims. Perhaps this was because she still seemed to him like a creature of another species pretending to belong to his.

In the gymnasium, some one was making a punching-bag beat a tattoo. Rita Townshend cast a quizzical look about her and remarked:

“The Good Times Athletic Club. In name only, it would seem?”

“How’d you come here?”

“In a taxi, of course. I went to the house and one of your young gentlemen told me your whereabouts. Or, I should say, turned you up?”

“Where’s your husband?”

“I haven’t the faintest idea, darling. He went out to exercise his right of franchise before I was awake and he hasn’t— — showed?— — since. While I was having my lunch, I got very, very lonely. And naturally I worried about you.”

She looked at him with a tremulous smile, her eyes, too, belying the gayety of her voice.

Nick Sassotti sat down and shook his head.

“Listen, baby, you got to stop this tootsying in on me like we might be married. You think it’s okay because it’s away over here. Don’t kid yourself. This town’s full of the back-and-forth stuff. Pretty soon your friends over there are going to be serving up the chili.”

“Then you’d have to marry me,” she mocked, “and make me an honest woman.”

He rejoined, with a serious scowl:

“If I marry you, I don’t want to do it on account of you getting in dutch because you didn’t use your head.”

She remained still, her beautiful face the background for emotions that passed over it like the faint shadows of clouds: incredulity, consternation, humor, tenderness, awesome reverie. She said, in her richest tone, as if deeply touched:

“Would you really marry me, darling?”

He took his time to reply. He saw her moist eyes and lips, her elegance and difference. He perceived her closeness and her ever-baffling evasion of him— —her tangible being captured, her spirit beyond possession. There

came over him a sense of folly and of necessity like that of life. He answered reluctantly:

“Why not. If you’d have the children.”

She turned away quickly, to stare, with her back to him, at a picture on the wall, of a girl in lingerie embracing a soldier of the French Foreign Legion.

“Here we are, darling,” she murmured. She came to him, biting her lip, looking as if she were about to weep. “Are you going out shooting today, Nick?”

“I’ve put that matter on for tonight,” he told her shortly.

“Even if you lose the election?”

“Perhaps, if your husband’s side was to win, it wouldn’t be no harder to pay that dollar to than my side.” He rose with his characteristic movement, unexpectedly swift, lithe, graceful. “Now, baby, there’s a lot on my mind; so I wish you’d chase yourself. See you tomorrow, hey?”

Rita Townshend looked at her gloved hands.

“Why can’t I have dinner with you, Nick? Rufie’s sure to be at the Association headquarters.” She explained unsteadily, “Before you do ahunting go, you know — —”

He rubbed the back of his hand against her cheek.

“Okay, baby, at the casa. I’ll get the old ladies to make it good and Eytalian — — antipasti Genovesi, risotto Milanese, polio arrosto, with them white truffles, and a glass of Asti spumante. Don’t be late, or I’ll bust you in the eye.” He gave her a light spank and pushed her toward the door.

Rita Townshend still hesitated.

“Darling, I’ve been thinking about that battle with Frank What’s-his-name, the time you were hurt and your sister went on with it.” Rita twisted her fingers together, looked at him with feverish eyes. “Was she right there, darling? Right in the midst of it?”

“What’s the idea bringing up that old story now?” he demanded impatiently.

“Well, I was thinking about it. She was brave, wasn’t she?”

“She just used her head. I’m on my back and she knows the matter should be settled up that night. If she hadn’t been on the job, the boys might

of lost their steam and scattered. Then Frank Pagliuca would of walked into my business. The way it turns out, they worked as hard for her as they would for me, to show off in front of her.”

“But you admire her for it,” Rita persisted.

“I’m always admiring Lu,” he said. “Finest girl in the world.”

Rita Townshend’s eyebrows went up at the outer corner, giving her a charmingly diabolic look. She compressed her lips, then uttered:

“The finest. Well, well, well.”

He was mildly surprised.

“Listen, baby, Lu’s the finest in the way that a little trouble don’t worry her a bit. You’re different because you never seen trouble, outside of them books. I’m crazy about you; I’m taking you the way you are; but you ain’t cut out for the strong stuff. We can’t be everything.”

“Thanks so much!” she snapped, whirling around toward the doorway.

He stood grinning at her back.

“Coming to dinner?”

“I doubt it,” she cast at him and slammed the door.

He sat down at the desk, called his house. “Get me Aunt Anna or Aunt Bianca. . . . Hello, Zia Anna.” He continued, in Italian, “I want a nice little dinner for two at seven o’clock and put some Asti on the ice— —”

Tony Fava walked in rapidly, the indigo around his eyes in wider circles than ever. Nick Sassotti hung up, scrutinized the bereaved father from head to foot and said:

“Well, ain’t you good. Now I murdered a reporter.”

The short, wide Italian instantly assumed a dramatic pose, half crouching, both hands extended. He lifted up his parrot-like beak, as if to call heaven as his witness, and shouted tragically:

“You said you’d like some pubbulicity!”

“You simple Wop. Not that it ain’t my fault. That and mama and Bice and the girls is the only thing keeps me off you. What you here for? Why ain’t you down there watching their district-headquarters?”

“They piled out on me and took O’Shaughnessy’s polling-place away from us. They’re putting the boxes in a car.”

“And you didn’t phone in. You think you’re in Calabria and had to walk it?”

“Nick, they chased me for my life.”

“I’d of paid them money to run faster.” He called into the phone, “Precinct Station-House. . . . Hello, Sarge. Nick Sassotti. Tell the captain it’s begun, if he ain’t heard it, down at O’Shaughnessy’s. I’m leaving right now myself.”

As he rose, a man stuck his head in at the door and whispered:

“Gent by name of Townshend to see you.”

“Go wait outside,” Nick said to Tony Fava, after a moment of silence. “Show Mr. Townshend in.”

Rita’s husband entered. His serious-looking face was paler and more fatigued than Rita’s had appeared—pale, perhaps, from a sense of danger in this shabby clubhouse, fatigued, no doubt, from an anxiety not due to politics. He took off his hard hat with a hand gloved in pigskin; Nick tossed his own hat upon the desk. They stood gazing at each other till Rufus Townshend, after moistening his lips with his tongue, said, in his cultivated voice:

“I should like you not to see my wife again.”

Nick Sassotti resembled an effigy made of yellowish wax, decorated with hair of tarnished gold and with dull glass eyes. There was no sign of breathing to show that he was alive.

Rufus Townshend turned paper-white. His lips parted on his buck teeth in an involuntary grimace. He was trembling, in this situation so far from his upbringing, his expectations, his desires. He straightened his shoulders with an effort and continued:

“My wife’s interest in you, while innocent, is compromising her.”

The effigy, without any facial expression, spoke at last:

“All right, I can marry her.”

Rufus Townshend looked as if he had not understood those words. Then his face turned from white to red and his eyes burned with indignation. He took a step forward, as if pushed from behind, and said, in a husky tone:

“Are you out of your mind?”

“How so?” the effigy inquired.

“A person in your way of life. A bootlegger, a criminal.”

The effigy stirred, became alive. The handsome, slightly coarsened face showed a smile. Nick Sassotti returned:

“I had a glass of brandy, at your house, after the cocktails and the wine. Maybe the wine was pre-war. I wouldn’t try to make out the gin in the cocktails. But I imported the brandy.”

“I don’t understand you,” said Rufus Townshend.

“Then I’ll set it to music. If I’m a criminal for selling it, what are you for buying it? How would I be doing it without you? The fact is, I’m better than you are, because I don’t look down on you for being on the other end of the same deal.”

“What rot!” Rufus Townshend exclaimed, turning livid again.

“Ain’t it? You’re one of the reformers that don’t like my party’s politicians. Go clean my booze out of your house if you don’t like my party’s liquor-traders neither. Excuse me,” Nick Sassotti interjected, picking up the phone. He said into the mouthpiece, “I’m starting now.” He put down the instrument, concluded, “I’m sorry; but I got to leave you. Your friends are running off our ballot-boxes.”

“You’re an impudent fellow. I shall take very good care that you’re run out of this city.”

“You and the Chinese army.”

Rufus Townshend came a step nearer. He had the look of a simple and inoffensive man goaded nearly beyond endurance. He said in a hushed, shaking voice:

“I demand your promise— —if a promise means anything to you— — that you’ll not see my wife again.”

“Why don’t you ask her to promise?” the other suggested. “And, anyways, why blame us? If you ain’t— —”

Tony Fava showed his beak in the doorway.

“How about it, Nick? They’re all out in the cars.”

He looked at the two confronted figures and vanished. Nick Sassotti finished his speech:

“If you ain’t man enough to keep her at home, why not blame yourself?”

He saw the punch coming, a swing at the chin. He stood still, without raising his hands. As the punch came to his face, he leaned his head to one side, to ease the force of the blow. Even so, the fist in the pigskin glove struck his jaw with power enough to wrench the muscles of his neck, to send to his brain a shock that flashed light before his eyes. "Quite a wallop," he thought, swaying to his former position. Through some lingering sparks, he saw Rufus Townshend step back, cast around him a look of hopelessness, then stand in the attitude of a person prepared to die before a firing-squad. Nick Sassotti felt an amused respect for Rita's husband.

"I owed you that," he explained. "Make yourself at home."

He passed through the gymnasium and climbed into his touring-car. They set out through the frowsy street at the customary forty-five miles an hour.

Nick saw some dirty children parading on the sidewalk, squealing in unison:

"Down with crime! Down with vice! Down with the rule of the Guinea McGonigals!"

An angry woman swooped out of a house and slapped them.

Angelo, the swarthy driver, took the corner at forty. His breath, whipped back by the breeze, smelled of sour wine and garlic. He began to sing quaveringly, "O, l'amore, e che fa-fa." Tony Fava, who sat beside Nick Sassotti, plucked up the courage to join in.

A crowd filled the street ahead. The drivers parked the cars double; the men poured out, drawing their blackjacks. Tony Fava remained behind, because he was too old for street-fighting. Nick Sassotti went first. Beyond the surge of hats a roar gathered volume, then slowly died away; but through the cold air a tremor still expanded from the point of conflict. Empty-handed in front of his shock-troops, Nick Sassotti bored into the crowd. At his pressure, people turned angrily, looked at him, shrank back to make a lane.

Ahead, the roar went up again, louder and louder.

IV

A man must do very much for himself in order to do anything at all for others.—NIETZSCHE.

The old, black-clad women, smiling with a gentle slyness, took away the zabaione-glasses and served the bitter coffee. They leaned over Rita Townshend with a tender air; Aunt Anna even wheezed, “Two pieces of sugar, princess?” At last the house saw a woman almost worthy of its master — —a lady, beautiful like an angel, accomplished in Italian, with a body made for the production of radiant little Sassottis.

She was as precious to them as if she were a human treasure seized in some far-away castle and brought here on a saddle-bow in an embrace of steel.

The table, covered with a cloth of Florentine lace, had been set in the “study.” It was lighted by silver candlesticks that Lucrezia had sent to her brother from across the sea. Nick, looking through the sparkle of them at Rita, reflected that he must find a house in a better part of town. It was settled in his mind. He would know how to handle her. This afternoon she’d walked out on him and here she was all calmed down.

“Darling, aren’t you going to tell me how you got that lump on your jaw?”

“I told you your husband give it to me.”

He lighted one of the shriveled, dark cigars called Toscanos. He had taken a shower, had changed into a black suit and a dark-blue shirt and tie. He smelled of the quinine hair-tonic.

“You do have a quaint sense of humor,” Rita Townshend laughed. He saw that she was on edge from suspense; she had drunk four glasses of Asti. Now she drank a glass of Benedictine.

The mosque-like clock struck eight.

Nick Sassotti rose, turned on all the lights, pulled down from a moulding on the wall a map of the city. He opened the door to the hall, which was full of men.

“Bennie. Monk. Bring your drivers.”

His round-cheeked lieutenant came in and bowed to Rita, with a soulful smile. Next came a small man whose simian face had a bluish tinge and whose air was fiercely competent. Two others entered, stared at the map. Nick Sassotti said:

“Speak your pieces.”

“At nine,” Bennie Mendelssohn recited, like the brightest pupil in a school, “I take them up Harding Avenue to D Street. I turn left at the church and make the Wislica Club. I knock it off and join at E and Wilson.”

“I go up Wilson to E,” said the man with the bluish face. “I jump the scatter next to the Elysian Theaytre and I see that nobody don’t leave.”

“Correct. Bennie, you go by the gas-works; Monk, you cut around the railway tracks. I want all the cars to make A and Harding at nine to the second. Let me see your watches.”

“Where are you, chief?” Monk inquired.

“Behind Bennie, west on D Street, north on Wilson, east on E, to the Hotel Belvedere. Joe Klopick’s up there with a blonde. I’m making the detour to see that you’re all acting like you should.”

“Give Big Joe our best regards,” Bennie Mendelssohn said earnestly. They were filing out, when he added, “Anything straight yet, chief?”

“Durand phoned we got a chance.”

“I should hope so,” Bennie sighed. “Imagine if a town like this was turned over to a lot of wrong ones.”

Nick Sassotti sat down, moved the candlesticks aside and stared at Rita Townshend. Perhaps when he had attained his full ambition, they might go to Italy? He pictured her there, against a background of mountains, smiling in the sun, holding in her arms another little Nickie, as Lucrezia was holding her child in the snapshot print in his wallet.

“Don’t drink no more Benedictine, baby. I wouldn’t like to see you stewed.”

“But it has no effect on me, darling. It must be the excitement.”

“What excitement?”

She laughed again, a bit wildly. She had painted her lips more brightly than usual, so that she looked still more pale. Her eyes, gleaming as if from fever, had shadows under them.

“Darling, I don’t see why you couldn’t come even now to an understanding with him.”

“How would I come to understandings in this business? If I was to go easy on them, they’d chew me up. Look what Joe done already to Leo and Whitey, to start me after him. I don’t fall for it and he thinks I’m under the bed. Now he’s bringing his folks over tomorrow night. He should of made it this evening; but I hear he started with a one-man-boiler and he’s still got a one-man-boiler mind. It’s going to be fun to see what the Pojay looks like.”

“Well,” Rita said indignantly, “I still think it’s very strange that there has to be so much killing in a basic industry.”

“You like to hear me talk, don’t you? Supposing it was in the Constitution that they couldn’t sell no bread. Lots of citizens get a kick out of eating it; so they’re going to have it. Smart people begin making bread and selling it under cover. Their business can’t have no protection from the law; so, because we’re all human, the competition goes lawless. Bakers call in hard boys to keep from getting run out by other bakers. Pretty soon there’s funerals. ‘Ain’t they acting dreadful,’ says the citizens, with their mouth full of bread. Your husband been home?”

“He phoned Spokes he wouldn’t be home till late. Why bring him up again? Tell me the truth, darling: are you going to be in much danger?”

“Not as much as I am setting right here with you.”

“Bless your heart.” She finished her second glass of Benedictine. “Nick, I want to come along.”

He thought, “She’s jealous of Lu, wants to show me she’s just as good.” He looked keenly at her eyes and felt that the alcohol had only clarified her resolution. He decided that he needn’t worry, after all, over how the children would turn out. His face became younger.

“All right, baby. I’ll take care of you.”

She put her fingertips to her cheek, as if only now confronted with the consequences of her wish. She murmured:

“I don’t think I could stay behind imagining all sorts of things— —”

“There ain’t a thing to imagine. It’s just routine.”

“I should walk the floor and worry— —”

She touched her shadowy eyelids, to suppress some tears. Nick Sassotti glided around the table and lifted her into his arms. She faltered, “I’m mad

these days. I really don't know myself. It's you," she whispered, in a tired voice, laying her head on his shoulder.

They drew apart. Bennie Mendelssohn stepped in, holding a gas-mask furnished with glass goggles.

"Lookit, chief," he inquired brightly, "won't it leak through this stuff?"

"Please don't ask me no more silly questions, Bennie. And don't let nobody go riding through town trying on them masks. Remember now. Look around; find them first; then chuck your tear-bombs right away. How did I say to go in?"

"A bomb-chucker in front between two riot-guns; then me," said Bennie Mendelssohn, with his air of a well-dressed prize pupil.

"You better get them in the cars."

For a while Nick stood holding Rita in his arms, gazing over her shoulder at the spot on the Persian rug that had once been stained with blood.

"I guess I love you, baby."

"And I guess I love you," she breathed unhappily.

A voice called through the door:

"Monk's off."

The telephone rang. Over the wire, a voice offered the information. "That blonde must be wearing fly-paper: Big Joe's sticking."

"I'll be there at nine-five," Nick Sassotti said. "Pull into the hotel at nine and take over the switchboard. Nobody's to go out. Don't hurt Joe. I want to see him." He hung up and said to Rita, "You'll need my fur coat on account of the open car." He pushed back the door for her.

"Bennie's left," the bandy-legged man said throatily.

One of the old women was climbing the stairs beyond the Venetian chandelier. Nick called cheerily, "Buon' riposo, Zia Bianca." The old woman turned, smiled with her toothless mouth, croaked, "Buona notte, Nicolino." And to Rita Townshend, with the gesture of throwing a kiss, "Felice, felice notte."

Angelo was sitting at the wheel of the Cadillac touring-car, humming, "Io son' l'amore." The bandy-legged Willie sat in front. Rita sat between

Nick and a young man named Pat, who reeked of lavender-water. There were no shot-guns on the floor.

She gave the young Irishman an uneasy look. With his solemn horse-face and striped tie he might have been a college senior. Rita, working herself deeper into the fur coat, remarked, in a thin voice, to Nick:

“If you have your people watching them, why haven’t they some watching you?”

“We been fixing that this evening.”

The touring-car droned in the night. The sky was full of clouds: it was going to snow before morning. They sped through empty streets, through bright little centers of trade, through mournful boulevards where houses were spaced like rows of broken teeth. They whizzed on for twenty minutes, then slid to a stop beside three open cars.

Nick Sassotti called to the first one:

“Wait for Bennie when you’re through. Go out together for the stuff; get it back in the plant by midnight. It’s in the car-barns just beyond Sanseyville.”

“I know,” Monk responded.

There were seven men in each of the three cars. One could see them putting on the gas-masks. Three more cars glided up, five seconds late, on the other side of the street. Their occupants looked like monsters with glaucous eyes.

“Go ahead, Monk,” said Nick Sassotti.

The first three cars sped away.

He sat staring at the luminous dial of his watch. Silence persisted until he spoke again:

“Wislica Club, Bennie.”

“You betcha.”

The second trio of cars followed the first.

He felt Rita lean closer and gave her a hug, without ceasing to regard the watch. He was aware of all her lovely aspects, of the future that she was to beautify for him, of Big Joe Klopick, in the Hotel Belvedere, his one-man-boiler heart enmeshed by a cheap blonde. He said to Angelo almost gayly:

“Let’s go.”

The swarthy driver stopped humming “La donna è mobile” and sent the car fast up Harding Avenue.

When they turned to the left, into D Street, they saw people running. Halfway along the block, Bennie Mendelssohn’s cars stood before a house labeled, “Wislica Club.” But the Wislica Club was silent.

Nick Sassotti jumped from the Cadillac and went in through the doorway.

He saw newspapers strewn about a hall, caught sight of a scare-head, “Landslide for Reform.” A man in a gas-mask tried to push him back; his eyes began to water from diluted chloracetophenone. A stream of men rumbled down a staircase at the rear of the hall. A muffled voice, Bennie Mendelssohn’s, shouted from the top of the stairs:

“Not so good. All up on E Street.”

Nick Sassotti went back to his car.

“E Street, Angelo.”

The Cadillac whirled from D Street into Wilson Avenue, from Wilson into E. In a building between a picture-house and a garage, on the floor above a Chinese restaurant, there sounded a single thump from a riot-gun. Before each of Monk’s cars stood a man with a short-barreled Winchester, his left hand on the sliding-action. A white dog romped around them.

Angelo stopped the car and whistled to the beast. He explained:

“My wife was saying yesterday we should have a puppy for the children.”

“This one’s mangy,” Willie chirped.

The young Irishman promised:

“I’ll get you a regular dog.”

Nick Sassotti looked at Rita. Her face, sunk in the fur collar, stared straight ahead. He glanced up at the windows. There was no more noise. Here, too, it seemed, he was throwing his men into empty rooms. He set his jaws.

“Go on to the Belvedere.”

The Cadillac ran three blocks, to stop before a hotel with a meretricious marble vestibule. A man in a derby came out munching a toothpick. He seemed embarrassed. Nick Sassotti slipped from the car.

“Well, what’s the matter?”

“I guess the boys muffed one of Joe’s snoopers, chief. The tip-off gets here twenty minutes ago. Joe runs down the back-stairs, picks up his skiboo and tries the alley. We smoke the skiboo; but we chase Joe back in the house on account of you warned us not to do him no harm. We ain’t quite located him yet.”

“Hop out,” Nick said to Rita, with a snap of his fingers. “I can’t leave you here.”

She followed him into the lobby, like a woman in a nightmare, obedient from fright. The young Irishman caught the coat as it slipped from her back to the floor.

On one side of the lobby, a lad in coonskin was watching the clerk, who stood with his face to the letter-boxes. On the other side, two men sat docilely in leather chairs, their hat-brims pulled down over their heads so that their eyes were blindfolded. The elevator-boy, knocked out, lay on the floor of his conveyance. The elevator-bell was ringing.

Above the floor-level, through the railing-rods of a staircase, appeared a grinning face surmounted by a plush hat. The face whispered:

“Down here in the washroom.”

“Come on, baby.”

Rita stumbled down to the basement on Nick’s arm.

At the threshold of the washroom, the young Irishman lost his dignity by squatting on his hands and heels, to peer under the row of half-doors. The man in the plush hat said impatiently:

“No, no. In the cupboard.”

Nick Sassotti walked past them into the glistening washroom that was odorous as if from moistened camphor-balls. He looked at the door of a closet for mops. He said quietly, “Joe?” Behind him stood Willie, the young Irishman, the man in the plush hat and the man in the derby. Rita Townshend leaned against the wall, the back of her wrist against her eyes, her body shaking.

The door of the closet opened.

Nick Sassotti saw a large torso, a bloated face with a wisp of black hair on the brow. The mouth was wide; the eyes were inflamed along the lower lids. Joe Klopick, in his suit of scrambled-egg homespun, advanced as if

very tired, a revolver dangling from one plump hand. He gazed at his captor confidentially and sadly.

Nick went to him, took the revolver out of his hand and scaled it into a corner. Then he stared at Big Joe Klopick, trying to place those eyes. He said at last:

“You’re little Stanislaus Klopicky, ain’t you, Joe?”

“Yeah,” the other assented, in an expiring voice. “I’m little Stannie, Nick. Your little pal in primary school.” He choked and was silent.

“Can you tie that,” Nick Sassotti murmured.

The prisoner’s face seemed to swell, as though inflated by a pathos expanding from his heart. His lips quivered, as he barely pronounced the words:

“We used to eat our lunch together, Nick. If you got an apple in your lunch-box we split it and if I got a banana we made it fifty-fifty. One time you was over to my house and my mother give you a picture of Kosciusko.”

“That’s right,” said Nick Sassotti loudly, from sudden remembrance, in the echoing of the washroom. Then, quietly, “How’s your mother, Stannie?”

“She’s dead, Nick.”

“Tch, tch, tch.” He thought for a moment of her and of his own mother. He cleared his mind of them. “Well, Stannie, when you was riding me, you knew all along who I was, hey?”

The prisoner piteously smiled.

“I thought maybe when you seen it was just me, Nick, you’d take it as a joke.”

Nick Sassotti smiled slightly in return. He pondered the bloated face aglisten with the sweat of terror. How folks changed their looks, he thought, remembering the rosy cheeks of his childhood companion. It cost him an effort to say:

“Goodbye, Stannie.”

“Goodbye, Nick,” the other replied still more faintly.

Nick Sassotti turned on his heel, muttering to Willie, “Take him quick.” The bandy-legged man stepped up, put his pistol to Big Joe’s chest, fired twice. He moved aside, as the large body fell forward with a smack of the wet brow on the tiles. They all went upstairs fast, Nick Sassotti lifting with

his arm Rita Townshend's full weight. They emerged upon the sidewalk. From a distance came the squalling of an ambulance siren.

Rita broke away from him, ran across the street. A frightened old Pole was trying to start a Ford. She got in beside him. When Nick approached her, she screamed:

"Don't touch me, you heartless beast!"

He saw in her eyes horror, loathing, hatred.

"Oh, how frightful! how frightful!" Piteously she implored the shabby old Pole, "Please, sir, take me away from these fiends! Please, please take me home!"

Nick Sassotti stepped back, without expression, and said:

"You savvy home, Pojay? Here's ten bucks for your trouble."

He held fast to the banknote until he had sent one more look at her ghastly face, because he knew that this time she would not come back.

He recrossed the street, swung himself into the car with his customary grace. The Cadillac returned toward the house that he had thought unworthy of her. Presently he announced:

"I'm walking, boys."

"Okay, chief. We'll tail you."

"Go and mind your own business."

He walked at random, seeing nothing till a child held a newspaper under his nose. He read, "Crime and Corruption Defeated." He growled, "Why ain't you home in bed, you little tramp, you?" He gave the child a dollar, went on blindly.

He imagined Rufus Townshend, in the Louis Seize drawing-room, smiling over the imported brandy. He recalled the words, "I shall take good care to drive you out of the city." But that wasn't what Rita's husband would try to do now.

"I'm certainly in the middle tonight," the celebrated Nick Sassotti told himself.

The touring-car crept half a block behind him. He turned and shouted savagely:

"Didn't I tell you once to leave me be?"

He went on, pondering, “If I’d let Stannie go, he’d just of thought I was a chump.” And presently, “It was seeing it put over. When she didn’t see it, she felt like it was something in them books.”

Once more he seemed to smell “La Fille du Roi Pausole.” He felt with his thumb the ring that she’d given him. He saw her lips in the darkness.

Oh, well, she wouldn’t have been no mother for his children.

Nick Sassotti found himself standing with his hands on a railing, looking at dark water touched with yellow lights. He thought of the Atlantic Ocean, of Italy, of a house on a mountain, of a garden with flowers in it. Snowflakes began to drift down upon the dark water; they wouldn’t let it snow in Italy! He went on thinking of the flowers. Of her, leaning down to pick them, like a kind of flower herself, then turning to him with the words, “Well, I must say, darling— —” He recalled her walking into the Good Times Athletic Club, her face eager above her sables. He pressed his smarting eyelids together and decided:

“Yeah. I got some of that gas.”

PART III

ARMED TRUCE

I

Hath he not given you fortitude? When you have such hands as these, do you still ask for somebody to wipe your nose?—

EPICETUS.

In the house on the edge of Little Italy, three aged women were preparing for the holidays. In the basement-kitchen—less crowded now that Aunt Bianca was with the blessed saints—Aunt Anna, Aunt Agnese and Aunt Annina had been evolving the cakes called panettoni, the nougat and marchpane, the “tarts of paradise.” This afternoon, however, the old creatures had haunted the second floor, gabbling and laughing over a tawny-haired boy who would soon be two years old. Nick Sassotti’s sister had returned for a visit, with her husband and son, from Rome.

Lucrezia Arkel let them watch her child put to bed, then shoed them out. She said to the nurse:

“Go to bed, Giulia. Between Nickie and America, you’ve had rather a time of it.”

The young widow from the Alban mountains, robust, deep-breasted, black-barred above the eyes, glittered with a large smile.

“Già, Signora,” she answered, almost in a baritone, “a strange country makes the head ache. Yet here, at least, there are good Italians, too.”

She carried her youthful portliness majestically through the dressing-room doorway.

Lucrezia sat down beside her son, asleep in the new, small bed embellished with gayly painted animals. The whole second floor had been refurnished by her brother for this visit. She thought of Gerald, her husband, who had pleasantly suggested their staying, instead, at a hotel. She wondered what sort of reception he would have from the club, across the city, to which he had ventured this evening.

Lucrezia, however, was an always fairer reward for his having made this misalliance.

