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DETECTIVE BOOK MAGAZINE

By the author of "LAURA"
and "BEDELIA"

Vera Caspary

STRANGER THAN TRUTH

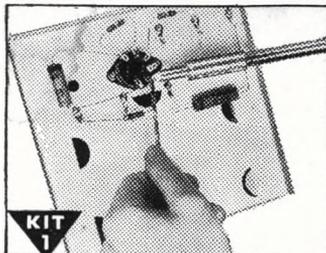
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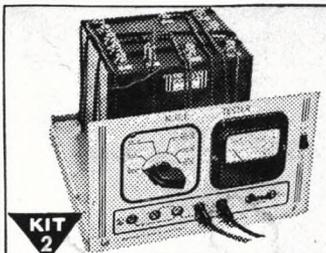
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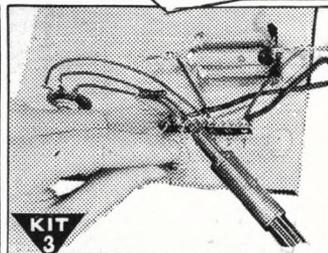
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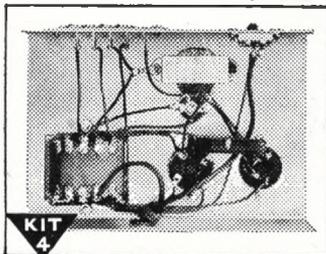
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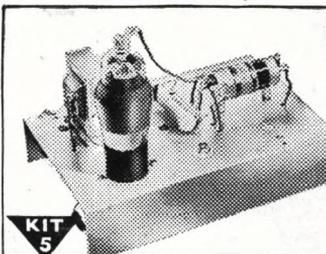
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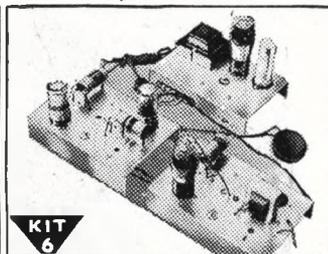
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In This Issue We Present . . .

**DETECTIVE BOOK MAGAZINE'S
\$2.50 BOOKLENGTH NOVEL**

STRANGER THAN TRUTH

By VERA CASPARY . . . 2

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Noble Barclay, the Truth Merchant, made a fortune out of his refined, sugar-coated product. But when John Ansell started writing *Crime*, Barclay's *Truth* poured forth raw and scalding . . . and only the homicide dicks wanted any part of it!



Also Two Thrilling Short Stories

THE DEVIL-DOLL MURDERS John Polito 91

A tough cabbie with a crime-wise mind delves into ancient voodoo lore . . . and finds his fingers dripping blood!

MURDER AFTER DARK J. G. Wilson 102

They shut little Linda's lovely mouth lest it prattle of the town's filthy rackets. But ex-dick Carson smiled coldly over her stiffening corpse. At last they had dealt him in . . .

DETECTIVE BOOK *Magazine*

T. T. SCOTT, *President*

ARCH ROBINSON, *Asst. Mgr.*

MALCOLM REISS, *Ed. & Gen. Mgr.*

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STRANGER THAN TRUTH

By VERA CASPARY

CAPTAIN RIORDAN told me the Wilson story in September. We were sitting behind a bottle of Canadian rye in a Third Avenue bar. He drank and I paid.

I had recently become editor of *Truth and Crime*, and was still new enough to believe I could improve the magazine. *Truth and Crime* was just another of the fact-detective magazines, filled with hashed-over newspaper stuff and old police-blotter cases, served up with sensational titles and pious crime-does-not-pay endings. The Wilson story had no ending, so I decided to use it as an Unsolved Mystery of the Month.

On Thursday morning, November 22, 1945, I was sitting in my private office in the Editorial Department of Barclay-Truth Publications. It was my first private office and I was still new enough to enjoy seeing my name and the title, Editor, in gold letters on the door.

The telephone rang.

"The Production Department," Miss Kaufman said. "They want to know why your Unsolved Mystery hasn't come through."

I took the phone. "Look," I shouted, "what are you worrying about? You've got everything except the Unsolved Mystery and I'm expecting to get the okay on it any minute now."

There was a rumble at the other end of the wire.

"Don't blame me," I said. "I sent that script through three weeks ago. It's in Barclay's office now."

The rumble at the other end of the wire grew ominous.

"Look," I demanded, "can I help it if Mr. B. holds up the works? He's boss here, he made the rules, he knows when we go to press. Look," I continued as the rumbles grew louder, "here's my secretary. She's just come back from Barclay's office. What did they tell you about the Un-

solved Mystery, Miss Kaufman?" Miss Kaufman who had not been near Mr. Barclay's office merely raised her bushy eyebrows.

"Good news!" I shouted into the phone. "Mr. Barclay's secretary told her he hadn't had time to get to the script until this morning, but he's just finished reading it and he's crazy about the yarn. I'll have his okay any minute now, and I'll get it to you pronto. How's that?"

Just then an office boy came in and dropped into my In Basket an envelope decorated with red stickers which meant *Rush* and yellow stickers which meant *Rescheduled for Current*.

"Just keep your pants on," I told the rumbles. "The script's here now. We'll send it right over."

Miss Kaufman had opened the envelope. She grabbed the telephone. "Mr. Ansell will call back in a few minutes," she told the Production Department. Then she handed me the manuscript. Attached to its upper right hand corner was a green sticker. Green stickers meant *rejected*.

"What the hell!" I said. "They can't turn down this story."

"But they did," said Miss Kaufman and handed me a memorandum typed on blue paper. It read:

"In accordance with our editorial policy, cannot allow publication of above ms. Have read myself and called attention of Mr. Barclay to such objections as would offend readers. Would suggest you substitute material discussed in conferences, Dot King or Elwell cases, more nationally known and of wider interest. Hope this does not seriously interfere with your schedule. E. E. Munn"

"Hope it doesn't seriously interfere with our schedule! That fool!" I said. "He's been holding it in his office until the last minute, so he can put me on the spot."

"What are you going to do about an

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Unsolved Murder?" asked Miss Kaufman.

"The Elwell case! Dot King! As if every true-crime magazine in the country hadn't reprinted them a dozen times. I'm going to tell Edward Everett Munn . . ."

"Before you shoot off your mouth about what's wrong with other people," Miss Kaufman remarked, "maybe you'd better find out why they've turned your precious story down."

She handed me a carbon copy of the memo that Edward Everett Munn had sent the publisher.

"In order that we have on record our objections to above ms—Unsolved Mystery, Feb. '46—I herewith submit the following reasons why said ms is unfit for publication:

"1. The crime is unknown. Has it not been definitely decided *in conference* that the chief sales feature of the Unsolved Mystery is popular knowledge of the featured crime?"

"2. Satirical tone of article. It is not the object of Barclay-Truth Publications to point out the ironies of life.

"3. Frivolous attitude toward alcoholic beverages. Editors should be conversant with our policy in this matter."

I crushed the memo into a ball and aimed it at the wastebasket.

"For once in the history of Truth Publications, Miss Kaufman, an editor is going to fight for his magazine," I said.

"But your job, Mr. Ansell."

"Think I'm afraid?"

"What about the forty a week you send your mother?" asked Miss Kaufman. Then she smiled and added, "You'd better comb your hair, Mr. Ansell. And straighten your tie."

I whirled around. I embraced her. She was on the wrong side of forty and her breasts would have been a bumper crop in any harvest. "Kaufman, old girl, you're tops." I kissed her full on the mouth.

"None of that. I'm a respectable married woman."

I combed my hair, straightened my tie and took off my glasses. "Good or bad, that story's going into the February issue. I'm fighting to the finish."

Typewriters stopped as I crossed the general office. Everyone who had listened while I shouted my opinions of Munn watched as I opened his door. I held my

head high, thrust out my chin, stood straight, so I'd seem taller. This time, I told myself, Ansell triumphs.

"COME IN, come in," Munn called jovially. "Sit down, won't you? Are you comfortable there? Let me pull down the blind. I'm sure you don't want the light in your eyes."

That was Munn, glib and unctuous. The smile was too quick, the voice too smooth. He loved himself, he was a success, a male secretary who had become a big executive. He had a clown's mouth, red as paint and curving like the crescent moon. His desk was neat, the blotter spotless and all of his papers filed into one of those leather folders called a "Work Organizer." On the wall hung numerous photographs lovingly autographed by Noble Barclay.

He offered me a cigarette.

"I don't smoke Turkish," I told him and took out my own. He leaned over to light one for me.

After a while he said, "You wanted to see me about something, Ansell?"

"You know damn well what I've come to talk to you about." I waved the crumpled memo. "We're supposed to be going to press today."

He nodded. "I've noticed before, Ansell, that you always wait till the last possible moment before putting through an important story."

"I wait? Look, Munn, that story was held in your office for almost three weeks. Look at the date on the manuscript. You're on top here, you're the Supervising Editor and General Manager. Why did you hold the story until the day we go to press and then reject it with a sappy memo?"

Munn watched his smoke rings drift toward the ceiling. "I don't quite understand your complaints, Ansell. Most of our editors find that the organization functions efficiently."

"Damn it!" I shouted. "You can't do that to me. You know I can't put the magazine to bed without an Unsolved Mystery."

"Have you no other copy to substitute?"

"The illustrations have been made. The plates are all ready."

"We can get cuts made over night. Have you no other Unsolved Mystery, Ansell?"

I jumped up. I stood before him. I pounded on his desk with both fists.

"There's nothing wrong with that story. Why the hell are you sabotaging it?"

He nodded toward the crumpled memo. "You're aware of my objections."

"I don't entirely agree with you, Mr. Munn."

Out in the General Office, the typewriters were clicking again. I heard laughter to my left, which was the direction of the *Truth and Love office*, and I wondered whether Eleanor had returned from the Studio, and what Lola had told her. Would Eleanor also think me a solemn young fool, or would she admire a man who fought for his rights?

"Look," I said to Munn in a moderate conversational tone, "I don't want to be stubborn about this. You're right about that correspondence-school stuff. I've no illusions about the purpose of our magazine."

"Our purpose, Ansell, is to disseminate truth."

"Yes, of course, Mr. Munn. But the advertising . . ."

"Advertising helps finance our periodicals, Mr. Ansell."

"I understand that. And I'm quite willing to cut out all the cracks about correspondence schools. I'll simply state that this particular course was a phony and not to be compared with the accredited educational institutions which advertise in our incorruptible publications."

I saw my mistake at once. Humor of any kind baffled Munn. He was one hundred per cent literal and any remark that hinted of irreverence toward Noble Barclay or Truth Publications was a personal affront.

I hurried to cover up. "Look, Mr. Munn. Where the liquor is concerned, you haven't a leg to stand on. How can we, in our editorial columns, pretend that liquor doesn't exist, when three of our magazines are running wine ads?"

"I believe that you were absent from the conference at which we discussed the matter."

"I didn't miss the piece in *Truth and Health* that said that wine, taken at meals in moderate quantities, is a vitamin-packed food and provides an antidote against the craving for stronger liquor. And in the next issue of *Truth*, I understand . . ."

"I didn't know that you were so well ac-

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ADDRESS

quainted with the contents of our other publications."

"Such a drastic change in policy can't go unnoticed. Look, Mr. Munn . . ."

"Look, Ansell. I'm astonished at you, a professional writer, abusing the English language in that manner. You ask me to look. What am I to look at? Don't you mean to employ the verb, to listen?"

I was going crazy. You could never argue with Munn. He was always like that, going off the main path, scooting down some dark alley.

"Listen, if that's what you prefer, I'll merely mention that there was liquor in the murder victim's glass. I won't say what kind of liquor."

"Do you consider that consistent with our policy of strictest truth in every detail?"

"I'll cut all mention of liquor out of the story. It has nothing to do with the murder anyway. Will that suit you?"

"Compromises are useless, Ansell. Need I remind you that you're wasting time? The story has been rejected. Definitely." He crushed out his cigarette and split the paper, emptying the tobacco into the ash tray. Then, he rolled the paper into a little ball.

There was a long silence. He had dismissed me and he waited to enjoy the spectacle of my retreat. I sat tight. Who was he, Edward Everett Munn, to turn me out? For a moment there, I had wavered and been willing to call quits.

"Look, Munn," I said, and when he frowned, I didn't bother to change the verb. "I've offered to take out everything you object to in the story. Even without the comment which I think gives it quality, we'll be offering our readers something fresh. I'll make the cuts now, and send you the manuscript by lunchtime. If you'll okay it immediately, I can get it to the printer's this afternoon."

"And if I refuse?"

"I'll send it through anyway. As editor, I'll take the responsibility."

He rose. Sitting down he seemed insignificant because his head was small and his shoulders narrow, but when he stood on his incredibly long legs, he looked like a middle-aged boy on stilts. "Very well, there's only one thing for us to do. We'll take it up with Mr. Barclay."

He lifted the mouthpiece of his inter-office phone. "It's Mr. Munn," he told the instrument. "Very important."

A female voice shrilled through the box. We waited a few seconds and the female voice shrilled again. "He'll see us now," Munn said, smiling because the boss had not kept him waiting.

He walked ahead, the shepherd leading the lamb to slaughter, the warden taking the condemned man to the death house. Before the door of Barclay's office, he stopped and leaned over to whisper something. His breath smelled of peppermint-flavored mouthwash. "Has it ever occurred to you, Ansell, that your stubbornness might lead to disaster?"

It certainly had occurred to me, but the disaster I had in mind was the loss of a good job, not the horror and tragedy which came as the result of my determination to get my *Unsolved Mystery* into the February issue.

I have a copy of the manuscript in my files, and since it is the focus of a much stranger story, I am including it here, just as I wrote it and submitted it on November fifth to the Reading Department, the Supervising Editor and Barclay.

Here it is:

Unsolved Mystery

THEY did not immediately see the body. It lay face downward in the narrow channel between the wall and the bed. The right arm was extended. The man had apparently fallen while reaching for the telephone.

It was nine o'clock on Sunday morning, May 13, 1945. The body had been there since Friday night, for it was on Saturday morning that the chambermaid, the bath maid and a bellboy had noticed the sign on the door: *Do Not Disturb*.

On Monday morning the sign was still there. The chambermaid had notified the housekeeper. The housekeeper had telephoned the desk clerk. The desk clerk had reported to Mr. Frederick Semple, manager of the hotel. Accompanied by the desk clerk, the housekeeper and the chambermaid, Mr. Semple approached the door of Suite 3002-4. Before using the pass key, Mr. Semple pressed the electric button, knocked at the door and called the tenant's

name. There was no response, and Semple, followed by his retinue, entered the apartment.

Drawn curtains repelled the sunlight. Bulbs burned in three silk-shaded lamps. The electric phonograph's motor throbbed. Evidently the machine had been burning up current since the last of the records had dropped into the well. Pillows were heaped at one end of the wide couch and close by stood a coffee table with cigarettes, ash-tray, French brandy and a snifter, not quite empty.

Beyond this room a short corridor led to bedroom and bath. The bed had been turned down and on the night table were shell-rimmed spectacles, a copy of Saki's short stories and a thin gold watch which had stopped at 5:20.

At the far end of the room a desk had been overturned. A portable typewriter lay on its carriage, legs upward like a helpless animal. Pens, pencils, paper and carbons were scattered on the desk and spilled on the floor.

And in the narrow channel between the bed and the wall lay the tenant with a bullet in his back.

An hour later Mr. Semple, quivering from shock and thinking of the effect of scandal upon the conservative bankers who operated the hotel, told the police what he knew of the late tenant.

His name was Warren G. Wilson and there had been nothing in his way of life to suggest a violent end. He had occupied his suite for five years and three months, and never in that time had his activities created any of the problems which distress the managers of exclusive hotels. Servants remembered his generosity and regarded his passing as the loss of a friend. He had spent most of the time in his suite, reading in bed or lying on the couch, listening to his records.

According to the Coroner's report this inactivity had been due to illness. Pale flesh had been stretched meagerly over Wilson's bones and his lungs were so embroidered with scars that it was remarkable that he had lived long enough to be killed by a shell fired from a .22 automatic.

There had been a woman. She had come to the hotel infrequently, but had never left her name at the desk because she returned with Mr. Wilson after he had dined

out. Two elevator boys said she was good-looking, but neither could remember whether she had been blonde or brunette.

No stranger stopped at the desk that night to ask the number of Wilson's apartment. The murderer had evidently known that his victim occupied Suite 3002-4. To the busy elevator boys all passengers bound for the thirtieth floor were party guests. One boy, a new employee, hired only the week before and unfamiliar with the hotel guests and their regular visitors, told the police he remembered a nervous lady who dropped her pocketbook as she got off at the thirtieth floor. He had bent over to pick it up, but the lady had swooped down, grabbed the bag and tucked it under her arm in a most belligerent manner. All the boy could remember about this lady was her plaid coat.

The hostess in Suite 3006-8 could not recall a guest in plaid. Her party had been formal. A plaid coat would have been as inappropriate as a top hat at a baseball game. The police decided, therefore, that the plaid coat might help identify Wilson's visitor. It was not much of a clue. Plaid coats were all the style that season.

To make the search more baffling there was the report of Jean Pierre Hyman and the conflicting opinion of his headwaiter, Gustav. Mr. Hyman is the owner of the French restaurant that attracts so many gourmets to his modest but expensive quarters on East Twelfth Street. Jean Pierre remembered the lady who had sometimes dined in his restaurant with M. Wilson. She had been young and fair, and on her last visit, ten days before Wilson's regrettable death, had worn a new spring coat of red, blue and green plaid. She had been, according to Jean Pierre, a dainty blonde.

Although he did not like to disagree with the boss, Gustav, the headwaiter, insisted that Wilson's girl friend had been a willowy, radiant brunette with soulful dark eyes. Yet Gustav and Jean Pierre were agreed on one point. There had not been more than one young lady.

The police found themselves seeking a girl who was either blonde or brunette and who wore one of the hundreds of thousands of plaid coats circulating in New York. It was a tough assignment, but Captain C. Allan Riordan of the Detective Bureau vowed that he would not rest until he had

discovered the lady in plaid who, on the night of May eleventh, might or might not have been carrying a .22 automatic in her pocketbook.

One fact about Wilson baffled Riordan as much as the identity of the lady in plaid. No one knew the source of Wilson's income. On the second day of every month he had deposited in his checking account two thousand dollars in cash. It was highly irregular, but his bankers had asked Wilson no questions. Since the '29 depression there had been a number of eccentric depositors who, fearing revolution, had converted their assets into cash which they kept in safety-deposit boxes.

None of the vaults in New York had a box registered in the name of Warren G. Wilson. And in those sacred cells where gold and bonds and cash are locked away, no record, no clerk, no guard recalled a customer of Wilson's description who unlocked his box on the second day of each month. The Department of Internal Revenue had no files on Warren G. Wilson.

In a corner at the bottom of the bookshelves Riordan found the strange clue. Not a death clue so much as evidence of the strange birth of Warren G. Wilson. For he had not been born at all; he had been conceived more than twenty years earlier over a bootleg Martini in a Chicago speak-easy.

The birth clue that Riordan found on the bottom bookshelf was a series of loose-leaf pamphlets in an imitation-leather binder that bore the title:

BUSINESS DYNAMICS

by

WARREN G. WILSON

THIS was the pretentious title of a correspondence course of thirty lessons sent out in envelopes labeled, *From the Private office of Warren G. Wilson*. Warren G. Wilson was President of the Warren G. Wilson Foundation, Chicago, Ill. The course cost seventy-five dollars and students paid at the rate of five dollars for two lessons a month.

Research into its history proved that the Warren G. Wilson Foundation which had guaranteed success to its students was it-

self a financial failure. The first advertisements had appeared in 1920 and in 1922 its offices were closed.

Through records in the files of the magazines in which Wilson's course had been advertised, Captain Riordan discovered the name of the agency which had placed these ads. It had been a one-man company and its owner, now vice-president of a respectable New York agency, told Riordan all he knew about the Wilson business but asked, for the sake of his reputation, that his name be kept out of the story.

This man, the reputable but nameless advertising agent, remembered the conception and assisted at the birth of Warren G. Wilson. The name was chosen deliberately. In 1920 many Americans believed that Woodrow Wilson was one of the great martyred Presidents, while others thought he had run the country onto the rocks and that it would be saved by Warren G. Harding. The author of the lessons, owner of the business, so-called president of the Foundation, was a Mid-Western youth named Homer Peck.

Peck had been an advertising copywriter. He had been brilliant at it, made a great success, and older advertising men had prophesied a wealthy future for him. But Peck had demanded more than prophecies and promises. When his employers refused to raise his salary he quit his job and went into business for himself. Over cocktails served in teacups Peck had outlined the idea for his correspondence course to his friend, the advertising man. Neither considered the business shabby. Both had majored in the subject of mail-order education by writing ads for schools of signal engineering, scientific farming, sign painting and photoplay writing.

Of Peck's personal life the advertising man knew little. Peck had lived in a cheap apartment on the near North Side in the Bohemian arty neighborhood bordering Chicago's so-called Gold Coast, had written short stories which no one would publish, and had an affair with his stenographer, a slim, radiant young girl who wrote poetry. The advertising man had admired Peck's ingenuity, considered him a cock-eyed genius and expected him to make a fortune. He was surprised, he said, when Peck decided suddenly to give up the one-room office pretentiously called The Warren G.

Wilson Foundation of Business Dynamics. With a little effort and a few thousand additional dollars, the advertising man believed, the Warren G. Wilson Foundation might have flourished.

This is all the New York police have learned about Homer Peck. A Chicago bank account closed in November, 1922, advertisements in old magazines, an advertising agent's recollections of a client's failure—nothing more. The loft building in which Peck had his office has been torn down and a skyscraper erected in its place. The speak-easies where Peck and his friend held their conferences are gone, too. Even the blatantly wicked Chicago of their day, the taxi wars, bootlegger battles, get-rich-quick schemes, the blue-sky mail-order courses are memories of an era that goes down in history as preface to the Great Depression. And only a corpse with a bullet wound in his back brings back memories of the great jazz era.

Whose was the body? What strange and secret events led to the death of the man who was never born? What became of Homer Peck whose agile but none-too-scrupulous mind created the fabulous Warren G. Wilson? And where into this pattern of mystery does the girl fit, the girl who is neither blonde nor brunette and who rode to the thirtieth floor on the night Wilson died? These are the questions to which the police seek answers. These are the only known facts about a murder committed last May and still unsolved.

THAT was the Wilson story, just one in a long series of Unsolved Mysteries. Perhaps, in fighting to get it into the February issue, I was stupid. Perhaps subtleties escaped me. I had no idea then that I was suspected of knowing more than I had written into the manuscript. As I followed E. E. Munn along the corridor to Noble Barclay's office, I honestly thought I was defending my rights as an editor.

We had to wait a while in the reception room before Mr. Barclay would see us. His secretary, Grace Eccles, bestowed upon us the smile reserved for those privileged to enter the private office.

"He'll be just a minute," she said.

Oblivious to the strangers' uneasy stares, Munn stood before the great window, his head thrown back as though he were pray-

ing secretly or exulting. I wondered whether he rejoiced because he had me in a spot, or whether he was merely rehearsing for our scene with the boss.

The strangers crouched humbly on the carved Italian bench at the dark end of the room. There were five of them, shabby and self-conscious; a middle-aged woman with a furtive sniveling boy of ten or twelve; an elderly couple who sat as if they were paying for space on the uncomfortable bench; and a hunchback who offered his abject grin as appeasement for his ugliness. These were true believers who would sit all day on the hard benches to catch a glimpse of Noble Barclay.

"Ready now," cooed Miss Eccles.

She pressed a button, the latch of Barclay's door was released, and the strangers stared enviously as we were admitted to the holy place.

Barclay stood at the window looking down upon the rainy street. His back was toward the door. We walked to the center of the long office, but a thick carpet muffled our footsteps. I cleared my throat. Munn frowned and shook his head, but it was too late. Barclay's meditations had been interrupted. He turned.

Munn had pretended not to know why I burst into his office. Barclay used the frank approach. "I thought this stormy petrel would beat his wings against my window."

"You know about it, Mr. Barclay?"

"I've read the story. A great yarn, boy. Ask Ed what I said about you last night." His glance demanded response and Munn bared his teeth in a phony smile. "I wanted to talk to you myself, but I came into the office late this morning. Mrs. Barclay and the twins just got back from the Coast and I had to meet the train."

"I don't understand, Mr. Barclay, if you liked the story . . ."

"Liked it? The story was great. Great writing. Guts and punch. And I liked the way you went after the stuff yourself. You weren't content just to rewrite the printed stuff; you had to find out how the wheels turned. That's the spirit we appreciate, lad."

"Let's get down to facts," I said. "You think it's a good story, but Mr. Munn says we can't run it. He sent you a memo. Have you read it? Do you agree?"

