



The Chilling Novel That
Inspired the Iconic Film

**WHAT EVER
HAPPENED
TO
BABY JANE?**

HENRY FARRELL

With Three Short Stories, in Print for the First Time

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BABY JANE?
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INTRODUCTION: HENRY FARRELL AND THE STORY OF BABY JANE

I first met Henry Farrell in 1981 when he contacted me about representing stage rights for his novel *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?*

He had previously been in touch with my associate, the legendary agent Monica McCall, for book representation. The relationship did not work out, but Henry remembered me as I had told him about how, when growing up in a coal-mining family in the mountains of Kentucky, my sister, who worked for a local 5- and 10-cent store, had brought home a discarded copy of the novel as my high-school graduation gift. I told him what a fan I had become and how his depiction of the glamour of early show business and the rewards and consequences of fame had encouraged me to leave the mountains to seek wider horizons.

Thus began a relationship that continued until Henry's death twenty-five years later.

It was then I learned that Henry had left me and his longtime lawyer, Norma Fink, equal shares of all his literary rights, including *Baby Jane*.

When I embarked on the writing of the foreword to this new edition of the book, I was surprised to learn that for all his prominence in the film and literary communities, Henry had remained a very private person. He shunned photographs of himself, and he lived a quiet but interesting and fulfilling personal life.

He was born in 1920 as Charles Farrell Myers and would later write under the names "Charles Myers" and "Bud Myers" before adopting the name "Henry Farrell"—"Farrell" from his middle name; he and his wife, Molly, came up with the name "Henry." Later he would change his name legally "at the insistence of my accountant to avoid continued confusion at the IRS."

He grew up in Chowchilla, California, where his father owned a filling station. But the place was too small for Henry and his sister, Wanda, who

ended up moving to a town near Seattle. Henry's way out was the U.S. Army during World War II. It was there that, in order to compensate for his lack of a college education, he became involved in theatre and took a creative writing class, where his instructor told him to "stick with it." This resulted in his first published work.

His friend Jane Winslow remembers that he first wrote for the "penny dreadful"—a type of pulp magazine that became popular starting in the midnineteenth century. From that came a character called "Toffee," a graphic, almost comic-book female detective that produced a series of stories later collected in book form. Henry would write over one hundred short stories over the course of his life.

Another defining moment was his meeting with the actress Molly Dodd, who had toured USO camps and whom he met when he struck out to Los Angeles after his army discharge to try his hand at acting. Finding no success as a thespian, Henry returned to Chowchilla. But Molly tracked him down and brought him back to Los Angeles where they were married, a union that lasted until Molly's death at the age of fifty-nine in 1981.

Molly was Henry's passport to the world of show business. She had made her stage debut in 1939 and was well known in the business. What's more, her father, Neal, was a Hollywood fixture, a charismatic Anglican minister who was known as "the Padre of Hollywood." In a film career that started in the 1920s, he would consult or appear as a minister, usually uncredited, in over 300 films. On-screen, he married Claudette Colbert and Clark Gable in *It Happened One Night*. Off-screen, he officiated at the weddings of the stars themselves. Molly and Henry became a respected Hollywood couple, living first in an apartment in Beverly Hills and later in their first and only home, a grand residence in Pacific Palisades on Chautauqua Boulevard overlooking Rivas Canyon in the Santa Monica Mountains. They would live there all their lives.

Henry continued his writing, and Molly was the force of nature who looked after his every need. She maintained their beautiful home life, oversaw their social activities, and organized wonderful soirées for their friends—a set that included Peggy Chantler Dick, writer of the *Dennis the Menace* and *Hazel* television series, and her psychologist husband, Douglas Dick (a former actor and writer with over seventy-one film credits); Ava Astaire (Fred's daughter) and her husband, Richard MacKenzie; Dick Sargent, a star of *Bewitched*; and Broadway and film star Nancy Walker and

her husband, David Craig, who taught musical theatre.

In 1959 Henry's first novel, *The Hostage*, was published. It tells the story of a six-year-old boy trapped in a moving van with two killers after witnessing a murder. It would later be filmed by Crown International. A second novel, *Death on the Sixth Day*, would follow in 1961. He began writing for television, penning episodes for *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*, the *Bus Stop* series, and, later, *Perry Mason*.

Molly's acting career thrived with appearances on television, which, over time, would include *The Andy Griffith Show*, *The Twilight Zone*, *Gomer Pyle*, *Hazel*, *Petticoat Junction*, *The Brady Bunch*, *Bewitched*, and *The Rockford Files*.

Then Molly was diagnosed with cancer. The couple became strapped for money, and Henry, who had always been plagued by writer's block, decided he had to come up with a really commercial idea. Inspiration came in the form of Jane Winslow, the very young daughter of his and Molly's friend Yvonne. "I was told by my mother and others that every time Henry came visiting, I would run screaming from the room," remembers Jane, today an award-winning digital filmmaker, media producer and director, and a professor at SUNY Oswego.

Jane's display of histrionics would remind Henry of other Baby Jane types—Baby Peggy of silent films and vaudeville's Baby Rose Marie, the singing child wonder who was now grown up and a regular on *The Dick Van Dyke Show*. It set an idea in motion.

"I decided on a story so outrageous that it couldn't help but be commercial," he recalled. The story involved a former child star known in vaudeville as Baby Jane and her sister, Blanche, who had become a glamorous movie star in golden age Hollywood. He decided that "Blanche must be beautiful beyond description, a photographer's dream who, without trying, could project glamour such that few other stars ever could. Still, she didn't have any large performing talent, which was all right for the time and place... but a matter of acute pain and jealousy to Jane, who had talent to burn. Indeed, Blanche did have a career and future worth killing over. And I had to make the audience feel that in the past and present, Blanche had something to lose—and, through Jane, was about to lose it."

He was also aware of the tightrope he was walking between suspense/drama and high camp. "The subject of early movies, kiddy stars, and movie queens already embodied the camp element just by nature. It had

been exploited over and over for years.” But Henry concluded, “I felt I should just let it exist to the degree that it was already inherent in the story and characters, and let it go at that.”

He had no idea that he was introducing a whole new subgenre of gothic horror to the world. Immediately following the book’s publication, an option to produce the story on the Broadway stage was taken by Gabriel Katzka. However, a film producer, Robert Aldrich, saw the screen potential in the material and optioned the film rights, acquiring Katzka’s stage rights as well. Aldrich opted to go the film route, and he didn’t have to look far for the ideal cast. Joan Crawford, a superstar from the 1930s through the 1950s but who found her recent career in decline, called Henry Farrell and Robert Aldrich to personally make a case for playing the role of Blanche Hudson. Surprisingly, she also had a suggestion for the role of Jane: “Why not Bette Davis?” she asked.

Davis and Crawford had been bitter rivals in the past, vying for several of the same roles and fighting each other for box office position. When Crawford had asked for the title role in *Mildred Pierce*, she learned that Bette Davis was first choice. When Davis turned down the part, Crawford was cast, but only after doing a screen test for director Michael Curtiz. Her performance won Crawford an Academy Award, a fact Davis never forgot and bitterly resented. In an article published in London’s *Daily Mail*, critic Michael Thornton claims the feud had sexual overtones as well: Crawford, who, according to Thornton, was bisexual, made a pass at Davis, which Davis resisted.

Furthermore, Davis had fallen madly in love with Franchot Tone, but Tone had married Joan Crawford. Crawford’s quote, according to Thornton, was “Franchot isn’t interested in Bette, but I wouldn’t mind giving her a poke if I was in the right mood. Wouldn’t that be funny?”

But Crawford realized that a pairing with Davis could spell box office magic for both of them, and she had been secretly looking for a project that would pair them and hopefully revive their faltering careers.

Along with her recommendation of Davis to Farrell, Crawford added, “I’ll wipe up the screen with her!” Davis jumped at the chance to play Jane, ironically echoing to Farrell Crawford’s sentiments to the word: “I’ll wipe up the screen with her.”

While maintaining pleasantries in public, the two stars engaged in a series of epic battles during filming that included a reported “accidental”

kick to Miss Crawford's head by Miss Davis. This incident was countered by Crawford's adding weights to her body during a scene in which Davis had to carry her from a bed, causing Davis to throw out her back. In the end, the film was a triumph for them both. Not only was it a huge comeback for the pair, but Davis and Crawford had taken a percentage of the profits in exchange for accepting low salaries. They made a fortune.

The film was a worldwide hit, grossing over \$9 million dollars. *TV Guide* called it "Star wars, trenchantly served," and added, "If it sometimes looks like a poisonous senior citizen show with over-the-top spoiled ham, just try to look away.... As in the best Hitchcock movies, suspense, rather than actual mayhem, drives the film."

The film was nominated for five Academy Awards including one for Bette Davis, as leading actress. Bette Davis lost to Anne Bancroft for *The Miracle Worker*, but Joan Crawford, who did not receive a nomination, managed to accept the award on Bancroft's behalf, reportedly saying to Davis on the way, "Excuse me, I have an Oscar to accept."

The Crawford-Davis feud and Henry Farrell's involvement with the pair would not end there.

The success of the novel and the film would launch Farrell's next film project, *Hush... Hush, Sweet Charlotte*, based on his unpublished story "What Ever Happened to Cousin Charlotte?" Farrell himself would write the original story and then the screenplay with Lukas Heller, who wrote the screenplay for *Baby Jane*. Crawford and Davis were once again set to star. Filming began at the Houmas House, forty-five minutes outside of New Orleans. The battle started even before Crawford's arrival, when Davis had the Pepsi-Cola machines on the lot (Crawford had been married to the president of Pepsi-Cola) replaced by Coca-Cola machines. She and the crew even posed for photographs of them drinking Coke.

Crawford was furious and ordered the Coke machines removed and the Pepsi machines brought back. According to published reports, Crawford left the picture in short order due to illness. Davis accused her of feigning pneumonia, but Henry Farrell remembered the events differently in a conversation I had with him in London in 2001. "When Crawford brought back the Pepsi machines," he recalled, "Bette had the crew gather all the Coke bottles on the lot and line them up in the path outside of Crawford's door." The next morning, Crawford stepped out on them, taking a nasty fall and subsequently taking a powder from the entire production. Crawford was

quickly replaced by Davis's friend Olivia de Havilland.

The film would be another hit, receiving seven Academy Award nominations for Best Supporting Actress (Agnes Moorehead), Best Art Direction, Best Black-and-White Cinematography, Best Black-and-White Costume Design, Best Film Editing, Best Original Song, and Best Original Score. Henry Farrell and his co-screenwriter, Lukas Heller, won a 1965 Edgar Award from the Mystery Writers of America for Best Motion Picture. Patti Page had a *Billboard* hit with her recording of the title song. Judith Crist said of the film, "The guignol is about as grand as it gets."

When Joan Crawford died in 1977, Davis did not attend the memorial, nor did she issue a public statement. However, at a lunch in 2001 Burt Reynolds recounted to me Bette Davis's initial reaction to Joan Crawford's death. "We were having lunch with a reporter, and just as I was about to introduce them, we were interrupted by a fan," Burt told me.

"Oh, Miss Davis," said the woman, "I am so sorry to tell you this, but Joan Crawford just died."

"She was a cunt!" replied Bette.

Burt interrupted: "Bette, this gentleman we are about to have lunch with is from *The National Enquirer*."

"But," replied Bette, "she was always on time."

What Ever Happened to Baby Jane? would become a part of American culture. Bette Davis had a hit recording of the title song, which she would perform throughout her career, including on an appearance on the Dick Cavett show with her young accompanist, Barry Manilow. Blanche and Jane would be spoofed and referenced in episodes of *The Steve Allen Show*, *Batman*, *Seinfeld*, *French and Saunders*, *The Simpsons*, *Designing Women*, *Jeopardy!*, *Doctor Who*, and in the music videos for Shakespears Sister's "Goodbye Cruel World" and Christina Aguilera's "Ain't No Other Man."

The film was remade for television in 1991 starring Lynn and Vanessa Redgrave. A major motion picture remake by Walter Hill was announced in 2012.

Henry Farrell had given birth to what has been called the psycho-biddy movie, a brand of horror film dealing with psychotic older women, providing vehicles for dozens of aging stars: Tallulah Bankhead in *Die, Die My Darling*; Ruth Gordon and Geraldine Page in *What Ever Happened to Aunt Alice?*; and Olivia de Havilland in *Lady in a Cage*, among others. It also carved out a lasting career for its author.

He would write the screenplay for a television film based on his novel *How Awful About Allan*, starring Anthony Perkins and Julie Harris in 1970; and a theatrical film, *What's the Matter with Helen?* starring Debbie Reynolds and Shelley Winters, in 1971. Molly played small roles in both, as well as the television film *The Eye of Charles Sand*. Henry's novel *Such a Gorgeous Kid Like Me* would be adopted as a 1972 French film directed by Francois Truffaut under the title *Une Belle Fille Comme Moi*.

Henry Farrell wrote a musical stage version of *Baby Jane* with lyrics by Hal Hackady and music by Lee Pockriss, which was produced in 2002 in Houston, Texas, but it played to mixed reviews. Henry, devastated by the death of Molly, was hospitalized with a bout of cancer during rehearsals in Texas and his health started to fail. The composer, Lee Pockriss, suffered a stroke, and lyricist Hackady, in his late eighties, retired to an assisted-living facility outside of Manhattan.

The revisions needed for the musical were never completed, and the project was abandoned.

Without Molly by his side, Henry became more and more reclusive, although he did finish a nonmusical stage version of *Baby Jane* shortly before his death at the age of eighty-five in 2006.

A new novel, completed by Henry some years earlier, titled *A Piece of Clarisse*, has recently been discovered.

* * *

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Mitch Douglas

Mitch Douglas is a veteran literary agent who has represented Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, Graham Greene, Kander and Ebb, as well as biographers Anne Edwards and J. Randy Taraborrelli, and a host of other literary and theatrical luminaries over a long career at ICM and now with his own literary agency, Mitch Douglas Literary and Theatrical, in New York City.

PROLOGUE

1908

They waited there in the deep summer shade of the alleyway, a small decorous band of young matrons and their fidgeting female offspring. The women wore long skirts of soft linen or lawn, summer-weight blouses and wide-brimmed straw hats. The little girls, starched and ruffled, bore on their heads voluminous hair ribbons of pale, shiny satin. Many of them were of the town's best families, not the sort, ordinarily, to attend the performance of a common vaudeville show, even at a ladies' matinee.

Only the special character of the theatre's present attraction had made their presence permissible. Baby Jane Hudson (The Diminutive Dancing Duse from Duluth—ONE WEEK ONLY!) was so eminently beyond reproach that they were able even now to linger in the alley behind the theatre for one last glimpse of this remarkable star before leaving.

"They say she's a lot older than anyone lets on." This softly, from the woman in the red lacquered straw hat, close to the left of the stage door. "They claim she's just very tiny for her age."

Her companion, dressed all in pink, glanced down at the sombre child at her side, nodded, cushioned her reply against her hand. "I heard they give her whisky to stunt her growth."

"No!"

"Oh, I don't really believe it. Do you?"

It was also said of Baby Jane that she was really just a midget dressed in child's clothing. Some said she had been born with the gift of speech. A spiritualist group in Philadelphia claimed she was possessed of the spirit of a deceased actress, who used the child as an instrument through which to project her talents from The Great Beyond.

In any case Baby Jane was a phenomenon. She was known everywhere.

Her sayings, printed on small, ornamented cards, were included in boxes of confection. A dime purchased her photo, personally autographed with love and kisses. Baby Jane was an authentic celebrity. And so a tremor passed through the group in the alley when the stage door finally opened and Baby Jane stepped forward onto the outer platform.

A small compact child with large luminous eyes and thick dark hair, she was dressed entirely in white. Her dress and gloves were of white lace. The white satin sash about her waist matched the ribbon depending from the brim of her white straw hat. Her sturdy legs were encased in long white stockings. Her high-topped shoes were of soft white kid. The corkscrew curls that cascaded from beneath her hat to her shoulders seemed as black as night by contrast.

At first glimpse she looked exactly like a little white angel. But the illusion vanished when one saw the mottle of temper in the small, round face; saw the tiny, lace-covered hands double themselves into tight, hard fists.

“I won’t, I won’t—I will *not!*” Baby Jane’s voice—the same voice lifted so sweetly in song minutes before—shrilled against the adjacent walls. “I won’t go back to any old hotel. And I won’t take a nap. And you can’t make me!”

A dark, pleasant-looking man, appearing quickly behind her, knelt down, reached out to her. At the same time there emerged through the doorway a mild-faced woman carrying an infant.

“Ray...” the woman said anxiously.

But the man was intent on Baby Jane. “Janie—don’t act up, sweetheart. You’ve got to take your nap. You know——”

“I won’t!” Baby Jane yelled. “I won’t even close my eyes. You can’t make me!”

The man glanced out at the crowd, attempted a smile. “Be Daddy’s good little girl now, please, and——”

Baby Jane stamped her foot. “No!” she screamed. “No—no—*no!*”

“Now, Janie...” The woman started forward, but the infant in her arms began to whimper and she stopped. “There, there,” she crooned distractedly.

The father cleared his throat. “You want your nice friends to think you’re a bad little girl?”

“I don’t care! I want a sweet ice!” Baby Jane pulled against his grasp. “I want it and I’m going to get it!”

“Janie, we talked about that, and——”

The child’s eyes flicked toward the crowd. “I want it, I *want* it!” Her face grew liverish. “I make the money, so I can have what I want. You can’t stop me!”

“Jane, that’s enough!”

Baby Jane kicked out at his shin. “I can have it if I want!” she screamed.

Except for the increased wailing of the infant, the scene grew hushed. And then the father nodded. “All right. It’s a hot day. I guess you’ve earned it. But this is the last time this week. Do you understand that?”

Baby Jane’s demeanor underwent an instantaneous transformation. The small hands unclenched, her expression became demure. “All right, Daddy,” she said.

Her father produced a handkerchief from his pocket, mopped uneasily at his brow. “You don’t want to forget to say hello to all your nice little friends now...”

With a sudden smile Baby Jane turned to her admirers, lowered her eyes in an unabashed show of bogus self-effacement and bobbed down in a brief curtsy. Then, blowing kisses, two to the left, two to the right, she turned back and held out her hand to be led down the steps. Below, the woman in the red straw hat turned to her friend with a sharp lift of the brows.

“My stars!” she gasped. “Did you ever? *Did* you?”

The woman in pink looked up in round-eyed dismay. “What’s ever to become of a child like that? Mercy! Can you guess?”

The woman in the red hat shook her head. “It’s the others I pity,” she said, “the ones who’ll have to live with her. Just think what life’s going to be for them!”

PART ONE

1

1959

I don't give a hang what Father says. I'm in love with you, Meg. What are all the Standish millions next to an angel like you?"

He was a clean-cut young man with dark lustrous hair combed down close to his head. As he spoke, his companion, the blonde girl with the lovely sooty eyes looked up at him. Her brows, which were no more than thinly penciled crescents, lifted slightly at the inner corners, giving her a look of pained enquiry. An intense moonlight beamed down from somewhere behind, nesting in her platinum hair in a perfect halo. She wore a frock with enormous puffed sleeves of gossamer organdy and a skirt that flared widely from the knees. Music frothed up out of the magic night, as from the very air around them. The tune—their theme—was called "Moonlight on Fifth Avenue."

"But he'll cut you off without a penny. Oh, Jeff, you've never had to work for a living."

The young man, though, now had the strength of his love, and he smiled to show it. "I'll learn to work for you, Meg. I want to. You'll see—you'll be proud of me."

The girl lifted her eyes to his and though they were moist, her face was placid. "But it isn't that simple. You were born to"—her gesture included the alabaster terrace upon which they stood, the mansion in the background, the acres of clipped lawn, the fountains, the two glasses of half-tasted champagne on the balustrade—"to all this. Can you even guess what it's like, living in a cold-water flat?"

"It would be heaven—with you."

"Oh, Jeff, you poor—romantic—fool!"

As “Moonlight on Fifth Avenue” murmured yeastily on, they embraced. The sooty eyes opened wide and then closed, presumably with ecstasy. A saxophone moaned. Violins, a hundred of them, swelled the night with heady vibration. And then, as if banished by the sheer din, the terrace, the mansion and, finally, the lovers themselves faded from view. In their place there appeared a man with a strained smile and circles under his eyes...

“Sorry to break in on this fine feature film, folks, but you’ll be glad I did when you see what I have here for that favorite pooch of yours!”

Moving her comfortably expanded bulk forward in her easy chair, Mrs. Bates reached out and turned down the volume. Smiling softly with gentle reminiscence, she looked around at Harriett Palmer seated at the other side of the coffee table on the divan.

“Oh, I remember, when I first saw that picture I thought it was just grand. Claude took me—on a Sunday afternoon.” Seeing that Harriett’s coffee cup was empty, she rose and picked it up. “It was showing at the old Majestic.”

Harriett Palmer smiled pleasantly and nodded. “I think I saw it; I’m not sure. Do you remember when it was made?”

Mrs. Bates paused at the entrance to the hallway. “ ‘Thirty-four. That’s what it said in the program in the paper.’ ”

When she returned with the replenished cup, she crossed to Harriett and put it down on the table before her.

“You know, I don’t believe I ever missed a Blanche Hudson picture.” She glanced back at the set to make sure the commercial was still on. “I was such a fan of hers—right up until the time she had her accident. Oh, do you remember when that happened? I felt so awful it might just as well have been someone in my own family.”

Harriett, taking a sip of the coffee, looked up, nodded. “Oh, I know. She *was* beautiful. I still think so.”

Even there in the muted lamplight, the difference between the two women, though they were both in their early fifties, was striking. Mrs. Bates, being undeniably plump both in face and figure seemed somewhat older than Harriett Palmer, who had kept herself stylishly slim. Where Mrs. Bates had let her hair turn a natural steel gray, Harriett had rendered her own a sleek silver blonde. Mrs. Bates wore a loose-fitting house dress with a pattern of pale flowers; Harriett had on a pair of fitted black slacks and a white silk blouse. Mrs. Bates had just moved out west from Fort Madison,

Iowa. Harriett Palmer had always been a native of Hollywood, California.

For all of their differences, though, the two women had gotten along famously from the very first day of Mrs. Bates's arrival there on Hillside Terrace. Mrs. Bates, a widow of less than a year, had come to California to be away from all the familiar sights of home which had become only sad reminders of happier days before her husband's death. Harriett Palmer was married to a corporation lawyer who spent a great deal of time out of town. Both of them being somewhat at loose ends, they were grateful for each other's company. As they were doing tonight, they spent a great many of their evenings in Mrs. Bates's comfortable, homey living room watching television.

"Have you ever seen her?" Mrs. Bates asked. "I mean, does she ever show herself outside the house?"

Harriett promptly shook her head. "Not that I know of. Oh, I've seen her from a distance—sure—in the car, when they have to drive somewhere—but not so you could tell what she really looks like. I figure she must be at least fifty by now."

Mrs. Bates smiled with a faint show of hesitation. "You know—I shouldn't tell this on myself—but when I bought this house, the thing that really decided me was when they told me Blanche Hudson lived next door. Isn't that silly—a woman my age? And I haven't had even a glimpse of her."

"Well," Harriett grinned, "it does give the old hill a touch of glamour. There was quite a colony of movie people up here in the old days, but she's the only one left."

Mrs. Bates nodded. "Back in Fort Madison—well, you just didn't ever see any movie stars—not in the flesh." Her gaze went to the row of French doors that comprised, almost totally, the east wall of the room, and to the darkness beyond. The Hudson house, a white, two-story Mediterranean absurdity, loomed in ghostly dimness at the end of the garden. "Can she walk at all?"

"I don't know. I think I heard once that she had partially recovered the use of one leg. But apparently she still has to be in a wheel chair all the time."

Mrs. Bates made a soft clucking sound of sympathy. "I'd love to meet her," she said wistfully. "A real movie star. Sometimes I wonder..." Her voice trailed off thinly.

“Wonder what?”

“Oh, it’s just some more of my silliness.” Mrs. Bates turned back to her guest. “I spend so much time out in the garden. Sometimes, I’ll be out there and—well, I just wonder if she’s watching me——” She broke off, darting her gaze quickly to the television set. “Oh, the picture’s on!” Hurrying forward, she turned up the volume again.

The blonde girl and a female companion stood on a busy street corner in front of a cafeteria. As the camera moved in for a medium shot, she consulted her wrist watch, then glanced off anxiously down the street. Her dress was simple but attractive and her hair caught the sunlight, as it had previously caught the light of the moon, in a perfect halo.

The other girl was smaller and stouter. Her face was that of a pouting and somewhat fatigued cherub, making her appearance, at once, comic and sad. Her dark hair was arranged in a profusion of absurd ringlets. Her dress was fussy and tasteless, and she had lavished upon her eyes and mouth far too much make-up. As the blonde girl turned to her, she made her eyes wide and foolish in an obvious striving for humorous effect.

“If they don’t show up soon,” the blonde girl said, “I guess we just aren’t going to get fed.”

The brunette nodded vigorously. “You said a mouthful. We’ve got to be back at the office in twenty minutes.”

“Well—let’s give them five more minutes—and then we’ll just go ahead.”

“Sure. Besides—when it’s Dutch treat who needs a man anyway?”

Harriett sat sharply forward, pointing at the screen. “That’s her!” she said. “The other one, I mean—there!—the sister.”

Mrs. Bates stared in blank confusion. “That dark girl?” she asked.

“Yes. Don’t you remember? It was in Blanche’s contract that they had to use her sister in all of her pictures. I forgot until just now. They used it in all of her publicity.”

“Oh, yes! Yes, I do remember now. But I never knew which one was her. For heaven’s sake! Have you met her?”

“Her?” Harriett looked around with loftily raised brows. “You just don’t meet her. She’s very funny—strange—everyone says so.” She sighed. “Sometimes I wonder about the two of them over there in that big old house all alone. They don’t ever seem to do anything—or have anyone in for company. It must be awful...”

Mrs. Bates looked again toward the French doors and the night beyond. "It's nice, though, that she's stayed and taken care of Blanche all these years. She must be a nice person to do a thing like that."

"Well, maybe," Harriett said darkly, "and maybe not. They say she had something to do with that accident, you know."

Mrs. Bates looked around sharply. "*She* did? The accident where Blanche got hurt?"

Harriett nodded. "There was some story around at the time about how it happened. I forget now exactly what it was, but she was supposed to be responsible."

"Oh—how could she have been? It was just a plain automobile accident, wasn't it?"

Harriett waved a hand in light dismissal. "Oh, there's always talk. Around this town, there is. You can't really tell what to believe."

Mrs. Bates nodded thoughtfully. "I've forgotten," she said; "what's her name? You told me once, didn't you?"

"Jane?" Harriett asked. "Her name's Jane. She was famous, too, I understand, way back when she was just a little girl. Maybe you remember hearing about her—they called her Baby Jane Hudson."

"There they are." The clean-cut young man, dressed now in workman's clothes pointed ahead up the street. "Come on, Mac."

The other young man, fat and jolly-looking, glanced ahead and frowned. "Which one's Gertie? No, don't tell me. I know already."

A reverse shot showed the blonde girl and the brunette as they looked up, saw the men and smiled in greeting. The camera then returned to the men. The fat man shook his head.

"Boy, is that Meg some dish! No wonder you're ga-ga over her."

And then the four of them met. In a close shot the blonde girl and the young man grinned at each other in vigorous noonday ecstasy. The fat man held his arm out to the brunette in an exaggerated gesture of gallantry.

"Ready to tie on the feed bag, Gorgeous?"

The brunette giggled and looked up at him with broad archness. "Okey-dokey, Slim," she said, linking her arm through his. "Don't mind if I do."

The blonde girl with the sooty eyes, looking up at the clean-cut young man with mute adoration, put her hand in his, and together they looked after their retreating friends and smiled.

The girl on the screen smiled, and there in the dimness the woman huddled in the wheel chair at the far side of the room seemed, for a moment, close on the verge of tears. Blanche Hudson, her gaze held fast to the flickering screen in a kind of intense wonder, moved one taut, tapering hand to the collar of her light, rose-colored robe and held it there, palm outward, as if in a gesture of defense.

Moonlight on Fifth Avenue was the third of the old movies Blanche had seen within just the last month, and with each of them she had been left feeling, somehow, a bit more decimated. An invalid for more than twenty years now, loathing increasingly the helpless, wasted old woman she had become, she had begun to believe in the legend of what she had once been on the screen. She had begun to believe in the glamour, the charm, the magic that was said to have once been hers. For a long, long time now she had managed to warm herself by this bright image, to hug it close to her where its radiance might reach the spreading chill inside.

Now she saw that it had been a mistake, watching the old movies. They had brought with them a sad disillusionment that, in its own way, had been a kind of dying. Twenty-five years ago, *Moonlight on Fifth Avenue* had made a fortune almost purely on the strength of her name. Gazing now at the preposterous, posturing creature on the screen, Blanche found it hard to believe. What she did see—and this with stinging clarity—was that through all these years her sole defense against empty reality had been simply hollow illusion.

And yet she had needed the illusion, for it had sustained her. And she needed it still. Anything was preferable to the stark reality of her present existence.

Reality was crowded so close to her here in this room. It was the large hulking bed there in the shadows, and the wheel chair, and the invalid's lifting bar, suspended by chains from the ceiling above the bed. And the bedside table filled with medications. And the writing desk before which there had stood no chair for more than twenty years. That was reality, that and the stale-sweet smell of her own invalidism, which made her think of fallen leaves rotting slowly and hideously in some dank, sunless place. Blanche sighed, and hearing herself sigh, looked around in sudden apprehension at the dark, squat figure seated dimly at her side.

Distracted by her own unhappy speculations, she had quite forgotten she was not alone. Turning now, she looked obliquely at the face of the woman

beside her, a face both revealed and obscured by the shadowing dimness. The large, dark eyes, intent upon the images on the screen, were half closed, narrowed really, as upon some intense inner observation. The contours of the face, underscored by the shadows, seemed not so much softened with age as swollen by it, so that the sagging flesh threatened, greedily, to swallow up the once pert and childlike features embedded within its folds. But there was more there, too, more than mere age and some dark fledgling thought. There was a fever in the narrowed, watching eyes, and in the face there was a kind of angry justification.

A justification, though, for what? Taking her gaze, by force, from Jane's face, Blanche made herself look back in the direction of the screen. Very likely it was all just in her imagination; she was attributing to Jane's attitudes and expressions sinister depths which they did not possess. It was like that when you were too much alone; you became oversensitive and you had to be careful not to let your mind play you tricks.

Jane's moods were nothing new, nor were they a cause for alarm. Jane was simply in the first phase of one of her periodical "spells." They always started the same way, with the abrupt withdrawal into sullen silence, the dark, furtive glances and the sudden bright stares of angry defiance. There would be, perhaps, an emotional outburst and then, toward the end, the drinking. Blanche had, years before, accurately catalogued, in her own mind, the pattern of Jane's spells; they contained no surprises for her now. She understood them. She knew their root. She was used to them.

But then why did she seem to detect in Jane's present lapse some special character that set it apart from the others and made it, even in its beginnings, somehow more disturbing? Blanche again lifted her hand to the neck of her robe, this time pulling the opening more tightly closed. Before, she thought, there had always been that marked edge of wary defiance in Jane's behavior, but this time it was lacking and in its place was something more measured, a kind of purposefulness, it seemed, as if... Blanche brought her hand down flatly onto the arm of her chair. She had to stop this sort of thinking instantly. She was simply using her imagination to dodge the real truth of the matter; Jane's upset this time was nobody's fault but Blanche's own.

She should have been stronger. She should have resisted the desire—the compulsion, really—to see herself again on the screen. Somewhere at the back of her mind she had known all along that the old films could only

bring trouble. She should never have watched them herself and most certainly she should never have let Jane watch them.

Still she couldn't help wondering what thoughts stirred behind Jane's level, hooded eyes. The old jealousy was there no doubt, the old smoldering envy that, through the years, had only slumbered and never, never really died.

Once, during one of Jane's drinking bouts, Blanche had seen clearly the face of Jane's jealousy, and it had been ugly beyond forgetting. Even now it came back to her at times, the dark vision of Jane standing there in the doorway clutching the frame for support, making the air between them alive and hideous with her slurred words of anger.

"Oh, you were so great, huh? So glamorous?" She had stood there, chewing the words over, spitting them out at Blanche like venom. "Oh, I know—they all said it; they told you how wonderful you were because they thought you were important. They *used* to say it. But who says it now? What are you now, you old—you cripple. Let's see you dance around and— and show off how pretty you are. Let's see you do it now!" She had paused, staring at Blanche for a long time, her eyes bright with malevolence. "Oh, yes," she went on, "you got the looks all right. But that's all you got! I got the talent! Even if nobody cared... And I've still got it. And you, you're—you're nothing! You're not any damn thing at all! So don't go trying to act so—so big with me you—you—nothing—nothing-at-all! Don't try to make out you're better than me!..."

Blanche shuddered against the memory, wondering if these same thoughts were echoing through Jane's mind now as she sat watching the picture. Get rid of the past, she told herself with sudden force; wipe it from your mind. And Jane's, too. Banish these foolish shadow images to the darkness and oblivion they deserve. Her eyes fast upon Jane, she moistened her lips to speak, awaiting the sound of her own voice as if it would herald the beginning of some impending disaster.

"Jane?..."

Before she could go on, Jane rose from her chair, crossed to the television set and summarily turned it off. On the screen the girl with the sooty eyes, smiling with false rapture, fell away into a fretful, wriggling band of light and then vanished altogether. The light from the desk lamp seemed suddenly to grow brighter, spreading its yellowish stain in a wider arc upon the rich fabric of the rug. Conversely, the shadows beyond the bed

and in the far corners of the room appeared to deepen and creep forward. Blanche stared in surprise and then, as Jane turned back in her direction, managed a quick smile.

“I—I was just going to ask you to turn it off.” Jane’s gaze glittered toward her through the dimness. There was a moment of silence, and then Blanche laughed nervously. “I really don’t think we should waste our time on any more of those old things. They’re so awful...”

With a slight, noncommittal shrug, Jane moved off toward the door. Reaching down to the wheel of her chair, Blanche swung herself around.

“Will you come back?” she asked anxiously. “To help me into bed?”

At the doorway Jane stopped, her squat, fleshy figure outlined dimly against the deeper darkness of the hallway. Again her eyes seemed alight with some painfully withheld emotion. When she spoke, however, her voice was flat and unrevealing.

“All right... if you want...”

Turning even as she spoke, she disappeared into the hallway.

Blanche sat perfectly still, hunched slightly forward, staring after her. A wash of silence seemed to break over the house, causing the shadows to stir and pulse around her. Slowly she reached out a hand to the wheel of her chair, thinking that if she went to the window and pulled back the drapes she would be able to see the night and the stars. And then, suddenly, she stopped, her body gripped with shock as the silence was shattered by the thunderous slam of Jane’s door at the end of the hall. The whole house seemed to shout back in anger.

For a long moment Blanche was perfectly motionless, listening tensely for the silence to come back into the house, waiting for the thunderous slam of the door to stop reverberating against her strained and frightened nerves.

2

When they had first brought her home from the hospital and carried her upstairs to this room she had decided that the heavy exterior grillwork over the window would have to be removed. Almost immediately after the accident the big gates at the front drive, made from the same design, had been taken away and sold for scrap, and she wanted no further reminders here in the house. Her mind at that time, though, had been more concentrated on other matters, filled with the shock of the absolute certainty that she would never walk again, and so, through procrastination, the grillwork had remained. Now, with the passing years, her eye had become so trained at looking around and beyond the grille's flamboyant iron tracings that she barely knew it was there at all.

This morning the window was open, and Blanche had wheeled her chair close to it, seeking the touch of the cool breeze from the spring day outside. As she strained forward her profile was illumined by a reflected shaft of sunlight and for just a moment she was again the silver-haired girl of thirty years before. Actually this was not entirely illusion, for Blanche had never really lost her beauty. Her near-perfect features, refined and sharpened by pain had successfully resisted the dulling influence of the encroaching years. Indeed there were times when it seemed that Blanche's invalidism had given her a kind of delicate, waxen loveliness that, in its own way, transcended the bright prettiness of her youth.

Unaware, she directed her gaze thoughtfully down the hillside to the ragged patchwork of yards and red tile roofs that marked the other thirty-year-old Mediterranean extravagances like her own. So much of what she saw, like the grillwork, had become dimmed by familiarity. But now she made herself look at it more closely, more analytically, and in so doing she saw that the neighborhood, as if while she had dozed, had turned old and

shabby. Seeing it this way, she was suddenly assailed by a nearly overwhelming desire to be away from it. All at once she wanted only to be free of this house, this room, this feeling of being buried alive in the past.

Her reasons for clinging to the old house all these years had been purely emotional ones. She had known this, really, from the very beginning. After the accident she had needed badly some tangible confirmation of the time before when she had been something more—much, much more—than the drab, useless cripple she was now. And so, in clinging to the house, she had clung to the past. The same past that she now felt so urgent a need to escape. Blanche nodded her head in solemn resolution: she would do it; she would call Bert Hanley and ask him to put the house up for sale.

Bert was one of Blanche's few remaining contacts with the outside world. He was one of three partners in the business management firm that handled her financial affairs. It was Bert who had shrewdly and carefully invested her studio earnings so as to provide the income that had supported her and Jane through the intervening years.

After the accident Bert had taken it for granted that Blanche would sell the house. And so his astonishment had been acute when she had refused. He had pointed out to her, volubly and at length, all the obvious reasons for selling; the house was too big, too costly to maintain, too inconvenient, and it would depreciate in value too swiftly. And, he argued, it was almost insanely dangerous for an invalid to live, as she did, in an upper story room. However, in the face of her continued refusal, he had been forced, finally, to give up.

"Someday," Bert had shouted at her in exasperation, "you'll be sorry! You'll see!"

Since then Blanche's affairs had become a matter of minor routine for Bert, and he had given up ever mentioning the house. Actually it had been two years now since Bert had come to Hillside Terrace for a visit; their relationship, with the passage of time, had formalized itself into a matter of periodical letters and business statements, these interspersed with an occasional phone conversation.

Outside the breeze touched the tall eucalyptus beside the window. A branch leaped forward, its leaves tapping at the edge of the sill like quick, brittle fingers. Blanche smiled at her present mood of decision; tomorrow—or the next day at the latest—she would call Bert and tell him to sell the house to the first taker for whatever price he could get. Meanwhile, she

must think about a new place to live, so she could discuss that with Bert too. Something away from the hills would be best, something smaller and more convenient. After all, it was only fair to Jane; despite the continuation of her astonishing vigor, it was time she be allowed to take things easier. Something newly built, Blanche thought pleasantly, something modern and bright with sunlight. Something, in short, quite different from this gloomy old place.

Blanche saw suddenly that her disillusionment with the past, the disillusionment engendered by the old movies, had its constructive side, too. In death there could also be rebirth. And then, her eye caught by the sight of a movement from the house directly below, she leaned forward again to the window. As she did so, one of the French doors at the side of the house swung fully open, and the new owner stepped out into the bright sunlight, dressed, as usual, for gardening, in a smock and a wide-brimmed straw hat. Mrs. Bates. That was the woman's name, though Blanche couldn't remember just at the moment where she had learned it. Mrs. Bates from Iowa.

Almost daily for close to three months now Blanche had watched her new neighbor as she moved about down below, weeding, raking, turning the sun-warmed soil, putting in the new bulbs and plants, taking out the old. There was something almost dedicated in the way the woman went about her work, and Blanche had vicariously enjoyed sharing this labor of love with her. Indeed, she had come to feel a kind of kinship with this woman, this Mrs. Bates, though she had never exchanged a glance or a word with her and probably never would. As the woman moved farther out into the garden, Blanche reached out to the grillwork to pull herself up for a better view. But then, hearing a sound behind her, she dropped her hand and looked back into the room.

"Excuse me, Miss Blanche..."

As Blanche's eyes adjusted to the inner dimness of the room, the angular, raw-boned figure in the doorway swam into view. Today was Friday. Mrs. Stitt's cleaning day. Blanche had forgotten.

"Come on in, Edna," she said cheerfully. "You want to start in here?"

And then, looking more closely into Mrs. Stitt's florid, practical face, she saw couched in the level eyes the glint of some extraordinary consternation. Reaching out, she pulled her chair away from the window and out farther into the room.

“Is there something the matter?”

It was a needless question. For three years now Mrs. Stitt had arrived faithfully every Friday morning to clean, change the linens and help Jane with the week’s heavy cooking. In that time Blanche had learned that it was a point of professional pride with Edna Stitt to maintain, in the face of even the worst sort of adversity, a calm and unruffled exterior; it took a considerable provocation to excite from her any open demonstration of annoyance. It was for this reason, then, that Blanche now regarded Mrs. Stitt with a sharp sense of apprehension as she stood there in the doorway pressing her hands down flatly over her heavy-duty cleaning apron in an unmistakable gesture of restrained agitation.

“What is it, Edna?”

With a final flush of indignation Mrs. Stitt came forward into the room. Offering no word of explanation she removed something from her apron pocket and thrust it forward. In bewilderment Blanche saw before her a thick packet of letters bound together with a heavy rubber band.

“Here!” said Mrs. Stitt.

Taking the letters, Blanche looked up, her eyes wide with questioning. “But what——?”

Mrs. Stitt had now gone quite pale but she determinedly stood her ground. “I could be wrong,” she said with trembling bravado, “and I may be way out of line.... Miss Blanche, if there’s anything in this world I don’t want to do it’s to cause you any kind of trouble, but—you just look at those—if you don’t mind—and you tell me if you ever saw them before. I—I just want to know, that’s all....”

Looking down at the letters, Blanche saw, with a slight touch of surprise, that the one on top was addressed to her. Stripping away the band, she spread them out on her lap. They had all been written to her. One of them, she saw, was marked *Personal*. She saw, too, that the one on top had been opened.

Blanche looked up at Mrs. Stitt again in enquiry, but the woman’s face, deliberately closed against her gaze, told her nothing. Turning back to the letters, she picked up the first and drew out a sheet of cheap, ruled tablet paper. She opened it to a scrawled message in pencil:

Dear Blanche Hudson: Last night I and my husband watched that picture of yours Hasty Honeymoon. While we were watching it I said to my husband that seeing you again after all these years was just like seeing an

old time girlhood chum. Back in those days I was a real fan of yours and when Hasty Honeymoon first came out I was just starting to go with this boy...

Blanche's gaze blurred, and she put a hand to her eyes, unable to read any further. It was silly... silly... but something deep inside her had been touched so suddenly and so by surprise she couldn't help herself. Her hand fell to the letters in her lap. Fan letters! After all these years! To think there were still those who remembered—who cared enough to write.... It was incredible... incredible....

"You didn't see them before, did you?"

Taking her hand from her eyes, Blanche looked up in confusion; for a moment she had quite forgotten about Mrs. Stitt. Still unable to speak, she shook her head.

"I didn't think so."

But Blanche had already returned to the letters. Taking up the one marked *Personal*, she looked for the return address and found the name *William Carroll*.

Her hand was seized with such a trembling she could hardly get the letter open. Bill Carroll had been her leading man in four of her most successful films. The romance the studio had contrived for them had never quite jelled, but they had been the closest of close friends. For a while, that is, until the accident. Afterwards, Bill had tried repeatedly to visit her, both at the hospital and, later, at home, but she had refused to see him, just as she had refused to see the others. And, like the others, he had finally drifted away. But how wonderful it was to hear from him now. Particularly now, this morning, when she had made her decision to leave this house and make a new life for herself outside. If they could be friends again... In her anxiety to get the letter out of the envelope she nearly tore it.

Dear Blanche (she read), I know the odds are against this ever reaching you, but after seeing "Blonde Byline" on TV the other night I just had to write. If by some miracle you should happen to read this, you will notice that I have included my present address and telephone number. Of course I must warn you that I am an old married man now—and I do not use the word old figuratively—but then...

The letter, falling from her hand, joined the others in her lap. She started to pick it up again, but a sharp clearing of the throat reminded her that Mrs. Stitt was still waiting for her reaction. Forcing herself, as nearly as she

could, into a state of composure, she looked up.

“Where—where did you find these? I thought the morning mail——”

Mrs. Stitt drew her mouth down into a thin line of disapproval. “Those weren’t in the morning mail,” she said flatly, “they were in the trash. I took some papers out to the barrel and if I hadn’t just happened to look down ——”

“In the trash?” Blanche stared at the woman. “But—are you sure?”

Mrs. Stitt nodded portentously, then jerked a thumb back over her shoulder. “I guess she just—tossed them out!” As a means of expressing her controlled but active dislike for Jane, Mrs. Stitt, from the first days of her employment, had refused ever to call her by name. “I don’t claim I actually saw her doing it, I don’t say that.”

“But where——?”

“They came from the TV station that’s showing your pictures. The big envelope they came in was there, too.”

Blanche made a gesture of limp confusion. “Jane must have thrown them out by mistake. If the studio insignia was on the envelope she probably thought it was some sort of advertisement——”

Mrs. Stitt shook her head in stubborn denial. “It was already opened up—and that letter on top, too. And besides——” Hesitating she glanced back, almost furtively, toward the open doorway.

“Besides——?” Blanche prompted.

Reaching again into the wide pocket of her apron, Mrs. Stitt produced a large brown Manila envelope. After a moment’s hesitation, she held it out.

“You—you might as well see this, I guess...”

Blanche took the envelope. In the upper left hand corner was the insignia and name of the television station. At the center was a white sticker upon which had been typed her name and address. Other than that it seemed entirely unremarkable.

“The other side,” Mrs. Stitt said thinly, looking away. “Over.”

With a faint chill of apprehension, Blanche turned the envelope.

The word seemed to leap up at her like a shouted epithet, angry, ugly, obscene, scrawled in strokes so vicious that in several places the point of the pencil had bitten into the thick stuff of the envelope and torn it. Turning the envelope back, Blanche pressed it quickly down into her lap as if in an attempt to crush the word out of existence. Looking down at her, Mrs. Stitt drew her hands stiffly across the front of her apron.

“I’m sorry.” Her voice was contrite now, but still unsteady. “I guess I shouldn’t have shown you. Lord knows I hate to be a trouble maker, but _____”

Blanche raised a hand. “It’s all right.” Her gaze slid inadvertently toward the open doorway. “I don’t really think——”

Abruptly, Mrs. Stitt held out her hand. “Here, I’ll take that and get rid of it.” Retrieving the envelope from Blanche’s lap, she folded it deftly over upon itself and jammed it into her pocket. “Miss Blanche,” she said, her voice quiet with concern, “I know this isn’t anything much to get worked up about. But it’s not a normal thing for someone to do—not for a person her age—and with her starting to act up again....”

Blanche looked down, shielding her eyes from Mrs. Stitt’s gaze, afraid she might reveal the fear that had suddenly come alive inside her. Jane is my sister, she told herself sternly, she has taken care of me and stayed with me and protected me all these years. The least I can do is try to understand. She’s my own sister....

She may be your own sister, honey, your own flesh and blood, but you’ve got to face it, deep down inside she hates you like poison and nothing would please her more than to see you get it right in the neck.

The words echoed suddenly into her mind from far, far back in the past. It was Martin Stagg who had said them to her. She had been working on a picture, and he had called her into his office....

I know, it’s a hard thing to admit to yourself, but Janie’s so crazy with jealousy she doesn’t know what she’s doing.

Marty had been the producer of the picture, a big, bluff man with a large, knowing heart and an uncanny instinct for picture making and its people. When one of Marty’s performers was in trouble, he was always anxious to understand and help.

Why do you think she pulls these drunks all the time—and going out and making a show of herself in public? Look how many times, just this last year, she’s got herself tossed in the can. Four, five times? Five. Next time, maybe the boys won’t get there fast enough to hush it up. And whose career is it going to reflect on? Hers? Hell, no, her career was washed up before she was even twelve years old. You’re the one who’s going to take the rap. And will she be sorry? Look—why does she have all those tantrums on the set and hold up shooting? Why is she always so sick every time Publicity sets up a personal for you, and you have to stay home and take care of her?

And don't think I'm not sympathetic to the whole problem. She was a star, one of the real biggies, and in a tough racket, too. I give her credit. She probably kept your whole family in chips, and not just pocket change, either. So just think what it must be like for her now. It's like her life was over before it even got started. Everyone yelling and making a fuss over her and then, all of a sudden, nothing. I've never seen a kid star yet pull out of it without some kind of scar to show for it. And it's twice as bad for Janie. Here you are—her kid sister—a bigger star than she ever was. How do you think she feels, tagging along in your shade all the time? She knows damn well the only reason she works is because of that clause in your contract. Hell, the whole world knows it! Honey, think how it's twisting her up inside. I don't care what kind of good intentions you've got, you aren't doing her any kindness. Now, look—take my advice, let's get rid of that clause. The front office is willing to buy her off with a good piece of change—I know that for a fact—and the publicity boys will make it look right. Come on—before she cracks up completely and does you some real damage—let her off the hook, huh?...

But she had refused Marty's advice. She had promised Jane, she told him, and she wasn't going to go back on her word. And now, suddenly, thirty years later, his words were as distinct in her mind as the day he said them. Because of the old movies, of course, and the fan letters. Another confirmation that she was right: she and Jane needed to leave the old house and all its lingering, unhappy memories as soon as possible....

"Your sister is not a well woman, Miss Blanche."

Again Blanche forced herself to look up into Mrs. Stitt's anxious face.

"Miss Blanche, somebody's got to tell you straight out, and I guess it's got to be me. Your sister needs—well, she needs some kind of—attention. And I don't care if you fire me for saying it, I *don't*! It's for your own good. When she gets into these—sulks—of hers, I just don't know how you stand it. She gives me the shivers. Maybe, being close to her all the time, you just don't notice like anyone else would. But just in the time I've been here it's plain that she's a lot worse...."

Blanche looked up sharply. "Worse? How do you mean, Edna?"

Mrs. Stitt touched the pocket of her apron. "This sort of thing. And the way she acts generally—like a little, spoiled kid sometimes. And how she tries to stop me from doing the things you tell me so she can make me do something else. It's hard to say exactly but—but it's getting—worse. I don't

mind telling you, now the subject's open—I'd have quit this job flat a long time ago except for you. She's just too hard to get on with—with the drinking and all that...."

Blanche pulled herself forward in her chair, feeling an urgent need—a compulsion, really—to say something in Jane's defense. "Edna, I'm sure it isn't anything—serious. I think I understand Jane. She's always been moody, and she's been under a strain lately——"

"Maybe so," Mrs. Stitt broke in, "but I still say you'd be smart to have her see your doctor. Oh, I know it's a hard thing for you to see. Shut up here in this house all the time, you've got no way to make a comparison—but lately, Miss Blanche—well, I just worry about you...."

"Oh, Edna!"

"Oh, I don't mean she's really—off—or anything like that—I'm not saying *that*—but she does get—well, irresponsible. This thing this morning—it's not so important just by itself but—well, I get to thinking about what could happen to you alone in this house with her sometimes—especially when she gets to drinking—and I lay awake at night. I do, for a fact!"

Blanche looked up at Mrs. Stitt in helpless desperation. She dared not let the woman go on like this. Perhaps it was true; perhaps, just as you developed a tolerance for pain through long familiarity, you could also develop a tolerance for eccentricity. But Jane was her own sister, the only person she had, really, in the whole world. She refused to believe that Jane's spells were beginning to be dangerous. For one thing they weren't really so very frequent; Blanche had come to accept them as a kind of infirmity that she must put up with just as Jane put up with her invalidism. Of the two of them, Jane had gotten all the worst of it; imprisoned all these years with a helpless, cheerless cripple performing the duties, really, of a servant. It was only natural that it should be too much for her sometimes and that she should rebel. *If I had only listened to Marty thirty years ago*, Blanche cried within herself; *If I didn't know in my own heart that it's really all my own fault...* She gazed up at Mrs. Stitt, rubbing one hand in agitation across the back of the other.

"You must be exaggerating," she said with an abruptness she didn't intend. "There's nothing for you to worry about."

Instantly sensitive to her tone, Mrs. Stitt flushed a deep crimson and looked down awkwardly at her hands. "You're right, Miss Blanche," she said, "it's none of my business. I guess I just ought to learn to keep my big

mouth shut.”

Blanche reached out in quick distress. “Oh, Edna—no! I appreciate your concern. I honestly do, more than you know, but——” Sensing, she thought, some subtle shifting of the shadows out in the hall, she broke off. After a moment’s hesitation, she returned her gaze to Mrs. Stitt. “Where’s Jane?”

“Downstairs.” Mrs. Stitt spoke absently, still absorbed in her own embarrassment. “Miss Blanche, I apologize. I shouldn’t have butted in like this. I knew I shouldn’t when I started in, but—well, if you’ll just try to forget it...”