The ruddy tresses, so prompt to turn flame-like at the approach of light, enclosed a pallor that redoubled the bizarre beauty of her eyes. The aquiline Sassotti nose gave a haughty touch to that face in which Gerald had discerned a resemblance to the terra-cotta portrait of Cleopatra. But Lucrezia

had been shaped from a larger mould than the Macedonian queen, so that Gerald was apt to compare the rest of his wife to sundry sumptuous goddesses of Italian Renaissance art. Which one, he told her, depended on whether she ate more or less spaghetti.

The mother contemplated her child with insatiable admiration. He held in his arms a white velvet rabbit bedecked with a pink satin necktie. The donor of this present walked into the room. Lucrezia smiled at her brother.

“Nobody yet?” she asked.

“Sherry Durand’s on his way. That big crook O’Connell’s coming. You want to set in, Lu?”

“And see this famous lawyer of yours.”

Nick Sassotti, staring at the baby, took a chair beside his sister. Under his breath, he said:

“Sherry looks like an old chaser in a three hundred dollar suit; but you could fill a jury-box with droppers and he’d make them cry reciting the Sears Roebuck catalogue.” He leaned forward to rearrange the white velvet rabbit. “You done a good job on that kid, Lu. He looks to me pretty near perfect.”

“He’s more than pretty near perfect.” She picked up her brother’s left hand, which was adorned with the chrysoberyl ring. “Where did you get this intaglio? Venus and Mars: my, my. I’ve seen worse in the Naples Museum. Who is she?”

“You want me to squawk on a dame that was strictly McCoy, what I mean, while she lasted?”

He had in his buttonhole a rose from the immense bouquet that had greeted Lucrezia’s return. His dull-blond hair was trimmed short; he had grown in her absence a closely cropped moustache. She was sure that some woman’s wish had impelled him to this unprecedented nonsense. His face, which wore no mask for her, seemed older than his thirty-three years. She would have liked to know if the woman of the Greek intaglio, or merely the state of his fortunes, had given him so changed a look.

“What’s worrying you?” she asked.

“The town’s gone sour, Lu. I wrote you about the recall-election last winter. They got a year and a half yet to run on our administration’s time. Well, it’s amachure-night every day at the City Hall now. High-hats and college professors playing they’re councilmen. Take Rufus Townshend,”

Nick said bitterly. “He married, you know, Rita Quellan. Townshend’s threwed up his job as a bank vice-president to go and fool round on the council.”

Lucrezia asked herself, in amazement, “Is that the woman?” What contact could her brother have attained with so fashionable a person?

“I suppose,” she remarked, “their slogan is that the time has come for gentlemen to do their part.”

“And how. Last election day I had a talk with Townshend. He tells me he’ll have me run out of the city. Ever since he’s on the council, they been crowding me till I can’t hardly move my goods. When I get everybody greased these days, there’s hardly no profit in it. They even chased Rooney out to the tin cans and put in a wrong skipper to make the precinct tough. I should hope you might remember Willie, my little riveter? They sent him up last week just for wearing a pistol.”

Lucrezia Arkel declared herself:

“I’ve wanted you to get out of the business for quite a while. It’ll always be the bad news. When you hadn’t these reformers to fight, you had competitors. There was Frank Pagliuca. We had to wipe him out to exist ourselves. Last year some one that you call Big Joe came along and you took another chance. I admit I’ve been living quietly in a country that hasn’t the blessings of Prohibition— —”

Nick Sassotti frowned.

“Listen, when I quit I won’t be rolled out by no long-hairs. I’m supprised at you. Besides, I might go into politics myself. I’m looking to get that dollar.”

“How much have you, Nick?”

“Three-four million. I ain’t counted lately.”

She shook her bright head, held out her hand, with the family snap of the fingers, toward the cigarette-case protruding from his waistcoat-pocket.

“Hey, you can’t smoke round the kid,” he said indignantly.

Laughing, she rejoined:

“Get married; have a few of your own.” She saw his unguarded face flinch. Yes, she decided, some woman—Rita or another—had done plenty of damage here. She concluded, “Meanwhile, don’t underestimate the

high-hats and the college-professors. They might learn how to make it still worse.”

“They’re doing that right now.”

“Have they tied you up with Big Joe or with Frank Pagliuca?” she whispered.

“They got something better. A reporter.” Rubbing the Greek ring with his thumb, he related impassively, “I square up with Joe Klopick on election night. We don’t win the election and I got to use my head plenty. My out costs me seventy thousand bucks and I have to take over half of Joe Klopick’s payroll. My fall-guy’s end is forty thousand when he comes out of the pen. All that trouble in Polish Town was just a little mix-up between Joe’s own gees. A fella used the excitement to drill Joe on account of a blonde. The fella only got a manslaughter-sentence, because him and the blonde was engaged. It was a crime of passion, like they say.”

Lucrezia winced.

“Go on to the reporter.”

“That was when I was ribbing it so’s the City Hall folks would give me the okay on Joe. It’s something you wouldn’t think could happen outside of an asylum.”

He described the worst known evidence of Tony Fava’s failure to understand a jest.

“Good heavens,” Lucrezia sighed.

“No fooling. None of the papers seemed to like it,” Nick Sassotti assented dryly. “So what would make this administration extra-solid with them and what would suit Townshend like tying it to me?”

“How is it the reporter’s paper doesn’t know?”

“Tony seen him having his dinner in the Gran Vittoria and takes him straight to the plant. He don’t phone from the plant, because Tony sticks him out in back and then goes and sets in the office with Joe’s stool and Monk. When Tony and Monk put on their act and leave, the reporter’s still hiding in the dark, thanking Tony for the chance to see a hist with his own eyes. I hear from one of Joe’s gees that he’d of got away with it, too, if he hadn’t chewed his gum so hard.”

“Then who’s going to tie it to you?”

“What they call District Attorney D. Webster Brassfield, Esquire, is getting closer every day.”

“Oh, Nick.”

She saw her brother, whose hearing was acute like an animal’s, listen to some sound downstairs. He grinned:

“Not a warrant. Just Sherry coming in.”

He rose, lowered his hard and handsome face toward the sleeping child, cautiously kissed a small hand.

“Ain’t it funny,” he mused, “how you can pass yourself on? I guess I better get busy. I know a very healthy dancer, name of Blanche de Vinne — —”

Lucrezia stood up and embraced him, to hide her sudden tears. He freed himself, walked quickly to the doorway, cast back the words:

“Is it married life that’s made you mushy?”

“Possibly,” she retorted, to the empty corridor.

She presently descended the staircase, past the chandelier of multi-colored Venetian glass hanging from the frescoed ceiling, in her frock of russet silk and her necklace of old cut-amber, in her perfume “Bellezza Fiorita,” which Babani had concocted for her.

Lucrezia had not told her brother that across the ocean three gentlemen had suggested her eloping with them, or that she had been called “graziosa” and “elegantissima” in the newspapers of Rome.

Instead, she had assured him that she lived, over there, “without any frills,” just as he would like it.

She paused on the halfway landing, brooded over the hall. Changing images rose before her. She saw her father’s blossom-laden casket going out through the front-door, borne by dark men from Sicily and Naples, and papa himself red-headed. She saw Nick’s boys, before the battle with Frank, seated on the parquet floor, fitting pistol-cartridges into machine-rifle drums. She saw Nick coming back from the hospital with the face of an invalid. She saw Gerald appearing for the first time, to thrill her with the strangeness of his gentility.

She stopped, in the hall, to touch the roses in the huge vase of majolica, depicting Alexander’s conquests, which she had sent her brother from abroad.

Then she heard the hall-clock chime, just as when she was a girl setting out for high school. She remembered the body-guards coughing from their cigarettes on the sofa under the staircase—Leo, who had been killed a year ago—Willie, now in prison, who, at her command, had shot those twenty bullets into Vito. The whole violent past, now alien and hateful, rushed in upon Lucrezia. Recoiling from it, she thought of the peace of her Roman and Alban homes. She entered her brother's "study," where even Gerald had once had to kill a man.

Two strangers rose at her apparition. Nick Sassotti said:

"Meet my sister."

She gave O'Connell a pleasant nod; he was stout, half-drunk, apparently in a vicious mood. She looked with veiled keenness at Sheridan Durand, the eminent criminal-lawyer. All that she saw, at first, was an aging, foppishly-dressed cavalier of ladies, bending down toward her hand the subtly incomplete face of a person who has missed some great satisfaction in life. She wondered if it was social security; for she perceived that Sheridan Durand was a snob.

"Dear lady," he was saying in a voice of suppressed resonance, like an actor's, "you bring us the beau monde of Rome. Do you, by any chance, know a Princess Bisantini over there?"

"I had the pleasure of buying some handkerchiefs from her at a charity-bazaar," said Nick Sassotti's sister.

Durand pushed forward a chair. Lucrezia, while talking with him, cast a look around her. The "study" had taken on in her absence an exotic richness; it nearly suggested the divan of a pasha. Oriental lamps, of metal studded with semi-precious stones, laid a mottling upon the wine-red walls. The mantelpiece, faced with Moorish tiles, supported a silver clock that looked to Lucrezia like the Taj Mahal. She noted on the carved desk, behind the tray of bottles and glasses, a framed photograph of a pretty brunette in a plumed and spangled head-dress. The photograph bore the legend, "To my Big, Blond Act of God— from his Happy Casualty."

Lucrezia decided that this was Blanche de Vinne.

"And who," she asked Sheridan Durand, "is the new district attorney?"

The eminent criminal-lawyer gave her an appreciative look, as if to say that she had lost no time in finding the point of the general situation. He cocked his eye toward O'Connell, who was drinking Scotch straight and sullenly watching Nick answer the telephone. Sheridan Durand explained:

“Inherited wealth. Admirer of Roosevelt, the gentleman who became president notwithstanding. Apparently still urbane although in politics. Our stout friend yonder is liable, at any moment, to have an invitation from him to a most engaging function.”

“What’s Brassfield’s weakness?”

“Women.”

Nick was speaking wearily to the telephone:

“Listen, my family’s got in. I’ll bring them round to your matinée tomorrow. Now don’t bother me no more tonight.”

Three more men entered the “study.” They were presented to Lucrezia as Mr. Avanzi, Mr. Flaherty and Mr. Higgins. She murmured to Sheridan Durand:

“A bachelor?”

“Yes. Always in the greatest demand. Friend of the Rufus Townshends, by the way.”

She studied the lawyer’s demurely pinched-in face, then suggested, in French:

“The friend of the family?”

He caught her meaning and laughed:

“Everything’s possible, of course, in so naturalistic an age.” Bending forward, he added more softly, his moist eyes gleaming in their lead-colored pouches, “What a charming perfume you wear. You make me think of the Place Vendôme and of beautiful ladies hurrying, in their furs, shall we say to tea-rooms, where men wearing Charvet ties are waiting in the utmost impatience.”

The door opened and she saw the lean, brown face of her husband. He did no more than put his head in, to stare at her quizzically.

“Well,” she observed, “you came back early.”

“Saturday night. Club empty. One old chap unconscious in the library. The bar-man was enchanted to see me. We had some swizzles together.”

“Come in, Gerry,” said Nick.

“Thanks; I’d only be a nuisance. I’ll just stagger about the house.”

He withdrew his head and shut the door.

Nick Sassotti began to talk of the efforts that his party was making already to win the next election. Everybody listened to his words, as if his right to speak at length were nowadays taken for granted. But Lucrezia missed in him that buoyancy of thought, with its promise of audacious action, which had been his most valuable quality. Was it "that woman" who had left him, as her parting gift, a self-distrust produced by his emotional defeat?

"Anything to keep them explaining," he was saying, "they give the Urban Railway the franchise, and they say they're going to get back two per-cent of the net for the city. Everybody knows the Urban'll fix it so there won't be no two per-cent. Let's start to printing—"

A radio, in the parlor adjoining the "study," gave a howl, then began to render "Neapolitan Nights." Nick Sassotti continued:

"They got seven hundred thousand in the Metropolitan-First on a day-to-day deposit at two per-cent again. That's Townshend's old bank," he interjected with a stiffening of his face. "Let's print they got it there on a year's deposit at four per-cent— Say, Lu, have we got to have that music?"

As if his question had been heard in the parlor, "Neapolitan Nights" died away. The door-bell rang.

"Now take Mr. Webbie Brassfield—"

O'Connell looked more vicious than ever, as all the others glanced at him. A white-haired, pink-faced man, with an enormous chest, entered and waved a paw like a fielder's glove. He was introduced to Lucrezia as Mr. Xavier Mulqueen.

The door-bell rang again.

"At that," Nick Sassotti remarked, as if parenthetically, "this Brassfield would make us a mayor if we could buy him in."

Xavier Mulqueen, his pink-quartz face turning red from merriment, glanced at O'Connell and boomed, "Mat here wants it put up to him quick, then." They all turned to the doorway, in which Gerald Arkel's amiable face had reappeared. He announced:

"Gentleman wearing a star-fish; won't take no for an answer. The boy got the job."

He drew back. There marched into the room a pallid, fanatical-looking young man in a very long overcoat, displaying on his chest a deputy-

sheriff's badge. The intruder rolled his eyes around, with the aspect of an early Christian about to be devoured by lions for the sake of his faith. He advanced to O'Connla, made his Adam's apple quiver and, in lieu of words, jabbed a grand jury subpoena into the other's breast-pocket. Wheeling and marching back to the doorway, he gasped, "That's all. That's all. That's all." He went out with his shoulders hunched up, as though he expected a fusillade of lead in the back.

There was a silence. Gerald came in and sat down. O'Connla stared at Sheridan Durand, who shook his head.

"I can't take this one. Sorry, Mat."

"You'd take Nick for first degree murder," said O'Connla violently.

"This is bribery, Mat, and Brassfield's got you cold. You were too careless, last administration, for Cicero himself to make much of a summing-up. In the future, try to observe these laughably simple rules, which go for all degrees of malfeasance and felony. Never take or give checks. Never leave finger-prints or personal souvenirs. Never have a witness. Never tell a woman."

Lucrezia let her glance slide past her brother. He was gazing calmly at the Greek intaglio.

O'Connla drained his glass and set it down so hard that it broke upon the tray. He rose, divulged to Sheridan Durand a look of homicidal hatred, then lurched out of the room.

"What they won't give him," rumbled Xavier Mulqueen.

"You're well rid of him," said Durand. "You'd be well rid of all the rest whose past behavior might be useful to this administration for defeating you next time."

"Correct," Nick Sassotti agreed, staring at the pale-green ring.

"There must be no more scandal," Durand concluded blandly.

"Perhaps," Lucrezia suggested, "a bit of a scandal might be arranged for the other side."

The lawyer wagged his gray curls, ambrosial from scented brilliantine.

"Trust you, dear lady, to see that!"

Nick asked them, with a frown, what they were talking about.

“Never mind; but I must beg a conference with your delightful sister. If you’ll permit,” he purred at Gerald. “What about luncheon tomorrow, my dear, at Mr. Mulqueen’s excellent restaurant?”

“She’s eating with us tomorrow,” said Nick Sassotti.

Lucrezia withdrew her thoughts from them. She had returned to this house in resentment at its unchanged atmosphere. She was fresh from safety and honor; she had been at rest in her love for her husband and her child. Now, suddenly, she knew that there was no lawlessness or violence to which she would not assent, in order to save her brother from being tried for murder.

Vain conjectures, she reflected. It was after being brought to trial that he would have to be saved. She perceived that the lawyer, beneath his airs of a crumbling Casanova, possessed the triumphant adventurer’s impudence and wit. She’d heard that he had at his command all the tricks of law; now she imagined him before the jury, pleading with the resonance of his voice, supple, infinitely persuasive, surely victorious?

“You must forgive me,” Sheridan Durand apologized, “for not having thought of it myself.”

She smiled at him:

“Ah, you didn’t think of it because a surreptitious love-affair seems commonplace to you.”

Between flattered vanity and covetousness, he whispered:

“I can imagine one that wouldn’t.”

Something odd was happening. Nick Sassotti seemed at the same moment to be sitting in his chair and standing upright, hurling a telephone-book. Lucrezia heard him say, “Look out, Sherry.” In the doorway, O’Connell, in a heavy ulster, stooped to let the telephone-book whistle over his head. His face was insane from alcohol and spite; his outstretched hand held a silver-plated revolver. Fire shot from the muzzle five times. O’Connell vanished.

They were all on their feet. The eminent criminal-lawyer took a step toward Lucrezia. She put her arm around him, held him up. He tried to laugh; some blood spurted out of his mouth upon her russet silk sleeve.

With a stare of mortification, Sheridan Durand breathed, “Oh, I beg your pardon,” and died.

II

Set death before me, set pain, set a prison, set ignominy, set condemnation before me, and you will know me.—EPICTETUS.

Lucrezia, Gerald and Nick made their way across the theatre, between the orchestra-pit and the front-row seats, while the audience was going out at the end of the "Afternoon of Dances by Miss Blanche de Vinne." Lucrezia, who went first, saw a man and a woman still sitting in the front row, the woman putting on her hat, the man leaning toward her to speak more quietly. The woman looked up at Lucrezia and her tawny eyes turned dark.

She was Mrs. Rufus Townshend.

Her hair was ruddy again. There was something in her pale countenance, nowadays, that suggested what is called in France the "grande amoureuse." Lucrezia noted the dark mascaro on her lashes, the emphatic paint on her lips, the imported hat and the broad-tail coat, the string of pearls and the perfume, "A Toi Maintenant," which had not been out a month in Paris.

The man was big, good-looking, at once nonchalant and keen, in his middle thirties, his sanguine face decorated with a black moustache.

Passing on, Lucrezia heard Rita Townshend exclaim, "As I live, it's Gerald. I must say you might have phoned us." Lucrezia's outraged ears caught her husband's murmur, but heard nothing pass between Rita and her brother. The woman even had the effrontery to call, "Give us a ring the end of the week, then. Rufie ran up to the capital this morning——" The three went on in silence to a door behind the boxes, where Nick Sassotti took the lead.

"Who's that man?" Lucrezia hissed at Gerald.

"Old Webbie Brassfield."

"She gave you a turn, didn't she," said Lucrezia acidly.

"Old Rita? Good Lord, my girl, don't go shooting off squibs at her again."

Breathing hard through her nose, Lucrezia followed her brother into Blanche de Vinne's momentary reception-room. Two young men and a woman went out. Flowers stood about in gilded baskets. The dancer appeared from her shower in a rubber cap and a bathrobe.

She held up toward them her wet little face, with its tilted nose and lifted upper lip, with the blue still around her dark eyes and the rouge still on her ear-tips. Smelling of Castile soap, she gave Lucrezia a small, cold, apparently boneless hand and gurgled:

“I’m so glad to know you, Lu. You were kind to come to my concert, weren’t you, though? Thanks for the lovely yellow roses, Nick.”

“Yellow?” he inquired.

“Oh! I’m sorry; but you never write a word with them.”

“No,” said Nick Sassotti. “This year I never write nothing and I never leave no finger-prints.”

“Honestly?” She smiled at him like a child that is used to being slapped and quick to divert the next threatening gesture. “You look awfully tired, Nick.”

He turned away, with the command:

“Get into your clothes. We’re going to a party.”

“The like of which you’ve never seen,” Lucrezia added. “You danced wonderfully, dear,” she said and gently pushed the girl toward the doorway of her dressing-room.

Nick Sassotti sat down and looked at his hands, which did not tremble. Lucrezia saw the sweat shining on his forehead. The silence badly needed breaking. She asked briskly:

“Who’s the lawyer that got the Dungannon case reversed?”

“I said already I want Chase, Humbolt & Chase,” her brother growled.

Gerald Arkel offered the opinion that he wouldn’t get them. Humbolt’s cousin was commissioner of schools. Gerald, sitting with one thin knee over the other, his hard hat, gloves and walking-stick in his lap, remarked, “All those chaps belong to the administration’s clubs and their wives are all Junior Leaguers together and their tiny tots all drink out of the same flask. You ought to find a rising fellow that was never put up for the Union Club or the Benedicts, but who looks as if he belonged to something somewhere else — —”

“What a fine helper you are,” said Nick. “I want Chase, Humbolt & Chase and I’ll pay them any retainer up to a hundred thousand bucks.”

There was a tap on the door.

Nick's lieutenant, Bennie Mendelssohn, came in and removed his hat, displaying an exceptional marcel. He was still ingenuous-looking, with round, fresh cheeks and sentimental eyes. He had on a near-black suit; his shirt and handkerchief were lavender; his tie was violet.

"You set on going to Tony Fava's party, chief?"

"Come here," Nick Sassotti retorted.

His hand darted out and flipped back Bennie Mendelssohn's coat, revealing a pistol in a patent-leather shoulder-holster. The general regarded his officer with burning eyes.

"What did I tell you? You looking to go up there with Willie? You think I ain't got enough troubles without you prancing around playing soldier? Take that cannon off before them wrong coppers pat you, you simple punk, you."

Bennie Mendelssohn looked hurt.

"I just put it on because the news ain't so good." He slid his eyes toward Lucrezia and Gerald, then said, "They took Tony Fava down to see Brassfield this morning."

Nick Sassotti sat motionless, his hands on his knees, his fur-lined overcoat thrown back from his suit of maroon English cloth. He wore a maroon-colored tie with the large black pearl in it; his shirt bore faint maroon stripes. His opaquely yellowish face—the face of the Italian blond whose complexion always seems dusky—showed not the slightest animation. He plucked from his coat-lapel a tarnishing gardenia, looked at it critically, threw it upon the floor. He inquired:

"Who says so?"

"Napoli," Bennie Mendelssohn affirmed. "He was in the restaurant by himself on account of Sunday and Tony come in to talk about tonight. Two guys like under-cover dicks walk in and say to Tony, 'Are you Mr. Fava, the proprietor?' Tony makes them right away and folds. The dicks tell him to get his hat and one of them says to Napoli, 'You keep your trap shut, fella, or we'll be back for you.' They had him downtown for three hours, then turned him loose."

"Perhaps they only took him on approval," Gerald suggested.

Nick Sassotti sent his brother-in-law a glassy stare. Lucrezia bit her lip, then asked:

"Did he give up?"

“Can’t say for sure, Mrs. Arkel. Napoli tells me he come back with his coat-tails dragging and started in to hit the booze.”

“Napoli let on he tipped you?” demanded Nick Sassotti.

“That boy?” Bennie Mendelssohn hooted. “He says to tell you he’ll do anything you want there. Me, too, of course,” the ingenuous-looking young man concluded, glancing modestly at the left side of his coat.

Nick’s face expressed commiseration.

“Get this good: nobody won’t do nothing. We’re going to Tony’s party like it never happened. Hey,” he called toward the door of the dressing-room, “what’s holding you up? These dames.”

His haggard face was calm; his voice was easy. He looked more kindly at Blanche de Vinne, as she came out timidly smiling in her hat and wrap.

Before the theatre, in the early darkness, the new car was waiting, a Rolls-Royce limousine. It set out, as always nowadays, at the legal rate of speed.

Lucrezia held her brother’s hand all the way to the party.

The limousine slid past a shuttered building with a sign, “Italian-American Food Products Company—Antonio Fava, Inc.” It stopped before a restaurant proclaiming itself to be “The Gran Vittoria Café.” An awning stretched from the doorway to the curb. Three policemen were hanging around. In the vestibule, stood a floral horse-shoe with flowing ribbons inscribed, “Their Twenty-Fifth Honeymoon.”

There was a humming of voices, a warmth scented with garlic, tobacco-smoke, wine-fumes, flowers, roast chickens. “Hello, Napoli,” said Nick Sassotti, to a narrow-skulled head-waiter who had rushed to take Lucrezia’s wrap. Beyond, the restaurant blazed with American and Italian colors, with the vivid dresses of the women and the paper caps of the men.

Somebody ran in there and shouted, “I Sassotti!” Trumpets and trombones began the march from “Aïda.”

“Hello, Nick,” a young girl said shyly.

Lucrezia remembered that face, oval, golden, pensive like the face of an immature, half reluctant saint. Nick laid the back of his hand to the soft cheek; the maiden happily trembled. “How are you, Beatrice?” murmured Lucrezia, bending to kiss Tony Fava’s oldest daughter. The girl looked in

awe at the graduate from the borders of Little Italy to the mystic grandeurs of Rome.

At their appearance in the doorway of the restaurant, there was a clamor:

“Evviva Sassotti! Evviva Nicolo! Brava, bravissima, Signora! But what beauty! And what a gallant husband she has! A toast! A toast!”

The people at the tables stood up, lifting their glasses; they caught from one another the drinking-song from “La Traviata”:

Enjoy the cup with songs of pleasure,
Which make the night so gay and glad
That scarce we heed the dawn— —

All the clans were present. They had come from north and south, from Piedmont and Sicily. The women had blue-black hair, hair of burnt-brown and gold, hair as red as foxes’ fur. Some faces were strong, some devout, some softly voluptuous. The men, nearly all of them law-abiding citizens — — except that they were hardly going to do without their wine — — showed the fairness of Goths and the darkness of Moors, the heads of Northerners and of Mediterraneans. Here and there, at the tables, aged folk, who knew no English, sat leaning forward with chicken-legs in their hands, smiling at the uproar.

“Nick! By Jimminy! I says to the old lady it looks like you wasn’t coming.”

Lucrezia turned her eyes to Tony Fava.

She saw that he was drunk and terrified. Short, abnormally broad, in a long black coat decorated with a white chrysanthemum and streamers of red-white-and-green, he swayed as he peered up at Nick Sassotti. Above his beak, his eyes, surrounded by shriveled indigo bags, resembled the eyes of a parrot. Nick looked down at him calmly, as if in reassurance, a social smile on his lips.

“Many happy returns, Tony.”

The gaunt visage of the traitor fell before that scrutiny. Tony Fava made Lucrezia a sort of obeisance, like an acolyte’s, and kissed her hand awkwardly.

“Well, Miss Sassotti,” he groaned. “What I mean— —”

“Married twenty-five years to the same party,” Nick said to Blanche de Vinne, who was hanging on his arm. To Lucrezia, in the midst of her

wretchedness, they seemed like a pair of tourists before an almost unbelievable spectacle. “How sweet!” Blanche de Vinne squealed, dilating her eyes at Tony, who might have been a beaked octopus slowly sinking toward the floor of his aquarium.

“Let’s shake hands with your old lady,” Nick Sassotti suggested. “Standing for you so long.”

“Them silver flower-baskets was too much,” Tony Fava quavered.

“Yeah?” Nick took from the other’s nerveless hand a wad of white tissue-paper. He straightened it out; it was a fool’s-cap. With an air of solicitude, he jammed it down upon Tony Fava’s head.

The proprietor of the Gran Vittoria Café and of the Italian-American Food Products— —the betrayer who had grown rich especially through Nick Sassotti— —staggered in the lead around the room. Bennie Mendelssohn remained in the doorway, looking the company over.

The head-waiter came bustling along beside the Sassotti party.

“Nice seats we saved,” he assured them. Thrusting his narrow skull past Lucrezia, he added, between his teeth, to Nick, “Signed confession.”

“Thanks, Napoli.”

At the long table stretching across the end of the restaurant, Mrs. Fava, dressed in white satin, was waiting in the place of honor, behind the two silver flower-baskets overflowing with roses. She was an undersized, physically ruined woman, with a transparent skin and the simper of a wax doll furnished with imperfect teeth. Batting her eyes at the Sassotti party, she piped, with a nasal Calabrian accent:

“You do us great honor. Arrange yourselves, for pleasure.”

“She doesn’t know,” Lucrezia decided.

Tony Fava dropped into the chair at his wife’s left, as if at the end of his strength. Lucrezia, to her indignation, was asked to sit beside him. Nick Sassotti came next, then Blanche de Vinne, then Gerald, who had on his other hand a young woman of the Zarziulo clan, magnificent in vermilion silk, inky tresses and flesh like vanilla ice-cream. Lucrezia heard her husband say at once, in his best dinner-table voice, “Marvelous perfume, Miss Zarziulo, if you don’t mind what happens— —”

Mrs. Fava, beating a wine-glass with a knife, was screaming, like a small bird:

“Domiziano! Alfredo!”

But waiters were already running with platters of hors d’œuvre and decanters of vermouth. Nick Sassotti and his sister, although they allowed their plates and glasses to be filled, touched nothing.