Barclay cleared his throat. "I like the way you handle a story, John, but I don't like certain angles of this one. It's the character, the man who was murdered. People are only interested in a story when the characters are exciting."

"Don't you think there's something exciting about a man who got two thousand dollars a month without doing a lick of work for it?"

Barclay laughed. "What do you think of this lad, Ed? Obstinate as Granddaddy's mule. It's a spirit I admire. Tenacity. I knew from the minute I met you that you were the sort of fellow we wanted for Truth Publications."

"Then you'll run the story?"

"No."

"That's that," Munn said. The clown's mouth curved in triumph.

"It seems to me, Mr. Barclay, that you and Mr. Munn have some other reason for rejecting this story, something you don't want me to know."

Munn dropped his cigarette case. Barclay spoke into the telephone box on his desk. "Tell the Senator I'll be a few minutes late." He hung up and turned toward me. Our eyes met. I waited. He said, "How long have you been working for us, Ansell?"

"Four and a half months."

"Four months? And I've been running these magazines almost twenty years. Munn has been with me for much of that time. Do you, after three months, presume to tell me that you know more about the business than I do?"

"Remember the war," I said. "The people who got their countries into it always answered criticism by saying they'd been governing a long time and knew more about it than those who warned them that they were heading for disaster."

Munn slid forward in his chair. He was prepared to speak, but Barclay waved him to silence. Rising, the boss came over to my chair and looked down into my face with a candid unwavering glance. "You've been pretty frank, young man, in asking my reasons for rejecting your story. But let me ask you: Why are you so determined to run it?"

I was surprised. The question was too simple for that dramatic build-up. "It's a good story. It's one of the best Unsolved

Mysteries we've ever had. You said so yourself, Mr. Barclay."

"I said it was good. I didn't say it was the best. When a man wants something very much, his desire is likely to exaggerate, even to twist and pervert, the truth."

"But you said you liked it."

"When you're in a tough spot and feel the world's against you, John, do you ever stop to examine the causes of your grievance? I don't mean the surface causes or what you believe is the other fellow's reason for thwarting you. What I'm asking is that you search yourself and dig deep for the elements of your discontent."

"I've read *My Life Is Truth*, Mr. Barclay."

BARCLAY nodded. He began to speak glibly as if he were repeating phrases he had learned by heart. "It's not always a simple matter to discover the truth. We've got to dig deep to find the heart of weakness. What's the core of that obstinacy, young man?"

His eyes were fixed upon my face. His smile was gentle but his manner compelling. I felt myself blush. This made me angry. I clenched my teeth and doubled my fists.

Barclay turned away as if he wished to save me embarrassment. Munn and I watched him cross the office to the door of his private lavatory.

"Stand up, John. Come here." Barclay had opened the lavatory door.

I knew what was coming. So did Munn. He grinned as he rose and stretched himself with an attempt at nonchalance. The inside of the lavatory door was a mirror. Barclay held the door open at an angle which reflected the three of us. It was cheap, a side-show effect, but successful. The stilts which Munn used for legs gave him a full six feet and Barclay was two or three inches taller. I stand five foot five in my shoes.

Barclay spoke softly. "You've got to face it, lad. It's resenting the big fellow and wanting to show you're stronger that's made you into a little fighting cock who thinks he can whip the giant roosters."

Munn smiled and hummed softly.

Barclay's hand found my shoulder. "Sore, aren't you? Not that I blame you. Pretty fresh of old man Barclay to bring this up. What the hell business is it of his?"

He caught my eye, smiled ruefully. "You see, I can tell what you're thinking. And I'm right about you. All the trouble you've ever had with other people is because you've made up your mind you won't be dominated. You're going to show them. You're going to knock us big fellows right down into the gutter so we'll have to look up to you. Right now, John, you feel like telling me to go to hell, don't you?"

It was true and I shook my head.

"Say it aloud. Say, 'Go to hell, Barclay. It's not your business that I'm a pint-sized runt.' You don't know, fellow, how it's going to help you to tell me right out loud what you feel." He spoke gently. His eyes had grown moist with earnestness. "Don't be ashamed because you're not satisfied with yourself. All humans aspire to perfection. We all loathe our imperfections; we hide them as if they were sins. No man can escape the essential truth about himself; no man is ever free of shame and resentment until he sees the truth fully and shares the truth." He raised his head and looked about, blinking as if he had come out of darkness into sunlight.

Munn watched, titillated by my embarrassment. The lavatory mirror reflected his smirk. Barclay noticed and closed the door.

"You've read my book, John. Then you know me for what I am. No man since Cain has ever loathed himself so violently as Noble Barclay. And look at me today," he smiled as if he and I alone knew the story which had been printed in 6,182,454 copies and sixteen languages. Then, because I had not offered the expected response, he asked in a subdued voice, "You've read the Introduction, haven't you?"

"The Introduction," Munn said pontifically, "is the greatest document on human despair ever written."

"We're keeping you from lunch, aren't we, Ed?" Barclay wet his lips.

Munn's grin faded. In some subtle way which he could not understand the dog had displeased the master. He shook his head, mumbled something about liking to have his meals on time, and left, tail dragging.

I wondered whether I ought to leave, too, but Barclay was not through with me. He seated himself on the big red leather couch, and indicated that he wanted me to sit beside him.

"Angry?"

"No," I said.

"Why do you lie about it?" He threw back his head and laughed. "If you weren't sore, you wouldn't be human." Leaning forward, his big, square-fingered hand on my knee, he whispered, "I was right though. Confess it. You hate being a runt, don't you?"

Rain beat against the windows. The room had grown dark. Barclay switched on a lamp. His movements were powerful and precise. He let his hand fall to my knee again and his dark, restless eyes searched my face. The lamplight made me feel naked.

"Go on, say it. Tell me I was right. You've always wanted to beat the big guys, haven't you?"

"I guess so."

"You'll feel a heck of a lot better when you've said it aloud. You won't be sore at me any more. You'll know that I know what's at the bottom of John Ansell, just the way I know Ansell knows what's at the bottom of Noble Barclay."

Although I had read that ultimate essay on human despair and knew the brighter facts about his regeneration, I was not so sure I knew what was at the bottom of Noble Barclay. Sincere prophet or clever charlatan? Twenty weeks after I had come to work for him I was no more certain than at my first interview.

To keep him from eavesdropping on any more of my inhibitions I said quickly, "Okay, you're right."

"Good for you, John!" He extended his hand. His face was ingenuous, shy and happy. He clasped my hand with a powerful fist. He had won the round, but his pleasure in triumph was so naive that I was not only free of resentment but glad I had acknowledged my shame.

He had too much sense to rub it in. Our interview was over. "Sorry we can't lunch together, but the Senator is waiting. Some other time, I hope." He put on his camel's hair coat, fished a pair of pigskin gloves out of the pocket, smoothed his white hair. As we went out he graciously held the door for me.

We parted in the reception room. At the door of his private elevator, Barclay gave me a mock salute and a friendly grin. I felt fine. As I walked through the deserted general office, a lonely stenographer eating

lunch out of a paper bag looked at me and smiled. My self-esteem grew. I was a pint-sized runt and I wasn't afraid to say it aloud. I was a good guy; people liked me. Noble Barclay was sorry he couldn't have lunch with me. My hand was sore from the clasp of that big fist.

A bulky shape blocked my path. Until she spoke I did not recognize my good friend, Miss Kaufman. She told her cronies to go on while she stopped to ask about the Wilson story.

"It's out," I told her.

"Why?"

"Mr. Barclay doesn't want to run it."

"Doesn't he like it?"

"He thinks it's great, one of the greatest stories ever written for *Truth and Crime*."

"Then why won't he let you run it?"

I couldn't answer. After all that had happened it was still an unsolved mystery.

MISS KAUFMAN'S questions had shattered me. I felt inadequate and no longer the sort of man whose smile brings sunshine into the lives of lonely stenographers. The glow had faded and Barclay's approval was no more than an ironic symbol of my defeat.

As I entered the Grille, Barclay employees stopped eating to stare at the man who had defied the boss. From the round table at which the editors ate, Lola Manfred beckoned. I did not hurry to the seat she had saved for me. Through the smoke and steam of the restaurant I saw that Eleanor was not in her accustomed place.

A waitress noticed and, with a jerk of her thumb, guided my glance. Although the Grille was situated in a structural steel building, it had been decorated to look like a seventeenth-century English inn. Heavy beams and plaster columns divided the room into a series of dim caves. Lights were hidden in lantern-like fixtures shaded in cloudy amber.

Eleanor waved. She sat alone at the small table. She had on a black suit. It was tailored and severe, but there was nothing severe about Eleanor. She wore a white blouse with a lace collar and a bib or frill of lace cascading down the front. As I came close I decided that today I would tell her I thought her the most beautiful woman on earth.

"Hello," I muttered as I stood awkwardly beside the table. Opposite her a tilted chair showed that a seat had been reserved.

"Would you like to sit here?" Eleanor said.

"Thanks." I tried to be nonchalant, as though I ate lunch with her every day.

"Were you fired?"

"Oh! That's it. I'm the man of the hour. Everyone in the place is talking about me."

She smiled. "You hardly made a secret of your feelings about the Munn memo. What happened?"

"I wrote a story and thought it was good. Your father doesn't want to run it."

"Why not?"

The waitress handed me a bill of fare. I pretended not to know what I wanted. Eleanor's question embarrassed me. I had been crazy about her since that August noon when she had first smiled at me across the table where editors and privileged editorial assistants lunched. Evidently Eleanor had liked me, too, for she had gone to lunch with me the next week. I had taken her to a quiet, expensive restaurant and everything had been wonderful until I asked her about her father, her life with the Truth-Sharer and how it felt to be the Truth Girl. That had been a terrible mistake. She was sensitive on the subject. Since then I had been obliged to find excuses to visit Lola Manfred in the *Truth and Love* office, hoping Lola's assistant would be there. Sometimes at night I waited in the corridor until Eleanor came along, and rode downstairs with her in the elevator and made excuses about dining in Greenwich Village, so I could sit beside her on the bus.

"Why wouldn't Father let you run it?" Eleanor persisted. "What kind of story was it?"

I said, "It must be Thursday. What's there about Thursday that always makes them play Viennese waltzes?"

"All right, skip it. But you weren't fired?"

"Would you care if I had been?"

Eleanor looked over my shoulder at Lola Manfred. They exchanged some sort of signal.

"What's that about?" I wanted to know.

"I won a dollar bet on you. I bet you wouldn't be fired. Lola was sure that Ed

Munn would stick his knife into your back."

"I'm glad I didn't take any bets on myself. I'd have been on Lola's side. For a while I was seeing myself in the *Sunday Times*—Young Man, Editorial Experience, Will Travel . . ."

"Were you frightened?"

"Frightened isn't the word. Realistic."

"I'm glad you weren't fired, but I'm gladder that you risked it. Most of the others around here—" her scornful glance included them all, Henry Roe of *Truth Magazine*, Tony Shaw of *Truth and Beauty*, Lola Manfred, the associate editors, sub-editors, readers, and Edward Everett Munn who was eating health salad at a side table—"most of them think only of their jobs. They show off a lot and sometimes they laugh at Father. But when they get upstairs they're afraid to express their opinions. They're yes-men. You'll never be a yes-man if you live to be a hundred."

I was glad I had defied Munn and stood up to Barclay. Eleanor admired me. I ate up her praise like a two-dollar minute steak and begged for more. "Yes-men don't die in gutters. I'm looking for a nice sunny gutter with running water."

"I'd rather have you die in the gutter than be like those others."

She said it defiantly, as if she were telling her father and all the yes-men how she felt about gutters. I thought of her standing up to Munn and the office stooges, defending and praising the lone rebel, John Miles Ansell.

I wanted to thank her by saying something gallant and wonderful.

"You're looking extra beautiful today. More beautiful than yesterday or last week or the first time I saw you."

"Don't kid me. I'm not even pretty."

Eleanor's face was a contradiction, delicately modeled with a fine, faintly aquiline nose, almost hollow cheeks and a broad firm jaw. The jaw saved her from fragility. I liked the contrast between the delicate nose and the definite chin. Her eyes were set deep and heavily shadowed. At the first glance they seemed dark, but it was always pleasant to discover and rediscover their gray transparency. The shadowed eyes gave her a dark look so that she seemed brunette, but her skin was pale ivory and all the small curls around

her forehead fair enough to show she had been born blonde.

"You're dazzling."

"Because I bet on you?"

"Eleanor," I began. "Eleanor . . ."

"Yes?"

"Eleanor, we ought to celebrate tonight, you and I."

"Celebrate what?"

"Gutters. Or not getting fired. Anything you like, just so we celebrate."

She laughed again. Eleanor was glad I had asked her out to dinner. All the time I'd been seeking excuses to visit the *Truth and Love* office and waiting in corridors, Eleanor had expected me to ask her for a date. And I had thought the warmth and graciousness was just natural charm, that she would have greeted any other man, Henry Roe or Tony Shaw or even Edward Everett Munn, with the same measure of enthusiasm.

"Tonight then, Eleanor?"

"Tonight."

We ordered ice cream and drank two cups of coffee, so that we'd have an excuse to linger at the table. We sat through *Tales from the Vienna Woods*, *Southern Roses* and *Vienna Blood*. When we left the restaurant was almost empty. I pulled out Eleanor's chair and held her coat. When my hand brushed against her arm she quivered slightly and pulled away.

The strains of *Vienna Blood* followed us through the tunnel.

"May I have the waltz, Madame?"

"You're crazy."

I held out my arms and we waltzed down the tunnel. She had always seemed tall to me, but when we danced together I noticed that the shoulder of her plaid coat was lower than my shoulder. This fact delighted me. Tall girls make me sensitive about my size.

Eleanor gave me her address and told me to call for her at seven. I went back to the office and phoned Jean Pierre's. I told Gustav to save the best table and select the choicest duck. I told him we'd start with champagne cocktails. I owned the world.

THE UNSOLVED MYSTERY was an advertised feature of *Truth and Crime* and had to be included in every issue. There was no time now to get a staff writer on the story, so I decided to write

it myself. Fortunately we had used material I could do again with a new slant. And there were pictures left over from a story in *Truth and Love*, June, 1937. We used a stock layout and sent the photos to the Production Department with Rush stickers on them. We had to get a Rush release on the story, too. Since he had got his way about the Wilson piece, Munn graciously allowed the new manuscript to go through his office, sight unseen. We needed a sight-unseen release from Mr. Barclay so that we could send copy to the printer as fast as it came out of the typewriter.

"You'd better get Mr. Barclay's release yourself, Mr. Ansell. You know Grace Eccles. If I ask a favor she'll probably stall until Mr. Barclay's gone for the day and she can get me blamed for inefficiency. But if you ask her, we'll have it in five minutes."

"What makes you think so?"

Miss Kaufman raised a shaggy eyebrow. "You're an attractive young mn."

"Okay," I said. "I'll exercise my charms."

Mr. Barclay's secretary smiled at me over her typewriter. She was a scrawny female with a rough skin that she tried to conceal with layers of cosmetics. The structure of curls on her head looked like carved mahogany. She swung around in her swivel chair, clasped her long white hands and looked expectant. I leaned over the desk as I told her that I needed help in overcoming an insurmountable obstacle, and added plaintively that this was an appeal to her well-known generosity.

White hands fluttered. "Anything I can do for you, Mr. Ansell, will give me the most profound pleasure."

"Would you have the courage to approach Mr. Barclay and ask him a favor for me?" I gave her my most soulful glance. "I need a sight-unseen release on the Unsolved Mystery. We're using the Dot King story . . ."

"I know all about it, Mr. Ansell," she put in quickly, so I should know that no detail of office business escaped her.

I handed her the release form. "Tell Mr. Barclay I promise to make the story exactly like all the other stories we've ever run. And I positively guarantee, Miss Eccles, not to use any dirty words."

"Oh, Mr. Ansell, what a sense of hu-

mor! You must teach me to laugh." Miss Eccles trilled her pleasure like an intoxicated canary. Sighing, she settled down to business again. "I'll bring this in to him myself, just as soon as he's off the wire. He's on the phone now. Washington, you know."

"Miss Eccles," I began slowly, "can you tell me why Mr. Barclay rejected the Warren G. Wilson story?"

Miss Eccles' hands fell like rocks. Her chest was as flat as a washboard and in action it looked even duller.

"The Warren G. Wilson story," I repeated.

The washboard continued its rise and fall. "I don't know what you're talking about, Mr. Ansell."

"Come, come. Nothing in this office escapes your vigilant notice. The Wilson story, the Unsolved Mystery of the Month, the story the boss rejected . . ."

A buzzer sounded. Miss Eccles picked up the release form and started toward Mr. Barclay's office. "He's off the wire. I'll see about your release. You needn't wait, Mr. Ansell. I'll send it over by boy."

I went back to my office. I started to work. At five-fifteen, when other Barclay employees were washing their hands and covering their typewriters, I had written exactly one page.

Miss Kaufman offered to stay and work with me.

"Never mind," I said. "I'm not staying. I have a dinner date and I'll come back later. Leave word for the night man that I'll want to get in."

An office boy dropped an envelope in my basket. It was a manila office envelope with a blue memo form inside. This is what it said:

Dearest J. A.

Please forgive me but I can't possibly make it tonight. Give me a rain check, please, and don't be angry. I know you'll understand.

E. B.

P. S. Don't ask why. Don't ever.

I was stunned. Why should I understand? What did Eleanor think? I'm not psychic. It was our first date and I had been stood up. Why? She had seemed enthusiastic, as if our first date were important to her, too. Now I was to understand a crazy, incoherent note. Mine not to

reason why, mine not to make reply. Hell, I wasn't the brave six hundred.

"I'm going to find out. No woman can do that to me. Understand, my neck! What does she think?"

In this mood I stormed into the *Truth and Love* office. It was empty. Neither Eleanor's plaid coat nor Lola Manfred's frowsy fur cape hung on the costumer. Both desks were neat, both typewriters covered.

Miss Eccles was at the telephone when I rushed into her office. She held one hand over the mouthpiece while she said, "This is an important call. Long distance. Could you wait outside, Mr. Ansell?"

The light in Miss Eccles' office was switched off. I ran in, turned on the light and caught Miss Eccles with her coat and hat in her hands.

"Trying to sneak out on me, Miss Eccles?"

"No, indeed. I completely forgot about your wanting to see me. I usually take this at night," she nodded toward the door of the private elevator. "The other's so crowded, you know."

"What did you tell Eleanor in the Ladies' Room?" Somehow I knew that Eleanor had called off our date because of something Eccles had said to her in one of those Ladies' Room chats this afternoon.

Her pale eyes blinked and the washboard chest began to rise and fall.

"What did you tell Eleanor, Miss Eccles?"

Barclay's door opened. He had on the camel's hair coat, the pigskin gloves, and in his right arm he carried an expensive briefcase.

"I'm leaving now, Miss Eccles. How's it coming, Ansell?"

Miss Eccles' eyes followed hopefully as he crossed the office. But he had no more duties for her that day, and did not think of asking if she wanted to ride with him in the private elevator.

Miss Eccles chattered, struggling for breath. "A great man, a wonderful human being, absolutely devoted to his work. It's a privilege to work with him, to be so intimate with one of the great figures of our day, a man whose name will live in history and whose philosophy . . ."

"Look, Miss Eccles, I don't care about

his greatness. I want to know what you told Eleanor in the Ladies' Room and why it happened just after I'd asked you about the Wilson story."

She gave me the look of a stricken doe. I was ruthless. Grabbing bony shoulders I shook her until her teeth chattered.

"The secret is not my own."

Her body remained rigid, but her head turned on the thin stalk of her neck. She looked at the wall that was broken by the copper and chromium door of Noble Barclay's private elevator. This door opened.

"I think I'll leave this," Barclay said, gesturing with the hand that held the briefcase. "Can't work tonight. Wife's just home from California, you know." For emphasis he set the briefcase upon his secretary's desk. "Going home, Grace? I'm driving uptown, can I give you a lift?"

He waited at the elevator door. She glanced at me over her shoulder, and it was as if the angels had swooped down and rescued her at the very portals of hell. This time the elevator door closed with a bang.

I worked until seven o'clock, went downstairs and had two Martinis and two lamb chops at the Grille. When I returned to the office there was no sign of life in the place. All the lights had been turned out and the darkness was like something solid. I switched on a small light and hurried to the *Truth and Crime* office.

Noble Barclay did not ask his editors to work in sordid surroundings. "One incentive for joining us," he had said when I came to talk to him about the job, "is the cheerful atmosphere of our offices. We believe that creative people are more productive under harmonious influences. All of our private offices have been done over recently by one of the best interior decorators in the business, under Mrs. Barclay's personal supervision."

My office represented the decorator's blue period. The walls were gray but the chairs had been upholstered in some shaggy blue material, the picture frames and lampshades matched, and even the Thermos jug and drinking glass were of a harmonizing blue plastic. The effect under artificial light was melancholy.

I finished my cigarette and automatically lighted another. The storm was over, the night air clear. A high, angry wind whined

through the airshaft. My tongue was heavy, my throat dry and I felt as if I had just awakened with a bad hangover.

The water in the blue Thermos was cool and refreshing. Suddenly my typewriter began to move away. The wall behind it retreated, too. My desk had begun to rock, the floor to tip, the whole building to pitch like a small ship on a furious sea. Clinging to the arms of my chair I lifted myself like a cripple. At the first step my legs unhinged and I slid along a glazed surface.

A weight lay upon my chest and the thing that clasped my wrist was a human hand. Remote and pontifical a voice sounded.

"We can't be sure until we've got the analysis but I saw one just like this when I was interning. Bichloride of mercury. The patient died."

II

GRACE ECCLES' STORY

WHEN THE HISTORY of this generation is written there will appear high upon the roll call of contemporary immortals the name of Noble Barclay. I have had the singular honor of associating for seven years with this great man, five of which were spent in such close intimacy that I have often wondered if his wife knew him as well as his secretary.

Let me first introduce myself, Grace Jacqueline Eccles, forty-seven years of age (in this as in everything else, I am completely truthful), independent, self-sustaining, mentally and morally free. What a contrast to that Grace Eccles of a decade ago! Not only was I inhibited and narrow-minded, but also unemployed. The latter was not wholly my fault. Our country was in the midst of the so-called Depression. Few positions were available and those were usually bestowed upon younger girls of obvious charms who looked as if they would perform other than the conventional duties of a private secretary.

Even in these dark hours, however, my normally unselfish nature asserted itself. Unable to help myself, I tried to help others. There lived in our neighborhood a girl younger than myself and more unfortunate in that she was blind. According to stories whispered by scandalmongers she

had none to blame but herself for this tragic fate. It was said that she had consorted with a married man whose vengeful wife waited one night until her husband and this girl came out of a bar and dashed acid in the girl's face. As a result of shock and remorse the girl went almost insane but she was saved by the tender nursing and devotion of her dear mother. Her eyesight, however, was lost. She was taken to see several world-famous specialists, but they shrugged their shoulders and shook their learned heads. The optic nerve had been destroyed and she would never see again.

In addition to this tragedy the girl also suffered the belief that her face was hideously scarred. This was untrue but no one could convince her. In her mind's eye this girl saw a countenance so distorted that none could look upon it without revulsion. As she had been extremely pretty and consequently a vain person, this cross was almost too heavy for her frail shoulders.

I tried to bring some brightness into the life of this tragic creature, and whenever I was not immersed in personal melancholy or seeking employment, I spent my time reading aloud to her. One day by a coincidence, which some would call a minor accident but which I prefer to think of as a divinely guided miracle, a copy of *My Life Is Truth* came into my hands. I had picked it up by mistake, leaving the copy of a light novel by Kathleen Norris.

I glanced over the Introduction. It was strong meat. At first I was dubious for it seemed that no mortal could suffer what Noble Barclay had gone through in the first fifty-seven pages. What inspired me to go on reading was the reaction of my audience.

When I had come to the last sentence in the Introduction (just the Introduction, not even the philosophical portions) this girl said to me in a trembling voice, "Grace, it's absolutely true what people say about me. I have been lying to my dear mother and my good friends. I was fooling around, as they say, with Mr. L. Not only that, but I tried to take him away from his wife. God help me, I never confessed this to a living soul but you, Grace, but I swear it's true. I feel much lighter now that I've said it, as if 'd cast off a heavy load."

Unfortunately her mother entered at this moment and we shut up like clams. AI-

though her mother had been a devoted nurse, she had never ceased abusing her daughter for immoral conduct. I left immediately, the precious book clutched tight in my tremulous hand.