“Oh, please, Edna, I don’t want to worry about it. You haven’t done anything wrong.” She felt a strong anxiety to have the woman leave the room and be away from her. “You really haven’t.”

“Anyhow, I thought you’d want the letters—I thought you’d be glad to have them.”

“Oh, I am! But I’m sure it was just a mistake, Jane’s throwing them out. I’m sure of it.”

Nodding, Mrs. Stitt edged toward the door. “Well,” she said uneasily, “if I’m ever going to get finished up, I’d better get back downstairs.” At the doorway she hesitated, turned back. “Oh, yes, I guess I’d better tell you now. I can’t come but in the morning next Friday. I have to go downtown about jury duty. They’ll let me off all right, because I have to make my own living. But I have to go down when they say just the same.”

Blanche smiled. “Of course, Edna.”

“But I can come on Monday morning, too—just for the morning—if that’s all right with you? That ought to be some help...”

“That’ll be fine,” Blanche said hastily. “Thank you for telling me.”

For a long moment after Mrs. Stitt had gone Blanche sat in brooding silence, her previous mood of well-being completely gone. She started to turn back to the window, but stopped, thinking she detected, a second time, some slight movement out in the hall. And then, remembering the letters, she gathered them up from her lap and slipped them into her pocket.

Leaving her hand against the letters for comfort, she tried to calm herself. Even so, she heard a distant voice screaming faintly against some obscure inner ear.

I got the talent! it cried. Even if nobody cared... And I’ve still got it!

3

I'm sorry," the voice on the telephone said. "Mr. Hanley is talking to a client right now. May I take a message?"

"Well, no—except that I called—Blanche Hudson. My number——"

"Oh, Miss Hudson—if it's anything urgent, I know Mr. Hanley will want me to call him."

"Oh, no. No, it's nothing urgent at all. But I would like to talk to him when he's free."

"Surely, Miss Hudson. I'll have him call you back. Probably within a half an hour. Is that all right?"

"Yes, perfectly," Blanche said. And then she paused. "Oh—well, you might just tell him I've decided to sell the house. That should surprise him. Tell him I'm ready to sell to the first buyer."

The voice on the phone took on a slightly puzzled tone. "All right, I'll tell him. And I'll have him call you."

Blanche said good-bye and then, just as she was going to hang up, hesitated, listening. Though the secretary had already hung up, there was still a sound of contact on the line, a faint, whispered breathing. It continued for a moment or two and then, with a faint click, disappeared.

With a frown of concern Blanche lifted the phone from her lap and placed it on the desk. She had purposely brought it into her room from the hallway so that Jane wouldn't overhear her from downstairs. There was no really good reason for this, she supposed, or none at least of which she was consciously aware. It just seemed better to discuss the matter of selling the house privately with Bert before mentioning it to Jane. There was time enough to tell Jane when she was sure of what actually could be done. Then, too, there was no telling; with Jane in her present state, the idea of moving might upset her all the more.

There was no sense, either, in being annoyed with Jane for eavesdropping; even confronted with it she would only deny it and then do it again at the very first opportunity. But it was annoying, knowing that from now on all her telephone conversations would be monitored from downstairs. Also she wondered—and with a faint feeling of apprehension—what Jane’s reaction to selling the house might actually be, now that she knew. Turning her chair to face the window, Blanche let her eyes trace the intricate pattern of the grillwork against the sharp blue of the sky. Circles within circles, strong straight lines swerving off suddenly, tapering away into nothing. Like life itself. Like reason and unreason.... Blanche cast the thought from her, pulling her gaze quickly back into the room.

She looked back at the phone, suddenly certain in her own mind that Jane, having come upon the information about selling the house as she had, would surely oppose the idea. From experience Blanche knew that anything originating with her at the moment was sure to meet with Jane’s automatic disapproval. And anything that Blanche had planned in secret—well, there were bound to be repercussions from that!

Blanche curled her hands tightly around the arms of her chair. She had made up her mind; she was determined. She only had to think of some way to allay Jane’s opposition before it began. If she could just make Jane believe that she herself opposed the plan. If she could make her think that Bert was forcing a sale against her own objection... for financial reasons...

She nodded to herself, certain she had found the right way to win Jane over. Once Jane believed Blanche was against selling the house, she would support the idea. At least she wouldn’t bother to make a fuss about it. Blanche looked across to the push button fixed to the side of the bedside table. Frowning, she started in that direction. And then, abruptly, she stopped and turned her head toward the open doorway:

*“Oh, the postman, he won’t mind,
'Cause Mama says that heaven’s
near.
Tho’ you’ve left us both behind,
I am writing, Daddy, dear.
I l-o-v-e you!”*

As the song echoed with distant and terrible sweetness up the stairway

and into the room, Blanche remained perfectly still, listening. Eyes closed, she simply sat there, as if transfixed, and then a slight shudder passed through her wasted body.

She stood in the center of the room, a squat pudding of a woman in a soiled cotton house dress patterned with faded lilacs and daffodils. On her feet she wore flat-heeled sandals of red patent leather and bobby socks of pale pink. Above the rolled tops of the socks the whitish flesh of her age-thickened legs was heavily scored with broken blue veins. In the dyed, cherry-red ringlets of her hair was an enormous satin bow of such a vivid blue that even there in the dimness it seemed to generate a radiance all its own. Posing her hands close to her face, almost in an attitude of prayer, she assumed an expression of mawkish sweetness.

“Now, when I’m very good,” she recited, “An’ I do jus’ as I’m told...”

Across the room, her reflection, captured with merciful softness in the wall-length mirror, postured just as sweetly and mouthed the words back at her:

“I’m Mama’s li’l angel, Pa says I’m good as gold.”

The room, when it was built, had been intended as a rehearsal room for Blanche, a room in which she could practice the scenes, the songs and dances she would be required to perform in her pictures. Blanche had been intent upon her career; the room had been her own idea.

After Blanche’s accident, the room had, of course, lost its reason for being and as a consequence had remained, through the years, almost totally untouched. The hardwood floor had never been carpeted, the baby grand piano remained angled carefully into the corner next to the windows where the keyboard would catch the light. The iron sconces on the walls still contained, at the ends of short mock candles, orange-tinted bulbs shaped to resemble fat, pointed flames. The mirrored wall, through the years, had reflected little but dim emptiness and silently settling dust.

Jane, however, had found a use of her own for the room. Here it was that she came at intervals to seek the lost moments of her childhood and to escape the harsh disillusionment of the gathering years. Often at twilight she came into the room to sit, not on the piano bench which was the only seat in the room, but on the floor. Narrowing her eyes to abet the deception of the lowering light, she would gaze deeply and steadily into the mirror across the room until she had summoned from its false depths that fragment

of the past which she sought. Most often, as she sat there, the mirror was transformed slowly into the ocean, and the floor upon which she sat, cross-legged, as a child would sit playing a child's game, was the beach. Suddenly, then it was summer. It was vacation time. There was the sound of the rolling surf. And her father was nearby.

Don't stay in the sun too long, sweetheart! We can't have the star of the family down with sunburn!

He called out to her from the porch of the cottage, his face anxious, as always for her safety and well-being.

Don't go out too far out, Janie! A big wave might come up and carry you off!

That was her favorite daydream, the one about the beach and the ocean. Sometimes she could sit there on the floor for a solid hour, just listening to the breaking of the waves and the sound of her father's voice. Lately, though, she found herself more forcefully drawn to another part of the past. She had brought out all the old scrapbooks, full of her pictures and clippings, and the music and recitations that she had performed on the stage.

"But when I'm very bad..."

Suddenly remembering the line that had escaped her, she placed her hands flatly on her hips, spread her feet wide apart to achieve a stance of aggressive tomboy belligerence. Her voice was lowered to a strained and unconvincing bass.

"An' I answer back and sass..."

Her sagging, child's face took on an expression of frowning, contracted evil. She wagged her head back and forth in a show of pert defiance, and the twin wattles of her jowls loosely echoed the absurd motion, as did the preposterous bow nested in her garish curls.

"Then Ma says I'm a devil..."

Holding out one blunt, pointing finger, she shook it in a demonstration of a child's impression of stern parental remonstrance.

"Pa says I've got my brass..."

Dropping her hands and folding them before her in a gesture of angelic composure, she took a precise step forward, as to a row of footlights, and addressed her mirrored self with a look of round-eyed enquiry.

"Now I wish you'd please to tell me, Since I'm much too young to know..."

The sound of a buzzer gritted into the room from the direction of the

hallway outside, and she broke off. She frowned, and in the mirror her reflected self frowned back. Making no further move, she remained perfectly still where she was, listening. There followed a prolonged interval of silence and then, like the sound of some angry and determined insect, the buzzer sounded again. At that, she whirled about. Yanking the ribbon from her hair, scowling, she hurled it across the room where it struck the curved side of the piano and dropped to the floor.

Crossing to the door, she hurled it open and glared out into the dim enclosure of the hallway. To her right, in the direction of the kitchen, the buzzer sounded again. After a brief pause, she turned back into the room, crossed swiftly to the piano, lifted the protective lid on the keyboard. Quite deliberately and with all the petulant force she could muster she slammed it closed again. The resultant sound, a discordant crash, radiated noisomely out into the hallway and beyond into the other parts of the house.

Jane turned her gaze upward, listening as the discord fell away into silence. The buzzer did not sound again. Looking back into the mirror, tilting her head into an attitude of arch coquetry, she affected a smile of vapid prettiness. Then, with a brief bobbing curtsy, she let the smile drop quickly away. Turning, she left the room, entered the hallway and moved in the direction of the kitchen. As she did so, her eyes again lifted toward the ceiling in the direction of Blanche's room, catching the light, it seemed, with a kind of hard brightness.

A few minutes later, when she re-entered the hallway, she was carrying a large lacquered lunch tray covered with a spotless white napkin. Moving briskly past the door to the rehearsal room, she entered the living room, a large, long room with a high vaulted ceiling and faced along the west wall with a stairway leading up to a shallow hanging gallery. Opposite the stairway was a tall, ornate fireplace of pink Italian marble. The front wall of the room was punctuated closely with tall French windows arched at the top, and at one end by the front door, a heavy, intricately paneled slab of dark mahogany. Through the windows could be seen a narrow concrete terrace with a marble balustrade from the center of which a set of steep steps descended to the innermost curve of a circular drive.

The room was furnished with a conglomerate mixture of colors and styles. Before the fireplace stood an enormous, gaping divan of faded green velvet, the front surfaces of the arms decorated with rectangles of elaborately carved wood. Adjacent to this was a matching chair, and

between the two crouched a coffee table of gleaming blond wood. Against the inner wall of the stairway stood a heavy, carved library table, and next to that a matching chair with a leather seat. Breaking the tall opening of one of the French windows was a television set, of white plastic smaller than the one in Blanche's room. The drapes, bunched thickly between the windows, were of a gaudy rose-splashed fabric which was painfully at war with the rug, a large, intricately patterned oblong of rich Oriental reds and blues. From within the boundaries of a gleaming silver frame on the mantel, the blonde girl with the lovely sooty eyes smiled down upon the scene with an expression of fixed emptiness.

Making her way across the room, Jane started up the stairs, propelling her stocky body upward with separate, angry, forward thrusts. Now the great, glamorous movie star wanted her lunch—the great star of the silver screen who thought that just because her silly old pictures were showing on television she could start shoving people around again....

At the sound of Jane's footsteps on the stairs, Blanche turned her chair quickly toward the open doorway. She would have to be very careful. She would have to consider everything she said very carefully. Once Jane was allowed to take a position on the matter of selling the house, there would be no budging her. She had always been stubborn in her notions, absolutely unmovable. Blanche's hand gripped the arm of her chair as Jane neared the doorway.

With no glance in Blanche's direction, Jane carried the tray into the room and put it down on the desk with a deliberate abruptness, so as to produce a small angry clattering of china and silver. Immediately, she turned and started out again, but Blanche, moving forward, held out a hand to detain her.

"Jane..." Even to herself her voice sounded thin and unnatural. "Jane, I wasn't ringing for lunch—thank you for bringing it—but there's something I want to—to discuss with you."

At the doorway Jane turned and looked back, her eyes dull now and unrevealing. For a moment Blanche could only stare at her, at the dumpy, defeated figure in the shapeless dress, at the preposterous dyed hair with its hard reddish sheen, and at the childish face seamed with age and bitterness. Seeing all this—compelled somehow at this moment to see it—Blanche was filled with a curious mixture of fear and pity. She turned her gaze

downward to her hands.

“Jane, I’m afraid I’ve had some bad news. There have been certain reverses lately—financial reverses, you understand, and—according to Bert Hanley we’re going to have to give up this house. I’ve already——” She paused, aware of a subtle quickening in Jane’s attitude. “I should have told you sooner, I know that, but Bert kept thinking that things might change and _____”

“When did you talk to Bert Hanley?”

Startled Blanche glanced up to find the dark eyes full upon her, level, alive, waiting, and she felt a sudden breathlessness.

“Why—it was last week, it seems to me....”

Jane, staring at her unblinkingly, just perceptibly shook her head. “Bert Hanley didn’t call here last week. And you didn’t call him. I know.”

“I—well, no, we didn’t talk on the phone,” Blanche fumbled. “He wrote me a letter, actually. But that doesn’t make any difference....”

Again Jane shook her head. “He didn’t write any letter, either. There hasn’t been a letter from his office since——”

“Yes, Jane, yes, there was!”

“I bring in the mail,” Jane said with maddening evenness. “I guess I’d know.”

Blanche’s face, by now, was hot with embarrassment. She moistened her lips nervously. “Then it must have come sometime before. He sent it with our allowance check.”

“That was nearly a month ago. This month’s check is almost due. Why _____?”

“Jane,” Blanche broke in desperately, “it doesn’t matter when or how I heard from Bert. That’s not what we’re talking about. The point is...”

Before Jane’s merciless gaze, her voice fell weakly away into silence. A faint smile, it seemed, tugged at the corners of Jane’s mouth like a fleeting shadow.

“You’re lying,” she said calmly, flatly. “You’re just a liar, Blanche.”

Blanche started forward in her chair, but then the telephone shrilled and she looked around in a quick, convulsive movement toward the desk. The sound came so suddenly and so shockingly that she was unable even to get her chair into motion before Jane came back into the room and snatched up the telephone.

“Jane!”

Undeterred, Jane carried the phone from the room out into the hallway. With the briefest backward glance, she picked up the receiver. “Hello?” she enquired.

Too astonished to make any further protest Blanche listened in numb helplessness.

“Oh?... No.... No, she’s not here right now.... Oh, no, that’s not so at all.... Well, she’s mistaken; she isn’t interested at all.... Oh, yes, I’m sure. ... Of course I am.... Well, then she’s changed her mind, so you can just forget it.... Oh, yes, I will if you want me to.... Oh, I’m sure all right, I’m positive.... Yes... Yes, I will.... All right, if you want—but... Yes.... All right, then.... Good-bye.”

Replacing the receiver, she put the instrument back on the stand from which Blanche had first taken it. Turning, she started toward the gallery and the stairs.

“Jane!”

As Blanche moved her chair forward, Jane reappeared in the doorway, her eyes enormous with innocent enquiry.

“That was Bert on the phone, wasn’t it?”

For a long moment Jane simply stood there. Then, finally, she shook her head. “It was one of those women who advertise on the phone. Something about having the furniture reupholstered. I said you weren’t interested.”

“But you said I had changed my mind. Jane, I know you’re not——”

“She said you were on their interested list,” Jane explained blandly, “but of course she was lying.” Again the faintest shadow of a smile touched the corners of her mouth. “If I were you, I wouldn’t wear myself out talking to people on the phone.”

“Jane...”

“Any other calls—I’ll take them downstairs—so you won’t have to talk to anyone.”

“Jane, please...”

But Jane had already moved off into the dimness, and Blanche knew she would not turn back.

Rolling her chair to the doorway, she sat looking out at the phone. It was Bert who had called. There wasn’t the least bit of doubt in her mind about that. And there wasn’t any doubt, either, that Jane had warned her not to try to call Bert back. But suppose she defied her and called anyway? What would Jane do? Blanche’s gaze fell briefly to her withered legs and then

moved away again. The silence there in the old house seemed almost to congeal and contract around her. With a feeling of sudden panic, she turned back into her room.

She spent a long moment reasoning with herself, scolding herself back into a state of calmness. How silly to be upset by Jane's shenanigans. At this late date! Nothing so terrible had happened. Jane had always been like this, always trying to worry her and frighten her. When they were little girls, Jane had repeatedly taken her toys from her and withheld them—just as she had taken the phone from her now by threat.

She was simply allowing herself to get into a nervous state over nothing. And she knew what she must do—she would wait for a bit and then, when she was fully composed and sure of herself, she would call Bert and tell him what had happened. And Jane—well, let her do her worst.

She turned her chair toward the window, stopping it in mid-turn as her eye was caught by the sight of the lunch tray on the desk. Lunch. Yes, that was a good idea. First, she would have her lunch. She would eat slowly and calmly and get herself completely under control. She would relax as she ate and forget all about the incident with the phone—and her abortive attempt to “explain” to Jane about selling the house. And afterward, allowing the proper interval for digestion, she would go straight to the phone and call.

In a mood of self-congratulation she moved her chair toward the desk. She was being very sensible, keeping her emotions admirably in check. And the more she thought of it, too, the more she began to see that this morning's upset was at least partly due to yesterday's discussion with Mrs. Stitt. Well, she would just let that be a lesson to her. Henceforth, she would turn a deaf ear to the alarms of others; she would refuse absolutely to give audience to tales out of school.

With the beginning of a smile on her lips, Blanche reached out to the tray, picked up the cloth and pulled it away. Instantly the smile fell from her face, and her hand froze in mid-air. Her eyes stared from a face white with shock. She darted a hand to her mouth, to stifle the scream that was already rising in her throat.

It seemed ages that she sat there staring at the dreadful thing on the plate, at the bird stiff with death that lay there before her, returning her gaze of horror from empty eye sockets. It had been a small bird, a sparrow or robin and it had lain so long in death that it had gone even beyond the state of putrefaction. All that remained, really, were a few matted feathers, some

of the thin parchmentlike skin and the delicate white bones. This, with macabre deliberation, had been placed at the center of a carefully arranged ring of lettuce, and upon the back of the corpse had been obscenely spattered a thick dab of mayonnaise. Beside the plate, resting on a napkin bearing Blanche's initials, were a precisely placed knife and fork.

4

The shadows of evening had begun to gather thickly around her, and on the carpet the patterned oblong of light from the window had started to lengthen and fade. The worst of her terror had passed now, but only the worst of it, only the cold, white sting of panic. She was still unable to hold her gaze for long away from the dreadful tray on the desk no matter how much the sight of it sickened her.

Mercifully it was covered, though she had no recollection of having replaced the cloth. The moment following the one in which she had first seen the horror on the tray had passed in a sick, tumultuous blur. It was as if that small space of time had been completely lost to her; the next thing she remembered she was out in the hallway at the phone frantically dialing Dr. Shelby's number.

Instinct, perhaps, had prompted her to call the doctor, or she may have recalled Mrs. Stitt's insistence that she consult the doctor about Jane. She had not stopped, though, to consider her motives. Dialing the number, she had pressed the receiver to her ear and breathlessly waited.

Had she not been so nearly in a state of shock, she would have known instantly that something was wrong. As it was, fully half a minute passed before she realized that the phone was dead.

At first she simply couldn't believe it; it was impossible that the instrument should fail her just when she needed it so desperately. And then, with a new start of panic, she understood what had happened; Jane had taken the phone downstairs off the hook to prevent her calling out. At the same moment that this disquieting bit of knowledge came into her mind, she became aware, as before, of the soft sound of breathing on the line.

A moment passed, two. The breathing continued, marking Jane's listening presence there at the phone in the lower hallway. Blanche shook

her head in frightened disbelief. It was insane. As insane, nearly as—as making a salad of a dead bird.

“Jane!” she cried out suddenly. “Jane——!”

The sound of her voice struck sharply against the silence there in the hallway, broke and shattered it. She fell back aghast at what she had done. Quickly, thrusting the receiver from her, she dropped it into its cradle and turned away. She looked back into her room and it was then that she saw, with an audible sigh of relief, that she had covered the tray with the cloth.

The afternoon had passed as an unreal, sunlit nightmare, and Blanche, shrinking from the crystalline brightness that poured in at the window, had cowered in the false safety of the shadows by her bed. Forced upon her was the realization that Jane, having terrorized her, had also made her a helpless prisoner.

But why? Blanche asked herself. For what possible purpose? That was the worst of it, not knowing what dark inspiration lay behind this strange program of terror. Did Jane mean only to frighten her? Was this her way to voice a protest against selling the house? Or was it meant as a warning? These questions, no matter how they repeated themselves over and over in her mind, remained unanswered.

Jane wouldn't hurt her, wouldn't do her physical violence; Blanche felt certain of that. Jane would never do anything, surely, to increase the awful burden of guilt she had borne all these years since the accident. There was nothing, Blanche told herself, really to fear.

There in the shadows, she kept a book in her lap so that she could pretend to be calmly reading if Jane should suddenly appear. Knowing full well that she hadn't the courage yet to confront Jane openly and demand the meaning of this horror, she had decided that when Jane did come into the room, it would be best to pretend not to have lifted the cloth at all, not to have seen the odious display beneath. If Jane should ask, she would simply say she hadn't been hungry. Tomorrow when she was feeling more collected, she would insist that they discuss the matter fully and openly.

Mercifully, through the afternoon Jane had not come near the room, or even upstairs to the second floor. There had been occasional sounds of movement from down below, but nothing in any way extraordinary or alarming. Now, however, with the coming of twilight, the sounds grew louder and more frequent. And then, almost exactly at the moment when the last faint traces of daylight faded from the room, Jane's footsteps

approached with sudden briskness through the lower hallway and across the living room to the stairs.

Blanche reached out quickly to the bedside lamp and switched it on, commanding herself at the same time to be calm and composed. She watched shudderingly as the circle of light dashed itself out into the room, reaching, it seemed, with soft fingers for the desk and the repugnant tray.

She could not guess what Jane's attitude might be, what she might say or do. Taking up the book from her lap, she propped it firmly against the arm of her chair in an effort to hold it steady.

When Jane came into the room, Blanche kept her eyes rigidly lowered to the book. Even so, she felt the panic rise again within her, suddenly, sharply. In an effort to hold it back, she told herself that she must not let herself be hysterical. There was nothing, really, to be frightened about. Nonetheless her hands tightened their hold upon the book, as if in an effort to brace her entire being against the assault of any word or gesture that might come from Jane's direction.

Jane, meanwhile, showed no inclination at all toward communicativeness. Carrying a new tray—Blanche's dinner tray this time—she crossed directly to the desk and put it down beside the one already there.

At the corner of Blanche's eye there appeared two monstrous mounds of white horror in the shadows beyond the reach of the light. And then, taking up the dreadful lunch tray, Jane, still without a glance in Blanche's direction, turned and made her way out of the room. Not until her footsteps had faded off down the stairs did Blanche let the book fall from her trembling hands back into her lap.

The white-shrouded tray loomed sharply out of the dimness, seeming to swell in size and grow enormous. She closed her eyes against the sight, but it was still there before her in the darkness of her mind. And then she paused, sniffing the air around her. Was there an odor? Of warm food? Of roasted meat? She opened her eyes and sniffed again. This time Jane had brought her a proper meal. She started hesitantly forward, but stopped again, abruptly, as the odor suddenly soured in her nostrils and became the stink of death and decaying flesh. She leaned forward and lowered her head into her hands, fearful that she was going to be sick.

And then, slowly, it came to her—the reason why Jane was doing this to her. She meant to kill her, to starve her to death! She intended to create in

Blanche so strong a terror of what she would find on the trays at mealtime that she would not dare to go near them. Blanche was certain of it; it was exactly the sort of diabolical scheme that would appeal to Jane. In time she would be able to bring perfectly good meals into the room, just as before, and be assured that Blanche would refuse to eat them or even go near them. And in the end, when Blanche died of starvation in the midst of plenty, who would ever think to blame Jane?

Blanche returned her gaze to the covered tray on the desk. She was not mistaken in this conjecture; she was positive she wasn't. She and Jane were embarked upon a weird and deadly kind of guessing game. Each tray brought in from now on would contain either some monstrous horror like the dead bird or a perfectly good meal. It was up to Blanche to try to guess which was which. Her eyes fixed upon the tray, Blanche reached out to the wheel of her chair and began again to move forward. At least she knew now the kind of madness she was up against. That helped.

Within three feet of the desk she stopped. Leaning forward, she studied the confirmation of the white cloth over the tray, trying to determine what lay beneath it. The highest protuberance was surely a glass, a tumbler, but there was no clue to anything else. The odor now was much stronger, but it still alternated in her mind and upon her senses, first as the smell of roasted meat and then as the stench of moldering decay.

Forcing herself closer, she leaned forward and reached out her hand. But then she pulled it back sharply, thinking she had seen a movement, a faint, flickering alteration in the white folds of the cloth. She told herself it was only a trick of the light, the shadow of her moving hand. But her imagination had already begun to conjure up new horrors, things much worse than the dead bird at lunchtime. It insisted that the tray contained something alive—a live rat, writhing and kicking in a trap! Returning her hand to the wheel of her chair, she began to back away again toward the shadows.

For a moment she sat, breathless, watching the tray for further signs of movement, but there were none.

Of course not, she scolded herself, angry with herself now for being a frightened, weak-willed fool, *what nonsense! There's nothing alive under that cloth. Fool! You've simply worked yourself into another state of blind panic.*

Very deliberately she took a long, deep breath and let it out again. Yes,

she had been giving away to panic, and quite long enough, too. One brooding eccentric in the house was enough. She made herself face around to the tray again, made herself look at it steadily.

There was the possibility that she was right about Jane's plan to starve her through terror. But only the possibility. It could just as easily be that Jane was only behaving in accordance with some distorted, childish impulse that had no precise meaning at all. In either case the thing to do was simply to refuse to be terrified, to return to the tray and remove the cloth and determine once and for all whether it contained her dinner or another horror. Even if it should turn out to be the worst of the things she feared, the shock could not possibly be as great as it had been the first time. Now she was forewarned.

Steeling herself, she moved back again toward the desk. She had not covered more than half the distance, however, when she stopped. She sat for a moment staring straight ahead and then all at once she collapsed forward and buried her face in her hands. She couldn't do it. Suddenly she knew it. She simply hadn't the courage; Jane had won. Convulsively, helplessly she began to sob.

The first light of dawn, coming into the room by deflection, had been gray and oppressive, and Blanche, still huddled, as she had been through the night, in her wheel chair, had been fearful that the day would not be fine. Poor weather would spoil everything.

Since the dawn, however, she had dozed, and now, with the passing of more than three hours, there had been a sufficient gathering of warmth and brightness to reassure her. Turning, she looked back toward the door into the hallway. It was still closed. And the tray on the desk was still there. Jane, then, had not come into the room while she was asleep. She looked back toward the clock on the bedstand. It was nearing nine o'clock, now, the hour when Mrs. Bates usually made the first of her two daily visits to the garden.

Moving her chair as close as possible to the window, she set the brake. That done, she gripped the arms of the chair and started to pull herself up and forward. Bracing herself with her right leg, the one that still contained some slight glimmering of life, she managed slowly to raise herself just up a bit and out of the chair. Craning to see, she peered down into the garden below. It was deserted. The house, at the far end of the garden, was still

closed; the blinds were still drawn on the French doors. With a faint sigh of impatience, Blanche let herself back into her chair.

The fear and panic which had kept her awake through most of the night had begun to be dimmed with the coming of the small, still hours of the morning. Exhaustion notwithstanding, as the grip of fear had begun to relax its hold upon her mind and body, she had begun to think and reason more clearly. She had seen that even without the telephone there was still a way to summon assistance.

No sooner had the idea come to her than she had gotten a pad of note paper and a pencil and gone to work.

Mrs. Bates (she had written in a wide, agitated scrawl) This is from your neighbor, Blanche Hudson. I am forced to ask your help in a very serious matter. For reasons I cannot explain in this note, I am not able to use my telephone. As I need desperately to reach my doctor, I am asking you to call him for me. His name is Dr. Warren Shelby, and his office number is OL 6-5541. Please ask him to come here to my home to see me as quickly as possible. Tell him not to call beforehand but just to come. Please do this for me. It is a matter of life and death.

She had signed the note with her initials and then added a postscript: *Please do not, under any circumstances, disturb my sister about this matter.*

When she had finished it, she had folded it over carefully and put it in the right-hand pocket of her robe, where it would be handy when she needed it. Almost immediately afterward, with the relief of having put into progress a plan that she was confident would work, she finally dozed off.

And then she dreamed.

In her dream she had been a little girl again, five or six years old, and she had been walking with her mother along a deserted stretch of beach in the late afternoon. As they walked, the waves reached toward them from across the sloping sand, rolling up and up, falling, crashing, growing darker as the minutes passed, with approaching dusk. A soft mist had risen from the water and was beginning to drift up toward the row of small wooden summer cottages on the rise. Little Blanche clung tightly to her mother's hand, for the way ahead was blurred by her own tears.

Actually it had been a fragment from the past, less dreamed than remembered, for once long ago it had been a part of something that had really happened.

It had all begun earlier that afternoon, out on the porch where Jane and

her father were practicing.

The daily practice period was religiously maintained in order to keep Jane “in shape,” even during her month of holiday, and to prepare new material for the fall bookings. It took place between the hours of two and four and was held out on the porch, according to their father’s explanation, so that Jane might take full advantage of the healthful salt air. If, at the same time, a large number of onlookers was attracted from the ranks of the casual visitors on the beach, and from the tenants of the adjacent cottages, neither he nor Jane seemed especially to mind.

During these sessions, Blanche, chubby and tanned in her sagging blue-and-white-striped bathing suit, was permitted to attend, but only as one of the spectators. Her designated place was at the side of the porch, far to the right and close behind her father’s chair from which he provided Jane’s musical accompaniment on a magnificent five-string banjo. It was firmly understood that Jane’s work period was to be regarded always with respect and solemn sobriety; Blanche was suffered to remain and watch only on the strict admonition that she was to be absolutely silent. It was also understood that any interference would result in instantaneous banishment.

For some time little Blanche had begun to find it increasingly difficult to stand by the terms of this agreement. Watching Jane perform her songs and dances before the rapt stares of her porchside audience, she felt within herself a burgeoning desire to share at least a ray of Jane’s bright spotlight. It had come into her bright young head that, if she just wanted to, she could sing and dance every bit as good as dumb old Jane—and probably a whole lot better. All you had to do was jump around a lot and wave your hands and make faces. And anyone could do that. The hand of temptation, at first, merely beckoned and then, when Blanche still resisted, it took her by the scruff of the neck and thrust her helplessly forward.

The ring of the banjo loud in her ears, Blanche darted out suddenly from behind her father’s chair and joined Jane, forthwith, in the dance. Jumping violently up and down, she shook her head and waved her arms in an idiot frenzy of excitement. And then, breaking into a kind of mad jig, she suddenly embellished her performance with a series of cries that sounded, approximately, like Indian war whoops.

It was a performance that demanded—and got—the instantaneous and complete attention of all concerned, and though the banjo music came to an abrupt stop, Blanche’s dance did not. Spurred on to new heights by a roar of

laughter from the onlookers, she lolled her tongue out of her mouth and shook her head so hard from side to side that for a moment it seemed in peril of flying loose from her neck. And then, in the next instant, retribution befell her; a hand struck her stingingly across the face, and another caught at her hair and pulled it so hard that she was thrown to the floor. Jane's voice shrilled close to her ear.

"Go away! You go away, you—go away, *go away!*"

Then a larger, harder hand, her father's, was around her arm, jerking her dizzily to her feet.

"What do you think you're trying to do?" her father roared. "What's got into you?"

Blanche looked up dazedly into his flushed and furious face, and for a moment she was assailed by a terrible feeling of sickness. At the same time she was aware of Jane standing close beside her, arms akimbo, breathing heavily with exertion and righteous indignation.

"You can't dance, you dirty little fatty! Who ever said you could!"

And then her father led her swiftly across the porch and down the steps to the sand. "Now you just run along, Missy," he said coldly, "and don't come back until you're ready to behave yourself and leave poor Janie alone."

Blanche had stumbled away, around the corner of the house, out of sight of the tittering onlookers. At the rear of the house, she had taken shelter beneath the wooden steps leading down from the back porch, and there in their shade, hugging herself tight, she had wept.

Nearly two hours later her mother found her and taking her hand, led her out along the dusk-dimmed beach. Out of sight of the cottage they stopped. Her mother, sitting down on a rock that jutted up out of the sand, drew her close.

"You mustn't mind, sweetheart," her mother told her. "You must try to find some way not to. Your daddy didn't really mean it, not the way it seemed, he didn't. It's just that he has to give Jane a lot of special attention that he doesn't give to you—or even to me—because of her work. We owe such a lot to Jane, you know, all of us. If it weren't for her we wouldn't have all the nice things we have. You wouldn't have all your nice, pretty clothes. We wouldn't be able to come here and live by the ocean in the summer. We'd miss—oh, so many nice things. Janie works very hard for us—and for you, too, dear." Her mother lifted her chin gently with the tip of

her finger and gazed deeply for a moment into her eyes. "But you're the lucky one, sweetheart, you really and truly are, if you only knew it. You'll see one day. And when you do, you must remember to be kinder to Jane and your father than they are to you now. Do you understand at all?"

Not really understanding but anxious to please her mother, Blanche nodded. "Uh-huh," she murmured. I—I guess so...."

"I wish you did, my love; oh, I wish you really did."

In all the long years since, Blanche had not thought about that moment on the beach until now, and she wondered why it should suddenly have come into her mind with such clarity. Thinking back, she could even remember that her mother had been wearing a dress of pale blue voile, decorated with delicate ivory-colored embroidery. Shaking her head with sad astonishment, Blanche freed herself of this reverie and looked around toward the door. She listened closely, but there was still no sound to indicate that Jane was up yet and about.

Turning back to the window, she strained up again out of her chair. This time, thrusting herself sharply forward, she reached out, grasped the grillwork and pulled herself up until she was almost in a standing position. Peering down into the garden, she frowned with disappointment; it was still deserted.

She felt a small flutter of anxiety; perhaps something had happened. Maybe Mrs. Bates had been taken ill during the night and was confined indoors. Or she might have been called away by some emergency. It was beginning to be so late now....

Her gaze flew out suddenly to the house at the end of the garden as one of the French doors swung open, and Mrs. Bates, as if making her appearance at just that moment deliberately to point out to Blanche the foolishness of her overwrought conjecture, emerged placidly onto the lawn. Dressed as always in her smock and straw hat she paused, glanced down the length of the garden with evident satisfaction and then crossed to the faucet to turn it on. Blanche, pulling herself closer to the grillwork, reached eagerly into her pocket for the note.

But then, thinking that she had perhaps heard a sound from somewhere out in the hallway, she pulled her hand quickly away again. She looked around toward the door and finding it still closed turned back to the garden and Mrs. Bates. For a long moment she was perfectly still, her actions suspended in indecision. If she dropped the note out the window now, Mrs.

Bates was still far enough away that she might not notice. But if she waited to drop it, and Jane came into the room before she'd had the chance.... Then the sound came again from the hallway, more certainly this time, and her decision was made for her; letting go of the grillwork, she shoved herself back and dropped down into her chair.

She had only just managed to get her chair away from the window and turned around when the door opened and Jane shuffled into view.

Jane was wearing her usual morning costume, an old wrapper of quilted and badly soiled white satin. Her dyed hair was in the same state of wild disarray as it had been when she had first awakened and gotten out of bed, and on her feet she wore the red patent-leather sandals. Evidently she had been up and moving quietly about the house for some time, for as she entered, Blanche saw that she was carrying another covered tray. She paused for a moment just inside the door and glanced hastily about the room with eyes still so puffed with sleep they were barely more than slits. Blanche slipped her hand down to her pocket and held it protectively over the note to Mrs. Bates.

Jane put the breakfast tray down on the desk and with no sign of any special interest took up the one from the evening before and moved back toward the door. Just as she was starting from the room, however, she paused, looked back at the tray she had just left and then down at the one she was carrying.

Blanche could not tell whether Jane's glance had moved in her direction or not; there had simply been a quick stirring of the slitted eyelids and no more. And then, as if in a mood of sudden decision, Jane crossed back to the tray on the desk, reached out to the cloth and pulled it aside. As she did so Blanche quickly averted her eyes.

She remained quite still, even after Jane's footsteps had faded away through the hallway and down the stairs. But then, knowing that she would have to sooner or later, she made herself turn and look in the direction of the desk.

For a moment she could only stare. She had been so certain that she was to be confronted with a sight of sickening repugnance that it was several moments before her mind adjusted to the fact that what she was staring at was only her usual breakfast, a poached egg, orange juice, buttered toast and tea.

From below stairs came the familiar sounds of Jane going about the

business of getting her own breakfast just as usual.

Just as usual. The phrase leapt out at her from the bulk of her thoughts, presenting itself before her in sharp definition. *Just as usual*, Jane had brought her breakfast which, *just as usual*, was the same breakfast she had every day. And now, *just as usual*, Jane was downstairs fixing her own breakfast. In the face of so much “usualness,” the terror of the afternoon and night before seemed suddenly to pale. With a lagging glance toward the door, she reached into her pocket and took from it the note she had written in the dark, haunted reaches of the night:

... forced to ask your help... a very serious matter... need desperately to reach my doctor... as quickly as possible... a matter of life and death... Please... please... please...

Her eyes skimmed the note, then turned back to the open window. After the sight of poor Jane, poor futile-looking Jane, in her dirty wrapper, with her messy hair and her swollen eyes, the note seemed wildly melodramatic. But still... With an air of resolution she wheeled herself back to the window, boosted herself up out of the chair and reached for the grillwork.

Down below Mrs. Bates had nearly reached the flower beds beneath the window. She approached them from the left, taking great care to give ample water to the hedge that fronted along the street. Blanche drew the note forward to the grille and waited. She had thought it out carefully; unless Mrs. Bates actually saw the note falling she might assume it was only a scrap of paper which had blown into the yard during the night and overlook it. She would have to wait, then, until the woman was fully turned in her direction. Holding herself upright, Blanche tried, as she waited, to project herself into Mrs. Bates’s mind; she tried to imagine the woman’s first reaction when she saw the note fluttering down from the window, what she would think when she picked it up and read it.

Naturally she would be surprised. But then—after that first moment of surprise—would she think it was some sort of joke? Oh, no, no, she couldn’t do that! Not with a note that said someone needed a doctor. But would she be willing to take the responsibility of calling the doctor as the note asked? She might be one of those women too shy or too cautious to take a hand in the affairs of their neighbors. Actually Blanche knew nothing of Mrs. Bates; she had no clue at all to the sort of person she might be. Craning forward, she studied the figure down below more closely. Suppose she was the kind of woman who liked always to be at the center of the

excitement, who might try to interfere personally instead of calling Dr. Shelby. Or—suppose she was a notoriety seeker and called the newspapers!

The newspapers! Blanche drew back from the window as if from a threatened blow. Suppose her note did find its way to the newspapers and they printed it? Suddenly she saw it quite clearly, photographed and reproduced in the evening papers—along with a résumé, no doubt, of her career, ending with the accident which had ended that career. They might even uncover some of the information about the accident that the studio had managed to suppress, a few small details....

She let go of the grille and eased herself down into her chair. She saw now that her plan with the note held dangers she had not considered; there could so easily be ugly consequences, consequences that she didn't dare risk. But if she threw away this chance, there wouldn't be another until Mrs. Stitt came on Friday....

And then she remembered; Mrs. Stitt had altered her plans for the week; she had said she would be back on Monday morning. Tomorrow! The awful weight of her anxiety fell suddenly away. How foolish to have forgotten; in her fright it had simply slipped her mind. But now that she had remembered it was all so simple; when Mrs. Stitt came tomorrow, she would promptly send her out to call Dr. Shelby from the nearest phone booth, and when he came... What an absolute fool she had been to let herself get into such a state over nothing. Folding the note quickly, almost embarrassedly, she shoved it back into her pocket.

Certainly, Mrs. Stitt had informed Jane, too, of her plans. So Jane could hardly be plotting anything so very sinister, knowing that the woman would be coming into the house the very next morning. Recalling her morbid fancies about Jane's plans to starve and frighten her to death, Blanche felt a faint flush of chagrin. What a state she had been in! Since Jane had uncovered the breakfast tray to show her there was nothing wrong with it, it was evident that that hideous nonsense was at an end.

At the thought of breakfast, Blanche looked back toward the desk, and at the sight of the food, she was suddenly famished. In a mood of happy relief, she turned her chair and started forward.

As the day passed quietly and without incident, Blanche's newly found optimism seemed justified. Jane spent most of her time downstairs. Promptly at one she appeared with Blanche's lunch, uncovered the tray as

she had at breakfast time, so that she could see that it contained only a fruit salad in gelatin and a few crackers.

After lunch Blanche read a bit and then, to make up for the sleep she had lost during the night, napped. Shortly after four she awoke, greatly rested, and wheeled her chair to the window to see that Mrs. Bates, in accordance with her accustomed schedule, had returned to her garden. Blanche's hand sought the note in her pocket, but left it there undisturbed.

At seven, when Jane brought her dinner tray up to her and left it on the desk without removing its cover, Blanche felt none of the previous day's apprehension. With only a momentary twinge of doubt, she moved her chair over to the desk, reached out to the cloth and removed it.

The food looked wonderful. There were two perfectly grilled chops, a small helping of mashed potatoes, carrots and peas, a small green salad and a slice of cherry pie. Eagerly Blanche picked up her fork and took up some of the potatoes.

She had only just put the food into her mouth when with a sharp gasp she started forward. Letting her fork fall, unnoticed, to the floor, she reached quickly for her napkin. And then she stopped, staring down hard at her plate.

She saw now what she had not seen before; the entire meal had been carefully sprinkled over with fine, white sand.

5

At a quarter to nine the house was still silent; Jane had yet to awaken and emerge from her room.

For Blanche the night had passed again in frightened and interminable sleeplessness. Again she had sat the night out in her chair, listening to the endless silence, her heart racing for fear of—she didn't know what. And again she had watched the dawn come obliquely into the room through the window, creeping in past the grillwork with cold, gray stealth. Now, as the day began to ripen, and a band of golden light appeared on the sill, Blanche waited with increased tenseness, praying fervently that Mrs. Stitt would come before Jane was up.

It was just two minutes to nine when she finally heard a sound from downstairs and rolled her chair quickly over to the door. There was a slight scratching sound which, even from so great a distance, Blanche recognized as Mrs. Stitt's key being fitted into the lock of the back door. After a moment the door opened then closed again. As Mrs. Stitt's footsteps echoed through the kitchen, Blanche put her hand out to the doorjamb in an effort to keep from calling out.

Again a door opened, this time the one to the downstairs hallway closet, and Blanche could visualize Mrs. Stitt putting away her hat and coat, taking down her cleaning apron, slipping it on, tying it around her waist. Any moment now the woman would be on her way upstairs. In anticipation, Blanche wheeled her chair back into the room. The footsteps resumed, approached through the lower hallway, crossed the living room and started up the stairs.

Entering the upper hallway, Mrs. Stitt came briskly forward. At the sight of Blanche sitting there in her chair, she stopped in the doorway in an attitude of surprise.

“Edna!” Blanche said.

“You up already?” Mrs. Stitt asked. “With the house so quiet——”

“Come in here,” Blanche said urgently, keeping her voice low. “Come in and close the door.”

Mrs. Stitt started forward and then, catching sight of the unused bed, hesitated and looked back along the hall toward Jane’s room. “She up, too?”

Blanche shook her head. “Edna, listen...”

Mrs. Stitt, continuing to look down the hall, raised her hand in an abrupt gesture of warning. “Well, good morning,” she said flatly. “I thought I heard you stirring around in there.”

Blanche went slack in her chair, weak with disappointment. Now she would have to wait; she would have to endure more of this dreadful anxiety.

As Mrs. Stitt came into the room, Jane, tying the sash around her soiled wrapper, appeared, swollen-eyed, in the doorway behind her. Her slitted gaze went directly to the desk and the covered dinner tray. Without a word, she shuffled into the room, took up the tray and carried it hastily back in the direction of the door.

Mrs. Stitt glanced around at Blanche. “What was it you wanted, Miss Blanche?” she asked.

“Well,” Blanche fumbled, waiting for Jane to leave. “I——”

In the doorway Jane stopped and turned, her gaze narrowed upon Mrs. Stitt. “You better come down and get breakfast,” she said.

Mrs. Stitt’s face took on a faint flush of anger. “Just a minute,” she said. She turned back to Blanche.

“It’s nothing important,” Blanche said resignedly. “You can take care of it when you bring my breakfast up.”

“Okay,” Mrs. Stitt nodded.

Turning to find Jane still there, she crossed swiftly to the door, moved out into the hallway and past Jane, pointedly refusing to relieve her of the tray or even to give any sign that she thought she ought to. Blanche was unable to hold back a sigh of defeat as Jane, casting a last fleeting glance in her direction, followed on down the hall and out of sight.

Fifteen minutes later Blanche received her breakfast, but it was Jane who carried it up the stairs to her and not Mrs. Stitt. As on the previous morning, Jane put the tray down and removed the cover. It contained only the usual breakfast.

Alone, Blanche forced herself to eat. Mrs. Stitt knew now that she

wanted to talk to her; certainly she would return upstairs before she left the house. As the hours of the morning slipped past, however, and Mrs. Stitt still did not come, Blanche's feeling of desperate uncertainty increased. Mrs. Stitt wouldn't be back until Friday; if she didn't get to talk to her this morning it would be nearly four days before the chance came again.

Blanche closed her eyes, pressing back tears of fright and frustration. She had to get word out to Dr. Shelby today. She *had* to. She couldn't stand any more of this. Whether there was any danger in it or not, she couldn't bear the prospect of another day in this house alone with Jane. She glanced back at the clock on the stand and saw, with quickened alarm, that it was nearly eleven forty-five. Mrs. Stitt would be leaving in just fifteen minutes!

Moving her chair to the doorway, she paused and listened. For a long moment there was nothing and then, faintly, there came a series of small sounds from the direction of the living room. Quietly, she moved her chair into the hallway and then out onto the gallery. At the bannister, peering down into the living room, she issued a faint sigh of relief.

"Edna!" she whispered. "Edna!"

Mrs. Stitt, dusting the library table directly below, started slightly and then looked up. Stepping back quickly, she glanced off into the lower hallway. What she saw must have reassured her, for when Blanche motioned to her to come upstairs, she nodded and put down her cloth.

Blanche waited for her to catch up with her at the door of her room. "Thank God!" she breathed. "I was so afraid you weren't going to come upstairs again..."

"I've been trying every way I knew. She's been just determined to keep me from it."

"Where is she now?"

"In the kitchen, I guess—or maybe out on the porch."

As they entered the room, Blanche nodded back the way they had come. "Close the door," she said urgently, "close it..." Mrs. Stitt nodded with a look of sharp concern. Her hand had only just touched the edge of the door when, with startling shrillness, the phone suddenly rang out in the hall. They exchanged quick glances. Mrs. Stitt moved hastily back into the hall.

"No!" Blanche cried. "No, don't bother with it!"

"But she'll know I'm up here for sure..." Mrs. Stitt snatched up the receiver before it could ring again. "Hello?" she enquired.

"Edna!" Blanche wailed. "Please! You've *got* to listen to me. I've got to

get word to Dr. Shelby!” She stopped in desperation and then, despite the fact that Mrs. Stitt was speaking—was saying things—into the phone, went on. “Edna, you were right about Jane. These last two days—she has kept me absolutely helpless here in this house. I’ve been a prisoner here in this room, with the...”

“Yes, Mr. Cooper,” Mrs. Stitt was saying rapidly into the phone. “Yes, that’s all right—perfectly all right. Yes, I’m certain. Good-bye—yes—good-bye.” Hanging up, she turned and came back quickly into the room. “Now, tell me,” she said anxiously, “I couldn’t listen to him and hear you, too...”

“Mrs. Stitt!”

They turned in quick unison toward the door as Jane’s footsteps clattered with angry rapidity up the stairs and into the hallway. In the next instant she was there in the doorway, panting, her gaze snapping from Blanche to Mrs. Stitt.

“Who were you talking to on the phone?”

Mrs. Stitt folded her hand upon her nonexistent stomach in a stiff gesture of exasperation. “Mr. Cooper from down at the store,” she said shortly. “They’re out of your brand of canned vegetables for tomorrow’s deliveries, and he wanted to know if they could bring another kind. I said it was okay.”

Jane accepted this explanation with a look of narrow suspicion. There was a moment’s silence. “I thought you were going to just do the work downstairs today,” she said finally. Her gaze moved to Blanche, then quickly away again.

“I—I just thought I’d have a look around up here before I leave,” Mrs. Stitt said with muted fury. “That’s all.”

“It’s all right, Jane...” Blanche offered weakly.

Unheeding, Jane looked over at the clock, then back at Mrs. Stitt. “It’s three minutes past your time,” she said flatly. “You’d better go if you’re not going to be late at the next place.”

Mrs. Stitt cast her a deliberately measuring glance and then nodded. “I’m going now,” she said. She looked back at Blanche worriedly, made a slight shrugging motion. “I’ll do your room first thing next time, Miss Blanche.” After another moment of hesitation, she wheeled about and stalked out of the room.

Blanche felt a quick tightening about the heart as, for the first time in days, Jane brought her gaze directly down to hers and held it there. In the

depths of Jane's glittering eyes, more frightening by far than any dead bird on a platter or meal dashed over with sand, was naked, staring hatred. Distantly, like hollow echoes from another, saner world, Mrs. Stitt's footsteps sounded in rapid indignation through the lower hallway to the closet and then, after a brief interval, through the kitchen and out the back door.

"Please," Blanche said, her voice thin with strain, "Jane..." She had to know what was in Jane's mind, why she was doing these horrible things to her. Now that she had lost her chance with Mrs. Stitt, she couldn't endure not knowing any longer. "Just tell me——" And then, seeing the blank denial forming in Jane's eyes, she stopped.

It was always that way with Jane, always had been. Confronted with her own mischief she simply, flatly denied it. She denied it in the face of all logic and proof. *Dead bird?... Sand?... I don't know what you're even talking about. You must be crazy.* It was no use, no use at all; Blanche could hear Jane's answers already.

She shook her head in a gesture of defeat, and Jane, her mouth twisting with an expression of scorn, turned on her heel and left. Blanche sat looking after her, frightenedly aware of the thunderous pounding of her own heart.

One o'clock came, and Jane did not bring Blanche her lunch. Not that it mattered, certainly, not that Blanche was concerned about food in her present mood of sick despondency. Later, when she heard Jane starting up the stairs, she turned away and closed her eyes, pretending to be asleep.

Jane passed the open doorway without hesitation and continued down the hall to her own room. Blanche opened her eyes and sat up. Sounds of activity came from Jane's room, muted sounds, hurried and purposeful. They continued for some minutes and then the door opened and Jane came out into the hall again.

Jane passed the doorway rapidly without glancing into the room, and Blanche saw, with astonishment, that she had dressed to go out. Over her dress she wore a coat and on her head was her red velvet beret with the preposterous rhinestone clip. Blanche turned, listening carefully, incredulously, to Jane's progress down the stairs and through the house to the back door.

A moment later there was the distant tap of heels on the concrete walk leading through the back yard and out the gate to the garage. Blanche moved her chair quickly to the window, where the sound carried better from

the direction of the garage. After a moment there was the slam of the car door and shortly after that, the roar of the motor.

Blanche couldn't believe it; there had to be some trick in it. That was it, of course, this was another of Jane's horrible jokes.... But then there was the sound of the car backing out of the garage, swinging around and heading off down the hill.

The silence, this time, seemed to come into the house as a prolonged sigh of relief. Blanche gripped the arms of her chair with tense alertness. She had to act at once; whatever Jane's intention, there was an opportunity in this moment that she must seize before it was lost. Boosting herself up in her chair toward the window, she peered hopefully down into the garden below. Mrs. Bates was not there. And probably wouldn't be for at least another hour or two.

Turning from the window, she wheeled herself rapidly out into the hallway across to the phone. She did not doubt for a moment that Jane had remembered to take it off the hook again downstairs, but she had to be certain.

She put the phone down and turned away, feeling, anew, a sudden rush of panic. No wonder Jane had been willing to go off and leave her alone. She was helpless—completely and utterly helpless—cut off from everything and everyone outside this house. The chill hand of hysteria brushed over her heart making it contract suddenly. She couldn't stand any more of this; she simply couldn't! Whatever the risk, she had to get out of here! She had to save herself!