Men came up to greet Nick. They all asked him “how things were stacking.” He answered genially, “Just right.” Nobody mentioned the murder of Sheridan Durand, or the arrest of O’Connell on a train five hundred miles away. Occasionally Nick Sassotti glanced toward the door, as though expecting to see the police with the warrant for his own arrest. He lighted one of his Toscanos. The noxious smoke wreathed itself around his tarnished-gold head scented with eau de quinine.

A man, far off in the glamour of lights and colors, shouted deeply:

“Canio! Vesti la giubba!”

People laughed, turning to look at Tony Fava, who sat with his elbows on the table, his face in his hands, the fool’s-cap on his head. They were thinking of the tragic clown in “I Pagliacci.” Voices called out, “Sing it!” Mrs. Fava, leaning forward, simpered to Lucrezia:

“And he can sing it fine; but tonight he is too drunk, poverino, in his happiness.”

Lucrezia heard Gerald saying to the belle of the Zarziulos, “Hang it all! I knew you’d be in love with d’Annunzio.” Blanche de Vinne was murmuring to Nick, “Why won’t you let me give you a real ring, honey?” He turned his back on her. Beatrice, the Fava’s oldest daughter, was standing behind her father, looking down at him. With each hand she held a younger child of his, decked with streamers and a paper cap.

“Come here, Bice,” said Nick, snapping his fingers at the girl. He pronounced that abbreviation “Beechy.”

She came to him slowly, with a sway, as if reluctantly. He took the youngest child upon his lap, then put his arm around Beatrice Fava. “You’re growing up, ain’t you?” he asked her. A wave of red flowed over the golden face; she lowered her long, black lashes toward her bosom. The child on Nick’s lap threw her arms about his neck, crying indignantly, “No! Me!”

Tony Fava raised his head, the fool’s-cap crooked on his grizzled curls. Grief overflowed his eyes. Nick Sassotti, enveloped by the traitor’s children, permitted himself a cold smile.

“I been one of your family a long time, ain’t I, Tony? We done plenty business together and I guess you never suffered none from that. Now and then I got sore. Like that little matter last year. But we all make our mistakes.”

From amid the clattering and buzzing of the tables, the deep voice called again:

“Vesti la giubba! Canio!”

The orchestra began the song popularized by Caruso.

“Yeah. We was pretty close,” Nick Sassotti continued, giving Bice Fava an impersonal hug. “I almost seen your kids born. Sometimes I seen them die. Imalda and Tessa. Tony and Carlotta. George and Tom. Them boys was careless; but they wasn’t yellow. Nice kids you always had, you little chimpanzee. When a man’s got a nice family, you got to make allowances.”

“Yes, Nick,” said Tony Fava hoarsely.

Napoli whisked away the brother’s and the sister’s untouched plates. Tony Fava watched them go, like the symbols of friendship, of faith, of life itself in dissolution. Nick Sassotti, patting the head of the child on his lap, finished with the words:

“You ain’t much of a father; but I guess you’re better than not having none at all. I always got along; I’ll manage; but I won’t be seeing you. Thanks for the pleasant evening.”

The music grew louder. All over the restaurant, people were standing, looking at Tony Fava, shouting:

“Canio! Canio!”

“Go on and sing it,” Mrs. Fava twittered fondly. “Even the way you are, you can do it better than Carus’.”

She had understood nothing.

Slowly, in the midst of the uproar, Tony Fava stood up, as if in a trance. He lifted his beak and looked toward the orchestra.

“On the table! On the table!”

He clambered upon the table, stood erect, swaying, between the silver flower-baskets full of roses. He had a tumbler of brandy in his hand; he drained it and threw it down. He waited for silence, his black coat dangling to his knees, his fool’s-cap aslant, his face disordered by its secret.

A rough voice, vibrant with sorrow filled the restaurant:

To play on, when my head's awhirl with madness,
Not knowing what I'm saying or performing!
Yet somehow I must force myself to do it;
I'm not a man; I'm but a mannikin— —

The Sassotti party had risen to leave the room. Now they were waiting, their eyes on Tony Fava. But every one in the restaurant was intent on that grotesque visage transfigured by suffering. Every one was startled by that bellow of authentic horror which made the scalp stir. The mouths of men and women were open. On this face and that pleasure was mingled with alarm. The violinists, stimulated beyond their talent, bent their inspired foreheads toward the sweep of their bows.

The music swelled into the aria itself:

The people pay; so they must have their fun— —

Lucrezia closed her eyes. She could see the commerce of the night, under the frosty stars— —the commerce in the forty-eight united states. She thought of the ships approaching, the caravans rumbling on countless roads, the multitude of men plotting, bribing, betraying, killing, going to retribution. Gay laughter and shameful death; immunity balanced by destruction. She opened her eyes, at last, with a long shudder, as the creature on the table attained the climax of a million phonograph records:

Laugh, Pagliaccio— —

Then, with a sob more realistic than Carus's:

Laugh for the pain that's gnawing at your heart— —

The audience surged forward, booming out their bravos. With a cry, Tony Fava jumped from the table, scuttled through the crowd, disappeared.

The Sassotti party left the Gran Vittoria Café.

Their homeward ride was silent. In the house, to the old woman shuffling across the hall, Nick Sassotti said, "Get us a bite to eat, Aunt Anna, and some champagne." They went into the "study."

"Sweet girl, Miss Zarziulo," observed Gerald. "Make a nice pet, like a shiny black leopardess."

"And I wish she'd et you up," Nick Sassotti replied.

“Mr. Fava sang wonderfully, didn’t he, though?” Blanche de Vinne ventured. “I always love that good old hooey about clowns with breaking hearts.”

“I was hoping he’d bust his blood-vessel and die on the top of my presents.” Nick seated himself in his desk-chair. “Lu, they ought to been here before this.” The phone rang. He listened attentively, said, “Thanks again, Napoli,” hung up. “Well,” he remarked, “Tony went down the cellar and shot his brains out.”

The silence was ended by Lucrezia’s shocked voice:

“You’re sure it’s suicide?”

“Certainly. He quits singing and goes right down and does it. Only somebody goes down, after, and robs the gun. I guess some bright friend of mine figured on doing me a favor.”

He gave a mirthless laugh.

Lucrezia thought, “That woman has left him so flat that he isn’t fighting.”

She pictured Rita and the nonchalant district attorney laughing together over Tony Fava’s signed confession. She saw the Greek intaglio shining pale-green on the gallows. The headlines announcing the execution rushed through the streets. Rufus Townshend smiled at the news with his face that Lucrezia had not seen.

The “graziosa Donna Lucrezia,” of Rome and Frascati, felt an intolerable thirst for war without law or quarter. Once more she was Lucrezia Sassotti, for whom the guns had charged into Fanny’s Inn. Alluring, like a “grande amoureuse” herself, in the perfume by Babani, she sat searching her mind for some sufficiently ferocious plan of action.

III

If I escape, I shall be of use to many; if I die, to none. Nay, if it had been necessary, we should have crept through a mouse-hole to get away.—EPICETUS.

Lucrezia stood lost in thought, while Aunt Annina, like a benevolent witch, put the finishing touch to the black evening frock from Worth, the dressmaker of queens. The withered fingers pinned to the narrow shoulder-strap a white rose that seemed less splendid than Lucrezia's bosom, most of which was revealed. The ruddy hair gleamed in contrast to the white skin and the dark satin. Lucrezia slipped down her corsage a drop of "Bellezza Fiorita."

"Eh! all the men will lose their hearts," Aunt Annina mumbled. "Tonight, the young husband, who thinks the world is only a joke, should be at your side."

"He'll be there later," said Lucrezia, relaxing with a smile. "He won't lose me, Zia Annina."

"So one always says," the old creature croaked, "beforehand."

Lucrezia walked into the next room. Beyond the lamp, waited the nurse from the Alban mountains, majestic like a young Juno, her teeth and her gold ear-pendants glittering in the shadows. Nick Sassotti, in a dinner-jacket, leaned forward on his chair toward the child with the tawny curls, who stood up sturdily in his sleeping-suit. Perhaps Nickie was puzzled by certain emotions that his uncle was dissembling with a grin. Nick Sassotti, after more than twenty-four hours of suspense, did not know whether he would be able to finish his next remark before the police rang the door-bell.

"Say it in English," he exhorted his tiny nephew, as one man to another. "We got a law over here against talking foreign. What's the American flag look like?"

"Sono tredici striscie, bianche ed azzure — —"

"Ain't you never let him see one?" Nick Sassotti looked up at his sister in despair. "Here he's two years old next month and he tells me the stripes is blue. A swell in you got with Sandy Claus, young fella."

The child reflected, then laughed merrily:

“Già, Sandy Claus! He will come in the carrozza alle renne, with much pleasure for me. Uncle Nick, if you will have the gentilezza to tell him, in first, that I pray to get uno schioppo— —”

“Yeah. He brings you a gun and you shoot us all dead. Who give you that kind of ideas?” He reached out with his unexpected swiftness to sweep the boy into his arms; he gave his nephew a spank with his cupped hand, then a kiss on the neck. “Chase yourself to bed. Next time I look you over, try to act like a genuwine American, not a little Wop.”

“We’re late, Nick,” Lucrezia murmured. “I’ll just see him tucked in.”

As she descended the staircase in the hall, she observed Bennie Mendelssohn. Plump in his dark sack-suit, his hair freshly fluted, his cheeks as rosy as if he had been rubbing them, he held out toward Nick Sassotti a bulbous bottle of whisky.

“Can you imagine them kilties, chief?” he inquired plaintively. “Here’s one of the last shipment. Schmidt and Beardsley says they must of made it last week and they shaved the bottles down again.”

“Phone Carter to knock off fifteen per-cent or drink it himself,” said Nick Sassotti, helping Lucrezia with her lynx-trimmed wrap. She looked askance at Bennie Mendelssohn, who nodded. Tonight, the young man was to be Lucrezia’s lieutenant.

“I hope you have a great evening, Mrs. Arkel,” he said soulfully. “If you ain’t going to want me, chief— —”

The door-bell rang. Without hesitation, Nick Sassotti advanced to the door and threw it open. In a gust of icy air, stood the oldest daughter of the late Tony Fava.

She did not come in. The cold filled the hall, while Beatrice Fava stood on the door-mat in her black hat and coat, a crape veil framing the golden oval of her face. Her eyes and nose were swollen from weeping; her tender lips were pressed together in grief. The maiden, looking straight at Nick Sassotti, spoke at last:

“Did you tell somebody to kill papa?”

He said quietly:

“That’s fine, Bice, you thinking I could do that to you and mama and the girls.”

Trembling in the stream of cold air, Beatrice Fava laid one narrow hand around her throat. She peered at Nick Sassotti with a grimace of pain, like a distorted smile, and uttered:

“Well, then, maybe they won’t let him be buried like a good Catholic.” Of a sudden, her features seemed to melt and run together. She gave a cry and was clinging fast to him, her sobs muffled on his breast. “Oh, Nick, I’ve lost papa and you never came near.”

He put his arms around her, moved her head so that she could not weep upon his shirt-front.

“I got held up. I was figuring on coming tomorrow. Don’t think nothing of these clothes, baby; I’m meeting some parties on business. You know. Business has got to go ahead.”

The frail young saint, lying in the powerful arms of her dead parent’s victim, sobbed out the information:

“Everything was mixed up and crazy. They kept carrying on and I kept watching at the window. I knew, if only you’d come, you’d make it stop being so mixed up. And John Zarziulo said you didn’t come because you’d killed him. And I slapped his face.”

“I’ll bust John a good one for you,” Nick Sassotti said comfortingly. “What could you do to him with them cute little hands?”

“Nick, will you come by and by and sit with papa a while? He looks just like Napoleon or some one — —”

“You betcha. If nothing don’t stop me.”

“Thanks, Nick,” she sighed. “I feel better now.”

She released herself, as though recoiling into her virginal modesty. She turned and ran down the steps to a waiting taxi. Nick Sassotti watched her flight with somber interest. He made the comment:

“Bice’s hips is wider than what I’d thought they was.”

Lucrezia gave him his hat and led him out of the house. He handed her into the Rolls-Royce limousine, told Angelo to drive to the Imperial Café. He sat on the right; but Donna Lucrezia Arkel did not refer to that faux-pas. Instead, she patted his hand, found the Greek intaglio and suggested:

“Blanche de Vinne won’t quite do, will she, dear?”

“That’s right.”

“Of course, Rita Townshend would spoil you.”

He made no reply.

The limousine drew up below the canopy of the Imperial. In the restaurant, beyond the white-and-gold lobby, green lights were on for a waltz. Xavier Mulqueen floated forward, his shirt-front bulging, his white hair slicked down, his pink and rocky countenance ashine. He bowed to Lucrezia, like a champion in the ring, saw that Nick Sassotti was busy with the cloak-room girl, wheezed, in what he thought was a whisper:

“My office.” He pivoted lightly on his toes, to shout at Nick, “How’s business?”

“Never better. Higgins and Avanzi here?”

“In the red room, with a private-sign on the dure. Listen, a fillet of sole Joinville, pressed ducks, orange salad, crêpes Suzette. Hey, Mrs. Arkel?”

“Splendid. Go on, Nick. I’ve forgotten my powder.”

She walked toward the women’s room, her reflection cast back at her from the mirror-lined walls. She saw her tall, tapering body in the black dress by Worth, her white bosom and blazing hair, her tawny eyes that did not seem to her unique. As Nick entered the restaurant, his sister swerved to the door of Xavier Mulqueen’s office. She went in, closed the door behind her and looked at five men who stood up and took off their hats. Three said shyly, “Hello, Miss Sassotti.” Another made the elaboration, “You’re a sight for sore eyes.” One, almost an albino, Lucrezia did not know; the others had been with her at the battle in the country.

The door opened and Bennie Mendelssohn came in.

“Just heard from Al, Mrs. Arkel.”

“Has she shown?”

“Limousine to a big house on Brewster. Dinner party; four cars in front; the soup-and-fish.”

“Which is she wearing?”

“The one with the white collar.”

“All the better.” Lucrezia looked at the others and inquired, “What’s this about its not being in his office?”

A bluish-faced man, whose name she would remember in a moment, spoke succinctly:

“It’s three this morning when we make it. I’ve spent one grand. We give the whole floor a good frisk and we take two hours. I open the big safe in the record-room and the little safe in his office. Pink” — —he twitched his head toward the quasi-albino — —“goes through the files.”

Pink spoke in a reedy, educated voice:

“The big files and the boxes, for Fava and Sassotti, for Tony’s businesses, for everybody Nick deals with, for the reporter and his paper, for Joe Klopick and Frank Pagliuca. There was plenty about Nick, but nothing so serious. Nothing about Nick and the reporter. Don’t fret, Miss Sassotti. I’m a graduate librarian.”

“What do you mean, don’t fret?” said the bluish-faced man. “All you’re giving her is that it ain’t been made a record. This evening,” he continued, “we pick up his secretary, take him where it’s quiet and slip him a little treatment. He turns out to be a cry-baby; but he sticks to the story that Brassfield took it with him when he left this afternoon. The secretary says the last thing Brassfield tells him was that this is a confidential matter.”

Lucrezia had a moment of incredulity.

“You don’t mean, Monk, that Brassfield took a thing like that home?”

“Took it somewheres.”

“Who was in on the confession?”

“Just the secretary and Brassfield and a couple to give Tony the massage.”

“Did you ask about photostats?”

“He says there wasn’t none made.”

“Where’s the secretary now?”

“We stuck him in the plant on Wright street.”

Lucrezia reflected, while the six admirers of her tradition and beauty breathed her perfume. They stood around her as inconspicuously dressed brigands might surround a princess. Bennie Mendelssohn, gazing at her hair, seemed ready to swoon from esthetic appreciation.

“What about his residence?”

A horse-faced young Irishman, who had a collegiate air, informed her in a deep voice:

“Swell apartment-house: doorman, desk-clerk, two elevators. An hour ago, we come in the back when he leaves by the front. Give the flat a complete casing. It isn’t there. I’m wrecking the phones when a dame calls in and asks where can she find Mr. Brassfield. High-class voice.”

“Did she say anything else?”

“I’m the telephone-company man and there’s strictly nobody in. So she tells me, like it hands her a pain, ‘Well, I must say — —’”

“That’s fine, Pat.” Lucrezia’s white fingers touched him on the shoulder, in a gesture like an accolade. She turned to Bennie Mendelssohn. “You’re sure that Rufus Townshend won’t be back till tomorrow?”

“Absolutely. He’s having his dinner with the governor this minute.”

“Very well, then, Pink, you phone Mrs. Townshend at the house on Brewster. Mr. Brassfield has asked you to tell her that he’ll be at his flat by midnight and unengaged, if she cares to be troubled then. Say just that and hang up. Bennie, I’ll want a car at eleven-fifteen. I won’t need the rest of you tonight.”

“Don’t take no chances, Miss Sassotti,” the bluish-faced man protested.

“I’m not Miss Sassotti any more, Monk.”

“That’s right. Many happy returns.”

They all laughed. They moved closer to her, as though to feel more intensely, before parting from her, the thrill of her vital spirit, which had returned from a fabulous foreign life to allow them one more chance for adoration. She gave each her hand, smiled at each as she thanked him, went out into the lobby. Xavier Mulqueen was waiting, entrenched behind his chest.

“Shaping up?” he inquired, in his resonant whisper.

“I think so. And would you mind very much if the orange salad were endive?”

“Just what I was telling meself.”

He led her to the red room.

Her brother, Avanzi and Higgins got up from the round table, at which six places were laid. She sat down beside Nick, an empty chair on her right.

“What’s the six places for?” Nick Sassotti called to a waiter, who had entered with a frosted silver shaker.

Lucrezia remarked that Gerald might bring a friend. Her brother stared at her.

“I thought this was a private party.”

“My private parties in Rome,” she told them, “are famous for their piquant combinations of guests.”

“Yeah? Listen, you know how I like the kind of people Gerry would show up with. I’d most rather see Brassfield’s dicks.”

“You’ll see better than that.”

“Sandy Claus?”

“Perhaps, disguised as an excellent lawyer.”

Nick turned his shoulder to her.

“Thanks. Maybe you ain’t heard the news. My new lawyers are Grossman & Zanders.”

“What’s your lawyer’s name, Mrs. Arkel?” asked Avanzi, a little gray man, with an abnormally long nose, who looked like a sickly tapir. Pretending not to have heard his question, she called a waiter to light her cigarette. Higgins, a flabby giant, his pear-shaped face mottled with liver-spots, prompted her brother:

“That’s why you changed your account from the Metropolitan-First?”

“And he was as glad to get it as they was to lose it. I talked to him yesterday. We can deal him in any time, if we don’t put it on the air.”

For that matter, Nick Sassotti remarked, the reform administration was alienating more than one financier, who had thrived too much better under a government with privileges for sale. He was sure, he said, that in six months half the Bankers’ and Merchants’ Association, which had brought in the reformers, would be ready to change their tune. The president of the street-railway system was afraid of municipal ownership, if this administration won again. The person whom he’d mentioned, Nick added, as the waiter went out, might lend a hand toward discrediting the mayor on a charge of illegal election-expenditures.

“All we need for that is a right grand jury foreman. Of course, boys, I might not be here to put it through— —”

The door opened. Lucrezia saw Gerald ushering into the room District Attorney Brassfield. Both wore camellias and both looked as if they’d had a

lavishment of cocktails.

Webbie Brassfield, the large and nonchalant ornament of the best society, no less than of the forces of reform, recognized Lucrezia first. His face, shrewd yet indulgent, glowed with satisfaction.

Gerald airily announced:

“From left to right, my wife, my brother-in-law, Mr. Higgins and Mr. Avanzi. Armed truce, with Christmas approaching. The boys out of the trenches, eating, or talking, turkey. Draw up a chair, Webbie, and let’s all see what we can do toward making the world a sweeter place to live in.”

Webbie Brassfield perceived the three watchful men.

“Well, I’ll be blowed,” he remarked, then began to laugh.

He took the chair, without being invited, beside Lucrezia.

As he turned his head, she saw that his eyes were slow in focusing. She noted the texture of his sanguine face, the color of his teeth, the moisture of his hair at the temples, the degree to which his thick neck exceeded his collar. Suddenly she was aware of his sensual attractiveness, balancing with a taurine sort of power her feminine allurements.

Gerald circled the table, the silver shaker in his hand, to sit down beside Avanzi. Two waiters appeared with the first course. Nick Sassotti was frigidly looking at his sister.

“After the theatre the other day,” said Brassfield, leaning close to her, “you can imagine whether I jumped at this chance.”

“Why, when you’re already acquainted with my alleged double?”

“Bosh! you’re not doubles to me. Besides,” he smiled, “I shouldn’t dare to find any resemblance at all. I hear you once resented that.” He glanced at Gerald, who was trying to tell the outraged Avanzi a story. “But if I were ever silly enough to be teetering in my mind between you and any one else, you could shoot off a gun at me, too.”

“You seem to know all about me,” she murmured, sending him a flash of her eyes.

He looked down at her bosom, from which the perfume “Bellezza Fiorita” was dispelled by her warmth. He answered, under his breath:

“Only enough to want to know a lot more.”

Nick Sassotti was eating his filet de sole Joinville as though he were alone in the red room. Higgins sat looking at his plate with the aspect of a person expecting to be poisoned. Avanzi remarked to Gerald, "You're wasting your time, young man. My sense of humor isn't working tonight."

Webbie Brassfield chuckled:

"I've come across your brother's name somewhere. What's his business again?"

"My brother is an industrialist," she said, "and a philanthropist. For instance, he held a good part of the Amalgamated Power Company stock; but in the last half-year he's been disposing of it, in lots up to a hundred dollars' worth, to the humbler sort of investors. Not, of course, because their votes will come handy if your administration makes a campaign for municipal power-bonds."

Nick Sassotti laid down his fork and glared at the intruder.

"What's the big delay on that warrant, Brassfield?"

"My dear man! I don't know what you mean."

Nick stood up, threw his napkin on the table, to a gleam of the chrysoberyl ring, and snapped at Lucrezia:

"Let's go."

Avanzi and Higgins were moving toward the door.

"I'm sorry you're spoiling my party, Nick. Mr. Brassfield and Gerald and I will have to eat up all Mr. Mulqueen's crêpes Suzette. I'll tell you about them later."

"And I'll tell you something later," he promised her, with a look of incredulous fury, from the doorway.

"Go and smooth him down, Gerald," she said. Her husband slipped into the corridor and closed the door behind him. A mumble of expostulation was heard, then her brother's grating voice, "Silly trick — — only a woman — —" Everything, so far, had turned out as Lucrezia had wished. From now on, each move might bring failure.

How long would Mulqueen be able to hold Gerald in the corridor?

Webbie Brassfield drank a glass of champagne and inquired:

"Just what was it that you wanted?"

Under his scrutiny, she stirred like a white, human rose outrivaling the flower on her shoulder. The lights brought forth the full splendor of her hair. Her tawny eyes now appeared black. She looked proud yet replete with ardor, conquerable by audacity or by some still-hidden necessity of her own.

She approached the point obliquely, praying for time enough to reach it.

“Tell me how you’d like to be the next mayor?”

He made a gesture of mock consternation. Touching the sleeve stretched out by his biceps, she warned him hurriedly:

“Your party’s being deserted by the money. Next time, we’ll beat you; but first we want a man like you to head the ticket. You’ll be approached; I’m merely telling you now. You’d soon find yourself with your most powerful friends— —with business, with the banks, with the independent vote, with us who know how to pay our debts both ways. Don’t go under with those amateurs. Mayors become governors; governors become senators; a strong man can throw a stone from the Senate to the White House.”

Brassfield reached down to the bucket beside his chair and fished up the champagne bottle.

“What a woman you’re turning out to be.”

“Of course. And I know what you’re thinking. You’d need to have made a record as district attorney. But don’t count on my brother to make it for you, Webbie. We’ll punch Tony Fava’s confession full of holes. If you want to win a sensational murder-trial, concentrate on O’Connla. If you don’t like O’Connla, we’ll set up some one else for you.”

The district attorney of the reform administration gaped at her. Lucrezia continued quickly:

“My brother, you’ll find, didn’t have that reporter killed. The man who had him killed was Tony Fava. And my brother, incidentally, didn’t kill Tony, either. Make a note of that.”

Brassfield wagged a finger at her.

“Since you know so much, my dear, you must be aware that Fava’s confession lays the reporter’s death smack on your brother’s doorstep.”

“Then why is he still at liberty?”

“Ah,” said the district attorney, straightening his face, “that’s another matter, Lu.”

She glanced at the door. Her eyes assumed an expression of appeal, as she rejoined:

“If I could tell you the story without being interrupted— —”

Webbie Brassfield, whose weakness was women, looked into her eyes. Sardonicly she forecast to herself, “The private conference, the kisses and what more have you; then the regrets that, after all, the majesty of the law must not be flouted.” When he took her hand, when of course he kissed its palm, she regarded the moist thickness of his hair with triumphant derision. When he raised his head, she listened, gently passive, to the words:

“I never want to be unjust, my dear. Let’s see. If by some chance you would run into my house, where there’d be no publicity for you— —”

She made her eyes dilate, as though, while confidently walking forward, she had come upon a precipice. She was too wise to pretend that she misunderstood him; for understanding was expected of fair cosmopolitans freed from all naïveté by the pageant of Europe’s corruption. Lucrezia looked startled only for a moment, while she let her gaze pass over all his features, then rest on the most attractive one, his mouth. Her eyes softened. She bowed her shining head.

“When?” she sighed.

“The sooner the better.”

Her husband’s hand was on the door-knob. Her answer flashed back:

“Tonight, then, at half-past eleven.”

IV

See how many evils you give yourself up to. . . . But all will be well tomorrow.—EPICETETUS.

Lucrezia stood in the cold darkness, looking down at her child. Then she passed through the dressing-room, where the nurse from the Alban mountains was asleep. She crossed her own bedroom and entered her husband's. Gerald lay with his lean face averted from the bedside-light, his fingers relinquishing a copy of *Vanity Fair*. He opened his eyes.

"Hello, angel," he yawned. "Was I tight?"

"Just a touch; so I dragged you home."

"Jolly chap, Webbie, but a tank. We Nordics! Why can't we do with light wines and modest beers?"

"Go to sleep, you idiot. Can I get you anything?"

"How about yourself?"

She gave him a kiss and put out the light before he could remark her stronger make-up. She descended the staircase in the hall, where one lamp was burning to welcome her brother home. She threw around her shoulders a new evening wrap collared with white fox fur, then let herself out of the house. On the corner, Bennie Mendelssohn was waiting beside a sedan.

The car sped away. It was twenty minutes past eleven.

"How about the phones?" she asked Bennie, who sat beside her gingerly.

"Both still out of commission."

"Who's this driver?"

"One good banana, Mrs. Arkel. Lookit, Mrs. Arkel, you ain't going to let the chief can us for this caper?"

"Don't be silly."

Staring ahead, at the darkness full of swooping lights, she felt every moment farther from that acquiescence in nobility which now seemed folly. Perhaps this was nobility, the employment of cunning and force for the rescue of one's own. A cruelty that had lain suppressed in her heart now freed itself and was glad. Her face, reflected by the dark glass, looked more like her brother's face.

Bennie beamed as happily as though he were being driven to a party. No doubt in excessive imitation of his chief, he had drenched his head with quinine tonic; the wind did not prevent the car from smelling like a barber-shop. Bennie instructed the driver:

“Side street, kid.”

“Side street.”

The car entered the fashionable district. The Townshend house was near. The driver whirled the car around a corner and ran slowly for half a block.

“End of the line,” he said, turning to display a face that looked as if it had been stepped on by an elephant.

“You’re letting us in,” Bennie told him.

The driver made short work of the service-entrance. Lucrezia and Bennie Mendelssohn climbed a cement staircase, opened a metal door from which the lock was missing, entered a carpeted passageway. “Second on the right,” Bennie said and disappeared. Lucrezia rang Brassfield’s bell.

“My dear! I was afraid you wouldn’t make it.”

She slipped from the new wrap with the words:

“Bring it along. It wouldn’t do for me to be chilly and you warm.”