While I was helping my sister wash the supper dishes our telephone rang. It was the blind girl. Her mother had gone to an Eastern Star meeting and she wanted to talk to me. I hurried to her at once, bringing Noble Barclay's immortal work. We did not read much, however, because I listened while she poured out her heart. She confessed everything about her relationship to Mr. L., from the first caress to the pleasure she had experienced in intimate association and her evil desire to get rid of his wife. At times her emotion was so great that I had to bring her black-berry cordial from the bathroom cabinet. But she was almost in an ecstasy, and to make a long story short, she not only recovered her sight miraculously within twenty-four hours, but soon afterwards married a prosperous automobile salesman, and is now living happily in Birmingham, Alabama.

MY OWN miracle, while not so sensational, worked such a change in my sensitive and shrinking nature that timidity was transformed to self-confidence, foolish and desperate fears were overcome, and within a fortnight I found myself the incumbent of a part-time job. In addition I was cured almost immediately of the malady from which I had suffered for so many desolate years, and my complexion soon afterwards became clearer.

All this happiness and good fortune were due to a single cause, my belief in Truth as expounded by Noble Barclay. Day and night I sought some way of expressing my gratitude. A second miracle brought me that opportunity. I happened to hear through an employment agency that there was a vacancy in the Stenographic Department of none other than Truth Publications. I applied at once for this position, and when the Head of the Department heard that I was not only one of Mr. Barclay's followers, but would be satisfied with \$16.50 a week, I was hired on the spot.

For more than a year I was but a cog in the wheel of his vast enterprises.

I confess now that I was shocked to discover that many employes were not believers in his principles, and wondered why he did not insist upon belief as a prerequisite of employment. How narrow-minded of me and how much broader his policy! He would never make arbitrary rules for his help but was willing to give all the same opportunity. The Head of the Department was such a cynic that I felt privately that she did not deserve the honor of that position which she managed to hold because she got maximum work out of the girls and found many excuses to dock those who were guilty of small infractions of the rules.

Once again I was the vessel of what others may call chance or coincidence, but which I prefer to think of as a small miracle. Why was I lucky enough to be sitting in the office eating a box lunch when Mr. Barclay suddenly was seized with the desire to dictate while his secretary was enjoying his noon meal at a restaurant!

Up to this moment I had not met Mr. Barclay personally. With his almost omnipotent glance he noticed my tremors. "You're not afraid of me?" he asked in the kindest voice in the world.

"I adore you," I replied humbly.

A few months after this, destiny called me to the position which I have enjoyed for seven years. It was not long before I gained Mr. Barclay's confidence and was able to keep him informed daily as to the undercurrents in the office, the crude and impolitic remarks of the envious and cynical, and the true nature of those who pretended to admire their employer. With an increase in my responsibilities came several substantial raises in salary. Mr. Barclay is more than generous with those upon whose loyalty he can depend.

I am often filled with melancholy as I ponder the cynicism and distrust with which others regard the nobility of this man. But I comfort myself with the thought that he is so big that our little natures do not distress him overmuch. Some day all humans will learn to face and acknowledge Truth, and then war and illness will disappear from the earth, and there will be no more drunkenness or poverty, and life will be one sweet song.

Because I have been so close to this great man, Mr. John Ansell has asked me to

contribute a chapter to his book on Noble Barclay. That this request flattered my humble person I admit frankly, since I have had little time in my life for literary pursuits. I admit also to some bewilderment anent the subject of my reminiscences. Why does Mr. Ansell particularly request my memories of the "incident" regarding Mr. Warren G. Wilson? But, as Mr. Ansell suggests, it is ever the duty of one who knows the truth to challenge the spread of rumor.

On that fatal Friday in May, I returned from luncheon at my usual time. No sooner had I entered my office than the telephone rang and one of the switchboard operators informed me that she had a message for my chief. A Mr. Warren G. Wilson had called to say that the date was on and he expected Mr. Barclay at his apartment that evening. As is my habit, I went into Mr. Barclay's office and made a notation on his desk calendar.

Mr. Barclay had been lunching with the Senator, and did not return to his office until 4 P. M. A few minutes afterwards he buzzed me.

"Where did this come from?" he demanded and pointed to the lone message on his calendar pad.

"It came while I was at luncheon. I received it from the switchboard," I replied.

"Thank you, Miss Eccles," he said briefly. Jerking the page off the calendar pad, he tore it into minute particles and deposited them in the wastebasket.

Evidently Mr. Barclay communicated with Mr. Munn on the inter-office telephone, for I had hardly returned to my desk when that individual came hurrying through my office and disappeared into the private sanctum.

My duties were interrupted a second time when Mr. Barclay commended me to summon his daughter. Eleanor was not at her desk in the office of *Truth and Love Magazine*. I was to locate her immediately. After a few unsuccessful attempts I discovered that she was in our Photographic Studio, helping to pose models for illustrations. A few moments later, in response to my request, she hastened through my anteroom and disappeared, also, in her father's office.

Their conference did not break up until

after six o'clock and I saw no more of them that day. The incident, no doubt, would have been erased from my mind had not a curious coincidence followed. That being Friday, the next day was Saturday. Mr. Barclay was absent from the office. Certainly a man so unstinting of his energy was entitled to an extra half holiday each week, which he usually spent in the country with his wife and small sons, while faithful myrmidons kept watch over his affairs from nine until 1 P. M.

Eleanor was also absent that morning, but unofficially. She had simply failed to appear in the office. For that reason I was involved in an argument with the Photographic Studio. Shortly after I had settled at my desk Mrs. Harden, who is in charge of the Studio Property Room, telephoned to inquire about a gun.

Yes, a gun. This may sound melodramatic but it is a comic facet of our work in the confessional magazine field. Since many of these stories published in our magazines are true confessions of crime, it is necessary in posing illustrative photographs to use firearms. And in order to have this equipment when necessary, we have an ever so amusing little arsenal adjacent to the studio. Although the guns are not loaded, they are considered lethal weapons and when an editor or sub-editor or assistant, in posing pictures, wishes to use such property, he signs a requisition. The love story which Eleanor was working on evidently required the pictorial display of a .22 (what this is, I confess, I have never been certain). The point was that she had this pistol in her hands when summoned to her father's office.

Mrs. Lola Manfred, Eleanor's superior on *Truth and Love Magazine*, reported that the gun was not in the office they shared. She suggested to Mrs. Harden that Eleanor might have carried the gun into Mr. Barclay's office and left it there. Hence, I was involved in the search. No gun was visible. I hunted high and low, but was unable to find anything of that description.

Let me say here, before any further suspicion is engendered in the reader's mind, that the gun was discovered that very Saturday morning on a window sill in the Photographic Studio. Mrs. Harden had telephoned Mr. Munn about it, asking if

he had seen the gun in Eleanor's hand. He replied in the negative, but offered to assist in the search. Shortly after the weapon was discovered and we all had a big laugh over our "gun hunt."

It was not until the following Monday morning that I learned from the newspapers that Mr. Wilson—yes, our own Mr. Warren G. Wilson—had been murdered. In self-defense, let me remark that it seemed perfectly natural for me to comment on this to Mr. Barclay.

"Did you see the morning papers?" I inquired. "Aren't you shocked about your friend, Mr. Wilson?"

Mr. Barclay, usually the most considerate of employers, snarled at me. "Never mention his name again, Miss Eccles." Not content with that he stamped across my office to the door of his sanctum. "Not to me or anyone else. Do you understand?"

"But, Mr. Barclay," I argued, trying to explain what I considered a normal interest in the sensational occurrence.

"You are never to speak Wilson's name again, neither to me nor anyone else. I never knew the man. He was trying to annoy me. You'll forget the whole incident, Miss Eccles."

It was easier to pledge my word than discipline my unruly thoughts. Each day thereafter Mr. Wilson's name was in the newspapers. I was almost ill with worry. Mr. Barclay's admonitions to silence contradicted the most elementary precepts of his creed. The only explanation with which I could satisfy my gnawing curiosity was that he was shielding another. I repeated and repeated over again his wise words regarding the sacredness of the secrets of others. I realized then that I, also, must conceal what I knew in order to shield some unknown innocent. The pain of such concealment was sweeter when I realized that I suffered for another's sake.

MONTHS PASSED. The name of Warren G. Wilson was almost buried in my unconscious mind when John Ansell, unwittingly, I believed, chose his murder as the subject for the Unsolved Mystery Department of *Truth and Crime Magazine*. I was not surprised when Mr. Barclay rejected the story. I thought the matter would be buried for the nonce. But Mr.

Ansell was a rebel in our midst. Challenging authority, he demanded a reason for the rejection of his story. When Mr. Barclay withheld the answer to his impertinent questions, Mr. Ansell tried to force the information out of me.

But Grace Eccles was too clever for him. Using feminine wiles I made a tactful excuse about a telephone call and managed to get rid of that inquisitive little gentleman. Although I gave him no reason to suspect that his questioning had unnerved me, I felt quite ill and knew I could not continue with my duties unless I unburdened myself partially or wholly of the heavy load that had been fermenting within me. The pressure was too great for my fragile consciousness to bear.

Let me add here that I suspected no one of intrigue. At this time I sought nothing more than relief from the pressure of self-distrust. What guilty untruth about myself was I hiding behind the suspicion of others? It would have been most salutary to discuss this matter with Mr. Barclay himself, but since that day when I had promised never again to mention Mr. Wilson's name, I felt that to seek his confidence *on this particular matter* would be tactless.

While I was pondering the matter and watching office personnel through the glass window of my own little domain, I noticed Eleanor Barclay among the girls going to the Ladies' Room. This seemed divine coincidence.

Who was more worthy of my confidence than his own daughter, and who could be trusted more completely to guard his interests? In indulging my need for a session of Truth-Sharing with Eleanor Barclay, I felt no qualm of disloyalty.

I followed her to the Ladies' Room. It was my presence, I am sure, that quickly cleared the place of all the stenographers who waste company time smoking and dawdling before the mirrors.

"Eleanor, I must speak to you," I said, locking the door.

"Is it necessary to barricade ourselves?" she inquired flippantly.

"Please do not be cynical, dear," I admonished. "When you know this organization as well as I do, you'll realize how many two-faced people there are in the world. There's no other place in this office

where you can be sure of complete privacy."

"But somebody may want to use the toilet."

"I shan't be long," I promised. "I sorely need a short session of Truth-Sharing."

"Is it really necessary?" she asked ungraciously. "I want to leave early today. I'm going to have my hair done. I've got a dinner date, a particular dinner date, a dinner date I've been wanting for months."

This was inconsiderate, since I had frankly appealed to her for sympathy, but I generously overlooked it on the score that youth must have its fling.

"I have something more important than a dinner date to discuss with you," I rejoined.

"Well, make it snappy," she retorted.

I was careful at the start to explain that I suspected no one of deceit, but was merely trying to purge myself of unworthy emotion. But I had hardly begun to describe my actions in relation to the telephone call when she interrupted.

"Is it true the switchboard operator made a mistake on that call, and gave the message to Mr. Barclay instead of me, or was it you, Grace, playing one of your little tricks?"

Needless to say, I was shocked. "I was not aware until now, Eleanor, that you were acquainted with this Mr. Wilson."

Her cheeks wore an unbecoming flush. "He was calling me," she said. "That's how it all started. But I hope you don't think it has anything to do with the murder."

"Why, Eleanor!" I exclaimed. "That thought never entered my mind. It was simply that your father showed so much emotion over the incident and was so vehement in forbidding me ever to use Mr. Wilson's name again that I..."

"Why don't you do what you're told?" she interrupted harshly.

"I have never mentioned his name..."

"What do you think you're doing now?"

"Truth-Sharing," I reminded her, "is different. Confessions are sacred. You know as well as I that the secrets of another person's heart, no matter how freely offered, are not yours to disperse."

"Okay," she snapped. "What else do you know?"

Just then the janitor opened the door.

I made my way through the throng of gaping stenographers and returned to my office. I did not see Eleanor again that afternoon but was informed that she had left without finishing her work for the day, probably to have her hair set for that dinner date.

In spite of her lack of sympathy this little session of Truth-Sharing had purged my spirit. For me the unpleasantness would have been completely over had not Mr. Ansell burst into my office a second time that day and demanded to know what information I had imparted to Eleanor in the Ladies' Room. When I refused to answer, he laid his hands upon me savagely. Had it not been for the fortunate coincidence of Mr. Barclay's appearance, I might have been the victim of brutality.

It was almost as if Mr. Barclay had known instinctively of my predicament. Was it mere chance that ordained my rescue? I prefer to think there was something deeper in the coincidence of Mr. Barclay's taking his briefcase with him that night and then suddenly remembering that he would not need it and deciding to return it to the office. My spirit had cried out to his, silently, and without perceiving the direction of his guidance, he had opened the elevator door at the crucial moment.

His powers of intuition must have perceived my distress, for upon leaving his briefcase upon my desk, he kindly invited me to ride uptown with him in the limousine, a privilege which I do not often enjoy.

The office that morning was in a state of the wildest excitement. One of the scrubwomen, arriving at ten o'clock the previous night, had discovered Mr. Ansell unconscious on the floor of his office. Had not the night man summoned the ambulance so promptly and the doctor been so efficient in rendering first-aid, we might have lost our *Truth and Crime* editor.

Mr. Barclay did not arrive at the office until noon that day. Upon seeing me his first words were, "He's all right. Let them know it outside."

"Who's all right?" I inquired, not crediting Mr. Barclay with knowledge of the unhappy situation.

"Ansell," he answered briefly.

Then he dictated the following memorandum:

For the sake of our tenant, the Barclay

Building Grille, and our friend, Mr. I. G. Smith, its proprietor, I am requesting you not to repeat the rumor that Mr. Ansell was poisoned by eating shrimps at the Grille. Mr. Smith exercises the greatest care in preparing the dishes served in his restaurant, and would never allow food to be set before a customer if there were any question as to its freshness.

Unfortunately, it is not always possible to judge seafood. The shrimps cooked yesterday in the Barclay Building Grille kitchens showed no sign of deterioration, and no one was more surprised than Mr. Smith himself to learn that Mr. Ansell's sudden illness was blamed upon the food served in the Grille.

Since Mr. Smith is not only our tenant but a good friend to all of us who eat in his restaurant, I appeal to your sense of good sportsmanship in asking that you use all possible discretion in keeping the story from spreading.

"Make ten copies and circulate them through the office," Mr. Barclay instructed. "Have them signed by every employee and then have every copy returned to me with the signatures."

"Yes, Mr. Barclay," replied this humble servant.

While I was typing the memo, Eleanor burst into the office. She greeted me as if our last meeting had not ended in an impasse.

"He's all right, Grace!" she cried, as if I had inquired as to some party's condition. "All he needs now is a short rest and he'll be back at work. You can't imagine how I feel."

"Are you by any chance alluding to Mr. Ansell?" I inquired.

She nodded vehemently. "I thought I'd die when I heard he'd been poisoned. I guess I have a melodramatic mind because I..." She paused at the brink of revelation and changed her mind about voicing it. Shrugging her shoulders, Eleanor babbled on, "What a relief to learn it was only seafood! Hasn't Father been wonderful?"

"Noble Barclay," I replied, "is always wonderful."

"They called him early this morning to tell him one of his editors had been found half dead in his office. Father rushed to the hospital at once, and told them to do

everything they could for Johnnie. I've never seen Father so wonderful."

"I am glad," I observed, "that you appreciate your father." I would have said more, but Eleanor, with that rudeness which is characteristic of her and which, I am sure, she must have inherited from the distaff side, fled from earshot.

Since I am in the habit of eating a light breakfast I take my lunch early. As soon as I had finished typing the memo and had sent it, with complete instructions, to the various Department Heads I wended my way downstairs to the Grille. Seating myself at my usual table, I consulted the menu. My regular waitress approached me and asked, "How about shrimp Creole, Miss Eccles? It's very nice today."

"How dare you?" I cried with the utmost indignation. "Do you think it in good taste to jest when one of your patrons almost lost his life by eating your contaminated shrimps yesterday?"

The waitress seemed surprised. "Shrimps! Yesterday?"

I was annoyed with Mr. Smith for failing to inform his employees of the unfortunate affair of Mr. Ansell's shrimps. Although I had typed the memo requesting employees not to spread rumor outside of our office, I considered it my duty to inform the waitress lest she hear of it through unreliable sources and indulge in idle gossip.

"But we didn't serve shrimps last night," she insisted. "We haven't had a shrimp in this place for over a week."

I tried patiently to argue with the stubborn creature, but I could not convince her that I had spoken the truth. She even summoned other waitresses to back up her assertions. Naturally her friends took her side in the argument. This puzzled me. Although I would not take the words of ignorant working girls in preference to Mr. Barclay's interpretation of the case, my curiosity could not be appeased. My mind was riddled with questions that had no right to enter that holy ground. Doubtless I was at fault. Somewhere in my sly psyche was buried an untruth which I had not the courage to force out and boldly face.

If only Nature had endowed me with greater courage I should have purged myself by sharing known truths with the best of all confessors. Too timid to uproot the

festering sores of buried doubt by laying my problems at the feet of Noble Barclay, I comforted myself with the excuse that a busy man occupied with problems of international import had no time for my petty concerns. This, however, was bare comfort. "Oft in the stilly night" have I wakened to wonder at the excessive discretion of my employer and his daughter. Was there not some hidden knowledge anent the connection between Mr. Wilson's death and the misdirected telephone message? Why was Mr. Barclay so stern in commanding my silence and rejecting Mr. Ansell's story?

Whatever the dark secret was, I knew it not to be mine. Nor did I cast the slightest shadow of suspicion upon Noble Barclay. With his unfathomable faith in humanity in general and his friends in particular, this paragon of honesty might readily have been victim of some cruel fraud. Tragedy is the inevitable result of deceitfulness. Out of the roots of falsehood evil flowers; that is the law of Nature and she is a stern taskmaster.

III

JOHN ANSELL CONTINUES . . .

LOOK, MY PRETTY," I said to the nurse who enjoyed the adjective without deserving it, "I admire you but I can't afford you. I can't afford this expensive layout. How the hell did I get here?"

"Don't worry, Mr. Ansell. If somebody couldn't afford these things, you wouldn't be in this room."

I lay back on the expensive bed and tried to figure it out. Since my knees had given way under me in the office and I had felt myself hurled through space on the cannonball express, I was not clear about anything. My adventures with tossing seas and dead weights had been delusions, and here I was in a hospital room that was not white and narrow, but done in muted colors and with a big corner window through which expensive sunlight streamed.

They would feed me nothing but gruel. Along with the breakfast tray came Noble Barclay.

"How you feeling, lad?"

"I'm still trying to figure it out. Maybe I'm not bright. They tell me I lost consciousness and one of the scrubwomen

found me on the floor. Didn't I hear the ambulance doctor say something about bichloride of mercury?"

"You must have been dreaming," Barclay said. "Too much imagination, lad. Comes from working on all those detective stories." He laughed. "I'm giving you a holiday from *Truth and Crime*."

"I was expecting it."

"Afraid you'd lose your job, eh? What kind of a heel do you think you're working for?" This pleased Barclay. He laughed jovially. "You're being promoted, son. As of this week you're editor of *Truth Digest*."

"*Truth Digest*?"

"The newest Barclay Truth Publication. Truth in tabloid. Fits into your vest pocket but contains the best that is being printed, not only in our own magazines, but in all popular periodicals. What do you think of the idea? Original, isn't it?"

The idea of a digest magazine was about as original as a Christmas greeting. "Won't you," I asked cautiously, "meet a lot of competition?"

Barclay considered. "It's true, there are other digests but this would be the first Truth digest. Get the idea? We've been selling reprint rights to other digests and even carrying their stuff, originated in their offices and written by their staff people. But what do we make on it? A few thousand a month. Think, lad, of the money we'd coin with our own digest. And what a medium for bringing our message to the public."

"What about your contracts with the other digests, Mr. Barclay?"

"Don't you worry about that, John. We've got the best attorneys in the country. You're to keep your mind on the editorial side. It's a cinch, boy, six magazines of our own to draw on, just as a start. Absolutely no cost for editorial matter, and anything we'd like to feature in *TD*, we can print first in one of the other magazines. Beautiful setup, isn't it?"

I agreed. The setup couldn't have been prettier. "But," I said, "*Truth and Crime* and *Truth and Love* can hardly be used as a source of digest stuff."

"Not as much as *Truth*," Barclay said. "The bulk of the digest material would be from it. We've got a gold mine to draw on, exposes, political stuff, war, human inter-

est. And *Truth and Health!* Look at the other digests, filled with health stories, medical discoveries, reducing diets, the newest cures . . ."

"Mostly phonies," I put in.

"We can expose them," cried Barclay. "And once in a while we can throw in some *TC or TL*, nothing the public likes better than a good fact romance or a true crime. And *Truth and Beauty* gives us the woman's angle. What do you think of the new job, boy?"

"Sounds good."

"Good?" sniffed Barclay. "That's the best job you ever dreamed of. Boy, you don't know. It's going to thrill you so that you'll have to be dragged away from your desk nights. It might be hard work but not too hard for an intellectual like you. Look at the public you'll reach, the chance you'll get to tell them straight simple truth instead of the guff that's usually concealed under a welter of literary language. It's a man's job, lad. As of this week your salary is two hundred per."

Two hundred a week? Was I still unconscious? Wake up, Ansell, you're hearing voices. In a split second the cannonball express is going to crash head-on into solid fact. If the bichloride of mercury had been fantasy, what of the seventy-five dollars a week raise?

It was not a dream. There, solid as the hospital bed, was Noble Barclay, radiating health and good humor, and the nurse, who was not pretty, coquetting all over the place because she was attracted by his wealth or his virility. Aware of the admiration, Barclay exhibited more of his good humor. "You don't believe me, John? Sounds too good to be true, huh?" His enjoyment was so frank that I did not flinch at his making a show of it.

He strode across the room. He covered its length in seven steps and strode back to the bed. "Don't belittle yourself, lad. You know you're a damn good editor. Do you sit around like the rest of the highbrows, wisecracking, while the staff writers get the material?" He paused beside the bed, looking into my face. "When an organization like mine is lucky enough to find a man of your caliber, it's our job to hang onto you and to find work worthy of your talent. Why, if you weren't satisfied with us you'd be looking for another job. And some other

publisher would grab you like that." He made a gesture intended to show how hungry publishers would grasp a smart young editor by the coat collar and swing him into a mahogany swivel chair. "Don't think you're not worth the price. I'm too canny a businessman to pay that salary to a lad who doesn't deserve it."

He turned to the nurse. "Could he have a cigarette, young lady? I don't smoke myself but when a smoker gets a piece of startling news he reaches for a cigarette. Will you get one for him?"

"He's not supposed to smoke."

"Get him a drink of water, will you?"

"Do you want one?" she asked.

"I don't mind if I do," I said.

She poured some water from a glass jug. I saw the look of disappointment in Barclay's face.

"Look, my pretty," I said to the nurse, "Mr. Barclay wants to talk to me privately. Would you mind stepping out for a few minutes?"

She went.

Barclay winked at me. "You're an astute person."

"I'd be a moron not to understand those elephantine tactics."

He laughed again. I stood in well with Noble Barclay; he liked me for being fresh. I finished drinking my water, and as I put the glass back on the bed table, I remembered something. "I've got it," I cried. "The water. Last night I took a drink of water . . ."

"I have a favor to ask of you," he interrupted. "I happen to be interested in the English Grille and I'd be grateful if nothing more was said about those shrimps you ate last night."

I LOOKED around. There were no bars on the windows and the walls weren't padded. I tried to ask a couple of questions, but Barclay rode over my interruptions like a hopped-up jalopy. He was not so much concerned, Barclay said, with the financial returns from the Grille as with the fate of Smith, its proprietor. Smith was one of his followers, an ex-dipsomaniac reclaimed by Truth-Sharing.

"His story is remarkably like my own," Barclay assured me. "And since you've read the Introduction, you must realize how I feel about Smith's making good. Don't re-

peat what I've told you about him because it wouldn't help his morale if the story became common gossip. Smith's pulled himself out of the gutter, so to speak, and made a pretty good thing of the Grille. That's why I feel so strongly about this affair last night. If the story got out, it might ruin the restaurant. And God knows what would happen to Smith."

"Wouldn't his belief in Truth help him survive it?" I asked, not without malice.

"It was the belief that he was a failure that made him shun Truth and sent him on the downward path. A repetition of the experience might doom the man." He caught my eye and asked for understanding. "Keep it under your hat, won't you, Ansell?"

I leaned back upon the pillows, closed my eyes, tried to look sick. I needed time to think about Barclay's sudden generosity and his unctuous interest in Smith. A bribe had been offered, so that I should forget I had taken a drink of water from a blue carafe on the desk in my office.

Curiosity tore at my guts, made me sicker than the poison. I knew that I'd get nowhere by asking questions. There was only one way for me to find out what really had happened. As long as I worked at my job and kept quiet about the water in my carafe, I could do as much undercover investigation as I wanted. When I found the answer, I promised myself, I would spare no one. You can't poison an Ansell and get off without paying the price.