Reaching out tensely, she turned her chair and propelled it, not back toward the bedroom but out into the gallery. The paintings on the walls of the gallery—the trite, undistinguished still lifes, the Spanish dancer in the firelight—gleamed dully, then faded away behind her as she crossed to the head of the stairs, and braking her chair to a stop, sat looking down.

The stairs seemed to stretch down and down endlessly, and she shook her head, as if in denial of the insane impulse that had brought her here. But she did not let herself move away.

Through the years she had often managed to get down the stairs. Not, of course, without Jane's help. But that didn't mean it was impossible for her to do it by herself, if she had to. She had developed amazing strength in her hands and arms from both the constant manipulation of her chair and from using the lifting bar over her bed. She looked around at the newel post at the

top of the stairs; if she took a good firm hold with both hands and braced herself with her right leg... Again her head moved in an involuntary gesture of denial. It *was* impossible; she could never do it without falling. Feeling suddenly quite dizzy, she gripped the arms of her chair and closed her eyes.

*Oh, the postman, he won't mind,
'Cause Mama says that heaven's
near.
Tho' you've left us both behind...*

The ridiculous song, sung in Jane's piping little girl's voice, echoed back to her from two mornings before. Behind her closed lids time seemed to spin backward, and there rose a hazy vision of a group of laughing people.

They were gathered around a piano, and at the center was a drunken, cavorting figure, holding her skirts up with delicately arched hands, singing, dancing...

*I'm writing, Daddy, dear.
I l-o-v-e you!*

“ ’At’s the stuff, Janie!” a voice yelled. “Give ’em hell!”

The figure executed a clumsy high kick, staggered backward, laughing, and fell into the lap of the young man on the piano bench. She kissed him energetically, leaving a red smear across his mouth and shoved herself away again. There was wild applause.

“Whoopee!”

“You tell ’em, Janie! Come on now, let ’er rip! Give out!”

And then a quieter voice, a woman's, spoke close at hand: “Isn't anyone going to stop her? Poor Blanche stuck with a mess like that out in public. Marty must be thrilled to death.”

“Don't worry,” another voice answered. “If Blanche weren't her sister, she'd have been out on her ear long before now.”

“Disgusting.”

“Awful—just awful...”

Meanwhile the figure at the piano had managed to regain her feet. She stood laughing, head thrown back, mouth torn wide in a red gash of

mindless hilarity. The large, protruding eyes, turned upward to the light, were at once luminous and blank with a kind of blind ecstasy. And then the face snapped to one side, as a slender white hand shot out suddenly from nowhere and struck it solidly across the cheek.

“Stop it. Stop! Can’t you see you’re making a fool of yourself!”

Blanche opened her eyes, suddenly, widely, as if with a fierce effort. Caught in a spasm of trembling, she gripped the arms of the chair all the harder. She waited for the spell to pass, refusing to think any more of that terrible, terrible night.

When she felt steadier, she quite deliberately made herself look down the stairs again. She had to try. She had to, no matter what the risk, for all at once there had come to her the conviction that here before her lay her last hope of escape.

Minutes passed before she summoned either the strength or the courage to reach out to the newel post and pull herself up and out of the chair. When, finally, she had accomplished this much, she remained quite still for a moment, her heart pounding.

Even at this point, however, she had not yet committed herself irrevocably to the desperate project ahead, and the impulse to turn and fling herself back into the safety of the chair was all but overpowering.

Quickly, banishing the thought from her mind, she forced herself to go on. Jane, she knew, might return at any moment, but that didn’t seem to matter now. She had to try, she *had* to....

6

Exp. accompanist-arranger, male, to join est. star in act for clubs, TV. Piano, violin, req. HO 6-1784.

Jane studied the corrected copy the girl had shoved across the counter to her. Then she looked back at the original she had composed herself:

WANTED: Gentleman accompanist to work with internationally renowned star of long standing in established act for top supper clubs and television programs. Must be of virtuoso caliber with piano and violin, also expert in music arrangement. For private appointment please call HO 6-1784.

Jane frowned. Visualizing both versions as they would look in print, it seemed obvious to her that hers was the best. But the girl behind the counter had been so crisply certain about hers; she had written it all down so swiftly, like she really knew.

“Well,” Jane mused, “I don’t know...”

The thing was that hers was a lot classier, and that was what she wanted, something classy. It was only a certain kind of gentleman that she wanted to hear from.

Within Jane’s mind the type of man she wished to reply to her ad was very clearly defined. He was slender and distinguished-looking, graying at the temples, slightly stooped, perhaps, and possessed of a gentle, fatherly manner. Actually, he somewhat resembled Mr. Dahl, her accompanist when she was little. In spirit he was her father; he talked like her father. He would read the ad in the paper, and he would call her, and they would talk....

Her gaze went back to the corrected version.... *est. star...* The girl had said it was really the same thing as what she had said in her ad. But that wasn't so at all. It was—well—businesslike, and that wasn't the impression she wanted to give. She wasn't absolutely sure yet whether she really meant to revive her old act or not; it just seemed that she ought to talk to someone about it.

A lot of the old-timers were coming back into the business. You saw them on television all the time. Ed Wynn, Buster Keaton—lots and lots of them. And kid acts were always good. Fanny Brice made a fortune with Baby Snooks; she'd be going yet if she were still alive. With new arrangements to bring the songs up to date and a good accompanist... But she had told herself these things over and over again; now she needed to tell them to someone else, someone who would listen and understand and see it the same way she did.

"... also," the girl behind the counter was saying, "it's a lot cheaper this way."

Jane looked up, and as she did, the cheap jeweled clip on her red velvet beret glittered with the false brightness of weary laughter.

"Well..."

Maybe she should have put her name in the ad after all. *Baby Jane Hudson*. She narrowed her eyes, seeing it in print as it once had been, and for a moment she felt a small thrill of excitement. Then, very suddenly, she opened her eyes again, and the girl behind the counter, for the first time, came fully into focus for her. A nice-looking girl, Jane thought randomly, a plain girl but nice-looking all the same. The poor little thing didn't know how to use make-up properly. None of the young girls you saw around these days did. That was one thing about a theatrical background: you learned how to make yourself up so you at least looked alive. Girls didn't wear any rouge any more. No wonder they all looked so sickly and washed out.

"Of course we can print your copy," the girl said, "if that's the way you really want it..."

Jane decided that the girl was very pleasant and that she liked her very much. To please her, she would do it her way. It was just possible that the girl was right; the replies would come from exactly the same people anyway; the object was to get in all the vital information with as few words as possible.

"Well," Jane said, "since you're a newspaperwoman, you probably know

best.”

The girl, drawing the corrected copy back to her side of the counter, smiled. “I’m sure you’ll get just as good results.”

Jane handed her a bill to pay for the ad, and the girl retreated to get her receipt and change.

Exp. accompanist-arranger, male, to join est. star... Professional, Jane thought, nodding to herself; it did sound professional when you stopped to think about it, even if it wasn’t as refined as hers. Suddenly her mind reached into the future and again she saw the man with the graying temples, coming to call, following her into the rehearsal room, playing the piano while she sang, praising her... praising her... And then, too, she had a sudden glimpse of Blanche’s face, torn with jealousy and resentment.

Miss Bigshot Movie Queen. Miss Crippled Nothing. Jane had to smile. Blanche always was a fraidy cat; all you had to do was put a good scare into her to get her to do what you wanted. She wouldn’t be going behind Jane’s back any more, telling people lies, trying to sell the house. Maybe she’d know now that when she did things that made Jane angry...

“Here you are.”

Smiling, Jane took the money and the receipt from the girl and put them in her bag.

“Thank you,” she said pleasantly.

The girl nodded, started to turn away and then turned back again. “Excuse me...”

Jane, snapping her bag closed, looked up. “Yes?”

“I know I shouldn’t, but—well—I’ve just got to know. In this ad—would you mind telling me—who’s the star?”

Jane’s smile broadened. She made a small, pointing gesture with her gloved hand. “Me,” she said. “Maybe you’re too young to remember, but I’m the original Baby Jane—Baby Jane Hudson.”

The girl’s lips parted. “Well,” she said, with a look of blank perplexity, “well, for heavensake!” She glanced away, toward a co-worker who had just put in an appearance at the end of the counter. “Well, thank you, Miss Hudson. Your ad should be in the morning edition, if you want to look for it. I—I hope you find the—person—you want.”

“Yes,” Jane nodded, “thank you. Thank you very much.” Holding herself very straight, she turned and left.

“For heavensake,” the girl said, moving off to join her companion, “who

in the world is Baby Jane Hudson?"

At the bottom step, Blanche leaned forward to rest her head against the cool, hard surface of the post. Her descent had been arduous and painful. Clinging to the handrail, lowering herself tediously from step to step, she had needed to rest frequently. Now, as she sat there, small brilliant pinwheels of light whirled behind her closed lids.

After a moment she looked up again. It had been longer since she had last been downstairs than she realized. The drapes were new. And woefully wrong; poor Jane, she had such awful taste. But then Blanche turned her gaze upward to the ceiling and her lips twisted in a smile of wry amusement. Against a field of vivid blue an artful scattering of stars winked down at her dully. Her smile faded, and she let her eyes fall to the mantel and the framed photograph of the blank-faced girl who had once believed she could actually possess the sky and the stars and had ordered them fixed upon her ceiling. What a vain, profligate child that one had been. What a contemptible fraud, really. And hardly in a position to charge Jane with poor taste. Blanche looked away, returning her attention abruptly to the balustrade and the chore ahead.

Close by, against the wall of the stairway, stood the carved chair and just beyond that, the library table. The doorway into the hall was only a few feet beyond, a little to the right. The rug fell short of the table by several feet, leaving a clear path of gleaming hardwood floor. Studying the chair again and its position against the wall, she reached up to the newel post and pulled herself slowly to her feet.

Bracing her right leg against the post for support, she pulled herself around and away from the steps. Leaning forward, she reached out quickly to the outer side of the balustrade and began to draw herself forward, moving her hands with great care from one support to the other. At the point where the balustrade rose beyond her reach she stopped. The chair was still a little more than a yard away.

After an interval, putting one hand flat against the wall, she inched forward as far as she could and fixed her sights firmly upon the chair. Then, taking one last deep breath, she shoved herself forward and let go. Her right leg buckled instantly, pitching her to the floor.

She landed abruptly but not painfully on her side and lay still for a moment, panting. When she was able, she boosted herself up again and

looked around. The chair, now, was within easy reach. Pulling herself forward and into a sitting position, she turned so that her back was resting firmly against the front of the chair.

Straightening in preparation, she reached up and placed her hands firmly on the seat. Slowly, painfully, she boosted herself up, first to the edge of the seat and then back onto it. Collapsing at last into the chair, she went limp before a sudden attack of dizziness.

When the world had finally steadied again, she looked around at the table. After another moment, she reached out to it, gripped the edge and pulled. Beneath her the legs of the chair moved easily if noisily across the waxed surface of the floor.

At the end of the table, she faced directly into the open doorway of the hall. From this point forward the chair would be useless since the hall floor was covered from wall to wall with thick carpeting. Her gaze reached out past the open door of the rehearsal room to the small arched niche that contained the telephone. It was not more than eight or ten feet away, but for the moment she could think of no possible way to reach it.

Jane, hugging her coat around her, stood staring into the bright, cluttered window of the Nu-Mode Dress Shoppe with a concentrated rapture that bordered on a state of transfixion. The dress to which her gaze was so magnetically drawn was of a deep wine-colored satin, gathered elaborately at the bodice and hip, the draperies held in place, or seeming to be held there, by two large red rhinestone clips. The mannequin upon which the dress was pinned, an impossibly svelte creature with a wig of shimmering platinum nylon, returned Jane's gaze with lofty disdain.

A cocktail dress. Jane savored the phrase and all it implied, and for her it implied a great deal. Sophistication. Fun. Glamour. For the moment she was transported; she stood upon a balcony overlooking moon-dappled waters. In the background there was music, dulcet and foreign. A man with no particular dimensions or face toasted her gallantly with a glass of bubbling champagne. Staring at the model in the window, Jane was mercifully unaware of her own reflection just inches away in the glass, of the ghostly duplicate of the ridiculous red beret with its winking pin, of the huddled coat made shapeless by the spreading shapelessness of her own body beneath. Neither was she aware that the scene of her imagination was one of drab triteness, nor that just such a scene had been religiously included in

every one of Blanche's pictures.

A passer-by brushed against Jane, and she was jostled back into reality. Traffic sounded again behind her, footsteps pounded dully along the sidewalk. Jane sighed. The dress would never be hers. Blanche was too tightfisted ever to let a person have something pretty once in a while.

That was why she was always nagging at Jane to stop dyeing her hair, hinting around that she was too old for it. And trying to get her to stop wearing jewelry when she went out. Just to save money. And if Jane ever wanted anything, anything nice like the dress in the window or the gold-mesh belt with the colored stones down at the Fashion Mart, there was always the same old sermon about their limited income and how they had to watch their pennies. And that was a lot of malarkey, too. There was plenty of money somewhere—if you could just get your hands on it.

Blanche didn't really like pretty things. She didn't like to be reminded that there was something pretty in this world beside herself. The way she kept her looks was—just unnatural. There were times when Jane almost prayed for Blanche to lose her looks, to grow old and ugly like—like she should. There were times...

Reluctantly Jane drew herself away from the window and the beautiful dress and started off down the street. She loved the Boulevard and all the pretty things in the windows—that collar, there, all of pink pearls—and the little hat made all of lavender feathers. Then, looking into a jeweler's window, she saw that she had been away from the house for more than an hour and quickened her step. She had to hurry; it wasn't wise to leave Blanche alone too long.

Bracing herself against the chair, Blanche pulled herself onto her feet. She balanced herself on her stiffened right leg and then let go to swing forward and grasp the doorjamb with both hands. That accomplished, she eased herself forward and into the dark passage of the hallway.

When she had gone as far as she dared, she stopped. The extended edge of the rehearsal-room door was no more than two feet away. Releasing one hand from the jamb, she reached out to the door, let go with the other hand and swung forward catching hold of the outer knob. Quickly then she brought the first hand down to the opposite knob and pushed up hard against it to break her downward momentum.

For a moment the reached dimness of the hallway seemed to thicken and

stir around her, but she pressed her cheek hard against the edge of the door and waited for the spell to pass.

As the dimness receded, she pulled herself up more firmly against the door. Using her right foot as a guide, she propelled herself with the door, an inch at a time, toward the wall beyond the doorway. Tears of exertion stung at her eyes, but through the blur, she could see the telephone niche coming steadily closer.

When she was near enough, she reached out to the approaching jamb and swung herself toward it. This time, though, her strength failed her and she toppled to the floor.

There in the threatening gloom she lay motionless, a crumpled, gasping figure, fearful of losing consciousness. Then, looking up and seeing that the niche was almost directly above her, she rested her head back on her hand, reassured.

With her returning strength came a pressing sense of urgency, and she roused herself. Such a long time had passed since she had first started down the stairs; Jane might return at any moment. Placing her hands flat before her, she pushed herself up and into a sitting position against the wall.

When she reached up into the niche, she discovered with a pang of disappointment that the phone was just beyond her touch. But then, seeing the cord, she put her hand out to it and grasped it. Taking care to direct the thrust away from herself, she pulled.

After only a moment's resistance, the instrument slid forward to the brink, teetered there briefly and then spilled forward and down, striking the carpeted floor with a muted clatter.

Blanche drew the instrument into her lap and squeezed her eyes tight shut in an effort to clear her teeming thoughts. Then, pressing the receiver to her ear, she dialed and waited. There was a series of faint buzzing sounds, a click, and then a pleasant female voice: "Dr. Shelby's office. May I help you?"

Blanche leaned tensely forward, tipping the phone with both hands. "Miss Hilt?" she breathed. "Miss Hilt, this is Blanche Hudson. I—is the doctor there? I've got to talk to him. It's—it's about Jane—my sister.... It's terribly important—urgent—" Knowing she was on the verge of senseless babbling, she brought herself abruptly into check. "Is he there?"

"Well—" a note of hesitation came into Miss Hilt's voice—"he's with a patient at the moment..."

“But I’ve got to talk to him!” Blanche cried. “I’ve *got* to!”

There was a slight pause, and then Miss Hilt said, “I’ll try to get him—if you’ll just hold on...”

There was a click and then silence. It seemed an eternity before the second click sounded, bringing the line back to life again. The voice that spoke this time was low-pitched, reassuring, friendly.

“Miss Hudson? Miss Hilt says you’re a little upset about something. What seems to be the trouble?”

“Doctor Shelby——” Blanche paused. Her thoughts were still muddled and unclear. How could she make him understand? “Doctor Shelby, I’m afraid... I mean it’s—it’s Jane... she’s... Doctor, I’ve got to see you right away. It’s so important! Can you come out here to the house?”

“Well, yes,” Dr. Shelby said, “I suppose so—if it’s really that urgent. But—has there been some sort of accident?”

“No.” Blanche shook her head. “I can’t explain, not now, not on the phone, but—you’ve got to come right away before Jane comes back.... Doctor—you will come, won’t you?”

“Well—yes, of course. But can’t you give me some idea of what to expect? If Jane’s out of the house now—can’t she come down here to the office? If I want to make an examination—or need to take tests——”

“No,” Blanche broke in urgently, “no, you don’t understand. It’s—not physical. She’d never come down there—not voluntarily. And I’m helpless. ...”

“Then it’s some sort of—emotional disturbance, is that it?”

Blanche seized gratefully on the phrase. “Yes, yes, that’s it. She’s emotionally disturbed.”

“Is she violent?”

“Violent?” Blanche pressed a hand to her brow, still trying to clear her thoughts. The important thing, she told herself, was to get him here to the house before Jane returned and found her downstairs. It didn’t matter what she said now. “Yes,” she said, “yes, she is. You must come at once.”

“Perhaps I should send the police——”

“No!” Blanche cried in alarm. “You don’t understand. We’ll see about the police after——”

She broke off, her whole body gripped in a sudden convulsion of horror. There had been some change there in the hallway, a lessening of the dimness, a letting in of light.... A door had been opened somewhere behind

her. Turning fearfully, a cold sweat breaking out on her forehead, she looked back along the hallway. The kitchen door, as she caught her first glimpse of it, was open only a crack. Now, however, as she faced it fully, it swung open all the way. Blurred by her own fright, she saw Jane's hunched figure silhouetted there in the open doorway.

"Miss Hudson?" Dr. Shelby was saying on the phone. "Are you sure?"

Blanche answered distractedly, her attention frozen upon Jane. "Yes," she said thinly, "yes...."

"Very well. I'll be there just as soon as I possibly can."

There was a click and then the hum of the dead line. Blanche lowered the receiver from her ear, but continued to hold it limply in her hand.

"Jane..." she breathed. How long had she been standing there? How much had she heard? "Jane, I—I got downstairs all by myself. I never really thought I'd be able to do it—not——"

As Jane came up to her, she let the phone fall unheeded from her hand. In an unreasoning compulsion for flight, she reached one hand to the doorjamb, the other to the niche. She tried to pull herself up and onto her feet, but her strength now was utterly gone. As she let go, a hand lashed out of the pressing dimness and struck her sharply across the face. She collapsed to the floor, catching herself painfully on one elbow. With a shudder of fright she twisted about and looked up.

"Jane!" she whispered. "Oh, please!" At the sight of Jane's face she turned away again, covering her eyes with her hands.

"Who brought you down here?" Jane's voice hurled at her in an angry rasp. "Who's in this house?"

Blanche shook her head in desperate denial. "There isn't anyone. Oh, Jane, listen...!"

Again the hand lashed out, striking her with senseless rage across the back of the head.

"*I heard* you! I heard what you were saying about me! You think I don't know what's going on—what you're trying to do to me!"

Blanche looked up, tears of fright streaming down her face. "Please—Jane—I'm not trying to do anything! It's just——" A third time the hand shot out, hitting her, this time, glancingly across the cheek and the nose. A stabbing pain shot through her head, driving the words from her mind. "Don't, Jane, don't——!"

And then she was grasped roughly beneath the arms and lifted to her

feet.

“Oh, don’t! Please——!”

She was being dragged, pulled, through the hallway and out into the living room. There was a crash, presumably the chair in the doorway being knocked aside, and the thought fleetingly passed through her mind that she had never before realized the full measure of Jane’s strength.

Then Jane was forcing her up the steps. Her own voice seemed to come to her from a great distance, thin with pain, pleading with Jane to leave her alone. She fell and the edge of the step caught her with knifelike sharpness between the ribs, but Jane’s angry hands only caught her up again and dragged her on. After what seemed an age, her chair loomed dimly before her, and she was whirled about and hurled into it. She fell back into the seat jarringly, limply, moaning with fright and pain.

“Jane!” she rasped, but the name was lost beneath the tearing sound of her own harsh breathing.

The chair moved, spinning her about so that she fell to one side against the arm. The dark mouth of the hallway gaped before her, rushed at her and swallowed her up.

There was a moment of blurred darkness, and then she was careering crazily into her room. Out of the streaking confusion, her bed materialized, hurled itself forward, struck against the arm of her chair. At the impact, the room spun suddenly around, and she was thrown again against the arm of the chair. The door to the hallway appeared as a swiftly diminishing black patch in the grayness before her, and she knew that she was hurtling backwards toward the opposite wall. With a sob of alarm, she reached out to the spinning wheels, but instinct stopped her from touching them lest she burn her hands. And then she struck the wall, and received an almost paralyzing blow in the small of the back.

Gasping for breath, she struggled to right herself in the chair but was unable to do so. She lay panting against the arm, her eyes fixed on the figure in the doorway.

“Jane,” she gasped, “listen...”

For a long moment Jane simply stood there, staring. Then she reached for the door.

“Jane!”

The glittering eyes returned in her direction. “Just don’t wait for any doctor to come and help you,” Jane said. “Just don’t wait for anyone.”

“Jane—Jane! Wait!”

The door slammed. There was a prolonged moment of silence followed by the sound of the key scraping into the lock.

“Jane!” Blanche cried. “Oh, Jane—God in heaven!—Don’t lock me in! Jane!” She stared in horror at the blank face of the door. “Oh, please,” she whimpered, “Jane...”

As the room began to reel around her again, she pushed back hard against the arms of the chair. But it continued relentlessly, whirling, swirling, bringing with it an awful darkness that wound itself tighter and tighter around her and squeezed the air painfully from her lungs.

In the lower hallway, Jane picked up the phone, righted it and dialed. When she received an answer, she made her voice low, gave it a soft note of urgent secretiveness that made it sound remarkably like Blanche’s.

“This is Miss Hudson,” she said. “Please let me speak to the doctor.”

“Oh...” The nurse spoke with obvious surprise. “Just a minute, Miss Hudson.”

There was a prolonged pause and then Dr. Shelby came onto the line. “I’m on my way right now, Miss Hudson. Miss Hilt just caught me at the elevator.”

“Dr. Shelby—” Jane paused, made her voice still quieter. “I don’t want Jane to hear... Doctor... I’m sorry... I—I won’t need you after all. It was all a silly misunderstanding... I’m just glad I caught you in time.”

“But—”

“I know... but it’s all right now. She—Jane—she’s been to a doctor by herself... another doctor... and it’s much better that way...”

“Well”—a note of thinly disguised irritation came into the doctor’s voice—“of course if she’s under someone else’s care—”

“Yes,” Jane said quickly, “she is. So it wouldn’t really be right for you to—to interfere, would it?”

Hanging up, she replaced the phone in the niche, then turned back purposefully toward the living room and the stairs.

PART TWO

7

Find something in the ads?”

Edwin Flagg turned cumbersomely on the piano bench and watched his mother as she put his lunch tray down on the card table beside the piano. Without answering, he dropped the newspaper beside him.

Del Flagg straightened, wiping her hands across the skirt of her faded house dress, drawing them slowly and with a grotesque suggestion of sensuousness across her age-widened hips and up to her waist.

“Didn’t I see you mark something?”

The soft, fleshy folds of Edwin’s face seemed to contract slightly with an expression of cold loathing. Nothing ever got past old Del. He couldn’t make a move without her knowing. It was a wonder she didn’t follow him into the bathroom. Resignedly he picked up the newspaper and handed it to her.

“Here—this here.”

“Oh, wonderful!”

Edwin’s pale blue eyes brightened briefly with pain. She hadn’t even read it yet and she was gushing already. If he just belched, she had to run out and tell the neighbors.

“No big deal,” he said. “Good grief!”

Del Flagg lifted her myopic gaze from the newspaper with an expression of hurt bewilderment. It was the same expression she always showed him when he was curt with her.

Snorting against the effort, Edwin moved again on the bench so as to face the table. He reached out and picked up a thick tuna sandwich. As he chewed, he let his gaze rove unhappily around the room. The old rocker with the frayed cane back. The broken-down divan with its sleezy elasticized slip cover. The yellowing five-and-dime print of *The End of the*

Trail. The hideous TV lamp—fashioned of plaster of Paris to represent an Indian tepee—which, when it was turned on, gave forth a grisly red light. Edwin's gaze, picking critically at these items, lingered briefly with each, then moved on to the next with an expression of increased melancholy.

The apartment, one of ten that formed a side-street court, was old and depressing, a poor dwelling in a poor section of town. And here it was that Edwin had lived from the time of his very first recollection. Here, with Del close beside him, poor, simple-minded, impoverished, blindly adoring Del, he had lived out all the thirty years of his life. And ugly though the apartment itself was inside, the world immediately outside was still uglier. The central sidewalk that connected the units of the court was cracked and uneven, bordered on either side by narrow patches of parched and dying grass and weeds. The untended oleander bushes, one of which stood beside the shallow porch of each unit, were scraggly and shapeless, their leaves dingied over with dust and soot. In this atmosphere Edwin had fashioned a life which, in reality, was only a retreat from life.

It was here, too, years earlier, that Edwin had learned of his own illegitimacy. This knowledge had not been given him by Del, but hurled at him as a cruel epithet by the neighborhood children. From that day forward, hugging his hurt and shame deep inside him where he hoped even Del would never see it, Edwin had borne toward his mother a disgust and hatred equal in intensity perhaps only to her love for him. It was then that Edwin had begun his systematic retreat from a world that, to his child's understanding, could only find him despicable and obscene.

Having inherited from his unidentified father an intelligence in all ways superior to Del's, Edwin had learned early how to use his mother's doting and uncritical affection to his own selfish advantage. In school he took up the study of music with the avowed intention of making this his life's work. Already dedicated then to a musical career, he was safe, upon graduation, from the tedious and terrifying necessity of venturing out into the world in search of a living.

If, in the ten years following, Edwin failed to realize any profit from his musical compositions, it was only because his was the kind of genius not appreciated on the commercial market. Not that Edwin himself was ever called upon to make any such excuses; Del was always eager and happy to supply them for him. Indeed, through the years, it was not Edwin who apologized to Del for his lack of success but the other way around. And this

was just as Edwin had planned it.

Meanwhile, Del made a living for them as a household domestic. This way she had managed through the years to provide adequately for at least their basic needs—well enough, certainly, for Edwin to pursue his “career” without interruption. Things had gone along smoothly, if dully—until this last year.

During the last few months Del’s health had begun to fail. Arthritis had started to develop, first in her hands and then in her shoulders, so swiftly that within a very short time her usefulness in her regular line of work was all but at an end. Lately, even the acceptance of an occasional day job was out of the question; she simply could not stand the pain. Lean days were finally upon Edwin and Del, and as Del’s slim savings dwindled, it became increasingly apparent that, simply by virtue of his superior health, the burden of their support had been shifted onto Edwin. Clearly, unless some sort of miracle intervened, which was highly improbable, Edwin was to be forced out into the world after all, to forage for some new source of supply.

This prospect, after an entire lifetime of defensive isolation, was, to Edwin, almost too horrifying to face. He did not know where to begin, or even if he *could* begin. It was an enterprise obviously doomed to failure from the outset; Edwin in a dispirited analysis of his predicament appraised himself as all but totally unemployable.

He was so defensive before strangers he frequently found it impossible to speak to them. He did not make a good appearance, and he knew it; he was fat and awkward, pale and soft-looking. He was certainly beyond the first flush of youth; his hair had already begun to thin out, moving back upon his pinkish forehead before two constantly widening prongs. He was frightened of all men, including those younger than himself. Women, generally, disliked him instinctively, sensing his hatred for all womankind which had its roots in his hatred for Del.

But even supposing he did get up the courage to go out and look for work, what kind of work would he look for? What could he do? What could he even be trained to do? Nothing, surely, with his hands since he had to preserve his touch for the piano. He had no aptitude for figures and he was worse than hopeless with anything mechanical. The very thought of trying to be a salesman made him genuinely ill at his stomach.

Actually, there was only his music. Although Edwin had woefully abused and neglected whatever talent God had given him, he was basically

a capable musician. But, still, he had no professional experience, no business contacts and he belonged to no unions. And so even the one thing he could do seemed utterly useless to him. Just what was going to happen when the last of Del's savings were gone, Edwin did not know. Perhaps there was some sort of city or state agency that would step in in time to stave off starvation. He hoped so. At any rate he was almost certain there was nothing he could do about it.

There was, however, a moral obligation involved, and even Edwin could see that. He needed at least to make some sort of gesture. Accordingly he had taken lately to sending Del next door to borrow Mrs. Steele's morning paper so that he could look through the want ads. And so it was that he had come across the curious ad in the theatrical listings, seeking an accompanist-arranger.

Del Flagg, having subjected the ad to the same feverish scrutiny that a curator might have lavished upon an ancient manuscript, looked up finally and smiled.

"Why," she said with wary brightness, "this seems just about made to order for you, don't it?"

Without looking up, Edwin nodded. There was, according to his considered reasoning, no great danger of this particular ad leading him into the trap of gainful employment. Even putting aside his patent unemployability. Though it was true, as Del said, that the job described in the ad might have been made to order for him, he greatly doubted that such a job actually existed. Edwin was not so innocent as to believe that bona fide star performers, with contracts for supper-club and television appearances, hired their accompanists through the want ads. Still, he saw no harm in marking the ad or even, if it came to that, in enquiring into it. He would be dispatching his obligation to look for work, and when it turned out badly, no one would be able to say he hadn't tried.

"Like your sandwich?"

Detecting in her voice a note of plaintiveness, Edwin nodded. "It's fine."

Del ran her hand dryly over the paper, pressing down softly against the place where he had marked the ad. Edwin divined that she had already thought of something to fret over. He had heard it said that she was pretty when she was young and doing extra work in pictures. Looking at her now, he couldn't believe it; she was hideous, with her ratty gray hair and her wattled bulldog face. She looked up suddenly from the paper, and surprising

his expression, frowned.

“You going to call?” she asked.

For a long moment he didn’t answer. And then he shrugged. “I guess.”

“Who do you suppose it is—the star, I mean?”

“I’m sure I haven’t the faintest idea.”

“Night clubs, too, huh?”

Edwin nodded. God, how she could go on about just any little thing. “That’s what it says. Why?”

Del studied his face broodingly. “You think night clubs are good for somebody who’s artistic?” She stroked her hand across the paper one last time and put it down beside him on the bench. “Does it just mean night clubs around here—or out of town ones, too?”

“How should I know? It isn’t my ad, you know. I didn’t put it in the paper.”

“Well—I don’t know.” She was watching him now, carefully, but trying to make her gaze blank. “Would you want to go away like that—out of town—with somebody like that?”

Edwin frowned with growing irritation. “Somebody like what?” he demanded crossly.

“Well—you know—it could be just anybody. I wouldn’t like it.”

“Well, if I want the job, and they want me for it, I suppose I’ll have to do what they want me to. Won’t I?”

Del nodded morosely. “Yeah, I guess you would—if you wanted to let yourself be like that.” Her gaze moved away evasively. “I’d be here all alone when they made you go away. It would be—funny. You know?”

Edwin’s irritation leaped inside him like a small, furious animal. Oh, God! what he wouldn’t give to be away from here—away from her—free! For the first time in his life the spark of ambition came alive for Edwin, and suddenly he wished he did not have misgivings about the ad. He wished he could believe that the job was real, was his, that he was going to be hired to play at television studios and night clubs—miles and miles away. If only the stupid old bitch could know how he would love—how he ached!—to go off and leave her behind.

“Maybe you could take me, too,” Del said, smiling at this new inspiration. “Maybe they wouldn’t mind....” Edwin stared at her, blinking furiously in an effort to keep from lashing out at her. “There’s just one thing, though....”

She paused, waiting for his prompting, making him give her his complete attention. For a moment Edwin tried to resist this tactic, but as the silence grew between them he was forced to give in.

“That being?”

“It doesn’t say if this star is a man or—or a lady. It just says it’s a star. You’d think they’d figure you’d want to know, wouldn’t you?”

Edwin looked down at the table, reached out to the tray and took up a thick piece of cake. He knew what she was getting at. When, at Edwin’s birth, Del had foresworn any further association with men, she had renounced sex as sinful and bad and expected the world at large to renounce it, too. But if she was worried about Edwin’s continued celibacy, she needn’t be; he wasn’t likely to come that far out of his cocoon. Not at this late date.

“What’s the difference?” he asked.

“Well, if it’s someone you’re going to be traveling with and all——”

“Oh, Christ!” Edwin exploded. “Oh, sweet, scented Christ! I haven’t *got* the job yet. I haven’t even called to ask about it. And already——”

“I didn’t mean anything,” Del said quickly, in fright, “nothing to get worked up about. I was just talking.”

Retreating into glowering silence, Edwin took a large bite of cake. For a long moment he held the crumbling dough in his mouth, sucking at its sweetness, as if in an effort to leaven the bitterness that was always there inside him. All the while, Del kept her eyes on his face, cautiously, guardedly.

“You going to call?”

He chewed a moment longer, then swallowed. “You don’t want me to, is that it?”

“No! No, I’m not saying that, sweetheart. I—I guess I’m just... well—if you was to really go off somewhere—I guess I’d just about die of lonesomeness.”

Though Edwin did not believe in the ad’s legitimacy, the more she opposed the idea of his calling, the more imperative it became for him to do so—as a kind of confirmation of this new feeling that had begun inside him. He nodded down at the paper. “It’s the only thing that’s turned up since I started looking.”

Del nodded, her eyes bleak. “I know. I know....” For a long moment she stood staring at him; then with a gesture of resignation, she turned away.

Crossing to the old-fashioned built-in buffet that separated the living room from the dining alcove, she picked up the telephone and carried it back to him on its cord.

“I want you to do just what you want.” She stood before him, holding the phone out to him. “Go ahead and call. I don’t want you to say I talked you out of it.”

Dropping the piece of cake back onto the tray, Edwin looked down at the phone with an expression of faint dismay. Now that he had managed to get what he wanted, he was suddenly fearful. He hated this apartment and his life here with Del. But the evil here was known, and that of the world outside was yet to be discovered.

He reached out to the phone, touched the receiver, then drew back his hand. This was the nightmare plunge into the hostile unknown—the breaking away—that he had feared all his life. He could feel the moisture gathering on his forehead. Swallowing hard, he looked down at the phone and at the number marked in the newspaper. He raised his gaze slowly to Del’s, his eyes wide with a frightened appeal.

“You call for me, huh?” he said, putting the phone back into her hands. “You do it....”

8

Just as she reached the doorway she stopped and looked back at herself in the mirrored wall with an air of vague enquiry. She was wearing a dress of faded red lace, snagged just slightly beneath the right breast. Brilliants glittered at her neck and wrists, her face was feverish with rouge and lipstick. Her eyes showed, though, that she was not feeling well.

Not that the drinking accounted in any way for her present state of indisposition. People didn't understand about that. You didn't feel bad because you drank. It was the other way around. The liquor made everything brighter, and when there were bad things on your mind—like these last few days—you could just stop thinking about them. Taking her eyes from the mirror, she turned abruptly away.

She'd only had a couple of drinks so far today—three maybe—just enough to get awake with. Not enough to make her drunk, not half enough for that. In any case, she needed a little something to steady her nerves today. It made her edgy knowing that a stranger was coming here to the house. She frowned in an effort to remember. Flagg. Yes, that was his name; Edwin Flagg. Leaving the room, she made her way through the hall and out to the living room. The clock on the mantel showed that it was one twenty-five. Mr. Flagg was supposed to arrive at one thirty.

Actually, it was very disappointing about the ad; in all, there had been only five replies. Or only five, at least, that she remembered answering. Three of the applicants had demanded at the outset to know if the job fell under union jurisdiction and when she had been vague on the subject they had hung up. The fourth call was from a mere child, a music student in some obscure academy. Only the fifth—this Mr. Flagg—had seemed sincere in his enquiry. He had asked his secretary to call and make an appointment.

Mr. Edwin Flagg. She liked the name. It sounded stalwart and patriotic. She glanced about, checking the room in preparation for the interview. She would sit just there on the divan, and he would take his place there.... She brought her hands quickly together in an effort to stop their trembling. She really ought to have just one more, just a bracer to be on the safe side. She didn't want Mr. Flagg to get the impression she was nervous like this all the time.

She had only gone as far as the entrance to the hallway when she heard the approaching footsteps out on the terrace and stopped. Her gaze darted to the clock; Mr. Flagg certainly believed in promptness. Then the doorbell sounded, and even though she was listening for it she started slightly, as if with surprise. She made a small, flustered gesture with her hand and then, with a sigh of resignation, crossed to the door.

Her first reaction as she opened the door to him was one, purely, of shock. Surely this was not Mr. Edwin Flagg. There was no possible way to reconcile the sight of this pale, portly young man in his cheap, ill-fitting jacket and his baggy trousers with the vision she had held in her mind. Evidently there was some mistake: Mr. Flagg had undoubtedly been detained and...

"I—hello," the young man said nervously, "I'm Edwin Flagg." Producing a handkerchief from his pocket, he dabbed self-consciously at his glistening forehead. He had not driven up the hill, then; he had walked. "I had—uh—an appointment with Miss Hudson. For one thirty."

For a moment longer Jane continued merely to stare. Then, aware of the lengthening silence between them, she smiled. "Yes," she nodded, "I'm Miss Hudson." She stepped back, motioning reluctantly inside. "Come on in."

The young man, however, did not immediately accept the invitation. His hand, bringing the handkerchief down over his cheek, stopped suddenly, arrested in mid-stroke. He looked at her more directly, as if striving to bring her features into sharper focus. Jane uneasily repeated her inward gesture.

"Come in."

She showed him to a chair, the one to the right of the fireplace, then seated herself on the divan. Arranging her skirts carefully, she looked up with anxious anticipation only to be greeted with a similar look from Mr. Flagg. What was *he* expecting from her? Jane experienced a fluttering, panicky feeling in the pit of her stomach. He wasn't at all the sort of person

he was supposed to be, not the least bit what she had pictured. Suddenly she felt a positive loathing for this gross, pale-eyed young man, as if she had caught him out in a deliberate lie, and she only wanted him to go away again. Nonetheless, he was here now, and she had to say something to him.

“You saw my ad in the paper?”

The young man smiled mechanically. “Yes. I just happened to be glancing through—that part of the paper, you know—and since I happen to play both the piano and the violin...” He finished the sentence with a meaningless gesture of unease.

Jane nodded. “Yes. The ad said that—didn’t it?—piano and violin required.”

“Yes. Yes, it did. It seemed almost coincidental—in a way, it did—and so of course...” He concluded again with the same stiff gesture.

The silence between them resumed. Jane shifted slightly and then, in a paroxysm of nervousness, made a brief giggling sound. The young man looked up, his pale eyes startled. She moved her gaze yearningly in the direction of the kitchen.

“Tea?” she said with sudden inspiration. “Why don’t I go fix us some tea? And then we can have tea and—and talk. Do you like tea—Mr. Flagg?”

“Oh, yes!” Edwin Flagg started eagerly forward. “Yes, I do—very much.”

With a frown of perplexity Edwin watched her as she made her escape into the hallway. Again he produced his handkerchief and finished mopping his still-moist brow. He had been right at the outset. A silly, drunken old woman, got up like a Main Street harlot. What kind of a job did she have to offer anybody? He wondered if he could possibly manage to get up and leave without her hearing.

In the end, it was the room, the house itself, which restrained Edwin from leaving. The house was old, that was true, and it had been badly neglected, but it was still a good house, a well-built house which, when it was new, had cost a great deal of money. Edwin could respect expensive things, simply for their ability to command a price. The drapes, for instance. They clashed with the rug, and even the room, but they were custom-made. Edwin noticed things like that. The paintings he had glimpsed up on the gallery he was certain were originals.

Everything was good, if old; there were several things, too, which were quite valuable. The statuette of carved jade on the library table was an

excellent piece. The lamps on the end tables had been made of a pair of large metal candlesticks which were authentic Oriental altar pieces. And the silver frame on the mantel...

Edwin's eye caught briefly at the frame, moved beyond it, then darted back again. The frame was empty. Where there should be a picture, there was only a rectangle of brown cardboard backing. He stared at it with sudden conjecture. Divested of its subject, why had the frame been left on display? Had the picture been removed in anger—in grief? And where was it now? There was a sound behind him and he looked around toward the doorway.

The old girl was teetering toward him, carrying with desperate uncertainty a large tea tray weighted down with an ornate silver tea service. Pulling his girth as quickly as he could from his chair, Edwin hurried forward to relieve her of this burden. The gleam of silver bright in his eyes, he experienced, as he took the tray from her, a curious and unexpected feeling of expansiveness.

"Such a large burden," he said with sudden gallantry, "for such a little—girl."

He colored slightly, dismayed at his hesitant and patently arch use of the word "girl." Somehow it seemed to have been demanded of him, forced from him. Turning quickly, he carried the tray to the fireplace and put it down on the coffee table.

The old girl had been having a nip or two out in the kitchen. He could tell this as he accepted her invitation to change his chair for a place beside her on the divan. Settling himself into the deep cushions, he turned to meet her smile and return it. The liquor, at any rate, seemed to have vastly improved her mood. What a ridiculous old trull she was, how like old Del.

...

"I always think it's nice for strangers to—to break bread," she was saying with vague chattiness. "It helps a lot. Don't you think?"

Edwin nodded, his eyes seeking out the plate of small frosted cakes he had noticed on the tray. They weren't from the grocery; they were bakery cakes, fresh probably and very rich. As wacky as it all was, this was an improvement over being at home with Del.

She poured a cup of tea for him, spilling some in the saucer. Then, taking up a pair of tongs, she tried to place one of the cakes on a plate, but dropped it.

“Here,” Edwin said, “let me.”

For a moment her eyes met his and her smile broadened. “Thank you,” she simpered, with a wavering attempt at elegance. “You’re very kind—very nice.”

When he had served them both, Edwin sipped briefly at his tea. Then taking up his cake, he bit into it. Drawing deeply upon the comfort of its sweetness, he leaned back on the divan with an increased sensation of opulence.

“You mentioned your act in the ad,” he reminded her with sudden courage and directness. “What kind of act is it?”

Abandoning her teacup to the table, the old girl pulled her feet up under her and, with grotesque kittenishness, leaned back.

“Well,” she said slowly. “I suppose I ought to tell you I’ve been retired—for a time. I had to give up my career for a while because of—illness in the family.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.”

“There just wasn’t anything else to do.”

“But now you’re free again—to return to your profession?”

“Oh, yes—yes, indeed.”

Edwin paused, feeling a kind of bubbling amusement. It was as though they were playing a game, playing tea party. Picking up a second of the cakes, he popped it whole into his mouth, chewed it and swallowed it recklessly. He looked at the old girl with veiled speculation: she must have some money tucked away somewhere, an inheritance probably if there had been a recent death in the family.

“Can you describe your act?” he asked with great seriousness.

Into the flushed, sagging face came a kind of teasing waggishness. She was withholding something from him now, playfully, some bright surprise. She seemed to him, at that moment, ludicrous beyond all imagining, beyond reality itself. He longed to reach out and slap her across the face and see what her expression would be then.

“I’m Baby Jane Hudson.”

His first thought was that he had surely misunderstood her. Either that or she had meant it as some sort of joke, a kind of family joke that he couldn’t know about. Her eyes, however, intent upon his face for his reaction, said all too plainly that she was not joking.

“Baby Jane Hudson?” he said cautiously.

She nodded, looking at him now with doubt and disappointment. “Uh-huh.”

“Well,” he said. He hesitated, then went quickly on. “Well, I just don’t believe it!”

With this bogus show of astonishment he saved the day. Her face came instantly alight, and she leaned forward, clasping her hands about her knees in a gesture of girlish enthusiasm. Her breath, rank with whisky, assaulted his nostrils.

“I’m going to revive my old act. Just the way I used to do it—exactly.” Her gaze reached beyond him to some bright scene visible only to herself. “Oh, I know some of the old arrangements are way out of date now. Music, you know, it changes so much, the way you do it and all.”

Edwin nodded. “Yes,” he murmured.

“Everyone’s desperate for good acts, you know. There’s Las Vegas. And television. Do you read the trades, *The Reporter* and *Variety*?”

Edwin stared at her blankly.

“Everyone’s looking for acts. They’re just desperate. And there are people who still remember me, lots of them.” She turned to Edwin for confirmation, and he nodded. “A lot of the old-timers are already back. Ed Wynn and Jimmy Durante—a lot of them. You remember Baby Snooks?”

Edwin smiled stiffly. Baby Snooks. Yes, he remembered Baby Snooks—Fanny Brice. A comedy kid act. He looked at the old girl from a new perspective. If she had a real comedy talent like Brice’s...

“It ought to have a good chance,” he said bravely. “I don’t see anything against it.”

She leaned back again, looking upon Edwin now with unmistakable favor. “You know, I had a feeling about you. You know, a kind of—feeling—the minute I opened the door and saw you standing there. I just knew we were going to turn out to be friends...” Her smile seemed to turn inward, and she ran a hand aimlessly over her skirt. “Of course I’ll have to get rid of a little weight. But I’m going on a diet anyway. Tomorrow, I am, first thing. I was thinking about the costumes. Don’t you think I ought to have all my old ones copied?”

Edwin turned his attention evasively to his tea cup. “Well—of course I don’t quite remember——”

“Oh, of course not. But I do want your opinion, Mr. Flagg. Before you came I put out all the pictures in the rehearsal room so you can look at them

and tell me what you think.” She turned to him, her smile suddenly brilliant. “Oh, I wish Daddy could be here right now! You can’t ever lose your talent, he used to tell me. Once you’re born with talent, you have it all your life long. You can lose money, youth and looks, but——You want to see the pictures?”

In the rehearsal room, she led him to the piano and showed him a large leather-bound scrapbook.

“This one has nothing but pictures. I have lots of others with all my notices and the handbills and all that sort of thing if you want to see everything.” As she spoke, he noticed, she watched herself covertly in the mirrors. “While you’re looking, I’ll just go clear away the tea things.” She turned and started toward the door.

“Why don’t I come and help?” Edwin offered, half in malice.

She turned back in the doorway. “Oh, no! I can do it.” She steadied herself momentarily against the doorjamb. “Your first name is Edwin?”

Edwin nodded. “Yes.”

“Edwin,” she murmured and then, returning his nod, as if in confirmation, she swung about and left the room, closing the door very carefully after her.

Edwin gave his attention first to the piano. A baby grand, good make, expensive. He opened the lid over the keys. He struck a few notes, letting them fall and die as he struck them. The instrument was woefully out of tune; even worse than his old upright at home. He closed the lid and reached out for the scrapbook.

He stared at the first of the photographs with a look of faint incredulity. From a faded print brown with age, a little girl of seven or eight with dark curls and huge wide-set eyes grinned up at him with a guile that might have done credit to a coquette of twenty. Dressed fussily in the manner of fifty or sixty years ago, she had been posed in a curtsy, one finger pointed with stilted daintiness at the rounded point of her chin. Frowning, Edwin turned the page.

The same child appeared on the second page. This time her preposterous Bo-Peep curls jutted out like so many steel springs from beneath a miniature bowler. She wore a jacket and trousers and stood against a painted backdrop representing a forest glade. One chubby leg extended as if in a spirited strut, she carried in her right hand a small *shillelah* and in her left an enormous cardboard shamrock.

Edwin flipped through the pages. The child appeared again and again, in an endless parade of costumes and poses, looking, it seemed to him, just a bit more cloyingly cute in each succeeding portrait. Coming to a yellowed newspaper clipping, Edwin stopped. At the top of the item was the picture of the child wearing the bowler. Above, in the florid script of the period, was the legend, BABY JANE HUDSON. And above that was a fraction of the newspaper heading, bearing the date July 23, 1906.

Edwin closed the album and shoved it aside with a feeling of acute confusion. The old fool hadn't set foot on a stage for over fifty years! Why, she was out of her mind. If she actually believed... at her age... He turned away, aghast.

Noticing that there was sheet music on the rack, he reached out to it. Again he was confronted by a picture of the repellent child, posed this time with her nose delicately inclined to a large, fraudulent rose. *The Secret of the Rose*.

He sorted hastily through the others. *The Birdie in the Snow*. *The Night Daddy Left for Heaven*. *Tom-Tom Tomboy*. *An Angel Told Me*. *Come On Out and Play*. Under the published music were some handwritten scores, meticulously transcribed, titled informally to indicate their use. *Background for "Gettysburg Address."* *Background for "I'm Just a Hooligan."* *Background for "Stammering."*

Edwin put the music back. Then this was her act, this—junk. He looked down at the piano bench. Doubtless it was crammed to the brim with more of the same. He lifted the lid.

He was not disappointed; there were pictures and folios of music in abundance. He started to sort through them, then stopped, looking down at a photograph—if, indeed, that was what it was—that he had glimpsed between two of the packets of music. Hesitantly, he drew it fully into view.

He stared in bewilderment at the pale face that peered up fragmentarily from between the vicious slashes of red crayon. It was the picture of a woman, that was evident, and from what he could tell she had been very blonde and pretty. But whoever had marked it had done so, evidently, in a mood of savage hatred. The blunt point of the crayon had gouged deeply into the photograph, leaving heavy crimson gashes across the mouth and nose. Over the entire area of the face were lighter, quickly darting marks, as if the vandal, not content with having mutilated it, had wanted to obliterate it entirely.

Edwin felt a shudder of horror go through him as his mind suddenly leaped back to the empty silver frame in the living room. As if it had suddenly stirred beneath his touch, he dropped the picture back into the bench and closed the lid. At the same time he heard the door open behind him.

“Edwin?”

He turned to find her coming unsteadily toward him. He lifted his brows in silent enquiry.

“You saw the pictures?” she asked.

Turned as he was, Edwin caught a glimpse of himself in the mirrors. It seemed to him that he was noticeably pale. But then, with a faint feeling of astonishment, he saw himself smile.

“Yes,” he heard himself saying, “they’re wonderful.”

9

With a certain wariness, Mrs. Stitt turned from closing the gate and started up the walk toward the service porch. As she entered the yard, she caught a glimpse of the dim, bunched figure lurking in the open doorway of the kitchen and guessed that Jane Hudson was waiting in there for her. There *would* have to be trouble today, she thought impatiently, just when she was working a short day. No doubt the drinking had started by now. Poor Miss Blanche... Mrs. Stitt stopped short as, at her approach, Jane emerged suddenly through the porch and came out onto the steps.

Jane was all dressed up to go out, Mrs. Stitt observed sourly, all done up in a little short fur jacket with old-fashioned square shoulders and that silly red tam of hers that made her look like some kind of old streetwalker or something. It was sickening to see a woman that age running around in public in a getup like that.

And then Mrs. Stitt saw the thing in Jane's hand, the piece of cloth, the garment, and realized, looking at it more closely, that it was her own cleaning apron. Stung with surprise, she lifted her gaze from the apron to Jane's face. She was right, all right; from the look in Jane's eyes you could see that the drinking was well under way.

"Well," she said with guarded joviality, "all set to go out, eh, bright and early?"

In reply, Jane simply stared, her eyes bright and feverish in their sagging pouches of flesh. Her head turned slightly, jerked really, as with a nervous spasm, and from between her dyed curls there came a titter of cold brightness from a pair of gaudy pendant earrings. Her mouth, itself all but lost beneath two wide splashes of red, worked against a silent tremor. The fur jacket, Mrs. Stitt realized, now that she gave it a second look, was one that belonged to Blanche, one she still wore on the rare occasions when she

went out.

“Is Miss Blanche up, too?” she asked.

For an answer Jane’s hand shot forward, holding the apron out to her. “Here.” Her voice was small with strain but determined. “You don’t have to stay. We don’t need you here any more.”

Mrs. Stitt was too stunned for a moment even to speak. Her mouth lifted toward a smile, as if in an effort to confirm the impression that it was surely all a joke, and then fell slack again.

“But I don’t——”

“I would have called you, but I didn’t have your number.”