Once upon a time, when entering Gerald’s flat, she would automatically turn the latch of his front-door, to lock it. Now, with the same gesture, she had turned the latch of Brassfield’s door, to unlock it. As she walked before him, through the corridor, she remarked:

“These used to be Gerald’s rooms.”

“So you know my little place?”

His black hair was combed wet, his face scrubbed, apparently from a cold shower. He was wearing, over a fresh dress-shirt, an old homespun coat. He had been after the Scotch that stood on a tabouret amid glasses and bottles of charged water. Lucrezia inspected the living-room.

“It’s quite different now.”

“So much the better,” he laughed.

Only the walls of wainscoting were the same, and the fire-place, in which some logs were burning. The furniture and hangings were dark-red nowadays, the pictures not so well chosen, the odds-and-ends less amusing. A grand-piano in a corner was decorated with some silver-mounted

photographs. Lucrezia crossed the room to look at them. She did not find the likeness of Rita Townshend.

“Who’s this?”

She picked up the photograph of an earnest-looking gentleman perhaps thirty-five years old, with thinning hair and lips that concealed buck teeth. Webbie Brassfield, lounging up to her, gave her bare shoulders a squeeze. He seemed to her strong like a bull and hot like a cast-iron stove.

“Oh, that’s Rufie Townshend,” he said carelessly. “Heavens! don’t you smell good.” He kissed her hair. “How about a little stimulant?”

“An old friend of yours?” she persisted, without stirring.

“Friends all our lives. Bes’ friend I’ve got in the world.” A shadow passed over his congested face; then he laughed again. “Friend of your brother’s, too. Come on, Lu, little stimulant, to loosen you up a little. How does absinthe affect you?”

He had begun to sweat again.

She looked a moment longer at Rufus Townshend’s honest face, searching it for some evidence of defeat. Discovering none, she wondered if he was a fool. Gerald—Nick—Brassfield—how many others had Rita added to her collection? Lucrezia remembered the Princess Bisantini, who had remarked, in Rome, “No moderately clever woman should find it hard to persuade any man to an affair.” “And now,” Lucrezia reflected, “I have an affair of my own.” She dropped the photograph of Rufus Townshend with the thought, “Au revoir, poor husband of Venus.”

“Take your sticky hands off me, Webbie. By the way, where’s that confession?”

Webbie Brassfield, leaning against the back of a crimson sofa, merely laughed. She saw behind his scarlet face the mantel-clock, held up by nude porcelain figures, marking five minutes past twelve. She had a moment of alarm: what if everything failed now?

“Are you holding me up for the papers, Lu?” he chuckled. “For Pete’s sake, don’t shoot a fellow.”

Suddenly her nerves relaxed. She wandered into a corner of the room beyond the line of vision from the doorway. Sitting down, she gazed exultantly at Brassfield. She had heard, through the closed and curtained windows, a motor-horn honking its message.

“Take your drink,” she hinted. “You’re going to need it.”

“Perhaps I shall, you lovely rascal, if I’m to be a match for you. Tell me, Lu, d’you want me to give you that confession, or just let you feast your eyes on it?”

“Just let me feast my eyes on it, Webbie. I’ll do the rest.”

He planted his feet apart, like a sailor on the deck of a ship in a rising sea. He took a glass from the tabouret, dropped some ice into it, filled it half full of Scotch, sloshed it with charged water. Ponderous, seething from alcohol, he slid his eyes around to her with the slyness of a huge boy. It took him two seconds to focus his stare on her.

“What, Lu? No kissing and hugging, first, in the villain’s chambers?”

“Not one kissle or huggle.”

“I see: you’re the beautiful lady the crushader left in the castle and Tony Fava’s confession is the only key that unlocks you? Well, here’s to good old Might and Main.”

He saluted her, gulped down his drink. Setting his glass on the edge of the tabouret, he rolled toward her, dropped to one knee, put his arms around her waist. His bloodshot eyes seemed to look through her face at something a yard behind her. Under his black moustache, his lips became petulant.

“Why muss business intrude into our little nest, Lu? Whassa reporter between couple of splendid people like you and me? Whassa sense of couple of übermenschen wrassling? Dignified beauty like you. Haughty member fine old Italian family.”

“I’ll admit you’re doing your best to make my family more famous.”

Somewhere in the flat an electric bell rang twice. He went on resentfully:

“Whole family haughty. Pleasant lil party; brother sticks up his nose, walks out. Too hard to please. Square lil shooter like Blanche de Vinne; can’t do anything to make him real pal. Whass he want, a Balkan queen?”

“Perhaps Blanche hasn’t been working for you long enough. When did she take the job?”

District Attorney Brassfield, with a vacant laugh, tightened his grip on Lucrezia’s waist.

“Whassa difference? Come on, Lu; cut out the shop-talk. Gimme nice lil kiss.”

She heard the door at the end of the corridor slam shut. She pushed her palms against Brassfield's wilting shirt-front and informed him, "You have company, Webbie." Despite his drunkenness, he was startled by her low voice. He stood up, turned angrily. From the corridor came the utterance of a woman walking quickly forward:

"What in the world's happened to all the phones— —"

Rita Townshend stopped short in the doorway.

Her face set itself as she stared at Lucrezia. She laid a hand, adorned with a pink pearl, upon the edges of her wrap collared with white fox fur. She pulled the wrap together, as if to conceal the shimmering, white dress beneath it and the pearls around her neck. Then she stripped off the wrap, tossed it upon a chair.

Rita Townshend moved forward, her face high in its frame of tawny hair, like a sister of Lucrezia's. Her illegible eyes turned to Brassfield, as her approach included the others in that perfume, "A Toi Maintenant," which had just come out in Paris. On her shoulder, a spray of valley-lilies was fastened with a knot of silver ribbon.

"How odd," she said. "The Cortinets told me they'd be here before me." She turned her calm face to Lucrezia and explained, "We were at the opera. I must say, Webbie, that's a curious coat you have on for an evening party."

"Is it?" he exclaimed, in a strangling voice.

He turned toward the tabouret. His hand rattled the bottles together. Lucrezia spoke:

"Put down that glass." She said to Rita Townshend, "For the next few minutes, at least, I want this creature conscious. Pardon me— —"

She rose and reached Brassfield with two cat-like steps. She slapped the glass out of his hand, overturned the tabouret. She gave him a thrust in the chest, with her toe behind his ankle, that shot him backward, sprawling, upon the sofa.

"Stay there," she said.

She took a more comfortable chair, her shoulders dazzling against its crimson back. While the whisky gurgled over the rug, she stretched out her tapering legs, crossed one black satin slipper on the other, advised Rita Townshend:

"Sit down. You're not going to like this."

Brassfield shouted indignantly:

“Smashing my knick-knacks and shoving me around! Whass your game, anyway?”

Lucrezia turned to Rita Townshend.

“As you probably know,” she said, “this magnificent jackass has a signed confession, obtained through the third-degree, falsely involving my brother in a charge of murder.”

Rita Townshend reflected. As last she smiled and rejoined:

“Your frock— —by Worth?— —is charming. Your perfume puzzles me. What puzzles me about yourself is this: if you wanted to vamp a confession out of Webbie, why didn’t you make sure that he wasn’t giving a party?”

“I’m giving the party,” Lucrezia said. “The only invitation was to you.”

Suppressing a look of alarm, Rita Townshend picked up her wrap.

“In that case, please excuse me. I can’t imagine how I could help you as well as you can help yourself. Till another time, no doubt, since we seem to meet, every so often, in such an interesting way— —”

Lucrezia called toward the corridor:

“Bennie?”

“Check,” that young man’s voice responded vivaciously. “Do we walk right in?”

“Stand by for a moment.”

District Attorney Brassfield scrambled to his feet. He lunged toward a console on which stood his private phone and the phone of the apartment-house. He turned, with a frightened stare, when Lucrezia reminded him:

“They’re out of order.”

He stood swaying, looking at Rita in dismay.

“It’s just one of my brother’s boys,” Lucrezia reassured him, “and two reporters from the paper that’s been giving us those amusing cartoons about Daniel Webster Brassfield. They were interested to learn that there might be a tender feeling between you and the wife of the best friend you’ve got in the world. You know how inquisitive reporters are. Warehouses or garçonnières: it’s all the same to them.”

“You were here first,” said Rita sharply.

“Oh, no. You ignore our vague resemblance and you haven’t noticed my wrap. You beat me here by half an hour. I arrived in your taxi. I came straight upstairs, thinking the reporters would be in here already. I merely caught you a bit ahead of them.” Lucrezia turned to Brassfield. “While you were making love to me in your quaint way, willing feet came in the back-door and willing hands went to work. I hope that as an expert framer you’ll take a good look at the result.”

She barely heard the epithet he uttered.

There was a crash, as her chair went over backward. She was at him like a streak of flame and snow. The walrus-tusk paper-cutter that she had marked on the table slashed him across the temple. With a grunt, he flopped forward upon his hands and knees and hung like a four-footed beast in a hide of woolly homespun.

Rita Townshend had screamed. Lucrezia turned and saw Bennie in the doorway. “Get out of here,” she said. He vanished, a hurt look on his chubby face, answering instinctively, “Okay, chief.”

Lucrezia’s eyes were like eyes in hand-to-hand battle. She shook back her tawny hair, seized Brassfield by the collar, braced herself. With a wrench of her statuesque body, she brought him reeling to his feet. One side of his face was streaked with crimson; she slammed her hand against the other side.

“Don’t call me that again!”

He turned away and staggered to the sofa. Rita Townshend flew to him, sat down beside him, snatched out his handkerchief and pressed it to his temple. Lucrezia said:

“Come clean.”

Weaving his lowered head about like a wounded bull, he replied, deep in his throat:

“Let’s cry quits, Lu.”

“Where is it?”

“It’s gone, Lu,” mumbled Brassfield. “I gave it to Rita today.”

“And oh! what a fool I was to burn it,” Rita Townshend wailed.

“You burned it?” said Lucrezia blankly.

“I did!” Rita gasped, then began to laugh hysterically. “Just because he’s a medieval throw-back and can’t help it. Just because I saw the fool was still wearing my ring, that meant nothing except a joke. Ha, ha, ha! I hardly knew him and he had the impudence— Ha, ha, ha! saving the life of a throw-back that kills his competitors in a gentlemen’s washroom— —”

She whirled around on the sofa and muffled her wild laughter against the cushions.

Lucrezia blushed.

“Look at me, Webbie. Are you going after him again?”

He looked up at her with stunned eyes.

“I’m off him, Lu. Just ask him to behave himself while I’m in office.”

Two men were waiting at the door with Bennie Mendelssohn. Lucrezia shook her head.

“No game, boys,” Bennie reported. “Give you a rain-check.”

“No rain-check,” said Lucrezia.

They went down in the elevator. The old elevator-man was the same; he looked at her with timid friendliness. She remembered the miracle of love beginning. She seemed to be leaving a place that should always have remained as in those first magical days. Everything was changed there, now, and presently Rita, in her endless search, would take elsewhere her anxious smile, her latest perfume.

“Poor thing,” Lucrezia thought.

In the car, she felt tired, as if she were returning to her child and her husband after a long journey.

The house on the edge of Little Italy was brightly lighted. Nick Sassotti came out of his “study” and walked up to her. Aunt Annina, fully dressed, hobbled halfway down from the second floor and screeched:

“What hours of the night are these?”

Nick Sassotti took his sister by the arm.

“What you been doing?”

“I’ve been to Brassfield’s. The confession’s destroyed.”

Nick stared at her. She perceived that he had shaved off his moustache. His hand caught her by the chin and twisted her face to the glamour of the

chandelier.

“Yeah?” he said, his voice cracking, as she had never heard it do before.

She smiled at him:

“Oh, dear! Did you think life was as dramatic as that?” She quoted an old retort of his, “‘You been reading them books.’ Why, Nick, even Rita was there.”

He turned away, with the breathless words:

“Give it to me later. Chase yourself upstairs. Here you are bumming around all night and Nickie with a stummick-ache off of the old ladies’ pastry.”

While he was still speaking, she was fleeing up the staircase, in the evening frock by Worth, trembling from terror, panting:

“My precious! My poor little baby!”

PART IV

THE GOLDEN BRIDE

I

It is I who rule the world today, and a little fellow like that snaps his fingers at me.—CELLINI.

The page, a new boy in the livery of the Union Club, passed through, conservatively repeating:

“Mr. Gerald Arkel— —”

The taller of the two gentlemen leaning against the bar, thin and brown-skinned, with black eyes and a whimsical left eyebrow, turned around to identify himself. He was surprised to be told that he was wanted on the phone. It happened that only his lawyers had been forewarned of Gerald Arkel’s return to the United States. The page said that the lady on the phone hadn’t given her name.

Gerald shook his head and turned back to a concoction of high alcoholic content called the sidecar. He asked his friend, young Alex Humbolt, of the highly respectable law-firm of Chase, Humbolt & Chase:

“You’re the tattle-tale, I take it?”

Alex, who was short, husky and rather tight, replied:

“What I am, I’m an old boy-scout. Saw Rita at a dance last night and spilled it that you were practically here. Others may put two and two together; my mission in life is putting one and one.”

“You’re going outside your evidence, my good man.”

“I’m going now by the gleam in Rita’s eye when I told her.”

Gerald reflected that this flying visit might give him more excitement than he’d expected. His properties were in trouble. At his lawyers’ cablegram, he had left his wife in Rome, with their three-year-old child beginning to peel from measles. Here he was across the ocean from Lucrezia and here was Rita on the job. Yet perhaps the poor girl merely wanted to throw a party for him. His marriage seemed to have made little difference to his old friends: they welcomed him, on his return to them, as simply as if he had been exploring among cannibals.

“Let’s have a fresh set-up, Beechwood, and I’ll be bustling along.”

They drank in the silence of the windowless bar paneled with mahogany. It was the end of a dreary winter afternoon.

“How’s old Rufus?” suggested Gerald.

“Low,” Alex Humbolt said. “He went back to the bank when we lost the election to the powers of darkness— —no offense to your brother-in-law, who seems to have been the one that really stampeded us. Rufie Townshend expected to be something more, this time, than an amateur councilman.”

“Honest as the day is long,” Gerald mumbled into his drink. “I mean, of course, a day in summer.”

“Oh, rather. And a bit ingenuous, eh?” Alex Humbolt sent a glance at Gerald and continued, “Ever hear of Santa Ysabel Oil? Clay Burgoyne, it seems, had some misguided relative in it. Clay got enthusiastic about it and talked it up everywhere. He happened, at the moment, to be the Metropolitan-First’s most influential vice-president; so people got the idea the bank must be behind it. The public took up an issue of twenty millions at sixty, whereupon the outfit went into the hands of a receiver. Stock tobogganed to ten. The bank fired Clay and declared its innocence. Rufie Townshend, the soul of honor, is taking the scandal to heart.”

The bar-man so far forgot himself as to lament:

“I’m out six hundred on it, gentlemen.”

“See?” Alex Humbolt commented. “Small investors all over town. There was the deuce to pay in the papers. Shall we have another sidecar?”

Gerald declined; he was going to dine with his brother-in-law and didn’t care to show up tipsy. He explained, at Humbolt’s look of astonishment, that Nick Sassotti had never been drunk in his life. Besides, he added, over there on the other side of the city, it wasn’t practical to mislay one’s wits.

“And how he uses his,” Alex Humbolt agreed. “This stuff must be his avocation nowadays. Looks as if he’s getting ready to take our little village for his very own.”

“I dare say. Tomorrow morning at ten?”

“And the board-meeting at two,” Alex Humbolt reminded him, “so don’t go making a luncheon-date with Rita. Do give Clay one more afternoon.”

With a wooden expression, Gerald murmured, “Right you are,” and sauntered out to the hall. “What a girl,” he thought. This year old Clay Burgoyne; last year old Webbie Brassfield. The year before, heaven only knew by what chance, old Nick.

In the hall, as the footman helped him into his overcoat, Gerald mused, "Lucrezia trusts me because she's straight herself." On the pavement, waiting under the starter's umbrella, amid a darkness full of sleet, he pictured his wife in their apartment in the Barberini Palace. In Rome, it was late at night. Perhaps she had just returned from an evening party. Gerald could see her beautiful face framed by the ruddy hair, her white shoulders emerging from the wrap. Getting into the taxi, he supposed that during the evening some man had made love to her. They were always trying it. They thought no woman could be faithful forever and ever.

The taxi-driver called through the glass:

"Sure you know where you're going, boss?"

Gerald laughed. People, it seemed, still couldn't understand that Nick Sassotti had a preference for peace and quiet.

The end of competition had been the end of violence. Once Nick had gone to battle because he could not go to law; now he was benign from being unprovoked. He reigned alone, in calm benevolence toward a population insistent on its alcohol, like a legendary figure surrounded by fables.

His letters to Rome had mentioned the photographers that his body-guard chased away, his heavy mail, of which a quarter was mash-notes, the requests for charity, the annoyance from cranks, the breach-of-promise suit brought against him by an unknown paranoiac. His fame was at last expanding beyond the city. It was filtering throughout the land, to all those that adored the more picturesque forms of notoriety, that were dazzled by sudden wealth and that found in lawlessness the appeasement of obscure romantic cravings.

The taxi stopped before the old house on the edge of Little Italy.

Aunt Agnese opened the door, withered and bent, dressed in black silk, with a cameo of Cupid on her meager chest. She gave a squeal, seized Gerald with her claws.

"So it is thou," she quavered. "And they? Never mind. We had word from her under the sea; the Blessed Virgin" — — she crossed herself — — "has cured the rosolia. Listen, my boy, didst thou receive the charm?"

"What charm?"

Aunt Agnese, to speak more effectively, took out of her mouth a new upper-set of false teeth. She lisped:

“What charm? But to make thee a man, by Diana! One baby in four years!”

“Eh,” he smiled and patted her bony back, “the next is to be twins.”

“Attend to it. He is in there, busy with this one or that one. He needs to laugh and that is all thou dost seem to know how to do. I will bring the vermouth. For dinner, the risotto, turkey with chestnuts, to give thee strength, fennel with beef-sauce and cheese— —”

“Feasts of Nero,” he said, watching her shuffle over the parquet floor toward the basement-staircase.

“Because we must be fond of thee anyway,” she retorted.

Everything was the same. To the left, the florid parlor appeared. In the midst of it, at the onyx table, a strange man sat with his hat on, playing solitaire. To the right, the staircase ascended beyond the Venetian glass chandelier and under the staircase, on the sofa, were two more strangers.

A youth opened the door of the “study.” He looked like a college grind, with horn-rimmed spectacles.

“Mr. Arkel? Mr. Sassotti’s secretary. Mr. S. is concluding a conference; so if you’ll wait just a moment— —”

The familiar voice could be heard:

“Tell him I want him here tomorrow night. Nobody’s going to hurt him. That’s all. Come in, Gerry, you old cockroach.”

A giant with a mottled face went out past Gerald. Nick Sassotti swiftly crossed the room. His blond hair and face of a medieval soldier-of-fortune, his amber-colored eyes as strangely shaped as his sister’s, seemed changed by some interior illumination. He squeezed Gerald’s hand and gave him a bang on the back.

“So you thought you’d supprise me, hey? Well, Lu cabled me yesterday and turned you up. What you staying on the other side of town for?”

“I want to be close to the lads that have to save my bacon.”

“That’s what you get for being an ex-patriot.”

He pushed Gerald into a chair, as Aunt Agnese entered with the vermouth. “We’ll eat in here, Zia Agnese.” To the solemn secretary, who was hovering in the doorway, “Come on; let’s clean up for the night.”

Nick Sassotti sat down at the carved desk. The “study” had become an office, its orientalism adulterated by practical alterations. Across from the fire-place, which was still surmounted by the mosque-like silver clock, stood a row of filing-cabinets in imitation buhl. In the curtained bay-window, loomed a spherical safe painted over with gilt-and-scarlet arabesques. A smaller desk, bearing a typewriter, occupied that corner in which Sheridan Durand had died last year. The Persian rug, peach-colored and sky-blue, was again immaculate.

Nick Sassotti instructed the secretary to remind the assessor that Danny O’Meara was to pay no property-tax, that Xavier Mulqueen was not to be collected on them street-lamps and that he ought to know the city payroll was only for folks who could deliver votes.

The secretary observed:

“Schmaltz went broke again.”

“Only one touch today? Draw up a check for five hundred and tell him it’s a loan. Take a note that everybody out of work in the ward gets called by the commissioner on this snow. Phone Judge Seyfret at his house tonight and tell him to watch his step on Sconer’s suit for damages. Is Sullivan still holding up the council on the reporting of that bill? His mortgage comes due next month: warn him to get regular quick. Ring the Health Department in the morning and say they better work fast on them tenement inspections: I’m tired having my people played for a sucker by a bunch of crooked landlords.”

The secretary, closing his note-book, said:

“Bennie Mendelssohn phoned in that somebody tried to start a fire in the plant on Wright Street.”

“And I don’t need a fortune-teller to know who done it,” Nick Sassotti rejoined.

“What about the offer from Macleish & MacTavish?”

“If they give me a uniform licure-quality, okay; but I wouldn’t look to cut their American-style goods not even once. Wire Haggerty I’ll want five thousand extra gallons of moon next time, the way the public’s shouting for the Bourbon. Good-night. Tell the boys in the hall to get their supper.”

He turned to Gerald and clapped him on the knee. The chrysoberyl ring was still on his left hand.

“Well, I guess you see some changes.”

“Going to run for president?”

Nick grinned, drank his vermouth. All he wanted, he said, was to make that dollar and retire. Gerald had heard that once a chap got into this business, the rest wouldn't let him retire. Nick grinned again. Aunt Agnese and Aunt Anna brought in a small table set for dinner; Aunt Annina bore the soup-tureen. There was a gabbling and laughing. When the three old women had each drunk a glass of champagne— —“to the good return, to the dear ones”— —they went down to the kitchen, their wrinkled faces elated. The minestrone was full of white beans and cabbage.

“How about the election, Nick?”

“Fred Avanzi was running the campaign. Remember him? Little gray-haired fella with a big nose— —”

“Fellow who looks like a tapir?”

“Like a what? He was running it wrong, anyways. I stepped in and done it myself. Now everybody looks to me instead of Fred; so he don't like me no more.”

“Ignore him. Is this nineteen-twenty-one vintage?”

“Twenty-three. And what does he do to square up? He backs a competitor. He wants a hard one; so he picks out the wild, wild Zarziulos. John, Amerigo and Horace.”

“Zarziulo. The name's familiar.”

“Big family. Good-looking women and flashy men. Got their money doing everything I don't want tacked onto the party. Then they begin bringing in the junk. Six months ago I warn them. Fred Avanzi keeps backing them. Last month they try to blow up one of my breweries. A week ago they hist some freight. Wasn't satisfied with the load— —took the money out of the pockets of my hard-working boys. Nothing's too cheap for them.”

“They must be in force,” said Gerald.

“They've a fine collection. Dope-peddlers, dollar-house-runners, dirty radicals that want to destroy the Constitution of the United States. You got here just in time, Gerry, to see some cleaning done.”

“War again?”

“Just putting a few punks in their place.”

They devoted themselves to the risotto Milanese. Nick Sassotti ate delicately, his tarnished-blond head bent forward. He looked like a person whose fastidiousness was based on breeding, whose face was shadowed by the coarseness of some ancestral misalliance. Gerald could understand how Rita Townshend had been able to amuse herself.

“That kid of yours,” Nick declared, “sure had us worried with them measles.”

“Why don’t you marry somebody yourself? You’re getting so you can almost support a wife.”

“Maybe I will. You know how we put it off.”

They smiled. The turkey and the white truffle salad appeared. There entered an elderly man, fat, with protruding eyes, in the uniform of a police-inspector. Gerald recognized him as Rooney, who had once been the captain of Nick Sassotti’s precinct. They shook hands. Inspector Rooney sat down and accepted a glass of champagne. He remarked deeply:

“Little fire today in that plant.”

“Hope you don’t think I was looking to collect the insurance, Dominic?”

Rooney disregarded this pleasantry and continued:

“The patrolman on post seen somebody and made a hit; but the fella kep going. We dropped in to look at Amerigo Zarziulo. Found um in bed with a nice hole through his arm. Took um and throwed um in the hospital under guard. What you want done, Nick?”

Nick Sassotti frowned.

“Them bums’ll think I’m fine and yellow, letting coppers make my heat for me. Send Amerigo home in a taxi and leave me attend to the Zarziulo boys.”

Inspector Rooney put a match in his mouth and inquired:

“Has it got to be like old times all over again?”

“Stop worrying. Have another glass.”

“And what about my kidneys?”

“You been getting by without them for ten years, ain’t you?”

Rooney drank, shook hands and waddled out.

“That copper,” Nick Sassotti informed his brother-in-law, while helping him to more turkey, “has played with me a long time and I never found out yet how he’d act in a jam. He’s sick and he ought to be retired. He gets himself stewed every night and he couldn’t run a block sober. I made him an inspector for old time’s sake and all that tripe; but if I phoned him to come with two guns in his paws, he might buy a ticket for Europe.”

“I hardly think,” Gerald suggested, “that nerve is all a question of health.”

“Yeah? Look at Tony Fava. When I started in to do business with Tony, he had all the nerve you’d ask for, only there was that part of his brains that couldn’t digest a joke. By and by, I notice he ain’t so anxious to take a chance; but I put that down to him being a family-man. I begin to throw him the light work, because I don’t want his kids without no father. What I didn’t figure on was Tony losing his nerve so bad that an oil-can like Brassfield could take him with a third-degree. But I seen it all after his inquest. His stummick would of slammed him off in a year and saved him the price of that bullet.”

“I remember his daughter Beatrice. Pretty, modest girl.”

“She’s a big girl now,” said Nick impassively. “The sisters in the school kind of thought she had the vocation. I told her mama different and I guess she’ll remember what I said. I don’t know what that family would do if I didn’t watch their step, from making them see the dentist to handling their investments.”

“By the way, Nick, you’ve heard of Santa Ysabel Oil and these shenanigans touching on and appertaining?”

Nick Sassotti’s eyes became shallow. An imperceptible veil seemed to descend before his face. “Oh, Lord,” thought Gerald, “wasn’t he getting enough money without that?”

“I suppose,” he ventured negligently, “it was a small pool.”

In a toneless voice, Nick said:

“A few mixed friends. They issued two hundred thousand shares to sell round sixty. Them shares was an over-issue. They was to be bought in again, after the receivership, at twelve or ten. Then they was to be destroyed.”

Gerald whistled.

“And the profits?”

“Each of the pool took out somewheres under a million.”

There was a silence, till Gerald Arkel hinted:

“A lot of small people ruined?”

“That’s the story. Help yourself to the finocchi. And keep your mouth shut about it over there.”

His lieutenant, Bennie Mendelssohn, appeared in a sleet-covered overcoat. Bennie’s chubby cheeks were pink like apples; his sentimental-looking eyes were anxious. He took off his hat, revealing his fluted locks, and shook hands respectfully with Gerald.

“Napoli wants to see you, chief. More hot grease.”

“That’s dandy. Show him in.”

Napoli entered, swarthy, emaciated, his narrow skull clipped close, his features swimming in foreboding. Standing before Nick Sassotti, with his wet hat under his chin, the head-waiter of the Gran Vittoria uttered the reproach:

“You forgot us, I guess. Now there’s nice doings over there.”

“I put you in there thinking you could anyways run that size of a business right.”

“Not me, chief,” Napoli cried dramatically. “How would I run anything wrong? But you should of watched out for them Zarziulos. They always wanted the business— —the restaurant and the importing— —and now John Zarziulo is going to marry Miss Beatrice.”

“What’s that?” said Nick Sassotti, laying down his fork.

“Yeah. And tomorrow morning. Fine acting we had all afternoon; you could put it on the stage and make a fortune. The old lady faints twice and all the Zarziulos yell their heads off and Miss Beatrice begun to cry and says, ‘The world is not my place.’ So she goes running out to phone the sisters and John Zarziulo breaks the phone and we are all helpless, chief, like spring lambs mixed up with tigers. So tomorrow morning is the marriage by the judge, to cinch it.”