There was no danger. "You think I'm astute, Mr. Barclay. But what if I should happen to eat shrimps again?"

"You're too clever for that. From now on you'll be more careful."

There was a long silence. I looked at Barclay and he looked at his reflection in the mirror. The smooth son-of-a-bitch took it for granted that his bribe was enough to make me forget that drink of water.

The nurse knocked at the door, peered in and opened it wider to admit a bunch of yellow chrysanthemums. Behind them came Eleanor. When she saw me leaning weakly against the pillows she let out the prettiest little groan I ever heard.

"You're all right now, aren't you?" she whispered, her breath catching between the words.

I enjoyed her sympathy and kept up the fraud. Barclay beamed as if he dropped

happiness into our outstretched hands.

"I'll leave you kids alone now," he said. "You've probably got a lot to say to each other." At the door he saluted me. "Anything you need, John, just say the word. And don't worry about the job. We'll get someone to pinch-hit until you're well again. Good-bye, kids."

He left. Eleanor took off her hat and gave the flowers to the nurse.

"Take a long time finding a vase," I said. "My weakened condition requires that I spend some time alone with this young lady."

After the nurse had gone Eleanor sat in the armchair half-way across the room. She had become prim. Her skirt crept up and she pulled it down over her knees. I broke the news about the new job.

"Isn't Father wonderful!" she said.

I was irked. When a man tells his girl about a raise and a big job, she ought to praise him. *I'm glad you clipped that coupon, John. Now you are a big executive and we can get married.* If she read the ads in the Barclay Truth magazines she'd know she ought to praise the man rather than her father.

"Why did you come here, Eleanor?"

"I . . . I . . ." she stumbled over the words. "I heard you were ill. I was worried."

"Worried about me? I didn't know you'd care enough to worry."

"I liked you from the very first day," Eleanor said. The sun shining through the big window turned her hair to gold. Her skin was pale ivory gilded by the sunshine.

"I didn't know it," I said. "You were so elusive."

"Elusive?"

"I thought you regretted having gone out with me that time," I said. "I thought you were angry because I'd asked too many personal questions. I had no idea you were so sensitive."

Her hands were folded in her lap. She looked down at them. When the cynics at the Editors' Table made fun of Noble Barclay, she tightened into a steely mold. "People are always asking questions. They think they can find out more about Father by being nice to me."

"Thanks," I said, "for your frank opinion. It's nice to know what someone really thinks of you."

She jumped up and came over to the bed. "You've got to understand, Johnnie. I'm not suspicious. It's only the way people have always acted toward me. Being *his* daughter isn't easy, you know."

"Evidently you've changed your opinion of me. That's something to be thankful for."

"I was sorry I got angry with you that day," she confessed. "Only I didn't know what to do about it. I never had the courage to admit it, but I hoped you'd forgive me." The shy color crept back into her face. "Honestly, you won't believe it, but I used to wait for you to come out of your office, so we could ride down together in the elevator, and I'd hope you were having dinner in the Village, so we could be together on the bus."

"Did you?" I cried. "That's why I went downtown so often. Don't you know I live uptown? I liked riding on the bus with you . . ."

"Once you said you were in a hurry and were taking a cab, and asked if you could give me a lift. Remember?"

"As soon as you got out, I told the driver to turn around and take me back uptown."

"Did you!" she cried.

"Let's not beat around the bush," I said. "I'm crazy about you and I didn't know whether you liked me or loathed me. Every time I tried to make a date, you'd pull that startled-fawn stuff and . . ."

"I was afraid."

"Not afraid of me," I laughed. "Why, I thought you had written me off because I was kind of fresh about your old man. I was afraid you'd want a guy to believe in that stuff about purging your unconscious and secrets being festering sores. By me, that's a lot of . . ."

"Stop it," she said. "Please, let's not talk about it."

"If we're going on from here, we've got to talk about it."

"Please."

"How can we be friends, how can we ever mean anything to each other if we're afraid to talk about something as close to you as that? Besides," I couldn't help sounding facetious, "isn't that the basic tenet? Face the truth, uproot shame, confess . . ."

"I love my father."

She said it as if I had denied her that

right. Her eyes looked dark because the pupils were dilated, and hard cords rose in her neck.

"Naturally," I said. "Naturally you do, he's your father. It's only natural for you to love him."

SHE CROUCHED over the bed. Her voice was low and level, without inflection. "He believes every word of it. Everything he writes is completely sincere. The Introduction—it's his own story. He went through hell and he saved himself and he believes he can save other people."

"I wish you weren't so unhappy, kid." I reached for her hand.

Eleanor smiled, the radiance returned and her hand lay warm in mine. "What makes you think I'm unhappy? I want you to believe in my father. You don't have to believe in Truth-Sharing but believe in him, a good man, a sincere man."

My hand tightened around hers. "Okay, I believe he's sincere."

"Do you really?"

I was supposed to be a sick man but my strength was remarkable. I put my arms around Eleanor and pulled her down beside me on the bed.

Unfortunately the nurse came in and we were forced to separate.

After five days at the hospital, I was discharged. The doctor advised a few days' rest and Barclay said I could have a two-week vacation with pay. I went home to see my mother and to brag to the family and old friends about the new job. They were plenty impressed. After all, two hundred a week.

After a few days the adulation ceased to satisfy me. I wanted to get back to work and to Eleanor. Over the long-distance wire she had confided that she missed me.

On Thursday, December sixth, just two weeks after the excitement, I came back to work. My pockets were full of notes jotted on old envelopes and business cards. These were bright ideas for *Truth Digest*.

Everyone came into my new office to congratulate me. On the wall above my desk hung Noble Barclay's picture autographed to his dear friend, John Miles Ansell. Directly under it was a chromium tray with a Thermos jug and glass. They were made of green plastic to harmonize with the interior decoration, but otherwise they were exactly

like the blue carafe and glass in the *Truth and Crime* office.

I made a vow. No matter how thirsty I might become, I'd never take a drink from that jug. For the past two weeks I'd been trying to figure out the movements and motives of the character who had tried to poison me. Any office stooge might have done the trick. The whole staff had known that I intended to work late that night. Miss Kaufman had been instructed to tell the night watchman that I would return at eleven. Instead, I had come back at seven-thirty. Whoever had slipped a dose of poison into the blue jug must have visited my office while I was eating lamb chops at the Grille.

Most of the office staff left at five-thirty. Those who stayed were concentrated on overtime work: finishing manuscripts, reading proof, checking copy, balancing accounts. Nine chances out of ten, no one would have noticed an intruder in my office. There were so many legitimate excuses he—or she—might have offered that such a visit would hardly have been counted an intrusion. Or even remembered.

Anyone who worked later than seven signed the book when he left. Therefore, I figured, it had probably been between five-thirty and seven that the bichloride had been dropped into the water in the blue carafe.

If I had died that night, there would certainly have been an autopsy followed by an investigation. But the police would have stumbled up a dozen blind alleys before they found a straight path. I was a new employee; I had no enemies in the office. My arguments with the boss and his aide had concerned editorial policy. No sane policeman would consider that motive for murder. It is much simpler to fire a troublesome employee than to have him killed.

No one in the office had the slightest suspicion of dirty work. To everyone except myself the link between my fight over the Wilson story and the alleged seafood poisoning was invisible. And sometimes I wondered whether I hadn't been delirious that night.

I wanted to hear office gossip. I questioned my stooge tactfully.

What worried Miss Kaufman was the fact that I had eaten seafood. "I thought you had an allergy. I remember distinctly

one night when you worked late, Mr. Ansell, you asked me to have your dinner sent up and you said you ate everything but shellfish. You said you were allergic to lobster, crabs, clams, oysters, terrapin and shrimps."

"Okay, Miss Kaufman, I'm allergic. But I was careless that night. I ordered lamb chops but they took so long to cook them that I told the waitress to bring me a shrimp cocktail. I can't digest shrimps and that's why I got sick. Are you satisfied?"

"It's none of my business." Miss Kaufman was rummaging in the bottom drawer of the desk. Her back was toward me and I studied the curves under her thin silk dress. "You'd better take this home with you."

"What is it?"

She handed me a manuscript envelope. "The Wilson story."

While I had been away, the February issue of *Truth and Crime* had gone to press. Munn had got one of the staff writers to finish the Dot King piece. All copies of the Wilson story were to have been destroyed.

"Mr. Munn asked me to bring them to his office," Miss Kaufman said. "He thought I'd only made the usual three carbons, but I always make an extra one for the author in case he ever wants to do a book. You'd better put this where no one will ever find it."

"Thanks, Miss Kaufman. And look, can you get me a large picture of a shrimp salad or a shrimp cocktail?"

"Shrimp salad or shrimp cocktail, Mr. Ansell!"

"Very large and preferably in color. I'd like it framed."

"What for?"

"To hang over my desk," I said. "So that I never forget why I'm here."

She stared at me and shook her head slowly. I have often seen the same look on my mother's face and the same bewildered movement of her head.

At half past twelve I washed my hands and combed my hair carefully. I intended to celebrate my promotion by taking Eleanor to an expensive restaurant.

Munn was in the washroom. "Congratulations, young fellow." The clown's mouth curved as if his smile had just been put on with grease paint.

I plunged my hands into the hot water. "Thanks, Mr. Munn."

"A great honor for a young man like you. Most fellows twice your age'd give their eye teeth for a chance like that."

"My eye teeth have been extracted. I gave them up for my dear old Alma Mater, the University of Hard Knocks."

He made an effort to laugh. "When Barclay asked me about promoting you, I gave him my frank opinion of your ability. Maybe you can guess what I said." He looked at me expectantly, waiting as if I were his partner in the minuet. "I've always admired your talents. Even when I was obliged to disagree with you on certain matters of policy, I respected your opinions."

I hoped my face showed contempt. If there is any creature lower than the snake it's the stooge. Now that I had become editor of Barclay's best magazine, Edward Everett Munn was on my side. He'd always respected my opinions.

"Let's have lunch some day," he said, looking at his wrist watch. "At my club. Sorry, I must run now. Got a date."

I took a lot of trouble with the part in my hair and worked over my tie. Then I strolled toward the *Truth and Love* office, making myself walk slowly so that I should not seem too anxious.

"What about lunch?" I asked, throwing open the door.

"What about it?" echoed Lola Manfred.

"Where's Eleanor?"

"Gone to lunch."

I was staggered. "Lunch! Alone?"

"She went with some of the girls, I think."

"But I . . ."

"Did you invite her?" Lola interrupted. "I think she was waiting all morning for an invitation. That's the trouble with you men. You always take us so for granted." Lola's voice, which usually was pitched so that deaf people three miles away could hear her without earphones, softened. "Take her away from here, Johnnie. If you love the gal, get her out of this hell hole."

I stared. For the first time since I had known Lola I understood what people meant when they spoke of her faded beauty. Like everything else in the Barclay offices the legend of Lola Manfred had

seemed false to me. In the 1920's Lola had been a slim poetess, the toast of Greenwich Village.

She was supposed to have deserted a millionaire husband in Paris to live her own life, to write delicate verses about love and death, and to starve.

That was long ago. It was hard to associate the editor of *Truth and Love* with a slim girl who had written a slim book of sad little poems. Lola's legs were still lovely but the rest of her body was grossly fat, all bloat and alcohol. She had the eyes of a child, round and wide-set and blue as flowers.

"How long have you worked here, Lola?"

"Countless centuries. Only God's old enough to remember."

"Why do you call it a hell hole?"

She looked at me sadly, holding her head on one side and narrowing her blue eyes. "I'm tired, Ansell. A weary trollop."

"Have lunch with me?"

"Second fiddle? Time was when they asked me for my own sake. Ah, memory! 'Tis all the aged strumpet has left. Where do we eat?"

I felt gallant. I saw myself, one of those world-weary youths of 1925, drinking myself to death for love of Lola Manfred. "How about the Algonquin?"

She yawned. "As far as I'm concerned one saloon is like another." She ran her hands through her hair, pinned on the side of her head a pirate's hat with a dagger hanging over her right eye, tossed a mangy fur cape over her shoulders, rubbed the toes of her slippers against her stockings and started out. In the foyer, as we waited for the elevator, she looked at herself in the mirror.

"Would you say that face reminded you of old Gorgonzola? Very, very old Gorgonzola made from the milk of scrofulous goats."

The elevator stopped for us but Lola paid no attention. She was digging through the antiques in her pocketbook. At last she pulled out a tarnished lipstick. With tiny, caressing movements of her veined hand she painted a Cupid's bow. A new group of Barclay employees was gathering before the elevators.

"How the devil did you ever get that high-class job?" Lola asked. Her voice

could have called the cattle home from far fields.

I jolted her elbow. In the group around us there were probably one or more of Munn's spies.

RELENTLESS, she boomed. "Not that I'd begrudge it to an ambitious fellow, but how a clean-cut type like you ever got a break in this dump is what baffles me. Have you also discovered where the body's buried?"

We had let three cars go by. Suddenly Lola decided that the art work on her mouth was finished, and shoved me toward the elevator. Someone hurried in behind us. I smelled toilet water and peppermint. It was Munn, dressed like a clubman in a velvet-lapelled overcoat and derby hat.

"That's how I keep my job," Lola confided in her booming contralto. "I not only know where the body's buried, I've got maps. X marks the spot. I'm doing my autobiography and when it's published some juicy fruit is going to hang from the gallows tree."

The elevator bounced to a stop. Munn excused himself as he pushed past us. Lola thumbed her nose at his back.

We took a taxi to the Algonquin. The lobby was filled with people waiting hungrily to recognize celebrities or be recognized themselves. "In twenty years," Lola said, "nothing about this dump has changed except the costumes. When I started coming here skirts were so short that if a breeze blew your bra showed."

A crowd waited at the dining-room door. The headwaiter looked at me indifferently, but when he saw Lola, he was like a father whose wandering child has returned. Within seconds we were seated at one of the better tables.

"We don't see much of you any more, Miss Manfred," the headwaiter said and bent over our table like Essex before Elizabeth.

"That's what you tell all the girls," Lola said.

"You used to come every day, Miss Manfred." The headwaiter's brown eyes were reproachful. "Don't you like us any more?"

"I don't sleep with the better literary set now. Will you please have one of your nice waiters rush to this table with three old-fashioned?"

"Three, Miss Manfred?"

"Two for me and one for my youthful paramour."

Unruffled, the head-waiter moved away.

"You're disgusting," I said. "Why do you always have to show off?"

"I'm too lazy to write poetry. And the self-expression offered by my duties on *Truth and Love* does not satisfy my exhibitionistic nature." She took off the pirate's hat, put it on the seat beside her, looked at her face in the mirror, cried, "What a Gorgonzola!" and blew a kiss to someone on the other side of the room. When the waiter brought our drinks Lola raised hers in a toast.

"To the painful death of Noble Barclay!"

"Can't you find some other way to earn your living?" I asked. "When it flavors your liquor, it's going too far."

She held up the glass and squinted at me through the ice and liquor. "I wish you'd stop talking about him all the time. I came here to forget."

"It was you who proposed the toast."

A waiter thrust menus into our hands. I asked Lola twice what she'd like for lunch. She shuddered delicately. I ordered Vichyssoise, liver and bacon and salad for both of us. A man waved across the restaurant at her and she threw him kisses with both hands. "Isn't he growing repulsive, though?" she inquired of me, and smiled at the man.

When she had finished the first drink she said, "You'd be surprised if I told you how long ago it was that I first read the Barclay Bible."

"I thought you didn't want to talk about it."

"I read it before six million suckers had paid him their good dough, before it was translated into sixteen languages. I said it was hogwash and anyone who plunked down a dollar for it would be carried off to the nut house. Prophetic, wasn't I?"

"You've been saying it ever since. At least since I've known you."

"My opinion. May it ever be right, but right or wrong, my opinion."

A fat man stood over our table. Lola raised her eyes to him slowly.

"Why haven't I seen you of late, beauty?" asked the fat man.

"Darling!" exclaimed Lola. "I've been

thinking about you for weeks. We must get together. Do give me a ring soon." After he had gone she said, "I'd have introduced you but I don't remember his name. I think I had an affair with him. He's an oaf."

She settled down to her second drink. There was something childish about the way she held the glass in both hands and bent her head like a baby with a mug of milk. Looking at me over the glass, she asked, "Do you remember Coue?"

"Was he also one of your lovers?"

"Don't be silly. He was French."

"I didn't think you were prejudiced against any race, color or creed."

"I mean he was a Frenchman. He did come over here for a lecture tour, but I never heard him. What I'm trying to say is that I laughed at his book; I thought auto-suggestion was pure hogwash. I go into hysterics over all those psychology and Unity and Rosicrucian Help-Yourself-to-Health-and-Wealth books. Once a boy friend took me to an Oxford Group meeting and I laughed myself into the nearest saloon. I'm just giving you my record." Her voice softened and she said to the middle of the room:

*"Mock on, mock on, Voltaire, Rousseau,
Mock on, 'tis all in vain!
You throw the sand against the wind,
And the wind blows it back again."*

"When I write my autobiography I'm going to call it 'Sand Against the Wind.'"

"That's a nice poem. You haven't lost your touch."

"Kind of you, Ansell. I'll mention you in my book. The young man who paid me the ultimate compliment. Mixed me with Blake."

I frowned. Her chatter skipped ahead of my lame intelligence.

"Blake," she said emphatically. "Blake, William, English poet, 1757-1827. You heard him probably at college."

I did not mind the sarcasm. The poet's name had rung a bell in my memory. The bell tolled but I could not remember whose funeral it marked.

LOLA prattled on. She had said that she wanted to forget Barclay, but he had become her obsession. All roads led to Truth-Sharing. "They're not so different,

you know, Buchman and Barclay. Buchman made the Oxford Movement a success because Moral Rearmament provides the exaltation of confession. Public confession, mind you. A few true believers get together and relieve themselves by telling each other what a hell of a time they had being immoral. Out in the Bible Belt when I was a kid I'd go to revival meetings and witness the same kind of spasms under canvas."

"Are you defending Barclay?" I asked.

"Explaining him to myself. I've got to tell it to myself over and over, otherwise I'd commit suicide out of sheer disgust for the human race. The things people believe! Were you ever psyched?"

"I'm not inhibited, thank you."

"As an enlightened intellectual, you probably consider psychoanalysis the last word in spiritual pathology."

"Spiritual is an unscientific term. You ought to be more precise when you get into these discussions."

"You sound like a professor. What I mean is this: In psychoanalysis you not only get relief by naming your sins and lifting them out of the mysterious hell of the unconscious, but you also transfer your guilt to the doctor. Barclay uses something of the same technique. Look at the Introduction to his book. No matter how evil the poor suckers think they are, Barclay's worse. He's committed all the sins in the calendar and he's willing to take on the burdens of his followers. Truth-Sharing cleanses in a cheap, easy, popular way. You don't have to pay the doctor or fear the tortures of hell. It's the poor man's psychoanalysis. You find a bosom friend, get him excited about Truth-Sharing, and then confess your sins, your frailties, your secret thoughts, whip yourself into a hysteria, release the sense of guilt and whoops! my dear, deliverance."

"You make it sound too simple."

"All theories are simple to the people who believe them. When the tormented heart cries out for relief, it doesn't make much difference what method heals the pain. It doesn't matter what you believe as long as you *can* believe. 'Mock on, mock on, Voltaire.'"

The waiter brought iced soup. Lola ate two spoonfuls and asked for another drink.

"Do you think Barclay explains himself that way? Do you think he knows that he

owes it all to the psychiatrists, the psychologists, the theologians, the theosophists, the faith healed, the priests, the witch doctors and ancient gods?"

"Why should Barclay figure it out?" Lola asked. "He doesn't have to. Why explain a miracle that brings you hundreds of thousands of dollars every year?"

"Just the same he strikes me as a sincere guy," I said. "He certainly doesn't spare himself when he talks or writes about his guilty past, and you can't deny that he practices what he preaches. Whether we mock at him or not, Lola, I feel that Barclay believes he's got the true formula for health and happiness, and he wants the world to share it."

"At one dollar the volume, three-fifty in morocco. And yearly subscriptions to his magazines."

"That makes him no less sincere. Most roads to happiness extract a higher toll. The modern Messiah can't walk barefoot forever."

"What price sincerity?" Lola tossed the phrase at a roomful of complacent celebrities. "What's sincerity worth except to the man who profits by it? We are surrounded by hordes of people who can believe in anything sincerely as long as it brings them a good living. Fascists believe in Fascism, don't they, especially the big ones whose attitudes pay a profit? There's nothing in the world, my friend, so sincere as self-interest."

The waiter stood beside our table listening to Lola's talk. She noticed him at last, pushed the soup cup toward him and said, "Lucky you. You can afford to be sincere about your work. It's not hard to believe in a good meal."

"Thank you, Madame," the waiter said. "I'd like another drink."

"Not till you've eaten," I said.

"Strong-minded, aren't you?" Lola pouted. "A nice thing, plying me with liquor and asking a lot of impudent questions. Now that you've had your way with me, you get stingy."

"Eat your lunch. When your plate's clean, I'll buy you another drink."

Five more men came to the table. Each time it was a love reunion, followed either by a lapse of memory or the news that the ex-lover was *but* repulsive. When she had finished her salad I told the waiter to bring

coffee for me and a double brandy for the lady.

"How you understand me! I shall put you in my memoirs. 'John Ansell, a talented and handsome youth.' How do you like that?"

"Splendid. Just so you don't say I was your lover."

"How ungallant!"

I let her finish her brandy before I asked any more questions. As I lit her cigarette I said, "You must have known Barclay a long time."

She sighed. "Longer, darling, than I care to remember."

"Was he one of your lovers?"

"Take that back or I'll leave the table."

"Perhaps Wilson was," I said, still looking into her eyes. It as a shot in the dark but not too inaccurate. The bell that rang at the name of Blake had reminded me that Wilson's collection had included a number of valuable Blake items.

"Who, dear?"

"Warren G. Wilson."

There was no alteration in her posture or her expression. One blue-veined hand rested on the table. The other held the brandy glass. Her face did not change. No muscle tensed or contracted. I felt rather than saw the wincing and shrinking.

"Warren G. Wilson," I repeated.

"Never heard of him."

Lola finished her brandy, fished around on the banquette and accused a busboy of stealing her hat. The head-waiter hurried over to soothe her while the busboy and I crawled under the table. We did not find the hat until Lola got up. She had been sitting on it.

THIS is a plot to discredit me." Her hands smoothed the hat as if they were comforting the old wreck for some cruel insult. Then she put her hat on at a crazy angle and forgot all about it. On the way out of the hotel she stopped to speak to another brace of ex-lovers. Both, she confided when we were in the taxi, were filthy bastards.

"And you're not much better. The louisiest detective I ever saw. Why don't you learn the tricks? You can get a course by correspondence, five dollars down, five a month."

Her voice was hard. She had tried to be

funny and had not succeeded. For the rest of the way back to the Barclay Building she looked out the window.

Eleanor was reading proof in the *Truth and Love* office. She looked demure and beautiful in a dark dress with a stiff white collar and starched cuffs. The office smelled of fresh-cut flowers. On Lola's desk stood a glass vase filled with American beauty roses. It had not been there when we left the office and I wondered, jealously, who had sent them to Eleanor.

"Did you have a good lunch?" Eleanor asked.

"Superb," Lola said. "He's a dream man, a gent of the old school. He buys you hundreds of drinks and expects nothing for it." Her voice was rough and I could tell that she was still smarting from the wound inflicted by my ignorance.

"I'm sorry if I said anything out of the way, Lola. I certainly didn't mean to hurt your feelings."

"I'm bloody but unbowed," Lola said. Then she noticed the flowers. She looked accusingly at Eleanor.

"It's so hot in here," Eleanor said apologetically. "I opened the box and put them in water. It always hurts me to see flowers die. There was no card again."

Lola tossed the pirate's hat into a corner. The fur cape lay in a heap on the floor. She kicked it with the toe of a shabby patent-leather slipper. Lola must have been close to fifty, but she put on a show like a spoiled three-year-old.

Eleanor picked up Lola's hat, dusted it and hung it up. She shook the dust out of the fur cape. "We needn't keep them in the office," she said. "I'll give them to the girls in the reception room. They're always so grateful. I'll be right back, Johnnie." And Eleanor carried the roses out of the office.

Lola swept out, too. In a few minutes Eleanor came back.

"What's the matter with her?" I said. "Why'd she lose her temper all of a sudden?"

Eleanor shrugged. "She drank too much at lunch, I guess. She'll be all right in a little while."

"Must be pleasant for you, working with all that temperament."

"I feel sorry for her. She's been unhappy lately. She's such an unhappy wo-

man." Eleanor looked at a water spot left on Lola's desk by the vase.

I was still uncertain about the flowers and I said cautiously, "Why did the roses make her angry?"