As the surprise wore off, Mrs. Stitt experienced the first quick stirrings of anger. “Miss Blanche has my number,” she said firmly. “She could have called me if——”

Jane’s staring eyes widened slightly with alarm. “You’re fired,” she said abruptly. “You—you can just go—right now.”

“Now, wait just a minute, Miss Hudson——”

“You’ll be paid for today, don’t worry. We’ll send you a check. Here—take your apron. And you better give me your key to the house.”

Mrs. Stitt took the apron and thrust it composedly under her arm. “I don’t have the key,” she said blandly. “I just realized as I was coming up the hill just now—I left it behind today.”

Jane regarded her uncertainly, blinking. “All right, then,” she said finally, “you can put it in the mail when you get home.” Stubbornly she stood her ground, waiting for Mrs. Stitt to turn away.

Mrs. Stitt, however, was not yet satisfied. “As long as I came all this way,” she said, making her gaze level and hard, “I’d better see Miss Blanche before I go. If I’m fired, I’d like to have it straight from her. She’s the one who hired me. She’s the one who paid me. Then she’s the one to fire me.”

Jane’s mouth drew down into a straight hard line. “You can’t see her,” she said. “She’s—she’s still asleep.”

“Then, I’ll wait. I don’t mind a bit.”

“But I’m just leaving. I have to be down at the bank when it opens.”

“You don’t have to worry,” Mrs. Stitt said thinly. “You can trust me here alone. I won’t run off with anything.”

A look of uncertainty, almost of fear, came into Jane’s face. “I can’t stay here arguing,” she said desperately.

“There’s nothing to argue about. As long as you’re paying me for the day anyway, I can make myself useful until Miss Blanche wakes up.”

Jane stepped back quickly into the porch, slammed the screen door and latched it. “You’re fired, that’s all I know. So you can go on away!”

Mrs. Stitt, for all of her righteous indignation, knew when she was defeated. With a broad shrug, she turned and started back down the walk.

She should have quit, she told herself, all but aflame now with anger; she should have quit flat a long time ago. Anyone else would have, the tricks that one pulled. One minute she was the great grand lady, giving out commands and threatening to have your head chopped off practically, and the next she was the little bitty pouting baby, thinking she was so cute and cunning she could charm you out of all sensibility. Cute! She was disgusting. And a loony, too. Mrs. Stitt had seen a thing or two around that house, things she doubted that poor Miss Blanche even knew about....

Poor Miss Blanche. The poor soul probably didn’t know a thing about any of this. Jane had probably gotten up early just so she could manage the whole thing behind Miss Blanche’s back. Jane had always had some grudge against her, Mrs. Stitt knew that; no doubt she had been trying for a long time to think of some way to get rid of her.

And what kind of story was she planning to tell on her for not being at work today? Something good no doubt, something, sure as sin, that wouldn’t do her any credit in Miss Blanche’s eyes. Hugging her purse fiercely to her bosom, Mrs. Stitt made her way rapidly down the incline of the street, around the curve at the end of the block and turned in the direction of the boulevard bus stop.

She had just managed to get herself settled on the bench at the curb when she saw the gray coupé pull up at the corner. She looked just long enough to see that Jane was alone in the car, then turned stiffly away, pretending not to have noticed. The old fool, all decked out like some queen in a comic opera. How people must laugh at her behind her back, Mrs. Stitt thought with satisfaction, when they saw her walking along the street.

Well, she thought, smugly patting her purse, at least she had got the best of Jane Hudson on one thing anyway; she still had the key. Even if it was just silly and meaningless, it made her feel better to know that Jane hadn’t had her way about everything. And what was more, she wasn’t going to send the key back, either. Let her royal highness go out and have a new one made.

Mrs. Stitt turned back the sleeve of her coat and looked at her watch. Nine thirty, almost. By the time she got home again it would be after ten thirty. Practically the whole morning gone. And then she'd just have to turn right around and start downtown to talk to the jury-duty people. With a new wave of anger it came to her that she would now have to start looking for another job to fill in her Fridays.

She'd find a new job a lot faster than the Hudson sisters would find a new cleaning woman. Mrs. Stitt was certain of that. They'd see, once they asked someone else to come all the way up that hill without transportation. Not to mention putting up with that old woman's silliness and drinking and all. No one would put up with that sort of thing. No one but her. And the only reason she ever did was only for Miss Blanche's sake.

She sure pitied Miss Blanche, with that silly-headed Jane getting worse and worse all the time. Something awful was going to happen in that house someday; she could just feel it in her bones. Mrs. Stitt issued a deep, tremulous sigh. Well, she had tried to help the only way she knew how, but it was funny sometimes how people just couldn't see a thing when it was right there in front of them. There were times, for a fact, when she couldn't help wondering; Miss Blanche wasn't a stupid woman, but the way she kept on putting up with things... Catching sight of the bus approaching from up the street she got to her feet and straightened her coat. Forget it, she told herself, just forget it; there's nothing can be done about it now.

Opening her bag to take out her fare, her eyes fell on the disputed key to the Hudson house. There it lay, just beside her notebook, its identification disc attached with a loop of bright red string. In the street, the bus eased in to the curb and snorted its doors open to let her inside. Mrs. Stitt looked up, then quickly down again at the key. Now that Jane Hudson was gone, she realized with sudden surprise, there was nothing to prevent her going back to the house if she wanted to. And it would serve the old biddy right if she went back and told Miss Blanche just exactly what had happened. Inside the bus the driver leaned forward to peer out at her. "You getting on, lady?"

Mrs. Stitt glanced up and then, after another moment's hesitation, shook her head. "I'm sorry..."

"Well, for petesake!"

The door snorted shut again, and the bus roared off, bullying its way back into traffic. In a pensive mood now, Mrs. Stitt turned and started back up the hill.

She let herself into the kitchen with almost furtive care, then paused to listen for any sound from up above. At the same time she made a wry face at the sight of the nearly empty bottle of whisky on the drain. The place was a mess. With renewed indignation, she abandoned her previous air of stealth and made her way boldly from the kitchen through the hallway and out to the stairs.

When she reached the gallery, she paused and glanced ahead into the hall. Miss Blanche's door was closed. She was still asleep then: Jane hadn't lied about that. She turned and looked down into the disordered living room below. As long as she was there, she'd stick to her word and make herself useful. And she could fix Miss Blanche's breakfast and take it up to her. It was way past time for Miss Blanche to be up anyway, so it wouldn't hurt anything to wake her. Oh, there'd be a proper scene all right when Miss-Queen-of-Sheba got back from the bank and found out what had happened. But Mrs. Stitt was prepared to accept that.

First she tidied up the kitchen, taking great pleasure in pouring out the last of the whisky and disposing of the bottle in the trash. By the time she had finished this and had Miss Blanche's breakfast tray made up it was nearly a quarter past ten. Feeling quite cheerful now, unaccountably so, really, all things considered, she picked up the tray and marched out into the hallway.

At Miss Blanche's door she paused to listen, hopeful of hearing some sound from inside to indicate that Miss Blanche was already awake. Hearing nothing, she frowned. It was getting on now, and it wasn't at all like Miss Blanche to sleep so late. Balancing the tray against the wall, Miss Stitt reached out and very gently knocked.

"Miss Blanche?" she called. "It's me, Miss Blanche, it's Edna. You awake yet?"

She waited, but there was no answer. Mrs. Stitt straightened. Miss Blanche, as was common with invalids, was a very light sleeper; usually the least sound brought her around instantly. Mrs. Stitt knocked again, a bit louder this time.

"Miss Blanche?"

Again she waited, but there was still no answer, no sound of any kind at all. A faint feeling of chill touched the back of Mrs. Stitt's neck; there was something wrong here, something quite definitely not as it should be. No longer hesitant, she reached out to the doorknob and shoved. The dishes and

silver on the tray clattered as her forward movement was abruptly checked by the unyielding panel. The door was locked.

Mrs. Stitt stared in open-mouthed disbelief. No one—not even Jane Hudson—would go off and leave a helpless invalid locked up in a room like that! There had to be some sort of mistake. Putting the breakfast tray down on the floor she tried again, but the door still refused to budge; it was most emphatically, most securely locked.

For a moment longer she was held immobile by her own dismay. But then a surge of anger brought her quickly back to life again. Turning stiffly, she looked down the hallway in the direction of Jane's room. The door stood open letting a bright, slanting shaft of sunlight into the end of the hall. Mrs. Stitt started determinedly forward; if the key to Blanche's room was anywhere in the house it would be in there.

Inside the doorway she stopped. Her eyes, glinting brightly, raked the rumpled, unmade bed, the ridiculous collection of stuffed animals heaped high on the pink satin chair, the endless photographic display of Baby Jane Hudson on the walls. Her gaze fell finally to the dressing table beneath the windows and she crossed over to it.

She pulled out the drawers swiftly, angrily, one after the other, exposing the separate caches of cheap junk jewelry, artificial flowers, bright handkerchiefs and dime-store cosmetics. Finding nothing that even resembled a key, she shoved them closed again and turned her attention to the writing desk against the adjacent wall.

Having rifled quickly and fruitlessly through the random litter on top of the desk, the magazines and circulars, she opened the center drawer. There was a disordered assortment of note papers and envelopes of different colors, pink, lavender, pale blue, white bordered with bright yellow roses. Raking this impatiently aside Mrs. Stitt uncovered at the bottom an address book with a white plastic cover. Looking inside she saw that it had never been used; not even one name had been written in it anywhere. She ran her hand toward the back of the drawer, found something there with her fingers and pulled it forward. It was an ordinary writing tablet with a brown cover. She was just about to thrust it back into the drawer in a gesture of disgust when something, scraps of paper, fell from between the pages and fluttered to the floor. Quickly she stooped down and picked them up.

She stood there for a moment, holding them in her hand, feeling a quick stab of apprehension that she didn't quite understand. They were checks,

canceled checks; some of the ones that were always kept in the little accounts ledger in Miss Blanche's room.

Then Jane had taken them, appropriated them for herself. But why? Mrs. Stitt's gaze shifted to the tablet which she was holding open in readiness to receive the checks back again between its pages. Quickly she brought it closer to the light. Line after line was filled with Miss Blanche's name. *Blanche Hudson... Blanche Hudson... Blanche Hudson...* The name had been repeated over and over again the full length of the page.

Miss Blanche's signature! Or copies of it! Mrs. Stitt's eyes moved swiftly back and forth between the tablet and the checks. It was plain as anything, Jane Hudson had been practicing writing out—forging!—Miss Blanche's signature. Her gaze bright now with real fright, Mrs. Stitt looked down the hallway in the direction of the locked door to Miss Blanche's room.

Jane Hudson arrived at the bank just a few minutes after opening time, so she didn't have to wait in line. Reaching into her purse with an air of poorly controlled nervousness, she took out the allowance check from Bert Hanley and stepped up to the nearest teller's window. The young man who appeared before her was one she recognized, though she did not know him by name.

"How are you today, Miss Hudson?" The teller asked.

"Oh—I'm fine," Jane said. Sucking in a deep breath, she put the check between them on the counter. "There..."

Turning the check over, the young man observed the signature on the back, returned it to the counter and stamped it. He looked up with an air of polite expectancy. "Your deposit slip?"

Jane, swallowing against a sudden dryness in her throat, managed to maintain her smile. "Cash," she said in a quick, small voice. "I—Blanche—she wanted me to get it all in cash this time." The young man lifted his brows. "She has some special reason, I guess," she said quickly.

Nodding, the young man opened his cash drawer, counted out the money—what seemed to Jane to be great mounds of it—and shoved it smoothly across to her with the flat of his hand.

"There you are."

For a moment Jane merely stared at the money, almost afraid to touch it.

"Is that how you wanted it?"

Looking up, Jane nodded. Then, reaching out, she scooped the money haphazardly into her purse, eager to have it, all at once, safely in her possession.

“Thank you,” she said with a sudden breathlessness. “Thank you very much.”

Out on the sidewalk, she stopped and faced into the warm sunshine. *I don't have to ask anyone*, she thought. *I can buy anything I want. I can just walk down this street, if I feel like it, and buy everything I see.* She turned her head slightly, and her earrings cast forth quick flashes of brilliant fire. And then she smiled, quite suddenly, as if the sun had caught, too, some clear reflecting surface within herself.

But there was no time now to visit the shops, or even to look in the windows. With Mrs. Stitt fired and Edwin coming, there were things for her to attend to. Turning away, she started around the corner in the direction of the parking lot where she had left the car. Everything had been so terrible before yesterday; she had been lost then and frightened. But now she was quite sure of herself, quite sure of everything she was doing. She had lots and lots of money. And she had a new friend.

Edwin Flagg. Edwin. The mere thought of his name hastened her step, as if life itself had suddenly quickened so that she needed to hurry to keep up with it. He had said he would come to see her again this afternoon. And that was a sign that he really liked her; he wouldn't have promised if he didn't. She gave a quick sigh of contentment. It made you feel good just to know there was somebody somewhere who liked you and thought that what you did was all right.

Reaching the entrance to the parking lot, she hurried along the rows of cars in the direction of the gray coupé. Drawing her purse close to her, she hugged it tight against her bosom. Fifty dollars a week, she thought happily, was very little to pay for a good friend like Edwin, very little indeed.

Mrs. Stitt stared at the locked door with a rising swell of panic. Doubling her hands into hard fists, she pounded against it as hard as she could.

“Miss Blanche!” she cried. “Miss Blanche! Can you hear me? Miss Blanche!”

As her voice was absorbed by a sinister silence, she turned away, trying to think what she ought to do. Miss Blanche was drugged in there, she was convinced of it. It was just like Jane—drinking like she was—to give the

poor creature one of her sedatives and then go off and leave her. It was wicked—criminal!

With an air of sudden decision, she picked up the breakfast tray from the floor and carried it out to the gallery and down the stairs. She had made up her mind; she was going to get that door open if it took her all day and half the night. And if Jane Hudson walked in and caught her working at it, well, that would be just too bad—for Jane Hudson.

Entering the kitchen, she put the tray down on the table opposite the sink, then crossed to the tool drawer under the cupboards and pulled it open. She took out a hammer, the largest and heaviest there was, and a large screwdriver. Armed with these, she started briskly out of the room and back in the direction of the stairs. One way or another, she told herself staunchly, that door was going to get itself opened.

Mrs. Bates had spent so much time clipping the front hedge now that there just wasn't much left to clip. Earlier, seeing Jane Hudson drive off in the car, she had quickly stationed herself at the hedge where she could watch for her return. Mrs. Bates knew by observation that when Jane Hudson went off like this of a morning she was rarely away more than a few minutes, just long enough to drive down to the market at the bottom of the hill and back again. This morning, however, just when there was something she particularly wanted to see Jane Hudson about, she would go off somewhere and stay forever.

The newspaper clipping was one she had found in the TV section of last night's paper: CRIPPLED STAR REGAINS POPULARITY VIA TV, it said in the heading. And there was a picture of Blanche, too, one of the old ones taken by the studio back in the 'thirties. The article itself didn't say too much, but it was nice. Sweet. If the Hudson sisters hadn't seen it, Mrs. Bates was sure they would appreciate her bringing it to them. Enough, she secretly hoped, that she might be invited into the house to meet Blanche Hudson in person.

Already, as a matter of fact, she was planning what she would write to the folks back home. She wouldn't exactly lie and say right out that she and Blanche Hudson were close friends, but she could just suggest it, just for the thrill it would give everybody to think such a thing about somebody they knew and a movie star.

There was just one little trouble, though; Mrs. Bates wondered if Blanche Hudson's health hadn't taken a turn for the worse just lately. The

thing that made her think so was that the window, the one at the center of the upper story that she had decided must be Blanche's, had stayed closed up lately. Before, in the evenings, there had always been a light in that window even when the rest of the house was dark. For the last four nights now, however, it had remained dark. And even during the day the drapes had remained pulled. If Blanche Hudson was too ill even to have her window open, then she was surely too ill to receive visitors.

Mrs. Bates had considered taking the clipping over and giving it to the cleaning lady. She knew she was there today; she had seen her walking up the hill. In the end, though, she decided against it; an employee would hardly be at liberty to ask her into the house.

Mrs. Bates looked back along the even line of the hedge with a sigh of defeat; there just wasn't one more lick of anything left to be cut, and she couldn't just stand there, waiting, with nothing to do. She turned away and started back toward the house.

She had just reached the walk when she heard the sound of an advancing car and looked back to see the gray coupé cross the intersection. Casting down her shears, reaching for the pocket of her smock, she hurried eagerly forward.

"Miss Hudson!" Turning the corner, she made her way rapidly along the garden wall in the direction of the Hudson garage. "Miss Hudson! I have something here for you—for you and your sister!"

Jane Hudson, emerging from the black mouth of the garage, stopped short in surprise, then took a quick step backwards in retreat. Her glance darted to the gate leading into the safety of the back yard. But then she remained where she was, watching Mrs. Bates's approach with a closed and wary face.

Mrs. Bates, stopping before her, smiled broadly. "I guess I really ought to introduce myself," she said. "I'm Mrs. Bates—Pauline Bates—your new neighbor next door. I guess it's just about time we got acquainted, isn't it?"

Jane Hudson simply stared at her, offering no response at all, not even so much as the flicker of an eyelid. A moment passed, uneasily. Mrs. Bates made a gesture of sudden nervousness.

"Of course I already know who you are. I would, naturally, though, because of your famous sister." Noticing what appeared to be a sudden coloring in the plump, unpleasant face before her, she hesitated. "I—I know how silly it probably sounds to you and I'm sure you're sick of hearing it,

but I really am one of your sister's most ardent fans. I really am. Ever since I was a young woman back in Fort Madison I've just adored her. To me she was always so much more beautiful than any of the others....” Again she faltered, self-consciously aware that she was talking childish nonsense. “You must be very proud of her... with her new success... on TV, I mean, and all...”

Though her face remained blank, Jane Hudson nodded curtly. “Yes,” she said. “Yes, I am.”

Mrs. Bates held out the clipping. “Well, anyway, what I came over for—I ran across this in last night's paper and I thought—maybe, if you missed it—I ought to save it and bring it over.”

After regarding the clipping for a moment with narrow suspicion, Jane Hudson reached out and took it. Again she nodded. “Thank you.”

“Don't mention it.” Mrs. Bates smiled stiffly but with determined friendliness. “And—and while I'm talking to you, I wanted to ask—is your sister all right?”

Jane Hudson's gaze, which had moved off again toward the gate, came back to Mrs. Bates's with fierce suddenness. “All right?” she asked. “What do you mean?”

Mrs. Bates's smile fell away under a look of open alarm. “Well—nothing—really.” For a moment she hovered on the brink of admitting her speculation about the window above the garden, but something in Jane Hudson's face made her reject the notion. “I just remembered that she was—an invalid. I just thought I'd ask, that's all.” She nodded at the clipping in Jane Hudson's hand. “Well—I just wanted to bring that over to you—I thought maybe you'd be glad to have it.”

Some of the tension seemed suddenly to go out of Jane Hudson's face. “Why, yes,” she said, her voice just a shade more cordial than before. “I'll—I'll show it to Blanche.”

“Fine,” Mrs. Bates said. “And give her my regards, won't you? From an old fan of hers.”

“Yes.”

Hopeful that she yet might achieve the hoped-for invitation, Mrs. Bates hesitated a moment longer, but when it still did not come, she turned away. Then, with a sudden resolution born of an equally sudden resentment at Jane Hudson's determinedly distant behavior, she turned back again.

“Miss Hudson,” she said with smiling bluntness, “I wonder—I hope this

isn't too forward of me—but do you suppose I could meet your sister sometime? I mean, does she ever see anyone? I've written to all my friends back home that we're neighbors—and they all keep asking about her. It would mean so much.”

“I'm sorry,” Jane Hudson said abruptly, “my sister—Blanche—she won't be here any more. She's—she's going away. I'm sorry.” She moved out toward the gate. “I have to go in now. The cleaning woman isn't here today, so I have to——”

“Oh, yes, she is,” Mrs. Bates said, eager, even now, to offer a piece of helpful news. “Yes, she came. I saw her come up the hill to the house just a little bit after you left——”

Something in Jane Hudson's face stopped her. There had been a tightening, a draining, so that suddenly the woman's eyes, staring out of the pale mask of her face, seemed to grow larger, darker. And then, with no word of explanation, she turned, hurled herself upon the gate, tore it open and disappeared inside. At the same time something came fluttering back in her wake, swooping up and out into the street. Crossing, Mrs. Bates looked down and saw that it was the newspaper clipping. With a feeling of dark dismay, she picked it up, dusted it off and put it back in her pocket.

At first Mrs. Stitt had thought that she would be able simply to remove the lock and get the door open that way. Then, taking a closer look, she saw that this was plainly impossible. The lock, a piece of thick, hand-hammered metal, had been somehow imbedded in the wood and made secure there without the help of the usual screws and bolts.

Abandoning this plan, then, she turned her attention to the hinges. They were fastened to the door in the same mysterious way as the lock, but the pins were exposed so there was the possibility of prying them loose. Taking up the screwdriver and hammer, Mrs. Stitt knelt down to the lower hinge and set to work. Placing the edge of the screwdriver against the butt end of the pin she lifted the hammer and struck it.

Engaged, finally, in a course of direct and positive action, Mrs. Stitt's spirits experienced a decided lift. The fact that Jane Hudson might return at any moment did not disconcert her in the least now. If anyone was going to be made out the guilty party in this affair, Mrs. Stitt had decided, it was going to be Jane Hudson. The thought had no more than passed through her mind when she heard the slam of the kitchen door downstairs, followed by a

series of hurried footsteps in the lower hallway. Calmly, Mrs. Stitt put her tools aside and got to her feet. As the footsteps sped up the stairs and across the gallery, she turned to face the entrance entirely poised and unalarmed.

“Well,” she said evenly, “so you’ve decided to come back, have you?”

Jane, appearing in the entrance, stopped, stunned for the moment into silence. And then her face contorted with anger.

“What are you doing here?” she demanded. “What was that pounding I heard?”

In answer, Mrs. Stitt pointed to the locked door. “What do you mean, going off and leaving your poor sister locked in like that? What’s the matter with you that you’d do a thing like that?”

Jane’s mouth snapped open, then closed again. Her expression, now, was one of uncertainty. “It—it’s none of your business,” she said with false bravado. Then her eyes widened with sudden realization. “You said you didn’t have your key.”

“Well, it just happens that I did after all. And a good thing, too, with this sort of thing going on. Suppose something happened while you were gone and Miss Blanche needed help? Suppose the house should catch fire. Did you bother to think of that?”

Jane’s face clenched again with anger. She stamped her foot. “It’s none of your business what I do in my own house!” she cried. “It’s none of your business! You’re fired! Now go on and get out!”

“Oh, it’s none of my business, isn’t it?”

“No! No, it isn’t! Or anybody else’s! This is my house, and I’m ordering you to get out of it!”

“*Your* house!” Mrs. Stitt took a threatening step forward. “This is Miss Blanche’s house, that’s whose house this is!”

A light flamed wildly in Jane’s eyes. “Get out!” she screamed. “Get out, get *out*—right now!”

Mrs. Stitt merely shook her head. “Oh, no. Not until I know exactly what’s going on around here. Not until I know Miss Blanche is all right.”

A flicker of uncertainty cut through the heat of Jane’s gaze. “She’s—*asleep*,” she said. “I gave her a sleeping tablet.”

Mrs. Stitt nodded in angry confirmation. “I thought so! You just went off and left her here doped. And I suppose that wasn’t enough, so you had to lock the door, too?” She paused, her eyes dark with a fierce determination. “I’m not moving an inch from this spot until you get out your key and let

me see inside there.”

Jane, her mouth still open, seemed to take in a great gulp of air. “I won’t!” she said. “I will *not*! And you can’t make me. Now, you go on and go home!”

Mrs. Stitt took another step forward. “I think,” she said in a tone of deadly evenness, “that you’d better hand over the key to that door—if you know what’s good for you.”

Jane took a stumbling step backward. “What can you do?” she quavered. “I won’t.”

“All right, then.” After a brief but effective pause, Mrs. Stitt went on, “Then I’ll just have to call in the police, won’t I? One way or another I mean to know what you’ve been up to here, signing Miss Blanche’s name to checks and locking her up in her room...”

Jane’s face had gone white with terror. “I didn’t!” she gasped. “I didn’t, either!”

“Then why are you so scared?” Mrs. Stitt pointed a finger. “Now, you get that door open and no more fooling around, do you hear me?” Jane, for the moment, could only stare at her and shake her head. “It’ll be a lot better for you to let me have a look in there than to have to explain to the police.” Mrs. Stitt nodded significantly toward the telephone stand. “Shall I put in the call?” she demanded. “Shall I?”

Jane turned her head, and the bauble on her beret glittered there in the dimness with a sudden and obscene brightness.

Mrs. Stitt held out her hand. “Now, you give me that key. I’ll just look in and see for myself if she’s all right. If she is, I’ll go on away and leave you alone. I won’t even need to wake her up. Come on, now, give it here.”

Slowly, her shoulders going limp in defeat, Jane opened her purse. She reached inside and produced the key. Looking up at Mrs. Stitt, her eyes dull and hidden, she dropped the key into her outstretched hand. Mrs. Stitt nodded with satisfaction, then turned and fitted the key into the lock.

Throwing the door open, she found the room so shrouded in darkness that she was forced to stop on the threshold for a moment and wait for her eyes to adjust. Then, as the room and the objects inside began gradually to gather dimension and shape, she leaned sharply forward, and her eyes widened with horror. For a space of nearly fifteen seconds she stood breathlessly still and then, with a low, animal moan of numbed disbelief, she put out a trembling hand to the doorjamb for support.

Behind her, Jane reached down and picked up the hammer.

10

*'Neath an Oriental lantern,
In an Oriental tree,
Sat an Oriental couple,
Making love in Japanee.
In his Oriental manner,
In his Oriental way,
This is what he told her,
'Cause she loved to hear him say:
Sing-a sing-a song song,
Chong chong chew
My Niponese sweetie,
I love you.*

By narrowing her eyes until they were nearly closed she could begin to see the ocean. She could see the waves as they swelled out of the placid blue and came forward, reaching up and up, breaking, falling, dissolving upon the sand in a racing, giggling froth. And if you knew how to squint your ears, too—something you had to learn to do way back inside your head and your thoughts—you could hear the waves, hear them roar as they crashed, hear them fall and whisper across the sand. Sometimes it even seemed possible that if she would just turn her face upward she would feel the hot touch of the sun. But she wanted to go on watching the waves—*had* to go on watching them—so she kept her head down. All the time she could hear her father back on the porch beyond the dunes, playing his banjo, singing:

Tick-a tick-a tock tock,

*Ching ching chee,
Be a nice sweetie,
Marry me.*

She loved the beach, loved it more than any other place in the world. It was special and warm, and Daddy was there with her all the time and didn't have to go away anywhere to take care of business. When she grew up she was going to live at the beach always, just her and Daddy. They would have a little house with a porch on the front where they could talk and play together and the people would stop and watch...

Say, mister, is that your little girl there?

All mine, friend, nobody else's.... Aren't you, sweetheart?

By golly, she sure can sing and dance. I'm serious, you ought to think some of putting her on the stage.

You don't mean to say!

Yes, I do, too. She's a marvel, that one, a regular little marvel.

Well, friend, I guess you're just a year or so too late. Not that I don't appreciate your kind suggestion. I surely do. But—well, maybe you heard of my little girl somewhere by her professional name. We bill her as Baby Jane.

Baby Jane? Baby Jane Hudson? Mister, you're joking me, now, aren't you? That pretty little girl right there? Well, I swan! You know, I thought she looked mighty talented, the way she was singing and dancing like that right out in front of everybody without being shy or scared or nothing. By jings, mister, I sure bet you're a proud man to have a little girl like that.

And then Daddy put his arm around her and drew her close in a modified bear hug, and you could tell from the way the man smiled that he thought they made a fine picture there together.

Friend, if I got any prouder I guess I'd pop the buttons right off my vest.

By golly! So that's Baby Jane Hudson herself! I do swan!

Daddy hugged her tight, so tight he almost squeezed the breath right out of her, and then he let her go.

And when she grew up, and she and Daddy came back to the beach to stay... Her eyes widened, and the ocean started to go away, to fade back into the mirrors... along with the beat and the sound of Daddy's singing....

Her hand moved out and nearly upset the bottle on the floor next to her. She pressed the hand to her brow as if to clear her thoughts. Daddy had

been taken sick in the epidemic—he and Mamma—and they both had died. And she had never gone back to the beach; she had never seen it again... the little house with the porch... She and Blanche had come out to California to live with Aunt Jewel. And Aunt Jewel had started making a fuss over Blanche right away, telling her how pretty she was, and that she had a friend at the studio who could help her get into pictures.... Quickly Jane squinted her eyes again, tightly, tightly, trying to make the ocean come back... and the warm feel of the sun... and Daddy....

*Said the Oriental boy,
To his Oriental spouse,
We will be so happy,
In our rice-paper house...*

She sat there swaying in rhythm to the foolish song.

Chick-a chick-a chok chok...

A bell rang somewhere, raucously, disruptively, and her eyes flew open, putting to untimely flight, the surf, the sand, the song. She looked around, her face stunned, as if trying to think where she was. Her hand moved out, touched the bottle, then darted back as the bell rang again.

Her gaze lifted, and now, there in the mirrors, were only the piano and the bench and, back in the corner, wrapped round with shadows, herself. The ringing... It was the doorbell. Someone was trying to get in!

She shrank back against the wall, making herself as small and quiet as possible. The police. She paused, frowned. Why should she think of the police? She hated them. They had treated her horribly before, back during the time at the studio. They had always treated her like dirt, and they wouldn't be nice to her until she said she was Blanche Hudson's sister. Once they had even slapped her and called her names, and that time she had refused to say it no matter what. She had waited until the men came from the studio, and then... She hated the police... hated them...

For a moment she came close to remembering something, something with a dark, sad feeling to it, but then it faded away, and she decided she didn't want to remember. She didn't want to remember anything sad or ugly

ever again.

But she had to think who it was that kept ringing the doorbell in that persistent way. She really knew if she could just... And then she did remember, and it wasn't sad at all. Edwin! Edwin had said he would come back today and play the piano for her. She remembered and felt an instantaneous touch of warmth.

*... Ping ping tye,
If you refuse me,
I will die...*

Edwin was at the door waiting for her to come and let him in.

Only by leaning forward and grasping the leg of the piano with both hands was she finally able to drag herself to her feet. Rising, she was overcome with a swooping dizziness and had to lean against the piano for a moment and rest her head down on the cool, steady surface of the lid. The doorbell shrilled again.

“Coming,” she murmured, “I’m coming.”

Balancing herself as best she could, she turned toward the door, but at the first step the whole room seemed to slide backward in a quick countermovement and she came close to falling. Righting herself, she forced herself to go on and when something struck her sharply against the shoulder she looked around in surprise to see that it was the doorjamb.

Clinging to the jamb, she swung about and looked back into the room and down at the abandoned bottle. She considered going back for it, but then the doorbell rang again and she gave it up. Turning, she shoved herself out into the hallway, holding her hands out at her sides to keep from bumping into the walls.

In a sudden flash of clarity she remembered that Edwin had said he would come at two. So much time, then, had passed since... She stopped, putting her hand out quickly to the library table. Since what? The dark, sad thing stirred again at the back of her awareness and this time, though she still did not want to, she knew that she must remember. It was very important for her to remember just now, very, very, important.

For a moment she was on the very brink of recall, but the bell rang again, and her thoughts were diverted. Edwin. Blinking, she looked up toward the door. Maybe Edwin would like to go to the beach with her. They

could find a little house somewhere with a porch that faced toward the sea. ... She needed to hurry to let him in, for if she didn't she would be all alone... all alone.... She would let him in and give him the money she had promised him. And he would be her friend and wouldn't ever talk and plot behind her back like Blanche....

She stopped short as the thing—the sad, ugly thing she had forgotten—leaped out at her like a bogie from the shadows there upon the stairs. She turned then and lifted her eyes fearfully to the gallery—and beyond to the hallway, to the place visible only in her mind. Sobered all in a moment, she looked back toward the door where Edwin waited. Realizing what she had nearly done, she recoiled in horror.

She put her hand out again to the table, waiting for the repeated sound of the doorbell, cringing in anticipation of its shock. But this time it did not come. A full minute passed, more. And then there was the sound of retreating footsteps.

“No,” she whispered, “oh, Edwin, no....”

She hurried forward, past the door and to the tall French windows and looked out toward the terrace. Obscured by the drapes, she caught sight of Edwin just as he left the terrace and started down the steep angle of the steps. She remained still until he had disappeared and the sound of his steps had faded off down the drive. And then she turned back into the room, tears glistening in her eyes. She was to be alone after all... all alone... and lost.

...

She started back toward the stairs as if drawn helplessly in that direction. At the bottom she paused, frowning, and then she made herself go on. At the top, she started across the gallery, but here again she faltered, unable even to force herself beyond this point. She stood, undecided, and then turned, convulsively, as if to retreat back down the steps. But suddenly her weary little girl's face crumbled and she collapsed against the newel post, holding tight to it for support. A shuddering sound of pain escaped her lips and then after a moment came back to her from the vaulted ceiling above in a sad, echoing sigh.

Just to add to his present mood of depression Del had fixed macaroni and cheese again for dinner. It was getting to the point where he considered hamburger a real treat. Also, Del had something to spring on him, some nasty little piece of news or gossip that he wasn't going to like. He could

always tell, when she got that I-know-something-that-shows-you-aren't-so-smart gleam in her eye. Maybe she knew that Jane Hudson hadn't answered the door to him today; God knows it wouldn't surprise him any if she did.

And that was really all it amounted to; the old girl had given him the brush. She had been there all right; he had heard her moving about inside. And the car was in the garage; he had checked on that, too. So there it all went right down the drain—the job, the fifty bucks a week she had promised him—the chance to get free of Del. So—back to the macaroni and cheese set. The set of two, the unbreakable set—the goddamn, everlovin' unbreakable set—him and Del.

“You don't look so good tonight, sweetheart. You tired?”

He could feel her eyes fast upon him, digging little holes in his face, almost, trying to get at the thoughts and feelings inside his skull. If only she knew! he thought. But when he spoke his voice was mild.

“I guess so, yes.”

“You—rehearsed?”

“Uh-huh.”

“She say what she's going to pay?”

Edwin looked up sharply. Had she found out somehow about Jane Hudson's promise of money? But that was impossible....

“No. No, she didn't.”

Del's lips twisted into a pale, false smile. “It seems funny—not knowing what you're going to get—or if you're even going to get anything or not. Didn't you ask her?”

“Mom—Jesus!—I'm tired.”

Her smile faded. “I don't see why you don't even want to discuss it with me.”

“Discuss it! Oh, Christ!”

“Now, you don't need to swear at me. I didn't raise you to swear.”

Edwin opened his mouth and then, after a moment, snapped it closed again.

Del made an uncertain motion with her hand. “I don't think you ought to go back there to that place any more anyway.”

Here we go, Edwin told himself; here comes the snapper. He sighed fatefully.

“Why not?” he asked. “It's a job, isn't it?”

There was a pause as Del put her hands down to the edge of the table

and pressed the cloth tight to the curved surface. “You remember I mentioned her name was familiar—Jane Hudson?”

“Uh-huh?”

“I should have remembered right away, but it was so long ago, you know. Anyway, I was up front today—at Hazel’s—and I happened to mention, just in the conversation, that you had this job with some actress. And I said her name—Jane Hudson. Well, when I said that you should of seen Hazel’s face.” Del looked up at him for a moment, then quickly down again. “Well, I asked her what was the matter, and so she started reminding me—you know, of back in the days when we was both doing extra work in pictures—and all that went on...” She paused, pressing the cloth hard over the edge of the table, watching the table’s mark appear in the fabric. “I don’t guess you know who she is at all, huh?”

Edwin stared at her blankly; obviously this was to be even a bigger scoop than he had thought. “Jane Hudson,” he said flatly. “She’s Jane Hudson. Anyway that’s who she says she is.”

“Well, yes,” Del said gravely, “but she’s Blanche Hudson’s sister, too—Blanche Hudson who used to be the big important star. Did she tell you that?”

Again Edwin kept his gaze blank.

“You know—the one that was crippled in that accident right at the zenith of her career.”

... *at the zenith of her career.* Mentally, Edwin turned his gaze to heaven. Merciful God, why did she always have to talk like a column out of some old fan magazine? Blanche Hudson—he supposed he had heard the name somewhere; it sounded familiar.

“Well, it was her that did it—that crippled Blanche. Jane Hudson, I mean. Crippled her own sister!”

Edwin stared in genuine surprise.

“They hushed it up at the time all right. They thought maybe some of the operations they tried on her might make her walk again—so she could go back to acting—so naturally they didn’t want it to come out that her own sister had tried to kill her.”

“Kill her?” Edwin asked. “You mean murder her?”

“Yes, I guess so,” Del said, “it’s the same thing.”

“What happened?”

Del met his gaze across the table, pleased that she had managed to

capture his interest so completely. “Well, it all started at one of those big parties, you know one of those big Hollywood parties where there are a lot of movie people. It was at some big producer’s house, there was a lot to drink and all that. Anyway, Jane Hudson got drunk and started right in to make a fool of herself—like she always did—she was famous for it—only this time, well, I guess Blanche just decided she’d had all she could stand. They said she grabbed her right there in front of everybody—that Blanche grabbed Jane—and she told her to go and get her coat because they were going home.

“Well, that was bad enough. You can imagine. There was a big squabble between the two of them, and then finally when they got out of the house and out to the car, it started all over again. Jane was bound she was going to drive home, and Blanche was bound she wasn’t. In the end, though, Blanche gave in—I guess just because she was so embarrassed and anxious to get out of there. And so—the next thing anybody heard the next morning there had been this awful accident, and Blanche was crippled up in the hospital.”

“Well, then—it was just an accident.”

“Well, yes, but then the real story began to leak out. Where it happened was right at the front gates to their own yard—a pair of big fancy iron things, they said they were, in front of the driveway. Nobody ever said what happened in so many words, but there wasn’t much doubt about it. When Blanche and Jane Hudson got home that night, Blanche got out of the car to work this trick gadget that made the gate open, and Jane Hudson tried to run her down and kill her. She just waited until Blanche was standing in front of those gates and she stepped down on the gas and drove right into her. It gives me the shivers just to think about it.”

Edwin stared at her in doubt and horror.

“But that isn’t the worst,” Del rattled on. “After she hit Blanche, she just jumped out of the car and ran off. Imagine that; it’s a wonder, the way the car was smashed up she wasn’t killed herself. And I guess she would have been except she was so drunk. You know how drunk people never get hurt in a wreck because they’re all relaxed? Anyway, she must have known Blanche was hurt bad and she just went off and left her there to die. Her own sister!

“Later on they found her in some cheap hotel downtown, drunk as a lord and out of her head. They tried to smooth it over by saying she had gone

into shock and didn't remember anything. They said she didn't mean to hurt Blanche, that her foot just slipped on the gas. But there were some on the inside who seemed to think different. Everybody knew Jane Hudson was jealous of Blanche and was always trying to mess things up for her."

Del paused, shook her head. "But the awful part is that Blanche Hudson *would* have died, too, right there in the street like a dog, only she managed to crawl up onto a neighbor's porch and get help. Now if that isn't the worst thing you ever heard..."

Edwin lowered his gaze to his plate. "It's probably just another studio story," he said. "In those days they made a big scandal out of everything."

"I even heard they had to put her away for a while after the accident," Del persisted, "this Jane Hudson you're so crazy about."

"*Crazy* about?" Edwin looked up, angered. "I don't believe it, that's all. It was just an accident, like they said."

"Well, a lot of people said it wasn't—people who should know."

"Maybe I'll ask her about it next time I see her," Edwin said.

Del's gaze came up sharply, striking hard against his. "You're going to see a woman like that again? A woman who'd try to kill her own sister?"

Edwin began to laugh then. The laughter came chokingly, bursting from him in a broken torrent. He laughed so hard he had to brace himself against the table. Across from him, Del watched with growing alarm.

"Edwin?..."

He shook his head, letting the laughter die out of him slowly, wiping the tears from his eyes.

"Don't worry," he said, his voice still unsteady with the remains of his hysterical mirth. "I'm not going to see her again. You're right, you're absolutely right, you shouldn't hang out with deadly types—not the quick-killing kind. Give me that old slow poison every time, because blood's a hell of a lot thicker than arsenic."

Del frowned in bewilderment. "You shouldn't talk like that," she said.

Edwin didn't answer. He had said he didn't believe the story. But he did believe it. He believed it partly because it explained so much about Jane Hudson that had baffled him, and partly just because he wanted to. It established a kind of kinship between him and Jane Hudson; they both had good reasons to not like themselves; they were both outcasts. And—even if belatedly—that made them friends.

"Did Blanche Hudson show herself any while you were there?"

Edwin glanced up, startled. Then he shook his head. Blanche Hudson hadn't shown herself. As far as he could remember there hadn't been even so much as a sound to indicate her presence in the house. And Jane Hudson hadn't even mentioned her. It was curious. And then there flashed into his mind the empty silver frame on the mantel and the ruined photograph in the piano bench.

"She was an awful rich woman," Del was saying. "Blanche Hudson really made a pile. And now—I guess they're just closed away together up there in that big house. But can you imagine it, the two of them living together after what happened? Wouldn't that be awful?"

Edwin nodded thoughtfully. "Yes," he said, "that would be awful."

"But I guess misery loves company."

Edwin looked away. Maybe he would be seeing Jane Hudson again after all. If her sister had been a big star and had invested her money well... Maybe he should be a bit more persistent, a little less sensitive about today's slight. Jane Hudson had hired him and promised him a salary. If he could just get to her sister, Blanche, who undoubtedly controlled the money... Glancing back at Del, he smiled. Misery, it was quite true, did love company. He knew all about that.

11

Jane awoke in darkness, her heart pounding. All around her was a threat of something, a terrible, encircling danger. Her head throbbed, and there was a bad taste in her mouth. She reached out in a frightened, tentative effort to determine where she was. Her hand touched a warm softness, and then it came to her that she was lying on the divan in the living room. And then, fragmentarily, she began to remember.

“Edwin?” she called. “Edwin?...”

There was no answer. And then she realized that there could be none because he was not there. He had been there though—Edwin, Edwin Flagg—but he had gone away. And then—she had gone up the stairs—to where Mrs. Stitt lay in the hall...

And then it all came back to her—her decision to wait until it was dark when it would be safer. She had sat with her hands clasped tight together, making herself plan it. She would wait for the darkness, and when it came... But now the darkness had come: it was here.

By clawing at the back of the divan she managed to pull herself up into a sitting position. Pain stabbed inside her head and even there in the darkness there appeared a dull, ringing redness. Mrs. Stitt. Edna. She held her breath against the name, trying to make it leave her mind. Just to think the name made her want to cry, on and on, helplessly. Getting to her feet, she made her way unsteadily through the darkness into the hall.

In the kitchen, she found the light switch and turned it on. The room sprang into being with cruel clarity. The litter on the drain. The bottles, two of them, one all but empty. And the ice tray full, now, of tepid water. The rest of it, though, was clean and neat. Mrs. Stitt... She crossed the room, opened the door and stepped out onto the porch.

Next to the utility sink, leaning against it, was the wheel chair, the light

collapsible one Blanche had bought to carry in the car for the times when she had to go out. Jane reached out to it. But then her hand faltered and fell away.

How did it all happen? How had she been able to do such terrible things? She hadn't meant to hurt anyone. But they had been at her, deviling her, forcing her. It wasn't her fault—if only someone somewhere would understand that. Tears coursed freely down her cheeks and fell into the lower darkness.

“Edwin...”

He was a nice person, a good person, mild and polite. But they would never be friends now. She cringed inwardly before the thought of what Edwin Flagg, in his goodness, would think of her if he knew the terrible things she had done. Turning away from the thought, she reached out and picked up the chair. If she could just get through this last terrible part of it, she promised herself, this would be the end of it. Tomorrow she would wake up and she would be different. She would be good—like Edwin—and she would never do anything bad again. Never, never again.

On the deck of the ocean liner, the girl with the lovely sooty eyes turned to the young man with the dark, wavy hair and smiled. Stars glinted in her eyes, her hair held its halo of moonlight.

“Oh, Mike,” she breathed, “what a silly little fool I’ve been. Do you think you’ll ever be able to forgive me?”

“Forgive you?” the young man said. “Kathy Anderson, I can do a lot better than just forgive you—if you’ll just give me the chance.”

They fell into each other’s arms and kissed. The night sobbed with music. The scene faded. THE END.

Mrs. Bates rose from her chair with a little sigh of pleasure and crossed to turn off the set. It was a lovely picture, even now after all these years. The movies had seemed so much pleasanter in those days, so much prettier. Probably because of the depression and all the troubles everyone was having; people had needed to see pretty things to take their minds off themselves.

Now that the picture was over, however, Mrs. Bates felt restless. She was alone tonight; Harriett had gone off somewhere with some relative from out of town. She looked out through the French doors and across the garden to the Hudson house. It was so dark over there, so quiet. A vision of the girl with the sooty eyes rose in her mind. No matter what Blanche

Hudson's life was now, it was surely some compensation to her to know that she once had been that beautiful creature on the screen, that she had worn all those lovely, expensive clothes and walked through all those wonderful, exquisite rooms. Life, then, must have been a dream come true, an experience so perfect that it would touch all her days for the rest of her life. Crossing to the glass-paned doors, Mrs. Bates opened the nearest and looked out into the night. There was a full moon, white and high in the heavens. A mild breeze touched her cheek. Perhaps, she thought, since it was so nice out, a short walk would tire her and help her to sleep.

Slipping a light coat over her shoulders, she moved down the length of the walk, stepped out into the quiet street and started up the hill. The Hudson house loomed large and ghostly in the moonlight, and again the vision of Blanche Hudson as she had been in the picture rose in Mrs. Bates's mind. How lovely she had been; surely such beauty never really faded away, not entirely.

Perhaps, she thought as she moved along beside the hedge, one of the windows on the other side of the house would be lighted and she would look in and catch a glimpse of Blanche Hudson.... She smiled at her own foolishness; she was behaving exactly like some glamour-starved high-school kid. Still, she supposed her curiosity was only natural; at least Harriett seemed to share it and understand it. Approaching the front of the house, she peered up the drive. It was quite dark; there didn't seem to be a light on anywhere.

Disappointed, she moved on, emerging shortly into the ragged circle of dim radiance that emanated from the suspended light at the center of the intersection. Here she hesitated for a moment, then turned away to her left, keeping to the wall that enclosed the Hudson's yard.

She had taken only a few steps in that direction when she heard a sound and looked up ahead to see the gate to the back yard swing open. She stopped and waited as, dimly, two figures, one of them seated in a wheel chair and pushed by the other, emerged through the gateway and out into the street. She started forward, then stopped again, watching, as the figures turned away in the direction of the garage.

After her encounter with Jane Hudson that morning, Mrs. Bates was not eager to approach her again; the woman had certainly given her nothing to go on in the way of neighborly friendliness. But surely, she reasoned, Blanche Hudson was not like her sister. And there was still the clipping to

be used as an instrument of introduction. Raising her hand, she started forward.

“Miss Hudson!”

The shadowed figures, close now to the open door of the garage, stopped abruptly. Jane Hudson whirled about, peering through the darkness at Mrs. Bates’s approach. Turning back to the wheel chair, she very rapidly and very deliberately pushed it ahead of her into the obscuring darkness of the garage. Mrs. Bates stopped short with a gasp of astonishment.

For a moment she could only think to retreat, but then hot anger began to boil up inside her and with it a determination to force Jane Hudson to offer her a polite and civil introduction to her sister. Hastening to the garage, she peered inside just in time to see the light go on in the car as Jane Hudson opened its door. She saw, too, with a sense of wonderment that the figure in the wheel chair, despite the mildness of the evening, was swathed from head to toe in a heavy blanket. *My sister*, Jane Hudson had said, *is going away....*

“Miss Hudson...” Mrs. Bates said.

Jane Hudson froze for a moment where she was and then quickly slammed the car door, cutting off the light. There were quick footsteps and then she appeared in the lighter area just inside the doorway. Looking out, she cast Mrs. Bates a glance of pure fury and then, with no pretext of having any real excuse for doing so, she reached up and pulled the garage door down, directly in Mrs. Bates’s face.

Mrs. Bates could hardly believe it. For a minute she was too stunned even to move. An impulse rose sharply in her to take hold of the handle of the door and hurl it open again. Oh, couldn’t she just tell Jane Hudson a thing or two! And Blanche Hudson, too, for that matter! When it came to simple common courtesy... And then, aware of the stillness from inside the garage, she was struck with the wild absurdity of the situation. Were the two of them so terrified of her that they were actually cowering in there in the darkness, shivering in their boots for fear she would come and hunt them out? Just who did they think they were?

In a new flush of anger Mrs. Bates turned and stalked away from the garage in the direction of the corner. Just wait, she thought furiously, just wait till I tell Harriett! Why, I’ve never been so insulted in all my life!

Wearily, Jane carried the wheel chair back into the porch and returned it to

its place beside the sink. Making her way into the kitchen, she turned on the light and stood for a moment looking down at her begrimed skirt and shoes. For a moment it threatened to come back to her, that terrible moment in the darkness there in the park when she had dragged Edna Stitt's body from the car and sent it rolling down and down into the pitch-blackness of the ravine. But then, shoving the memory back and away from her where it belonged, she turned her attention to the sink and the nearly depleted bottle that stood there. Picking it up, she tilted it to her mouth and drank deeply. The liquor burned her throat bringing tears to her eyes, and she brought the bottle down again with a quick gasp for air.

Coughing, she carried the whisky to the table and sat down. It had been so awful out there in the darkness.... Taking off her beret, she dropped it to the table. The brilliants in the pin winked up at her, catching her eye, and she stared down into their glinting, many-pointed brightness with a kind of blind fascination.

Nothing, she thought sadly, was ever really what it seemed to be. The stones in the pin contained no light of their own and yet they caught up the sad yellow glow from the ceiling and transformed it into this dancing brilliance. But they did not really catch and hold it.

Nothing could ever really be caught and held—and possessed. Sometimes you thought you had a thing—but then part of it—or all of it—always got away. Life itself could not be possessed, really, not even a minute of it. She saw it with sudden clarity; life kept slipping away from you, it kept shifting and changing, like the dancing lights in the false stones, shifting and changing and shooting off into the shadows without you. It was all just a reflection. People were only reflections. When the light was falling in your direction you could really believe sometimes that you had found yourself and that all the sudden brightness and aliveness was really you. And then, just when you were beginning to be sure, the light went away again, and the reflection—which had seemed to be you—had vanished and gone. And so you waited for the next roving beam of brightness, always thinking that this time you would catch it and hold it and know once and for all just who and what you really were. But while you waited, while you wandered there in the darkness—then you couldn't even find the shape or the heart of yourself—and that was terrible, and you were afraid....

Jane's face, as she sat there, seemed to hang haggardly upon itself like a tattered cloth. Her eyes were dull, shielded from the light by the forward

inclination of her head. She was lost. Lost and terribly frightened. In her fright, she turned back upon the bleak vista of the day, trying to discover by what wrong turning she had arrived at this final moment of lonely desolation.

Once the way was known to her, perhaps she would be able to retrace the minutes like steps so that tomorrow she would arrive back at today's bright beginning. The harder she stared, though, the more obscure the path became to her. It was a shadowed lane that she had traveled blindly.

She had been led, helplessly, by elements and forces beyond herself. None of it was her fault; it had been forced on her, relentlessly, cruelly. But forced or not, she saw in her fright that she must turn back, or turn in a new direction; she must escape while escape was still possible. Blinking, she stared harder, harder....

She was not alone in this day. Edwin Flagg was here, too—just back a bit, just there where the shadows began to deepen—rotund, smiling, watchful. His lips were full and moist with murmurs of polite agreement, so that when he turned to life's light he gave off the bright golden reflection of promise. But when she reached back to him, trying to make him see her and help her, he turned away, watching her covertly from the corner of his eye with a secret frown of disgust.

He knew. Edwin knew what she had done. He was good and so he had a special sensitivity to evil. And now he stood ready to flee at the first step she might take in his direction. He would not clasp her outstretched hand and lead her back through the darkness to safety; he would not guide her back past the worst shadows of all from the black depths of which Mrs. Stitt kept shouting angry red words too awful even to hear.

But there was help back there somewhere. There had to be, because there was light there, a *real* light that was its own source. If this could be reached, if she could only hurl herself swiftly through the dark terror that surrounded her to its outer perimeter, she would be safe; by twisting and turning she would catch some of the light and she would find herself, if only for a moment, and run into that bright tranquillity where the shadows dared not come. The past cried out to her, bidding her be swift and to fly like a burning meteor through the darkness into the light. And then suddenly there was the way she had been searching for all along—there just beyond Edwin Flagg. As the light turned casting its beam in a new direction, Blanche appeared, holding out her hand, offering it to her....