Nick sat glaring at Napoli, his hands on the edge of the table, as if about to propel himself forward and tear the messenger to pieces. When he spoke at last, however, he remarked quietly:

“Imagine them upstarts.” Aunt Agnese came in. Turning to her, he asked, “What you got for dessert?”

“Eh! la zuppa inglese.”

“Bring the coffee and the brandy with it.” He said to Napoli, “Go back and make out you didn’t see me. I’ll drop over in half an hour and marry her myself.”

II

I said, "You have spoken; I will do." —CELLINI.

Gerald and Nick had drunk their deviled coffee; Nick had lighted a Toscano. As he rose from the table, he admitted that he should have married Beatrice Fava on her graduation from the convent-school. But there had been the campaign, then the election and, after the election, a thousand things to do. As it was, she'd have to wait till later for the trip to Niagara Falls.

Gerald leaned his bony length against the door-post and suggested:

"Give a thought to the fact that you can't send her home if you don't like her. She's apparently a good Catholic— —"

"So am I," said Nick Sassotti, "if you're talking about divorce. I don't look to get married every couple years, like your friend Mrs. Townshend does. I'm marrying Bice just because she is a good Catholic. She'll play straight. She'll do like I tell her. She'll have the kids. Let's go and get it over."

He started out of the room, as the front-door admitted two men in wet fur coats. They crossed the hall, under the glitter of the chandelier, and came into the "study" with their hats on.

The big man, with the mottled, pear-shaped face, was Higgins, the politician. The little, gray, sickly-looking man, with the tapir-like nose and malevolent eyes, was Fred Avanzi.

"Set down," Nick snapped. "Glass of wine?"

Higgins, with a troubled smile, declined a chair. Avanzi, seating himself in his overcoat and hat, stared at his enemy.

"All right, here I am," he said. "Ahead of time: I couldn't wait to hear it."

Gerald felt a grudging admiration for the small, pugnacious creature. His body, smothered in fur, was puny like a child's; but the eyes, washed-out and old, were resourceful like those of a poisonous little beast. Nick Sassotti leaned back in his desk-chair.

"I guess nobody can't cure you, Fred. I'll give you one more chance, though. See if you can get this through your brains."

“I’ve got one thing through my brains that I’ll never forget: how you climbed up over my shoulders, during the election, like the double-crossing crook you’ll be till the day of your death.”

Nick removed the Toscano from his lips.

“Listen, Fred, your politics would never of won that election. Nobody could of took this town from them without promising plenty on the square. Nobody won’t hold the town without keeping them promises. That’s one thing the matter with you: you’re breaking my promises for me.”

“Am I?” said Avanzi, hunching up his shoulders and burrowing into his overcoat-pockets with his hands. “And what promises did I make?”

“I made them for you. We got in on them. They give us the chance to cut up the town legitimate and hold the split to a few, which should be enough for anybody but hogs. You ain’t satisfied with that. You turn loose the pertection-gangs. You put the okay on all the old-army-games. You tell them Zarziulos to go ahead and bring in the junk. The more folks you turn into tramps the better you like it.”

“And your liquor business?”

“Don’t be silly,” said Nick Sassotti.

Bennie Mendelssohn stuck his rosy face in at the door.

“How many cars, chief?”

“Two.” Nick stood up and crossed the Persian rug, apparently with one movement. He muttered, “You’re going to drill yourself in the leg, Fred, and blame it onto me.” Running his hand down Avanzi’s right arm into the overcoat-pocket, he fished out a revolver, which he tossed into the waste-paper basket.

Avanzi, huddled in the chair, stared at him balefully. Higgins sighed and departed.

“It’s come to the point, Fred, where you’re a menace, like they say, to the party and to me. I’m going to watch you one more month and then, if you ain’t stopped all them capers, I’ll stop you. All the capers except the Zarziulos’. I’ll attend to that family myself.”

Avanzi cautiously lifted himself to his feet. He looked very small; but his livid face confronted Nick steadily. The pallid eyes, close together above the dangling nose, were burning like white-hot metal.

“I shall profit by your observations.”

“Anyways you like. Good-night, Fred.”

Avanzi went out slowly. Bennie Mendelssohn came in and reported:

“Out in front.”

They went down to the touring-cars vibrating at the curb. Gerald spoke to Nick’s driver, Angelo; the rest of the men were strangers. Two sat on the folding-seats of Nick Sassotti’s car; Bennie Mendelssohn sat with Angelo. The second car took in six. They went away fast; the sleet had changed to snow.

“Rape of the Sabine maiden,” Gerald thought, “Twentieth Century model.” He shivered and said aloud:

“Should have snatched another spot of brandy.”

“You and Rooney.”

A man on a folding-seat silently handed Gerald an unscrewed flask. Gerald took a pull, handed the flask back. A chap’s blood, he explained, got thin in Italy.

“You let little Nickie’s blood get thin and see what I do to you.”

“I hope you’ll soon stop running my child and have interests of your own.”

The cars whizzed around corners, skidding in their chains. They ran along a deserted street, passed the sign of the Food Products Company, drew up before the Gran Vittoria Café. On the left side of the car, a face, appearing out of the snow, announced, “John and some dames upstairs. Horace downstairs eating.”

Nick, Gerald and Bennie Mendelssohn entered between the steamy glass doors. The rest remained in the cars.

The lobby was empty, except for the cloak-room boy. In the restaurant beyond, a small orchestra was playing. Nick Sassotti opened a door on the right, leading to a flight of stairs. He ran up the steps; Bennie Mendelssohn followed. Gerald, on the point of doing likewise, found himself whirled around by the arm. He looked into the eyes of a dark young man as handsome as a gigolo, a napkin in his hand. This, it occurred to Gerald, was Horace, “downstairs eating.”

“What’s coming off here, you?” the youngest Zarziulo uttered, much more roughly than his looks had promised.

Gerald hit Horace between the eyes and sent him reeling backward, across the lobby, to crash into a long mirror. Napoli walked in briskly from the restaurant. The cloak-room boy, reaching over his counter, handed the head-waiter a nightstick.

“Right on up, Mr. Arkel,” Napoli suggested. “I’ll look out for Orazio.”

Gerald, leaping up the stairs, said to himself, “Seven years’ bad luck for one of the wild Zarziulos.” He passed down a corridor scented with fried garlic and “Purple Orchid,” blundered into a pale-blue bedroom. He retraced his steps, tracked down the smell of “Purple Orchid” and stuck his head into the parlor.

The parlor overflowed with rococo furniture and crayon portraits draped in Syrian scarves. A majolica lamp was suspended above a center-table depicting, in mosaic, the Square of St. Peter’s. On the table, were children’s school-books and exercise-tablets, a half-knitted shawl in lemon-and-magenta, a bottle of Strega and some sticky cordial-glasses. A parrot, in a brass cage, broke the silence by croaking:

“But what time is it, by Jimminy? To bed!”

It was the voice of Tony Fava, late father of the golden Beatrice, who stood, slender and rigid, beyond the lamp.

Yes, Gerald decided, golden was the word for her. The golden face of a young, outraged saint; large, brown eyes flecked with golden lights: a gleam of dark gold in the heavy black braids wound around her head. A gold cross, fastened to the black dress, above her high bosom, moved to her rapid breathing.

The mother, huddled in a rocking-chair, wept with the countenance of a wax doll blurred by long misuse. Flanking her, like guardians of her prostration, stood two splendid women, their eyes defiant under heavy brows. Against the wall, his arms folded, leaned John Zarziulo, a broad-shouldered, dark-faced young man with salient jaws. On his wrist shone a bracelet of platinum or silver.

Nick Sassotti stood before the table. Bennie Mendelssohn, looking unusually soulful, stood behind him.

“You could of phoned me, mama,” Nick said. “You know how busy I been.”

“Why should she phone you,” Beatrice Fava flashed at him, “and interrupt you in your important affairs?” She wrapped her hand around her

throat, as if to choke back the words, “You’re too grand, these days, to be bothering with the Favas. It’s three months since you set your foot in this house; then you spent all your time talking to Napoli.”

“About the business, Bice. I ain’t too grand to watch out that the business don’t go broke.”

One of Mrs. Fava’s splendid guardians gave a snort. Gerald recognized her as the Miss Zarziulo who had sat beside him at the twenty-fifth anniversary dinner downstairs. He beamed at her; she answered with a sneer.

John Zarziulo, tense against the wall, showed no expression whatever.

A sleepy-eyed girl of ten ran into the parlor in her night-gown, looked around in astonishment, sped to Nick. With a squeak of pleasure, she threw her arms around his waist. He laid his left hand on her head. Bennie Mendelssohn stepped quickly to one side.

“Where you been, Nick?” the child resentfully demanded. “It’s getting just terrible around here.”

“I’m fixing that, Gemma.”

John Zarziulo raised his eyelids, to look at the other without visible interest. It occurred to Gerald that this was a dangerous person, more than a cut above Nick Sassotti’s former rivals. Mrs. Fava, distractedly rocking back and forth, was sobbing through her nose, with the Calabrian accent:

“It’s too late, Nick. When a girl is promised, to do anything is an offense. Bice is right: you should have thought of us sooner.”

“What are you saying, mama!” Bice Fava cried. “I never said he should think of us at all. Am I a beggar for his notice? That God may pardon him his wicked pride!”

“My poor husband!” wailed Mrs. Fava, her face in flux, as if it were dissolving. “Blessed soul, if thou wert with me in this calamity.” She snatched at her black dress, pulled it out from her body, in witness. “I, a poor widow, alone.”

“You ain’t alone, mama,” said Nick Sassotti. “I’m looking after you fine.”

The magnificent Miss Zarziulo filled her bust with air, stuck out a fist covered with emeralds and rubies, shouted, in a hoarse contralto:

“Vampire and shark! gobbling everything, after killing the father.”

“Oh, what a lie,” retorted the ten-year-old girl, glowering at Miss Zarziulo. “Nick just loved papa and you know it. Like we love Nick. And Bice loves him, too.”

“Gemma!” cried Bice Fava.

“You do, too. Everybody knows that. Why, it’s ridiculous.”

Bice, her face changing from gold to crimson, swooped down upon her small sister, dragged her out of the room and slammed the door upon her. That swift movement was replete with the charm of youth breaking, in an unexpected flow of loveliness, the mould of virginal habit. Bice returned to her place, stood there composed and grave. The blood ebbed from her brow. Like the novice, now, instead of the swooping nymph, she murmured:

“I don’t love anybody except mama and the children and the sisters.”

She gave Nick Sassotti a steady look, like a challenge.

Gerald was aware of a cabinet near him, against the wall, to the right, supporting an atrocious lava vase. The vase was heavy; it had a neck that a chap could get his hand around in a jiffy. Gerald moved a few inches closer to the cabinet.

Nick proposed, in a tone of kindness:

“If you want to stay here, mama, okay. I suppose it’s home to you here. If you want to live with us, we’ll be glad to have you. There’s plenty room for all.”

John Zarziulo looked still more remote.

“Come on, Bice,” said Nick, snapping his fingers. “I ordered the judge and the license for over there.”

With her hands clenched, Bice Fava shook her head.

“No,” she panted. “Not even when the great Nick Sassotti snaps his fingers. Your proud heart will be the end of you, Nick; but I don’t have to humble myself to it. At your leisure, when something reminds you, when it’s too late!” She threw out her black-clad arm and pointed at John Zarziulo. “He didn’t wait,” she said, “until the last minute. He wanted me a year ago.”

“Is that a fact?”

“Yes, that’s a fact. And what are you going to do about it?”

“Plenty.”

He turned on John Zarziulo, who, by some sleight-of-hand, already had out his pistol. Gerald, with the thought that Nick was as good as shot, hurled the vase across the room. It bounced, without breaking, off the head of John Zarziulo just as Nick caught his wrist. With his left arm as a lever under John Zarziulo's right arm, Nick bent back the elbow-joint. The pistol dropped to the floor. Bennie Mendelssohn snapped it up.

Mrs. Fava was screaming phrases of sacred import, while the parrot urgently repeated, "Dinner! dinner! dinner!" Miss Zarziulo came at Gerald, in a fragrance of "Purple Orchid," to give him a deafening clout. The other splendid creature rushed to John Zarziulo, who was lying on the floor.

"Assassins!" bellowed the Zarziulo ladies.

"Good-night, mama," Nick Sassotti called. "See you tomorrow. Don't worry. We'll have a church-wedding, too."

He carried his struggling bride out to the corridor.

In the lobby of the restaurant, Napoli was waiting.

"Orazio's still out," he imparted. "Congratulations, Miss Beatrice."

At this, becoming limp in the ravisher's arms, Bice Fava made the signs of fainting.

They emerged into the snowy night. Nick and Gerald stowed Bice between them on the back-seat of the touring-car, with Nick's overcoat around her. Angelo drove homeward fast, humming to himself. The second car held the men from the folding-seats.

"How did John happen to lie down?" asked Gerald.

"I'm afraid I hurt him with my knee. What do you know: that low-life would of messed up mama's parlor with a lot of shooting."

"No savoir-faire," Gerald assented. "Hard on mama's nerves as it was."

"What I mean," Nick Sassotti explained, "no matter what you do, you should look to do it decent." He glanced down at Bice's face between them. "Lu's going to be tickled to death."

"What do you want for a wedding-present, Nick?"

"Oh, just send us a bottle of Scotch."

Behind them, there were some slamming noises, muffled by the snow. A dark limousine as big as a hearse overhauled them, looming out of the storm with all its windows down. Flames spouted across its sills; Nick and Gerald

thrust Bice to the floor. Bennie Mendelssohn stretched his arm behind the driver's back and slowly fired off a clip. The hearse-like car, going at sixty, careened toward the opposite curb and crashed through a lamp-post on its side. They had left it a block behind, before Bennie had time to say:

“That was one careless chauffeur.”

Their second car came alongside. A man leaned out and bawled:

“Give us the lead, hey, chief?”

Nick Sassotti waved his arm. The second car became the first. They roared over the icy streets, through the blinding snow.

Putting his arm around Bice, the bridegroom said:

“Sorry, baby. Didn't think they'd start in so quick.”

“I guess I'll have to get used to a lot of things,” she answered faintly.

“They must be fine rats, taking pops at a car with you in it.”

Bice Fava was silent, then admitted:

“I guess I'll have to share whatever comes.”

As they neared the old house, they saw gun-fire through the snow. Angelo, rolling cautiously forward, was met by men on foot, who said, “They're gone.” The house appeared through the thickly falling whiteness, the front-door open, all the windows lighted. Nick helped Bice from the car.

She shrank back. Before the lowest step, a man lay on his face.

Nick Sassotti, picking her up, stepped over the body, as ancient bridegrooms, bearing their brides in their arms, stepped over the threshold that was ominous of the future.

The Venetian chandelier in the hall shed its light upon them. The florid parlor was full of white chrysanthemums. The three old women clustered, cooing, around the golden bride. She cast about her a look half frightened and half rapt. Her home, hereafter, terrible with its unrevealed pangs of suffering and joy.

“What a lovely thing she is,” Gerald thought. Lifting the glass of brandy-and-soda that he had lost no time in finding, he said gayly:

“Here's luck!”

He looked uncommonly tall and aristocratic; he had got into the house with no more than a slash under his ear, from which blood was dripping

down his collar. Nick Sassotti examined this wound.

“Yeah,” he remarked. “If there’s any around, you stop them. Little more and it’d been the juggler-vein.”

“Folks’ll think I cut myself shaving.”

“With a cleaver. Hello, Judge.”

Municipal Judge Leone, obese and pale, advanced cautiously into the parlor. He protested:

“A man has just been killed in the street. What are you trying to make me, particeps criminis?”

“You’re enough of that already without my help. Let’s have a little service. Close them window-shutters, boys.”

“Anybody giving away the bride?” Judge Leone uneasily inquired. Gerald said:

“I am, if Bice’s kind enough to let me.”

The girl turned to him her dark gaze flecked with gold and whispered:

“Thank you, my cousin.”

Her voice broke. Perhaps she was thinking of her father.

Nick and Bice stood close together, looking at Judge Leone. Gerald stood beside Bice; Bennie Mendelssohn stood beside Nick. Behind them, stood Aunt Agnese, Aunt Anna and Aunt Annina, quivering from happiness. The doorway was full of men.

“Do you, Beatrice, take this man, Nicholas, to be your wedded husband?”

There was a splitting and splintering of the shutters, a swiftly passing racket of pistols. The racket rose again, as another car-load flew by. On ceiling and walls, as if by magic, bullet-holes appeared. Judge Leone seemed about to collapse. Bice held him with her eyes.

“I do,” she said.

III

In the end you will discover which of us here is the greatest villain.—CELLINI.

The dinner of eleven persons was drawing to its close, in the Louis Seize dining-room of Rita Townshend's house. It was to have been a dinner of twelve; but Webbie Brassfield had not put in an appearance.

Gerald Arkel wondered how many of these gentlemen— —Webbie Brassfield, for one, being out of the picture— —had interested his hostess. He supposed that, at the moment, the happy man was Clay Burgoyne.

Clay seemed quite cheerful over losing his position, in the Metropolitan-First, on account of his ill-advised enthusiasm for Santa Ysabel Oil. He sat halfway down the table, between the least attractive ladies. Gerald sat on Rita's left, because he was returning to Rome. On her right, sat Brederode, the retired Prohibition commissioner for the state, a thin, gray gentleman of excellent family, with a flair for public service. He had not touched the cocktails, sherry, sauterne or burgundy.

The butler and his assistants were now going around with champagne.

A chatter rose, through the film of cigarette-smoke, toward the Eighteenth Century luster. The brilliant evening frocks and the white shirt-fronts hemmed in a sheen of silver and Venetian glass, a vividness of flowers drooping from the heat of the candles. Behind the moving servants, appeared dimly the high walls paneled with faint color— —with terraces peopled by courtiers of Versailles, amusing themselves, beneath fanciful foliage, with music, monkeys and little turbaned blackamoors.

At the far end of the table, Rufus Townshend, his homely face fatigued, agreeably showed his buck teeth.

"What's the name of this new perfume?" Gerald asked Rita.

"'Ambre Faustine.'"

"Ah, you don't need amber to disturb us."

"I've seen no signs of weakness in you, I must say, this long month and a half that you've been here."

She gave him a kick on the ankle with her slipper-heel.

He decided that he had, indeed, been noble, during these weeks far away from Lucrezia. Rita Townshend seemed more beautiful than yesterday, more annoyingly like his wife. Observing his glance at her ruddy hair, she remarked sarcastically:

“Yes, it was mahogany-red until two months ago; then I changed it back. When you arrived, I thought I’d been impelled to that by fate, to make you feel at home.”

They laughed. She leaned toward him in her low-cut dress of cream-colored satin and carmine, in her necklace and bracelet of rubies, her dark-red orchids, her physical whiteness and fragrance.

“What’s the latest about your brother-in-law? How is he getting on, now, with his little bride from the slums?”

“Slums nothing. I’ve told you he married an heiress. Happy as turtle-doves. Informed me, this afternoon, the baby’s on the way.”

“Not really? Oh, my dear, that’s too funny!”

She uttered a peal of laughter, metallic, unnatural, her eyes fixed and glinting. The people nearby turned and smiled. Brederode, the retired commissioner, inquired:

“Good one?”

In the sudden quiet, Rita Townshend announced:

“Gerald says that Nick Sassotti is going to be a father.”

A few made remarks, “How normal of him— — Love comes to all— — We’ll need bootleggers forever— —” Clay Burgoyne, a strong-looking man of thirty-five, foppishly turned out, suggested that Nick Sassotti was doing well to provide himself with an heir. “You’ll see,” he said, “that they’re the aristocracy of the future.”

One of the ladies cried up the table:

“What’s he really like, Gerald?”

“Like the head of any medieval Florentine family— — the Donati or the Cerchi. Or with Mosca Lamberti’s special enterprise when something unpleasant has to be done.” And Gerald quoted from Machiavelli, “‘Although some took into consideration the evils that might ensue, Mosca Lamberti said that those who talk of many things effect nothing.’”

There was some laughter, amid which Rufus Townshend remarked, in a tone of annoyance:

“Let’s not regard a criminal as a medieval hero.”

Some one advised, “Page Webbie Brassfield.” A lady affirmed that lawless characters acquired a glamour because the world was hard up, in peace-times, for romantic figures.

“The country,” Rufus Townshend assented, “really is becoming enamored of criminals and their exploits. Not a healthy symptom.”

Gerald rejoined that the country, thanks to those who were trying to cure it at present, was getting more unhealthy symptoms every day.

The ex-commissioner suggested gently:

“You mean from the Eighteenth Amendment? We mustn’t forget that derived from an almost holy aspiration.”

“So it did, sir,” Gerald agreed. “In the midst of the war-time exaltation, on a wave of faith that the world was being made over. We had our Moseses; but we couldn’t all make the grade to the Promised Land. The desert hasn’t turned out so badly. Don’t go and hide that bottle, Spokes.”

“I’ve got it right here, Mr. Gerald,” said the butler.

“You’ll have to sit still,” Rita announced, “until Gerald stops being Voltaire or some one.”

“Plato,” he corrected her. “Who said, ‘But if you wish, also, to consider a commonwealth that is suffering from inflammation, there’s nothing to hinder us.’”

He felt wise; so he knew he was tight. He was intensely aware of Rita’s nearness, like a sweet reward for his impudence. He remembered that he had a message for her from Nick. No, the message was for Rufus. Funny that. Unconventional chap, old Nick, and terribly amusing in his Cinquecento way.

Rufus Townshend expostulated:

“There’d be no inflammation without focal points like Sassotti.”

Gerald drank some champagne and laughed:

“But he’s merely serving the millions who require an equivalent of this excellent wine. He has to participate in one of the most extensive systems of corruption in history, to do his duty to the nation. Has to bribe or subsidize

endless policemen, sheriffs, judges, politicians, federal agents— —maintain an army and a private court of justice— —evolve his own transportation systems and go without insurance— —connive with the government at plausible income-tax reports— —”

The laughter swept around the sumptuous room. Rufus Townshend remained glum. Brederode said quizzically to Gerald:

“Shall we have a repeal, then, young Plato?”

“Not on my account, sir. There’s no better champagne than this in Europe. And certainly not on my brother-in-law’s account. He’s a bigger Dry than the Anti-Saloon League.”

“You fool,” Rita chuckled, pressing his foot with hers. “Go up to my sitting-room.”

“I should love to and have some coffee. Because I see you with a nimbus, which I know very well you haven’t got.”

She rose, with a shimmer of cream-and-carmine satin, with a flash of rubies. She turned to Brederode and Gerald compared her figure with Lucrezia’s. She turned back, fixing her shoulder-strap, pearly-white in the hollow of her arm-pit.

“Congratulate the redoubtable Nick for me,” she murmured, “on his triumphs as a statesman.”

Gerald said naïvely:

“That’s right; you met him once, didn’t you?”

“More than once, in a friendly way, as you must know very well. But I found that being invited to a battle was a bit too thick in the way of entertainment. I do hope they’re over now?”

“The battles? I’m afraid not.”

“Don’t tell me another competitor’s appeared.”

“Three in one. Parvenu family by name of Zarziulo.”

“Oh, Gerald! Not all over again?”

Rita Townshend walked away, as if quite out of patience.

He watched the women leave the dining-room, a stream of powdered shoulders, diamonds, coiffures rescued from the bob and the shingle. “Nice set of backs,” he meditated, squinting to see them more clearly. He went out

into the hall, past a group of men who were hurriedly exchanging stories. Spokes came across the black-and-white pavement, with a tray of liqueurs.

“Good Lord, no,” Gerald exclaimed.

He veered away to look into the library. Just fancy: from that very garden, through those French windows, on a jolly summer night, his dear Lucrezia had fired ten shots from a Mauser pistol at him and Rita. He approached the mantel, where a shattered plaque had yielded its place to a whole one. He saw that St. John’s face, in the Mantegna, had been repaired. He remembered the groove across his triceps, over which Lucrezia occasionally shed a tear.

“I like a full, rich life,” he proclaimed, rotating on his heels.

Why was he drinking so much in the old hometown? Was it to numb his conscience, which, in that case, seemed to need a lot of numbing? He thought of Rita’s voice on the phone in his bedroom at the club, sometimes early in the morning, sometimes late at night. Asking him to tea, to drive, to take her to a view of pictures. Too exquisite, too patient, not to start a chap slipping. Oh, well, what was the harm? “Après le plaisir, la peine; après la peine, la vertu.”

He called to a footman, who was passing through the hall:

“How about some bromo-seltzer?”

The footman brought him a bottle and glasses on a salver. He mixed a double dose and drank it fizzing. The footman had a nimbus, too.

He climbed the white marble staircase, its balustrade fashioned by the iron-smiths of Venice into scrolls of grapes and vine-leaves. He looked distinguished, with only the brightness of the scar under his ear to show that he was tight, with the camellia as fresh as ever on his tail-coat by Mattina. Halfway up, he stopped thinking of his dear Lucrezia, so far away in Rome, and thought of Rita.

Alcohol made everything seem natural, easy, proper. A chap in his cups was a king by divine right. “Droit du seigneur,” he muttered grandly, tripping on the last step. He recovered himself and walked with dignity into Rita’s sitting-room. The yellow-shaded lamps were lighted, in a fragrance of “Ambre Faustine.” He lay down on a yellow silk sofa and went to sleep.

When he awoke, the door was shut and all the lamps but one were out. Rita, seated on the edge of the sofa, was leaning forward to his lips.

“What ho,” he said, startled by the look on her face.

With that special sound of hers, half laugh, half sob, she crushed her mouth to his.

“At last! Oh, darling, how could you— —”

She wrapped her hands around his head, half smothered him with her kiss. Her lip-paint tasted of cinnamon, a flavor that he didn’t care for. No matter: this was the full, rich life, all right.

“Oh, darling, if you hadn’t left me, that time, none of this folly would have happened. None! none! none!”

He patted her back, much nicer than the nicest of those backs downstairs. Poor girl! Blundering around and about, trying to forget. It was one of life’s tragedies.

“Oh, darling, we’ve only got tomorrow. Don’t take that ship. I shall simply die if you do.”

What ship? His blurred thoughts passed beyond this beautiful face, went wavering out across the winter ocean, approached a greater beauty. The reality instead of its convenient counterfeit. Old-fashioned, too, Nick Sassotti’s sister. Had a theory that if you slipped once, something happened to the whole thing.

He removed his hand from Rita’s back and said:

“Suppose old Rufus dropped in, to inquire about all the breathing?”

She stood up, with a cry of reproach, the dark orchids disarranged on her shoulder.

“Always scoffing. Nothing sacred to you.”

“It’s you that’s sacred to me,” Gerald comforted her. “I regard you as — —”

“As a star in the sky. Thank you, Gerald. I must say I’ve never been so complimented in my life.”

There was a knock on the door. Rufus Townshend entered. He came forward, his homely face impassive, and asked his wife:

“Gerald not feeling well?”

“Too much hospitality,” said Gerald, sitting up. “Rita wanted to ply me with medicaments. What I need is bed.”

“Perhaps,” Townshend assented. He turned his eyes toward Rita, scrutinized the crushed flowers on her shoulder, divulged an almost

imperceptible smile of hopeless acquiescence. He said to her:

“Prepare yourself, my dear, for a bit of bad news. I’ve just had a telephone-call: the reason Webbie Brassfield didn’t come to dinner.”

“Yes?” Rita Townshend returned, in a clear voice.

“He was drunk and tried to beat a train to a crossing. Killed instantly.”

Her husband watched her sink into the nearest chair. She uttered:

“The rest will be going home.”

“They’re waiting to say good-night to you, my dear.”

She closed her eyes. Gerald said:

“Terrible. I’ll phone you.”

He went to Rita, took her limp hand and kissed it. He gave Rufus a clap on the shoulder, then meditated:

“I seem to have a message for you, from Nick.”

“A message for me, from Sassotti?” Rufus Townshend stared, in scornful wonder.

“He asked me to inquire whether you’d been interested in Santa Ysabel Oil.”

Not a pleasant message, it seemed, from the man who had been involved with Rita, to Rita’s husband, who had vowed to drive him from the city.

“He suggested that you might care to drop around for a chat, this evening before midnight.”

Rufus Townshend made no response.