Eleanor wiped off the spot. "American Beauties always do. This has been going on for months. She probably loathes the person who sent them."

We dropped the subject. I was less interested in Lola's tantrums than in Eleanor's charms. The stiff collar and demure dress made her particularly seductive. I kissed her. She softened in my arms, snuggled against me, let me kiss her forehead, her neck, her mouth.

"You're wonderful, Eleanor. Any other girl would keep her eyes on the door and remind me that someone might come in."

"I don't care who knows I love you."

What could a man do about a girl like that? Since she would not worry about our being caught in the office I was the one who had to remember conventions.

I straightened my tie and combed my hair. "I wanted you to have lunch with me glamorously in some costly dive, but you found a worthier escort. What about dinner?"

"It's cooking."

"What's cooking?"

"Dinner."

"Whose dinner?"

"Ours, foolish."

"I may be dull," I said, "but your persiflage perplexes me. I'm inviting you to dine with me."

"And I'm telling you that our dinner is being prepared by Brenda who works for me afternoons. You've been ill and you oughtn't go around eating in restaurants. Brenda is preparing a simple but nourishing meal."

I kissed her again. I was a happy fellow. The girl loved me. She worried about my health. She planned my meals. She let me kiss her as often as I liked and did care who knew that she loved me. This would have been the best evening of my life if it hadn't been for Blake. The same Blake, William, English poet, 1787-1827.

In a city of seven million, it should be possible to find three people who know and like the same poet, quote him and collect his works. There was a logical connection between Eleanor's tastes and Lola's. They

worked together and probably talked about authors and books. I figured it out that way when I saw the poet's name lettered on the backs of three volumes in Eleanor's apartment.

She had gone to the kitchen to mix a Martini. I wandered around the living room, looking at her things, noticing how cozy she had made the small apartment. When Eleanor had come to the hospital to see me she had told me something about herself and I knew what a struggle it had been for her to convince Noble Barclay that she would rather live alone in three rooms on East Tenth Street than to enjoy the luxury of his duplex on upper Fifth Avenue.

I had just started reading the titles on the second bookshelf when Eleanor returned with the Martinis. We drank to each other and started making love again. The mulatto maid kept coming in and out, setting the table and pretending she did not see us.

The Martinis were excellent. The olives had no pits and the glasses had been chilled. Eleanor's skin was as cool and smooth as a flower just out of the florist's icebox. She was in my arms and I was looking over her shoulder at the second bookshelf when my eye hit on the volume of Blake.

Eleanor felt the tension in my body and pulled away. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing."

"Why did you recoil?"

"I didn't recoil."

"Excuse me. I'll go and wash." She left, walking stiffly. I did not call her back nor kiss her again, but went straight to the bookshelves.

THE FIRST BLAKE was a modern edition, published in 1937, illustrated with reproductions of the poet's drawings. A silver sticker inside the back cover showed that it had come from a Greenwich Village bookstore. The second was a biography of the poet. And there was an old volume, probably a collector's item and worth a lot of money. There was an inscription on the flyleaf. As I read it my heart stopped beating.

To that most genteel lady, Eleanor Barclay, from her humblest admirer, this Valentine.

W. G. W.

"Hello, Johnnie," Eleanor said.

She wore a long black velvet thing, a hostess gown, I think it is called, with a full skirt and low neck. She had on old-fashioned earrings set with dark red stones and a big red pin, shaped like a heart, on her shoulder. She was beautiful, she was a lady, a genteel lady to whom a humble admirer had given the poems of Blake as a Valentine.

Dinner was ready. Brenda lit the candles. I pulled out Eleanor's chair, became formal and bowed over it. The candlelight gave her face a different look. The wonder of this girl was that she could look like so many different people: an innocent youngster or a sorceress or what they called in our office, a business girl. Or a genteel lady. This should have made me love her more, love the variable qualities which would prevent boredom, but I was distressed by the variable qualities. I loved her, but I did not know what to expect of Barclay's daughter.

Just around the corner from Eleanor's apartment was the hotel where Warren G. Wilson had lived and died. You could walk there in two minutes. I thought of Eleanor hurrying along East Tenth Street, the plaid coat pulled tight around her, and her high heels tapping the pavement.

The dinner was good. Brenda took away the soup plates and served broiled chicken, broccoli and browned potatoes. There were hot biscuits, strawberry jam and a thin white wine. It was my first dinner at her place and I am sure Eleanor had thought about it and had a long conversation with the maid.

Conversation flowed along, but it had no meaning. A lady in black velvet entertained a guest. Have some more chicken, please. Do you like this wine? It's a Rhine wine. Rhine wines are my favorite. We talked about books and I asked if she liked poetry. I had not read much poetry since I left college, but I talked as if I gave three nights a week to the Browning Society. Finally I managed to say, casually, "I see you're fond of Blake."

"I had a friend," she said, "who tried to make me appreciate Blake. That's where I got all the books." She nodded in the direction of the shelves. "In fact, I've known two fans in my life."

I could name both of her Blake fans,

Lola Manfred and Warren G. Wilson. Instead I remarked with heavy humor, "Nice highbrow evenings you three must have had, getting together and reading his works."

"We never did. As a matter of fact, they didn't even know each other. Why aren't you eating, Johnnie? You ought to, you know. You've lost weight."

She was so sweet that I hoped her concern for me was honest and not an attempt to divert me from memories of the poetry lovers. Through the rest of the meal she talked rapidly and gaily, Everything I said, whether it was funny or not, made her laugh. In the circumstances her nervous vivacity made me restless.

Brenda left, and for the first time Eleanor and I were alone in a secluded place. I did not even try to sit next to Eleanor on the sofa, but chose a chair at the opposite side of the room. She seemed disappointed. Her movements were jerky. She changed seats frequently. For a while she stood with her back to the fireplace as if she were cold.

I went away early. My excuse was reasonable. I had not been out of the hospital for long, and the new job had taken a lot out of me. I needed sleep.

"Yes, of course, I understand perfectly," she said as she took me to the door. "Well, good night."

"I've had a swell time. The dinner was swell. Thanks."

She did not offer her hand nor ask me to come again.

I rode uptown on the top of the Fifth Avenue bus. My feet were cold and I remembered how cozy it had been at Eleanor's. I got angry, not only at myself, but at William Blake and Warren G. Wilson. A mystic poet and a correspondence-school tycoon, both dead, were ruining my love life.

As I unlocked the door of my one-room bachelor apartment I heard the phone ring. I caught it just in time. It was Captain Riordan, my friend at Police Headquarters.

"Have you run the Wilson story yet?" he asked.

"What?"

"The murder of Wilson, the guy that took the name of the correspondence course. He was murdered last May. I

thought you were going to write it up."

"Of course I remember. I was shocked at your calling me about it tonight."

"Shocked. Why?"

"Coincidence. I just happened to be thinking of that story."

"They've got the woman in the plaid coat," Riordan said.

"Go on."

"She got lit and staggered out of a Third Avenue bar and told the cop on the beat she was the girl who had taken the elevator up to the thirtieth floor of Wilson's hotel the night he was murdered."

I tried to sound cool about it. "Who is she?"

"Name's Arvah Lucille Kennedy. We found the name in her purse."

"Has she confessed?"

"She passed out. When she's slept it off we'll question her. I called you because you told me your story was going to press this month, and I thought there might be a new development."

"Thanks," I said. "I appreciate your thinking of me."

"I didn't want to put you on the spot by solving your Unsolved Mystery before the magazine came out."

"You think you've got it solved then?"

"Arvah knows something. Otherwise it wouldn't have taken six months and a bun to get it off her chest."

After Riordan had hung up I sat on the studio couch and thought about the Unsolved Mystery. Was my face red? Remorse broke out in beads on my forehead. I hated myself for having tolerated the suspicion that Eleanor know something about the murder. My relief was so great that I conveniently forgot Grace Eccles and how Eleanor had looked when she hurried out of the Ladies' Room after that secret session. I even forgot the shrimps.

I dialed Eleanor's number.

I hesitated. What would she think if I told her suddenly over the phone that I had imagined her mixed up in a murder? I used the first excuse that popped into my head "Look, Eleanor, I'm crazy about you. And I was afraid to make love to you, afraid you'd be angry . . ."

"Eleanor, my sweet. You're wonderful. You're beautiful. Can I come back?"

"Now?"

"Right away."

"It's so late."

"I've got to come and tell you how sorry I am. I want to say good night properly. I want to thank you for that wonderful dinner. I've got to tell you how much I love you. Eleanor . . ."

"Hurry," she said.

I leaped up the stairs. The door of Eleanor's apartment was open. She was waiting in the hall. Her hair hung loose over her shoulders and she had on a blue robe. I took her in my arms.

MY GOD, Ansell, you do look silly with that smirk on your face. What's up?" Tony Shaw asked.

We were sitting on stools at the counter of the Barclay Building drugstore. It was half past nine in the morning. I was so hungry that I had ordered a double orange juice, a bowl of oatmeal, two eggs, ham, toast, Danish pastry and coffee.

"I'm feeling healthy," I told Tony as I finished my oatmeal and started on the ham and eggs.

I had never felt better in my life. I was in love with Eleanor and she with me. We had decided to get married. She hoped our children would have curly hair like mine, and I had put in a bid for a daughter who would look exactly like her mother.

"Morning, Ansell. How's the bright young editor?"

My coffee tasted bitter. The world had been so beautiful that I had forgotten the existence of snakes, lice, cockroaches and Edward Everett Munn.

"Good morning," I said, and ate a little faster.

"How about lunch tomorrow? Are you free? I'd like to take you to my club."

"Thanks, but I don't believe in clubs. They promote class feeling. When it comes to clubs I'm a bit of a Communist."

The waitress set before him a cup of hot water and a tea bag. He took out his watch and set it beside the saucer while the bag dangled in his teacup.

"The Wilson case may be solved, after all," I said.

"Wilson case? Oh, the Unsolved Murder. Really?" he inquired politely.

"Yep, it may be solved. Warren G. Wilson's murderer is probably in the hands of the police at this very minute"

Without consulting his watch Munn

yanked the tea bag out of the hot water. The clown's mouth formed several wordless syllables before he asked, "Who was it?"

"The lady in the plaid coat. She staggered into a policeman's arms last night and confessed that she'd gone up to the thirtieth floor the night he was shot."

"What's her name?"

"Kennedy. Arvah Lucille Kennedy."

He picked up the tea bag by the string, and dangled it in the hot water again. His eyes were fixed upon the cup as if there were nothing in the world so important as the strength of his morning tea. "Has she confessed?"

"She was so tight she passed out in the cop's arms. The last I heard she was sleeping it off. They expect to get the full story this morning."

"It's about time." Munn lay the soaked tea bag on his saucer, measured a level spoonful of sugar and squeezed some lemon into the cup. His lips moved and I thought he was counting the drops.

In the mirror behind the counter, between the signs—FRESH ORANGE JUICE 20c and BANANA ROYALE 35c—I could see him blowing into his hot tea. He took out his cigarette case.

As he offered it, I said, "Every time you do that I tell you I don't smoke Turkish. Can't you remember?"

"If I were you I wouldn't say anything about this to Mr. Barclay, Ansell. He won't be interested."

"What won't he be interested in?"

"This lady."

"Which lady?"

"The one in the plaid coat who rode up to Wilson's apartment that night. You seemed wrought up about her."

I put out the half-smoked cigarette and lighted one of my own. "Why do you think Barclay won't be interested? Everyone is interested in the solution of a mystery."

He crushed the light out of his cigarette and went through the regular routine of squeezing out the unsmoked tobacco and rolling the paper into a little ball. "I don't think you like me, Ansell."

"You're oversensitive," I said. "I'm sure I've never done anything to give you that impression."

"I've always tried to help you; I've given you a hand wherever I could and you've

always laughed at me. Some day," he hinted in a whisper, "you may need help. I'm not without power in the organization."

"Thanks, but I don't believe in patronage. I'm the sort of fellow who fends for himself. Pulls himself up by the bootstraps, so to speak. Why is it, do you suppose, that my salary was raised to two hundred a week if it wasn't for my hard work and willing spirit?"

His mouth worked. "I've warned you, young man. If you're too smart to take a hint . . ." He slipped off the stool and, without finishing the sentence, left.

I was too smart to take the hint. Hating Munn and not wanting him or Barclay or anyone else to think I'd take a bribe, even temporarily. I did exactly what Munn had advised me not to do. Whether or not Barclay was interested in the lady in the plaid coat, he was going to hear about her. Even though the unknown Arvah might be proved Wilson's murderer, Barclay was involved in the case. When I had pursued my private investigations too far, someone had slipped a dose of poison into my water bottle. Then I had been bribed with a big raise and an important job. Probably other people had been bribed, too. What about the voice in the ambulance? Either I had been poisoned by shrimps I never ate or a few crisp bills had been slipped into the hand of an underpaid ambulance doctor.

Instead of dictating it to Miss Kaufman, I typed the memo myself. I did not want her to ask questions nor offer advice. The memo, I thought, was fat bait and would make the fish bite.

MEMORANDUM

Unsolved Mystery (Warren G. Wilson case)

According to information I have received privately from my contacts at Police Headquarters, this murder has been solved.

Inasmuch as we have gone to the expense of making layouts, illustrations, etc., I suggest we absorb this expense by having part of the story rewritten, eliminating the Unsolved Mystery angle, and run it in TaC. All objectionable matter, such as reference to spiritous liquor, irreverence toward correspondence schools, etc., can be eliminated.

Any personal objections you may have had to the use of this story are obviously eliminated by the solution of the mystery.

I filed the third copy and sealed the other two in manila office envelopes, addressed them to Barclay and Munn, pasted red *Rush* stickers on them and put them in my Out-Basket.

Miss Kaufman came in, looked suspiciously at the Out-Basket, but did not ask why I typed my own memos. "You'd better step on it," she said. "Mr. Barclay won't like a new editor being late for a meeting."

I strutted out, the new editor bound for his first conference. On the way I passed the *Truth and Love* office. The door was open. Eleanor turned from the typewriter and blew me a kiss. At the risk of keeping her father waiting I stepped into her office and took her in my arms. She squealed.

"What's the matter? Don't you like it?"

"I love it, but the door's open."

"You weren't so cautious yesterday."

"It's your reputation I'm thinking of, Johnnie."

Lola Manfred had not come in. Eleanor was worried. "I've called three times but no one answers the phone. I can't imagine what's wrong. Lola always lets us know if she's going to be away from the office. Do you think anything could have happened?"

"She's probably sleeping off a hangover. How about dinner, Eleanor? We ought to celebrate. Think of some place expensive you'd like to go. Still love me? Then give me a kiss for luck and wish me well, I'm on my way to my first *Truth Digest* conference."

NO ONE BROKE a bottle of champagne over the masthead of the new magazine. The boss was a teetotaler. We launched our ship on a dollar-fifty-blue-plate sent upstairs by the Barclay Building Grille. The lunch conference was said to promote friendship and good feeling, which enabled Barclay to enter the expense as legitimate on his income-tax returns.

The conference table was covered with a damask cloth. Dishes and glassware were decorated with Barclay's monogram, surrounded by laurel wreaths. The forks were so heavy that the lightness of the food was barely noticeable.

Barclay sat at the head of the table.

Opposite him was Gloria, his wife. He had found her in Beverly Hills, California, where her type is said to be indigenous. She was a long-legged, high-shouldered, full-breasted beauty. Every third month *Truth and Beauty* printed Gloria's picture to prove that healthy motherhood does not destroy the form divine. She had given Barclay twin sons.

At conferences Gloria represented the Woman's Angle. This custom had been instituted long ago when Barclay was married to his second wife, a Vassar graduate, said by office veterans to have been a high-brow. No one could accuse Gloria of anything like that.

An office boy came in, dropped mail into Barclay's In-Basket, looked over his shoulder at the lunch table and went out contemptuously.

Among the mail in Barclay's basket I saw a manila office envelope decorated with a red *Rush* sticker. . . .

While Barclay entertained us with a detailed history of his triumphs, two waitresses entered, took away our empty cocktail cups and placed before each of us a plate containing creamed chicken, mashed potatoes, string beans and a few limp beets.

"In our new publication," Barclay thundered, "we shall be courageous as no other digest is courageous. As of this day, boys, the brakes are off. *Truth Digest* is going to make magazine history. And more than that, it's going to leave an indelible mark on modern civilization."

"I've got an idea," Munn said eagerly. "If we want lively material, what about a condensation of the Podolsky articles?"

Henry Roe put down his spoon. "Are you crazy?"

"I believe they increased *Truth* circulation," Munn said coldly. "Isn't that true, Mr. English?"

"Increased cancellations."

Munn started to protest, but Barclay silenced him with a wave of his ice-cream spoon. He addressed himself to the Circulation and Advertising Departments. "Was it our fault that Russia didn't seize Manchuria as soon as the Jap war ended? Podolsky thought she would. So did I. So did a great many people who are wiser than we are, politically speaking. Let's say that Podolsky made an error."

"It wouldn't be the first time," I said.

"Are you questioning the integrity of one of our contributors?" Munn asked. "A rather important contributor, by the way. After all, he's a well-known authority on world affairs."

"A well-known fake," I added.

The silence was uneasy.

Gloria smiled brightly. "But General Podolsky's so charming. He has such old-world manners."

"He isn't a general." I told her. "He was never an officer in the Czar's Army. He's not even a Russian. His adventures never happened and most of his facts have been proved false."

Munn let out a hollow laugh. "Ansell must have been reading those Red newspapers."

"Like the *New York Times* and the *Herald Tribune*, Mr. Munn?"

"Ansell's right. You're right, lad," Barclay assured me. "Like everyone else in the world, Podolsky's made mistakes. But he's always been ready to acknowledge them. As a matter of fact, my faith in Podolsky is so great that I've asked him to join our staff."

Gloria beamed.

"In what capacity, may I ask?" queried Munn.

"As sort of roving reporter," Barclay said. "Later I may give him an editorial title. Right now I want him to travel around the country, take the national pulse, so to speak. I expect a sensational series for the new digest."

"Couldn't we use his articles in *Truth* first? Save a little money," suggested Munn as solemnly as if he were proposing a world-shaking idea.

"That's what I'd planned," Barclay said with authority.

Munn wilted. Henry Roe winked at Gloria. She suppressed a giggle. The waitresses brought coffee for Javes, Wince, English, Henry Roe and me. Munn and Dr. Mason had tea, and Barclay and Gloria drank milk.

The contemptuous office boy brought in the afternoon papers. The conference table was in use, so he put the papers on the metal cover of the radiator just behind my chair.

I looked over my shoulder and read the headlines. Then I turned my back to the table and read a front-page column:

PLAID-COAT SUSPECT FOUND
Mystery Woman Confesses Ride in
Death Elevator

"The woman in plaid, sought in connection with the death last May of Warren G. Wilson, bachelor recluse, confessed this morning to Captain A. C. Riordan of the Detective Bureau that she rode in the elevator to Wilson's floor the night he was shot in the back. She is Arvah Lucille Kennedy, divorcee, of Bayside, L. I. Suffering pangs of... turn to Page 21."

I turned to Page 21. Barclay went on talking about policy, truth and the new digest. Arvah Lucille Kennedy had not killed Warren G. Wilson. She had never met the late tenant of Suite 3002-4. On the night of May eleventh, wearing a plaid coat, she rode to the thirtieth floor of the exclusive apartment hotel because her friend did not want her to be seen getting off at the twenty-eighth. She had walked down two flights for the sake of her friend's reputation.

Her friend was Frederick Semple, morning-coated manager of the hotel. He could not set a bad example to guests nor let employees discover that he had relations with the Bayside divorcee. It was for Mr. Semple's sake that Arvah had kept silence for six months.

"What are you reading, Ansell?"

EVERYONE at the table stared. I could see that Dr. Mason and E. E. Munn were shocked by my bad manners. "You'll be interested, Mr. Barclay," I said, and handed him the paper.

He was about to refuse it when I pointed to the plaid-coat headline.

"Excuse me, boys," muttered Barclay and began to read the Kennedy story.

In the wire basket on his desk was the envelope with my memo. The basket was less than ten feet from where I sat, but I could not, in the sight of the boss, the boss's wife and six other employees, snatch mail from the boss's desk.

"Very interesting," Barclay said as he handed me back the paper.

It was after three when the meeting broke up. As I left he was opening the envelope with the red sticker.

"Yes, he is," Miss Kaufman said. She put down the phone and turned

to me, saying, "He wants you in his office. Right away."

I was glad. The agony was about to start, but the suspense was over. Barclay had promoted me, raised my salary, made me his new favorite in order to keep me quiet. I had accepted the bribe and he thought he had me where he wanted me. And now he had discovered that I was not content to stay quiet in my niche.

Gloria was still in Barclay's office. She greeted me brightly. "I'm so glad to know you at last, Mr. Ansell. Daddy's told me so much about you. You must dine with us some night. I'll arrange it with Eleanor."

News traveled fast in the Barclay office. I did not mind their knowing about Eleanor. What puzzled me was the air of approval. On his desk, at the center of the blotter, my memo lay.

"Lover," Barclay said to his wife, "I've got to speak to this young man about business. I'm sure it wouldn't interest you."

She kissed her husband, and was gone.

Barclay picked up the memo. "What's the meaning of this, lad? Trying to be funny, eh?" The approach was mild.

"No, Mr. Barclay."

"What are you trying to get at?"

"Look, Mr. Barclay," I began nervously, "I heard the lady in plaid had been found and I naturally thought the murder'd been solved. I told you in my memo, I thought we could use the cuts instead of junking them. Save the organization some money."

It was a neat excuse. Showed that I had the interests of the firm at heart, rather than a single magazine. It should have convinced Barclay of my good will.

He shook his head. Strong, tanned hands clenched and unclenched. He seemed older. There was not so much arrogance in his carriage.

"Tell me, Mr. Barclay, why do you want to suppress that story?"

He crossed the office. The thick carpet muffled his footsteps. He came close to me and we stood side by side, Barclay six foot three and Ansell, a pint-sized runt. But Barclay could not answer my question.

I went on bravely. "What have I got to be afraid of? I don't eat shrimps. I can't take seafood. I could get the waitress to say that I ate lamb chops that night."

"You're a cocky little guy, aren't you?"

"I don't like being pushed around. Why

the hell are you afraid to run the Wilson story?"

Barclay walked back to his desk, head high. "All right, I'm going to lay my cards on the table. After you know, you may change your tune. Sit down."

Barclay rolled my memo into a cone and swept its point back and forth across his desk blotter. It was the first time I had seen him make a nervous or unnecessary movement. "Do you know that Eleanor was a friend of Wilson's?"

There was a long silence. He looked at the paper cone, at the desk blotter, at his hands, while he waited. I showed no surprise. I wasn't shocked because I had had this information already — from Wilson himself. Back on St. Valentine's Day he had inscribed a volume of poetry to a genteel lady.

"Was she?" I had decided to play dumb, to wait and learn.

"Do you know she had a date with him the night he was killed?"

That hit me harder. It took effort for me to answer in the same dry monotone. "Did she?"

A light burned green in the box on Barclay's desk. He spoke into a grilled panel. "I'm busy now. I'm not taking any calls." The room was getting dark. Twilight had entered like fog. The big man sat quietly at his desk, shoulders bowed, arms extended, hands limp beside the bronze nudes that held a cauldron of ink.

In a voice so cold and distant that I barely recognized it as my own, I said, "She had a date with Wilson the night he was killed, you say. What happened? Do you know the facts, Mr. Barclay?"

He crushed the pink memo and tossed it into the waste basket. "You know how I feel about secrets." His voice was warmer. Barclay had decided to take me into his confidence. "I don't believe in secrets. Buried truths are festering sores. Dig them out, cleanse the wounds, tell the truth no matter how painful. That's my creed and I try to live by it. But when someone else is involved," he drew in his breath, "and that person has never confided in you, it plays the very devil with your conscience."

"Wait a minute. If she hadn't confided them, how did you know Eleanor's secrets, Mr. Barclay?"

"Eleanor had a date with Wilson; they were to have dined together the night of his death. I learned about it by mistake. The switchboard girl thought his message was meant for me instead of Eleanor. Mr. Barclay, not Miss Barclay, you understand. As soon as I learned about it I sent for Eleanor and demanded an explanation."

"Why?"

"Eleanor had never told me she knew Wilson."

"Should she have?"

He swallowed twice, nodded and said, "A father is a father."

"So I've been told. Do you always demand an explanation when you discover that she's dining with a man? Or was there something special about Wilson?" My voice was low, my manner objective. I might have been asking his opinion of an unimportant editorial detail.

"If you knew the facts you wouldn't be quite so flippant, young man. Eleanor had a gun on her when she came into my office. She was hysterical..." His voice trailed off, and he looked beyond me into the window which the room's lights and the sky's darkness had turned into a mirror. It gave back a hard, glazed portrait of Noble Barclay.