“Blanche!” Jane cried out suddenly, her voice shrill with both fright and relief. “Oh, Blanche!...”

You are sisters, her father’s voice answered her, the same flesh and blood. And that means that you’ve always got to stick together, no matter what.

“Blanche!...”

Her head jerked up, and she glanced around her with a kind of stunned perplexity. She was so tired, so terribly, terribly tired. But still she could not rest, not just yet. With great heaviness, she got up, moved to the cupboard and opened the door. Taking out a glass, she filled it with water. And then, looking up to the higher shelves, she found a box of soda crackers and reached them down. Carrying these, she turned and walked into the hallway.

Crossing the gallery into the upper hall, she stopped in front of the door to Blanche’s room. For a long moment she simply stood there in the darkness, in an effort, it seemed, to make herself perfectly still. She thought, with a sickening thrill of horror, that she could feel, even through the soles of her shoes, the damp spot on the carpet where she had wiped up the blood which, even now perhaps, still contained some faint stirring of life, some small, glinting part of the brief illusion which had been Mrs. Stitt. Putting the box of crackers under her arm, she reached into the pocket of her jacket and brought out the key.

Even when she had unlocked the door and shoved it open, she did not immediately go inside. For some moments she hesitated on the threshold, aware only in the first instant of the stench that reached her nostrils from inside. Finally she took a reluctant step forward, found the panel that contained the light switches and turned the nearest of them on.

The lamp on the bedside table came alight, casting its dim, circular radiance weakly against the deeper darkness beyond the bed. Jane took another step, hesitated, then came forward.

At the edge of the bed she stopped, staring down at the still, sprawled figure that lay there, at the twisted and soiled nightgown, at the pallid face upon which the mouth had been obliterated by a wide strip of adhesive tape. Here, close to the bed, the stale smell was much stronger, but she seemed not to notice.

The face of Blanche Hudson, its precise features pinched and somehow diminished, was as quiet and bloodless as a plaster death mask. The eyes remained closed and unmoving in heavily shadowed sockets, and across the

left cheek bone, like a sooty smudge upon the waxen whiteness, was a slanting bruise. Her hair, a dull gray in this light, radiated from the still face and out across the pillow in a matted tangle. Her wrists, lashed together with a piece of stout brown twine, were tied to the head board of the bed. The bedclothes, twisted around and beneath her like her nightdress, gave mute testimony of a vain struggle for freedom.

Jane stared, her face impassive. And then, turning away to the bedside table, she put down the crackers and water. Leaning down close to the still figure on the bed, studying it closely, she reached out to the adhesive on the mouth, worked it loose at one corner and tore it off.

“Blanche?” Her tone was flat, unmarked by any decipherable emotion. “Blanche?”

The white, withered lips of Blanche Hudson remained still. After a moment Jane moved away, looking back toward the bed as if in deep perplexity. Finding a chair, she dragged it close to the bed and sat down.

“Blanche?”

The name hung upon the foul air for a moment, then drifted away into the eddying silence. Jane reached up to the bound wrists, found the knotted cord and worked it loose. The hands, numbed, grasping claws, fell stiffly to the pillow, just above the head, and lay motionless.

“Blanche?” Jane said. “Blanche, wake up!” And then the emotion came as her face contorted with a spasm of terrible doubt. “Blanche!”

For a moment longer the face upon the pillow was still and then, in apparent answer to Jane’s sharp command, the slack folds over the eyes stirred, very faintly, and struggled to open.

“Blanche!... Blanche!...”

The eyes flew open suddenly, going wide so that they looked up with a bright terror that seemed surely to contain all the remaining life in the pathetic body. Blanche Hudson stared up at her sister, her eyes crying out in silent, eloquent alarm.

Jane motioned with her hand toward the water and crackers. “I brought you something,” she said softly.

The eyes continued to stare, fixedly and utterly without comprehension. The room filled with silence.

“Your dinner!” Jane said suddenly, her voice strained and sharp. “There!”

At that the eyes blinked as if with understanding, and the white lips,

beginning to show a faint bruise of color, formed some silent word. Then the eyes turned and strained in their sockets to follow the direction Jane had pointed. When they found the glass of water, they stopped, and the lips moved again. A faint whisper, the sound really of an indrawn breath and no more, issued into the room. Blanche's lips formed the word, "Water."

Above the wasted head, the hands stirred, and a look of surprise came into the fevered eyes. The hands moved again, but without direction and they still retained the rigidity of brittle claws.

"Water..." Blanche breathed again, pulling her hands down stiffly next to her face. "Water... please...."

Jane's gaze, though it had remained fixedly on Blanche, was distant and unseeing. Then, quite suddenly, her eyes shifted and came alive.

"Blanche," she said almost breathlessly, putting her hand out to the edge of the bed, "it wasn't really my fault. It wasn't... I told her to go away... I told her she was fired... but she came back... she *sneaked* back... after I was gone... and she said she was going to call the police." Her face collapsed upon itself in a spasm of self-pity. Bringing her hands up to her eyes, she began to make moist, snuffling sounds. "I was so frightened," she sobbed, "so *scared!*"

On the bed, her eyes fixed with glittering brightness on the glass of water, Blanche inched her hand down and down, slowly, painfully, toward the edge of the filthy pillow.

"Listen to me!" Jane cried. "*Listen* to me!"

12

Bands of sunlight fanned out wanly from either edge of the heavy drapes, and Blanche knew by their short reach that it was still morning.

In her fright she had lost track of time there in the darkness and now she had no idea how many days had passed since she had been locked in the room, how long it had been since that first awful moment when she had regained consciousness and found herself trussed up on the bed. After the first day when she realized Jane had started drinking and that she might be held captive indefinitely, she had begun to hover, it seemed, in some teeming, panic-filled middle distance, in some desperate walled-in place where time and space and light would never penetrate. She had felt almost disembodied, curiously cut loose even from her own animal senses. Now that she was free again, it was all so strange, so mixed up.

Her head lolled on the pillow, and again her eyes closed. Then, suddenly, her lips parted as if to cry out, and in her mind there was a terrible vision, a vision of someone standing in an open doorway.... But almost instantly it was gone again, forgotten. She sighed and drew her hand down across the pillow. She was too tired to think about anything, too weak, and she'd had quite enough of nightmares for a long, long time.

Aware, then, that she had moved her hand, she opened her eyes again with a quick thrill of pleasure. She had forgotten that her hands were free and that she could move them. She moved her hand again, savoring the feel of it sliding across the fabric of the pillow. Turning her head so that she could look at her hand, she flexed her fingers and smiled at the accomplishment. Dry twigs, she thought, twigs within which life still stubbornly stirred.

Hope, she supposed, was the thing which had sustained her in that first awful day of imprisonment. And hope was the thing she had lost when she

had let herself drift off into the limbo of unknowingness. Now, like the life ebbing back into her stiffened fingers, hope had begun to return to her. And then she had a memory of Jane sitting there in the lamplight, her face so close—so sad and lost. Her gaze moved beyond her hand and caught a glimpse of the glass on the table and the bit of water that remained in it.

Remembering that she had spilled some of the water before, she reached out to the glass with both hands and wrapped them carefully around it. At the same time she tried to lift herself up slightly so that she could drink more safely and comfortably, but the effort was too great for her, and after only a moment she was forced to relinquish her hold on the glass. Her breath coming harshly from this exertion, she fell back and closed her eyes. At the same moment, however, she heard the sound of approaching footsteps, and she looked up in bright alarm.

Her thoughts, following what she had been through, were automatically those of fear and self-preservation. Her gaze darted toward the precious glass of water. Jane was coming to take it away from her!

Trembling with anxiety, she reached for the glass. The water was hers, and she meant to have it. She moved too swiftly, too carelessly; her stiffened fingers struck against the glass instead of curving around it, and she could only stare in horror as she saw it fall, heard it crash to the floor. She collapsed to her pillow, her body wracked with dry sobs of despair. Across the room, the door opened and Jane, wearing her soiled white wrapper, came in.

Blanche turned her face away. If Jane had come to tape her mouth and tie her hands again she didn't care; she wouldn't resist. She had lost the water and next to this tragedy nothing else mattered, nothing else in the whole world. Through her near-hysterical misery she was only faintly aware of the sounds of movement in the room, the opening of the door into the bathroom, the hiss of running water. She was still lost in her own wretchedness when something moist and warm softly touched her face. Her eyes flew open, and she saw that Jane was bending over her, washing her face with a damp cloth.

But Jane looked so old to her, so incredibly old somehow, and for a moment she wondered if it wasn't really someone else who only resembled Jane. The face above hers made her think of a piece of coarse paper which had been wadded up in anger and then only partially straightened out again. As Jane's eyes looked suddenly into her own, she glanced quickly away

with a new tremor of fright.

“Blanche,” a voice said softly, “Blanche, please... I’m sorry....”

A sigh, a faint breath of relief, touched Blanche’s lips. Then it was over, the horror, really, really over, at last. She looked up at Jane, feeling a sudden and totally unreasoning rush of love. Too weak still to speak without an effort, she nodded her head to indicate her forgiveness.

The damp cloth left her face and moved upon her arms and her hands. It felt good, good.... She let her eyes close again and felt herself drifting off into a state of blissful suspension. She did not actually sleep, for she was aware of Jane lifting her up to change the bed linen, and then again, to put a fresh pillow beneath her head. Then Jane’s voice brought her gently back to full wakefulness, and she was given food, warm soup from a cup, one careful spoonful at a time. As the food reached her stomach, she had a slight sensation of nausea, but there was also a feeling of revitalization; a gradual loosening of the numbness that had gripped her body.

“Blanche?...”

She looked around to find Jane sitting close to the bed, hunched forward, tears streaming down her face. It was hard to see, though, because the drapes were still pulled and in the dimness only the closest objects were clear to her. She moved a hand weakly across the bed in Jane’s direction. Noticing, Jane looked up, her eyes shining with tears.

“You’ll help me, won’t you?” she said. “I’m—I’m so afraid, Blanche—and there’s nobody but you. If they find me—if they find out—I don’t know what they’ll do to me!”

Blanche stared at the frightened, contorted face in confusion, trying to put words together in her weary mind so that they made sense. She moved her lips, but the words still would not come. Then Jane had clasped her hands before her like an imploring child.

“It was her own fault—you heard what she said. She wouldn’t go away. I told her to go—and she wouldn’t. You have a right, don’t you, to—to do something—when a person won’t get out of your own house? Oh, Blanche! I didn’t know—I didn’t mean to kill her!”

Kill! The word leapt into Blanche’s awareness as if it had been shouted with fierce stridency out of a dead silence. She felt herself go cold all over. Kill! Again a vision rose mistily at the back of her mind. There was a figure—falling—falling—and then—the slam of a door. It hovered briefly on the threshold of recall and then abruptly vanished. But the cold, frightened

feeling remained. If only she were strong enough to think clearly, to know what it meant.

“We have to stick together, Blanche, you and me,” Jane was saying tensely. “Daddy always told us that, remember? We’re the same flesh and blood—no matter what. Blanche, you won’t let them hurt me, will you? Blanche?...”

Blanche continued to stare in silent horror. Kill. Jane had said kill. She shrank back against her pillow, pulling herself away from Jane. It was a mistake; Jane’s tear-stained face instantly hardened.

“Talk to me!” she demanded harshly. “Why don’t you talk to me? You don’t care, do you? You’re jealous of me... and you hate me... and you want bad things to happen to me. You always have!” And then, evidently shocked by her own harsh words, she stopped, staring down at Blanche in white-faced alarm.

“No, I didn’t mean it,” she said quickly. “Blanche, I’ll take care of you—I will—and you’ll see—you’ll like me again. You need me to take care of you; you really do.... I’ll comb your hair and fix it so you’ll be pretty. You’re the pretty one. Blanche—everyone always said so. I’ll be good to you, Blanche—if you’ll just help me and not leave me alone. You heard.... And they’ll believe you. They always believe you....”

Caught and held by the intensity of Jane’s gaze, Blanche could only stare back at her. Still she was unable to understand. Jane wanted something of her, that much was clear, but she didn’t know what it was. Nonetheless, the black dizziness of fatigue beginning to turn inside her head, she nodded.

“Yes,” Jane said eagerly, interpreting for her. “Yes....” She sat quietly for a moment and then, thoughtfully, rose. “If they come, you’ll talk to them. You won’t let them hurt me....”

Blanche managed a second nod; poor Jane, she looked so sad, so desperately sad. Her eyelids drooped and closed. She heard Jane leave the room and shut the door, and she let herself go completely limp. The feeling of dizziness gradually passed away and she experienced a pleasant floating sensation. She was just drifting off into the oblivion of sleep when the word came again, as if shouted in her ear:

Kill!

A figure fell, crumpling silently downward. A door slammed.

Her pulse quickened with terror, now as then, and she knew that she must flee, must save herself. Her eyes flew open, and she looked quickly,

dartingly around the room. Her pounding heart was a red pain within her breast.

And then the room came more clearly into focus, and realizing where she was, she closed her eyes again. Almost at once the floating sensation returned and she knew she was falling asleep.

13

After the last two days of recuperation, Blanche was feeling better, much more alert; the real had begun to unravel itself from the unreal. Aware, as she awakened on the morning of the third day, of an intermittent scratching sound coming from somewhere beyond the drapes, she realized almost at once that it was only the branch of the eucalyptus touching the sill outside and she wondered if there was a spring storm on its way.

Jane had spent considerable time at Blanche's bedside these last two days. There had been times when her voice seemed to fill the room endlessly with its murmuring unhappiness. Word came crowding upon word in some agony of contrition which Blanche, in a state of dozing unawareness, had not quite been able to comprehend. Meanwhile, Jane had fed her and cared for her with an almost feverish solicitude.

Flattening her hands out upon the bed, Blanche attempted to shove herself up into a sitting position, but without success. She hadn't regained nearly the strength she had thought. Trying a new tactic, she reached up to the lifting bar. She managed to secure her grasp on it, but when she tried to pull herself up she wasn't able even to budge the dead weight of her body. Evidently she would have to wait a day or two before she tried again.

Again there was the scratching sound from outside, and she lay there thinking that when Jane came with her breakfast she would ask her to open the drapes so that she could look out. She turned to the button that rang the bell downstairs in the kitchen. But then, with a sudden, strange feeling of bleakness, she hesitated to use it.

She lay for a moment, pondering this curious thing she had felt, wondering what had prompted it, what fleeting impression or memory had brought it on. She tried hard to summon it back, but it would not come. There was still so much she didn't remember. She supposed she would

never know how long she had been left there in the darkness behind the locked door; she knew she would never have the courage to ask.

Let it go, she told herself firmly. All she needed to know for now was that the worst of it was over. Jane's anger, her drinking and even, perhaps, this last painful period of extreme contrition, were at an end, and everything should go on again as it had before. Still something nagged at her, a feeling of uneasiness; there was something impending that needed her most urgent attention. There was something... At a sound, she looked around just in time to see Jane come into the room carrying her breakfast tray, and she realized with a sense of surprise that she had been concentrating so hard she had not heard her sister's approach on the stairs.

Blanche felt herself tense slightly at the first sight of the tray and she made herself relax. Jane, quite noticeably, was not dressed in her soiled wrapper this morning, but in a freshly laundered house dress of pale green. Her hair was combed back neatly and plainly, and her face was scrubbed clean of make-up so that she looked, in contrast to her accustomed appearance, oddly pale and washed out. Her manner was one of almost unnatural composure. When she put the tray down carefully on the stand and uncovered it, it contained only Blanche's breakfast.

"You're better?" Jane fussed with the things on the tray, avoiding Blanche's gaze.

Blanche nodded. "Yes."

Jane reached out and helped her gently into a sitting position against the pillows. Blanche studied her sister's face with a faint expression of incredulity. In Jane's lowered gaze and meek demeanor was a touch of saintliness that, under different circumstances, might have been very close to comic.

"It—it seems a little cooler—today," Blanche managed in a hoarse rasp.

Jane nodded, and if she was aware that these were the first words Blanche had actually spoken aloud since her liberation, she gave no sign. "I'll get your robe," she said.

When she had helped Blanche into the robe, she retreated to the bathroom and brought a warm cloth and, again, bathed Blanche's face. That done, she placed the breakfast tray on the swiveled invalid's table and swung it forward across Blanche's lap. Retreating to the door, she paused to look back.

"I'll be back when you're done—to clean up."

Blanche nodded. "Thank you, Jane."

"I'm glad you're feeling better."

Blanche looked after Jane's departing figure with a frown of troubled speculation. This mild, pious tone, this self-effacing manner—neither of these was natural to Jane; it hardly seemed possible that they could be genuine. But if Jane was shamming, what purpose could there be in it? Blanche picked up a piece of toast, took a bite from it and absently began to chew. But her gaze remained on the open doorway.

Jane returned half an hour later to straighten the room and carry the tray back down to the kitchen. Again there was the air of calm restraint, of concentrated subservience, and again Blanche suffered a curious reaction of apprehension. As Jane started from the room, Blanche remembered about the drapes. She started to call out, but she had only managed to speak Jane's name when her gaze fell to the hallway carpet and the words died abruptly in her throat.

"Yes?" Jane asked, turning back in the doorway. "What is it? What's the matter?"

The sight of the stain on the carpet had stunned Blanche into a paralyzed silence. The thing that had remained obscured in the dimness at the back of her mind was suddenly thrust forward into the blinding light of complete recall. Angry voices echoed clearly against the inner ear of her memory; and the figure was there again before her, silhouetted sharply in the doorway. And then there was a second figure, holding something in its hand, raising the thing and bringing it down viciously upon the head of the other. The rest was as it had been before. The first figure fell. The second stepped forward and slammed the door.

"Blanche? What's the matter?"

Blanche looked up, drawing her gaze by force from the carpet. "Nothing," she said quickly. Her breath, though, was so constricted in her lungs she could hardly get the words out. "I—I just had an attack of dizziness. It's nothing. I'm all right now."

But Jane lingered in the doorway, one hand on the knob, watching her with a strange air of indecision. She remained a moment longer, then finally turned away and pulled the door closed after her.

Blanche sat staring into the shadows, thoughts of feverish, remembered terror winging through her mind like screaming black devils. *I didn't mean to kill her*, Jane had said. Kill... Blanche brought her hand up to her mouth

against an inadvertent sob of anguish. She knew now who the figure in the doorway was. She knew—that Jane had killed Edna Stitt.

Miss Blanche, I just worry about you. I get to thinking about what could happen... and I lay awake at night.

Mrs. Stitt had tried to warn her, and she hadn't listened. Tears of remorse burned her eyes and she let her hand fall away. All these years she had gambled blindly. And she had thought herself so wise. Now she saw that her blindness had destroyed two precious lives—that of the person who had served her all these years—Jane—and that of the one who had tried to save her—Edna Stitt. The guilt, then, was hers just as much as Jane's.

So Jane's present mood of contrition was explained; she was trying, in her own pathetic way, to atone. For murder. It was too horrible, too ugly.... Blanche wanted to cry out against the nightmare she now shared with Jane, but she forced herself to be still. Evidently Jane's crime had not been discovered; she must have managed somehow to conceal Mrs. Stitt's body. Perhaps in this very house. Blanche shuddered as with a sudden chill. The police had to be told at once. Whatever the consequences, there was no alternative.

Blanche stopped, forced all at once to the realization that she was no less at Jane's mercy now than before. Possibly Jane still controlled the telephone from downstairs. Her gaze lifted to the closed door. If anything, she was more helpless; even if the phone were available, she was too weak to reach it. Slowly the old panic began to build up inside. She had to get out... had to find some way to reach help....

Her gaze came to rest on the draped window. Before she had started to drop a note to the woman next door. Mrs. Bates. Perhaps, if she could only manage to get out of bed and across the room... Guided by the memory of her previous effort, she reached into the pocket of her robe, found the piece of paper that she sought and pulled it out.

Mrs. Bates: This is from your neighbor, Blanche Hudson...

Thank heaven Jane hadn't found it; it was a sign perhaps from divine providence. Blanche read the note over carefully. It would serve.

At the sound of footsteps out in the hall, she hastily thrust the note beneath the covers. Pretending to have fallen asleep, she dropped her head to the pillow and closed her eyes. Outside, mercifully, Jane passed her closed door and moved on without interruption down the hall. Blanche opened her eyes again and simply lay there listening.

After an interval, when Jane had returned downstairs, she retrieved the note from under the covers and sat up again. Despite her present state of physical depletion, she was filled with the urgent conviction that she must act at once before the chance was lost. Taking a deep breath, she shoved back the covers and turned to the curtained window.

Frightened determination became fearful doubt. She could never make it that far; she simply hadn't the stamina. Still she looked around for some source of help. Her wheel chair was there against the wall just beyond the bedside table, just out of reach.

She *had* to get to the window; she had to think of a way. In a surge of frantic determination, she reached up to the lifting bar, grasped it with both hands and this time, with the advantage of being propped up on the pillows, managed to pull herself up into a sitting position.

She returned her attention to the chair. It was so terribly far away. But then, catching a glint of light reflected from some polished, curved surface just behind the bedside table, she remembered her cane and brightened. Bracing herself with one hand, she reached out and drew the cane out of its hiding place.

That done, she began to inch herself around on the bed. Using the lifting bar to keep herself upright, shifting so that she moved just a bit at a time, she angled herself around until she faced the wheel chair. When she had finally achieved this, she brought her hands down carefully beside her. Clinging to the edge of the mattress, she swung her numbed legs out and down.

Fighting down a new feeling of dizziness, she turned her attention to the bedside table and reached out for the cane, drawing it up close beside her. Then, sucking in another deep breath, she extended her arms before her and leaned forward.

Her hands struck against the top of the table joltingly, but her arms held. The dizziness came again, worse than before, but she refused to give in to it.

After a moment, she removed her left arm from the table, reached back for the cane and extended it toward the arm of the wheel chair. She was able to reach the chair easily. Hooking the handle of the cane in place, she pulled. The chair remained stubbornly immobile exactly where it was, and with a sinking sense of disappointment she realized the brake was set.

For a moment she panicked, but then she began to see a way around this

obstacle. Drawing the cane back to the table, reversing it, she aimed it at the foot lever that operated the brake and prodded.

It took several tries before the brake finally gave. Breathless from the exertion, Blanche lowered her arms to the table and leaned forward to rest. When she felt better, she pushed herself back again into a sitting position. Then, reaching out with the cane, she hooked it around the arm of the chair again and pulled. The chair moved easily forward.

When she had teased the chair into position, she looked down at her dangling legs, wondering if the right one still contained its fraction of strength and would support her for the instant needed to see her safely from the edge of the bed into the chair. She paused, listening; Jane seemed to still be moving about down in the kitchen.

When she felt steady enough, she reached out with the cane, jabbed at the brake and set it again. Bracing herself with one hand on the arm of the chair, she brought the cane down to the floor and lowered her feet to the footrest. Moving quickly, she threw herself bodily forward.

Using her arms to support and guide herself, she swung out for a moment into space, rested her weight for one instant on her right leg, twisted about as best she could, and fell back into the chair. She landed with a jolt, sharply aware of the edge of the chair biting into her flank, but breathless with triumph. She had made it! Gripping the arm of the chair, she pushed up with the cane and tried to improve her purchase on the seat. Then, all at once, she collapsed and fell back, the darkness billowing up around her with cruel swiftness. She fought as a swimmer fights the sucking tide to bring herself back from the dark depths, up again into the air and the light.

She remained quite still for several minutes, becoming slowly aware of an ominous silence from downstairs. She looked toward the door, straining for any disruption at all in the still pulse of the house. The last few minutes Jane could easily have come up the stairs without her knowing. She reached out to the footrest where the cane lay at an angle across her legs; it would serve as a weapon of defense, if need be. But then, there was a sound quite distinctly from below, and she leaned back with a sigh of relief. After a moment, taking a firm grip on the wheel, she turned around toward the window.

At the drapes, putting her hand to the center where they divided, she lifted the nearest, held it as far as possible away from her chair and, moving

forward, let it fall behind.

The bright sunlight assaulted her eyes painfully, and for a moment she was blinded. Unseen, the eucalyptus plucked at the grille, scraped back out of the way. Blanche opened her eyes slowly giving them time to adjust. She pulled out the other drape and swung it behind to join the other. She sat for a moment listening to the stillness outside.

The sky, though incredibly blue, was dashed across here and there with wispy white clouds. In the distance the top plumage of another eucalyptus undulated under the erratic persuasion of a gusting breeze.

Reaching out to the clasp, Blanche opened the window and drew it back. The breeze hurled itself in upon her face, stirred her hair, then fell away into an abrupt and complete stillness. The branch close outside reappeared, slapped against the grille, vanished.

Revived, Blanche stretched her hand out, grasped the grille and using her cane as a brace, pulled herself up. Straining forward, she peered down into the garden below. It was deserted and utterly still. She managed to cling a moment longer, then let go and fell back again into her chair.

She turned her gaze back to the sky, trying to guess the time of day by the slant of the sunlight; it was possible that Mrs. Bates had made her first visit of the day already, which could mean a long and disastrous wait.

She seemed to sit there in an island of silence, and there rose again in her mind the fear that Jane would come into the room and find her. She made herself listen all the harder.

When at last a sound came, she recognized it instantly; even without seeing she was able to trace Mrs. Bates's progress as she opened one of the French doors, came out onto the walk, took up the hose and turned on the water. Taking the note tremblingly from her pocket, she reached out to the grillwork and drew herself up.

Yes, she was there! Mrs. Bates, wearing her smock and her big floppy hat, had already started along the flower beds at the side of the lawn beneath the hedge. Blanche put down forcefully an impulse to cry out, fearful of what unknown horror might befall her if Jane should hear and come upstairs. She let go and dropped back into her chair; she needed to conserve her waning strength until the sound of the water told her that Mrs. Bates was directly below.

The waiting was nearly unbearable. Reaching back, she parted the drapes and listened. She thought she heard a sound from downstairs, but at

the same moment the eucalyptus slapped suddenly against the window making her uncertain. She turned back again. Gradually the sound of the water came nearer, until she was certain Mrs. Bates had reached the corner nearest the window. She reached up to the grille.

Mrs. Bates was almost exactly where she had guessed. As the woman rounded the corner, Blanche strained anxiously forward. Holding herself close to the grille she tried to attract Mrs. Bates's attention by waving the sheet of paper between the bars. Mrs. Bates, however, her face totally hidden beneath the wide brim of her hat, remained concentrated on her chores. Again Blanche needed to restrain herself from crying out.

"Oh, hurry!" she whispered to herself. "Hurry!"

Mrs. Bates's next move brought her almost precisely into position beneath the window. More than ever, though, her face was hidden beneath the brim of her hat. Blanche pressed forward, totally unaware of the cold bite of the bars against her cheek. Reaching the note out as far as she could into the open, she released it.

And then she knew that she *would* cry out, knew that she must; now that Mrs. Bates had the note it couldn't really matter. She parted her lips. But she did not speak. Instead, hearing a sound close behind her, she whirled about, her face taut with fright.

A hand tore at the drapes, stirring them into violent life, hurling them back. Blanche dropped into her chair, fumbling frantically for her cane....

Mrs. Bates, catching a flash of something white, looked down, saw the note and stooped to pick it up. As she did so she had an impression of a childish scrawl. She started to smooth it out in her hand, but then, hearing her name shouted from somewhere in the direction of the house, she turned, still holding it, and started in that direction.

"Out here, Harriett!" she called.

As she approached the house, Harriett Palmer appeared on the walk and, waving something before her, hurried forward.

"Have you seen this?"

Arriving at Mrs. Bates's side just as she straightened from turning off the water, Harriett held out the paper. Folding it quickly back to the second page, she pointed to a photograph in the upper left hand corner.

"Look at that!"

Mrs. Bates stared at the picture. It was of a woman, a woman in middle

years evidently, angular-faced and for the purpose of the picture stiffly smiling. A pleasant-looking woman, actually, but by no means pretty. The reproduction, though, was a poor one and as far as Mrs. Bates could tell it might have been a picture of almost anyone. Aware of Harriett's eyes fast upon her, she frowned in a further effort at recognition.

"Don't you see who that is?"

Slowly Mrs. Bates shook her head. "I—no, I don't think so." As she spoke, though, her gaze fell to the caption beneath the picture: MURDER VICTIM. "Oh, no!" she breathed, repelled at the very thought that anyone of her acquaintance could ever meet with a violent or newsworthy death. "This—this isn't someone we know?"

"Yes," Harriett assured her, "yes, it is. Just look again. Don't you see? It's the woman who cleans for the Hudson girls. There's her name—see—Stitt, Mrs. Edna Stitt. Every Friday for three years now I've seen her walking up the hill to their house."

Gazing down at the picture with reluctant recognition, Mrs. Bates nodded. "Terrible," she murmured, "terrible..."

Harriett nodded in the direction of the Hudson house. "Do you suppose they know yet? They just found her this morning—the police—in a ditch over in the park. They said she'd probably been there a couple of days."

Mrs. Bates shook her head; she felt suddenly empty and cold inside. It was hard for her to believe that people could really do such terrible things to each other. Murder...

"I just don't know..." she said vaguely.

"I never noticed whether they get the early edition or not." Harriett glanced down at the paper again. "Gives you a funny feeling, doesn't it? She was a widow, too, poor thing."

Mrs. Bates, making a brief clucking sound, let her gaze lift across the length of the garden to the Hudson house and the window at the center of the second story. Curiously, she had the impression that only a moment before the window had been open and the drapes pulled back. But now it was closed.

"What's the matter?" Harriett asked.

Mrs. Bates looked around. "Nothing," she said "nothing." She forced her lips into a smile. "Come on in and we'll have a cup of hot tea. It's kind of windy."

Harriett nodded in quick agreement; the subject of Mrs. Stitt's

mysterious demise had yet to be fully explored. "I'd love it."

Mrs. Bates crossed to the open French door, motioning Harriett into the house ahead of her. As she paused to take off her hat, she looked back again in the direction of the Hudson house. Then, remembering, she glanced down at the piece of note paper still clutched in her hand. Crumpling it into a tight ball, she thrust it into the pocket of her smock and hurried inside.

She stood before the mirrored wall, close to the windows where the light was harshest, looking at herself with a steady, troubled stare. Frightened at the slowly admitted and slowly emerging spectre of herself there in the mirrors, she moved back a bit into the shadows. Lifting her skirt slightly in a dainty gesture, she placed one foot before the other and pointed the toe at an angle. Then quickly, with a small moan of pain, she turned away. The reality, now that it had fully emerged, would not be dimmed by mere shadow. She saw clearly now that the finer, better self that had always awaited her just beyond the horizon of the next moment did not exist, had never existed and never would. The things she had done, the person she had become, could not be altered by mere wishing.

She knew it now; the tomorrow that contained the Jane Hudson she had always believed herself truly to be, would never dawn. Others had good reason to feel as they did about her. Blanche would always be afraid of her, would always want to escape her and leave her alone. Mrs. Stitt would be forever dead. Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow would contain always the horrors she had committed today, yesterday and the day before. Slowly, Jane lifted her hand to the welt across her cheek where Blanche had hit her with the cane. Tears welled swiftly in her already swollen eyes and spilled down her cheeks.

She had not been sane. She had begun to see that plainly. She had dwelt for a time in a world removed, utterly, from reality. But the impact of the full realization that she had actually killed another human being had released her from that world into the limbo of now. She was like a child who had shocked herself out of her own temper tantrum by inadvertently breaking a treasured piece of china; the angry delirium was past, but the calm present was made even worse by the imminent threat of some terrible

retribution.

Beneath the level of her first awareness was the thought she still refused to recognize except as a dark, uneasy feeling; the only real solution to the horror in which she now found herself was to surrender herself to the police. It was fear, though, that impaired this recognition, fear of the police themselves, and a new fear, still half hidden in her subconscious, that another experience of shock might plunge her back into madness.

Affairs, though, could not possibly be allowed to continue as they were. The time would soon come when she would be forced to see what must be done and do it. But not just yet, the fearful part of her cried, not just today. But, meanwhile, what was she to do about Blanche? Her own freedom, it was now painfully evident, could be maintained only at the cost of Blanche's. If only she could make Blanche understand; if she could just make her see that the danger was over, that it was only a matter of being patient now a little bit longer...

Leaving the room, she closed the door after her with not even the slightest backward glance into the mirrors. She would never enter the room again; she had learned this day to despise even her own mirrored image.

In the kitchen, she crossed to the table, pulled out a chair and sat down. Taking up a paper napkin, she dried the tears from her eyes. She sat there, looking about the kitchen in an attitude of dejection, looking to see that everything was in order. Suddenly it had become very important to her that the house be kept clean and orderly. It was as if, by setting to rights the externals of her world, she would be able to rid herself of the chaos within. And yet, even as she sat there, her gaze was drawn again and again to the cupboard where the liquor was put away. There were two bottles there, two full quarts, brand new, unopened.

She glanced down at her trembling hands. She hadn't touched a drop in four days—not a drop. But now, after what had happened upstairs with Blanche—after seeing the awful, animal fear in Blanche's eyes... She put her hands together, lacing the fingers tight, in an effort to stop their trembling. She put them down firmly on the table, holding them steady, and sat staring down at them, as if for confirmation of the strength of her own determination. Nothing, though, could stop the trembling inside.

By compulsion, her eyes lifted again to the cupboard. Giving up the drink had been a part of her penance. It had been hard, hard at first, but then she saw that Blanche was getting better and seemed to be learning to trust

her again, and it had been worth it. There had been the two of them again—no matter what had happened. Just as Daddy had said... But now—now she was alone as before. Alone and lost.

She was lost in hell, she told herself in sudden anguish, lost and doomed forever to a burning hell of unavailing remorse. Her madness had begun in her fear of losing Blanche, of losing, at last, Blanche's forgiveness. And it had ended in her bringing upon herself, finally and irrevocably, the very thing she had feared. So what did it matter now? What did anything matter? What was the good of doing penance when you were already judged and damned forever? There was no turning back, no changing any of it, not now. Rising slowly, her hands still clasped before her, she started across the room.

She stood before the cupboard, looking up at it... looking... What was the use of anything? Of anything at all? Pulling her hands loose, wrenching them apart with brutal suddenness, she reached up and threw open the door.

In the moment when Edwin stepped off the bus and paused to look up the hill, the street lamps came on marking the rising curving path ahead for him with their dull, intermittent light. The sun had gone down now, but the sky had yet to obtain the deep shades of night. Edwin, his pale face creased with strain, made his way to the corner and started up.

Edwin had finally decided to leave Del, to simply abandon her. He could no longer stand the sight of her. Or even, now that he was away from her, the thought of her. You had to survive. He had reasoned it out this way in an attempt to justify himself. You had to watch out for yourself; that was how the world was made.

For two days he had thought about it, until it came clear to him that he would have to start with the means available to him. Jane Hudson had money or at least access to some and would, therefore, have to provide him with his beginning. She had even promised him money, and a job, too, and so she was in his debt for these things. She was in his debt, and he was determined to find a way to make her pay up.

As he reached the drive in front of the Hudson house, however, all his carefully bolstered determination began to totter upon its own faulty foundation, and it occurred to Edwin that he had not yet committed himself to this undertaking irretrievably. He could still call it off. Del would be glad to have him back. He hesitated. Then, crossing to the door, he resolutely

pressed the bell; Del would always be glad to have him back.

The sound of the bell rang in the kitchen with a sudden sharpness that almost caused Jane to knock over her glass. Gripping the edge of the table, she leaned forward and peered narrowly into the black maw of the hallway.

Her first reaction was one of panic. They had come for her! They had come and she was alone. She couldn't bear that, she couldn't... The bell rang again and then, almost immediately, again. She rose from her chair and moving as if in a daze, crossed into the hall. Bumping against the edge of the door, she paused, cautioning herself to be very, very quiet. If she didn't let them know she was there, they would have to go away after a while. And then she would run away...

Entering the living room, she attempted to walk through the darkness on tiptoe, but she staggered and fell against one of the chairs. Bracing herself, blinking hard to make out the dim shapes of the French windows, she straightened and took a new heading.

"I am very, very drunk," she told herself in whispered secrecy, "so I must be very, very careful."

The sound of the bell came again, echoing back hollowly from the distant ceiling. Making her way slowly, teetering across to the center window, she put her hand to the drape and peered out. At once she recognized the awkward, hulking figure on the terrace.

He had come back! Just when she had thought she would never see him again, just when she was so utterly deserted and alone in the world, he had come back to her. With a small cry of relief and joy, she started toward the door. But then she stopped. She couldn't let him in. She mustn't. It was much too dangerous. She couldn't even let him know she was there.

But why?

She paused, trying to make it all fit together in her befogged mind. What possible danger could there be in just seeing Edwin? What foolishness! Edwin wasn't dangerous. He wouldn't hurt a fly. He was her friend, her only friend, and he had come to—to help her. Of course! He had heard she was in trouble and had come to help her. That was exactly the sort of thing Edwin would do. Aware suddenly that the bell had been silent for some while, she moved quickly back to the window and looked out again. In the outer dimness, Edwin's dim figure was already moving down the steps and onto the drive. Shoving herself away, she hurried to the door and pulled it

open.

“Edwin!” she cried. “Edwin!”

In the lowering darkness he stopped and turned. After a moment’s hesitation, he came back, lumbering breathlessly up the steps.

“I—I thought maybe I’d missed you again,” he wheezed. He crossed toward her with an unaccustomed air of decisiveness. “I’m glad I didn’t though.” But as he came closer to her, he hesitated, stopped. “But maybe...”

Jane moved her hand with limp urgency, motioning him inside. “Come on in,” she said shakenly. “You’ve got to come in... you’ve *got* to, Edwin... and... and have a drink with me. You’ve got to!”

Blanche turned her head on the pillow, listening. There had been the repeated ring of the doorbell, and now—she was almost positive of it—there was the sound of voices from down in the kitchen. Staring hard into the darkness, she strained to hear. Yes, she was positive of it now, there *were* voices. Jane’s. And some man’s.

She had awakened sometime earlier, feeling heavy and ill. For a while she had remembered nothing and then, slowly, it came back to her, her encounter with Jane there at the window and her subsequent headlong plunge into unconsciousness. And she remembered something else, too, from a fleeting moment of awareness—Jane giving her something in a glass of water... A drug?

And then, remembering the rest of it, she realized that a great deal of time had passed since she had dropped the note out the window and help had still not come. Mrs. Bates, then, had deliberately abandoned her. Or Jane had found some way to forestall any interference. Since then she had lain in the darkness, empty and despondent. Again she had failed.

I will die, she had told herself, *I feel it, I know it*. And she had wondered how death would come to her. Her eyes reached into the dark, seeking some vision of death, of its shape and substance. Would there appear a benevolent spectre, a gentle-faced angel in white robes such as she had seen in her Sunday-school books as a child? Or would there be—just dying, a gradual, uneventful diminishing until there was simply nothing left? Tears welled upon her cheeks and she knew she was weeping, but she was too weary even to lift her hand and wipe them away. Now, however, with the sound of the voices, hope once more began to pulse within her.

There was a stranger in the house, someone perhaps who would save her. From below came the muted sound of laughter, this followed by the brief hiss of running water. The man laughed again, by himself. If she could only let him know that she was there, that she needed his help!

She *had* to do it. She had to think of a way. She repeated this over and over to herself, hoping that the mere repetition would somehow generate some plan of action in her mind. The laughter came again, and there in the darkness, she pressed her hand to her forehead in an effort to think.

Thinking was actually painful to her; her mind seemed almost bruised with weariness. She breathed deeply, trying to concentrate upon the fresh air and the revitalizing effect it was having upon her responses. Still strong in her mind was the thought that it would be so much pleasanter just to forget everything, to give up the struggle and drift back into sleep—and death. There would be no more bother then, no more of this awful weariness; it would be over. But then there was a faint crash from below, as if a glass had been dropped, and she was jarred into renewed alertness.

A crash. The thought came to her spontaneously, prompted by the sound; what she wanted to do was make a noise, knock something over, make a loud and startling crash. The kitchen was almost directly below.... She pressed her hand harder to her brow in a new effort to think and remember. There was something perfectly obvious...

The tray! Jane had brought her lunch into the room when she had arrived and found her at the window. She had put it down—she'd had a glimpse of it there—yes, on the nightstand. Within easy reach. If Jane had not remembered to take it away again...

Rolling herself as best she could to the left, she felt for the table and the tray. The tray was there. It was there! But from her present position she was just barely able to reach it with the tips of her fingers.

Weakness, both mental and physical, was her most formidable foe. Turning upon the bed, using her elbows to propel and guide herself, she struggled to pull herself closer. Panting, damp with perspiration, she dragged herself slowly across the bed until she felt certain she must be within reach. She lay still for a moment, trying, through the labored rasp of her own breathing, to hear the sounds from down in the kitchen. She hadn't any time to waste, she knew that; the stranger might decide to leave at any moment.

Groping through the darkness, she again felt for the edge of the tray.

Almost instantly her hand found the cold metal and caught hold of it. Her pulse quickened with a heavy drumming in her ears. Would he know, whoever he was down there? Would he guess her desperation?

Taking a deep breath, she worked her fingers away from the corner of the tray to the center of the front edge. Again she paused, listening to the muted sounds from down below, and then she drew her hand forward. Nothing happened. The tray, a heavy one, too heavy for her feeble strength, refused to budge.

But she was not defeated, not yet. Taking another short rest, she reached out again, this time with both hands. And then she stopped, aware suddenly that for the last few minutes there had been no new sound from the kitchen, only silence. There in the darkness her cry of alarm was only a faint whimper. He had gone!...

She lay there, her cheek pressed deep into the mattress, her hands still anchored on the edge of the tray. Tears started again in her eyes. And then, abruptly, there came a loud bark of laughter from down below. Instantly she tightened her fingers on the tray, and rolling this time as she did so, pulled.

The dishes, the silver, the glassware cascaded to the floor in one brief din. Then the tray itself struck upon all the rest with a crash that resounded through the darkness like a clap of thunder... It was done, and the silence descended as suddenly and shockingly as the noise. Drawing her aching arms back to the bed, Blanche lay back, gasping for breath, listening... listening....

I've got to have the money you promised me. And I want it tonight.

Edwin had meant to say it, and just that bluntly, directly he saw her. In the first place, he wanted to get it over with, and in the second, he was determined to put their relationship firmly on the businesslike level at which it belonged. Now that he had finally left Del, he was determined there would be no more toadying to weak-minded, neurotic old women.

Despite his hard determination, however, he had suffered a collapse of courage; it was harder to make financial demands on a woman than he had supposed. Then, too, he had the excuse that Jane Hudson, in her present state of alcoholic emotionalism, was hardly in the mood to discuss business. Still he was determined that she would give him the money. She *had* to. And for this reason, he had decided to stay and drink with her. A way to accomplish his purpose would surely turn up sooner or later.

Under the harsh kitchen light, Edwin grinned with a certain looseness and helped himself to his third drink of raw whisky—a heavier concentration of liquor than he had experienced in all his life previously. Putting down the bottle, he looked across at Jane Hudson who was still babbling at him with vaporish incoherence.

At first it had been some kind of nonsense about how she had been damned and thrown into hell. Now it was a lot of drivel about how he was the only friend she had in the whole wide world, and the only one she would ever need. He was glad to note, however, that the old bag was at least beginning to cheer up. He had no more than made this observation when Jane, as if to assure him of its accuracy, suddenly threw back her head and emitted a peal of laughter, shocking in its shrill penetration.

“We’ll be on Ed Sullivan!” Jane Hudson crowed, gasping out the words through diminishing bursts of laughter. “But he’ll have to put up a fight to get us. Shove off, Ed—we’ll say—you can’t get Baby Jane Hudson for peanuts!”

“Or,” Edwin interjected in quick response, “Herr Maestro Flagg!”

“Or Herr Maestro Eddie—Edwin—Flagg,” Jane agreed with an abrupt nod. “No, sir!”

“Or even the piano—you can’t get that for peanuts, either!”

“Or the damn violin!”

“Don’t bother us, Ed,” Edwin said, taking another draft from his glass, “until you can be really—truly—serious. Maybe you can get Marlene for that kind of chicken feed. Or Frankie. But Baby Jane and Maestro Flagg—are you kiddin’?” At this, Edwin himself was dissolved into gales of mirth.

“Hell, no!” Jane cried.

“A thousand times no!”

“A thousand times *hell* no!”

“Maybe you can get Clark Gable to dance the tango—or Orson Welles to saw Marilyn Monroe in half but—but——”

Edwin rocked back in his chair, trembling with laughter. He was enjoying himself so hugely that it was some moments before he noticed that his companion’s mood had again and with the same lightning swiftness as before, reversed itself. As he looked up in surprise, Jane Hudson returned his gaze with a mournful shake of the head.

“No,” she said, “no.” Her eyes filled with tears, and Edwin felt a charge of anger that she should want to spoil his fun. “It isn’t right to laugh...”

“Oh, come on, come on!” Edwin said crossly. “You said all you needed was a friend—everything would be all right if you just had a friend. Well, here I am—I’m your friend. Isn’t that right? So what’s the matter now?” Jane shook her head again, and the tears glistened in her eyes like trembling jewels. “You were feeling just great a minute ago. Come on, cheer up!”

“I want to,” Jane said. “I want to so bad, Edwin. But I can’t be happy now... not now...” She looked up at him suddenly, her eyes weirdly intent through the glaze of her tears. “Edwin...” she said, “could I tell you—something—and you won’t think I’m—terrible? I mean——”

Edwin waved a hand. “Sure,” he said grandly. “You can tell me anything you want—any time you want. You don’t have to hold back; just get it off your chest.”

Jane’s eyes searched his face. “You promise?”

“Promise?”

“Not to—to stop being my friend?”

“Yes, sure, I promise.”

Jane Hudson spread her hands in a gesture of finality upon the table, and when she looked up at him her eyes seemed to hold an expression of absolute sobriety. In preparation for what she was about to say, she moistened her lips nervously with her tongue. And then, in that moment, it came. The crash. A calamitous, smashing sound almost directly above them. Edwin, startled, leaped to his feet, knocking his chair over behind him. For a moment he stared at the ceiling, then looked down into Jane’s pale, upturned face.

“Holy smoke!” he said, “what was that?”

Jane shook her head, seemingly without comprehension.

“What happened?” Edwin swung loosely around toward the hallway. “Who’s up there?”

“No one! Edwin!...”

In an instant she was there beside him, holding tightly to his arm. He looked down into her ashen face, felt a tremor pass through her body. Some very urgent and terrible communication seemed to pass between them. What was it she had been about to tell him just before the crash? Had she been on the verge of some sort of confession? Turning away to the darkened hallway, he pulled free of her.

“I’m going up and have a look.”

“No!” After a moment’s hesitation, she followed quickly after him. “No! Edwin... it’s nothing!”

He moved on through the hallway, lumbering through the darkness to the living room and across to the bottom of the stairs, his footsteps made heavy with the drink. Jane hurled herself after him, catching again at his sleeve.

“Edwin—listen!”

Goaded on rather than deterred by her objections, he grasped the handrail and pulled himself forward. At the top of the stairs, he stopped and waited for her to come up beside him.

“Edwin...”

“Turn on the lights.”

“Edwin, please, listen to me....”

“Turn them on,” Edwin said with a rough authority born largely of the liquor. “Turn them on, dammit!”

She moved away from him then, obediently, and there was the click of a

switch. The flame-shaped bulbs in the wrought-iron brackets, twins to those in the rehearsal room, came alight with a dusty orange glow. Along the wall the paintings shone with a wettish, oily sheen. Jane Hudson turned back to him, and in the pall her face looked yellow and sickly.

“Go back down,” she pleaded. “Please... let me tell you first...”

He turned to her threateningly, enjoying her reaction of fright. “What’s going on around here?” he said. Following the direction of her glance, he moved toward the entrance to the hallway.

“*Edwin!*”

There was such urgency in her cry that he stopped, and with a faint feeling of dismay, looked back at her. For a moment their eyes met and held, and then Jane shook her head in mute desperation. In that moment Edwin wished that he had not come here, that he had not insisted on climbing the stairs. And then the words came spilling from her mouth, in a tide that would not be stopped.

“She was going to put me out—out of the house—out alone...” She had begun to sob, as if telling him of some terrible grief. “I—I didn’t know what to do. She hates me! She thinks I don’t know, but I do. She always did hate me—even when we were little—when we were children. All these years ——” She stopped suddenly, staring at him, blinking back her tears. “Edwin? ——”

Edwin nodded back toward the hallway. “Your sister?”

For a moment longer she continued to stare and then, defeated, she nodded. “Yes. Blanche—She’s in there.... But it’s all right ——”

“In there?” Compelled now, even against his will to play out this moment to its end, Edwin moved off into the dimness, in the direction of the closed door.

“But it’s all right now,” Jane said. “You don’t understand...”

Edwin reached out to the door, tried it. “It’s locked,” he said. He turned to her, looked down into her frightened face. “You’ve locked her in, haven’t you?”

Jane nodded. “You said you’d be my friend.... You promised....”

Abruptly, Edwin held out his hand. “Where’s the key?”

Jane took a faltering step backward. “No,” she said, shaking her head. “No!...”

Edwin stared at her, thinking how much she looked like Del there in the dimness, with that expression of hurt bewilderment on her silly, old face. In

a red burst of sick anger he suddenly grabbed her by the shoulders and began to shake her. “Give it to me!” he yelled. “Give it to me!” As in a nightmare he watched her head bobbing there before him, heard the choking gasp of her voice.

“Edwin—don’t!”

He let go of her and again held out his hand. “Give it to me!”

Jane nodded, still gasping for breath. “Yes,” she whispered. “It’s in my room....”

He followed her, watching from the doorway as she took the key from the drawer of the desk and brought it back to him.

“All right.” His anger was suddenly gone, leaving him empty and ill. Still, now that he had the key, he had to go through with it. “All right,” he repeated, and turned back down the hall.

At the first sound of the key touching the lock, Blanche strained upward in the darkness, struggling to face the door. She had won! Her heart beat wildly with the wonderful certainty that she had managed to bring help at last. A moment before, listening breathlessly to the voices outside her door, she had only been able to pray and hope. But now she knew!

The key turned in the lock and the door swung open. Still struggling, she was only obliquely aware of a dim fan of light upon the carpet, broken by a large stretching shadow. But then she looked up and saw him there in the doorway in silhouette, stout, towering, enormous. She had to speak; she had to make him know what it meant to her that he had come.

“Thank God!” There in the darkness her voice was only a dry whisper, so weak she wasn’t at all certain that he heard. “Thank God you’ve come. ...”

Uncontrollably, tears began to stream down her face, tears of gratitude and relief. The figure in the doorway swayed slightly. But it made no move to come forward.

With a first faint tremor of misgiving, Blanche brought her hand up to her breast, watching.... A moment passed, and then the man moved again, reaching out to the wall in search of the panel that contained the light switches. When he found it, there was a faint click, and a harsh flood of light came down upon the room from the ceiling, forcing Blanche to close her eyes. There was a beat of silence and then, from the man, a sharp grunt of dismay.

Opening her eyes against the glare, Blanche looked up at him. He was there just inside the doorway, staring down at her with an expression of glazed horror. Blinking furiously against the brightness, she had only a vague impression of what he looked like; he was stout, his forehead glistened with perspiration. She struggled to prop herself up on her elbows.

“Take me—away—away from here...” she panted. “Please... please!”

She waited, but he still did not come to her. As her vision cleared, she looked more closely into his face and saw that he was immobilized by shock. But then his expression changed and became one of sick revulsion. He took a faltering step backward toward the hall, and his hand reached out again, mechanically, to the light switch.

“Please!” Blanche whispered in fright. “Oh, please!”

The switch clicked, and the darkness was upon her with the numbing impact of a physical blow. The man in the doorway was once again only a faceless, hulking silhouette.

“No!” she cried. “No!” She tried vainly to pull herself forward across the bed. “Don’t leave me here! Don’t!——”

For a moment longer the man loomed there in the doorway, as if torn with indecision. And then, with a sound like that of retching, he turned and reached for the door.

“No!” Blanche cried, her voice no more than a faint gasp now, even to herself. “Oh, no! You can’t!”

Abruptly the door closed and he was gone, and in his place was only the darkness and the stinging shock of what had happened. She remained for another moment straining toward the door, and then she turned, pressing her face down hard into the tangled bedclothes.

“Oh, please!” she sobbed, “please... please!”