Gerald descended the staircase, tip-toed past the drawing-room, in which the stunned guests were sitting, and let the butler help him into his overcoat. The butler remarked that it was a shocking affair.

“That’s what comes of hard drinking, Spokes. Seems to be in the air over here.”

He slipped the butler a banknote, went out among the chauffeurs and hailed a taxi. It was a cold, clear night. Gerald told the taxi-driver to take him to Nick Sassotti’s.

A man opened the front-door and said that Nick was out. In the parlor, Gerald saw, on the onyx table, some Winchester riot-guns, which Bennie

Mendelssohn was loading with buck-shot shells.

“Not tonight?” Gerald exclaimed.

“No fooling,” Bennie said. “And glad to have you with us, to give it tone.”

Gerald thought, in that case, he'd freshen himself with a shower. He climbed the stairs to the second floor, where Nick now lived with his bride. A bedroom-door was open; Gerald saw, over the bed, a brand-new image of the Virgin, in a gilded shrine. Bice came to the door.

“Hello, Artemis of the Golden Brow.”

She did not smile. Slim and dark, tonight she was like the adorable young saint. She looked at him piteously.

“Do you know what they're going to do, Gerald?”

“Faint idea: open season for Zarziulos. Why don't those boys behave themselves?”

“He tells me I'm a child. No, Gerald, he is the child that doesn't know right from wrong. How am I to save him?”

“They've tried to kill him half a dozen times this month, Bice dear. You don't want to be a little widow? Not just when you're thinking of going for to have a baby?”

“Why should the world be like this?” Bice suddenly sobbed. “When will people be kind to one another?”

She turned back into the bedroom.

Gerald climbed to the third floor. He went along the corridor toward the bathroom. A mumble, like chanting, came from the sitting-room of Aunt Anna, Aunt Agnese and Aunt Annina. He pushed the door, peeped in.

The room was lighted by a single candle. On the floor, the three aunts sat on their haunches, facing one another. Before them was an iron pot. Slowly the trio rocked their lean bodies back and forth, their eyes gleaming with malice, their cracked voices vindictively reciting, in unison:

It is not these three toads that we cause to die,
But all these things together we cause to die:
The toads, the hairs that we have tied to the toads,
The heads that the hairs have lived on — —
Giovanni, Amerigo and Orazio,
The three accursed Zarziulos.

Leaning forward all together on their talon-like hands, the old women spat into the iron pot.

Gerald softly closed the door. He was so well chilled that he no longer needed a shower. He went downstairs, in a hurry, picturing Nick Sassotti's three "old ladies" in traffic with the Zarziulos' barber. As he reached the parquet floor of the hall, he saw Nick walk in, followed by his body-guards. He had on a dark suit, without an overcoat, a shirt and a tie of deep blue. The battle-costume.

"Hello, Gerry. Have a good time?"

He came to Gerald, with the cat-like step, took in his appearance in a flash, picked from his coat-lapel a tawny hair.

Gerald caught Nick's arm as it whipped forward. Their chests banged together; they stood gripping each other hard. Gerald looked into eyes like those of a wild beast. Nick Sassotti whispered:

"I might of knocked your block off for that."

"For Lucrezia," Gerald replied, very low, "or only for yourself?"

The husband of the golden Bice made his face blank like the window of a vacant house. He let go, stepped back, remarked indifferently:

"All right, Gerry. I guess the two of us are nothing but a couple men."

IV

I will bring your pride down lower than a spaniel by the words of reason that you shall hear from me.—CELLINI.

Three went down to the cars, each carrying two golf-bags, heavy from the riot-guns and the boxes of buck-shot shells. Bennie Mendelssohn came to the door of the “study.”

“Chief, I think I better go ahead and look them visitors over. They might get dressed up all wrong in a strange town.”

“Do that,” said Nick Sassotti, who had called a number into the telephone. He inquired of the hand-set, “Rooney? Listen, Dominic, I’m squaring up, you know, in about half an hour. Pull the coppers off the state-highway as far as Ellum Park. Send Shane out there to see that nobody don’t walk into the Paradiso with the tip-off. The Ellum Park exchange is fixed for tips by phone. Go to bed and forget it.”

He hung up, turned in his chair, addressed his brother-in-law:

“Why don’t you go to bed yourself? Anybody shoots off something, you stick a piece of your shape in front of it. What’s Lu going to say, if you don’t make that boat?”

“I feel lucky tonight,” Gerald Arkel responded, leaning back in his chair and stretching out his long legs.

He had refreshed his scalp with a dash of Nick’s quinine tonic. His shirt-front and his camellia were unwilted. He wanted to remark that if he could get away from Rita unscathed, a mere battle would be child’s play.

One of the house-guards hovered in the doorway. He announced:

“Mr. Townshend and Mr. Humbolt.”

Nick looked at Gerald. A crease appeared on each side of his mouth, to produce an imperfect imitation of a smile.

“Chase them in here.”

Rufus Townshend and Alex Humbolt entered the “study.”

Townshend, his black overcoat parted on the whiteness of his evening costume, his silk hat upside-down in his gloved hand, refused, with a slight movement of his head, the invitation to be seated. The short and husky Alex

Humbolt, who was wearing a dinner-coat, solemnly pulled a face at Gerald and sat down upon the arm of a chair. The thirteenth vice-president of the Metropolitan-First and the junior partner of Chase, Humbolt & Chase regarded Nick Sassotti.

That notorious personage leaned back against the desk; on his left hand the intaglio shone pale-green. His face brooded over the face of Rita's husband.

At last, he spoke pleasantly:

“Well, Mr. Townshend, everybody knows you're on the level. If you went into that operation of Santa Ysabel, you thought it was okay. Maybe, when it was over, it didn't look so good to you. But you didn't get the inside dope. All right, I'll give you the inside dope and set your mind to rest.”

Rufus Townshend licked his lips and returned:

“You were in on it, I presume?”

Nick Sassotti ignored that question. He looked benevolent; he seemed to have endless time at his disposal.

“I suppose,” he said, “it was Mr. Clay Burgoyne got you into it? You give him some cash to play with. Him or a group that's going to force up the stock.”

Rufus Townshend glanced at Alex Humbolt, who advised him:

“Why not tell him?” He himself addressed Nick Sassotti, with the words, “At Mr. Burgoyne's suggestion, Mr. Townshend let him have fifty thousand, in the belief that the stock was going up.”

“So it went down instead,” Nick Sassotti concluded for him, “and Mr. Townshend made something like four hundred thousand profit.”

He smiled. His two visitors watched him apprehensively. Alex Humbolt stood up, flushed and chesty, and demanded:

“What's the low-down?”

Nick Sassotti glanced critically at the Greek intaglio, then observed:

“Well, Mr. Townshend, you should of learned in school how to tell a crook, because every time you pal with a crook, pretty soon you're a sucker.” He held up his hands and counted on his fingers, “Burgoyne— — Ashland— — Torbinhill— — Carey— — Johnson— — Courtland— — Mather— — Meyer— — Avanzi. Remember them nine names. That's the pool put

out two hundred thousand shares of phoney Santa Ysabel stock, sold it to the public at sixty, bought it back at ten and cleaned up, I'd say, nine-ten million dollars."

"Phoney!" cried Rufus Townshend. "You mean an over-issue?"

"Just worth the bill from the printer." He laughed genially, "Then the stock was to be destroyed and who's to know?"

There was a silence. Rufus Townshend's face had turned ghastly. Alex Humbolt snapped:

"You didn't tell us this to ease Mr. Townshend's mind."

"You should know why I told you. Now you can go back and spill the story, unless you're crooked yourself. The whole of them can be got, from this lead, on their under-cover brokers and their out-of-town bank transactions. If that ain't enough, there's eight thousand shares, that wasn't destroyed, in Avanzi's secretary's flat. I looked out for that and I don't begrudge the money." He turned his glassy stare toward Rufus Townshend. "Don't be no later than tomorrow, or you won't get the credit of spilling it yourself."

Gerald remembered Rita's words, "The redoubtable Nick."

There was something uncanny about such unerring progress. It couldn't, by the mere law of chance, go on indefinitely. Gerald turned aside his head, feeling sorry for Rufus Townshend, caught fast in a trap from which he would not escape without some reflected dishonor. Bice was standing in the doorway. Yes, Gerald mused, something, sooner or later, must appear in old Nick's life as retribution.

Alex Humbolt addressed the victor:

"Evidently you're not in it?"

"I don't go in on rooning folks. That's what's the matter with this country, the big fellows histing the little fellows, when they ought to keep them satisfied and quiet. Short-sighted: robbers are never safe forever, picking a pocket or governing a race of people."

"You're turning up Avanzi," Alex Humbolt persisted.

"Fred Avanzi was always a skunk; but he happened to be our skunk. That's why I stood for him so long. He stepped outside the law with an extra-dirty caper, this time. He can think it over in the pen."

Rufus Townshend went out of the room. Alex Humbolt followed him, without glancing at Gerald. Bice came in and stood before her husband.

“I’m going home to mama, Nick.”

He stared at her uncertainly, as though not yet perceiving clearly the golden face. He frowned and asked:

“What’s the matter? Lonely for mama?”

“I’m not coming back, Nick.”

“Yeah? Why ain’t you?”

“Because when you touch me, Nick, your hands will be red with blood.”

She made a knot of her fingers before her bosom; she looked at him in love and renunciation. The angels of her prayers were hovering around her, no doubt, prompting her to abjure the evil that was mingled with happiness. Perhaps all the images of sacrifice, saintly and divine, before which she had prayed in maidenly rapture, fortified her, as she contemplated the nefarious hero. She had thought, Gerald supposed, to justify profane love by Nick’s salvation, to effect a miraculous rescue of his soul that would make her saintly after all. She had accomplished only the miracle of being transfigured as a woman in his arms.

The telephone on the desk gave a ring. Nick Sassotti spoke into it:

“I’m starting.” He said to Bice, as if humoring a child, “You go make yourself a nice, hot milk-punch, baby, and you’ll go to sleep quick and not worry. I won’t be gone long and there won’t be no blood on my hands.”

“Yes, Nick, there will be, because you won’t come back before the Zarziulo boys are dead. You will have murdered them and I shall see their faces in my dreams. But I could never close my eyes in sleep in this house again.”

Nick lost his patience.

“What do you mean, murder,” he said. “Can’t a party perfect his own life? I suppose you could sleep fine, if they slammed me off.”

“Oh, for shame!” cried Bice.

“Listen, why didn’t you marry them and get them to act right to me? There’d be some sense in it, then.”

“You hear him, Gerald?”

“Easy, Bice. Easy, Nick. Lady in a delicate state.”

Nick Sassotti crossed the room, with a snap of his fingers. "Come on, Gerry," he said. Bice planted herself in his path. She looked frail before him, trembling and courageous. Her dark eyes were filled with defeated zeal and anguish. She spoke rapidly, her mouth shaking:

"Nick, I warn you. Nick, we are parting. The Church won't hold me to it. You shall not have the child, Nick."

"Easy does it, Bice dear."

Shaking off Gerald's hand, she went on wildly:

"You could have frightened them. You could even have made them leave the city. You didn't have to kill them; but it is their blood you must have. Because the Zarziulos are vile, must you be vile too? Yes, you must, as people told me. I couldn't believe it, because you were kind to us. What shall I say, Santissima Madonna, to my child about his father? I shall say his father is dead and it will be a blessed lie. Goodbye, Nick."

She fled through the hall, flew up the stairs. Nick Sassotti walked out of the "study" to watch her disappear.

He and Gerald left the house in silence. They were alone in the Cadillac touring-car.

Angelo did not have to be told to drive fast; for half an hour it had been Sunday morning. The streets swarmed with push-cart business. On corners, policemen waved their hands at the car. The Cadillac and the Rolls-Royce limousine, the license-plates showing nothing but sevens and the swarthy driver breaking all traffic-rules, had become a portent in the city.

Nick was absorbed in somber thought. He said bitterly, at last:

"That's what you get, when you're looking to have a family."

"Nonsense, Nick. You're very fond of Bice."

"It's the religion. You can't talk commonsense with them."

"Will she really walk out?"

"You don't know her."

"But she'll come back."

"Not from anything I do or say."

Gerald smiled to himself. He knew that Nick had come to care more for Bice than he ever admitted. Watching her a long while, he had perceived in her the reassuring virtues of purity and candidness. Pouncing upon her, he

had ignored her pious stubbornness. Now her exasperated piety had scorned and threatened him; the reproach of multitudes had been symbolized, in his house, by a defiant young face. Well, old Nick wasn't the first chap who had married his conscience.

"It does seem a shame," said Gerald, "that these rumpuses keep coming up."

"Yeah. I'm getting to where it's petty."

Nick relapsed into his gloomy meditation.

The Cadillac entered a quiet street, passed a string of parked cars, stopped under the sign, "Bassi's." Gerald followed Nick into a pool-room foggy with tobacco-smoke and overcrowded with men. A dozen were dressed as policemen.

Nick drew Bennie Mendelssohn aside. The chubby-faced lieutenant began to look depressed. Gerald heard him say:

"Why, chief, John'll think you lost your mind!"

"Not when I'm through with him," Nick promised. "Just like I say, you hear me? Phone Monk, right now, to watch his step, when he takes his boys into John's plant. Then phone Willie the same, about knocking off the Hop-House. Meantime, I'll look at these coppers."

Bennie Mendelssohn ordered forward the men dressed as policemen.

They stood in a clump, gazing curiously at the celebrated Nick Sassotti. They were all from out of town, so that the enemy might not take warning from their faces. Behind them, the rest pushed forward to listen, their hats over their eyes, their smoke rising to the pressed-tin ceiling.

Nick beckoned the men in uniform to him one by one. He spoke monotonously, "Who are you—fix your badge—show me your gun—what do you say when you go in—" He pulled one, a sallow, sweating young man, forward by the arm and sniffed him. "We'll let you off," he said. He turned away with the words, "All right, you coppers. Go out and get in your cars." He lighted a Toscano.

Gerald wandered to him and asked:

"What was the matter with that chap?"

"That's the way they smell when they're scared. You was in the war; ain't you never smelled them like that?"

The men were trickling out into the street.

In the cold darkness, Nick spoke to the first police-car, "Meet you at the Paradiso in half an hour to the second." He matched his watch with the driver's. The police-cars disappeared. He said to Bennie Mendelssohn, "First Joe's scatter, then the Silver Bucket. Remember, now: the riot-guns stay in the cars till we make the Paradiso and you play these two spots with the saps. If there ain't enough saps to go round, break up some chairs. Don't you let me hear no popping, without you can explain it plenty. I want both dumps cleaned in record-time and don't leave nobody in shape to phone from Joe's to the Bucket. Let's go."

The Cadillac whistled through the night, leading the rest, which were spaced a block apart.

"No shooting at all?" Gerald ventured.

"Not if they don't cut loose on us," Nick Sassotti answered gruffly.

Gerald was ruminating, nevertheless, on the pleasures of a domestic life in Rome, when Angelo stepped on the brakes. All the cars were suddenly together; the men were pouring out. A youth at the entrance of a "soft-drink" parlor gave a yell and vanished inside. The men galloped across the sidewalk and poured in through the doorway. A deafening uproar followed, composed of howls, splintering wood and glass, trampling and whacking.

Leaning back against the cushions of the Cadillac, the general glanced at his wrist-watch.

All along the shabby block, windows were going up. Across the way, a woman stuck out her head covered with curl-papers and screamed:

"I'll report you! I'll report you!"

The drivers, sitting behind their thrumming engines, gave her various sorts of advice. Bennie Mendelssohn came out, followed by men armed with blackjacks, chair-legs and bottles. He said happily:

"Mike was in there, chief."

"That's dandy. Hurry up. We're late."

They sped off in a string, then spaced themselves a block apart. Presently, Angelo muttered, "Accidente." He slowed up quickly, worked his stop-signal three times. Half a block ahead, under a street-lamp, men were running across the sidewalk and jumping into cars.

“Tipped off, hey,” said Nick Sassotti. “Eight on through, Angelo. Hold your hat, Gerry.”

They hummed abreast of the cars beside the curb, in which men were frantically trying to rouse the cold engines. Each carful blazed with pistols at the Cadillac as it passed. Behind it, sounded a banging of riot-guns, one volley after another. Suddenly there was silence. All Nick Sassotti’s cars were flying on in a line.

“Now I suppose you’re bleeding at every pore,” he growled at Gerald.

“Never touched me. Hot dog. How about yourself?”

“Okay. Listen, Angelo, you got to make the Paradiso in seventeen minutes.”

“From here,” Angelo promised. “Don’t think nothing if I shift with my left hand.”

“Want me to drive?”

“Why, chief.”

They twisted through the slums, traversed a suburb, darted into the country. They droned along a level road, between farm-land darkly clear in the blue starlight. Dogs barked at the rumor from the caravan of cars, as they would bark, later on, at the caravans of trucks, piling up wealth for Nick Sassotti. The frosty air was filled with the soil’s keen health, and sweet with the fragrance of space.

“The country’s the spot for kids, Gerry.”

“Who are you going to get to have them now?”

“I’m angling right now on getting Bice to have them.”

In the sky ahead, appeared a red-and-green electric sign, announcing, “Paradiso, the Place for Fun.”

The cars turned by a wagon-track into a frosty field. Men went off on foot in two directions. Nick Sassotti and Gerald advanced toward some trees, beyond which glittered the sign and the windows of the road-house. An orchestra stopped playing. In the doorway, one of the mock policemen shouted:

“Take it easy. The house is pinched front and back. All the guests go out quiet and they won’t be bothered. I said guests, you. Now, then — —”

Men and women scampered forth and hurried to their cars. There was a grinding of engines, shrill laughter, impudent jesting. Head-lights went streaking away.

From behind the house, came the thud of a pistol-shot.

“Who done that?” Nick snarled.

He walked across the open and into the Paradiso.

Gerald followed, feeling idiotic in his silk hat and evening overcoat, like a belated guest highly suspicious of the Paradiso’s promise as a place for fun. The dance-floor was surrounded by tables overhung with paper flowers. At the doors, stood the counterfeit policemen. In the middle of the dance-floor, close together, were John, Amerigo and Horace Zarziulo, backed by a dozen of their henchmen.

“Look out, Johnnie!” a girl’s voice shrilled. “It’s Goldilocks!”

Gerald, despite his nervousness, nearly grinned at that one. He saw, amid the tables, a wan, pretty, dark-haired dancer in a mauve ballet-dress: he recognized Blanche de Vinne. Apparently, Blanche had not gone on climbing the ladder of fame since offending Nick Sassotti. That personage spoke over his shoulder to the pseudo-police-captain:

“Pass her out and warn her.” Blanche de Vinne crept away. “Pass them musicians out; take their names and warn them.” The musicians, clutching their instruments, jumped from their platform and raced across the dance-floor. “All right, you coppers are through. Take the waiters and checkers with you.”

Through the doorways, front and back, Nick Sassotti’s men scuffled in, the riot-guns ahead.

Their general strolled forward, spick-and-span in his dark-blue costume, the smouldering end of the Toscano between his fingers. He stopped six feet before his competitor.

“This is the square-up, John.”

The three Zarziulos and their henchmen remained motionless. Amerigo and Horace were classically handsome. John, the oldest and strongest, looked as remote as on the night when he had lost the golden Bice. His arms were again folded across his broad chest; the platinum or silver bracelet shone on his muscular wrist.

With none of his features moving except his lips, John Zarziulo said:

“How about talking business?”

“I’ll do the talking and you’ll listen. Avanzi’s going to jail. You and Amerigo and Horace are getting out of town, with your families, before noon today. If you’re here after noon, I’ll chase you down like rats. If you come back, order your funerals beforehand.”

John Zarziulo thoughtfully inquired:

“Why so generous, Nick?”

“That’s part of the business we ain’t talking about.”

“Pass along my regards,” said the other, with a brief smile.

Nick Sassotti replied serenely:

“I’ve pulled your teeth, John. I guess them folks in back of you are all that ain’t learned their lesson. They’ll know it perfect, when my boys are done with them.” He let his cold stare pass over the henchmen. He instructed them, “Go with Bennie, you apes, and shake hands with yourself that I’m feeling good-tempered tonight.”

He watched his retainers, ignoring the Zarziulos, swarm around the henchmen, disarm them, cuff them, hustle them toward the back-door. The prisoners started off without resistance, their slapped faces wincing stoically, their eyes staring ahead. At the door, one held back, went down under a blow from the flat of a pistol, was dragged out by the arms. Another began to gibber in falsetto. Bennie Mendelssohn reproved him with the comment, “Tch, tch, tch.”

“That’s all for now, chief?”

“That’s all.”

Nick Sassotti reminded the three motionless Zarziulos:

“Noon is twelve o’clock sharp in the middle of the day.”

He walked out of the Paradiso, crossed the frozen field, got into his car. As Gerald joined him, he glanced at the Greek intaglio, then said:

“I lost a dame once just from slamming off a better low-life than them three. Well, now I hope Bice’s good and satisfied.”

Angelo drove homeward. The night was refreshing after the Paradiso.

“You know,” Nick added uncomfortably, “when your wife’s going to have a baby, you got to humor them a little. I wouldn’t want no son of mine born with nothing funny about him.”

“Ah, yes,” Gerald agreed, “one ought to watch out for that.”

“You humored Lu, didn’t you?”

“Good Lord! I never stop humoring Lucrezia, with that shade of hair.”

It might be, Gerald reflected, that there really was a sort of law, milling about the universe, by which one got in the end pretty nearly what one gave. Then even the redoubtable Nick wouldn’t go on with impunity forever. Look at the Zarziulos. They’d leave the city; but were they the chaps to stay put? John seemed to have a personality and he knew when to keep quiet. Might give Nick a lot of trouble some day.

Gerald wondered if retribution, which often appears in the most innocent-looking disguises, could be, for Nick, the golden bride.

PART V

THE DAUGHTER OF NIGHT

I

We are on the road to be known, my dear; people of fashion are beginning to find the way to our house.—MOLIÈRE.

The street on the edge of Little Italy, breathless in the hot night of the third of July, was full of glossy cars. They crept in a line toward the house where an awning stretched from the curb to the front-door. Genial policemen marshalled them and restrained the crowd that overflowed the sidewalks. Nick Sassotti was holding open house, for one reason, because this was Bice's birthday.

The first floor was cool: refrigerating-machines hummed in all the corners. An orchestra played in the end of the hall, beyond massed azaleas. Nick, in a dark sack-suit—so as not to abash those who might have no evening dress—stood under the multi-colored Venetian chandelier. Beside him, stood Bice, slim and lovely, in lemon satin, her shoulders lustrous like pale gold. It was a year and a half since he had married her, yonder in the parlor, amid a splintering of shutters from the Zarziulos' bullets.

Ancient history. The three "wild Zarziulos," driven from the city, had never since been heard of. Avanzi had died of pneumonia in prison. Nick Sassotti held the field alone, magnified in wealth and power, unchallenged, except by the Federal Government.

He had become at last, in the land dedicated to idealism, a perverse sort of superman raised up by rebellion.

"Hello, Judge; glad you could make it. Meet Mrs. Sassotti. Hello, Salvatore and Rosa. Hello, Xavier. Mr. and Mrs. Torrance? Let them give you a glass of champagne in the parlor. Miss Brederode? Yeah. So am I. Hello, Commissioner; you and me'll have a quiet drink as soon as possible — —"

They filed past like the line that shakes hands with the president. Some of them Nick had made. Others had helped him, once upon a time, and now had received their reward. A few had come without invitation from the other side of town—fashionable young men and women, crashing the gate out of curiosity. He gave them an affable greeting, then passed them on, with a pull of his strong wrist.

None of them, he was sure, could have shown a diamond necklace as splendid as the one on Bice's bosom.

“Hello, Dominic. You look like you was all set to get blessed by the Pope.”

Chief of Police Rooney, his fat person encased in a dress-suit, bowed his grizzled head over Bice’s hand, in the manner of a decrepit Irish king. His bulging eyes resembled the eyes of a dead frog; the varicose veins on his cheeks were like smears of purplish paint. Nick Sassotti reflected, with a twinge of pity, that Rooney’s usefulness was finished.

“Some necklace, Bice,” remarked the old ally.

“My birthday present,” she said, laying her narrow hand upon her husband’s arm.

Tonight, Bice was radiant like a fair young saint, who, after much strife against the darkness of the world, had performed a miracle.

Chief of Police Rooney inquired:

“What did Lu get this time, Nick?”

“A boy again. See you later.”

Nick Sassotti stiffened his face into the handsome mask. Lucrezia, who had wanted her second child born “on American soil,” was out in the country with a fine son, two days old. Nick’s child and Bice’s, a girl, had died the day of its birth. Apparently, they couldn’t have another.

The orchestra struck up “The Conquering Hero.” The mayor, wearing a cutaway-coat, hurried in, so as to get away the faster.

He marched to the head of the line, with the flushed composure of a man who is doing something awful in the course of an initiation. He looked humbly at the wife of the outlaw who had put him into office. She smiled at him, her girlish throat aglitter with the too-magnificent necklace.

“This is a great honor, Mr. Mayor.”

He replied in a strained voice:

“This — — harumph! — — is a very, very wonderful — — I look around me — — It is an evidence of — — A beautiful nature always attracts — —”

“That’s right,” said Nick Sassotti pleasantly. “It takes Bice to pack them in.”

The mayor snatched at the hint:

“You pronounce it Beechy? Ah, the Italian language! Tasso — — Boccaccio — — I mean to say — — Well, yes, Boccaccio, too. In life one must

be liberal. Boccaccio's motives— — One's motives are often misunder— — Poetic Italy! I can never resist— — I wish you a very, very wonderful— —”

He crushed Bice's hand and hurried out between the lines of faces, some of which looked impressed and some ironical. Nick Sassotti followed him, watched him down the steps, turned back with more than his usual contempt. A fine lot of clowns you had to work with!

Gerald Arkel came in behind him, in full evening dress.

“Hi, Nick. Looks like Belshazzar's throwing it. Drove twenty miles to get a kiss from Bice.”

“One. After that I begin to bat you around. I kind of hoped Lu'd make it.”

Gerald's brown face displayed amusement.

“After having a baby day before yesterday?”

“Listen,” said Nick Sassotti, “morning after Lu was born, my mother wakes me up for school and goes and cooks my breakfast.”

“Ah, those were the heroic ages,” Gerald replied, making off toward a popping of champagne-corks. “And even after so much devotion, consider what you've come to.”

Nick laughed, then looked at Bice, whom he hadn't allowed, after her baby's birth, to get out of bed for three weeks.

Despite his careful contemplation of her, before their marriage, Bice had turned out to be “one of them delicate women.” Nowadays, every triumph was infected with the awareness of that fact. He did what he could, nevertheless, to prevent his wife from feeling like a failure.

The line was ending. Behind Bice, sat her mother, proudly simpering, like a life-sized marionette, in dyed hair and a black spangled dress, fanning itself by clock-work. Two of Bice's young sisters chased each other around the parquet floor of the hall, their heels flying high behind their short silk skirts. They were showing off for Nick, of whom they were enamored. The line ended and Bice came toward him, jeweled like a slender queen, her nymph-like legs trying to break through the lemon-colored satin.

“Tired, baby?”

“I'm a little deaf.”

“Get ahold of my arm.”

He led her across the hall. To the right, the staircase was full of bright frocks, among which moved the waiters, bearing trays of glasses. To the left, in the parlor, Napoli's men were filling the plates, at the tables above which towered the set-pieces of the cold buffet. The orchestra smothered in azaleas played a prelude for a tenor. Some couples began to dance.

A girl from the other side of town, blonde and tanned, wearing nothing but her evening frock and slippers, glided by in a young man's arms. Nick heard her laugh:

"Don't worry; he gets it wholesale."

Another, with the face of an experienced Diana, intercepted Nick, her smile half teasing and half defiant, as if she were taking a dare.

"Don't you dance, Mr. Sassotti?"

"With my wife. Glad you got our invitation."

He and Bice passed into the "study."

Three middle-aged men in dinner-coats and Chief of Police Rooney stood up at Bice's entrance. Nick shut the door. They arranged themselves in the oriental-looking chairs, their feet on the pale-blue and peach-colored rug from Persia. On the carved desk were bottles, glasses, a silver dish full of ice. Rooney, nowadays, took his whisky neat.