"A gun. Why?"

"She'd been in the Studio, directing pictures for *Truth and Love*. When she came up here, the gun was in her hand."

"What the hell's that got to do with Wilson?" I shouted. Barclay's facts had not got under my skin. They were too tenuous and irrelevant. What irritated me was his assumption that I ought to be frightened off by scattered hints.

"Are you trying to scare me off by hinting that Eleanor shot him with one of the Studio guns?"

Barclay winced. "You love her, John. You and I, we both love that kid. I was glad when I saw that she was falling for you. A clean, intelligent and ambitious young man. Why do you suppose I've been trying to build you up? You've got a great future, you know."

"Shrimps, Mr. Barclay. I do not eat shrimps."

"Eleanor needs you. You can help her, take care of her..."

I saw then that Barclay wasn't merely playing a game. Veins bulged on his fore-

head. The sweat stood out in giant dew-drops. His eyes clouded.

"Look, Mr. Barclay, let's get at the facts. You found out that Eleanor had a date with Wilson, and you sent for her to come up here. She had a gun in her hand, one of the property guns from the Studio. It wasn't loaded; those guns never are. Granted that she could have got shells if she had wanted them, why should she? What possible reason could she have had for wanting to kill Wilson?"

"She was very angry when I sent for her. Irrationally angry."

"Why irrationally? She's a grown woman and even though a father is a father, must she be interrogated whenever she dines with a man? What was there about Wilson? You must have known something, Mr. Barclay, to have sent for her."

"Did she ever mention Wilson to you, John?"

I had begun to sweat, too.

"That's what I thought," Barclay said. "She's kept it from you, too. It's that secretive strain in them. Her mother was the same way. You could never tell what she was thinking." He passed his hand over his eyes as if he had caught a glimpse of some hideous shape lurking in the shadows. "Eleanor's mother killed herself, you know."

I did know. The Introduction to *My Life Is Truth* is Barclay's autobiography.

"Her family," he went on huskily, "overbred aristocrats. Sensitive. Secretive. She's been growing more and more like them. John, I've been worried." He wiped the sweat from his forehead. His voice, more than his words, confessed hidden fear. I thought of the creed by which he lived. Buried truths are festering sores...

"Are you trying to tell me, Mr. Barclay, that you believe Eleanor killed Wilson?"

Scorn twisted his mouth. His dark eyes hardened. Noble Barclay shuddered with contempt at John Miles Ansell, an insensitive dolt who asked stupid questions. Everything that Barclay had tried subtly to convey I had cried aloud. Why, unless sternest truth demanded, should a father accuse his daughter of murder?

Barclay walked off. At the end of the room, he squared his shoulders, turned and came back to me. The mood had lightened. He was no longer contemptuous, but sym-

pathetic, my ally in sorrow. His hand fell upon my shoulder and his eyes sought understanding.

"She needs love, John." His voice tightened. "If I'd been able to help her mother, she'd have been all right, too. We've got to take care of that girl, you and I..."

I shrugged away from the heavy hand. "Your facts haven't convinced me. They're irrelevant. They don't prove anything. I care too much for her to believe she'd be capable of anything like that." It was a noble speech, but unconvincing. I did not even succeed in fooling myself.

"Fine!" Barclay boomed. "Splendid, my lad. Good for you. That's what she needs, love, devotion, unswerving loyalty."

"I'd have to have proof," I blustered, "damn good proof before I'd believe anything."

"Then you'll never do anything to harm her." Barclay offered his most magnanimous smile. "You'll do everything in your power to protect her. I can trust you to look out for my little girl."

He swung out his hand. I took it. The clasp was strong, hard and dry. To Barclay that handclasp meant he had won me, and we were united now in our determination to protect Eleanor. To me it was phony, like the oaths and handclasps and drawn blood of schoolboy vows. I jerked my hand away. Barclay let his drop and stood quiet for a moment. There was a pinched look about him. He seemed afraid to turn around. I listened, too. There was no sound in the office except his heavy breathing.

It had grown very dark. The room smelled of sweat.

There was a sheet of yellow paper stuck into my typewriter. On it Eleanor had typed:

*Johnnie darling:
I can't go to dinner with you in an old hat. Loving you as I do, it is imperative that I have a new one. I shan't be back at the office, so stop by for me around seven. I do love you.*

E.

A silly note, but I liked it. The switch from melodrama to millinery lightened my mood. How could I suspect a girl who had to buy a new hat because she loved me? Notice that word, *suspect*. I tried again and

again to reassure myself by arguing that Barclay had dragged Eleanor's name into the case merely to throw me off the scent, but I could not achieve one hundred per cent conviction. I did not believe Eleanor had killed Wilson but I was sure she knew something about the murder.

Why, for instance, had she never told me of her friendship with Wilson? Why had she kept it from her father until the switchboard gave Mr. Barclay's secretary the message intended for Miss Barclay? Was it merely coincidence that this happened on the day of Wilson's death, or had there been some connection? Why had Barclay summoned his daughter from the Studio when he heard that she was dining with Warren G. Wilson?

It was half past seven when I arrived at Eleanor's. I was late deliberately. My idea was to get her out of the apartment, into some public place where we would both have to be careful of our words and our voices. I had no definite plan, but I knew myself well enough to distrust any vows of discretion.

She greeted me sweetly.

We kissed.

"What's the matter?" she said. "Why are you like that?"

"Like what?"

WITHOUT answering she went off to fetch her wraps. I looked at the Blake again, studied Wilson's inscription. When I heard her coming, I put the volume back on the shelf. She was wearing a fur coat that smelled faintly of camphor. Her hair hung loose. It was tied on the side with a brown bow.

"Where's the new hat?"

"I didn't get one."

"Why not?"

"I couldn't find one I liked."

"In all that time? You were gone two hours."

"I don't like the hats this season. They look like deformities."

On Fifth Avenue we turned. Eleanor went on talking about hats. She was trying to be funny. The season's hats were all designed by men who hated women, she said, or by hideous women who wanted to destroy other women's looks.

"You've certainly given a lot of thought to the psychology of modern millinery,"

I said. "Why don't you do a piece for *Truth and Love* about it?"

"I'm sorry if I bore you."

"Where were you this afternoon?"

"I went to buy a hat."

"Why didn't you buy one?"

We had started across Fifth Avenue. A bus came along. I jerked Eleanor toward the curb.

"What's the matter, Johnnie? Why are you acting like that?"

"If I'm acting any differently than I usually act I'm not aware of it. Why are you so sensitive?"

I had hold of her arm. She pulled it away. "You kissed me as if I had halitosis. Then you got mad because I talked about hats. In fact you accused me of lying because I couldn't find a hat I liked. Then you practically yanked my arm out of its socket."

"I'm sorry. I was trying to save your life."

"Maybe you're sorry about last night. Perhaps you regret it now, saying you love me and," she hesitated, shy of words, "making plans."

I did not try to comfort her. We walked at opposite edges of the sidewalk. I led her past five restaurants to the door of Jean Pierre's.

"How about this place?"

"No."

Before I had a chance to argue, she had turned around and was walking downtown again.

"Want to go to the Brevoort?"

"I don't care."

"Why don't you like Jean Pierre's? The food is wonderful."

I don't want to eat there."

"Does it remind you of Wilson?"

The attack was not planned. Impatience had shoved me off balance. I was too restless to fence around any longer, too undisciplined to follow a pattern.

Eleanor said, "Is that why you took me there?"

"Why didn't you tell me you knew him?"

We were again at a crossing. Eleanor darted into the street so that I'd have no chance to take her arm. At the other side she waited. Falling into step beside me, she remarked coolly, "I've known lots of people I've never told you about. Have I ever told you how Lindbergh kissed me? I'll

show you the photographs if you're interested."

"You knew I was writing the Wilson story."

"No, I didn't. Not until you were ill at the hospital. Alfie Witzel was doing a *Truth and Love* yarn about Tommy Manville and I had to finish it, because he was rushed over to *Truth and Crime* to finish your Unsolved Mystery." She spoke as if there had been no more to it than a switch in office routine.

"Just the same I should think you'd have told me about him."

"Why?"

"It isn't everyone who's been intimate with a murder victim."

"I was never intimate with Mr. Wilson."

"I don't mean intimate. I mean you knew him and he was murdered. It seems strange you never mentioned him. When I was free-lancing I knew a woman who came from the same part of Chicago as Loeb and Leopold and she made a career for herself of it."

"I didn't know him so awfully well." She glanced down Fifth Avenue toward the hotel where Wilson had lived and died, and then looked away as if it had been no more important to her than Grant's Tomb. Her defiance had melted into a strange sick indifference.

"Were you in love with him?"

"Don't be a fool, Johnnie. He was forty-eight. Let's not go to dinner right away. Are you hungry?"

"Aren't you?"

"I couldn't look at food. Let's sit in Washington Square."

THE NIGHT was cold. We must have looked like a pair of idiots to the cop who watched over his shoulder as we chose a bench. Idiots, or lovers who had no place for privacy. We did not sit like lovers. There were six or seven inches between us.

"How long did you know him?"

"Mr. Wilson?" From where we sat we had only to raise our eyes and we could see the terrace of Wilson's apartment. "I met him last year. In September. September thirtieth."

"And you say you didn't know him very well."

"I didn't."

"You seem to be pretty accurate about

the day you met him. It must have been sort of important to you if you remember it that well."

She laughed. "I remember the day because it happened to be important to me. It was the day I broke my engagement."

That knocked the breath out of me. "There seems to be a lot of things you've never told me."

"I wanted to forget about it."

"Who was the man?"

Eleanor laughed again, mirthlessly. After a while she said, "I hated him."

"And you were engaged to him?"

She nodded.

"Why?"

"I oughtn't to get emotional, ought I, now that it's all over?" Her voice sounded like one of the smaller brass instruments. "It was just after my father married Gloria. Not that I dislike Gloria..." she grimaced and went on quickly, "Gloria's very nice. She adores my father. This man was older; he seemed kind and he was a good friend of my father's too..."

"But you didn't love him?"

"Oh, Lord!" She began suddenly to laugh. There was no gaiety in it. It was like the laughter of someone who had not laughed for years, a deaf mute finding a voice and using it in mockery. The tones were all metal. They hit me in the pit of the stomach.

"Shut up," I snapped.

The policeman was standing under an arc light. Her laughter floated out to him.

"Control yourself," I said.

The laughter ended as abruptly as it had started.

"Sorry," whispered Eleanor in a meek little voice.

"You needn't talk about it if it affects you that way. Would you like a drink?"

"No, thanks. I'd like to tell you about it, Johnnie. You see, I once thought that I could learn to love a man. I tried," her voice was humble, "but I couldn't bear it if he kissed me or touched me. I thought I was frigid. A frigid woman. I was reading for *Truth and Love* and there was all that stuff about failing to respond to normal love, and I was afraid I wasn't normal. I thought I hated men." She looked at the apartment building standing tall among the old four-story houses. "I've never said this aloud before."

"There's nothing for you to be worried about. You're perfectly okay, honey. You're wonderful." I reached across the bench for her hand. The memory of last night's love sent the blood rushing through my body.

She slid toward me on the bench. I put my arm around her. To hell with Warren G. Wilson! The scene in Barclay's office had begun to fade. Her hair blew across my face.

"Believe me, Johnnie, you're the first man I've ever loved."

"I believe you," I said.

"Mr. Wilson was nothing but a friend." She pressed my hand. "I've got to tell you about him, or what will you think? I have nothing to hide." Her face was close to mine, and in the lamplight I could see the contrasts.

No wonder Gustav and Jean Pierre had not been able to name the exact color of her hair and eyes. With every variation of light and mood she was different.

"I'd been engaged for almost a year," she said. "And then I decided I couldn't stand it any more. That was September thirtieth. So I went into my father's office and told him about it. I was scared to death. This man, you see, was my father's friend."

"How'd your father take it?"

"He was wonderful, just as kind as could be. Lots of people don't understand Father; they think he pretends to believe in Truth-Sharing because it's made such a lot of money, but he is sincere, Johnnie. That I know with my heart; Father is the most sincere man in the world." There had crept into her manner the defiance with which she always met her father's critics. "Father said I was sensible to face the truth; he was glad he'd educated me to be honest with myself; and I certainly need not marry a man I couldn't love. Father was wonderful..."

She would have gone on talking about Barclay, defending him against unspoken criticism, if I had not interrupted. "What had this to do with Wilson? You met him that night, you say. Where?"

"At Jean Pierre's. I picked him up. Have you a cigarette, Johnnie?"

I lighted one for her. She pushed closer toward me on the bench, fitted her shoulder under my armpit.

A new tenant had moved into Wilson's

apartment. I saw the lights go on in the room beyond the topmost terrace.

"How did you happen to pick him up? What were you doing in Jean Pierre's? Dining alone?"

"I'd gone to dinner with Lola. In a way it was a sort of celebration. Lola'd never approved of this man I was engaged to..."

"Oh! She knew?" I said and felt angry about it, cheated because neither Eleanor nor Lola had ever spoken to me about the engagement.

"I'd never told her in so many words that we were engaged. I never told anyone," Eleanor shivered delicately. "No one knew except Father and Gloria. But Lola guessed. She watched me when I talked to him; even on the phone, she said, I showed it. So naturally, when I broke it, I asked Lola to have dinner with me. Or maybe it was Lola who suggested it. I don't remember. I do remember that she suggested Jean Pierre's because I'd never eaten there. Lola insisted on buying the dinner, and we ordered wonderful food, petite marmite and sweetbreads en cloche and a green salad and profiterolles and coffee..."

"Considering that you'd just discarded your fiance, your appetite wasn't at all bad."

"That's just what Mr. Wilson said."

"Oh, you told him your life story."

"I told him why I was eating alone, and how an emotional crisis always affects my appetite."

"Eating alone! I thought Lola was with you."

"Right in the middle she remembered that she'd stood up a lovelorn young man at the Lafayette. So she had to excuse herself. She paid the bill though and told me to finish my dinner."

Wilson's apartment was dark again. The curtains had been drawn. I had seen pictures of the living room and I wondered how it had been when Wilson lived there and Eleanor came to visit him.

"So the minute Lola left you alone, you picked up a man?"

"That's not kind of you, Johnnie. You make me sound like a trollop. Anyway he picked me up. He was sitting at the next table and he kept watching me..."

"Through the soup, sweetbreads, salad, dessert and coffee?"

"He was very courteous about it. He sent

the headwaiter over to ask if I'd accept a liqueur. Then he came over to my table and said I looked awfully familiar..."

"Couldn't he have thought of a more original line?"

"It was true. He'd seen my picture in the magazines. After all, Johnnie, I've been the Truth Girl since I was twelve years old. When you've had as much publicity as I've had, you can't be fresh to people..."

"Not when they come to your table and offer you liqueurs."

"Mr. Wilson wasn't like that. He was one of the most interesting men I've ever met. He knew such a lot about poetry, for instance, and the life of marine animals and the Russian novelists and desert vegetation." She took a last puff at the cigarette and threw the stub on the gravel walk.

"You used to go up to his apartment," I said.

"Why shouldn't I? Mr. Wilson wasn't fresh. And besides I'm independent. I earn my own living. If a girl supports herself why shouldn't she go to a man's apartment?"

"Look, dear, I'm not trying to put you on the spot. I know Wilson wasn't fresh; he talked about marine life and the Russian novelists and desert vegetation. He had seven hundred phonograph records and always gave you the best brandy. Why shouldn't you have gone to his apartment?"

"You're talking like my father," she said coldly.

"Oh! He didn't approve, I take it."

"He was furious when he found out."

"Apparently he doesn't approve of the same conduct for his daughter as for the heroines of his true-love tales."

"That's just what I told him," Eleanor said. "I told him I was shocked at finding him so hypocritical."

"Was that on the day he discovered that you knew Wilson."

"What do you know about that day, Johnnie?"

"I know the switchboard operator made a mistake and sent a message intended for Miss Barclay to Mr. Barclay's office. I know that when your father sent for you, you were down in the Studio..."

"Who told you? My father?" Her voice had grown brassy.

"Let's try to keep our heads," I said. I wanted to sound strong and dependable. I

hoped that Eleanor would feel that she had at last found someone in whom she could safely confide. "For some reason or other, everyone seems to get hysterical when Wilson's name is mentioned. Please, please try to keep calm..."

My words had the wrong effect. She was starting to laugh again. I took her hand and twisted the wrist so that it hurt. Her laughter ended abruptly.

"I'm sorry," I said, "but I didn't want you to go hysterical on me again. I can't stand it."

"You're right," she whispered. She fished in her bag for a handkerchief and wiped her eyes. I lit her another cigarette.

"Look," I said, "We're going to hold hands. If you feel that you're going to start laughing, just squeeze. Although I don't see why you get so worked up every time we mention something that happened six months ago."

She squeezed my hand. "You're sweet, Johnnie."

"Now, take it easy. I'm going to ask you some questions. Why did your father get so upset at discovering that you had a date with Wilson?"

Her hand lay quiet in mine. "I don't know," she said. "It seemed ridiculous. After Father got that message from the switchboard operator, he phoned Mr. Wilson to see what it was about."

"Then your father knew Wilson?"

Her hand tightened. "Obviously, if he phoned him. He must have known where Mr. Wilson lived. And I guess Mr. Wilson must have told him the message was for me..."

"What did the message say?"

"It was only to remind me of our dinner date. That we were meeting at half past seven. It wasn't a very revealing message."

"Obviously your father had some reason for sending for you and asking about Wilson. Or does he do that whenever you have a date?"

Eleanor began to push at the gravel with her foot. "We had a ghastly fight, the first I'd ever had with Father. What right had he to forbid me to see Mr. Wilson?"

"Your father evidently knew Wilson and had something against him."

"He said Mr. Wilson wanted to destroy him. He said the only thing Mr. Wilson lived for was to hurt him."

"Sounds pretty melodramatic," I said.

"That's what I told Father. But he wasn't as bad as Ed. Ed was all excited. Father got angry and told him to keep his mouth shut. He kept snapping the lid of his cigarette case until I nearly went crazy."

"So Munn was there, too?"

"What do you think?" she asked scornfully. "Father had him telephone Mr. Wilson and say I couldn't have dinner with him. I was furious."

"Naturally. But didn't you find out what it was that Wilson had against your father?"

"He told me Mr. Wilson had done him a bad turn."

"Sounds as if your father ought to be the one who wanted revenge."

She shook her head. "I said that, too, but Father thinks it's more human to hate people we've injured than those who have hurt us. I think that's sound psychology, don't you?"

I thought of Lola Manfred and how she had once said that Noble Barclay had put the word psychology into the one-syllable class.

"Johnnie..." Eleanor looked at me intently, her eyes straining in the dim light to catch my expression.

"What is it?"

"When my father talked to you, did he mention a book?"

"Book? What kind of book."

"Then it doesn't matter, I guess. It must only have been my imagination." Eleanor sighed. "I looked in the newspapers after he died, but there was never any mention of a manuscript."

"You mean Wilson was writing a book?" I asked.

"He was writing a book," she said in a slightly irritable way as though I should have got this information from some psychic source. "I told them about it that night when my father said Wilson was only living to hurt him. I said Mr. Wilson was only living to finish his book. Ed Munn got awfully excited, but my father said Mr. Wilson was a fraud and nobody'd believe his book anyway."

"Do you know what the book was about?"

"I know the title."

"What was it?"

"*The Autobiography of Homer Peck.*"

MY FINGERS tightened on hers. This was not consciously an exorcism of hysteria; it was my impulsive reaction to the title of Wilson's book.

"Are you shocked, too? What does it mean?"

I drew a deep breath. "I don't know. When I was working on the Wilson story, I came across a reference to this Peck guy. I don't know anything about him, but it rings a bell. Do you remember what they said about Mr. Peck's autobiography?"

"They didn't say anything at first. They seemed to hold their breath. You know what I mean, Johnnie, when the silence becomes louder than sound. It embarrassed me and I began to chatter. I said..."

"It was silly. About the title of Mr. Wilson's book. I had told him I didn't like it. Why should he call a book an autobiography unless it was about himself? Or fiction, of course, written in the first person. But he said it wasn't fiction. He said it was the truth about fiction, that's why it was stranger than fiction."

"Is that what you told your father?"

"Uh-huh."

"What'd he say?"

"I don't remember." She pondered. "Ed wanted to say something, but Father sent him away. Father said he wanted to talk to me privately."

"What'd he tell you?"

She uttered a half-note of laughter. "His life story. About how he used to be drunk all the time and full of passion and how his dear mother had died of a broken heart and it was his fault that my mother killed herself, and all the rest of it."

"Then it wasn't the first time he'd talked like that to you?"

"I've been hearing it since I was six." She laughed again, ruefully. "But there's something about my father when he tells that story; he's so sincere and powerful that when he used to lecture, people thronged to the platform to confess their secret desires and their hidden sins."

"Did you confess?"

"I had nothing to confess. But he broke me down; he can always do that. Makes me feel that I've been stubborn and wilful, that there's something weak and inferior that I have to compensate for by trying to express my own will. And then he shows me that I'm not alone in these unworthy

feelings and that he understands and forgives, and I'm all right. Perhaps you don't believe me."

"It's happened to me, too. When your father uses his charm the beasts of field and forest lie down together."

"But when it's over and you're away from him, it stops. You fall with a thud. I've been falling a lot lately. People like Gloria and Grace Eccles can read a chapter from the book and become uplifted again. Not me though, not lately." She laughed again, but this time her laughter was free. "I've never talked like this before in my life, Johnnie."

"That night," I said slowly, "you fell with a thud, huh? How long after?"

"Later in the evening. Father took me to dinner and made a terrific fuss over me. It was like old times before he met Gloria. He made me feel so wonderful and important I felt disloyal for having questioned him. And then," she ran her hand through her hair, "then he had to broadcast; it was Friday, *Voice of Truth* night, so he put me in a taxi and sent me home. I suddenly realized that I'd been a sucker and he hadn't given me a single reason why I shouldn't go on seeing Mr. Wilson. So I phoned him. . . ."

"What time was it?"

"Half past nine, ten, I don't remember. I tried calling him again Saturday, but there was no answer. So I thought maybe he'd gone away for the week-end."

"When did you find out he was dead?"

"Sunday. It came over the radio." Her face in that uncertain light was like a mask made of some brittle material like clay or china, and her eyes were like hard stones set into the mask.

"What did your father say about it?"

"I never mentioned it to him."

"The hell you didn't!" I let go of Eleanor's hand and stood up. I couldn't believe her. It was incredible. On Friday evening she and her father had quarreled about Wilson; on Sunday morning Wilson's murdered body was discovered and Friday night named as the time of his death. "You must have talked about it. It's not possible."

"No." Her voice had gone flat. "Father and Gloria had gone away Saturday morning, to spend the week-end in Washington with the Senator. I didn't see him until late Monday afternoon in the office."

"And you didn't mention Wilson?"

The flat voice continued, "Father didn't bring it up; so I never mentioned it either. I'm always afraid to face things that I know will be unpleasant. I guess you don't believe me."

"For a couple of Truth-sharers you Barclays are about the most secretive people I've ever met. Why were you so afraid to talk to him about it?"

She had grown rigid. I had seen Eleanor like this before, protecting herself in the same steely way against the gibes and criticisms of the cynics at the Editors' Table. Tonight, for the first time, I had heard her question her father's sincerity. She had given a fine exhibition of resentment. Until now I had thought it was her love for Noble Barclay that made her so contemptuous of all scoffers. She had told me, defiantly, "I love my father." I saw now that it was not love, and not pride that she had been protecting, but doubt.

That clinched it for me. I said, "He thinks you did it."

"My father?"

"He thinks you killed Wilson."

"Did he tell you that?" Her voice was low and polite. She might have been asking whether I thought it would snow or if I liked two pieces of sugar in my coffee.

"He told you that, Johnnie?"

"This afternoon your father warned me against trying to find out any more about this case. He's been protecting you and what he tried to say is that if I love you, I ought to. . . ."

"Do you believe it?"

"No, I don't," I said, "but I think you know more than you pretend."

Her hands lay in her lap. She looked up at me, straining to see my face. Her lips moved but she did not immediately speak. The city, too, had become quiet. A curious kind of silence surrounded us as if we had suddenly entered a soundproof room.

She hugged the fur coat tighter about her. "You don't love me," she said bitterly. "You're like the rest of them, wanting to find out something. You wanted to know about us. You wanted to talk and write articles and show off. You made me think you loved me. . . ."

An ambulance shrieked down Fifth Avenue. Its siren roused me. The circle was broken; I heard every living sound:

the taxi horns, the tires, the brakes, the clatter of heels on the pavement, the shrill young voices. The NYU students were still passing, talking of their class work, probably, of French and trigonometry, of economics, of UN, the Russian drives, of Benny Goodman, Jack Benny and Benay Venuta.