Trembling, Edwin moved back from the door and reached out a hand to the wall. For a moment he was beyond any further movement or speech. It was a nightmare past all imagining, the sudden glimpse of that pallid, wasted face with its streaming, sunken eyes, its matted white hair, its bluish, lifeless lips pulled back upon the teeth in a horrible grimace of pleading. And the twisted, emaciated body in its tangle of nightdress. And the dry, whispering voice... the voice of a dead person... or of someone close to death...

He could not have looked at her another moment. He could not have

gone to her and touched her if his very life had depended upon it. It was too horrible, too repugnant. He turned, seized by a new wave of nausea, and made his way out to the gallery. Footsteps sounded behind him, and he looked around to see Jane Hudson emerging from the shadows.

“I couldn’t trust her,” she said unevenly. “I’ve taken care of her all these years—all these years... and she only wanted—she wanted to get rid of me—get away from me.... It’s only for a few days more—until tomorrow—or the next day...”

Edwin turned from her, moved away. Crossing to the top of the stairs, he gripped the newel post for support. The sweat on his forehead, capturing the light from the orange globes, glistened like beads of polished bronze. He stood there, waiting for the sickness to pass. All he wanted now was to be away from here, away from the awful, crushing reality of the horror he had just seen in that room. He faced around to Jane, his eyes dark with loathing.

“Your own sister!” he managed to say.

“You don’t understand!”

“It’s awful—*awful* !”

Jane put her hand out to him. “Don’t,” she implored him. “Don’t take her side. Everybody always, always does. You don’t know...”

Edwin straightened, looking down at her with fixed wonder. “You’re insane,” he breathed. “You’re mad....”

Jane shook her head. “You’re my friend,” she protested, “mine—and you promised!...”

Shuddering, Edwin turned back toward the stairs. “I want out of here.” Avoiding her outstretched hand, he moved off down the steps.

“Where are you going?” She moved close after him, following. “Edwin?...”

Impervious, he continued down to the living room and across to the front door.

“Don’t leave me here alone!” she cried. “I can’t stand it if you do! Edwin—you can’t leave me alone, you can’t! I mustn’t be alone now—you don’t know...”

He opened the door, and then as she reached out to him, stopped and looked back at her.

“Get away from me,” he said with quiet horror. “Get—*away* !”

Even after he had gone Jane stood staring at the closed door in stunned disillusionment. He had pretended to be so good, so nice; he had pretended

to be her friend. It came to her in a rush; she hated him—*hated* him! Whirling about, she hurled her gaze up the stairs, toward the gallery and the darkened hallway. Her face contorted and then, with a small, strangled sob, she began to cry.

The weeping, however, lasted for only a moment, for then, all at once, she saw the terrible danger in what had happened. Edwin had seen—he knew—and he would tell! He was probably on his way to the police at this very moment! She made a small whimpering sound of terror. She had to stop him! She had to go after him and find him.... She started convulsively toward the door.

She had only touched the knob when she pulled back again. He had been gone too long now; she would never be able to catch up with him on foot. She would be safer taking the car. If she could just find him and make him understand—if she could just persuade him to come back to the house with her... The key. The key to the car was in her room upstairs. She would have to run... hurry!...

Edwin, leaving the Hudson house, made his way blindly down the street, past the suspended light at the intersection and into the darkness beyond. Passing a number of houses, he came to a second lighted intersection, started to follow the street into a sharp, descending curve. Overcome, at that moment, with a sweeping feeling of weakness, he stopped. Making his way over to the short stone protective barrier that stretched around the length of the curve, he sat down.

Absently, he looked down into the black abyss beyond the wall. Never had he suffered a shock such as this one; never had he been brought up so sharply against stark, hideous reality. As Blanche Hudson's gaunt, pleading face appeared again in his mind, he strove to blot it out. He would not think of it again. He couldn't bear to—not yet.

He sat there staring down into the descending darkness, his thoughts wildly mixed and uncertain. For the moment he knew only one thing; from this night forward he would never be able to think of Jane Hudson or her sister without experiencing all over again the same awful, retching sickness that he felt now.

Jane's gaze darted out through the windshield following the forward thrust of the headlights. At the same time she consciously resisted the impulse to drive more swiftly, fearful that she might miss him in the dark. He might be hidden in the deep shadows at either side of the street, trying to elude her. She leaned forward over the wheel, her eyes sharp for the first glimpse of his graceless, lumbering figure.

And then, as she passed beneath the second street light and guided the car into the bend, she saw him. He was seated on the wall, slouched to one side, facing away from the street. His hands rested flat on the wall, bracing himself, and his head was lowered into the outer darkness. Jane felt again the quick inner twisting that had come with his betrayal back at the house; her vision blurred with anger, and her foot, almost of its own volition, pressed down on the accelerator. Centered now upon Edwin's huddled figure, the headlights stabbed sharply forward.

At the sound of the motor, the whine of its sudden acceleration, Edwin looked around. Jane saw that even as he wheeled about his eyes were wide with alarm. He blinked furiously against the jutting glare and she wondered if he realized what was about to happen to him. His lips parted in a fruitless attempt to cry out; for the moment he was obviously paralyzed with terror.

And then he bolted into convulsive action. Lurching backward, he scrambled onto the wall, a fat, graceless child pulling away instinctively from danger. Jane pressed her foot down even harder on the accelerator, and the car seemed to spring forward almost directly upon him. He looked back in fright and in that instant, even through the intervening glare, their eyes seemed to meet. But then another face seemed to rise before her, a face similarly drained with terror, caught in the onrushing flash of another pair of headlights. The gates were suddenly there, looming in front of her, the

tall intricately designed gates—the deadly gates.... With a stifled cry, she jammed her foot down hard on the brake.

With the scream of the brakes wild in her ears, she saw Edwin scramble back still farther on the wall, his eyes staring and enormous. And then it all changed. The brakes were silent now, but the sound of screaming went on. Only now it was coming from Edwin. And he was falling, his arms thrown wide against the night. He seemed almost to hang suspended there upon the darkness for a moment, and then he plunged down and out of sight beyond the wall. After that there was a silence so complete it seemed for a moment the whole world had gone still.

She simply sat there, staring incredulously at the place in the darkness where Edwin had last been. She couldn't believe it had really happened. She hadn't meant for it to happen; she knew that now. No matter how angry or frightened she had been, she hadn't really wanted to hurt him. A sound came from somewhere behind, a shout, the slam of a door. She turned looking back through the rear window, tense with alarm. A porch light went on, a figure appeared in a lighted doorway. There was the sound of voices, enquiring, concerned.

Realizing that she had killed the engine, she quickly set the gear and pressed the starter. It took three tries to get it going and by that time she could see figures beginning to materialize dimly on the street behind. She backed off, then shot the car forward and away from the wall in a tight, screaming turn. In response, a voice shouted from somewhere behind, and when she glanced into the mirror she saw a man running after her waving his hand.

The headlights, stabbing down into the dark, picked up the form of a woman hurrying up the hill. As the car hurled itself forward, the woman pressed back hastily to the curb and waited for it to pass. To Jane, in her present state of panic, the woman's face was only a whitish, featureless blob that appeared suddenly out of the darkness and then returned to it in a streaking blur.

She made her way past the Hudson house and into the circle of light at the intersection, and hearing voices from down below, looked in that direction. She saw a man emerge onto the street a few yards ahead and start down toward the curve.

“What is it?” Mrs. Bates called out. “What's happened?”

The man stopped and looked back. It was Mr. Junquist, the contractor who lived nearby. “Don’t know,” he replied. “An accident, from the way it sounded. Down on the bend. That’s a bad spot. We had a crack-up there just less than a year ago.”

“Oh, dear!” Mrs. Bates said, coming up beside him. “Then it must have been Miss Hudson...”

As they started down the hill together, Mr. Junquist looked around at her. “Jane Hudson?” he asked. “How so?”

Mrs. Bates avoided his gaze in sudden embarrassment: she didn’t want him to think she spent her time spying on her neighbors. Actually it was only by the merest chance that she had seen the Hudson coupé move away across the intersection in the direction of the curve; she had gone over to Harriett’s, and finding that Harriett had already gone out for the evening, had just been returning home at the time.

“Well...” she said uncertainly, “I don’t know. I heard a car drive off from here just a little bit ago. I guess I just assumed—I don’t know...”

Several people had already gathered at the bend before they got there. One man was playing the beam of the flashlight along a set of black tire marks on the pavement.

“Guess it was just a near thing,” he said. “A false alarm.”

“Thank heaven,” Mrs. Bates breathed.

“They sure burned their way out of here, though.”

A woman wearing an apron nodded in agreement. “Must have been someone who wasn’t familiar with the road. No one who lives up here would turn into this curve going that fast. I sure wouldn’t.” She paused, shaking her head. “It’s funny, though. Someone sure screamed like they were really hurt.”

“Kids, probably,” the man with the flashlight said gloomily. “Just some gang of crazy kids.”

“Well,” Mrs. Bates said, “just so long as nobody was hurt.”

“That’s right,” Mr. Junquist nodded. “Anyway, I needed the exercise.”

As he turned to go, Mrs. Bates followed suit. At the same time, however, a sound came faintly to her ears, and she stopped.

“Listen!” she said sharply to the others. “Shh!”

They looked around at her, their eyes reflecting the dim glow of the street lamp up above. There was a moment of silence.

“Didn’t you hear something?” Mrs. Bates looked up at Mr. Junquist.

“I’m sure there was a sound.” Again she held up her hand for silence, and after a moment the sound came again, distantly, an echoing moan of pain. “There! I told you—it’s from down there somewhere!”

In a body they all crowded quickly to the wall, leaning out over it to peer down into the black ravine. The man with the flashlight turned it on again, directing its pale finger of light at the bluff directly below. The sound came again, and he turned the beam to the left. Mrs. Bates, pressed close to the wall, emitted a small cry and pointed.

“There!” she cried. “There he is!”

As the circle of light centered itself dimly on the figure down below, it turned and pushed itself up painfully into a half-sitting position. At the same time it looked up in their direction, exposing a white face, the entire left side of which was a raw red smear. Mrs. Bates turned quickly to the others.

“We’ve got to help him!”

“I know how I can get down there.” It was the man with the flashlight. “Here, somebody hold this for me.”

Mrs. Bates turned slowly, looking back to where she knew the black tire marks were on the pavement. After a moment, her eyes, shadowed with dark speculation, lifted in the direction of the Hudson house. When she left the wall and started up the street, a voice called out behind her.

“Want me to come with you?”

It was Mr. Junquist, but Mrs. Bates shook her head. “Never mind,” she said, “you stay and see if you can help. I just thought someone ought to call the police.”

Jane pulled the car into the garage, switched off the motor and got out. By circling the hill she had been able to return by a route opposite the one that contained the curve. As she stepped out into the street and heard voices coming distantly from below, she stopped.

What had they discovered down there? Had they found him yet? She knew it was wisest to stay away but she had to know—she *had* to. Seeking the shadows next to the wall, she moved slowly toward the circle of light at the intersection.

Reaching the outer edge of the light, she stopped again and listened. Someone was shouting something, calling out instructions. From where she stood, though, it was impossible to see anything. For a moment she

hesitated, telling herself that she should hide herself quickly in the house. And yet she was unable to turn away. After a moment, she started cautiously forward again, out into the light. And then she faltered as a figure detached itself rapidly from the opposite darkness and hurried toward her.

In an instant of mutual surprise and recognition, the two women stopped. For a moment they simply stood there in the dim arena of the light, staring at each other in wordless dismay. Mrs. Bates was the first to move or speak. Under the sway of the shock of the last several minutes, she raised her hand in a melodramatic gesture of accusation and pointed off down the hill.

“You did that!” she said harshly. “You’re responsible! You should be in the hands of the police!” Suddenly she paled. Appalled at her own words, she turned and hurried off into the darkness.

“No!” Jane cried, looking after her. “No!” Somewhere in the darkness, Mrs. Bates’s footsteps became uncertain, faltered, stopped. “I didn’t mean it!” Holding her hand out in a gesture of desperate supplication, Jane started forward. “You don’t understand!...”

“Stay back,” Mrs. Bates cried out suddenly from the darkness. “You stay away from me!” And her footsteps resumed, running.

Jane remained where she was, staring fixedly ahead in mute wretchedness. And then it struck her; Mrs. Bates knew. She *knew*! She was always around, snooping. The night she had taken Mrs. Stitt’s body away in the wheel chair... She looked quickly around, as with a sharp sense of tightly encircling danger. Whirling about, she started toward the house.

“Blanche!” she cried, her voice thin with fear. “Oh, Blanche!...”

PART THREE

Twice since they had started out Blanche had dozed—or slipped off into unconsciousness—so she hadn't any idea at all where they were now or how long they had been driving. Only the dampness of the air and the increased chill made her think it had grown to be very, very late.

It had all seemed a part of some serio-comic adventure, Jane's dressing her with such frantic haste in her coat and shoes, carrying her down the stairs, leaving her there collapsed on the bottom step until she brought the folding wheel chair. Weirdly, it had all passed in silence. No explanation had been offered; there had been no exchange of words between them since.

At first she had been too dazzled by the drifting colored lights of the city, the white, stabbing ones of the onrushing cars, to notice anything else. But then, for all of her weakness and exhaustion, she realized that they had twice doubled back on their course and it came to her that they were embarked upon this curious flight into the night with no predetermined destination. Jane was fleeing blindly, evidently in the grip of some mindless fright. It had all been precipitated, of course, by the strange visit of the man to Blanche's room. She had just begun to think about this when she first drifted off to sleep....

Now, awaking from her second lapse from consciousness, her first awareness was of an eerie silence. She was stiff from having remained too long in the same cramped position and when she reached to the edge of the sill to pull herself up, the movement brought a sharp stab of pain to her side. Managing to lift herself slightly she looked out into the darkness and saw what appeared dimly to be the blank wall of some small building. It was then that she realized the car was no longer in motion.

She looked around and saw with a start of surprise that she was alone. Jane had gone off and left her! The car windows were rolled up, and the

doors were locked. She turned again to the window, with the first faint feelings of real alarm.

Then footsteps sounded close outside. She looked quickly around as a key touched the lock of the opposite door.

The door swung open and Jane, framed indistinctly against the night, moved forward and looked in at her. From the black distance of the night there came a sound, a softly rolling, whispering sound that seemed, at once, both strange and familiar. When Jane spoke her voice was flat, utterly devoid of any emotional coloring at all.

“You’re awake.”

Blanche did not answer. Aware of a sharp freshness coming into the car from outside, she knew they were near the ocean. The sound, then, was the rolling of the surf. Jane looked back over her shoulder into the darkness.

“I’ve been walking—on the sand.” Her voice still held a note of detachment as if she were speaking, really, to herself. “It’s nice...”

Blanche nodded, anxious, suddenly, to humor her, wondering why it so frightened her that they had come here to the sea.

“The water has lights on it in the dark,” Jane murmured.

Blanche hesitated and then, in an attitude of final supplication, leaned tensely forward. “Please, Jane,” she begged, “please take me home! I’m so tired... so tired...”

For a long moment Jane was silent, looking off into the night, and Blanche wondered if she had even heard. Then suddenly she turned back, bringing her gaze down searchingly to Blanche’s.

“You should see the ocean, Blanche,” she said. “You used to like it...”

Already Blanche had fallen back against the seat and closed her eyes in weary, uncaring defeat. The unending wash of the surf echoed fatefully at the back of her awareness.

“Yes, Jane,” she whispered finally, “yes...”

*Oh, Mistress Morning,
There on the hill,
Come from the night,
With tread so still.
Your voice is the birdsong,
So happy, so gay.
Oh, Mistress Morning,*

I bid you good day!

Opening her eyes, Blanche looked out onto a world of gray unreality. Somewhere beyond the drifting mists was a soft thundering. And then she remembered. The ocean. She moved her hand beneath the blanket that covered her and felt the sand.

Oh, Mistress Morning, ...

It was a child's poem that she and Jane had known as little girls. Their mother had taught them to speak the lines in turn, alternating their voices smoothly so as not to break the rhythm. For years it had been a daily ritual with them to say the poem to their mother first thing in the morning when she came into their room to wake them. But that had been such a long, long time ago.... Blanche blinked her eyes, trying to clear them of the haze of sleep. Had she and Jane recited the poem just now? Or had it happened only in her mind? Sensing a movement to her right, she looked around to see Jane seated beside her, staring off into the mists through dreamily narrowed lids.

Blanche turned away; she was cold, and the blanket felt heavy and damp upon her body. How long, she wondered, could this horror go on? How much more could she endure? These lapses of hers, she felt certain now, were not sleep but unconsciousness. Perhaps next time she would simply drift off into oblivion never to return. It might be better that way, more merciful. Tears stung her eyes, but then a new sound came dully to her ears and blinking she looked off into the grayness.

Someone was coming toward them, running. She had only just realized this, however, when a figure loomed suddenly out of the mists, a man, lean, muscular, tanned, wearing only a pair of brief white trunks. In the moment that he appeared he was nearly upon them; a spray of sand struck Blanche's blanket as he came to an abrupt stop less than a yard away. He moved his gaze from her to Jane in startled surprise. His next expression was one of open annoyance. He flexed his legs and shoulders in an unconscious demonstration of his impatience.

"Sorry," he said tersely. "Usually there isn't anyone out here at this hour."

Blanche struggled frantically to raise herself up. She must say something—anything—to detain him!

“Please——!” she managed faintly.

But the blanket defeated her; its lank weight seemed to press the very breath from her lungs as she fought against it. Before she had even gotten herself up on one elbow, the man had turned and darted off again into the mists.

Hopelessly, she sank back to the sand, and again there was the dull, pounding sound of his footsteps—fading swiftly into the sound of the surf.

Waiting for the coffee to brew, Paul Singer opened the blinds at the windows of the breakfast nook and looked out toward the beach. The soup was beginning to really lift now; you could begin to make out the deeper gray of the ocean beyond the line of the beach.

As far as he was concerned, however, it was okay if the fog stayed in all day. Fog was fine on a Sunday; it gave you a good excuse to just lie around and be lazy. Then, too, he and Kath had entertained friends from town until after three in the morning, and when you had the kind of head he had this morning, a nice dim, sunless day was just what the doctor ordered.

But it obviously wasn't going to be that way; the Martins were due out in the afternoon for drinks. That was the only trouble with having a weekend place at the beach; you had to ask everyone out. A bubbling sound issued from the coffeepot over on the stove and he turned. But not so quickly that he missed catching a glimpse of the two women out on the sand.

He turned and looked out again. Actually, through the fog, only one of them was even slightly visible, a dumpy little character, she looked like, wearing a bright blue coat. The other one, lying down apparently, was almost totally obscured from view. There was something arresting about the sight of the two old girls out there in the mists, something bizarre. He stood for nearly two full minutes staring out at them before he moved away to the stove.

He glanced up at the clock on the shelf and saw that it was almost ten. At this rate, then, the fog should be clearing around noon. He carried his coffee back to the table and, as he sat down, glanced out again at the two huddled figures on the sand which were now almost entirely lost behind a drifting strata of mist. And then his gaze was deflected in the direction of

the highway by an oblique glimpse of a gray coupé parked up by the garage. Evidently the old girls had driven out from the city under their own steam.

He wondered how they happened to come here at such a curious hour. They were tourists, probably from out of state, unfamiliar with the capricious ways of beach weather. Still, it was strange that no one had warned them. Taking up his coffee, sipping at it cautiously, he put the two old girls handily out of mind. He'd give Kath just ten more minutes sack time and then he'd go shake her out.

He didn't mind fixing his own coffee, but breakfast—that was another matter entirely.

The sun, when it had finally burned away the last of the mists, bore down dazzlingly upon the sand with unleashed intensity. Blanche could feel the crawl of the perspiration on her scalp as it gathered there and trickled down beneath her hair. Jane had wrapped the blanket around her so tightly she couldn't get free of it, and even behind her closed eyelids the sun burned with a fiery brightness that was rapidly becoming almost intolerable. She did not, however, want to wake Jane, who had finally succumbed to exhaustion and fallen asleep.

With the appearance of the sun on the beach there had come also the Sunday crowd—almost, it seemed, with the same miraculous suddenness. There were family groups with umbrellas and picnic hampers, groups of youngsters, noisy and laughing, dressed in scant bathing garments and fanciful straw hats. And the oily-haired, predatory strays who wandered through the crowd with sinister preoccupation, the defiant toughs, and the lonely ones looking for kindred spirits. Most of these had arrived early so as to secure a spot close to the water. Only two small groups had settled back near Blanche and Jane.

One group, a few yards to the right, was a young couple, a healthy, placid-looking pair, and their two youngsters, a little girl around two and an infant in a portable crib. Spreading out a wide, colorful blanket, the young mother gave the little girl a toy pail and shovel, then divided the Sunday paper with her husband and settled down to read. The second group, to the left, was comprised of three young girls in their early teens, dark-skinned and smiling, who, when they had arrived, had promptly stretched themselves out on enormous beach towels and turned their faces to the sun.

As Jane continued to sleep, Blanche gave her attention to these two groups with close speculation.

Once, one of the girls, a pretty youngster, with huge dark eyes and wearing a bright yellow sun suit, had looked around in Blanche's direction. But then, meeting Blanche's quickened gaze, she looked hurriedly away again before Blanche could make any move to secure her attention. Then, aware of a stirring at her side, Blanche turned to see Jane sitting up, stretching, blinking furiously against the sun. With a faint expression of remembered alarm, Jane looked around, bringing her arms down quickly to her sides. At the sight of Blanche she nodded, as if in joyless reassurance.

"It's hot," she said dully. "I'll take the blanket off if you want."

As she removed the blanket, Blanche watched her, trying to find in her closed expression some clue to her thoughts. At the same time Blanche resisted the impulse to plead again to be taken home; Jane, now that she had awakened, seemed in a mood of sad depression. Folding the blanket into a compact square, she fitted it under Blanche's head for a pillow.

"You must be thirsty," she said with a kind of weary gentleness. Surveying the length of the beach, she turned her gaze up the rise in the direction of the highway. "There's a refreshment stand." She got to her feet and brushed the sand absently from her coat. "I'll get you something."

Turning her head on the folded blanket, Blanche watched Jane's progress as she moved off toward the rise. A sad, defeated figure, an old woman who had lived out the empty years of a life that had ended, really, almost before it had begun. A pair of youngsters, yelling shrilly, darted across Blanche's line of vision, and she looked back toward the trio of girls. She raised her hand to signal for their attention, but as she did so one of them took a portable radio from its leather carrying case and turned it on. Under a salvo of raucous jazz, Blanche turned away.

Giving her attention to the young couple with the children, she tried to think of some way to catch their eye. She waited, watching them patiently, but they remained turned away from her, intent upon their reading. Aware that time was slipping rapidly past, she looked back to the girls. She raised her hand and waved.

"Miss!" she called, trying vainly to lift her voice above the blast of the music. "Young lady, please!..."

She continued to wave at them, centering her attention on the girl in the yellow sun suit. It occurred to her that Jane might be watching from the

distance, but she didn't care. Keeping her eyes on the girl, she struggled to bring herself up into a sitting position. Suddenly, as if forced to do so by the sheer intensity of Blanche's gaze, the girl turned and looked squarely in her direction.

Quickly catching and holding the girl's eye with her own, Blanche beckoned to her. The girl returned her look with one of surprised, almost frightened, uncertainty, then turned to her companions. Blanche watched, her breath coming in quick, shallow gasps of anxiety.

After a brief conversation with the other two, the girl looked back again. Blanche beckoned, more insistently. There was an exchange of glances and then, as her companions looked on with open suspicion, the girl rose reluctantly to her feet and started forward.

When she had come within a few feet she stopped and looked down at Blanche gravely, poised, it seemed, even now, for instantaneous flight. Blanche could understand the girl's reluctance; she knew what a disheveled horror she must look to this healthy young creature. The girl made a slight motion with her head, as if in denial, but then, biting her lip in perplexity, she remained where she was. Blanche, in an effort to reassure her, attempted a smile.

"Listen to me," she whispered with great urgency. "You must listen carefully..."

In an obvious effort to hear, the girl frowned. She looked back nervously at her companions, then hazarded another step forward and dropped to her knees.

"You must help me," Blanche said, speaking quickly, her voice coming in a dry, thin rasp. "I am crippled... I can't walk... and I am in danger. I am ill—and my sister—my sister is keeping me here.... You must bring someone... the police... so they can take me to the hospital. My name is _____"

She stopped, staring in astonished disbelief; the girl, her dark eyes fast upon her face, was shaking her head.

"But you can't refuse!..." Blanche gasped.

The girl only shook her head all the harder. "Excuse," she said, her young face troubled. "*Por favor*. I—visit—I—*tourista*. I never—no—understand—English. Excuse. Regret—regret..."

Blanche could only stare with stunned helplessness as the girl scrambled to her feet and fled back to the others. From down near the surf came

echoed shouts of laughter, squeals of protest and delight, the steady roar of the falling waves. She closed her eyes, staring in exhausted resignation into the flaming redness behind her lids—the mixed redness of the merciless sun and her own waning blood.

“Dear God,” she breathed, “dear God...”

A breeze wafted suddenly across her face and something touched her cheek. She started and opened her eyes again. The page from the newspaper, carried across the beach by the breeze, had lodged itself against the folded blanket. Reaching her hand to it, she drew it up before her face so that it would provide a shield from the sun.

She had only managed to get the paper satisfactorily into place, however, when she saw the picture of herself and held it back to have a better look. It was one of the old pictures—of the waxen-faced blonde. MISSING, said the caption underneath.

There were other pictures, too—one of Jane—and others.... Before she was able to see them all closely, however, a new gust of wind struck against the paper, tore it flutteringly from her enfeebled grasp and sent it hurtling away from her. In her last glimpse of it, the face of the blonde with the sooty eyes was seized with sudden animation, as if caught in a spasm of uncontrollable laughter.

And then she had vanished and was gone.

Sitting with one pajama-clad leg draped loosely over the arm of her chair, Katherine Singer stared in dark fascination at the front page of the paper and shook her head.

“You just simply wonder sometimes,” she said broodingly. “You wonder how people can do such things to each other. Every once in a while there’s something like this.”

Sprawled on the living room floor, Paul Singer looked up reluctantly from the sports section. “Like what?”

“Where this woman locked up her sister—this old movie star—and kept her a prisoner. You’d have to be crazy, wouldn’t you, to do a thing like that?”

“Of course,” Paul nodded. “Didn’t she kill somebody, too?”

“Well, they say she’s ‘sought on suspicion of murder.’ I guess that’s the same as saying she did it. Some woman who cleaned house for them.” She shook her head. “Remember, we saw her on television just last week—Blanche Hudson. My gosh...”

Paul Singer made a brief grunting noise of assent and returned to his own reading. Kath continued her frowning perusal of the story about the disappearance of the Hudson sisters, giving particular attention to the accompanying photographs. She rather liked the one of the stoutish young man in the hospital bed with his mother close beside him, her cheek pressed close to his. EDWIN FLAGG, INTENDED VICTIM. There was something in the man’s expression, a kind of numb bewilderment, that made the picture almost humorous. Below were posed portraits of a Mrs. Pauline Bates and Mrs. Edna Stitt, the poor cleaning woman who had been murdered. According to the story Mrs. Stitt’s purse had been found in a closet of the Hudson house.

“You suppose she really killed her?” Kath mused.

Paul nodded. “I guess.”

“She must have. I mean, it would be easy to find someone—someone who was crippled like that—if they were still around somewhere. They’d be recognized everywhere they went. Poor thing, though—Blanche Hudson—she’s had so much trouble in her life.” Letting the paper drop to the floor, she flung her arms vigorously over her head and stretched.

When are the Martins coming?” she yawned.

“Huh?”

“The Martins, Stan and Glenna. You asked them. When did they say they’d show up?”

“Three, I guess, between three and three-thirty.”

Kath made a face. “Drinks, huh?”

“Yeah, I guess...”

“Well—in that case—you’d better take yourself on a little jaunt down to the store. We’re out of everything—booze, eats, the works.”

“Okay, okay...”

“Well—you’d better do it.”

“Huh?”

“It’s almost two now. If they’re coming at three, you’d better shove off. Anyway, I’ve got to straighten up this ball park.”

“Okay.”

Twenty minutes later, shaved now and wearing sun glasses, Paul Singer made his way from the beach house out to the garage next to the highway only to discover that the gray coupé he had noticed earlier from the kitchen window was parked in such a way that it blocked the garage entrance.

His first reaction was one of annoyance; when people came to the beach they thought they could get away with anything. You could throw your trash anywhere, you could park your car wherever you found the space... He paused. The two old girls had arrived in the fog; they probably hadn’t even noticed. He looked back toward the beach. The Sunday crowd had assembled now in force; he’d never be able to find them in a mess like that. That meant he’d have to move the darned thing himself. He turned back to the house and called Kath.

It was an old routine, and they knew it by heart; Kath got inside to steer, while he stayed outside and shoved. Taking his place at the rear of the coupé, Paul leaned forward, and then, pausing, looked up toward the

driver's seat. This, too, was a part of the routine.

"Got the brake off?"

Kath looked out hurriedly through the window and then, in chagrin, reached down to the emergency.

As she released the brake, sliding it down into place, her eye caught at the registration slip, attached in its protective cover to the steering post. Moving her hand back from the brake, she touched the cover and turned it.

"Heave ho!" Paul yelled from behind.

The car rolled forward, but Kath, looking down at the name on the slip, uttered a small gasp of recognition and again grabbed for the brake.

"Hey? What's the big——"

"Paul!" Kath yelled. "Paul, come here!"

As he came up quickly to the window she looked out at him with an expression of numb dismay. And then, her bright young face contorted with a spasm of distaste, she reached for the door, clawing for the handle.

"What's the matter?" Paul asked. "What——?"

Leaping from the car, she took his arm in a hard, frightened grip.

"On the slip," she said breathlessly, "the name! Paul—this car—it belongs to Blanche Hudson!"

She had vomited, she remembered that. It was the cold milk that had made her sick; her stomach had reacted to it instantly. There had been the terrible cramps and then the retching. Hands had lifted her up and tried to soothe her. And when the spell had passed these same hands had helped her to lie back again against the folded blanket. Now, able to open her eyes for a moment, she saw Jane staring down at her with a curious expression of troubled bemusement.

She couldn't help bursting into tears; she no longer had any control of herself at all. She seemed to stand apart from herself with shame and vexation as she pled cravenly with Jane for her life.

"Take me home!" she whimpered. "Oh, Jane, Jane—I can't stand any more of it! I'm afraid... afraid..."

The part of her that remained detached shook her head in harsh denial: It doesn't matter. It doesn't matter in the least whether you're afraid or not. You've brought it all on yourself and there's nothing you can do to stop it now.

But her voice whined on. "Please, Jane, don't let me die... not here! It's

so terribly hot...”

Jane’s expression became still sadder, as if she, too, listened to some second voice within herself. “I shouldn’t have brought you,” she said. “I—I didn’t want to be alone—when they find me. I didn’t mean to hurt anyone—ever—I didn’t know...” Her voice trailed off into a thin sigh of despair.

“Help me,” Blanche whispered. “You *must!*” She tried to reach out, but her hand refused to move. She had to make Jane understand. She had to, before it was too late. “Jane, listen to me...”

“I didn’t mean to...” Jane murmured.

“Go and bring help,” Blanche begged. “Jane, please do...” Jane was still looking at her, but in her face was no sign of anything but her own anguish. “Jane, you have to! If it weren’t for you...”

No! The submerged part of her came forward suddenly, screaming in fury: No you can’t lie any more! Not now. You must tell the truth. That’s all that matters now. You must!...

And then it was as if she had come together within herself. She was no longer afraid, and looking up at Jane, she felt only an overwhelming pity and regret.

“Jane—Jane, listen to me,” she said. “You must listen....”

But Jane’s face seemed, strangely, to be fading from sight. One moment it was there, outlined in the restless red of the blazing sun, and the next it had melted away into a featureless blur. Or had it ever really been there at all? It was possible this was only an hysterical delusion—a part of some final delirium. But it didn’t matter. All that mattered now was that she be given time to speak the truth—even, if need be, in a hallucinatory dream. “I must tell you,” she was saying. “Jane—it wasn’t the way you believed—the night of the accident.”

And then it all came pouring forth, and she couldn’t have stopped it even had she wanted to. “On the way home that night you fell asleep—fell unconscious—at the wheel. I managed to get the car stopped and—I traded places with you. When we came to the gates, I woke you up and made you get out to open them. I was already angry with you and when I saw you standing there in the light fumbling with the gate—I was suddenly so filled with hatred——”

A voice seemed to protest, a small voice, trembling and frightened. “No, Blanche, don’t!...”

“You remembered, didn’t you? The old movies brought it back to you.”

“No. I—yes—I suppose they must have. Lately... there have been times when I seemed to remember. You’ve always hated me—I’ve known that.”

“Yes, I have. When I was a child I had to hear it over and over again, how clever you were, how famous, how I had you to thank for everything, the clothes I wore, the food I ate. And I hated Daddy’s wanting only to be with you—always sending me off somewhere...”

“I—I don’t want to hear!”

“When I signed with the studio I had that clause put in for revenge. Daddy was dead—and you had had all the love and attention he would ever give either of us. I knew what it would do to you, living on my charity; I had lived on yours long enough....

“But—then—that night—you were in the light, and I was behind the wheel. I don’t really know what went through my mind—I simply put my foot down on the gas——”

“No, no! I—I thought I only dreamed it!”

“The car raced straight ahead. You looked around and—just for a moment—there was an awful look on your face. And then you staggered back—or fell. Anyway, you disappeared into the dark. And then the car hit the gates....

“When it was over and I knew I had been hurt, I cried out to you, but you had run off—wandered off... Somehow I managed to get out of the car and crawl for help. They told me later—when they found you—that you had gone into shock and didn’t remember. And then, when I found out what everyone thought—I just decided to let them go on thinking it. They told me you needed help—but I said I couldn’t subject you to the shame of a mental analysis.”

“Oh, Blanche!...”

“I threw your life away, Jane. Without the guilt, the false guilt I’ve given you—with the competition between us ended—you could have had a happy life—even a husband perhaps—and children. But it was all finished for me, and I wanted it to be finished for you, too....”

The rest of it came in a prolonged sigh. “It’s all my fault—Mrs. Stitt—all of it. I’m the guilty one.”

She waited, listening for a reply. But there was none. Then, sensing a movement to her right, she turned in that direction.

“Jane?” She managed to force her eyes open, but all that appeared to her was a flaming blur. “Jane? Did you hear?...”

There were tears on her cheeks, hot, acid tears of remorse. Had she really spoken, or had it been only a delusion? Had she managed at last to unburden herself of the ugly truth?

“Forgive me, Jane...” Whether she imagined it or not a hand seemed to touch hers, lightly, lightly, and then fall away. She lay back, resting her head on the blanket, letting the sound of the crowd—and the ocean—swell and grow dim around her....

Holding the receiver to her ear, Jane looked out through the glass wall of the telephone booth, past the teeming crowd on the beach and out to the glinting sea. She must not let herself think, not any more, for when she tried to think she got terribly muddled and it frightened her. It had taken longer than she had anticipated to get from where she had left Blanche down on the beach up here to the Point. Waiting for the connection, she felt herself on the verge of crying with impatience. There was so very little time. Why couldn't they hurry?

“County Sheriff's Office,” a gruff voice said suddenly into her ear.

Jane put her hand to her breast as if feeling a twinge of pain. “Hello?” she said, her voice shrill with tension. “This is Jane Hudson. I'm calling to tell you——”

“What was the name again, please? And give me your address, too.”

“No,” Jane said, shaking her head, “no, you don't understand. I'm Jane Hudson—Blanche Hudson's sister. Listen—please listen—my sister is very sick—and we're here at the beach——”

“Wait a minute,” the voice said, its tone now urgent. “You're Blanche Hudson's sister?”

“That's right. And Blanche is terribly sick. You've got to bring a doctor right away. And let me tell you where to look for her—because—I—I can't stay here with her——”

Suddenly aware of the three men just outside the booth—the two uniformed patrol officers and the young man wearing dark glasses—she stopped. She turned fully in their direction and the young man nodded. She sat perfectly still, staring out at them, unmindful of the receiver as it dropped from her hand. The officer nearest the door swung it open, picked up the receiver and replaced it on its hook.

“This look like the woman?” he asked.

Behind him, the young man nodded again. His eyes came down to meet

Jane's for a moment and then, evidently frightened at what they saw, darted away. Trembling now, Jane folded her hands together and put them carefully, almost primly, in her lap.

"Miss Hudson?" The officer's tone held an odd note of courtliness. "Are you Miss Jane Hudson?"

Jane stared down at her hands, at the veins that coursed crookedly along their backs beneath the slack skin. Without looking up, she nodded.

"Miss Hudson, I'm afraid you'll have to come along with us. There's been a call out for you and your sister since early last night."

His voice was so quiet, so friendly. Jane nodded again and, as he touched her arm, got somehow to her feet. If she could just stop shaking, stop feeling so cold and afraid... And then, with a sense of surprise, she realized she was crying.

"I'm sorry," the officer said. His hand, holding her arm, guided her out of the booth. "Now, where is your sister, Miss Hudson? Is she here at the beach with you?"

Jane tried hard to concentrate, to understand what he was saying to her. It was important now to understand everything. But her heart kept pounding so thunderously that it made it very difficult. His touch, she thought, felt very hot upon her arm; she wanted to pull away, but she knew she dared not. What were they going to do to her? she wondered. Would they hurt her? Would they kill her?

"... your sister, Miss Hudson," the young officer was saying, his tone suddenly quite insistent. "It will save a lot of time and trouble if you'll tell us where she is right now."

Jane looked up at him. He was not an ugly man, not mean or hateful-looking. But you couldn't go by appearances. Some of the nicest-looking people were really very bad. Blanche was always so beautiful....

"Your sister, Miss Hudson..." the officer was saying. "Will you show us where she is?"

Jane nodded. "Yes," she said. She turned and looked down toward the beach. "She's down there... She's sick... awfully sick... we must hurry!..."

She led them in a diagonal path across the beach, moving along rapidly, the three of them close behind her. On all sides heads turned with quick curiosity as they passed.

"You're not sure exactly where you saw them, Mr. Singer?" the officer said behind her.

“I—no—just the general area. It’s too hard to tell when the fog’s shifting like that.”

Jane moved swiftly on through the sea of turning heads. The officer, coming up beside her, touched her arm.

She smiled at first and turned to him. But then, seeing that he was a stranger, she started in fright and whirled away. A hand closed quickly over her arm and pulled her back.

“Your sister, Miss Hudson,” the man said, bringing his face down close to hers. “Are you sure you know where she is?”

She looked up at him in blank bewilderment. Why was he after her like this? And why did he—and the other two behind him—keep looking at her in that funny way? A quick feeling of terror stirred deep inside her, and her brow puckered in a prelude to tears. With an expression of concern, the man let go of her arm.

“Don’t be afraid,” he said.

She turned then and looked at the others, the vast stretch of staring, waiting faces. The young faces, and the old ones, staring, staring... But what did they want of her? What were they looking for so expectantly? Her face felt so warm. Feverish. Why was the light so hot on her face? If she told Daddy...

“Miss Hudson... your sister!...”

All at once it all came back to her, in a whole and perfect memory, and it was as if she had finally managed to rouse herself from a deep and troubled sleep. She felt quite, quite wonderful and intensely alive. Turning, she looked about at the hundreds and hundreds of staring faces.

“... your sister is ill and helpless...”

Bowing deeply, holding her head at just the right angle, she straightened and picked up her skirts. Careful to arch her hands at the wrists, just as Daddy had shown her, she began, very prettily, to dance.

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WHAT EVER HAPPENED TO COUSIN CHARLOTTE?

The inspiration for the film *Hush... Hush, Sweet Charlotte*

Charlotte knew the moment she heard the sound of the bulldozer bearing down on Hollis house that the battle was at hand. She woke up and saw a roaring, rending, futuristic monster of gross unremitting steel, a huge wrecking machine, approaching the ornate and imposing precincts of the Old Hollis Place.

It clawed its way forward from a Dali-esque landscape of torn earth and mangled vegetation, hurling dust, disorder and ruin before it in all directions. Its intended victim, the Hollis house itself, a fanciful two-story structure girded with wide verandas and balconies, stood as a decaying relic of a Southern way of life now extinct. In its present state of neglect, however, the house seemed a poor match indeed for the remorseless machine, that fact becoming apparent as Charlotte watched from the vantage point of one of the crumbling balconies as it met a long abandoned outbuilding at the outer boundary of the rose garden and toppled it with neither ceremony or hesitation, leaving it behind a splintered, flattened matchbox.

But Charlotte knew that the spirit of the Hollis house was made of considerably more resilient stuff than was in its crumbling masonry. Indeed, it embodied the strength of the frail but determined person of Charlotte Hollis herself, heir, owner, and protector of all the now embattled Hollis property. Charlotte, though no longer young, had always been and remained a most arresting woman, for there blazed in her the dedicated zeal of the fanatic, harboring a long cherished *idée fixe*. Once strikingly pretty, there was still about her traces of the aura of a lively beauty that in the distant year of her coming-out made her one of the most celebrated debutantes in the country—and perhaps even the world. Also from the volatility of her

manner, one could well imagine that she might once have been the catalyst for both passion and scandal—and, yes, even tragedy. This last characteristic was at that moment in vivid ascendancy as her fine, well-bred features melded into a crush of passion as she carried her father's old hunting rifle swiftly through the upper hallway and out into the glare of the balcony, where she appeared precipitously before the rising clouds of dust as a vengeful Fury.

Lofting the rifle so as to take reckless aim on the monster machine and its operator, she pitted her voice vainly, though stridently, against the thunderous noise.

“Get back from my land!” she screamed. “Get that thing out of here and away from my father's house or—God help you—I'll shoot!”

That's when Velma suddenly appeared in the doorway behind Charlotte, wearing a solid, makeshift uniform, the badge of her status of a day nurse, distinguishing her from the more degrading position of cleaning woman. But she also appeared as a thin-nosed slattern who embodied all the worst traits that were usually attributed to Southern white trash.

Velma observed the melodramatic scene before her, not with alarm, but with a kind of wry, boneless indolence.

“With your eyesight, you could hurt somebody with that thing.”

But, accustomed to ignoring Velma, Charlotte only tried to take more careful aim. Below, the operator, intent on his job, remained unaware.

But then the foreman, who was busy directing the clean-up crew, happened to look up and see Charlotte leveling the rifle toward them. With a cry of warning he hurled himself forward toward the machine. It was in this same moment that Charlotte, knowing her command had been disregarded, fired. The shot struck with a smart cracking sound against the flank of the wrecker and ricocheted carelessly into the distance. On the balcony, a bit of the crumbling masonry beneath a heavy stone urn decorating one of the corners fell away.

The operator, startled, brought the machine to an idling stop, and, looking around at the foreman, followed his gaze up toward the house, the balcony, and Charlotte. Charlotte, herself, had been momentarily distracted by the falling stone, but her gaze went back to the scene below as the foreman, made incautious by anger, strode forward across the lawn and up to the terrace.

“Charlotte Hollis,” he yelled up at her, “now you got yourself into real

trouble! Doing a thing like that! I'm going directly to the law!"

"Who cares where you go," Charlotte yelled back, "So long as you go! And take that machine with you and those men! This is my land."

"No more, it ain't. This land belongs to the county—all of it—and you know it!"

Charlotte was totally deaf to this argument. "I'm telling you to get off," she yelled back, "and you better mind!"

The foreman, who had started away, turned back.

"I got more right here'n for you," Charlotte continued, almost as if this were a contest between children.

"You's suppose to clear outa here three months ago. You had your orders!"

From the distance the operator saw that the stone urn, undermined, had begun to list; and now it was his turn to call out a warning. The foreman, hearing the call and seeing the urn, quickly moved back and away, as the urn, listing still further, toppled and smashed down upon the stone floor of the terrace.

The foreman and Charlotte, in the backwash of silence, exchanged glances, he one of frustration and increased anger, she one of faint amusement. Then the foreman, seizing the excuse to make a retreat, turned on his heel and stalked off. Signaling to the operator to stop his machine and leave, he slammed into his pickup truck and drove furiously away.

Charlotte, her triumph complete, turned, handed Velma the rifle and swept into the house, becoming for a moment the youthful Southern beauty of the past in all her glory. Velma, unable to refuse the rifle, cast her a spiteful glance.

"Now you really got yourself in a fix."

When Charlotte didn't bother to answer, she followed after her. "Think I'd be satisfied jest havin' folks throwin' rocks at the house to drive you out." Charlotte, still ignoring her, went into her room; but Velma, not so easily put off, followed after her for one parting shot. "They're beginnin' to call me names too—jest for workin' for a woman like you. They say you'll have to move off and let them build the project only for me comin' out here to do for you..."

At last Charlotte turned to face the woman and with a look of utmost scorn slammed the door shatteringly in her face. Velma stood there with the gun in a state of total rage just wishing she had the nerve to use it.

That evening the old Hollis Place, bathed in the light of a witch's moon, stood as a hulking palace of terror against the night. At least it seemed that way to the small boy of nine or ten who edged toward the house from the unkempt protection of the shadows.

“Go on. The window's open there... easy as pie...”

“But if she catches me...”

“You want to be a Charioteer—like me and Buzz? Then you get in there—and get what you're supposed to.”

The boy considered it and nodded in frightened determination and turned back toward the terrace and French windows as one of his companions hissed, “It's got to be somethin' she touched with her own hands!”

Nodding again and trying hard to swallow down his terror, the boy moved slowly up the steps. Then, thinking he heard something, he stopped and looked back in bleak longing toward the hedge, then to the house which seemed to tower over him with a physical threat. Committed now, he forced himself to the open window, looked inside, hesitated, and climbed in and entered the foreboding darkness of the house.

He made his way through the room of formidable shadows and clutter, into the hallway, peering at whatever object came to his attention, uncertain about taking anything. He paused and looked out into the hallway, unwilling to press any further than he needed. Hearing a rustling sound of movement, he whirled about, eye torn wide with terror. But there was nothing. He peered into another room and for a moment he thought he saw someone standing there staring at him. But then he saw that it was only a large portrait and moved on to another doorway and looked in to be confronted with a profusion of images... of himself in mirrored panels. But then before him on a table bathed in moonlight he saw the tea service for one, obviously the remains of an afternoon tea.

He crossed carefully on tip toe and hooked his finger through the handle of a delicate tea cup, pausing to look around. Everything was still, so holding his breath against his own fright, he started back the way he came, making his way to the hallway and into the room where he entered.

He moved rapidly now, anxious to be out of the house, and headed for the open window. But it was just at that last moment as success seemed assured that a wraith-like figure rose up in bright moonlight before him—a fierce creature with glittering, murderous eyes and outstretched talon-like

hands. With a strangled cry of terror, the boy leapt through the window, still clinging tenaciously to the cup, and raced across the terrace and down stairs to the hedges, where he tripped and fell, landing at the feet of his companions, the precious teacup smashed to bits before him.

Inside the house, Charlotte, still standing in the flood of moonlight, looked after the departed figure, and grinned a good natured grin. That's when she heard a chorus of childish voices singing faintly in the night:

*“Oh, sweet Charlotte, My sweet
Charlotte,
With your sweet, sweetening ways,
I counted your graces,
You numbered my days.
I gave you my heart,
So I can't understand
Why you whacked off my head—
Not to mention my hands.”*

With that, the smile faded from her face. For a moment a look of sadness threatened, but then it disappeared as one of prideful determination possessed her features.

“Thieves!” she shrieked suddenly into the night. “Get away before I set the dogs on you!”

The next day the commissioner, accompanied, no doubt for protection, by the foreman, approached the broad front terrace of the old house. They were hesitant but dogged, knowing that they had a job to do.

Charlotte, observing their approach from inside the house, motioned Velma down the stairs to hold them off. At the landing, she paused to listen, at the ready to get her gun if need be.

“We're here to talk to Miss Charlotte,” said the commissioner with strained forcefulness.

“Well,” Velma drawled blank faced, “you can't. She told me to say she's sick in bed. She can't see nobody.”

“Velma Cruthers,” the foreman said, “you know good and well that ain't so.”

Velma shrugged. “She said to say...”

Meanwhile Charlotte was creeping down the stairs to hear better, but could be glimpsed through the open door by the commissioner. She drew back hastily out of sight, but the commissioner, given a way out, made the pronouncement he’d come to make, assured Charlotte would hear it.

“Well, then, you just give Miss Charlotte a message from me. And this is official. What she did yesterday changed this from a civil matter to a criminal one—if we so choose to bring suit against her. Now we don’t want to do that—but she was supposed to vacate here more’n a month ago, and we’ve given in to her all we’re going to. Her waving a gun at people is one thing, but firing it is something else. It’s coming to a weekend, so that’s in her favor. So she’s got until Tuesday morning to vacate in person and another day to remove her effects. After, I’ll have no choice. I’ll be forced to take action whether I want to or not.”

Velma took all of this in with some amusement. She liked excitement, especially the kind could still catch Miss Charlotte at a disadvantage.

“Whoo-ee,” she commented. “I don’t know how she’s going to take that.”

“Maybe she’d like a stretch in the county jail,” the commissioner said, loudly enough to be sure Charlotte heard. “You can tell her that too.”

Velma nodded. “Okay. She’s gonna have a fit.”

“That’s your problem,” the foreman intruded, stepping toward Velma. “You want to work for her...”

The commissioner put out a hand to stop him, motioning him to move away. “Come on, Bob...”

They turned and left, but not without an apprehensive backward glance from the commissioner.

Slyly amused, Velma went into the house and closed the door. At a groan from the direction of the stairs, she looked up to see Charlotte collapsed on the landing, clutching her side. With no perceptible change of expression, Velma went up to help her.

“Oh, God!” moaned Charlotte. “The persecution... it’ll never end ’til they put me in my grave.”

“I expect not,” Velma said, dragging Charlotte roughly to her feet.

For all of her helplessness Charlotte shook herself free of Velma, slapping her hands away. “And as if it weren’t enough,” she snarled furiously, “I’m left with you—a white trash slut!” Tears of vast self-pity

formed in her eyes. “I need my own people—my own kind—my own kin! I’m alone—alone! Call Doctor Bayliss! Go on, go on—do it. Well, go...!”

She watched furiously as Velma, imperturbable as ever, moved off down the stairs.

“Tell him I want Miriam!” she yelled after her. “Tell him I want her to come back!”

A country taxi made its way along the road with no great haste. Its passenger, Miriam Hollis, looked out at the passing scene with a kind of wry impassiveness. Miriam was a woman of “achieved chic,” which is to say that she was noticeably smart, compellingly turned out, commandingly beautiful—a kind of woman to be seen in all the smart restaurants, clubs and hotels in all the great cities of the world. She seemed entirely out of place in her present surroundings.

The view from the taxi window, for the moment, was one of calm and quiet rusticity. The road, lined with trees was warm, lush, and deep—after all, it was the “deep” South. Miriam’s eyes were caught by a pair of large stone gate posts, the entryway, she could not doubt, to a sprawling Southern “plantation.” Metal plaques on the posts rather ostentatiously announced the name “Mayhew.” Miriam leaned forward just a bit to peer into the drive, but she drew back again and made her face impervious when she noticed that she was being observed by the driver.

Soon the taxi reached the area of clearing, and she could see that this was the beginning of a major new project. The taxi continued on to the drive of Hollis Place which marked the end of the clearance for the new buildings. Miriam observed the house and the grounds with the quickness and interest of one who observes changes after a long absence from a once familiar, if not beloved, scene.

As the taxi entered the curve of the drive, Miriam noticed that on the front balcony there was what appeared to be a frazzled, night gowned wraith brandishing a gun. Miriam, with a lift of her eyebrows, got out of the taxi and paid the driver.

Charlotte, from the balcony, turned the full force of her present fury to the taxi, leveling the gun in that direction.

“And you, too!” she shrieked. “Get back in that car and go away! This is private ground. Get off my land!”

Miriam looked up in alarm. “Charlotte!” she cried, “Charlotte, stop that

and go inside! It's Miriam!"

Blessed relief flooded over Charlotte as she lowered her gun and peered more closely down in Miriam's direction. Suddenly realizing that she needed to dress, she rushed inside. At the same time, Hugh Bayliss came out of the house and headed rapidly down the steps to take Miriam's bags. He was sorry he wasn't able to meet Miriam at the airport; he had an emergency. For a moment they stood looking at each other, a moment when the memories of the past collided with the realities of the present.

"You've changed," Hugh said, smiling at last. "You've become more beautiful... more beautiful than ever."

Miriam did not respond to his warmth. "You've changed too," she said bluntly, and then, after the briefest pause, she nodded up toward the balcony, "Is she quite mad?"

Hugh shook his head. "Honestly... I don't know. But mad or not, she's clever... even more clever than you may remember."