"Just an old souse," Nick Sassotti said to himself. Drunken people annoyed him: they couldn't be depended on. While mixing two mild brandy-and-sodas, for himself and Bice, he erased Rooney's name, once for all, from his list of human instruments. He said to that officer:

"Having a nice time, Dominic?"

"It's a grand party."

"From here. Sip this, baby. You're getting them violet streaks under your eyes."

Out in the hall, somebody dropped a plate, probably one of the Sèvres banquet-set. It was Rita Townshend who had introduced Nick to the values of porcelain. He glanced at the Greek ring, on his left hand, which he still wore merely because it was valuable enough to be in a museum. Bice thought that he'd picked it up at an auction-sale.

"Feel better, baby?"

She gave him an intimate look of gratitude. He told himself that tonight his wife was as beautiful as Rita.

“What’s this I hear,” the police-commissioner asked, “about going out of business?”

“Why not. I made that dollar.”

“And ain’t he right,” Chief of Police Rooney affirmed, with maudlin satisfaction. “What’d be the idear of um staying in till more scounthrels wants his scalp? Now, Nick, don’t go raring on old Rooney. I’m only saying you’re smart to retire while your luck is lasting.”

Napoli stuck his narrow head through the doorway. The dance-music and the voices swelled loud.

“Two young gents acting like they wanted trouble. Will I serve them the Mickie Finns?”

“Just throw them down to the coppers,” said Nick indulgently.

Bice spoke from the depths of her chair:

“What we don’t want, Commissioner, is any more of a business where, sooner or later, human beings have to be hurt. No one can take the law of life and death into his hands forever— —”

Nick Sassotti frowned and interrupted:

“Listen, baby, you’re talking in front of people that know my record. Don’t tell them I ever took no law into my hands, unless somebody was looking to rob my business or my breath off of me. That goes for the whole of my career as a liquor-trader, from Frank Pagliuca to the Zarziulos.”

“What happened to the Zarziulo family?” the commissioner inquired.

“I guess they settled down in China.” Nick turned to stare at his brother-in-law, who had come in to kiss Bice’s hand. “You ain’t going home, Gerry?”

As the mosque-like silver clock on the mantel struck twelve, Gerald explained:

“I have to drive twenty miles into the wilds, to a neolithic castle called Miller’s Folly, which you procured for me and my dear ones, I suppose, to have us as far as possible from civilization.”

“I percured it so Lu and your kids could get them flowers and that air. There ain’t a million people breathing on you out there.”

“There ain’t nobody breathing on us, for leagues and leagues around,” Gerald assured him. “If you shouted in that landscape, the noise would scare you to death.”

“That’s the thanks I get.”

“Tomorrow night,” Gerald predicted, “I shall repay you by filling your pockets with lighted giant-crackers. Till then. Good-night, Bice dear.”

He made a sweeping bow, backed out melodramatically, collided with Bennie Mendelssohn. The latter came in and sat down, resplendent in an extreme style of dinner-coat, his hair marcelled, his face pink all over. He was taking on a solid look.

“Mercy,” he observed, “them society girls are terrible. What they wouldn’t say to a guy.”

The police-commissioner persisted:

“Tell me, Nick, how you’re dropping out of a business as big as this one.”

“Easy.” He reached for one of the Coronas in the silver box, then withdrew his hand; when he smoked a cigar late at night, it made Bice’s lips burn. “There’s no business so big you can’t pass it along.”

“Transfer it?”

“You don’t think I’d kill it and let the public down? I’m passing it on running as good as ever. I formed a company of five stock-holders— — Grossman & Zanders worked out the agreement for me— — with Bennie holding forty per-cent and each of the others fifteen.”

“The Foreign Imports Corp,” Bennie Mendelssohn laughed.

“I begun six months ago,” Nick Sassotti continued. “I let the business work with my capital, learning Bennie and the others to run it on their own. After every operation, I took back the cost and let them split the profit. Now they can operate, on the regular scale, alone. Of course, if they get in a jam, they can come to me for advice; but right now, from this Fourth of July, I’m just a politician.”

“My birthday and your coming-out party,” said Bice, patting his hand.

“Well, it just happened that way,” Nick Sassotti mumbled.

Rooney was asleep in his chair. Music and laughter penetrated the door. Nick thought of the past, of its dangers and escapes, its remorseless progress

to this wealth and safety. No law could touch him, now, through some slip of his or another's. No new rival could lay him low with that bit of metal unlike all the metal that had whistled so close to him. Perhaps he was getting out at the right time. As Lu had reminded him, one day, a man could defy the gods too often.

“Who's the dame the Greeks call the Daughter of Night, baby?”

“Nemesis,” said Bice. “What made you think of that?”

“Lu was telling me about it,” he yawned. “Listen to them out there. They won't none of them go home till day-light. That's it: start something and then try and make them stop it. Go upstairs, baby, and catch a little nap. I don't like the way you're looking right now.”

She rose, slid the palm of her hand over his shoulder, went out in the glitter of her diamonds and her eyes. Bennie Mendelssohn thoughtfully mixed himself a drink, then imparted, in an undertone:

“I'm having a chin just now with Bice's mama. She says she was downtown yesterday and seen somebody I shouldn't tell you about, because you would only worry.”

“Me worry?” Nick Sassotti said incredulously.

“John Zarziulo, with a curly beard.”

“Yeah? Amerigo and Horace with him?”

“Mama says no. She says he was all put out to meet her, only in a jumpmanly way, because he'd broke his promise. Then he made it okay with buying her a razzberry soda. He tells her he's on his way to take the train again.”

They looked at each other calmly, while Chief of Police Rooney snored. Nick decided:

“He wouldn't try it alone, or just with Horace and Amerigo. I guess his cork is pulled.”

Napoli opened the door, to suggest:

“Chief, would you make a little speech?”

“That's my business now.”

Nick Sassotti, in the doorway, found himself facing a crowd that packed the hall and filled to overflowing the staircase beyond the glamour of the chandelier. A crash of cheering swept out into the street, to be met there by a

drone of motor-horns. Flowers came sailing through the air, from the corsages of women and of girls.

He was mildly surprised, standing poised as if for some new, fabulous action, his slightly coarse face of a medieval warrior smiling, his hair unnaturally blond in the strong light. He did not realize that he was a myth to this crowd exalted by wine, something new in the world, from the magnitude of this different illegality and immunity.

A strong soprano trilled, through the uproar, in Italian:

I hear the breathing of his tender voice,
That voice beloved— —

The cheering changed to friendly laughter. In the ensuing hush, there came, from the street, the noise of fire-crackers set off in packs.

He began to speak quietly:

“They tell me the Declaration of Independence was signed on the sixth, not the fourth. Good Americans look to sign theirs every day.”

He was interrupted by whoops. He regretted that he had sent his wife upstairs. He noted, in the crowd, two young men scribbling on wads of copy-paper.

“Square laws should be elastic-like, to meet conditions. To fit human nature at that time. Not a thousand years from now and not in heaven. All right, when the laws ain’t square, in a nation dedicated, like they say, to independence— —”

He went on proclaiming his gospel.

II

I dreamt last night that I was in the greatest trouble imaginable, and that some one exactly like this gentleman came to me.—MOLIÈRE.

All around Miller's Folly, stone-walled, slate-roofed and towered like a castle, the empty countryside stretched far into the darkness, beneath heat that seemed to smother even the light of the stars. From the windows of the living-room, one discerned only the first of three stone-rimmed pools, marking the descent of a landscaped lawn to a by-road nearly a third of a mile away. On each side of the lawn, the driveways curved inward, dimly gray, to meet under the pillared portico. Now and then, a glimmer of lightning brought into being the encircling groves, tall, breathless, like discovered watchers of the cheerful human life in their midst.

It was almost too hot to set off the fireworks. Nick Sassotti turned from the living-room window, with the words:

“What we need is a big storm.”

“I feel it coming on,” said his sister.

They had carried Lucrezia downstairs on a chaise-longue. Both the trained-nurses were on the second floor, one trying to sleep, the other with the baby. Lucrezia reclined in a flimsy kimono of amber-colored silk that matched her eyes, against dark-blue cushions that emphasized the magnificence of her hair. Gerald, sitting on the edge of the chaise-longue, stopped fanning her, to kiss her small, aquiline nose.

“Every time she has one, she gets better-looking, Nick.”

A Sealyham, named Eustace, jumped up to squat upon her insteps, which disappeared into amber-colored mules. She moved slightly, kicked him off. He rushed at her, with a growl of delight, and tried to swallow her hand.

“The heat only hops him up,” Nick remarked, sitting down and arranging his linen suit so as not to crease it. “Him and kids.” He nodded toward the stone hall beyond the living-room, where little Nickie, in that species of Kate Greenaway costume suitable for four-year-olds, was jumping about the box of fireworks.

Nickie, feeling his uncle's gaze, came cavorting in from the hall. He planted himself before Nick Sassotti, sturdy, tawny-haired, like a

mischievous little angel out of a Botticelli picture. He frowned at the radio, which was offering a boop-de-oop quartet, and protested in Italian:

“Look, Uncle Nick, it is late and I cannot have my repose until— —”

“Not if you don’t speak English.” The brother turned to the sister, with the comment, “Ain’t that crafty? Him wanting his repose.”

“But, Uncle Nick, in Rome we speak Italian much and if I do not speak it here, how shall I not forget? To speak with gentlemen for practice, per Bacco! is better than always to speak with Giulia, who has terribly the peasant accent. Già. Let us set them on fire now. I want to hear much noise.”

“He wants to hear much noise,” Gerald said. “Who does he get that from?”

Lucrezia retorted that she had already heard enough noise to have produced an antipathy in her son. Nick Sassotti glanced at Bice, to call her attention to Nickie’s eager face. The fragile young wife, her skin darkened by her yellow frock spotted with purple flowers, was looking at the child sadly.

She suggested:

“The rockets will shine in this dark sky, won’t they, Nickie?”

“Okay,” her husband consented. “Call Angelo and Monk to haul the box, Gerry. Me and Bice’ll step out and pick the spot.”

Nick Sassotti led his wife through the hall, past Pompeo, the elderly butler from Rome, who was coming to collect the coffee-cups. They went out under the semi-circular portico, in which the Rolls-Royce was standing. The stifling night was faintly perfumed with foliage. Nick and Bice walked down the lawn into the darkness.

From far away, came a vibration of thunder. Bice murmured:

“Nobody else for miles.”

“Yes, there are. Them gardeners down by the gate.”

He turned to look at Miller’s Folly, annoyed that there had been some criticism of this estate which he had so carefully chosen. Quiet. Good air, when there was any at all. A private park for Nickie to play in. A rose-garden, in back, that ought to be a show-place. Only a twenty-mile drive for Dr. Mariett.

From thinking of Dr. Mariett, he thought of Frank Pagliuca. Five years since Frank and his folks had been wiped out at Fanny's Inn.

What a lot had happened since.

The victorious Nick Sassotti, his arm around Bice, admired the façade of Miller's Folly. A strictly swell casa. Them towers made it look foreign. On each side of the pillared porch, which had a stone parapet above it, there were two turret-like bay-windows, the living-room windows on the right of the hall, the dining-room windows on the left. It was Nick's idea of what a house should be, ample and ponderous, like a fort or something.

Funny how he couldn't put Frank out of his mind.

Suddenly he looked around him with surprise. Miller's Folly, except for its solidity and luxury, might have been the tavern before which Frank had died! This landscaped lawn might have been that rising field of timothy, up which Nick's men had crept with machine-rifles and pistols! He knew because, on his recovery, he had gone there himself, to study the battle so well carried out for him.

"Can you tie that," he thought, in somber amusement.

A man walked into the window-lights on the left, coming from the wooden garage, which was painted dark-gray to match the gray-stone house. Paul, the Roman chauffeur.

Monk and Angelo were taking their time about the fireworks. They couldn't, Nick tolerantly supposed, break away from the cook, the two maids and Giulia, the Alban nurse.

He became aware that Bice was weeping.

"Now, baby. We could always adopt one." He took her into his arms. Her tears were hot on the linen of his shoulder; her slender body burned his body. "Why, baby, I stopped thinking about it."

"It'll always come back when you see them. I saw you looking at him
__"

"I was thinking if you had him jabbering round all the time, he'd turn out to be a headache."

"I want them, too."

"I don't."

He held her tight; they burned more than ever in the heat. The thunder rumbled, then cracked, like a distant salvo of battleship-guns. That hardly perceptible pallor, far off, should be the light above the city. Beyond that light, in country fragrant, like this, from the suffocating foliage, Rita Townshend was smiling.

Down at the gardeners' house, a third of a mile away, somebody was celebrating the Fourth with a revolver.

“And I love you so much, Nick.”

“I'd call you plenty if you didn't.”

“Will you always love me, just the same?”

“Watch me, baby.” He laughed, “By and by, we'll travel. Take mama and the girls along. What more family would we want?”

“Oh, you're so sweet.”

“Ain't I?”

He heard, from far down the road, the sound of a motorcycle, no doubt the delivery-boy from the nearest drug store. He ignored that noise growing in the quiet of the night; he hardly noticed its cessation. He was breathing Bice's perfume, “White Rose,” and thinking how she became for him, over and over again, a bride, a maiden. He was trying to be content with that, he was trying to forget the cause of discontent, when he became aware of movement in the darkness. Twenty feet away, a man was crawling, on all fours, toward the house.

Nick Sassotti put his wife behind him. He had not gone armed for years.

“What you doing on this property?”

He heard a bubbling cry:

“Look out, chief. Look out— —”

“Who are you?”

“Paper-Box.”

Nick Sassotti ran forward and knelt down. The youthful face was distorted; the mouth was gasping for air. When Paper-Box spoke again, his words were preceded by a whistle from the hole in his lungs.

“Three down at the gate. Waiting for the rest— —”

“Rest of what?”

“John, with an army of out-of-towners. Knocked off the club. Knocked off Bassi’s. Got Bennie at home — —” The messenger coughed blood. “Beat it, chief,” he gurgled. “You’re through.”

“Thanks, Paper-Box.”

Nick Sassotti walked into the stone hall of Miller’s Folly with the body in his arms; Bice went in front, to get Nickie out of the way. The swarthy Angelo and the blue-visaged Monk dropped the case of fireworks. They laid Paper-Box on the dining-room table, then followed Nick Sassotti into the living-room. Lucrezia frowned from the chaise-longue.

“What is it, Nick?”

“John Zarziulo. Remember Fanny’s Inn?”

Her eyes turned black.

“Is there time to clear out?”

“We’d have to leave in the cars and they’d get the drivers down there on that hairpin-turn. Where you going, Gerry?”

“I thought I’d venture to use the phone,” Gerald said, with dignity. “After all, what are policemen for?”

“You’ll find the line cut. What you got in guns?”

“A hunting-rifle and a double-barreled duck-gun, with a box of shells for each.”

“Regular munitions-dump, ain’t you? Take Nickie upstairs and get them. Send the women up. Go on up, Bice. Lu, we’ll carry you up in a minute.”

“Oh, will you?” said Nick Sassotti’s sister. She addressed the butler from Rome, whose liverish face was embellished with drooping side-whiskers, “Tell Giulia to go up to the children, Pompeo, and take them and the nurses into the middle room. Tell Paul I wish to see him.”

“Excellency,” the butler stated, with a look of pain, “there’s a dead man on the dining-room table.”

“The dining-room is no longer your affair. Go and carry out my orders.”

A pistol sounded behind the house; from a room upstairs, a shot-gun banged in answer. A rifle-bullet came in by a front bay-window and slapped a hole through a set of Maupassant. Angelo ran to the dining-room, where he switched off the lights. Monk turned off the lights in the living-room. The hanging-lamp in the hall between was dimmed to a single globe.

Lucrezia sat up on the chaise-longue.

“And you picked a house without shutters.”

“We all make our mistakes, Lu. They’re just showing us, now, we can’t get away. They won’t hardly rush us without John.”

“Where’s Bennie?”

“Paper-Box says they got him.”

“What about Rooney?”

“Stewed, I guess, and under his bed.”

There was a crash of thunder.

“If it pours,” Lucrezia offered, “it might hold them off a little? Monk, go see if that dead man has a pistol.”

“I got it,” said her brother, “and one extra clip.”

Paul, the chauffeur, came in, a tall young Roman, his cheeks carmine, his brow low, like a gladiator’s. Nick Sassotti approved of him.

“Can you shoot, kid?”

“Three years army, sir.”

“Take the shot-gun off of Mr. Arkel. Lay for them hoods out in back. Tell him to stay upstairs and tootsy round with the rifle. Come on, boys. All the furniture up to the windows and doors. Lights out all over the house,” he snapped at the butler. As he set to work with Monk and Angelo, he thought, “Five men and an old dame with side-whiskers. Three pistols,” he counted, as they came to the hall-door, “a rifle and a shot-gun. Ain’t that dandy.”

He went on to the dining-room and arranged a sketchy barricade. The house was like an oven.

They reached the kitchen, where the windows, facing a slight declivity, were nine feet above the ground. The shot-gun exploded in the kitchen-porch. Paul, the chauffeur, was lying on the floor, looking down upon the rose-garden, firing to flashes of lightning.

The perfume of innumerable roses expanded, as if in gratitude for the rain.

For an instant, Nick Sassotti wondered if the rose-garden had decided his choice of this house. It had seemed to him like a garden in Italy, such as he had once possessed in his dreams. It was nearly the setting in which he had

pictured Rita, bending to clip the blossoms, then turning to him with the words, “Well, I must say, darling— —”

From the depths of the rose-garden, came mocking laughter. Two or three voices called:

“Hey, Nick! Hey, Goldilocks! Are you shooting or practicing?”

A slam of thunder shook the house. The rain came faster and faster. In the garden, the voices began to bawl:

Singing in the rain, just singing in the rain.
What a glorious fe-e-e-eling;
I’m happy again;
I’m laughing at clouds so dark up above;
The sun’s in me heart,
And I’m readee for love— —

The rain, pouring down like a cloud-burst, drowned the voices with its noise.

Nick Sassotti retraced his steps. In the blackness of the dining-room, Bice came to him, like a wraith perceived only by the scent of “White Rose.” She laid her head upon his breast and lamented:

“All my fault.”

“I’m going to fix it, baby. I’m going to have a talk with John.”

“That beast! That beast! No, God won’t let it be! God have mercy upon us. Blessed Mother of God, have mercy upon us. Sacred Heart of Jesus, have mercy upon us— —”

She was twisting in his arms, weeping, patting his face. He shook her steadily. When she was quiet, he kissed her invisible lips that were like a warm, soft flower.

“Take it easy, baby. John’ll listen to reason, the way I’ll talk to him. Help her upstairs, Monk.”

He heard her weeping die away. He stood, for another minute, in the black dining-room, beside the remains of Paper-Box. That had been a pretty good boy. His boys had always put themselves out for him.

He wished he had a few of them left.

In the sibilance of rain, in a rumble of thunder, he crossed the stone hall, his face glistening dimly, his hair wet and matted, his linen suit stained with

sweat. He turned out the hall-light, entered the living-room, sat down on the chaise-longue beside Lucrezia. Above her wedding ring, he felt the large emerald that Gerald had given her on her birthday, before their marriage, five years and more ago. Eustace, the Sealyham, crept out from under the chaise-longue and jumped into Nick's lap.

"Can you hold them, dear?"

"No, Lu. They'll come in like a clown through a hoop."

"What's keeping them back?"

"Maybe John ain't quite finished up in town. He wasn't looking for no tip-off out here."

"So we're done."

"The men are done. I wouldn't think they're rats enough to hurt the women."

"You and Gerald— —"

He was glad that he could not see her. He thought of her growing up, leaving high school, marrying, bearing children, always, as Gerry said, "becoming." And now Gerry was included in this affection, like that of some Italian family of the Middle Ages, behind the walls of their castle surrounded by enemies.

The rain was lessening. Monk tip-toed into the room, explaining, "Only me," and went to peer out over the furniture. In the depths of the lawn, a score of voices were chanting discordantly:

Happy days are here again!
The skies above are clear again!
Let's sing a song of cheer again:
Happy days are here again!
All together shout it now!
There's no one who can doubt it now— —

Lucrezia's hand was like ice in her brother's hand.

"When I was there," she murmured, "at the end of Frank, I never thought — — Miss Nemesis. Do you remember?"

"Yeah. I'm going out to meet her," Nick Sassotti said. "That's best, with us set up so we can't do nothing but run off a clip or two. If I let them come right in, maybe they might be too sore to use their head. I'll go out and find John and tell him all he wants is me. There's babies in here and you and

Gerry and them women. They wouldn't touch Bice. I guess I can shame him off of touching anybody else."

The voices down among the pools were howling:

So long, sad times! So long, bad times!
We're rid of you at last.
Howdy, gay times! Cloudy, gray times,
You are now a thing of thuh past—

The thunder was farther away. The rain had stopped.

"No," said Lucrezia. "Not if I have to wrestle with you myself."

"Lay still, then. I'll just have a look—"

He had eluded her hand, he was out in the hall, before she could spring from the chaise-longue. He heard her patter after him, crying:

"Stop, Nick!"

He bumped into a rifle-barrel. Gerald's voice protested:

"What's your brilliant idea, may I ask, allowing my wife to stay down here?"

"Get ahold of her, Gerry."

Nick was dragging the furniture away from the front-door.

"Gerald, he's going out!"

Nick was pulling at the bolt. Monk called to him sharply, from the living-room window:

"Chief. Come get this quick."

Nick Sassotti ran into the living-room and looked out at the darkness.

Far down the driveway, the head-lights of three cars were coming fast. All around them, in the wet night, fire was sparkling, as if the landscape were swarming with hostile life. The clattering of the guns was smothered more and more by the rising roar of the cars. One car made a swoop into the lawn, abruptly stopped. The others rushed on toward the house.

Nick sprang into the hall.

He heard a smash, as the first car failed to miss the portico—another, as the second hit the first. He swung the heavy door open. The fresh, cool air enveloped him, like a promise of renewed life.

“Snap a match, Gerry.”

A torrent of men scrambled in, bent double, sprawling, mixed up with the frantic Sealyham, clutching pistols, machine-rifles, armfuls of cartridge-drums, parts of a Colt-gun, ammunition-belt boxes. In the light held aloft by Gerald, Nick identified three, then stopped worrying. Twelve were alive. Two were dragged in dead. Bennie Mendelssohn dived in last, in a pink silk undershirt. Nick slammed the door; a flight of lead melted a hole in the top panel.

“Oh, boy,” Bennie Mendelssohn remarked, getting up off the floor. “And John right behind us all the way from town.”

The shot-gun in the kitchen-porch thumped twice. Nick Sassotti gave his orders:

“Mouse, out in back with that riveter. Yours in the dining-room, Pat. Rusty in the living-room. The Colt on the balcony. Bennie takes charge upstairs. Monk, Willie, Lusitania and Brownie stay down here with me. Show them the house, Gerry. Everybody get hot.”

Wet men scampered about. Nick Sassotti faced Lucrezia, who stood against the wall. She smiled at him. He said:

“Listen, chase yourself upstairs. Try to remember you’re a dame. You want to get steamed up and give that baby the colic?”

“A lot you know.”

“Willie. Lusitania.”

The two men made a saddle of their hands. They carried her up the staircase, Eustace growling around their legs. Halfway, she looked down, over her shoulder, and sang:

All together shout it now;
There’s no one who can doubt it now;
Happy days are here again!

The Thompson-gun in the living-room fired a short burst of bullets. Angelo, who had set the two dead men on chairs in the corners of the hall, dusted his hands and suggested:

“Well, I guess here comes John and his gees.”

III

Gently, sir, I beg of you. It is merely a summons— —a notice for you to leave this place.—MOLIÈRE.

In the dark living-room, Nick Sassotti looked over the barricade of furniture at the blackness of the night.

He considered the arrangement of the seventeen defenders. Behind him stood Willie, Monk, Lusitania and Brownie, their pistols in their hands. Angelo and Rusty were in the next bay-window, with a Thompson-gun. Pat and the Catfish, with the second, were in the dining-room. Mouse, Harry and Paul, the chauffeur, were out in back, with the third. Bennie and Gerald were cruising upstairs. Bugs, Milton and Sam, on the balcony above the portico, were putting the Colt-gun together.

Monk spoke quietly, behind his general:

“Ain’t John stealthy, though.”

“Very menacing,” remarked the gunner in the other window.

A flame winked rapidly in the midst of the black lawn. The gunner who had spoken gave a cluck; his machine-rifle fell to the floor. Nick Sassotti said:

“Go in, Willie.”

A short, bow-legged shadow advanced and picked up the gun.

Abruptly, on the roof of the portico, the Colt began to devour its belt of rifle-shells, the noise swelling and diminishing as the barrel swung from side to side. The machine-rifle in the dining-room gave a rip. Willie, in the next bay-window, was parsimoniously firing:

“Ta-ta-ta! Ta-ta-ta-ta-ta! Ta-ta-ta! Ta-ta-ta-ta!”

Bennie Mendelssohn bounced in from upstairs, a shimmer of pink silk underwear, a voice that piped, in the din:

“Lend hand— —minute more spit on their hat— —”

“Brownie! Lusitania!” Nick shouted. “Dining-room!”

He drew the pistol of the late Paper-Box.

An uproar of voices filled the outer blackness:

“Take ’em! All together! Right in now!”

The shadowy Willie retreated into the middle of the living-room and clamped a fresh drum to his gun. In the windows, above the piled-up furniture, mouths were shrieking jumbled phrases, profane, obscene, absurd, like the language of maniacs. The pistols and the Thompson-gun hurled lead at the shrieking faces. A heavy cabinet, full of Chinese porcelain, fell inward, with the sound of a pantry in an earthquake; three men clambered over it like monkeys.

“Howdy, Nick,” said the first, drilling Angelo’s vague skull with a bullet.

“Howdy, fella,” said Nick, shooting the man through the face. Monk stopped the second, Bennie Mendelssohn the third. Willie sprayed the windows. A deep concussion came from the rear of the house.

“Watch out for it here, Bennie.”

“You betcha.”

They were coughing in the smoke.

Nick Sassotti, a pistol now in each hand, passed into the hall. The front-door shook from a blast in the portico; one of the two dead men, seated in the hall-chairs, promptly flopped over sidewise. The enemy were trying to bomb the door; but the Colt-gun overhead, the pillars of the portico, the cars entangled before the steps, made it hard to aim straight in safety. On the staircase, in a faint light from the second floor, Gerald was sitting, with the rifle across his knees.

“Nice change in the weather,” he said bitterly.

“Where was that other bump, Gerry?”

“Sounded like the kitchen-porch.”

The Catfish came out of the dining-room and made for the lavatory under the stairs.

“Be right back, chief. Stummick upset all day.”

In the passageway beyond the dining-room, Nick tripped over outstretched legs, saw a match flare, discerned Lusitania, sitting against the wall. The front of Lusitania’s shirt, below his chest, was tattered and drenched with blood. He exclaimed, in a rapid, jaunty voice:

“Why, hello, chief. Say, would you think these holes had hurted my works any?”

“Don’t be silly. All you need is to set here a while.”

“Well, maybe I ought to, just a minute.”

Nick went on. A boy named Whitey— Only two bullets in that abdomen; so Whitey had lived forty-eight hours. Whitey sitting on the edge of a chair in the study— Rita Townshend sitting there, too— These recollections passed through Nick’s mind in one flicker, as he kicked the kitchen-door open.

So Mouse and Harry and Paul, the chauffeur, were done for?

Across the kitchen, a group of shadows were moving toward him, out of the wreckage of the porch. The leading shadow snapped a ray of light at his eyes and announced, in a familiar tone:

“Look, here’s the — —”

Nick shot Amerigo Zarziulo, twice, below his bat-wing tie.

He dived aside, fired into the group, sprang among them, like a charging beast whose paws were tipped with flame. The life surged up in him, hot and invincible.

“Welcome to our city.”