Eleanor had gone. She had hurried off, clattering along like the others on her high heels. Bareheaded, fur coat open, one of the crowd, like the girls she envied, the college girls with unimportant fathers. I hurried after her. NYU students swarmed the path. Three girls walked arm in arm, whispering. I cut through their secrets. "Where's the fire?" they shouted after me.

AT FIFTH AVENUE and Eighth Street, Eleanor jumped into a cab. I rushed across the street after her but a horn warned me and I leaped back to the curb. The lights had turned green. Eleanor's cab moved off. Before I could find an empty taxi, her was nothing but a red tail-light among a lot of other red tail-lights.

I walked up Fifth Avenue. At Twenty-third Street I remembered that I had not eaten dinner. I decided to go into Childs. On the way I bought a newspaper. I did not read it right away, for I was too concerned with my own affairs to care about the rest of the world. When the waitress brought my steak and French fries, I opened the paper.

It was a conservative paper, not a tabloid, so that I did not see Lola's picture until I turned to Page 3. It was a one column cut made from an old photograph taken when Lola had been slim and young and dark-haired.

The headline ran across two columns. It read:

POETESS FOUND DEAD
Lola Manfred's Body Found in
Greenwich Village Apartment
Suicide, Police Theory

I pushed my plate away. The odor of the fried potatoes sickened me. The waitress hurried across the tiled floor, but I had already grabbed my hat and overcoat. I motioned toward the table where I had left two dollar bills beside the plate. The

waitress stared after me through the plate-glass window.

I started walking north, thinking of Lola and what she had said about her autobiography. *Sand Against the Wind* was to have been the title because Lola had mocked at everything. She had to be an exhibitionist, she explained, because she had become too lazy to write poetry. There had been more to it than that, I thought. Something besides laziness had paralyzed her talent.

At Thirty-fourth Street I went into a cigar store and waited in line until the phone booth was empty. Fortunately Riordan's home phone number was in the little book I carry in my pocket.

"This is Ansell," I said and waited for the name to register. "Ansell of *Truth and Crime Magazine*."

"I know. In trouble, Ansell?"

"Lola Manfred didn't commit suicide. I'd bet my last dollar on it."

"Who's Lola Manfred?"

"Haven't you seen the papers? Poetess discovered in Greenwich Village studio apartment. They say it's suicide, but I have a hunch. Lola Manfred knew who killed Warren G. Wilson..."

"Just a minute," Riordan said. He must have put his hand over the mouthpiece and talked to someone else. Then he said, "Meet me at Headquarters. It'll take me about twenty minutes. I've got to get dressed."

As I hung up I thought I heard a woman's voice protesting.

IV

ELEANOR BARCLAY'S STORY

AS I STRETCHED my hand toward the doorbell my heart began to pound so that its throbbing seemed to fill the foyer. Such a chic little foyer all done up in black-and-white squares by a decorator who secretly loathed the rich and hoped they would suffer claustrophobia waiting for elevators. There had been, three years earlier when Gloria rented the apartment, a wan philodendron in a white pot on the black marble table. In my vague and sentimental way I had felt sorry for a living plant imprisoned by Fifth Avenue elegance, and had watched it as a mother

with a puny child. At my father's door the philodendron flourished like the green bay tree.

My hand fell away from the doorbell and I held it over my heart, believing the pressure could mute that noisy throbbing. It was like me to be thinking about the philodendron when I had to face my father and ask him a question which for months I had been afraid to whisper to myself. All of my life I have turned from unpleasantness to study the front patterns on a window pane or the play of light and shadow under a tree, to listen to the buzzing of a fly or the steam hissing in the radiator.

There were actually two questions, the one I had been afraid to ask my father, and the other newly born out of my conversation on a park bench with Johnnie. When Johnnie told me that ugly tale I had not turned away. Every fiber of me listened. I had heard not only voice and words, but I had tuned my ears to catch the undertones, the significance, the meaning of the meaning.

Your father warned me against trying to find out any more about this case. He's been protecting you and what he tried to say is that if I love you...

While I rode uptown in a taxicab and as I stood in the black-and-white foyer, looking at the philodendron and attempting to quiet the tumult within me, these words were like a far-off echo. I was determined to greet my father boldly, to question him courageously, and not to let him charm me into docility and agreement.

Except for the chatter of servants in the kitchen the first floor was quiet. In the second-floor sitting room I found Gloria. She lay on a fur rug before the fire, wearing leopardskin pajamas and studying French grammar. The room was filled with an expensive scent, one of those synthetics called *Fierce* or *Flagrant* or *Fearless*.

"Hello, Eleanor. I hope you know you stood us up for dinner. What's the idea? Don't you know what night this is?"

"Where's Father?"

"Are you out of your mind?" Gloria rolled over on her back with a liquid movement acquired by years of ballet training. "It's Friday."

"Friday?" I must have sounded like a cretin. In the Barclay family calendar Friday was more sacred than the Sabbath.

"Isn't it dreadful about Lola?"

"What about Lola?"

"Don't you know?" Gloria sat up, embraced her knees and drew in her breath. "She's committed suicide."

I walked unsteadily to a wing chair close to the fire. It seemed, as I eased myself into the chair, that I had always known that Lola would be found on the India print cover of the studio couch with an empty glass on her wormy walnut table.

"Why do you think she did it?" Gloria asked, her bosom rising and falling in excitement. "Drunk, I suppose."

Hardy knocked on the open door, arranged his handsome face in proper solemnity, announced, "It is one minute before nine, Mrs. Barclay." He then made a ritual of tuning in WBOR.

Downstairs the servants were grouped around the kitchen radio and in the nursery the English Nannie listened in snobbish loneliness. From every part of the house rolled the Battle Hymn of the Republic, and a baritone sang one line, "His truth goes marching on." The music faded, an announcer said, "This is the Voice of Truth," and after a heart beat's pause, my father began:

"Good evening, friends. This is Noble Barclay."

BEFORE I knew Lola Manfred, my mind had never admitted doubt. Faith was rooted in my worship of my father, not in his philosophy. I had gone through periods of rebelliousness—once when I refused to pose for any more Truth-Girl photographs and once, for seven weeks, when I wanted so much to go to college—but in the end I was always sorry because I had been wilful and disloyal.

One word struck terror in my heart. Disloyalty. The word cast its shadow upon the memory of departed servants and secretaries. And when I was twelve, his worshipful wife, Janet, became overnight as hateful as a disloyal upstairs maid. The next morning my father had my things packed and off I was whisked with a governess and a plump, red-haired secretary to Florida. Father joined us. The redhead remained loyal for almost a year, and then

she left us, too, and there was a happy interval when his daughter, the Truth Girl, had no rivals.

When I was seventeen, Father took me to California. When he was not too busy he wooed me as though I were as blonde and breasty as his favorite starlet, and had flowers sent to my room every day. Father became busier and busier with tasks involved in launching his magazine, *Truth in Hollywood*, and on the way home Gloria had a drawing room on the same train.

In New York Ed Munn waited at the station to take me home in a taxi while Father drove Gloria to her hotel in the limousine. It was my loneliest year. We had a big hotel suite but Father seldom used his rooms. I had no friends. I had never gone to school and it was better to dine and go to a show with Ed than to spend my evenings alone. That was during one of the periods of rebellion, when I wanted so desperately to go to college. I thought that if I had a tutor and crammed hard enough I could slide through the examinations.

My education had been haphazard. Whatever I had learned I owed to Janet Ordmann Barclay who thought intelligence and knowledge more important in a governess than the pretty legs and large breasts which were my father's standards. He did not approve of formal education. In his unregenerate days he had been thrown out of four colleges, and felt it his duty afterwards to expose the weakness of modern education. *Truth Magazine* writers proved that college weakened moral fiber, bred perversion, encouraged drunkenness, spread degeneracy. Charts with little cartoon men mounted on ladders showed that the percentage of failure was higher among college graduates than among the untaught.

Noble Barclay's daughter was educated in the offices of Truth Publications. I was young then and believed what I read. *Truth and Love* editorials preached on the curse of the frigid woman, and I thought there must be some congenital cause for my apathy and disgust when my fiance tried to hold my hand.

No one in the office was told about our engagement. I cringed when Ed's dry cautious fingers touched me, and shrank from the rubbery feel of his lips. Presently I began to play an elaborate game of hide-and seek, became coy, capricious, frail, and

finally deceitful in my excuses to avoid a dinner or an evening with him.

One day in the office Lola Manfred whirled around in her swivel chair and said, "There's no law, kid. You can say no to the jerk."

I was working on a manuscript called *That Braun Woman, The Truth About Hitler's Love Life*. The pages littered the floor and I stooped to pick them up, glad for an excuse to hide my scarlet countenance. "What are you talking about?" I demanded, choking over the question.

"I'm neither deaf nor blind. I can always tell who's on the phone when you answer, and when he corners you here in the office, I sicken at the sight of your innocent agony. You loathe him, Eleanor. Why do you let him pursue you?"

I tried to be loyal. I told her my fiance was kind-hearted, understanding, my father's dear friend. Lola snorted. I had to defend myself because I was engaged to him, and I lashed out at Lola, accusing her of prejudice and intolerance.

"Do you believe in Truth-Sharing, Eleanor?"

"Yes, of course."

"Why are you blushing?"

"I love my father."

After that, in my presence, Lola was less critical of Father. But I knew just the same that she continued to broadcast scorn particularly if Ed Munn or some other "loyal" employee was within earshot. That was typical of Lola. The posturing, the dirty words, the hard-boiled attitudes were veneer over a tender and tremulous heart. She was unendingly generous and patient with poor and simple people; bitterly cruel to the pompous and arrogant.

I learned to love Lola, but in self-defense I was sometimes arrogant and always too proud to let her see that I agreed with her about Ed Munn. But when I finally had the courage to tell Father that I wanted to break the engagement (he told Ed for me), then I celebrated by going to dinner with Lola.

It was that night, deserted by her between the entree and the salad, that I met Mr. Wilson. It was an innocent pickup and a virtuous friendship. I often talked to Lola about him and planned a meeting for them over my congenial dinner table. I thought Lola and Mr. Wilson would like

each other. There seemed coincidence in their common passion for Blake who is not a popular poet, and I felt certain that we would become a warm trio. Both of them seemed to understand me in the way older people who have not forgotten youth can understand the young.

I told each about the other, tried to arrange dinner parties, but never succeeded. Although Lola seemed to grow more and more petulant when I chattered about Mr. Wilson, I found nothing strange in her behavior. Lola was an unhappy woman, often irritable. So I quit talking about things that disturbed her. And when Mr. Wilson died, the circumstances were so bewildering that I brooded but could not talk about it, and I never told Lola that the man whose murder was reported in the newspapers had been *my* Mr. Wilson.

"NOW that Lola's passed away, you'll probably be editor of *Truth and Love*," Gloria observed, looking up from the French grammar. The broadcast was over and she had returned to her schoolgirl pose, so that when my father came in, he would chuckle and smack her buttocks.

"Shut up!"

"What elegant manners you have, Miss Barclay."

"I don't care. It's positively ghoulish of you to think about her job when she's . . ."

"Not cold in her grave?" Gloria looked at me sharply. "What a mess you are, Eleanor! Why do you go about without hats all the time? You'd better comb your hair and put on some powder before your father comes home."

When, brushed and docile, I came out of Gloria's dressing room, Father was sitting in one of the wing chairs with Gloria on the floor at his feet, her tilted chin supported by both hands.

"Ed's handling it for me," my father was saying. "'Spare no expense,' I told him, 'give her a decent funeral, I'm paying for it.' She didn't leave a sou, poor soul, hadn't even provided for a decent burial. But I want to do the right thing; she was a loyal employee. . ."

Lola was dead and could not resent the remark. "She wasn't loyal. She hated you and you knew it," I told my father.

Gloria looked as if I had said something

indecent. The room was hot and sickening with the scent of *Fearless* or *Fierce* or *Flagrant*.

"Now that she's dead," my father said reprovingly, "it doesn't behoove us to speak ill of her. Poor Lola had faults, but who that is human hasn't? Young people, Eleanor, are likely to be intolerant. You misjudge Lola. She had a bitter tongue. It probably amused her to poke fun at me, but she was never disloyal."

Gloria's voice rose and fell in enjoyment of the morbid situation. "What did you find out? Drunk, I bet."

"There'll be an inquest. You may be asked to testify, Eleanor."

"What do I know?"

"That she was emotionally unstable. That she drank too much. That she indulged a tendency toward melancholia. You were with her yesterday. What sort of mood was she in?"

I did not answer Father's question, for I was thinking of Lola as I had last seen her. She had stamped on her fur coat and gone off to the Ladies' Room, but when she had returned, remorseful and over-rouged, she had been contrite and eager to please me. I had been too self-centered to pay much attention to Lola; I was annoyed at her childishness and concerned with trifles, for Johnnie was coming to my house for dinner.

My father sighed.

The glass-enclosed clock tinkled and there was Hardy, as if on signal, with a tray, "Pineapple, grape or apple juice?" he asked, offering the tray.

"No, thanks," I said.

"Drink some; it's good for you."

The obedient daughter drank her apple juice, and gazing, innocent-eyed, at her dearly beloved parent, pondered his reason for accusing her of murder.

Weak-kneed, pale-lipped, quaking, I said, "Father, I must talk to you."

Gloria's blue eyes gleamed expectantly.

"Privately," I added. "It's very important."

My father was not unaccustomed to such requests. An audience with the creator of Truth-Sharing was a privilege granted only to members of the family, close friends and the very rich and influential. He rose and extended his hand, and after he had apologized to Gloria, we went down

the stairs to his luxurious study.

"What is it you want to tell me?" my father said gently.

I closed my eyes. In our calendar the blackest sin was disloyalty, a danger which, I used to think, could never threaten Noble Barclay's daughter. In our office, where skepticism was endemic, I had thought I was immune. My defense had been shrillness whose vehemence failed to conceal my weakening. I caught the disease from the people I liked best, those who were frankest in derision.

DISLOYALTY came to me, I think, in the Ladies' Room. Stenographers and file clerks, more than the clever critics, caused my final disillusionment. These girls would never confide in the boss's daughter, but when you have to hide in the toilet to enjoy a cigarette, you can't help overhearing confidences not intended for your ears. I heard the girls talk; I knew that two of them worked a week for the price of one of Gloria's hats; I grew hot with indignation at the injustices of petty fines and deductions. My father, who advertised his love for mankind in five magazines and a weekly broadcast, told me that I did not understand business when I asked why he paid the girls such miserable wages.

After Mr. Wilson died I closed my eyes and my mind to clues that might have solved the mystery. I was sick with terror, but my terror had no substance, for I knew nothing except that my father and Ed Munn had talked in a dark and evil way about Mr. Wilson's hatred and his aching need for revenge. In the office that afternoon I had tried to laugh at their melodramatic phrases, to hide my bewilderment in humor and bravado, but I had been horrified by the suggestion of conspiracy that their silences and secret glances concealed.

Buried truths, my father's book says, are festering sores; they poison the mind and corrupt the spirit. The sore had suppurated; it was green with pus, gangrenous and putrid. I was guilty, too, guilty of the wilful error to which my father attributed so much of human suffering. And like the rest of the fools and invalids, I blinded myself deliberately, donned a mask to shield my squeamish eyes from the furious light.

For a short time the blinders had been off. The sudden light was more than I

could stand. I became ill, physically ill, hurried home with a splitting headache, deserted Johnnie the day Grace Eccles insisted on five minutes of Truth-Sharing in the Ladies' Room. It was not so much what Grace revealed as what I imagined as background for the sum of her small odd facts. Why had my father forbidden her ever to mention the name of the murdered man? Why was his anger so fierce when Grace asked him about the gun which I had absent-mindedly carried out of the Studio when I had been summoned so peremptorily to his office?

"What is it you want to tell me?" my father asked again.

I had been off in a trance. Startled, I stared up into his face. He seemed a stranger beside me on the hard gray couch. He was smooth, tanned, exercised, massaged, handsome and healthy, but his face still showed the ravages of his dissipated youth. I looked at the insolent jaw and thought of that swaggering young drunk my mother had loved so extravagantly that the failure of their marriage was death to her.

He caught my scrutiny and, sure of his charm, smiled. "What do you think of that thing, Eleanor? You've got good taste." He nodded toward the painting of the animal's pelvis.

"It's repulsive."

His pleasure was ingenuous. "My taste isn't so crude, is it? I'd have thrown it in the ashcan long ago, only Gloria tells me it's art. The Lord knows I've got enough horses' tails around me in the office without having to hang one up in my home." This was Noble Barclay, a robust, jolly man, entertaining his daughter with a small, not unkind joke against his wife.

My voice was smooth, creamy, the Sunday-afternoon voice of a good child as I asked, "Why did you tell John Ansell what you told him this afternoon?"

"So he came to you and blabbed. Chivalrous, isn't he?"

"That's not the point. I want to know why you said it."

"Why did you bring the gun up to my office that day?"

I looked away, at the white plaster hands clasping the black plush curtain. "The gun had nothing to do with it. It was a mistake; you know that, Father. I was told to

rush up to your office; I'd just signed for the gun; I picked it up instead of my pocketbook. That isn't the point. . . ."

My wrist was locked in my father's strong hand. "Tell me the truth, child."

"I'm waiting for you to tell me the truth, Father. Why do you pretend that you think I killed Mr. Wilson? Why were you so furious when you found out I knew him? Why did you say all those ridiculous things about his hating you and wanting to destroy you?"

My wrist throbbled under the cruel fingers. I was ashamed to tell my father that he was hurting he.

He sighed. "Must we go over all of this again? I explained it to you then. I . . ."

"You explained nothing," I said, forgetting that it was considered disloyal to contradict Noble Barclay. "You played the heavy father; you shouted and ordered me around and reminded me that I ought to respect you. But you never told me why; you never explained your insane fury and your unreasonable hints about my being in danger because I knew Mr. Wilson."

"He had deceived me. It was part of a plot. He wanted to use my own daughter against me."

"Why?"

Father looked at the bones of the horse and sighed again.

"You told me that Mr. Wilson hated you and lived only to revenge himself upon you," I reminded him. "Then you said he'd injured you and because he wasn't strong enough to acknowledge the truth about his own weakness, he turned against you. But you never told me what he did and how he . . ."

"Sh-sh, you're shouting!"

"I've got to know."

"You're getting hysterical. Calm down. Sit quiet for five minutes and say nothing." His dark bright eyes shifted toward the black marble clock on the mantel. "Five quiet minutes and then we can share the truth, bitter as it is, about this unfortunate incident."

"I'm not hysterical, I . . ."

"Quiet!"

ISAT RIGID, watching the hands of the clock moving so slowly that they seemed to know my anxiety and to wish to thwart it.

The door opened silently and Ed Munn was there. He had not bothered to knock, Ed stood tall in the doorway, looking down at us, his eyes bland, his grin rubbery.

"I've made all the arrangements. The inquest's on Monday, and we'll have her buried the next morning. Funeral's strictly private."

Wrapped securely in the cotton wool of my own concerns, I had forgotten Lola. Recollection stabbed painfully. "Why did she do it?" I cried. "Has anything been discovered, Ed? Do you know anything?"

Ed sucked at his lips. "Drunk, of course. There were empty bottles all over the place."

"Why? She'd been drunk before. There were always empty bottles. Something must have hurt her frightfully. . . ."

One insolent shoulder was lifted. He did not even bother to shrug properly. "Probably discovered that one of her lovers had betrayed her."

I shivered. Ed's unctuous voice sickened me. He considered Lola a bad woman; her virtue was beyond his understanding. Lola had been capable of compassion and indignation; Ed was all oily self-righteousness.

"I didn't expect to find you here, Eleanor. It's an unexpected pleasure."

"Thanks."

"Why are you sarcastic? I'm trying to pay you a compliment."

"Am I sarcastic? You said it was a pleasure to see me and I thanked you. Nothing sarcastic about that."

"You're always sarcastic with me. You act as if I wasn't—weren't—good enough for you. Maybe I'm not a college graduate, but I'm no pint-sized runt. . . ."

"Please, Ed." My voice was querulous, too. Nothing made me more uncomfortable than the sound of a grown man's whining.

"Cut it, Ed. That's all finished," my father snapped.

"Is it?"

"I told you over a year ago she'd never have you. And I made it clear that I wouldn't force her into it. She's a grown woman; her life's her own. I'm sick of arguing with you about it. . . ."

"Once you needed something," Ed interrupted. "And you gave me your promise that if I helped you, you'd use your influence. . . ."

My father's eyes glittered and in the light shed by the lamp behind him his white hair shone like a crown. Ed leaned forward, shoulders drooping, long arms hanging loose. The lamplight illumined their hatred. I saw then that Ed Munn held some secret power which my father feared and resented.

"Please, Ed," I said quietly, "please leave us. I want to talk to my father."

Ed Munn was aware of his power, proud, showing my father how far he could go. A weak man had discovered and armed his arrow at the Achilles' heel of his superior. Slowly, turning his distorted smile upon me, Ed gloated, "About Wilson's death, huh? You want to know why your father blamed you for it, don't you? You want to know . . ."

"You've been spying," I said.

"That's my job." Ed's voice was all syrup and complacency. "Your father's made it my business for years to spy for him. The habit's developed. How can I help it if I spy on him for a change?" The speech sounded as though it had been written and memorized.

"Okay, Ed, but get the hell out now, will you?" Father said.

"I don't want to."

"Get out."

The elastic grin widened as Ed turned to me again. "That boy friend of yours is too inquisitive. We thought he'd keep his mouth shut if he thought you'd done it."

"Was that your bright idea?" I asked coldly. "I can see the Machiavellian touch."

"Get out," my father said again.

Ed seated himself in one of the metal chairs and held fast to the arms with his white, thin-skinned hands. There was swagger in his movements, defiance in his voice. "I'm sick of being kicked around. I'm tired of broken promises. You're going to keep your word to me or . . ." The pause was heavily significant.

"I must say, Ed, your threats worry me a lot," my father said with mock joviality. "Honestly, I'm shaking in my boots, I'm so afraid of you."

"Please tell me," I begged, "what's this all about? Why all the mystery? Why do you want Johnnie to quit asking questions about Mr. Wilson?"

No one spoke. I looked up at my father's gleaming dark eyes and the white crown of

his hair. My father, I whispered, my own father who used to walk with his hand around my forefinger and kiss my bruises. I had not forgotten the security of his arms and the strong tenderness of his caresses. These were sentimental things, but memory is all slyness and deceit, and I knew that I was lost unless I rejected it. I thought about Mr. Wilson who had been murdered and I said in a clear, bold voice:

"Was it you, Father?"

He did not answer, and I said, "Was it you who killed Mr. Wilson? Tell me the truth, please."

It struck me as curious, even then, that I should demand the truth of Noble Barclay. I had been taught, nearly all of my life, that truth was his nature, that a camel might pass through a needle's eye more comfortably than a word of deceit fall from his lips.

He raised his head. "I've done much wrong in my life. Daughter. I'm responsible for the death of my beloved mother and of your mother, my sweet wife. It was my stubborn pride and my weakness that broke their hearts. I have sinned but I have not committed murder. I have not aimed a gun at a man's heart."

"Someone shot Mr. Wilson in the back," I said.

My father shook his head as though he were denying accusation, and his fists clenched and unclenched in nervous challenge. Behind him were the black curtains and the white amputated hands. "Have you believed all these months that I was guilty of murder? Why didn't you come to me openly and talk to me about it?"

"You haven't answered my question, Father."

"You were suspicious, child. You locked suspicion in your heart and were unwilling to admit the cleansing light of truth."

"I was frightened," I admitted. "You acted so strange that night I found that Mr. Wilson was dead. I was afraid, Father . . ."

"If you'd only had the courage to speak to me," he interrupted. "Believe me, child, I had nothing to do with the murder. As a matter of plain fact, it wasn't until the following Monday morning, on the train from Washington, that I found out Wilson was dead."

"The news must have been a blow," observed Ed Munn who had been enjoying our argument.

"Are you still here?" Father said.

Ed stood up. He was smiling and his thin red mouth curved and coiled like a snake. He and my father hated each other so violently that the stench of their malice filled the room.

From the floor above came the enraged sobs of a child awakened by a nightmare. The other twin was disturbed by the sobs, and started shrieking, too. When this had ended we heard Gloria's silvery treble:

"Coming up soon, Daddy?"

"I'm busy, Lover. Go to sleep."

"Don't be long, Daddy. I'm lonesome."

The house became quiet again. Ed shifted, turning toward me with a smirk that suggested evil victory. "One thing I've always wondered, Eleanor. Why did you bring that gun up from the Studio? Did your father tell you to bring it?"