"More deceptive, you mean," Miriam said flatly, "if we're speaking of how I remember her."

"I suppose it's difficult for you... coming back here after all these years."

"Under the circumstances?" Miriam strode ahead of him up the steps and into the house, empathic with the air of one who had arrived to take charge.

Inside she was greeted by Velma who stood in a slouch at the foot of the stairs, a living affront to everything Miriam herself stood for.

"Miss Charlotte says to show you where your room's goin' to be." She nodded up the stairs. "Up there, next to hers. She'll be fixed up to see you pretty soon."

Hugh arrived to make hasty introductions, which Miriam briefly acknowledged with a look that implied her contemptuous disbelief of the appellation "day nurse" for this sorry creature.

The three of them proceeded up the stairs and as they passed Charlotte's room, the door hurred open and Charlotte, far from dressed, accosted them.

"So you're here!" She threw the words at Miriam almost as an accusation. "I must say I'm surprised. After the way you left here... how long has it been? Twenty years!"

Miriam observed her coolly. She and Hugh entered the room, Hugh signaling Velma to take Miriam's bags to her room at the end of the hall.

Charlotte looked at Miriam with sharp speculation.

“Hugh kept after me to have you come here. He seems to think I need some sort of keeper. God knows that white trash out there...” Her words faded into silence as she looked at Miriam more sharply. “What are you thinking? Looking at me like that... I never could tell what you were thinking.” Charlotte laughed, “or even if you were thinking...”

“Let me remove your doubt. I’m thinking I was a fool, after nearly twenty years, to fly three thousand miles to come here to help, just to have you insult me...”

“You’re so easily insulted.”

“Yes, I am, more easily than I once was. And if you really don’t want me here, than I can go just as quickly as I came.”

Miriam moved angrily out the door and down the hallway in pursuit of Velma. But Charlotte rushed to the door and called down the hall after her, “They’re all after me. It’s Jewel, she never lets up. She’s got them all after me... to tear down Daddy’s house...” There were tears in her eyes. “They’re not even laying a finger to Jewel’s place. They’re all after me... Miriam...?”

Miriam stopped and turned back. Recognizing Charlotte’s despair, her expression softened. “You’ve been alone too long,” she observed.

Hugh touched Charlotte’s hand. “You go on with your dressing and let Miriam get settled, why don’t you?”

Charlotte looked at him with a flash of annoyance then back at Miriam, “What do you think of him being my doctor?”

“He is a doctor,” Miriam said with an instantaneous return to coolness, “and you are ill.”

Charlotte’s eyes narrowed, “And he does need the trade.”

Hugh looked at her with a quick repressed anger. “Now, Charlotte,” he said.

“I’ll get dressed,” Charlotte snapped, ignoring him, “and we’ll have a nice tea, won’t we... out in the garden like we used to.” Then she remembered the garden was no longer presentable. “Or somewhere...”

“Or somewhere...” Miriam echoed and watched impassively as Charlotte, smiling now, stepped back into her room and closed the door.

“Any professional opinions?” Hugh asked as Miriam walked with him downstairs to the front door.

Miriam shook her head. "I don't know. Where is the dividing line between madness and quaint down-South eccentricity? You tell me." She paused to look at the old house, at its moldering grandeur, its proliferation of furnishings. "You'll get someone to sort and pack all this stuff?"

"Yes," Hugh agreed. He went to a table in the hallway, opened a drawer and took out a revolver. Miriam frowned as he held it out to her.

"You may need it," he told her. "Feelings are pretty high. All the old trouble has been stirred up again... all the old feelings. And now with the way she's acting... they burned down one of the outbuildings last week. The whole house could have gone."

Miriam took the gun. "It's all so melodramatic."

"Just in case. Velma's only here during the day."

"More's the blessing from the look of her. Everything will be all right. Don't worry."

At the door Hugh stopped and turned back. "Miriam, ever since that awful night when we said goodbye..."

"Goodbye, Hugh," Miriam said firmly. "I'll call you tomorrow..."

Sadly, Hugh turned and left the house.

That evening Miriam and Charlotte were finishing dinner in the oppressive shadows of the old dining room and walked out onto the terrace for liquor, some air and some talk.

"Think what wonderful days we had here when we were girls," Charlotte recalled.

"Did we?" Miriam asked. "You did, I'm sure."

Charlotte looked at her in astonishment. "You weren't happy here? But surely after..."

"After where I came from?" replied Miriam. "At least I wasn't a charity case, an orphan given shelter from the storm..."

Charlotte considered this. "You were always ambitious. I sensed it even then. And you've done very well, traveling around the world, mingling with all the famous people. You're a survivor. You've done well."

"Yes..." Miriam said hoping to leave it at that. "Yes, I have." And she thought, *and I mean to continue to do well.*

"How is it, by the way, that Hugh has become your doctor?"

"In a way, I suppose," Charlotte replied as if it were a question she expected, "I felt I owed it to him. He might have done very well if... if it

hadn't happened the way it did. But there's another way to look at it. He hitched his wagon to the wrong star."

"To me," Miriam said. "That was something of a trailer hitch, wasn't it? If he couldn't get the heiress, he could get the orphan cousin. But then he got unhitched fast enough when things went wrong. He used to plan what it would be like when he had his society practice and we used to..."

"You were right to leave him," Charlotte interrupted.

Miriam smiled very dryly. "That's probably the most tactful remark you've ever made in your entire life."

The talk turned quickly to the matter of Charlotte leaving the house and moving out, and Charlotte and the ghosts of the past were momentarily forgotten.

"They'll never drive me out... never... not Jewel Mayhew... not any of them. I don't care what they do. They mean to start by tearing down the house. They've given me notice and they brought in these frightful machines. But I stood there... right up there on that balcony, and I declared to all of them that I would not move, even if they killed me!"

Miriam observed the performance without visible warmth. "It must have been an electrifying moment for everyone."

"I promised Daddy that I'd stay right here and face them down... and face Jewel down... until they cleared my name."

"Do you think that's going happen by Tuesday morning?" Miriam asked.

Charlotte turned on her furious, threatening for a moment to dash the bit of liquor in her glass in Miriam's face. "You're in this with them, aren't you?" she demanded to know. "You want to see them win over me after all these years!"

"I want to see you stop wasting your life... though heaven knows why I should care."

"You haven't cared in all these years. You haven't come back to see me once—you only came to see him. And after all Daddy did for you... deserting me..."

"I'm a survivor," Miriam said calmly. "You said it yourself."

"You never did like me," accused Charlotte.

"Not with any overwhelming affection, no. But we were very young then," replied Miriam, her voice like icy steel.

"And I didn't like you!" Charlotte stormed back, "I didn't like you at all."

Charlotte tore off into the house and up the stairs. Miriam followed her for a moment but just to the balcony. Then, turning away, she went to the drawing room door and looked inside. The slanting light from the doorway picked up the portrait of Charlotte painted in the year of her coming out. She was very pretty, in what might then have been called “a high strung” sort of way.

Miriam closed the door and, thinking she might have heard something from outside, she made her way to the terrace. But there was nothing. She picked up the tray with the glasses and started back inside when a bottle, with a sudden explosive crash, smashed against the wall, thrown from somewhere out into the night. She whirled about and then, frightened, moved quickly inside and closed and locked the door.

She stood for a moment collecting her wits, and then as the house and the night outside remained silent, she moved down the hallway to the table where Hugh had shown her the gun. Miriam removed the gun slowly and with a new determination, carried it upstairs.

The next day Miriam had set Velma at the task of packing bric-a-brac and other light movable objects around the house—totally against Velma’s will. Velma asked sullenly, “Does Miss Charlotte know you got me doin’ this?”

“No,” replied Miriam.

“She’s goin’ to raise righteous time when she finds out,” Velma snarled. “She’s goin’ to have a proper cat fit!”

“She may,” said Miriam. “But it’s got to get done all the same.”

“She ain’t never goin’ to leave this house,” Velma said darkly, “and if you like to hear me say it or not, I reckon she’s got her own reasons besides her promise to her Daddy. And I’m not the only one to think so.”

“Evidently, you’re not,” said Miriam, “and you can take down Charlotte’s portrait from over the mantel.”

In full rebellion Velma banged back, “No, sir. I ain’t goin’ to lay a hand on to that picture. Not with her in the house, I’m not. I seen her... she talks to that picture. Like she was talkin’ to a whole ’nother person. ’Bout what happened back then, like she’s tryin’ to explain it away to somebody...”

“I ain’t suppose to do this kind of heavy work. When I come here it was just to nursemaid her and to do a little light cookin’. That was the understanding,” Velma continued to rant.

Hugh arrived at the moment of impasse and took over Velma’s packing.

Together he and Miriam removed the portrait, discussing how to get Charlotte to leave the house. Suddenly, Miriam lost her hold on the picture and it fell to the floor, damaging the frame, but sparing the picture itself. Miriam surveyed the scene with a kind of unemotional detachment and set about carrying the portrait into the hall when they heard Charlotte scream from the balcony upstairs.

“You put that back, you hear. You put it back on the wall where it belongs.”

And the ranting continued as Hugh and Miriam rushed to her just as she collapsed. Hugh put her to bed and gave her a sedative. To keep the peace, for the moment, they put the portrait back on the wall.

From behind them, Hugh and Miriam heard Velma, soft voiced and just loud enough for them to hear, “You ask me, she outa be put away in a nut house.”

Hugh left the room as Miriam stood in thoughtful silence.

Charlotte was settled and left in the care of Velma, as Hugh drove Miriam into town where she set about the business of getting help to dismantle and pack the things in the house. As she rushed down the street she saw none other than Jewel Mayhew. For a moment she was not certain it was Jewel, she was so changed since she last saw her, grown old and looking sickly. But then Jewel saw Miriam and seemed close to collapse in shock and surprise and then she quickly turned and walked in a different direction.

“Poor Jewel,” Hugh remarked. “She been in poor health for a long time now.”

“I didn’t know,” said Miriam.

As Miriam went about the town shopping for necessary supplies, she noticed the coldness of the locals. They obviously recognized her but turned away as she approached, deliberately snubbing her. When she returned to the car she found on the seat a copy of a cheap tabloid, and there emblazoned on the front was a picture of the Hollis house and of Charlotte as she was as a girl at the time of her coming out, overlaid by the figure of a ghost—a male figure without a head or hands. **THE HOLLIS HOUSE MYSTERY** blazed the headline... and in smaller letters, it continued: “About To Be Razed. What Is Hidden Within Those Walls?”

As Miriam started to hurl the paper from her in disgust, a young man approached the car, giving Miriam a start. “Hi, I’m Paul Selvin. I am on

assignment from a paper up North.” He was brash, quick and too sharply dressed—and certainly without a way with the ladies.

“I left that there for you. I thought you might want to see it.”

Miriam’s eyes flashed with anger. “You were quite wrong. I don’t!” She made a move to start the car, but Paul put his hand through the car window to stop her.

“I think you ought to hear what I have to say, Miss Hollis. My paper is *Now Magazine*. You’ve heard of it, I suppose?”

“I’ve heard of it,” Miriam replied.

“Then you must know that we’re not like that rag,” pointing to the tabloid. “We’re much more reserved, shall I say, in our approach.”

“You could hardly be less.”

“True. Exactly. But we are their closest competitors. I simply wanted to show you and Miss Charlotte what they were doing... the kind of consideration... or lack of consideration... you can expect. But of course they don’t bother to research their subjects; they don’t trouble themselves with the expense and inconvenience of seeking interviews...”

“But you do!”

“True. Exactly. Now, I’ll tell you frankly, what I’ve been sent here for is a picture of your cousin... preferably a picture of her leaving the house.”

“You may have a considerable wait.”

“But she will have to leave eventually. And in the meantime...”

“You have your expense account,” snapped Miriam.

“Yes. And a goodly amount of patience. But the point is... you can expect a much more sympathetic coverage from my publication than you’re getting from the competition.”

“In consideration for what?”

Paul laughed, disconcerted by Miriam’s directness. “Well, yes. First of all, I’d like an interview with Charlotte Hollis... a personal interview. Also an exclusive photo of her leaving the house.”

“An exclusive photo?”

“A tip off before she leaves... that’s all... a little phone call.”

“Not a big phone call... just a little one...?”

Miriam’s gaze moved to an elderly, portly gentleman who had evidently been eavesdropping, hovering discreetly nearby.

“We can make an arrangement. There’s the expense account. I’m allowed certain expenditures for... ‘contacts.’ ”

“Then why don’t you go make some!” replied Miriam.

“You don’t understand.”

“I do understand. So please step away from the car...”

At this point the elderly gentleman, Waldo Hopper, came forward and catching Miriam’s eye, smiled. And when he spoke, to Miriam’s surprise, it was with a pronounced English accent.

“Forgive me,” he said as he smiled, “if I may intrude...”

“Why should you be different?”

“True. Exactly,” replied Waldo in the direction and in a direct imitation of Paul. Miriam smiled. “But I only wanted to suggest that this young man here has a point. He is, after all, doing his job. Whether you intercede for him with your cousin or not, his publication will still do a story, and feeling and opinion is against her. In her way, which is almost entirely negative, she is an international celebrity of long standing. It’s popular to regard her as an untried murderess. If this young man can help offset this opinion with a sympathetic piece, well then, it might be wise to consider his offer.”

“But,” Miriam began, “I couldn’t possibly...”

“Of course, you can’t accept payment for an interview with your cousin... and you’re plainly not that kind of person.”

“I couldn’t guarantee an interview,” Miriam stated flatly. “And in any case, I have very little influence with Charlotte.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. I was hoping you might have.”

“Oh?”

“Yes,” continued Waldo. “You see I was rather hoping to speak to her myself.”

“You’re a reporter, too?” asked Miriam.

“Oh, no. It’s nothing commercial. May I give you my card?”

As Miriam read the card she saw that Waldo was an amateur criminologist associated with a society in London.

“Then you’re an investigator?”

“Quite unofficially, yes. As this was my favorite case, almost as famous as Lizzie Borden, and far more interesting. A missing lover, a severed hand, but a body never discovered... An heiress and a bloodied gown... I was elected to come and make a report on it. I must tell you that I’ve wanted to meet your cousin since I can remember. I can remember the excitement I felt when I heard the Hollis house was to be razed. I was in a state of terror that I wouldn’t get here on time.”

“But you did. Congratulations. Just what do you expect them to find in that house? If you’ll recall there were rumors just after my cousin sailed for Europe just after the murder that she was seen throwing a mysterious parcel overboard.”

“Oh, I know all about that. I’ve talked to nearly everyone who was onboard who were around and still alive. It was just poppycock, nothing more.”

“But that was nearly twenty years ago.”

“Yes, I know.” He smiled again. “You’re thinking I must be some sort of mad eccentric, aren’t you?”

“Yes, I am.”

“But,” Waldo asked, “do you think I’m dangerous?”

“No, not dangerous.”

“Then you will ask your cousin to see me... and this young man?”

Miriam hesitated and then said, “Perhaps. But I don’t think it will do any good.”

“As long as you ask.”

“I have to go now,” Miriam said, bringing the matter to an emphatic end. “Goodbye.”

“So nice meeting you,” said Waldo, “and you’re even more beautiful than they ever reported in any of the crime journals.”

Miriam started the car and setting it in motion, lifted a brow. “Thank you... I suppose,” and with that she drove off.

Charlotte was in a state as she handed Miriam the copy of the tabloid she had received in the morning mail.

“This is Jewel’s work,” cried Charlotte, hurling the paper from her. “She’ll never be satisfied until she drives me out!”

“I saw her in town, Charlotte,” said Miriam. “She’s old and sick. I don’t think she had anything to do with it.”

“Just because she couldn’t hang on to her husband,” Charlotte ranted, “she blames me. If she’d just taken an interest in him. If she’d just bothered to recognize his talent, his music, just because he needed some sort of beauty and youth and understanding in his life...”

“That’s all done with,” interrupted Miriam. “It has been for years now.”

“Oh, has it?” railed Charlotte. She drew forth another envelope from the morning mail and handed it to Miriam. “Just take a look at this...”

Miriam took out a single sheet of paper on which was scrawled a single word—"MURDERESS."

"I don't even bother to open the mail anymore," said Charlotte. "I know what's in it."

"How long has this been going on?" asked Miriam.

"I've had one of those every week, every Monday morning for the last eighteen years. She sends them."

"But that's incredible!"

"Who else could have sent them?" asked Charlotte. "It's her guilty conscience that makes her do it."

"Oh, Charlotte, why have you stayed here like this all these years? Why have you thrown your life away?"

"It wouldn't have been any different anywhere else. I tried escaping to Europe and they hounded me there. And I promised Daddy..."

"You must leave now!" Miriam interrupted. "There are people coming to pack. You mustn't interfere."

"I won't leave. Not while she's still here, not as long as they call me a murderess. I will not leave..."

"You've no choice. You must understand that!"

"Then they'll have to carry me out!"

"That may well be the case if you don't behave yourself."

Leaving Charlotte, Miriam went downstairs where Hugh was waiting. "She'll never listen to reason. Never," Miriam told him. "I don't know what she thinks she's protecting here."

The helpers arrived that afternoon and Miriam set them to work. They approached the old rooms unwillingly, almost with a kind of superstitious fear. Charlotte saw them as she stood on the landing, and then turned and went back into her room and locked the door. Miriam cast her eyes heavenward in exasperation.

That night as Miriam lay in bed, she was awakened by the sound of music, of a piano being played downstairs. Getting up and slipping on her negligee, she went out into the hallway and saw that Charlotte's door was open and in the lower hallway, the shine of moonlight came from the open door of the ballroom. She looked back in the direction of the bedroom and the revolver

lying on the bedside table, but left it there and started down the stairs.

There in the ballroom was Charlotte, sitting at the piano and playing the song John Mayhew had written for her—the song that children now chant the accusing words to. Only now Charlotte was playing the song as written by John—a song of love for her. Her voice was wistful and almost young. Miriam hesitated, loath to intrude, but then she heard a crash of chords from the piano, a gasp, and then, the sound of sobbing.

Miriam ran into the room which was flooded with moonlight coming in the French windows which comprised the entire far wall of the room and reflected in mirrored panels decorating the walls. Charlotte was huddled on the floor beside the piano in mute terror, too frightened evidently to make even a sound as she stared at something on the keyboard of the piano.

Miriam hastened to Charlotte trying to coax words from her, but Charlotte could only sob as her gaze remained fastened in the direction of the keyboard. Miriam followed her stare and suddenly froze in shock. There on the keyboard was a tapered, severed hand.

As soon as she recovered from the first revulsion of the sight, Miriam pulled Charlotte's face away, got her to her feet and helped her up the stairs. Once she had calmed Charlotte, she returned to the ballroom, paused for a moment in the doorway and reluctantly entered the room.

She found the light switch and turned on the large overhead chandelier bringing the room into vivid aliveness. At first she thought she saw another hand before realizing it was only a workman's glove left on one of the gilt chairs that lined the room.

Hesitantly, she made her way to the piano forcing herself to look at the keyboard. She stopped in limp relief. The hand, or whatever it was that was there, was gone. After a moment, she crossed to the French window and started to close it when she heard a sound from outside. She looked out into the darkness to see a figure moving hastily out of sight and away beyond the shadows of the hedges. Thoughtfully, she pulled the window firmly closed and locked it.

The next day the workers returned to continue the packing. As they worked, they made speculations among themselves. Through the previous day's familiarity, the house had become less menacing to them.

“My mama,” said one of the women, “she always claimed that if it wasn't for her Daddy payin' ever'body off, she'd of come up for trial sure

as sin. She was the last one to see John Mayhew alive out there in that cabin. And they say she had a temper like a wildcat when she got goin’.”

“She’s still got that, all right. Stealin’ another woman’s husband... and she was pretty enough in them days. She coulda had any young bachelor in the county.”

“What I heard, her Daddy had to get her out of town. It wasn’t just to keep her from comin’ to trial he shipped her off to Europe... there was another reason.”

“You reckon that’s so?”

“But her cutting him up that way...! They found one of his hands right here on this property.”

“So it stands to reason that the rest of him’s likely to be around here someplace...”

“It gives you the creeps, her here in this house all these years. Where’d you suppose you got to hide something like that—a head of somebody?”

“Ain’t nobody goin’ to do a thing like that. Not even her.”

“Oh yeah. Then how come they found that one hand...” the woman picking up the drapery suddenly uncovered another workman’s glove. The other woman saw it and let out a scream. They all laughed at her.

“That old hand could be just about anywhere inside this house. The woman turned and pointed to the boxes stacked around. “In there... in there... or...” she turned her attention to a large ornately carved box, “or it might just happen to be in this little coffin box here.”

“Coffin...?” the other woman gasped. “Oh, no, don’t you open that!”

Just then Charlotte suddenly appeared. “No!” she said with controlled fury, “Don’t put your grubby hands on that... don’t you dare!” She regarded them with eyes filled with blazing hatred. “Get out!” She picked up a nearby candlestick and hurled it blindly at them. “Get out, the lot of you!”

Miriam appeared and tried to get Charlotte back under control, but it was too late. Neither Charlotte nor the workers could be reconciled. The workers hadn’t wanted to come there to that death house anyway.

Charlotte took the carved box and headed back up stairs in heavy retreat.

“Must have something mighty private in there to carry on thataway,” one of the workers grumbled, picking up her things to leave.

As bad as it was to lose the workers, Miriam’s day was made even worse when Hugh arrived to announce that old Judge Grannie was on his way out to talk to Charlotte. The Judge had been a friend of Charlotte’s father and

had been prevailed upon by the commissioner and others to come and talk reason to Charlotte. Miriam was close to throwing up her hands as she told Hugh, "The whole situation is impossible. Charlotte is quite mad and should be committed."

"Then why not discuss that with the Judge? Charlotte is in no condition to talk to him."

Charlotte, it just so happened, was a witness to the Judge's arrival when he came to the house hours later. Below, Hugh and Miriam welcomed the Judge but explained that Charlotte was too ill to see him. The Judge, a very old man, seemed to have forgotten the purpose of his visit. The sight of the house excited all sorts of reminiscences in him—of the good times they had there and the tragedy that had occurred. It seemed impossible to get him to discuss the matter of Charlotte and getting her out of the house.

"Charlotte..." the old judge finally said, "it's a terrible thing how they've crucified that poor child... frightful... frightful. You'd think they'd be satisfied they drove her poor Mama and her poor Daddy into their graves with grief and scandal..."

"Yes, of course," said Miriam. "That's why someone must persuade her to leave here..."

At this point Charlotte, fully dressed now in her finest, and every bit the vivacious southern debutante of forty years ago, swept into the room.

"Why Judge Grannie!" she exclaimed, posing prettily in the doorway. "I just heard you talkin', just the least sound of your voice up there in my room and right away I knew it was you!"

"Miss Charlotte!"

"How long? When was the last time you were in this house?"

Incredibly, Charlotte and the Judge began to create a scene from the past, acting out what happened, Charlotte playing the young southern belle to the Judge's fatherly old man. Miriam and Hugh watched incredulously. The Judge, it was obvious, was senile and of no help to them at all. Charlotte, in the end, talked of her Daddy and how he made her promise to stay in the house and to never give in to the town and the people. She began to weep, so overcome with grief that Hugh had to help her upstairs to her room. The Judge, far from accomplishing his purpose of persuading Charlotte that she must leave, was eased out of the house by Miriam, still in a fury against the town meddlers who had bullied that "poor helpless little

thing.”

That evening Hugh drove Miriam into town to see the commissioner to ask him for an extension of time for the demolition crews to take over the house. At first, he refused.

“What are you going to do?” asked Miriam. “She may be ill. And she seems to be deranged. Are you going to march in there and throw her out bodily?”

“Well, I could hardly take the responsibility for that kind of action.”

“And you can’t simply tear the house down with her in it.”

“No...”

“I will do my best to get her out as soon as possible.”

“Perhaps if you weren’t here. If there wasn’t anyone to help her?”

“You tried that before I came back and it didn’t work. And she is my only living relative, the only one left. And there is the danger that someone might harm her. I have to stay.”

The commissioner countered, “But if we bring a criminal charge against her...”

“It will only delay and make matters worse,” Miriam fired back. “I’ll be responsible for her... at least to see that she doesn’t shoot anyone. You’ll simply have to give me a little time.”

In the end the commissioner agreed to give Miriam another week.

As she went to the car, Miriam was met by Paul Selvin, who tipped his hat and smiled. “I don’t like to make a nuisance of myself,” he said, “but I did want to enquire if you’d had the chance to speak to your cousin.”

“I’ve had the chance,” replied Miriam, “but I haven’t had the nerve.”

“Perhaps if I were to just drop in...”

Miriam shrugged, “Why shouldn’t you? Everyone else in town has.”

“Tomorrow then?” Paul asked.

“If you don’t care what you do with your time. There’s every chance that Charlotte will refuse to see you.”

“But then perhaps you’ll keep me company yourself?”

Miriam laughed, got into the car with Hugh and they drove away.

The night was warm and muggy. Miriam slept lightly and fitfully. Further down the hallway, Charlotte rose from her bed and looked out into the

evergreen hedges. Was there a figure there? Or was it a trick of light and her imagination?

“John?” Charlotte whispered. She stood a moment longer in indecision and then moved back into the house. Emerging into the hallway, Charlotte paused, took a silent step or two in the direction of Miriam’s half-opened doorway and listened. Hearing nothing, she turned and hastened down the stairs. At the foot of the stairs she stopped. The silhouette of a man seemed to loom against the window, and then it moved back and forth to become the shadow of a shrub. She opened the front door and found nothing more than the night and a breeze. She turned and went back into the house. She paused at the door of the drawing room and looked in. She started inside but a face loomed suddenly out of the darkness. She stopped, her heart pounding, as she realized that it was her own youthful face, caught in a patch of moonlight, staring from the portrait. Then hearing what she thought was a bit of music she started toward the ballroom. The door, usually kept closed, was ajar. There seemed to be a moving figure again, this time within the oblong of light shining from the doorway. She started forward and stopped, a little afraid and uncertain, and then thinking she heard the music again, moved slowly down the length of the hallway to the door and shoved it open.

Upstairs, Miriam moved restlessly in half-sleep. On the nightstand was the revolver, perfectly visible in the soft glow of the safety light. She too heard the music—a soft tinkle from the piano being played as before. The sound continued for a moment before she sat upright into full consciousness. For a moment she listened, and then rousing herself, she got up from the bed, put on her negligee and left the room. Out in the hallway, she stopped, peering downward to listen to the music. She turned back to look toward the bedroom but was drawn back sharply by a cry from below. She rushed back to the bedroom and snatched up the gun.

As she headed for the stairs, she heard the sound of smashing glass, which came again and again with shrill keening which continued as she rushed to the now closed door of the ballroom.

For a moment she was unable to get the door to open, but then open it flew nearly hurling her backward. The room seemed madly aglitter with moonlight although the French windows were closed. She heard sobs coming from somewhere at the center of the dimness. She switched on the lights, and then looked around in mute stupefaction. All the mirrored panels

in the room had been smashed, the floor littered with bright shards. Charlotte stood at the center of the room crying, clutching her arm with her hand. At her feet lay one of the hammers the workers were using when packing the furniture.

Miriam hurried across to Charlotte. "Charlotte, are you all right? What have you done? Why, Charlotte? Why, Charlotte?" The question poured out almost on reflex.

Charlotte could only sob and shake her head, and when she took her hand away from her arm, blood oozed through her fingers and down the length of her arm.

"You did this, didn't you?" Miriam demanded to know.

Charlotte shook her head and finally got out the single word, "No."

"Then who did it? You were here. You saw. Who did it?"

Charlotte looked back in the direction of the closed French doors. "John..." she finally managed to breathe. "He's angry at me."

"Go along," Miriam demanded. "Go on up to your room. I'll come in and fix your arm in a minute."

As Miriam went to test the French windows, to make sure they were locked, she found one unsecured. She opened it and looked out and for a moment thought she saw a moving figure out there, but the light made it uncertain.

The next day Miriam showed Hugh and Velma the room, which Velma, complaining all the while, had been set to cleaning up.

"It ain't the sort of thing anybody in their right mind would do," Velma proclaimed. "Bustin' up a place like this... that Miss Charlotte..."

Miriam interrupted, "No one said my cousin did it."

"Nevertheless," Hugh put in, "whoever did it was in a violent state of mind. One way or the other, Charlotte's got to be made to leave before anything else happens."

"I know," Miriam said, "that's why I called you. I wanted you to be here when I talked to her. If need be, I think we should give her a strong sedative... if you agree to that, of course."

"We'll see," Hugh replied.

As they left the room, Velma straightened up from her work, and then slowly, leaving enough time so that she wouldn't be observed by them, followed silently after to watch and listen.

Much to their surprise, Hugh and Miriam found Charlotte packing, getting her things ready, apparently, to leave.

“What are you doing?” Miriam asked in disbelief.

“I must go,” said Charlotte in an oddly quiet way. “I realize now...”

“I’m so glad,” Miriam said. “I felt certain you would sooner or later.”

“Yes,” said Charlotte, and then looked away so Hugh and Miriam could not see her expression, she added, “I should have seen it before. But I didn’t know...”

Miriam gave Hugh a quick glance. “You didn’t know what?”

“That John wanted me to. But now, after last night...”

Miriam stared at Hugh disbelievingly. This seemed to be proof that Charlotte most certainly was mad.

Downstairs, Velma, who had been eavesdropping, went to the phone to tell Paul Selvin, who had paid her to do so, that Charlotte had finally decided to leave the house.

Miriam and Hugh were engaged in a hasty discussion as Charlotte left the room. Was Charlotte up to something, or had she really decided to leave? They would simply have to wait and see.

“But I won’t leave in the daylight for them all to stare and crow over me,” Charlotte said vehemently. “They’re not the ones who’re making me leave... it’s because of Jewel. Tonight, I’ll go when it’s dark, when they won’t see, I’ll just vanish...” She turned to Miriam. “You’ll drive me, won’t you?”

“Yes, of course,” Miriam said. “Where do you want to go?”

“Where it’s sunny. Where it’s warm. Remember that little town down on the gulf where Grandma used to live?”

“I was never there.”

“Oh, weren’t you? Never mind. We’ll find it.”

“I know,” said Hugh sotto voiced. “I know where she means.”

Miriam looked back at Charlotte and smiled. “We’ll leave tonight, then, after supper.”

“Yes,” echoed Charlotte, “after supper. I’ll just vanish. I’ll just leave this place as it is... to the jackals...”

“I suppose,” said Miriam worriedly, “I’d better pack my bags.”

That evening as they sat down to the dinner that Velma had left for them, Miriam watched Charlotte nervously, uncertain as to whether she would

change her mind again or not. Since the food that Velma left was poor, she went to the kitchen, found her way to the wine cellar and returned with a bottle of champagne. Miriam had always had champagne tastes; and Charlotte, in her deepening depression, could use some cheering up. Miriam opened the bottle and took it out to Charlotte on the terrace.

“I never did have a good head for liquor,” said Charlotte. “Don’t you remember?”

“Just a little won’t hurt,” Miriam suggested. “Besides, there’s cause to celebrate.”

As they finished the bottle, Charlotte became visibly tipsy. Miriam saw and urged her to “Just eat a bite or two.”

Charlotte left the table and went back into the house. For a moment she stood looking down the length of the hallway. Then, not so very gracefully, spilling a little of her wine, she did a deep curtsy.

“How nice,” she said, in a light, girlish voice, “How nice of you all to come to my little party...”

“Charlotte,” Miriam called, entering from the terrace.

“Oh,” said Charlotte, smiling back at her, “I’m just funnin’. Don’t you worry ’bout me...”

“I’d better go get things ready,” Miriam said. With a quizzical glance at Charlotte she went on up the stairs. In the hallway, Charlotte gave a little laugh and offered her hand to some imaginary swain. Then she meandered room to room reliving moments from the past—at first the happy ones in which she was the pretty daughter of adoring parents. She stopped long enough to enact with her father just enough to give a hint of a kind of “conversational” incest. She could always get anything she wanted from a man... or so she had been led to believe. And she could get any man.

“John...” she murmured the name and whirled about. It was as if he was there before her. She reached out and took his hand.

“If anyone sees you!” she said in girlish delight. “If Jewel should find out... She acts so nicey-nice and lady-like, but you know how she is... married to her...”

Charlotte ran along the hallway as if leading John, drawing him into the shadowed shallows of the music room.

“Oh, if anyone knew! If Daddy knew! Oh, I hate to think... No, no, you mustn’t kiss me here. Anybody might come along. If they do, you go straight over to the piano and start playin’, like that was what you came in

here for...”

She smiled softly to herself. “Oh, you’re so silly comin’ here this way... for the help to see... but I’m glad... Glad! Oh, John, I don’t care anything about any of those silly, silly boys that come around. When I see them, and then I look at you... your handsome, handsome face and your beautiful hands...”

She stopped suddenly, her hands outstretched as if to take his, and then as some other vision rose before her, she groaned and covered her face as she whirled out of the room.

On the upper landing, Miriam appeared hastily, having carried out some boxes from Charlotte’s room. She called down to her, but heedless and crying now, Charlotte was only intent upon fleeing the terrible vision that confronted her there in the ballroom. She hurried toward the big front door, desperate now to be away and out of the house. Again Miriam called her name, but Charlotte was too upset to hear. Tugging at the door, Charlotte rushed outside.

As she started across the wide front veranda, a figure loomed monstrously and suddenly before her. She cried out, and there was a terrible blinding flash of light before her. In the black wake of the flash, Paul Selvin came forward, smug now at having gotten his picture.

“Miss Hollis,” he said, “I’m sorry if I frightened you.”

Sobbing in terrible panic, aware of some other flashing lights on the drive, Charlotte ran back inside the house, slamming and bolting the door before leaning against it, too terrified for the moment to move. Miriam, a box clutched in her arms, came awkwardly to the top of the stairs.

“Charlotte!” she cried. “What happened?”

Outside the flashing lights in the drive proved to be the headlights of Hugh’s car. He came to a stop and, having witnessed the hasty drama at the door, got out and went immediately to Paul. Cutting him off from escape and struggling with him, Hugh took and smashed his camera.

Inside Miriam continued to stare down at Charlotte. “Charlotte,” she said, “please...”

Charlotte turned from the door, trying to control her sobs and looked up at Miriam. She tried to speak, to say what happened, but she was unable to form the words.

“All right. All right,” said Miriam. She started to put down the box, but it slipped and as she made a grab for it the lid, the box, now turned to its

side, fell open.

Charlotte looked up at the opened box and its exposed contents and her sobs were stilled by a new and even worse terror, for there, before her, grinning down from the top of the stairs was a horrible severed head. As she stared, unable in her terror either to move or to make any sound, the head tumbled from the box and fell to the stairs, and descended a ghastly jouncing descent to the bottom of the steps across the floor to her very feet. Then sucking in a deep, convulsive breath, Charlotte gave vent to a deafening scream.

From above, Miriam looked down in frightened horror, and crying Charlotte's name, hurled the box from her and started running down the stairs.

As Charlotte woke up in her darkened bedroom, she felt an instantaneous sense of panic, of half-memory of the shocking experience she had downstairs.

"Don't be frightened," a voice said, and she looked around and saw Miriam sitting beside the bed in the dim lamplight. And then, her gaze moved past and beyond Miriam and fastened on something else in the deeper shadows. She rose up in the bed in terror for the severed head seemed to be here on the bureau, grinning back at her.

Miriam, realizing what was frightening her, hastened to assure her. "No, no," she said, "it's all right," as she reached behind her and brought the "head" into the light as it materialized as an old hat form. "This is all it is, Charlotte. I know how it must have frightened you..."

Charlotte turned her head to the pillow, crying softly.

"It was that idiot, exploding that flash bulb in your face. You couldn't be sure of anything."

Miriam took a pill from a bottle and along with some water from a glass, offered it to Charlotte. At first Charlotte refused, but when Miriam insisted that Hugh said for her to take it if she woke up, she hesitantly swallowed it down.

Charlotte looked at Miriam with a curious expression, as if seeing her for the first time, and then, giving up the struggle to stay awake, drifted off into sleep again.

Miriam, making sure that Charlotte was resting comfortably, left the room and went back to her own room, took out the gun from the nightstand

and thoughtfully checked it to make certain it was loaded.

In the morning Charlotte was awakened by Miriam coming into the room with her breakfast tray. At first she unquestionably allowed Miriam to arrange her position in the bed and put the tray out for her. Then finally, now fully awake, she asked, "Didn't Velma come this morning?"

"I called her and told her not to last night," Miriam told her. And at her questioning glance added, "If it hadn't been for her that reporter wouldn't have been here last night. And you wouldn't be in this condition this morning."

Charlotte watched Miriam with a curious kind of thoughtfulness, and then when Miriam started to leave, called out to stop her. "Miriam," called Charlotte, and in her indisputable look of illness was a new kind of softness, "I know you weren't happy in this house. I wasn't very kind to you."

"You were very wrapped up with yourself and all your beaux," replied Miriam.

"Yes. I believed all the things Daddy told me... about how beautiful I was. And charming..."

"You were beautiful," said Miriam. "Yes... and charming, too."

"But not quite legendary... I know... I did terrible wicked things. Stealing another woman's husband..."

"Undoubtedly, he wanted to be stolen."

"Yes, yes, I suppose so. Still I was wrong. But I've paid for it. It's been my sense of guilt that's kept me here so much as anything."

"Guilt?" questioned Miriam.

"For causing it all."

"You mustn't think about it... not now."

"But Miriam, I didn't do it. I've never said that to anyone before, not to any other living soul. I started to say it to Daddy, but he wouldn't let me. He said I mustn't say it. And I mustn't let them drive me off."

"But now," started Miriam.

"But now it's all gone. We're old, all of us grown old... Jewel... and me. But you... you escaped."

"I ran," said Miriam. "It's a very good policy. I've learned to run when your life's threatened."

For a moment the two women were silent, looking at each other. Finally Charlotte held out her hand. "I'm trying to say I'm sorry, Miriam," she said.

Miriam nodded, "Yes, I know."

"You won't leave me here alone will you?"

Miriam shook her head. "No, I won't do that."

Charlotte smiled, rather wanly, and turned to her breakfast.

"You'll see everything differently," Miriam said, "once you're away from here."

Hugh visited Charlotte later that day and gave her another shot to help her rest, coming into the room to speak to Miriam.

"There is no question about it," he said. "She's very affected by what's happened. She is in very deep shock."

"I was so certain she was going to leave," Miriam said with resignation.

Charlotte in the grip of the sedative babbled about the past, talked to John and spoke of her love for him all that day. In the evening she was roused by Miriam to take some soup, and then was left alone as Miriam went on to her own bedroom. Late in the night Charlotte woke up hearing the music, the song that John wrote for her. At first, confident that she was dreaming, she only smiled, but then, becoming more awake, the music still sounding dimly against her awareness, she boosted herself up in bed. Her door was open and there was a faint light outside. The music seemed to be getting louder.

Still dazed with drugged sleep, Charlotte managed to get herself out of bed. Half fearfully, she made her way toward the open doorway and looked outside. The music was still playing somewhere below, but as she moved out to the landing, it stopped. She started to move away but the music started again.

Charlotte looked back in the direction of Miriam's room, saw the lamp burning beside the bed and moved toward it. She went to the room and softly called Miriam's name, but the room was empty. She started away and then, seeing the gun in the circle of light beneath the lamp, she stood staring at it, seeing it as a glittering and a marvelous thing. Slowly, she went across to the bedside table and picked up the gun. She stood for a moment longer looking at it, and then, hearing the music again from downstairs, she carried it with her, forgotten, in her hand, from the room and out in the direction of the stairs.

In the moment after she left, Miriam appeared in the doorway of the adjoining bath, looked into the room, and seeing nothing and hearing nothing went back inside.

As Charlotte descended the stairs, she seemed to do so in a haze of confused fantasy. Her nightmares swirling around her, she seemed almost to become younger with every step. Only the revolver in her hand robbed the scene of an atmosphere of almost playful innocence.

The music seemed to come from inside the drawing room. As she stood there, she saw a soft rectangle of light falling across the floor, containing an indefinite silhouette—one of a man. As she moved toward the doorway, the light fell away, and, as she entered the room, the music stopped. She stood there for a moment listening.

“John?” she whispered.

But there was no answer.

She heard the music once more, this time from somewhere else. She went back to the hallway and decided the music was coming from the library. The door was shut but there seemed to be a light shining under it, broken by the movement of a shadow from inside. She hastened to the door and hurled it open. The music momentarily became a bit louder, then stopped. The room was dark and deserted.

“John?” she whispered again.

And again, there was no answer.

As Charlotte moved into the deeper shadows at the rear of the hallway, there seemed to be ominous shadows everywhere. She thought she saw the severed hand there on top of another packing box, or was it another glove? Was that a severed head there in the shadows, or was it just a hat? Beckoned by the music and the moving shadows while calling out John’s name intermittently, she moved from room to room. Was she merely doped into a state of delusion or was she really mad?

In a small sun room, Charlotte found her carved box standing in a flood of moonlight on the table. And at last she found the source of the music. Or had she? She was hesitant as she approached the box and touched its lid.

She stood there for a long while, the music tinkling improbably from the closed box, and then with a sudden resolution, she hurled back the lid. There was only the scene painted inside with flowers and birds. The music, maddeningly, stopped. A shadow moved quietly behind her as she whirled around. The doorway behind her stood black and vacant. She stood now

shivering with fright, not certain of what she was really afraid.

At last she moved forward determined to return to the protection of her room, but vacant, silent darkness loomed before her as she started toward the stairs.

Upstairs Miriam returned to bed, never looking toward the table or noticing the gun was missing. She lay down and closed her eyes.

Below, Charlotte had reached the foot of the stairs when she heard the music once more, very, very softly from somewhere behind her. She turned. The light now seemed to come from beneath the ballroom doors, and there were broken, darting shadows to suggest people silently dancing inside. Blinking hard, she tried to clear her mind and perhaps her sight as well as she was irresistibly drawn back in that direction.

At the door she stopped in the grip of some faintly realized warning. Then she heard a voice very faintly whispering her name... "Charlotte." She put out her hand to the door, turned the latch and opened it. As before, moonlight flooded the room, reflecting from the glittering remains of the mirrors as the open French window welcomed the balmy summer night.

"John," Charlotte whispered, a bit more loudly than before and in answer the music swelled. For a moment Charlotte stood there caught up in the beauty of the moment, growing younger, younger, and hearing the far off laughter of her coming-out ball, remembering...

Slowly, she began to sway to the music, first this way and that, smiling softly. And then she held out her hands as if to a favored partner, and with the gun dangling incongruously from her hand, she began to dance. She was very graceful and very young, and as the music swelled about her, her smile of pleasure widened and her eyes grew bright.

As she whirled around the ballroom floor, she saw other ghost figures dancing about her. Suddenly the mirrors became whole again, and the room bright and real, just as it was when she had her first ball there.

There was laughter and joy and the fulsome music of the orchestra. But as she dipped and glided the room dimmed and returned to moonlight, the mirrors returned to shattered fragments, and the music faded to the thin tinkling sound of the music box.

Then Charlotte caught a glimpse of someone... or what appeared to be someone... standing in one of the open French windows. Charlotte stopped dancing but still with a small laugh of gaiety and greeting—but the laugh broke off and her face grew stiff with horror. She found herself facing, not

the French windows, but one of the shattered mirrored panels. But unmistakably outlined in its interrupted surface was the figure of a man—a headless figure. As Charlotte stood transfixed with horror, the figure raised its arms to her, as if in invitation to the now broken dance, and she saw that he had no hands. Charlotte screamed and her scream echoed into the night. The figure moved toward her and out of the moonlight. In automatic defense, Charlotte grasped the gun with both hands and pointed it in the direction of the approaching figure. With a sob, she fired.

Upstairs, aroused by the deafening sound, Miriam rose up sharply in her bed and threw back the covers. At the same time several more shots came resoundingly from the floor below. Miriam turned to the nightstand, saw that the revolver was missing, and, getting up swiftly, hurried from the room. Running down the hall, she glanced into Charlotte's room briefly, just long enough to know that Charlotte was not there, and then she ran down the stairs.

“Charlotte!” she cried. “Charlotte!” And when there was no answer, she hurried on, headlong, down the hall. Stopping, she looked wildly around and, seeing the doors of the ballroom ajar, she ran toward them. As she entered the room she saw Charlotte silhouetted against the flood of moonlight, quite still and silent. When Miriam called out to her, Charlotte made no move to answer. Miriam switched on the lights and saw that Charlotte was standing over a fallen figure.

“What have you done?” Miriam demanded as she ran forward. Charlotte, too deeply in shock to respond, simply stood there staring down at the figure. Miriam looked down to see the man had fallen so his face was hidden. She looked at Charlotte. “Who is it?” she demanded to know.

But Charlotte still made no move or sound.

Reluctantly, Miriam knelt down to touch the man's shoulder, and, forcing herself, turned him over. Slowly, the bloodied head of Hugh was revealed.

“Hugh!” Miriam screamed, looking up at Charlotte. “But why...?”

Charlotte began to moan. Dropping the gun, she covered her face with her hands and turned away. Miriam looked at her for a moment in stunned disbelief.

“I'll have to call the police,” she said as she started from the room.

But then she hesitated and forcefully headed to the phone. Again she stopped and looked toward the ballroom. Should she go back and look after

Charlotte before making the call? Charlotte, swift, suddenly, like a wraith, appeared from the ballroom, came to Miriam and stopped her hand as she dialed the phone.

“You can’t call them!” Charlotte babbled breathlessly. “You can’t do it, Miriam. Oh, Miriam, if you’ve got any feelin’ at all for me, if you’ve got any feelin’, don’t, oh, don’t...”

“But I have to,” Miriam replied. “There isn’t anything else I can do.”

“But it will be like it was then. They’ll all come and ask all sorts of terrible, personal questions. Why do you think I’ve stayed alone here all these years? I can’t stand it. They shamed me. They killed Daddy and Mama. You can’t let them kill me too!”

“Charlotte, please stop.”

“No, listen, listen. I didn’t mean to do it. I didn’t know. I didn’t know it was Hugh. Why would I? He was just about the only one to pay me any mind all these last few years. I was so scared. It was dark, and when I looked and saw him there, it was just like...”

“Just like what?”

“Like a dream. A dream I’ve had over and over again for years and years... ever since that night when Daddy came here into this house and told me. Ever since they found John’s poor hand. Oh, Miriam, Miriam, I can’t stand it. I can’t!”

“But what can we do?”

“Take him away. Take him back to his own place and leave him there... where they’ll find him and take care of him... do what needs to be done...”

“Oh, Charlotte...”

“What good will it do? What good for them to come here. Miriam, I beg you, take him away. I didn’t mean it. I’d had all those pills and everything seemed... strange.”

For a moment Miriam stared at her, and in the excitement of the moment seemed convinced. “You’ll have to help me,” said Miriam. “We’ll have to get him into the car, and... you’ll have to help.”

Charlotte nodded, “All right then.”

“You wait here,” Miriam told her, “while I get the car.”

“Must I... must I stay?”

“Go inside, then,” Miriam told her, “and come out when you hear the car. I’ll be just a minute.”

Miriam hurried off into the darkness as Charlotte went back into the

hall, crying softly.

When Miriam arrived back with the car, she was forced to go to get Charlotte. Together, Charlotte weeping and frightened, they managed to get Hugh's body into the back seat of the car and to cover him with a blanket.

"Can't I go now?" Charlotte asked in her frightened, little girl's voice.

"We have to get him out again," Miriam said firmly and forced Charlotte into the car beside her. "I must be mad to be doing this for you."

"For me," Charlotte said, seeming more than a little disoriented. But then, very gracefully she continued, "Yes, for me. And I've been wicked... so awfully wicked, Miriam."

They drove through the night, at first with their lights out, so as not to attract attention, and then, when they got into the back roads, with them on. Charlotte, in a state of extreme shock and dazed hysteria continued to babble, and then to rave.

"I wouldn't hurt him! I wouldn't, you know that... I wouldn't!"

Miriam finally was forced to stop the car and slap Charlotte hard across the face to bring her back in control.

"You've got to be quiet," Miriam told her. But before they could move on, they looked around to find that they were parked almost directly next to a car in which a couple was necking. They drove away, just as the couple, only now noticing their presence, looked after them.

Finally, they pulled off the road and to a place near a shallow ravine. Miriam forced Charlotte to leave the car. To Charlotte, getting out into the darkness, every shadow, branch and leaf became a menace. With an averted gaze, she helped take hold of Hugh's body as Miriam gave her instructions as they dragged Hugh across to the ravine.

"We must cover him with leaves," said Miriam as Charlotte began to sob and babble.

"So much death... so much death..." babbled Charlotte.

"Come," Miriam said to her, "we have to get back."

She led Charlotte back to the car, and they drove away.

They entered the drive with their lights out and approached the silent, dark house. Miriam stepped out to help Charlotte out of the car in front of the veranda.

“You go in. I’ll put the car away. Go straight to your room. Don’t turn on any lights.”

“Yes,” said Charlotte in a faraway voice, “straight to my room.”

Miriam drove away, and Charlotte stood there looking after her. As the house loomed in front of Charlotte she seemed paralyzed, but remembering Miriam’s words, clinging to her instructions, she made her way to the door, shoved it open and entered the house. She started to the stairs and then noticed a light coming from under the ballroom doors, where there wasn’t any only a moment before. Uncertain, she made her way in that direction.

At the door of the room, she stopped, afraid to look in, not wanting to see the terrible stain of blood on the floor. But she threw open the doors and looked in. There was nothing there. The floor where Hugh bled out his life was quite clean and unmarked. Somehow this was even more shattering to Charlotte than if some new horror had been waiting for her there. The senseless impossibility of it struck her like a physical blow. She turned about and ran down the hall and up the stairs.

So concentrated was Charlotte on her headlong flight that she was unaware of the light coming on just at the landing. Not until she was full upon it, did she see it. In horrifying view was the bloodied figure of Hugh. She very nearly collided with the figure, and then, seeing it, uttered a piercing scream and fell back. Just managing to catch herself against the railing, she clung, sobbing, gibbering madly as she collapsed slowly to the steps, holding her face in her hands, shielding it from the view of the terrible, impossible thing there above her, only a few feet away.

Miriam, hearing Charlotte scream, ran into the house, through the ballroom, along the lower balcony and up the stairs to where Charlotte had collapsed along the railing. Charlotte could only hold her hand out, as if in defense of something at the head of the stairs. As Miriam looked in that direction, she saw that the landing was quite deserted. Dragging Charlotte to her feet, Miriam forced her up the steps and down the hallway to her room.

Miriam helped Charlotte into bed and waited for her to fall asleep.

“It will all be better tomorrow,” she told Charlotte. “Tomorrow we will go away from here and never, never come back.”

“Yes...” Charlotte managed to breathe as she drifted off to sleep. “Yes.”

Miriam got up, very wearily, left the room and locked the door.

Miriam went to her room and changed into her negligee, but instead of going to bed she came out of her room, turned out the hallway light and made her way down to the ballroom, across it, and out on to the terrace. She stood there looking out into the night, the wash of moonlight across the drowsy landscape. From behind Miriam appeared a man's figure—Hugh's. Hearing a sound, Miriam turned, saw him and smiled. He handed her a drink.

“For a difficult night's work,” he said.

“Difficult, and unpleasant. As much as I've hated her all these years—her and her whole monstrous family,” Miriam shrugged, “it had to be done.”

“I know,” Hugh replied. “You do feel sorry for her when you think how life might have been for her. It's too bad Jewel ran out of money...”

“Murder can be very expensive,” said Miriam.

“When observed by such an expensive witness,” added Hugh.

Miriam nodded in agreement. “Yes. And I am expensive. Very expensive. I think you'd better keep that in mind from now on.”

“Oh, I will,” replied Hugh. “I don't expect much... a decent allowance...”

“But don't get any fancy notions. I fell out of love with you years ago. Your life with me isn't going to be easy.”

“It's going to be hell... with Charlotte's money... and you,” Hugh lifted his glass. “Here's to us.”

“Here's to you,” Miriam corrected him. “And to me.”

They drank.

“You are beautiful,” said Hugh. He moved toward to touch her.

“Yes,” said Miriam, and as Hugh started to kiss her, she added, “and expensive... remember.”

“And to Charlotte,” Hugh added.

Above, Charlotte stood on the balcony, looking down on them. There were tears in her eyes, not tears of terror now, but of great sadness. She looked down on them as they embraced and a tear fell from her eye. She reached out to the remaining stone urn that stood in its moldering base.

Miriam, allowing Hugh to kiss her, was nonetheless observant enough to notice the droplet that had unaccountably splashed to the stone floor of the terrace. For a moment she couldn't think what it meant, and then, as it dawned on her, she shoved Hugh from her and cast her gaze upward. At

that moment the stone urn toppled from its base and came crashing down upon them.