“Horace! Horace! He’s killed — —”

He moved so fast that they checked their fire, fearful of hitting one another. He kept count of his shots: one was left in the right-hand pistol. Dodging, he found the light-switch, made the kitchen as bright as day. He saw before him young Horace Zarziulo, handsome like a picture-star, screaming, with open mouth:

“Come on! He’s shot my brother!”

Nick Sassotti laughed, jumped in, jammed his pistol into the open mouth. Behind Horace’s skull, a red-and-gray splash plastered itself upon the enameled wall.

“Jeest! now he’s killed — — Jeest! he’s killed the both — —”

In the rear-entrance to the kitchen, there was an inrush and recoil of men. “Watch out! They’re wise! There they come!” Bennie Mendelssohn had appeared at the opposite doorway, chubby in his undershirt, uttering, between shots:

“On the lam, you punks. And don’t come in our house again.”

Nick Sassotti turned off the light.

“Thanks, Bennie.”

Whistles began to shrill, one taking the signal from the others. The sound of firing diminished. In and about Miller’s Folly, there was silence.

“Recess, hey,” Bennie said.

“To tell John about Amerigo and Horace.”

“I guess that will lose John his temper.” With this prediction, Bennie groped his way out to the kitchen-porch, struck a match, extinguished it quickly. He came back, to offer the advice, “I wouldn’t go out there. The tommy’s smashed up, too.”

Nick was silent. At last he affirmed:

“Them boys was good boys. I want to see the rest, all together, in the front hall. Bring along the pistols and clips off of everybody here.”

Bennie asked unsteadily:

“Chief, why would you go and stick me upstairs like that?”

His general hesitated, in the darkness, then rejoined harshly:

“Why not. You just getting started in a nice way and all.”

He went back to the front of the house.

Presently, in the light of the half shattered hall-lamp, they gathered from the rooms on either side and from the floor above. Mouse, Harry, Paul, Angelo, Rusty and Lusitania were absent, for the best of reasons; Monk and Sam were slightly wounded. They stood in a semi-circle, stripped to their undershirts, their weapons in their hands. All faces displayed the look of workmen in the midst of a troublesome yet reasonable job.

Gerald came to them, with a silver tray full of glasses. They drank the heavy jolts of Scotch and smacked their lips. In the living-room, a woman’s voice was singing:

Oh, song of songs!

Oh, night of bli-i-i-s— —

Some one had marked the intermission by plugging in the radio.

Nick Sassotti stood on the lowest step of the staircase, like a disheveled demigod on whom their fates depended. He did not know that all they needed were the steel helmets, the chain-mail, the long swords to lean on, in order to reproduce, a bit more precisely, some hour of those unknown ancestors of whom he was the reflection.

One might have thought that the enemy had departed.

“The Colt downstairs, in back. Willie and Pat on each side, like before. We could do with a little light. We got to get along without it and take them at the windows. If they bomb the front-door good, we pull in all around and hold this hall. Look for John. If he’s out of it, they’ll drop it.”

He named the men for each station, asked about the ammunition. It was low. He stared over their heads, at the bullet-riddled panels of the front-door. He made his face hard.

“I’m sorry the others can’t hear me; but they’re gone. I want to tell you boys, and them too, that I appreciate you coming out here this way. I was out of the business last night. You was Bennie’s boys today. You hadn’t no call to stick your nose into this jam out here this evening. But you done so and how. I would be a fine heel if I didn’t tell you, from my heart, before it goes further, that I appreciate this favor you’re doing me.”

They looked flattered and confused. Monk said:

“Force of habit, chief.”

“Okay. That’s all. Go to your places.”

He turned his back on them, slowly climbed the staircase. The hall-lamp went out behind him.

In the gloom at the head of the stairs, Bice was waiting. She wrapped her young arms about him.

“Thank God you’re safe!”

“Ain’t you never heard of my luck, baby?”

“They won’t come back?”

“If they do, we’ll throw them out again.”

“I’ve been praying, Nick.”

“That’s dandy. Keep it up.”

He drew her, through the upper hall, to the room in the middle of the house, which the coolness had not yet reached. Eustace, the Sealyham, gave a whine of welcome. A silent company looked at Nick, in the light of one lamp.

The two trained-nurses, the three women-servants and old Pompeo, the butler, sat on the floor, Pompeo with his face in his hands. Giulia, the Alban child’s-nurse, rocked back and forth in a chair, her eyes gleaming under

thick brows, her ear-pendants dangling to her shoulders, a carving-knife in her fist. Lucrezia reclined on the bed, nursing her baby. She winked at her brother:

“My poor little precious is having his first supper. And so hungry.”

Nick glanced down at Nickie.

“Well, what’s eating you now?”

The small boy made a dramatic gesture and panted:

“You think I couldn’t hear it? All shot off without me! Che vergognaccia! Just wait till I’m big and you’re little!”

“I’m sorry, Nickie. I guess I got careless round them fireworks.” He sat down on the side of the bed, watched the tiny mouth feeding, then cautiously touched the forehead on which, under the delicate skin, the sutures had not yet united. “Lu, them bones on top ain’t glued together right.”

“Simpleton.” In a whisper, she asked him, “Any chance?”

“We’re managing. He can’t focus on me yet, can he?”

“Of course not, poor lamb. He hasn’t cried tonight.”

“Why should he? Ain’t he mostly Sassotti?” Nick stood up, remarked, “Well, just thought I’d drop in,” and sauntered out. The nurses and servants watched his departure mournfully; Eustace wanted to come along. In the doorway of the close room, Nick said to his wife confidentially, “Stay in here, baby, and cheer Lu up a little.” Then he looked back at them, sitting quietly together, Lucrezia with the infant nuzzling her breast, like in one of them pictures.

He heard a swish, saw a flash, through the dark doorway of a bedroom on the right. He went in and found Gerald at a window, arranging a sky-rocket on the leaf of a table balanced across the sill. Out of doors, a hundred and fifty feet away, in the upper windows of the garage, a glow was rising.

“You, Nick? Here’s your light coming up. I’ve put four in already.”

A bullet snapped between their heads. Below the second pool, there was some cheering, like the response of drunken troops to the harangue of a chieftain.

“What you’ve done, Gerry, you’ve got them started.”

“Well, then, if the garage is late, I’ll rush to and fro and toss out some Bengal-lights.”

“You and Edison,” said Nick Sassotti, halfway down the staircase.

For—I—am—a—soldier—of—the—queen— —

He went into the living-room and smashed the radio.

In the front of the house, every one was at his post. Nick Sassotti ran back to have a look at the Colt-gun. They had set it up outside, above the rose-garden, to profit by the barrel’s sweep of three hundred and sixty degrees. They had ripped loose the iron tubs in the laundry and piled them about the gun. Bugs sat ready on the saddle, his hand around the pistol-grip, the brass end of the belt fed through the breech from the left.

“Be saving,” Nick instructed him.

“My folks come from Aberdeen.”

“Chief,” said Milton, “did you hear about them two ahviators flying over Scotland?”

Ignoring this bravado, the general returned to the front-hall. The Catfish appeared from behind the staircase and said apologetically:

“All fixed.”

“Go tell Mr. Arkel to watch for bombers sneaking up to the porch.”

Through the front-windows, drifted a sound of voices, far-off, slowly approaching, howling in unison:

Goldilocks! Goldilocks!
Watch him shaking in his socks!
Goldilocks! Goldilocks— —

“Ta-ta-ta-ta-ta! Ta-ta-ta-ta-ta! Ta-ta-ta-ta-ta!”

There was a light, as though before a sultry sunrise, from the kindling garage. Suddenly, a blinding glare of red fire expanded on the lawn. Beyond that fummy radiance, which turned the night unreal, red groups of men, advancing in a wide line, halted and shrank back. The gunners in the windows jeered them:

“Smile. Look at the birdie. Let’s take a good one.”

“Ta-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta!”

The men bathed in red light scattered toward shelter. The gunners raked them, filled the bushes with bullets. A glare of emerald fire mingled with the red.

“See John?” Nick inquired of Bennie, who was peering out beside him.

“Don’t I wish I did.”

Machine-rifles were twinkling through the colored fire. Something was wrong in the next bay-window; Nick went to investigate. Willie, the bandy-legged gunner, was standing behind the piled-up furniture. While Nick stared, Willie’s head sloughed away in a steady stream of metal. The hands let go of the furniture; the body slid downward, as if telescoped.

“Monk. Take that tommy. Go in at this window.”

“Only two drums left, chief.”

“Make them do.”

“Pat’s gone,” called the Catfish from the hall. “Drum and a half.”

Nick Sassotti told the Catfish:

“Take Pat’s gun. Watch your step. Go look out for him, Bennie. His stummick’s been upset all day.”

Out of doors, there was a lull. One could hear, far away, a curious sound, like the sirens of fire-trucks. Nick dismissed from his mind an absurdity such as fire-trucks within miles of Miller’s Folly. He was more diverted by a clipful of rifle-bullets that plunged in through a side-window.

“What do you know, Monk: they got them guns Rooney was telling about, that you hold the kick down with a strap.”

“Putting on airs, hey? Well, I just stopped two of them with this little old-fashioned tommy.”

“I’d pay them money to go round in back and try them rifles on the Colt.”

“I’d give them a strictly new suit of clothes, with handles, if they’d only step out of them bushes.”

“It looks like you would get the chance.”

Beyond colored lights, spaced far apart, three clusters of rapidly flashing sparks, three batteries of shoulder-guns, covered the attack. The furniture in the window leaped about in fragments.

“Can you feature it, chief? Right through the fireworks.”

From far down the lawn, two files of running men were converging on the portico. Their small figures seemed ignited, as they raced toward the Bengal-flares. A faint shouting:

“This is the time! Nothing to it! Home-run!”

“What a cinch.” Monk snapped the bolt; the first cartridge of a fresh drum clicked into place. “Uh! so that’s — —”

Nick Sassotti caught him and laid him on the floor.

“Last drum, Nick.”

“Check. Wish there was something I could do.”

“Do for yourself.”

The fire of the covering guns poured in above their heads. The reflection of the Bengal-lights, on the ceiling, illuminated Monk’s bluish face, which was stern from his effort to die quickly, so that his general would attend to his own affairs.

Goldilocks! Goldilocks — —

The Catfish stood in the doorway, carrying Bennie in his arms.

“Drum run out, chief. Bennie ain’t feeling so good. Thought I’d take him upstairs.”

“Do that.”

He wondered if the Colt-gun was still going. In front, except for himself, it was all over. Monk smiled, as he listened to the noise, and slipped away with the comment, “Won’t them firemen run into plenty heat.”

Nick Sassotti picked up the Thompson-gun and went out into the hall.

He waited on the second step of the staircase, out of line from the doors on either hand, facing the front-door. He held the gun by the grips at his right side, his right forefinger on the trigger.

The two dead men in the hall-chairs waited with him. One had fallen across his chair-arm, as if overcome by sleep. The other sat upright, gazing at the staircase.

Lucrezia came halfway down the stairs, her hair shining from the lights switched on above, her face pallid and still, her shape wrapped in the flimsy kimono. She had the rifle.

“Gerry?” her brother asked quietly.

“Through the collar-bone.”

“Don’t stand there, Lu.”

“Of course I will.”

“Please, Lu.”

“An old family custom, dear.”

Beyond the front-door, a resonant voice shouted:

“I’m coming in to call, Nick.”

“Okay, John. Glad to see you.”

Silence. Then a stunning shock, as the door disappeared in flame. Through a pall of yellow smoke, over the shattered furniture, came a mass of men whose faces were distorted, like the faces of runners straining toward the tape.

“Here he is — — here he is — — here he is!”

He pressed the trigger.

In the stone hall, there broke loose a steady clanging, like a steam-riveter at work. The drum revolved; the muzzle swept from side to side. The lead tore through the hearts that had come from afar to dare him, through the brains that had thought to mock him. He was the demigod before whom all effrontery dissolved in blood.

The drum ran empty. He threw away the gun, flipped out his reloaded pistol.

John Zarziulo, young, black-bearded, broad-shouldered, like a dark paladin, vaulted the bodies of his men. His eyes burned; his teeth gleamed white. The bracelet shone on his wrist, behind the outstretched automatic.

Blades of flame stabbed at each other, like the blades of swordsmen.

Nick Sassotti was lying face-down on the pavement of the hall. He had slipped and fallen. He was glad that Rita Townshend could not see him sprawling there. Angry at that clumsiness, he stood erect with one movement, with the Sassotti grace. John Zarziulo’s head was lying prone before him. He thought:

“So quick. So easy.”

Once more, the life surged up in him, a warm, sweet tide of victorious arrogance.

The hall was full of policemen. Rooney came to him, without a collar, shaking and panting, a revolver in each paw. Rooney's breath was rank from whisky; tears were dripping down his purple-veined cheeks.

“I'm sorry, Nick. I come arunning, Nick. Just let old Rooney have a look — —”

At what? Nick Sassotti watched Rooney fumble with the linen coat, pull up the shirt. He heard Lucrezia give a moan. Incredulous, he bent his neck and saw, in the hard-muscled wall of his abdomen, two bloodless brown holes.

How could that be? He had never felt so strong, so triumphant. His last enemy was dead; the future stretched before him full of peace— — Of well-earned peace— —

IV

*Ask not of me what this region be, nor the name of its ruler;
you shall know it in time.*—MOLIÈRE.

The cream-colored room, with the apple-green furniture, in Dr. Mariett's hospital, was full of flowers. They overflowed into the other rooms, stood in painted baskets along the corridors. They were still arriving, though it was now forty-eight hours since Nick Sassotti had been brought here.

A nurse came to the bedside, to suggest:

"Haven't you seen them enough? They make the air very close."

"Leave them be. I like them."

His voice was serene. He gave the effect of resting awhile, before getting up and going about his business. One would not have suspected him of feeling pain. The morphine did little good to his abnormal nervous system.

He admitted to himself, however, that he was getting tired.

All his friends had called. He had seen many of them. The politicians. The prosperous Italians. Old Rooney, half-drunk again, from trying to forget his tardiness. Napoli, the Catfish, the survivors of the Colt-gun crew. Mama and the girls, put out when they began to carry on. Aunt Anna, Aunt Annina, Aunt Agnese.

Now it was midnight, an hour that would hardly occur to the least conventional caller.

He said to his sister and his wife, who sat one on each side of the bed:

"I looked it over with Zanders this morning. It's okay, without no changes. Two million in trust for your kids, Lu; the rest in trust for Bice. Maybe you'd like to live over there awhile, baby, somewheres near Lu and Gerry?"

Bice Sassotti did not respond to that. For two days, her face had looked empty; there had been no light in her eyes. Rigid in the arm-chair, she gazed over her husband's head, her forefinger marking the place in the Bible that a nurse had found for her.

"There's a provision for the old ladies, Lu, and for the girls, when they get married."

The young wife closed her eyes. The fragrance of the flowers, dispelled through the warm night-air, hung around her head, like a premonitory sweetness of incense in some convent, where one might seek to understand human riddles through prayer.

“I signed a check this morning for half the cash on deposit in the bank. Zanders split it up, today, for the families of the boys. Napoli reports to Grossman & Zanders on the restaurant and the store. Lu. Get them to phone how Gerry’s stacking.”

“He’s all right, really, dear. He says it isn’t half as bad as the one I gave him that time.”

“Won’t never let up on that little joke, will he? When do I see Nickie again?”

“Tomorrow morning.”

“Okay,” he said impassively. “That kid was pretty quiet today. He’s got a right to be sore with me, at that, about them fireworks.”

“He adores you.”

“Well, I ain’t so sure. He give me quite a bawling-out, the other evening.”

She pressed his hand, on which the Greek intaglio shone in the dim light.

“Listen, you better chase yourself around to the hotel and feed that baby.”

She seemed to him very pale. She no longer looked proud, despite that small, aquiline nose, with the freckles now so distinct on either side of it. The tawny eyes were surrounded by purplish shadows; the ruddy hair was not doing its usual flaming.

“And lay down, you hear me?”

“Yes, dear, I’ll lie down while I feed him.”

Lucrezia waited until the nurse had taken Nick’s temperature. Then, for a moment, she touched her face to his. Something passed between them, from one cheek to the other cheek of the same flesh, that nobody else could have imparted to either. Her dry lips and her feverish breath grazed his temple. She instructed him briskly:

“Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”

“Thought I’d just get up and shave.”

She went out, with a painful effort that she tried to dissemble.

Bice had lowered her face toward the Bible. He hoped she wouldn't start again about a priest. He didn't like to hurt her; but you ought to die like you'd lived, not begin, at the last minute, putting on an act.

He thought of Bennie Mendelssohn, in a room on another floor of the hospital. Since yesterday, Bennie had been bombarding him with notes, scribbled, in a shaky hand, on scraps of hospital blanks:

“Dear Chief, mercy, you should see my nurse, sincerely, B.M. Dear Chief, I am going to find out is there rats in this dump and learn them a trick, sincerely, B.M. Dear Chief, the Pres of the Foreign Imports Corp can even not get a shot of drug store Gin off of these cheezey drs, sincerely, B.M.”

Nick had the notes stuffed under his pillow, to give him more laughs, later on.

He dozed. Through the clawing pain, he had an impression of Tony Fava, fooling around and asking if there was anything he could do. When the pain awoke Nick, he was surprised to remember that Tony had been dead a year and a half: the small traitor's parrot-like beak and hairy ears had looked so natural. But here was Tony Fava's daughter, reading and reading the Bible.

She raised her dull eyes, as one of the nurses appeared from behind the screen and announced reprovingly:

“Mrs. Arkel said, downstairs, it would be all right for this friend of hers to come in; but I'm afraid that Dr. Mariett— —”

The pain ceased. Nick Sassotti retorted sternly:

“Who I see is my business.”

It was Rita Townshend.

She stood as if floating up from her simple evening frock, of chiffon, cloudily puffed out below the waist, pale-green, the shade of the chrysoberyl ring. Her head was bare; her ruddy locks were in disorder, as though she had come fast through the wind. Her perfume was “La Fille du Roi Pausole”— —the one that he had known— —and her stare was darkened, in the well-remembered way, by her emotion. The lightly painted lips parted:

“You don't mind, do you, Nick?”

At the sound of that low, rich, nervous voice, Bice came to her feet. Her eyes swept the intruder in one avid glance, then seemed extinguished.

Humbly Bice Sassotti bowed her head and passed out of the room.

“You needn’t go, baby.”

She was gone, clutching the Bible to her bosom.

Rita floated forward, till her perfume extinguished the fragrance of the flowers. She sank down, in a billow of the pale-green chiffon, upon Bice’s chair. She said faintly:

“Well, I thought I wasn’t going to make it. Rufie’s been home all yesterday and today— —he nearly drove me mad— —then some people dropped in; so I simply walked out to the garage and got the roadster and came like the devil thirty miles— —”

Nick, his face mildly pleasant against the pillow, remarked:

“Hot out there, too, I guess. I see you didn’t need no wrap.”

“Wrap?” She looked at him in bewilderment. “I don’t know what I had. I knew I had my hands and feet to drive with, my eyes to see you.” She worked her lips together. “You and your wraps!” she cried. “I must say, when I break every law of God and man to come here and get a ticket— —”

“I’ll speak about that to the commissioner.”

“Please, Nick,” she faltered, “don’t laugh at me.”

“How would I laugh at you, Rita?” He hesitated, then went on quietly. “But maybe you would laugh some more at me.”

“At you?”

The beautiful face was stricken, as if by a slap. She turned aside her windblown head and stifled her sobs against her palm.

He watched her, his amber eyes grave. He remembered her coming toward him on their last day together, eager yet mocking, close yet always escaping. Many a time, holding her in his arms, he had felt that, because of their difference, she was not really there. Many a time, he had perceived, at some word or action of his, that her desire was mingled with an incomprehensible derision. She had brought him his only feeling of inferiority.

The hand that wore her ring was hidden under the sheet.

“This gives me the chance,” he told her steadily, “to say that was quite a favor you looked to do me, with Tony Fava’s confession.”

She whirled her head around to him, her eyes inflamed, her lips quivering. She said, in an exasperated wail:

“Can’t you see how I feel about you?”

Looking down his nose, he somberly considered this question. He wondered if she hadn’t come here, tonight, from one of those famous impulses that so varied her life, in her constant flight from boredom. He asked himself if she’d ever loved any one. He suspected that she had destroyed the confession out of mere goodness of heart. One thing that Rita had was goodness of heart, so much, indeed, that she couldn’t keep it under control.

“And you feel the same about me,” she said, with a gulp.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. I don’t have to see it to know you’re wearing it.”

He glared at her and growled feebly:

“Where do you get that stuff? I can’t wear a good antique without you say a thing like that about me?”

“A thing like that!”

He closed his eyes scornfully on the glitter of her tears, the redness of her lips. Through his closed eyelids, he seemed to see, behind a redness of Bengal-lights, the glitter of the guns firing on Miller’s Folly. It was like seeing, in her brain, the business of night before last distorted by the newspapers, headed, “Nick Goes Down in Glory,” with a lot of fancy writing that had made him feel proud and annoyed. That was what had brought her here: the battle, the excitement of it, the wish to be identified with it, for a moment, in the safety of its aftermath.

Opening his eyes, he observed:

“Funny, you coming back right after another blow-off like the one made you run out on me that time. I should think you would be disgusted all over again.”

“Why did you let me see such things? How could you expect me to bear it? Yes, I was ill from you. I drove you out of my mind, out of my nightmares. Love made squalid by the squalor of that awful night. And your darned dignity, in the midst of that squalor, and your darned high head, like a fallen angel’s— —”

“Say, don’t start that kidding, or I’m going to get up and spank you plenty.”

“Kidding, after what I went through?”

“Why,” he inquired coldly, “ain’t you been having a nifty time? I kind of thought you was.”

She looked at him reproachfully through her tears.

“And what good did it do me?” she retorted. “What did I find, if you’ve got to have plain talking? Yes, Nick, I’ve made myself like other men; I’ve even grieved over things that happened to them. You can try a man and get very fond of him; but that doesn’t have to be love. I knew what you’d done to me yesterday, when I read the papers. I felt as if I were going to die myself.”

Her weeping filled the room.

The pain could not live in him together with this happiness. He smiled and whispered:

“Come here, baby.”

She came in a rush of her cloudy chiffon, in a wave of the familiar perfume. She sank down, upon her knees, beside the apple-green bed. The bed was high; he had to move, with a sickening pang, so that her lips could reach his. She was awkward, after so much harmonious movement, because she had never knelt by a hospital-bed to embrace a dying lover.

“At last! Oh, darling, darling — —”

There are only a certain number of words by which each woman may express herself in emotion, here or there, again and again, as though speaking them for the first time. Yet he was satisfied. The truth seemed to reach him at last, through her breath, her tears, the shaking of her flesh. It was truth for the moment, at any rate, for all the time left to him. He accepted it as another might have accepted the truth of religion. It brought him the only triumph that his life had lacked.

“Don’t fret, now, baby; don’t fret. These things will happen.”

“You mustn’t let it! Fight, darling; fight hard! For Rita!”

He was twisted on the bed; the pain was clawing at him with a new ingenuity. He smiled through the fog between them.

“Okay. I’ll fight hard for you, baby.”

“I want the future, anyway. Can’t I just have the future?”

He lifted his hand, feebly patted her cheek. Dear, soft, wet cheek. Dear lips, still painted with a cinnamon flavor. Dear throat, white and perfect, like the rest of her.

“Tell me, Nick! Tell me!”

“Yeah. I guess I love you, baby.” He surrendered, admitted the fact that had run, ever since their first meeting, like a deep current under all his distractions. “I guess I never loved nobody else, baby.”

She was whispering confused, hot phrases, mixed up with sobbing and laughing. Promising a future such as the past had never been. Promising all that he wanted of her, even the children— —the beautiful, amber-eyed children. She could hardly wait to be his, far away somewhere, defying life and death.

Another voice mingled with hers, the indignant voice of the head-nurse:

“You are doing Mr. Sassotti a great deal of harm, madam.”

Rita stood up, her bright head bowed, and murmured:

“It’s true. I’ll go. Oh, Nick— —”

The head-nurse was waiting by the screen. Rita bent down, blindly kissed him, uttered:

“Hard! Hard! Hard! Because I’m yours.”

She went quickly, floating above the pale-green skirt, her hand across her brow. Her shoulder bumped the edge of the screen, which her eyes had not perceived. She was gone, taking with her the secret of her compassionate deception.

Nick Sassotti, when the nurses straightened him on the bed, was suddenly too weak to ask them who they thought they were, busting in and bawling people out. He dozed. Through his pain, he dreamed that he and the three Zarziulos and Fred Avanzi were conferring in the “study.” Fred Avanzi, who wore his prison-clothes, made some witty remarks about Horace’s not being much use in a conference with the back of his head blown off. When the pain woke him, Nick instantly remembered Rita. It was better than them shots of the junk.

The flowers looked faded. Bice was sitting beside the bed, reading the Bible. He watched her for a while, then said indistinctly:

“Don’t fret, baby. These things will happen.”

He pictured the public reading the newspapers, rubbing their hands, saying, “Well, Sassotti got his.” The business, which Rita, one night long ago, had called “a basic industry,” would go on supplying the national demand. He, himself, was merely a scape-goat for the complementary lawlessness of the people. His death would satisfy their sense of justice, while they went on drinking. He smiled, a sardonic sacrifice, and reminded Bice:

“All in the game. Just an occupation-risk, like they say.”

She rose to her feet. He saw her face in a blur; her eyes looked enormous to him. This was his fair young wife. Their child had been a girl and had died. He felt his tenderness filling the silent room, for Bice, for mama and her other daughters, for Tony, who used to be such a riot, with them foolish mistakes he made. A nice family, Nick meditated, next, of course, to his own.

He heard her say:

“There’s still time.”

“No, baby. A priest’s fine; but he would only be worried over me. It’s too much to ask him. Don’t you bother no more. I’ll manage.”

She stood watching him, her blurred figure so slender, like an adolescent’s. He reflected that he hadn’t done right, where Bice was concerned. She would probably have been happier in the convent. After marrying her, he’d found out that the way he cared for Bice was like for a sweet little sister. He seemed to know this much more clearly since Rita had come back, to show him again what love, you know, was like.

Bice was speaking to him from a distance:

“You’ve been good to me, Nick. My heart is breaking, Nick, because of the way I’ve repaid you. I meant well and I’ve brought you to this. Now I am losing you, without ever doing you good. Only evil. I suppose because I’ve loved you more than I’ve loved God.”

He weakly offered the opinion:

“It was me got you into this jam.”

“No, Nick, I did that. I made Napoli come and tell you. I was bound to marry you. It was a sin and I am punished.”

He pondered this, feeling that he was suspended in the air and swaying to the occasional throb of his heart.

“Well, we was together quite a little while.”

“And all the while you thought of her. I don’t blame you. What am I? I am the sparrow that wanted the eagle, Nick. She is grand and high, like you.”

“This dame that just called?” said Nick Sassotti. “Why, baby, for that dame I wouldn’t give the hairs off of your hair-brush.”

She hid her face with her hands.

While he dozed, his will kept striving to bring him back to the world in which Rita lived. He awoke to recall everything that Rita had said, to make a humorous statement to Dr. Mariett and, later, to laugh about little Nickie with Lucrezia. When he returned again, all the flowers had been removed by them fresh nurses.

Another day. Seven hours better than Whitey.

A nurse was sitting on one side of the bed; Bice sat on the other. The pain was now a normal part of him. He was in the hall of Miller’s Folly, with the guns rattling outdoors. Tony Fava appeared from the dining-room, carrying Nick’s and Bice’s infant child. Tony said, “Drum run out. She ain’t feeling so good. Thought I’d take her upstairs.” Nick said to his previous lieutenant, who had been dead five years, “Go look after her, Vito. Her stummick’s been upset all day. Mind, now: something’s wrong; so I guess she’s all I got left.”

The nurse arose.

“He’s going, Mrs. Sassotti.”

“All I got left now, Vito; so watch your step.”

He barely heard the murmur of Bice’s voice. She was desperately reading from the Bible, in her wish that he might depart accompanied by some substitute for the Viaticum. He sank into a soft oblivion, to the words:

And the dust return to the earth,
As it was;
And the spirit return unto God,
Who made it.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *Here's Luck—A Social Footnote* by Stephen French Whitman]