From above, Charlotte looked at the ruined urn and the ruined figures below. Then she sank to her knees and the tears flowed freely.

The next morning the crowd had gathered at the front of the old Hollis place, the news of the tragedy having spread through the town. Among those gathered, being held back by the local police, were the reporter Paul Selvin and his new friend, Waldo Hopper.

“I just knew if those kids didn’t stop pestering her around out here, somebody’d get hurt,” said one woman. “Throwing things at the house and deviling that old woman...”

“And then to have it happen to the other two. They say she was in her nightgown.”

A hush fell over the crowd as the front door of the old house opened, and Charlotte, being helped by the old Judge, came out of the house. She was dressed in all her finest finery; after all, Charlotte was not a poor woman, and she would soon be still richer from the settlement of her property. She leaned on the Judge’s arm as he led her toward his car which was waiting in the drive.

Paul Selvin and Waldo Hopper started forward. Paul got ready to take a picture, and Charlotte, seeing him, far from ducking away, paused to give him her best angle. As she moved on to the car and got inside, Waldo came up to the car. The police moved in to block him, but Charlotte raised her hand and they let him through.

“I have it on good authority that Jewel Mayhew suffered another attack this morning when she heard the news... a paralytic attack this time. Perhaps you’d be interested to know.”

“Poor, poor Jewel,” said Charlotte. “I do really feel sorry for her.”

“Sorrier, I dare say, than your cousin, Miriam, did?”

A certain quickness came into Charlotte’s face, which caused Waldo to smile. “I’ve had reason to speculate since our last meeting on the identity of that witness, and where he... or she... might have been all this time. The only thing that might have kept them silent—I would judge—would be blackmail. Would you agree with that, Miss Hollis?”

Charlotte was not able to answer, for at that moment the car pulled away. As it drove into the distance, Charlotte looked out the window, at Waldo,

and very faintly, she smiled.

THE DEBUT OF LARRY RICHARDS

None of them that night would have hesitated to help him had they known of the danger. Long before showtime, however, they were all quite prepared to dismiss his behavior during the performance as simply another manifestation of his “artistic temperament.” Allowing even that the rehearsals had gone smoothly—which they had not—the incident at the end of the final run-through would have convinced them of that much. It is one of the commonest of human failings that few of us ever see in the unpleasantness of others the generative element of fear, and only Larry knew the truth.

Shielding his eyes against the incredible brightness of the light, he wheeled sharply and looked up toward the control booth. In the ragged shadow of his hand, his famous, still-handsome face clearly reflected an inner tautness. There remained, now, less than thirty minutes before showtime, and the crew, waiting in the outer dimness, was restive, sullenly despairing of the last chance for a final break. The voice of the director, sharp with accumulated impatience, barked down at him from the studio speaker.

“Larry, for Petesake remember to work into Camera *Three* on that last speech. If you don’t, you’re cooked. I wish you could see—!”

In the swift clench of quickened anger, Larry Richards turned and left the set. Holding his gaze coldly averted from the others, he strode across to the hallway, entered his dressing room and slammed the door. He stood for a moment, gripping the doorknob, pressing his nervous excess into its hard, cold surface. These people didn’t know the difference between a real flesh-and-blood actor and the carpet sweeper in the commercial!

In disgust, he let his hand fall limp. He knew, even better than they, that he was behaving like a temperamental child. How could he expect them to guess out there what these next ninety minutes could mean to him, that they were to be the proof to Bert Fielding that, despite four years of illness and

forced retirement, he was still up to playing the lead in “The Deaths of Kings”? The legend of Laurence Richards was still astonishingly bright on Broadway. Larry had worked hard to keep it that way, to keep secret his illness, his depleted finances, the poverty in which he and Lisa now lived. Producers were chary of an actor when he was desperate—and quick to forget how good he once had been. Bert Fielding had somehow learned the truth. Larry raised a hand to his forehead, then withdrew it quickly as a knock sounded at the door.

It would be Lisa, of course, come to soothe him. He closed his eyes, willing his mind, as best he could, to quietness. Poor Lisa. These last few days of rehearsal had been hard on her. He wondered sometimes if there was anything he could think or feel without her knowing. Not that his recent behavior had concealed much. He opened the door, managing a wry smile.

“Don’t tell me,” he said.

She stood there, just outside, a small, mild woman in her early thirties, huddled in a practical brown coat that almost fatally submerged her subtle prettiness. Her gray eyes, seeming suddenly too large for her small, precise features, met his with deepening distress.

“Larry,” she said softly, “they don’t understand. They meant only to help.” In her voice there was still a trace of the native Austrian accent she had tried so hard to be rid of. She reached out to him but drew short of touching him. “Please, don’t let them believe you are like this.”

He looked down at her, thinking what a presumptuous romantic he had been when he had married her. That had been twelve years ago, during a Special Services tour in Europe. Then, her youth and her grave foreign manner had seemed a captive, fledgling charm needing only his touch for release and fulfillment. He had intended to change her, to transform her into some splendid Galatea, but she had steadfastly—and wisely—remained herself, letting him realize for himself that his efforts were misguided. His anxiety for tonight’s success was more for her sake, really, than his own.

“What shall I do,” he smiled, “hand out chocolate bars?”

“Please, Larry—”

“Lisa, I created this role on Broadway and played it for over five hundred performances. That’s why they signed me for it. Should I let that young genius out there tell me how to play it—with Bert Fielding watching?”

“Larry, you don’t listen. He doesn’t mean to quarrel with your

interpretation. It's the mechanics—to have you in range of the camera—he is worried about.” Her gaze softened. “When you hurt people, Larry, you make them cruel—”

Suddenly he was sorry that she had come; he felt again the quick, cold twist of uncertainty in the pit of his stomach. Following her turning gaze he saw the company makeup man hurrying toward him from the next dressing room.

“Touch-up, Mr. Richards?” the man called.

The words rushed to Larry's lips before he could stop them. “I've done my own makeup for twenty years,” he said curtly. “I think I can manage it tonight.”

The man's smile vanished. “Yes, sir,” he said quickly and hurried away.

“Larry—”

She was looking up at him, her hands shoved deep into her pockets in a gesture of retreat. “When you are an important person, Larry, you must be kind.”

Her words recalled an unwanted vision to his mind. There had been a young actor at the auditions for “The Deaths of Kings.” The boy had recognized Larry and after his dismissal, under the misapprehension that Larry was starring in the play, had waited for him in the alleyway to beg for another reading. Larry, struck with the irony of the situation after his own interview with Bert Fielding, had laughed. It had been purely a reflex, hysterical perhaps, but the boy hadn't known that. Larry would never forget the look that had come into his eyes. When you hurt people, Lisa had said, you make them cruel.

“If I can just get through this, Lisa,” he said, begging her to understand, “if I can just get through tonight, I'll be all right.”

Her gaze faltered and fell away. “You may never get through tonight,” she said. “Tonight may continue always if you—” She shook her head hopelessly. “I can't help you, Larry. You are too badly frightened.”

She seemed about to go on, but then, concealing her face from his gaze, she turned and walked away, a small, erect figure in flight from the directness of her own words.

He watched her go with a growing sense of astonishment, but he made no move to follow her. And then, because there was nothing else to do, he turned back into the room and closed the door. The dry snap of the catch echoed through the room sharply. Crossing to the dressing table, he sat

down and rested his head in his hands. He tried to turn his mind hopefully to the job ahead.

And yet what Lisa had said was true; he was frightened. His success in the theatre had been hard won, a hazardous journey into a desperate world of barred doors and hostile human deities in whose cold, impersonal eyes was the constant admonition that Mr. Laurence Richards, for all his remarkable talent and ambition, was hardly irreplaceable. His arrival at the top had not been a triumphant emergence onto a secure plateau, but a hesitant ascent to a precarious summit with a straight-down view of the depths that awaited him if he should slip. And now, after four years of illness, it was like starting all over again. Perhaps, he thought, there was an end of courage; perhaps it could be used up like the other, tangible commodities of this world.

Wearily, he opened his eyes. Scanning the articles of makeup before him, he derived from their precise, familiar arrangement on the table an oblique sense of reassurance. He reached for a brush and glanced up into the mirror. His hand froze.

The boy stood directly behind him, a pale, slack figure in a cheap gray suit. He wore no necktie, and one hand was pressed deep into the pocket of his jacket. His gaze rose to meet Larry's in the mirror, but seemed to dwell on some other image, some inner equation that could not be readily solved. Stung with surprise, Larry turned abruptly in his chair.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded. The continued withdrawal in the young face made him speak more sharply. "What do you want?"

The boy's gaze remained steady. His lips moved, as though to smile, then fell again into stillness.

"I think you had better leave," Larry said uneasily. "I—"

The boy frowned. His eyes became shadowed. Larry felt a queasy tightening at the back of his neck.

"You have exactly three seconds to clear out of here."

The boy shook his head. "I've been waiting all afternoon," he murmured. His tone was soft, noncommittal. "I've been hiding."

Larry placed a hand flatly on the dressing table and felt a sudden dampness in the palm. Ignoring an inner warning to remain still, he stood up.

In anticipation, the boy moved instantly forward. At the same time, his hand darted from his pocket. Larry stopped short, gaping down with

shocked disbelief at a small, gleaming automatic. He drew in a quick, shallow breath.

“What are you doing with that?” he blurted. The boy looked up at him, his eyes more keenly focused, more sly. “My wallet is in the drawer, there. There isn’t much—”

The boy wasn’t listening. He looked slowly from the gun to Larry, as though absorbed in some delicate relationship between the two devined only by himself. “Mr. Richards,” he murmured softly. “Mr. Laurence Richards.”

“I—” Larry stopped. Studying the boy’s face more closely, memory stirred. He was the young actor from the auditions. Remembering, he heard again the boy’s desperate plea echoing shrilly through the shadowed alleyway. He heard his own laughter and saw the young face contort with deadly hatred. In an agony of embarrassment and self-recognition, he had spoken, he had said something.

“Young man,” he had said, “You’ll never convince anyone that way. You sound like a fictional character.”

It had been an abortive attempt at lightness, aimed more at himself, really, than the boy, but the boy couldn’t have understood that. Hopelessly, Larry had turned and walked away, leaving the boy behind, alone and mute in that narrow, littered arena of humiliation and failure.

“Am I convincing now, Mr. Richards?” the boy asked suddenly. “I’d hate to waste your time.”

Larry’s gaze returned swiftly to the gun. There was no use trying to explain; the boy would never believe him now. “You’d better forget this and leave,” he said. “If I just yell—”

“If you do,” the boy said, “I might kill you.”

Larry’s mind recoiled sharply from the word. “I—I’ve got a show to do,” he said foolishly. He took a step backward and collided with the chair. “You’re insane.”

The boy nodded. “Maybe,” he said. “Maybe you get kind of crazy when people laugh at you and treat you like nothing.” His pale eyes narrowed. “Have you got time to listen to me, Mr. Richards? I’m not very important.”

Larry caught a fleeting glimpse of himself in the mirror and put a hand to his glistening brow. He felt a quick rise of panic. Where the devil was everybody?

“What are you going to do?” he asked.

The boy shrugged. “Maybe nothing, Mr. Richards. Maybe you could rush me, and I wouldn’t do a thing.” He smiled at Larry’s uncertainty. “I honestly don’t know. Do you?”

“If this is supposed to be a joke—”

“You owe me a laugh, Mr. Richards. You had one on me.”

“I’ve got a show to do.”

“Sure, I know.”

They both turned as a knock sounded briskly at the door. “Five minutes, Mr. Richards!” a voice called. “Places!” There was a pause, then the sound of retreating footsteps. Larry started forward, but checked himself.

The boy nodded, smiling. “I guess you’d better go do your show, Mr. Richards.”

“Go?” Larry looked up hopefully.

“Sure. Go on.”

“Then, you—?”

“Oh, I’m going along with you.” Lowering the gun into his pocket, he motioned toward the door. “Come on, Mr. Richards.”

Larry wet his lips. The metallic taste of fear, sharp in his mouth, gave rise to a sudden wave of nausea. With a numbing sense of unreality, he moved forward to the door.

When they entered the studio, it was a dark hive of activity. Stage hands, actors, technicians, moved in all directions, intent, concentrated. Larry and the boy were just another part of the moving pattern as they crossed to the more densely shadowed area at the back of the set. Larry’s gaze darted to the chair beside the set which had been Lisa’s during rehearsals. It was empty. He turned back, desperately.

“What do you want?” he begged. “If—”

The door of the set jerked suddenly open, and the floor manager, a solemn, shirt-sleeved young man wearing a throat mike, looked out in a dazzling, diagonal fall of light.

“Luck, Mr. Richards,” he nodded gravely. His gaze moved in a questioning, sidelong glance at the boy. Larry stared back at him dumbly, lost in a sea of indecision.

“I’m a friend of Larry’s,” the boy said easily.

The floor manager looked back at Larry, his expression stormy. “This is your responsibility, not mine, Mr. Richards,” he said shortly. “Keep him out of the way.” He stepped back inside and slammed the door. “Places,

everybody!” he yelled.

Larry swung about, his heart pounding. “Get out of here!” he rasped. “If you don’t—” A threatening move from the boy stopped him.

Footsteps approached rapidly from behind, and Edith Gates, Larry’s leading lady, took her place beside the door. She was a tall, handsome girl, an intelligent actress. Straightening her skirt, she cast Larry a hurried glance.

“Luck, Mr. Richards,” she said.

Larry and the boy exchanged glances. “Good luck,” Larry said tiredly.

The boy smiled. “Places, Mr. Richards,” he murmured.

Entering the set, the lights burst upon Larry’s vision in a blinding, white explosion. He stood for a moment, dazed. Hazily, the floor manager appeared beside one of the cameras.

“Two minutes!” he yelled.

Larry stared, his thoughts in chaos, his head throbbing. The lights were a solid, encompassing wall. The boy could be anywhere, watching, waiting...

“One minute!” the floor manager waved to him. “You open over at the desk, Mr. Richards!” He raised his hand and started calling off the seconds.

Incredulously, Larry crossed to the desk. His mind groped desperately for reality, for something—A hush fell over the studio.

A monitor, a greenish, distorted square in the outer dimness, glowed blankly and then, in a blare of music, came alive with the titles. Larry stared, blinking, and his senses were assaulted by the noise and flash of a jingling, jangling commercial cartoon. He looked away wildly only to see the floor manager wave violently for his attention. The commercial ended, and the floor manager cut his hand downward. Larry felt an inner cringing as Camera One bore down on him from the left, its red eye glowing brightly.

The director, his eyes fastened hotly on the control booth’s preview monitors, adjusted his headset and lowered his mouth to the mike. These last twenty minutes, since the opening of the show, had been a living, galloping nightmare.

“He’s dropped four minutes!” he said sharply. “Signal him!”

Down in the studio, the floor manager looked up frantically. “I have,” he whispered back through his throat mike. “He’s frozen. He doesn’t even see me.”

“Keep the idiot cards on him if you have to carry them onto the set.”

“What do you think I’m doing?”

The director looked back at the monitors and leaned sharply forward. In the action on the screen, Edith Gates had crossed up to the door to make an exit. According to the blocking, she was to hold there as the camera moved up to her, look back at Larry and then go out. Before the camera had even begun to move, Larry had rushed into the scene and, incomprehensibly, gripped the actress’ arm.

“Just a minute,” his voice said urgently over the speaker. “I want you to deliver something.”

The director stared, his blunt young features tight with dismay. In the scene, Larry crossed to the desk, took up a pencil and pad and scribbled a hasty note. Finished, he returned to Edith and pressed it into her hand.

“Deliver this instantly,” he said.

“Judas!” the director exploded, “he’s rewriting the script!”

His gaze, leaving the monitor, followed Edith as she made her exit. Down below, the actress emerged from the set, closed the door and stood for a moment in angry contemplation. Glancing down at the note in her hand, she squeezed it into a tight, hard ball and hurled it into the shadows. The director whistled softly.

“Edith’s ready to kill him.”

“If she doesn’t,” the floor manager whispered back, “somebody else probably will...”

At the break for the middle commercial, Larry, certain now that his effort to summon help through Edith had failed, made his way dazedly from the set. He was barely through the door when a hand gripped his shoulder and spun him around. With a muffled cry of alarm, he looked up into the intent face of his dresser. It came back to him that in the three minute interval he was to make a swiftly-timed costume change. Still, he tried to pull away. In his mind, possibility had become certain knowledge; the boy was going to kill him on camera, during the performance.

“Don’t—”

Unheeding, the dresser stripped off his coat and hurled it aside. At the same time, he reached for Larry’s tie.

Larry’s gaze scanned the back of the set. He gripped the dresser’s arm. “He’s going to kill me,” he whispered. “He’s—”

The dresser brusquely dislodged his hand and glanced toward the control booth. "If he doesn't," he said absently, "the producer probably will."

"Listen to me!" Larry pleaded. "I'm—"

He drew in a quick breath. The boy, appearing suddenly at the corner of the set, moved smilingly forward. Larry felt his knees begin to buckle.

"Hold still," the dresser commanded.

After a few shambling steps the boy stopped, watching, smiling. Larry looked away from him. The dresser deftly slipped a fresh tie under his collar and knotted it. Lifting a new coat onto his shoulders, he buttoned it and slapped his shoulder.

"All set," he said.

Someone opened the door. "Places, Mr. Richards! Thirty seconds!"

Larry turned. A hand was waving him imperatively forward. He started toward it, then stopped. In turning, he had caught a glimpse of Lisa standing at the side of the set. He started in her direction, but the hand reached out and pulled him back. "Places!"

The light struck his eyes again, and the vision of Lisa vanished.

The director, glancing up from the monitors, looked out across the set and put his hand quickly to his earphones. The show had now reached its final quarter.

"Who's that kid down there?" he snapped. "Get him out, he keeps edging into the light."

"A guest of Mr. Richards, the noted actor," the floor manager whispered tersely. "He came in with him."

The director sighed with weary defeat. "Okay," he said, "leave him be. Let's not offend the noted actor."

Edith Gates, her nerves taut, faced Camera One and cheated a glance in Larry's direction. She had worked other television shows and she had seen much of camera fright. She had never, however, seen anything like the demoralizing terror that had gripped Larry Richards. For a man with his background and reputation his behavior, in her humble opinion, was unforgivable.

"For myself," she said, speaking the lines of the play, "I won't mind too much staying behind..."

She spoke, less aware of what she was saying than of Larry hovering behind her, practically in her shadow. That was his latest—crowding. She felt, almost, that he was using her as a protective shield. Finishing her

speech, she turned and faced him.

Trying not to show it, she felt a flicker of alarm. Larry was beside her, hand outstretched, and for one brief instant she had the panicky sensation that he was going to grab her. Her eyes met his and some communication passed between them, too swiftly, though, for her comprehension. Then Larry let his hand fall away. Forcing a smile, she returned to character and crossed up to the desk.

She felt oddly shaken, as though having passed through some undefined crisis. If she wasn't wrong, in that last moment, just when he had withdrawn his hand, Larry's expression had shown a kind of relief. Or perhaps resignation. She shrugged it off; the important thing was the play, to get through somehow to the end of it.

Larry moved down and out of camera range as Peter Bliss, the English character actor entered upstage for his scene with Edith. Whatever happened now, he thought, he would at least know that he was incapable of risking someone else's life to save his own. In relinquishing his plan to use Edith as a shield for escape, he had placed himself somehow beyond the grip of terror. There were only a few minutes left; if anything was going to happen, it would have to happen soon and swiftly. He accepted this now almost with a sense of tranquility.

As Edith and Peter finished their scene he moved back into range. They exited, and he was alone before the cameras. There remained only the final scene, the business at the desk with the legal papers and the concluding telephone monologue. That left the boy three minutes in which to make his move. With an increasing sense of detachment, Larry crossed up to the table and stepped carefully into position.

He took up the sheaf of legal papers, studied them for a moment, then laid them aside. That done, he picked up the telephone. He marvelled at the sudden clarity of his thoughts, the sudden understanding that this moment was wholly of his own making. There was not an end to courage, it could not be used up; there was only the submission to fear. If he had not permitted his vision to be clouded by the astigmatism of apprehension and doubt, this moment could never have come. If he had only clung to the staunch standard of Lisa's strength and love—Reaching down, he dialed the number of the apartment that had been his and Lisa's home. Facing Camera Three, as it came toward him, he started the monologue.

With the first words, he saw the boy move into the light at the far side of

the set. He gripped the phone so tightly it seemed he would crush it, but he forced himself to continue speaking. Knowing bleakly that what was about to happen would not matter too deeply to anyone except Lisa, he lifted his face to the camera for the final close-up. He paused. There was a moment of hushed stillness. And then it happened.

It began with small, staccato jets of action that swiftly combined into a bursting fountainhead of wild confusion. Lisa appeared abruptly from the darkness, hurrying toward the boy. The boy whirled and drew the gun from his pocket. The two of them came together, and the gun glinted small, stabbing reflections of light as they struggled for its possession. Larry, guided suddenly by instinct, moved. Swinging away from the camera, he hurled the telephone with all his strength and saw it strike the boy solidly at the point of the shoulder. The boy lurched and, dragging Lisa with him, disappeared into the outer darkness. Above them, a light on a tall metal standard tottered crazily and fell. The telephone crashed to the floor, and there was a thunderous explosion.

Running footsteps converged from all directions. Someone shouted, "Cut the mikes!" A door slammed, and there was more yelling. The monitor went blank, then came instantly alive again with the jibbering cartoon. Larry, his heart pounding, reached out blindly for the desk. The lights danced before his eyes, and he knew vaguely that he was falling....

As Lisa entered, he rose, steadying himself against the edge of the table.

"It's all right," he said, anxious to reassure her. "I'm fine." His hand gripped the edge of the table more tightly. "I thought he had hurt you, Lisa."

She shook her head. "No," she said. "It was the light that made the explosion. I only ran after him, Larry, because I saw him step into the light. I should have known sooner—The gun was empty, Larry."

For a moment he was almost close to laughter. "Did you talk to him?" he asked.

"Only for a moment, before the police came. Larry—"

"He's only a kid," Larry said. "Sick, half-starved. He had his reasons." He closed his eyes for a moment. His thoughts which had been so clear before were vague and jumbled. "If I tried—I think I could help him." He looked up at her slowly. "You were right, Lisa. I was afraid. I—"

"Larry," she said, "please, let me tell you—Bert Fielding called. It was announced, what happened, on the air—"

He held out his hand, as though to stop her. "It doesn't matter," he said.

“Yes, Larry,” she insisted, “yes, it does. I spoke to him myself. He said that if you could be at the theatre tomorrow to sign the contract, he wants you for the part. He said he didn’t know how you got through it at all, but if you could he would trust you with anything. Larry...”

For a long moment, they simply stood there. The ordeal, tonight’s ordeal, the ordeal of the last four years, was finally over, and they had survived. Just for now, that was all that mattered. Then Larry moved forward, and she was suddenly in his arms. He held her close to him, tightly, knowing that the answer to their survival was here in this closeness, in the bond that held them together, knowing that he could never be afraid again.

“Lisa—” he whispered.

He started to speak, to say more, but there was a knock at the door, and the time for words was gone. She looked up at him and smiled. Returning her smile, he reached down for her hand. Their eyes clung for a moment longer, and when the knock sounded again, they went together to answer it.

FIRST, THE EGG

All because no one would take Orvil's egg seriously, the world was in for quite a shock one of these days.

Of course, not even Orvil himself knew exactly where the egg came from. He had been buried in an avalanche somewhere up around the North Pole at the time and when he'd finally dug himself and the egg out of the snow and found his way back to Sitka, he wasn't quite sure of where he'd been.

When, after a very rough flight back to the United States, he arrived at the Featherstone Foundation, Orvil felt that his trials and tribulations were over. But he was wrong. Not one single member of the staff remembered anything about giving him the grant and sending him north in the first place. Finally, he wound up in a small office on the third floor, facing a gentle-eyed lady with gray hair and a nice smile. Twisting his long legs nervously around the legs of his chair, he told her the whole thing. As he concluded the narrative, the woman nodded patiently.

"I see," she said. "Can't you even remember the name on the project check?"

"It was some sort of French name," Orvil said slowly. "I remember that the man was very small and wore pince-nez glasses."

"Oh, of course!" the woman cried. "Well, that explains the whole thing! Poor Mr. Tuteur. He was confined—shortly after you departed, apparently. He did many curious things."

In essence, that concluded the interview. The Foundation didn't pay Orvil the bonus he'd expected, and they flatly refused to finance another one-man expedition in the opposite direction to the South Pole. Nevertheless, Orvil was permitted, not to say urged, to keep the egg all for himself.

"Those dinosaur things are very nice, I'm sure," the gray-haired lady said pleasantly, "but people keep bringing them in all the time, and we

really haven't much use for another one."

That settled the matter; Orvil suddenly found himself only slightly less out in the cold than he had been at the North Pole. He was unemployed, he was broke and he was in New York—a combination that rendered his long, sensitive face even sadder than usual. He returned to his drab room at the hotel, sat down on the edge of his iron-posted bed and stared morosely at the crate in which he had tenderly housed the egg. Heaven knows what he might have done next if, just then, a knock hadn't sounded at the door. Orvil answered it to find a dark, sharp-eyed man in a plum-colored suit looking up at him.

"Orvil Sleeper?" the man asked eagerly.

"That's right," Orvil said. "What do you want?"

"I write things," the man said. "I was down at the Featherstone Foundation today doing some research for an Arctic epic, and this dame told me you just pulled in from up that way."

"I was up north," Orvil admitted gloomily.

"Far north?" the man asked.

Orvil nodded. "So far north that I may have really been headed south again when the avalanche hit me. I should have kept on going, I guess."

"Avalanche!" the dark man cried, edging through the door and into the room. "Hey, that's great! Dramatic stuff! Tell me all about it."

Orvil watched bewilderedly as the man sat down in a chair and motioned him back toward the bed. He closed the door.

"Well," he said, "if you really want to hear about it..."

So, for the second time that day, Orvil recited the entire history of his ill-fated trip to the north country. He went clear through, from the beginning to the end. "So you see," he concluded apologetically, "I'm not quite sure exactly where I was. Just north, that's all."

"Kid," the dark man said happily, leaning forward and tapping Orvil's knee with a finger, "it doesn't make any difference. It will make a hell of a fabulous picture for Hollywood. It's got everything! An avalanche! Man against the elements! The works! They'll pay a mint for a true to life experience like this. Of course I don't know about this egg routine. It sounds kind of crazy to have a guy go through all that and come out with nothing but an egg. Maybe we could switch it to a lost treasure."

"It was an egg," Orvil said mildly. He got up and started toward the crate. "Would you like to see it? It's very interesting to look at."

“Not now, baby,” the man said quickly, “not now.”

“It’s very large,” Orvil offered.

“Some other time, lover,” the man said warmly and handed Orvil a large paper. “Just sign on the line at the bottom and we’re in business. It’s the usual release.”

“Well, all right,” Orvil said agreeably, “only don’t you want me to write it all out or something?”

“I’m doing that myself already,” the man said, watching closely as Orvil signed the paper. “I’m writing in my head at this very minute! Don’t worry about a thing, sweetheart, you’ll get yours.”

Orvil finished signing and handed back the paper. “I’m sure this is very nice of you—uh—dear,” he said, not wanting to be outdone in urbanity. “When will I hear from you again?”

“Sooner than you think, son,” the man said, “sooner than you think. I know a producer who’s just dying for this yarn. He’s got an Eskimo under contract.”

A mere two weeks later Orvil found himself in Hollywood.

The man in the plum-colored suit, it turned out, was a screen writer of some note named Sid Kelp. Sid had not only sold Orvil’s personal experience to Pacific Pictures for a feature film but had managed to get Orvil a job on the picture as technical adviser. Pacific Pictures found Orvil a bungalow cottage at the foot of the Hollywood Hills, and the second day he was there Sid pulled up at the curb in a tomato-colored convertible to drive him to work.

“Look, Sid,” Orvil said as they pulled away into the street, “I don’t think I quite understand what a technical adviser is supposed to do.”

“It’s easy, pal,” Sid said airily. “All you have to do is read the script and say it’s great. Everytime they ask you if they’re doing something right, nod your head vigorously up and down. These boys out here work best with encouragement.”

“Suppose I see something that’s wrong?” Orvil asked.

“Look the other way,” Sid said blandly. “Stare at the starlets.”

At the studio Orvil was shown to a sunny cubicle at the end of a second-story corridor. It contained a desk, two chairs and a lounge. Orvil sat down at the desk and waited. Presently a demure-looking brunette wearing a very tight sweater and a very loose skirt arrived to present him with a thick manuscript entitled *Journey Afar*.

When the brunette had gone, Orvil began to read. He read without interruption for an hour and a half, then rose and made a small sound of bewilderment. He walked down the hall until he found a messenger boy and asked him the way to Sid Kelp's office.

Orvil found Sid sitting with his feet up on the desk, eating an apple and staring bemusedly at the ceiling. He glanced around as Orvil entered.

"Hi, sweetheart!" he said genially. "Just dreaming up a new epic about the American Indians. Come on in and smoke a peace pipe."

Orvil carefully closed the door. "I just read the script, Sid," he said.

"Great!" Sid said. "I guess you noticed a few changes. How'd you like it?"

"Well, it's all right, I guess," Orvil said, "but—well, maybe they gave me the wrong story. I can't find anything that happened to me in it at all."

"Oh, didn't I tell you?" Sid said. "The big thing out here these days is technicolor. Everything is technicolor. The American public loves the stuff. And anyone knows that you can't get any color value out of a background of solid white snow. So we just made a little switch and changed the locale to the South Seas, which is a riot of color. Essentially, it's still the same story."

"But I've never seen a bamboo raft in my life," Orvil said. "I made the whole trip by dog sled."

"Be reasonable, kid," Sid said. "You can't cross the Pacific Ocean in a dog sled."

"And it was whale blubber the natives gave me, not coconut juice."

"You're fighting me, kid," Sid said. "Just relax and let it go. Release those nervous tensions." He took his feet off the desk and leaned forward. "What do you know about American Indians?"

"Nothing at all, Sid," Orvil said and left.

Orvil was troubled; the studio had bought a true to life experience and that was what they deserved to have. In Sid's script even the egg had been transformed into a beautiful girl who had been shipwrecked on an island as an infant. Orvil decided that it was only his duty to seek out Mr. Grossbeck, the producer of the picture, and explain to him what had happened.

It was three days before Orvil finally got an appointment. On the day of the interview, he brought his egg to the studio, in the hope that its presence would help him make his point clear to the producer. After a prolonged delay in the outer office, he was ushered into Mr. Grossbeck's owlish aura

by a sallow young assistant. Mr. Grossbeck greeted him with a blank stare.

“What’s on your mind, Sleeper?” he said. “Make it fast.”

“Sleeper,” Orvil said. “Orvil Sleeper.” As quickly as he could, holding the egg gingerly on his lap, he tried to explain about the script. He had only just begun, when Mr. Grossbeck, with a pained expression, looked around at the assistant.

“What’s with this creep, Dave?” he asked. “We ain’t doing any comedies this season, are we? Besides, it ain’t even funny, this bit with the egg. Get him outa here.” He looked around at Orvil and pointed to the egg. “And get that phoney prop back to the property department.”

So it was that another Golden Moment arrived only to develop a bad coat of tarnish. Before he quite knew how it had happened, Orvil found himself and his egg summarily banished to the dim reaches of a large, barnlike structure in the company of a lot of dusty curiosities.

After a moment of utter bewilderment, he sat down on a carved chest and wedged his narrow chin moodily into his hands. He almost wished he had stayed lost at the North Pole or, going still further back, that he had stayed home on the farm in Nebraska and never read *National Geographic*.

It was while Orvil was thinking these dark thoughts, looking long, lank and lonely, that a small, vital girl with dark, close-cropped hair, lovely soft brown eyes and an exclamatory figure appeared in the doorway. She strode forward into the dimness, then looked in his direction and stopped.

The girl in question was Meg Quimby. She was research assistant on another technicolor masterpiece called *Tasmanian Tempest* and she had come to the property department in search of a Tasmanian prayer rug. Despite her youth, she had been around Hollywood long enough to know the ropes.

As a child, however, Meg had spent most of her time playing with dolls and small wooly animals, and it was only natural that she had developed into the type who just naturally likes to have something helpless around to cuddle. Experience, though, had proved to her that around the studios this could be a dangerous impulse and she usually did her best to repress it. Now, however, as her eyes adjusted to the dimness and she saw Orvil sitting there with that bleak, unloved look on his thin, sad pan, the old yen rose up in her shapely bosom in an almost engulfing tide. She moved toward him, tentatively.

“Gee whiz, fella,” she said, “what’s the matter?”

Orvil raised his head only slightly. "Huh?" he said.

"What happened?" Meg asked. "Can I bandage something?"

Orvil shook his head. "It doesn't matter," he murmured. However, as Meg approached, he automatically moved over on the chest to make room for her. "Nothing matters around here, I guess."

"Look, son," Meg said softly, "you're the first male I've seen around here who looks like he might actually be some mother's son. Of course I might be wrong, but I'd still like to hear your story. What are you doing down here in the dark?"

Orvil looked up into her brown eyes and sighed deeply. "It's a long story," he warned.

"That's fine," Meg said and sat down beside him. "Tell me."

Orvil began to talk. He told her everything he had planned to tell to Mr. Grossbeck, then went on to his banishment to the property department.

"I guess they just don't want things done right around here," he concluded sadly.

Meg patted his hand. "You mustn't let it get you down," she said. "Everything turns out backwards out here. Look at the pictures they make."

"Well, anyway," Orvil said, "you're very nice to take an interest. It makes you feel better to get it off your chest to someone. Would you like to see my egg?"

"Oh, could I?" Meg cried delightedly. "That would be wonderful!"

Just then, however, a boy with a very long neck and a bad complexion stuck his head in the door.

"Hey, Meg!" he yelled. "How about that rug? The mad genius is tearing his hair out."

"Oh, golly!" Meg cried, jumping up. "I completely forgot!" She turned regretfully to Orvil. "Maybe you could show it to me some other time."

"Sure," Orvil said quickly. And before he knew what he was doing he made his first request for a date. "How about tonight? Maybe we could eat dinner together. I'll pay."

For a moment Meg's eyes searched his face. Then she smiled. "It's a date," she said. "I'll meet you outside the studio gate when I get off work." And with the boy following after her, she disappeared into the gloom.

At Meg's suggestion they had dinner at a small, inexpensive restaurant on Sunset Boulevard. On the occasion of his first evening out with a girl, Orvil

left the egg behind, since it didn't seem quite right to bring it along. Nevertheless, he talked about the egg; he told Meg minutely how he had hacked it free from a block of ice attached to an ice floe which was going south at the time.

"I also found a lot of bones and things, too," he told her, "but I lost them in the avalanche. The egg was the important thing."

Meg, who had listened to all this with an open-mouthed fascination which Orvil couldn't help but admire, sighed tremulously.

"For a guy with sad eyes," she said, "you certainly do get around."

"Well, maybe I'm kind of just bragging myself up a little," Orvil admitted. "I guess you're just about the first person who's ever really listened to me—except Mr. Tuteur. And they locked him up."

"Poor Mr. Tuteur," Meg murmured breathlessly.

After that, Orvil and Meg were a twosome. Alternately they had dinner at Meg's apartment and at the little restaurant. Occasionally, they went to the movies, but mostly they just sat and talked, and Orvil at last got to say a lot of the things he had always wanted to say to someone.

During the day, Orvil reported to the studio and sat quietly in his second-story cubicle, because Meg told him it was the thing to do. He took his egg home to the cottage and left it in the kitchen, since it was evident that Pacific Pictures was not seriously interested in eggs, even prehistoric ones.

As time passed, a new contentment came to Orvil. His friendship with Meg made up for all the disappointments of the past. At the end of the third week it was clear to him that this girl with the black hair and the enraptured brown eyes had become his whole reason for living. That night at the restaurant, taking his courage tremblingly in his hand, he blurted out a proposal.

"Maybe it's because you're so good about listening to me, Meg," he said, "but I love you, and I think we should get married."

Meg smiled radiantly and put her hand on his. "That's what I've been listening for," she said, and then, right there in the restaurant, she leaned across the table and kissed him on the forehead. "Bless your heart, Orvil."

The rest of the evening seemed aglitter with magic, and for the first time since they had met Orvil found that he had nothing to say to her. After dinner, they strolled the sidewalk, hand in hand, turning occasionally to smile at each other with a sort of choked-up happiness. When they reached Meg's apartment house, Orvil kissed her hesitantly on the lips.

“Gosh,” Meg sighed, “that’s just the way I’ve always wanted to be kissed. Who’d have thought it would happen in Hollywood?”

“I guess I’m not very experienced,” Orvil said apologetically.

“You will be,” Meg said and went inside.

At that moment it was inconceivable that any tragedy could possibly befall them.

Orvil returned to the cottage in a transport of joy. He had Meg, he had a job—of sorts—and he had the egg. Life had nothing more to offer. Orvil let himself in the door and made his way directly to the kitchen. In this moment of almost supreme happiness, he wanted to be with his cherished trophy. He switched on the light, gazed lovingly downward and, then, uttered a strangled cry of horror. The egg, lying in its crate next to the stove, had been smashed into mere fragments.

For a moment Orvil simply could not believe it; it was beyond belief that this should happen to him just when life was so full.

He found his way blindly to the kitchen table and collapsed into a chair. He couldn’t imagine what had happened to the egg. It fleetingly crossed his mind that it could be mended, but he knew it would never be the same. He stared dully into space.

He was still sitting there when the furtive noise first sounded in the bedroom. He sat up sharply and cocked an ear in that direction. The noise, soft and scraping, came again. He stood up with resolution and started warily toward the door. If the vandal who had done this thing to him were still in the house, he knew what to do about it.

He crept into the darkened hallway and up to the bedroom door. There he paused, listening. The sound came again. Orvil moved decisively. All in one swift, sure movement, he leaped into the room and switched on the light.

“So!” he cried.

Feet braced, fists fixed at ready, he stood inside the doorway and looked bewilderedly around the room. There was nothing. For a moment silence reigned, then the scraping sounded again. Orvil’s eyes lowered suspiciously to the bed.

He approached the bed warily, then, dropping to his knees, he quickly lifted the spread and looked underneath. He started with surprise. He found himself confronted by a small, freakish-looking creature who stared back at him with large worried eyes.

At first glance the animal somewhat resembled a large beaver that had somehow gotten its neck stretched. Its head was small; its brown, pear-shaped body tapered off at the bottom into a sort of abbreviated paddle tail.

For a moment Orvil doubted his senses; it was not possible that this curious animal, quavering before him, was what he knew it must be. The small, angling forefeet, the larger hindfeet that supported the awkward body in an upright position, the long neck and the hopefully grinning mouth—all these characteristics pointed to but one thing—the egg had not broken, but hatched, and the pathetic, frightened-eyed thing blinking at him from under the bed was the first living dinosaur the world had known for hundreds of centuries!

Sitting back on his haunches, Orvil checked his pulse and closed his eyes and touched the end of his nose with the tip of his forefinger. Everything was normal. When he opened his eyes again the animal was still there. It was holding its forepaws up defensively in front of its face.

Tentatively, Orvil extended a hand to the creature, but the poor thing only flattened itself into a corner and made a small hissing noise that was mindful of a terrified teakettle.

Orvil didn't know quite what to do. He had to find a way to gain the dinosaur's confidence and coax it from beneath the bed. Deciding that most young things were always hungry, he went to the kitchen and brought back a bowl of milk. He put it on the floor at the side of the bed.

The dinosaur emerged slowly, sticking its head out from beneath the spread, then inching forward a bit at a time. When finally it reached the milk it siphoned the bowl dry with a single gulp. Then it settled back and licked its paws. It looked up at Orvil with its wide-jawed grin and hissed with unmistakable gratitude. Orvil sat down limply on the edge of the bed, too overwhelmed to do anything else for the moment.

As a student of *National Geographic*, Orvil knew perfectly well that what had happened was impossible, but still it *had* happened, and after all who really knew which came first, the dinosaur or the egg? Perhaps this was nature's way of starting a whole new race of dinosaurs. He swung around and grabbed up the telephone from the night stand. He dialed Meg's number and presently got an answer.

"Yes?" Meg drawled sleepily, "who is it, please?"

"Meg!" Orvil cried, "guess what happened! The egg—you know, the egg—it's hatched! It's a dinosaur!"

“You’re sweet to call and say so, dear,” Meg said faintly. “I love you, too.” And she hung up.

Orvil put the receiver resignedly back in the cradle; evidently Meg was not at her best when asleep. He felt something against the leg of his trousers and looked down to find the dinosaur nuzzling him with what appeared to be warm affection. He reached down and scratched its head, and it hissed contentedly.

It was around nine o’clock in the morning when Orvil, having called all night, finally reached Mr. Martin Grossbeck.

“Orvil Sleeper?” Mr. Grossbeck said irritably. “Aren’t you the brain who wrote this fracas we’re trying to film?”

“I didn’t write it, Mr. Grossbeck,” Orvil said. “I’m the fellow who went up north, you know, and brought back the egg...”

“Did you ever!” Mr. Grossbeck said nastily. “You shoulda left it in the frozen north where it at least wouldn’t stink so bad.”

“But, Mr. Grossbeck!” Orvil said imperatively. “Listen! A terrific thing has happened. You can make a fortune with your picture no matter how bad it is. All you have to do is change a few things back the way they were.” He took a deep breath. “The egg hatched last night, Mr. Grossbeck, and you can believe it or not but I’ve got a dinosaur right here in my bedroom this morning!” He waited for a response, but there was none. “Are you surprised, Mr. Grossbeck?”

In the moment of silence that ensued, Mr. Grossbeck hung up very quietly.

“Mr. Grossbeck!” Orvil cried. “Mr. Grossbeck!” Realizing it was hopeless, he put the phone back. Instantly it rang and he snatched it up again. “Mr. Grossbeck?”

“Orvil?” Meg said. “Is that you, Orvil?”

“Meg!” Orvil cried elatedly.

“Why aren’t you at the studio, Orvil?” Meg asked. “Are you all right?”

“Yes, dear—sure! I’m wonderful! It’s just that—!”

“Did you call me last night, after you went home?” Meg broke in.

“Yes. I wanted to tell you—!”

“I thought you did. I guess I was asleep. Was there something you especially wanted to tell me, Orvil?”

“Yes, dear, yes! The most wonderful thing has happened. You’ll never believe it but—you know the egg—?”

“The big one you keep talking about?”

“Yes,” Orvil said, “that’s the one. Well, it’s done something fantastic! It’s hatched! It did it last night. I left the heat on in the kitchen and—well—it’s a dinosaur this morning!” There was a moment of silence as before with Mr. Grossbeck. “I know it sounds crazy, but—”

“Are you trying to be funny, Orvil?” Meg asked uncertainly. “You sound so serious.”

“I am serious!” Orvil cried. “It’s true. I’ve got a dinosaur. It’s asleep on my bed.” There was another pause.

“Do you feel very warm, Orvil?” Meg enquired, her voice curiously calm. “Do you notice that your face is flushed or broken out?”

“No, no!” Orvil protested. “You don’t understand!”

“You *did* say you had a dinosaur, didn’t you?”

“Yes, that’s right. It’s on my bed.”

“I’ll be right over,” Meg said quickly. “You just stay quiet until I get there and try not to think about anything.” She hung up.

Orvil turned back the corner of the spread at the foot of the bed and looked at the dinosaur which was sleeping quietly with its blunt muzzle between its paws. With this reassurance he picked up the phone again and dialed the number of the University of California. While he was waiting for the connection with the science department, he searched through the phone book for the numbers of the other universities and a couple of the leading newspapers.

Meg was the first to arrive. Orvil was waiting by the door when she rang the bell.

“Hello, dear!” he said brightly. He threw the door wide and kissed her lightly on the cheek. “Step inside!”

Meg’s dark eyes searched his face anxiously. “Has something happened to upset you, Orvil?” she asked.

“Not a thing,” Orvil said smugly. He led her inside the living room and closed the door. “Of course if you want to think I’m crazy, like everyone else does—”

“Oh, no, Orvil, I don’t—!” Meg said. “What do you mean, everyone else?”

“Never mind,” Orvil said. “Now, if you’d like to see for yourself—” Taking her arm, he led her to the bedroom, crossed to the bed and holding out one hand ceremoniously swept back the spread with the other. Watching

Meg's face, however, his hand suddenly wilted. He turned to the bed and his face blanched white. The dinosaur was not there.

"There's nothing there, Orvil," Meg said hauntedly.

"But there *is!*" Orvil said excitedly. "There *was!*"

Pulling a handkerchief from the front of her dress, Meg burst into tears and ran from the room. Orvil looked after her, his brow creased with distress. Then, hearing a faint hissing sound, he knelt down beside the bed and looked underneath. The dinosaur, trembling with fright, was crowded back against the wall.

"I should have thought," Orvil said, "you're a shy guy, aren't you?"

The dinosaur crept toward him and laid its head against his hand. The doorbell rang. After a moment's hesitation Orvil got to his feet and went out to the living room. Meg was quietly weeping into her handkerchief, but he didn't have time to do anything about it. He crossed to the door and threw it open. It was a sandy-haired gentleman in a tweed suit who identified himself as a professor of science from the University of California.

"Are you the gentleman with the dinosaur?" he asked. There was a sly, sardonic look in his eyes.

Orvil started to close the door but just then three other men appeared on the walk. As they approached the house they seemed faintly amused at something. Upon introduction, they proved also to be professors. Orvil waved them inside and addressed them in a composed manner. He announced that if they would just be seated he would run along and fetch his dinosaur. Meg looked up from her handkerchief.

"Oh, Orvil!" she wailed.

Orvil returned to the bedroom and knelt down beside the bed. He started to reach his hand underneath, then stopped. The space beneath the bed was starkly uninhabited. The dinosaur had disappeared again.

Orvil searched the room, first systematically, then frantically, but the dinosaur appeared to have vanished utterly. He was standing bewilderedly in the center of the room when the first one of the professors stuck his head through the door.

"Having difficulty with the beast, Mr. Sleeper?" he enquired dryly.

"I can't seem to find it," Orvil said. "It was right here just a moment ago."

"I see," the scientist said. "Well, my colleagues and I have to run along now. Perhaps later, when you've located your dinosaur again, you'll drop us

a note.”

“But you can’t go yet!” Orvil cried, following the man back to the living room and out the front door where the others had already started down the walk. “I can show you the egg it hatched from! Please come back!”

Undeterred, the scientists continued out to the sidewalk and their cars. Orvil watched them drive away and then went back inside the house. Meg looked up at him with reddened eyes.

“Oh, Orvil!” she whimpered.

“Stop saying that!” Orvil said, beginning to feel a bit put out. “I’m not crazy! You just wait till the newspaper men get here!”

Meg leaped from her chair. “Newspaper men!” she shrieked. She clutched at his sleeve. “Oh, no, you mustn’t let them in, Orvil! It’s bad enough already!”

“Excuse me,” Orvil said loftily, setting himself free from her grasp. “I have to locate my dinosaur.”

The dinosaur, when Orvil found it, was hiding behind its old packing crate in the kitchen. Orvil put out his hand and it came to him instantly.

“Meg!” Orvil called. “Come look, I’ve found it!”

“*Please*, Orvil!” Meg wailed from the living room. “I don’t think I can stand any more of this! If I just didn’t love you so desperately—!”

The doorbell rang.

Orvil looked at the dinosaur uncertainly. It was trembling badly; apparently any strange sound threw the poor thing into a violent state of panic. The doorbell rang again. Orvil put the animal quickly inside the crate amongst the fragments of the egg and put the top on loosely enough to give it air. In the darkness it would feel hidden and safe. That done he hurried back to the living room.

Conveniently, the newsmen arrived almost in a body. There were seven of them all together, five reporters and two photographers, and Orvil had never seen so many hand-painted neckties all at one time in his life. They all yelled at him at once.

“Just a minute!” Orvil said, holding up his hand. “Just a minute, gentlemen!” Silence followed. “I must ask you to be very quiet. I know it may seem odd to you, but the dinosaur is extremely sensitive and easily frightened. Now, if you’ll just be perfectly quiet, I’ll get the animal and bring it in to you.” He turned away and started through the hall into the kitchen. There was a tug at his sleeve and he turned to find Meg beside him.

“Orvil!” she cried. “You mustn’t do this, dear, *please!* There isn’t any dinosaur, there just isn’t! It’s all in your imagination no matter how real it seems to you!”

“You’ll be sorry you said that,” Orvil said sternly. He stepped around her and into the kitchen.

“Please, Orvil!” Meg pleaded, following after him. “Think of me! Do you think a girl wants to marry a fellow who—who has *dinosaurs!*” She made a vague gesture with her hand. “Besides, how could one of those big enormous things even get into a little house like this?”

“If you had studied dinosaurs,” Orvil said frigidly, “you would have learned that they were all sizes. Some of them were no bigger than an ordinary house cat. And besides that—!”

Suddenly he stopped, staring down at the crate in hollow-eyed futility. The lid had been shoved aside and it was empty.

“Oh, no!” Orvil moaned.

“Please listen, dear,” Meg went on. “I know it must have been a shock when you found the egg broken. I know how proud you were of it. But you mustn’t retreat into unreality. There isn’t any dinosaur, Orvil!”

“There *is!*” Orvil said, suddenly shouting. “There *is* a dinosaur!”

As he spoke, however, his gaze moved across the room to the door that led out to the back yard and up the hillside. Here he stopped, filled with horror. The door was standing slightly ajar, open just enough to permit the outward passage of a small dinosaur. Like a dream-walker Orvil moved to the door and stared hauntedly out into the empty distance.

“It’s gone,” he whispered numbly. “It’s run away!”

Meg moved to his side and took his hand gently in hers. “Of course it’s gone, dear,” she said. “Why don’t you go out now and tell those men it was only a joke? Tell them it was a publicity stunt for the picture. For me, dear.”

Orvil turned to her slowly and for a moment he looked down into her anxious, searching eyes. Then he shook his head. “I will not!” he said and, turning, he fled out the back door, across the yard and up the slope of the hill.

It was nearly an hour later when Orvil returned. His face and hands were scratched and his clothing was torn, but he was empty handed. He felt even worse than he looked.

As he approached the back yard, Meg ran to meet him, great tears welling in her eyes.

“Now, do you believe me?” she cried. “Can’t you believe that it doesn’t exist? Say you do, Orvil! Please!”

Orvil started to answer her, but he held the words back as he saw the two white-uniformed men approaching them across the lawn, each from an opposite direction. He looked down into Meg’s tormented eyes and his gaze softened and grew merely sad. He sighed, as though with a great weariness.

“All right,” he said, “I believe you. I guess I just went off my nut for a little bit.”

“Oh, Orvil!” Meg cried and twined her arms around his neck.

With all that emotional momentum built up, Orvil and Meg were married just three days later. The ceremony took place in Carmel by the Sea, where they remained for their honeymoon and spent an idyllic week in a cottage surrounded by twisted cypress and the sound of the surf. There were moments when Orvil became preoccupied and pensive, but Meg understood and did not intrude. They followed developments mainly by watching the newspapers.

Actually the business about the dinosaur didn’t turn out badly. The reporters were pretty cutting to Orvil, but they still gave Mr. Grossbeck’s picture considerable mention, and the studio, in appreciation, called Orvil long distance to offer him a job in the publicity department. Really it was all for the best, and when Orvil and Meg returned to Orvil’s little cottage in Hollywood they hadn’t a serious worry in the world.

As a wedding present Meg had sent the egg out to be patched for Orvil and when it was delivered she gave it to him. He was tremendously touched. A tear came to his eye, and Meg, sensing a tender, private moment, left him alone.

For a time, Orvil sat holding the egg, then, putting it down, he got up and crossed slowly to the window that faced out on the back yard and the hillside. Wistfully, he turned his eyes to the distance.

Suddenly he straightened, alert to the last nerve. His eyes searched the yard rapidly and with growing joy. He had detected that a good deal of the green foliage had disappeared from the trees and shrubs. It appeared to have been chewed off—systematically and to a level about as high as a man’s shoulder. Orvil threw open the window and inclined his ear toward the hill.

Presently, after some moment, he was rewarded by a faint and far-away hissing. He stood there for a long time, just smiling quietly to himself.

Dinosaurs, Orvil was thinking, were notorious for growing very large

very swiftly. Shortly, it appeared, the dinosaur in the back yard was going to be so large that a lot of people would no longer be able to ignore it. It might, in fact, get so big that it would scare the hell out of practically everybody. His smile grew even wider, and he wondered what they would all have to say to him then...

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