"Damn you, Ed, it was a mistake," I shouted. "Father sent for me in such a rush that I was upset and absent-minded. I picked up the gun instead of my pocket-book. You know that . . ."

"Sh-sh!" my father said. "You're screaming. Of course it was just a coincidence. Ed's just trying one of his tricks again." To Ed, he added, "You make her nervous. If you've got anything to say, say it to me."

Once more Gloria's soprano floated down the stairs. "I'm lonely. Please hurry, Daddy."

"For God's sakes!" I shouted up at her. "He's not your Daddy; he's your husband. You're a grown woman and you've borne him two children. Can't you call him by his name?"

"**P**OOOR ELEANOR." Father led me toward the couch. The poor kid, her nerves are shot. Let her rest, Ed, let her recover from the shock." Father arranged the pillows, and waited solicitously, as though I were an invalid, until I had stretched on the couch. "I'll go up and tell Gloria that you didn't mean it, dear. I'm afraid you've hurt her feelings. She's a sensitive girl, Gloria. Come on, Ed. Time you were going home."

Father left. I closed my eyes, played the shocked and weary role, hoping with

idiotic optimism that Ed would respect my fatigue. A few strained seconds passed. I turned to the wall. The modern chair did not creak when Ed got up and the thick rug silenced his footsteps, but every nerve in my body knew that he had come close to the couch. I turned my head, opened my eyes and Ed, taking this as a gesture of grace, sat beside me. He reached for my hand. I snatched it away.

"Why must you do that, Eleanor? Are you afraid of me?"

His hand encircled my arm and slid down slyly until his clammy fingers were locked about my wrist. I tried again to pull away, but his hand tightened and he moved on the couch until his leg touched mine.

"Please let me go."

His fingers relaxed slightly, but he still held my wrist. "Why can't you be nice to me? I'm tired of being treated like a dog." His face was close to mine and I smelled the peppermints he had been munching. He always smelled of synthetics, of mouth wash or Russian Leather or peppermint or shaving lotion. These scents revolted me; they were more offensive than an honest human smell; they were odors designed to hide the scent of living.

"What's wrong with me, Eleanor? I was good enough for you once. What's wrong with me now?"

He was good enough once; he was the only man I knew, my only friend, my dinner date, Ersatz for a sweetheart. I had been a lonely kid in a big hotel suite without friends or school routines to give form to my days. There were books from a Madison Avenue lending library and the movies and Ed Munn to take me out, like a grown woman, to dinner. He was adult if not charming, a suitor, and he sent beautiful boxes of French chocolates with tiny sugar violets decorating the top layer.

"I was always nice to you. Why did you turn me down?"

"Look, Ed," I began.

"Look. Look," he interrupted. "Is that the only verb you know? Are you asking me to look with my eyes, or do you wish me to listen to what you have to say? I know where you acquired that habit. From Ansell. You've been seeing him, he's your . . ."

I slid off the couch, I stalked with my

back up toward the door. My hand on the knob, my shoulders high, my chin in the air, I said coldly, "Please go now."

"Eleanor, Eleanor, little girl," his voice was meant to be tender, but it was off key and it whined through his nose. "Why don't you like me? What can he give you that I can't? Who's he, anyway! Little runt of a writer, he wouldn't even have a job if . . ."

"Get out."

"I was always crazy about you," he whimpered, his voice becoming more and more soprano. "You were a cute little thing when I first knew you, in a red raincoat with a little hood. I knew then you were the girl I wanted. I made up my mind to study and improve myself so I'd be worthy. You were like a princess to me . . ."

"It's a good match," he continued, looking at me with abject eyes, "you and I, heirs to the business. Who else could take Noble Barclay's place? The twins? It'll be eighteen or twenty years before they're old enough and the way Madame's spoiling them they'll be polo players instead of executives. By the time they're old enough to come into the business, you and I will be in control. . ."

He got hold of me again, pulling me toward him and pinning me against his chest with the thin strong cords of his arms.

My hands ached with the need to slap and scratch, but his arms were a jail, and all my kicking and shoving were like the writhing of a creature caught in a trap. "I loathe you. I can't bear it when you touch me." He quivered with hurt rage. His pallid cheeks had become colored by a faint girlish flush.

"You're vulgar," I cried in ecstasy, for the pleasure of hurting Ed Munn had filled me with cruel energy. "You're a vulgar, revolting man; everybody laughs at you; nobody takes you seriously. Why, if you were a leper," I went on rapturously, "people wouldn't be more anxious to shun you. All those lotions you use, the hair tonic, mouth wash, the peppermints, they can't start to conceal the stink."

"I'm vulgar, am I? You loathe me?" His mouth twisted in such a way that I could not tell whether it moved in anguish or perverse delight.

He pulled out a manuscript, folded lengthwise. "When you've read this, Miss

Barclay, you may change your tune."

"What is it?"

"Read it."

THERE WAS no signature on the manuscript. I recognized the paper as the yellow second sheets we used in the office for the first drafts of our stories. The title was typed six spaces above the opening sentence just as we were instructed to type manuscripts in the office: *A Short History of Homer Peck*.

"Homer Peck!" I said. "That's the name Mr. Wilson used in the title of his book. *Autobiography of Homer Peck*. Who was he?"

"You'll find out." Ed laughed. It was so false and off key that my nerves quivered at the dissonance.

The door opened and there was my father. I was pleased. My father was strong and kind. When I was a little girl he had lifted me high above his head and I rejoiced in his size and the strength of his hands under my armpits.

"You seem to be quieter," Father said. "Feel better now?" Then he noticed the manuscript and came closer. "What's that?"

Ed bowed over my chair. "May I?" He took the manuscript and handed it, bowing again, to Father. The mock gallantry was awkward. Derision and rebelliousness did not become him. It was more natural for Ed Munn to cringe.

"Where'd you get it?" Father asked.

"Aren't you grateful? Aren't you going to thank me for getting hold of it for you?" Defiant, Ed Munn lit a cigarette. He had never before smoked in my father's presence, but he seemed not to care any more whether or not Noble Barclay disapproved. "I expect my reward, you know."

Father's shoulders drooped. His eyes were reproachful, but the reproach was not directed at his disloyal aide. On the wall opposite him hung an unframed mirror. Reflected in it was the drooping, beaten figure of Noble Barclay. Ed reached for the manuscript and Father let him have it without protest.

"What is it?" I asked. "Why are you so frightened? Who was Homer Peck?"

"How about that promise?" asked Ed, holding the yellow pages before him like a shield. The manuscript seemed to give

him courage. With it in his hand he was Noble Barclay's equal. "Give me what I want and I'll give you this to burn, too."

"Why do you want it burned?" I asked. "What is it?"

I might have been tossing my questions at the wind. My father's color was robust, his hair a silver brush against the black drapes, but he was like a vividly colored model, a wax man in a shop window.

"She thinks I'm vulgar." Ed moved the hand that held the manuscript. The pages rustled. "She says I smell bad; she says people shun me like a leper. Make her change her mind, or . . ."

"What have I got to do with it?" I walked past my father and looked up into Ed's swollen, bloodshot eyes. "If you think you're going to blackmail my father into making me marry you because you know some old secret . . ."

My father pushed me aside. "Let me take care of this." He addressed Ed in a gentle, placating manner. "Let's not kid ourselves, Ed. You and I, lad, we're playing for big stakes. Who would it help if the business was ruined? Who else is going to pay you twenty-five thousand a year?"

Ed's tongue crept around his lips slowly. "I have my plans."

My father nodded toward the yellow pages. "You're right, son, I made a promise. And I'm a man of my word."

Ed came toward me. The smells of peppermint and hair lotion made me ill. Between my eyes and the lamp Ed's silhouette had become malignant and unsubstantial, shadowy as the future, a prophecy of my tomorrows.

"No," I cried. "Tell him no, Father."

My father shook his head in warning. I was not to deny Ed Munn, not to laugh nor insult him. Ed was dangerous, he knew something, he knew the secret that Mr. Wilson had known, the shocking truth that threatened the security of Noble Barclay. That much I saw clearly. That fine confession that introduced his philosophy in *My Life Is Truth* was not then the entire story of my father's old sins. There was still mystery in his life, buried scandal, guarded shame that the apostle of Truth-Sharing could not confide to his loyal followers.

Gently my father urged me toward him,

raised my chin with his hand and looked down into my eyes. His voice was aggrieved as though his stubborn child had defied him. "My little girl, my own dear daughter won't forsake her father."

"I'll do nothing," I said, "until I know what this is all about."

THE TELEPHONE rang. Its muted alarm shocked us out of the spell of self-absorption. That gentle, mocking tinkle told us that we were not alone, that a real world existed outside of this black-and-white fantasy of a room, and that we had responsibility toward that outside world.

Father answered. "Yes," he said, "she's here."

"Is it for me?" I started toward the phone.

Ed blocked my way. "Ansell, I suppose."

I was hot, angry, passionate and resentful. There had been too much frustration that night. I could bear no more of it. My hand swung out. I heard the smack, felt swift pain flash through my hand, saw the red, irregular mark on Ed's cheek.

"You . . . you . . ." he spluttered. The rest of the epithet was lost in his throat. His jaw trembled and he stretched his tense, gaunt arms toward me.

Father stepped between us. "It was Ansell," he said. "He wanted you to know, Eleanor, that the police are on their way to Ed's place in Jackson Heights. He's wanted in connection with the murder of Lola Manfred."

"You'll have to get out of town," my father said. He had taken down the painting of the bloated nude and from the wall safe behind it removed an enormous roll of bills.

"Ten thousand," my father said and handed Ed the money.

He took it apathetically. His lack of greed surprised me. In the few minutes since Johnnie had called, Ed had grown smaller, thinner, older. Within the undistinguished blue serge suit his body had shriveled. He moved jerkily, like a puppet whose strings have gone slack.

"I didn't do it, so help me," he moaned.

These protestations went unheeded. Father did not seem to care whether Ed was innocent or guilty; he was interested only in getting Ed out of the state. Ed

was to leave the building by the service exist, take the car which was parked outside, cross the George Washington Bridge into Jersey, drive to Philadelphia, leave the car, and take the first plane that was leaving for St. Louis, Memphis or New Orleans. He was to take the name James B. Thorpe. Father had a driver's license, State of California, all ready in James B. Thorpe's name. As Mr. Thorpe, Ed was to get transportation and a tourist card for travel in Mexico.

Father gave Ed the license, the car keys and the ten thousand. "You'll have about nine of it left by the time you get to Mexico. You can live like a king on it down there. In six months you get the tourist card renewed, and in a year I'll send you some more money in the name of Thorpe, General Delivery."

Father had changed, too. He was on top again, the boss, wielder of power. Excitement heightened his color; his dark eyes glowed, and he worked out the details of Ed's escape with great enthusiasm.

"I don't know but what I envy you. No work, no responsibilities. Pretty senioritas, plenty of sunshine, plenty of dough. Life will be sweet for Mr. James B. Thorpe, the mysterious Gringo."

"I don't want to go."

"Perhaps you'd prefer the electric chair," Father teased. His enjoyment of the situation was cruel. It was payment and revenge; it was compensation for years of forbearance and smothered hatred.

"But I didn't do it." Ed was six feet of self-pity.

"You must take me for a fool!" Father cried contemptuously.

Ed grinned. "Whatever I did, Noble, I did for you." He was injured righteousness; he was the victim of injustice; he was Sydney Carton declaring it a far, far better thing.

"You went too far," Father said icily. "No one ever suggested violence. I asked you to get me something. Your methods were your own idea and your own responsibility."

Ed moved forward. "Then why was a gun on your desk that day? Tell me why."

I sat far away, across the room. Father and Ed were no longer real to me; they had no color; they were like flat figures on a screen. Nothing was solid; reality had be-

come celluloid fantasy; I was a spectator in a chair made of black cords and steel tubing.

My father left the room. When he came back he was carrying Ed's hat and overcoat. With his pocket knife he ripped all the labels out of the coat and sliced three letters, E E M, out of the hat's sweatband.

Ed put on the overcoat slowly and slowly, walked to the mirror. He tipped that hat over his right eye. The effect did not please him and he changed the angle, grimacing at his pallid reflection. My father watched impatiently while this man, a fugitive and murderer, took time to adjust his hat.

By this time the police must have searched Ed's apartment in Jackson Heights. They would presently come here to look for him, for Edward Everett Munn was not only Noble Barclay's assistant but his best friend, a frequent guest in his home.

"Make it snappy, Ed. You haven't all night."

"Why are you treating me like this?" Ed implored, like a woman begging affection of a cold lover. "I'm doing this for you, giving up everything, my position, my place in the publishing world, everything I've worked for. The least you could do is show a little gratitude..."

I turned away. It was disgusting to witness such slavish fawning and cringing. My father was no more affected by the spectacle of human degradation than by Ed's weebegone pleas. He stood firm before the door, his right hand outstretched.

"Empty your pockets. Give me all your papers," he commanded.

"Why?"

"Don't be a damn fool. Suppose the police stop and search you. Come on make it snappy."

As though he were yielding a treasure Ed handed Father a leather wallet, a pocket address book, a few letters with dog-eared corners. This did not satisfy my father. He searched Ed's pockets, removed a key case, the monogrammed cigarette box and a card that entitled the bearer to four more half-hour sessions at a Coney Island massage parlor.

"Where's the manuscript?"

"Manuscript?" Ed pointed vaguely toward the ebony table.

"Come on, don't stall, give it to me."

"I haven't got it."

"Don't lie to me. I'm not going to let you get away with it. Suppose you were caught with it on you!" Father snapped.

Ed looked around blankly. "I put it down. It was there . . ."

"Hand it over, Ed. No monkey business."

Ed seemed dazed. Father lost patience and swung out at him. Astonished, Ed whimpered and backed away. My father struck again.

I pushed back in the steel chair, grasped the black cords of the seat. It was the only time in my life that I have ever watched men fight. Ordinarily I shrink from the sight of assault and cruelty. But this time I watched avidly; my eyes followed every movement.

He deserved punishment, I thought. He had killed two people, my friends, and he had hurt others, defenseless typists and clerks and office boys, for the pleasure of showing his power.

Servility was a deeply ingrained habit. Ed showed little spirit in defending himself and struck out feebly against his master. When he crumpled and fell, it was like the collapse of a dummy.

The doorbell rang.

Father paid no attention. He knelt beside Ed, searching the lining of his coat, feeling for the manuscript under Ed's shirt. Ed lay on the carpet, limp and spineless, his face the color of putty.

The bell rang again.

"Better answer it, Eleanor. Stall them as long as you can," Father said.

Evidently the servants had awakened. I heard voices and footsteps in the kitchen. Gloria called down the stairs. I opened the door and saw Johnnie. I do not remember what I felt when I saw him nor if I spoke a word of greeting before I fainted. All I remember is darkness and the sudden pain of light. Johnnie's arm tight about me and his anxious voice.

"You all right, kid?"

I WAS all right then, secure in a world of solid people. Johnnie was there; he stood for the solidity and rightness of the world. Gloria had come down a few steps and was asking petulantly why no one had answered the bell. Hardy, the butler, in a

black dressing-gown and white silk scarf, hurried out of the dining room.

Father came out of the study. "Sorry you were disturbed," he said to Hardy. "Go back to bed."

To Gloria he called, "It's Eleanor's impetuous suitor, coming after her at this hour. Go back to bed, Lover."

"Come in, lad." Father led us to the study. This surprised me. In the circumstances I thought he would not want Johnnie to find Ed there.

The study was empty.

"Sit down, make yourself comfortable."

Father fussed over Johnnie as though he were honored by this midnight visit.

"I'm sorry if I disturbed everyone," Johnnie said, "but I thought Eleanor might be shocked at the news, so I came to call for her. Mind if I smoke?"

"Go right ahead. Make yourself at home. Why did you think Eleanor might be overcome at the news? She broke her engagement to him more than a year ago."

"Oh," said Johnnie.

In that evening of shocking revelation, nothing had shamed me more than Johnnie's startled glance when he learned that Ed Munn was the man I had once promised to marry.

Johnnie took a long time with his cigarette. "Just the same," he said evenly, "it must have been a shock to discover that someone so close to her father killed one of her friends. Did he kill Wilson, too?"

My father shook his head. The movement was weary and without conviction.

"Why did you refuse to let me print the Wilson story in *Truth and Crime*, Mr. Barclay?"

The doorbell rang.

"Probably the police," Johnnie said. "Looking for Munn. Was he here when I phoned the news? Damn it, I didn't think of that until afterward."

Father stood up. "Take her home, John. Get her out of here. We don't want her involved."

"The police may want to question her."

"I'll take care of that. I'll take all responsibility. Take her home, son, she's all in."

Johnnie wheeled around. "Well, Eleanor?"

"I'm tired. Please take me home. I couldn't talk to them now, not now."

Father was pleased. "Use the service elevator. It's self-operated. Go straight to the basement. There's a corridor that will take you to Madison Avenue."

"Is that how Munn left?" Johnnie asked. The bell rang again.

My father went to fetch my coat, but I rushed ahead, pushed past him in the hall and jerked my coat out of his hands. Father tried to hold it for me, but I pulled away from him and from Johnnie, too. I would not let either of them near me until I had my coat on; and on the drive home I held my coat tight around me, hugging myself with both arms, because I did not want anyone, not even Johnnie, to know I had the manuscript hidden in the inside pocket.

I did not know at this time what the manuscript revealed but I heard and saw enough to realize that it was dangerous. I had learned that night of murder and treachery; I had been shocked, hurt and disillusioned, but I followed an instinct that urged the protection of my father. It was the old habit, loyalty.

He might be a fraud, a hypocrite, partner in murder, but he was still my father and his secret guilt, like the publishing business, the Barclay Building, the royalties, the country estate and all the stocks and bonds, was family property.

"He brought her roses," Johnnie said when we were in the taxi, the sirens and police cars and detectives far behind.

My thoughts had been on other things, and I must have seemed very stupid when I asked, "Who brought roses? Where?"

"Lola. There was an unopened box in her living room. Twelve American beauties. Just like the flowers that sent her into a tantrum yesterday."

"No, Johnnie, it's impossible. She loathed him and he detested her. Of all the men in the world! Lola had a lot of lovers. It could've been one of them."

"Do you remember the name of the florist on the boxes that came to the office?"

They were always the same, American beauties, a round, dozen, long-stemmed, unimaginative and expensive. G. Botticelli, the Personal Florist. But Ed Munn! In my wildest dreams I could never conceive of such a romance. Hadn't it been Lola who persuaded me, with subtle indirect argu-

ments and sly hints, to break the engagement?

Johnnie wanted to talk. I told him that I was too weary to think about the murder. This was not completely a lie. Fatigue was a pleasant drug that kept me from feeling or thinking. There had been too many discoveries that evening, too much emotion, a surplus of disillusionment. And if Johnnie asked certain questions, I should have been obliged to lie to him.

I disliked lying to Johnnie.

When we reached the apartment I gave my pocketbook to him and he found the key. He opened the door, turned on the lights and tried to help me with my coat. I pulled away sulkily and sat down, holding my coat tight about me.

"What a peevish wench! I guess it's because you're worn out."

"Please don't be angry, Johnnie. Please."

"Did you ask your father why he told me he believed you were mixed up in Wilson's murder?"

"Not tonight, please. I'm exhausted. Will you fix me a drink, a double triple highball with lots of ice and practically no soda?"

The drink was an excuse to get him into the kitchen. When I heard him running water over the ice trays I stole into my bedroom, hid the manuscript between the box spring and the mattress and hung up my coat.

Johnnie spent the night. He thought someone ought to be with me in case the police came. After he had tucked me in and kissed me he made up an uncomfortable bed for himself on the living-room couch. As soon as I heard his steady breathing and decided that he was sleeping, I closed the door between our rooms, wrapped myself in an Angora shawl and, smoking cigarette after cigarette, I read the manuscript.

When I had finished I put it away carefully in the inlaid box, locked it with the silver key, restored the box to the cupboard in the linen closet and hid both keys in the pocket of my plaid coat. There was no sane reason for these precautions as I did not think the police would search the house, but, until I had decided what to do about it, I wanted the manuscript hidden.

I opened the window wide to get the smell of tobacco out of my room, turned

out the light and crept into bed. Under two wool blankets and a quilted comforter I shivered. A chill had settled in my bones. If Mr. Wilson were still alive, I should have doubted the history of Homer Peck.

I WOKE with a start. The blackness around me was broken suddenly by brightness as searing as pain. Johnnie stood beside the bed, naked except for the blanket wrapped around him, Indian-fashion.

"What is it, Eleanor? What's wrong, honey?"

I was crying and trembling. The comforter and two blankets had slipped to the floor and I was stiff with cold.

Johnnie covered me again, sat on the edge of the bed, took me in his arms. "Why are you so frightened? A nightmare?"

I spoke weakly. "There was a man, he was carrying me, it must have been a mountain pass. It was worse than that, it was . . ." But the anguish had faded. I could not remember clearly. "He carried me to the edge and threw me over." For a split second the dream's exquisite terror returned. I shuddered out of Johnnie's embrace.

He warmed milk for me, brought a hot-water bag. When I was soothed and comfortable, he returned to his couch. Again I waited until I was sure he slept, and again I turned on the lights. I had become afraid of sleep and of darkness because sleep is lonely and in the dark you are deserted by all of mankind.

When Johnnie woke in the morning he found me bathed, brushed, and combed, rouge on my lips, a yellow ribbon in my hair and a starched apron over my best housecoat. The kitchen smelled of bacon and coffee. Bread was sliced and ready for the toaster; eggs and the beater waited beside a pottery bowl.

Johnnie kissed the back of my neck. "You look a lot better. Sleep well?"

I broke the eggs into the bowl. "Would you go downstairs, please, and see if the milkman's left any cream? I could scramble them with milk but cream's better. And you'll want some for your coffee."

"I want to ask you a couple of questions."

"After breakfast, darling. I never like to talk about serious things before I've had my coffee."

I was a happy, healthy little housewife. My coffee was strong, my toast and eggs ready at the same moment, my grapefruit cold and cut deftly out of the rind.

We were having second cups of coffee when the bell rang. Johnnie set his cup down hard upon the saucer. "I wish we'd had a chance to talk," he said, "but you were so nervous last night."

"I'm all right now. I can take it."

He pushed the button that opened the safety latch downstairs. "Look, kid, tell the whole truth, no matter what. Half the truth isn't any good; half the truth's the same as a lie." Then he opened the door.

Tall and straight, self-possessed, handsome, bringing the fresh air of December morning into my overheated room, Father marched past Johnnie, kissed me and said, "Good morning" as casually as if an early call were part of the daily program.

"Good morning, Father. We're just having breakfast. Would you like a cup of coffee?"

"My dear girl!" His anguish suggested that I had made some immoral proposal.

"Milk?"

He nodded, shook hands with Johnnie, took off his overcoat, looked the room over and chose the love-seat. I gave him milk in a tall highball glass and he drank it at one swallow. To Johnnie he said, "Captain Riordan wanted to talk to her last night, but I told him she'd collapsed. He'll see her today."

I lit a cigarette. My hand trembled.

"I wish you wouldn't smoke so much. It make you nervous," Father said. "They want to talk to you too, John. They want to find out if you knew, when you phoned last night, that Munn was with us. I told them I didn't know."

Father's eyes roved, took in the table set for two and the couch with the blankets and sheets.

"I stayed last night. Eleanor was nervous," Johnnie explained.

Father nodded. "He's a good lad, Eleanor. There's nothing that makes a woman so happy as a thoughtful man. You're a lucky girl. But I wish you wouldn't let her smoke so much, John. You see how nervous it makes her."

"It's not smoking that makes me nervous."

"You're very irritable," Father said. "I

don't like that shrill note in your voice. It reminds me of your mother before she. . ."

"Please," my voice became shriller. "You didn't come here to talk about my smoking. Why did you come?"

Father's glance was reproachful. "Come and sit beside me, Eleanor. I want to talk to you." He pulled me down to the love-seat beside him. His hands were cold and dry.

"I'd like a word or two alone with her, lad."

"Okay." Johnnie picked up his coat and hat. "I'll get the papers. Want me to come back, Eleanor?"

"Please come back."

"A fine lad," my father said as the door closed behind Johnnie. "A decent, honest boy, I could want nothing better for you, child."

"Why have you come here?"

"To see my little girl. Why are you so resentful? Afraid I'll disapprove?" He nodded toward the sheets and blankets on the couch.

I mover away, pushed myself into a small space at the end of the love-seat. My cozy living room looked cramped now; the furniture seemed swollen and oversized.

"What happened to Ed, Father? Did he get away?"

Father was no longer handsome, no longer radiant nor young. The lines deepened along his mouth; the cheekbones protruded like rocky knobs below sunken eyes. I saw again the cruel peaks, the tormented paths, the endless precipice and the face of the man in my nightmare.

"What did you tell the police? You must have told them that Ed was there if they asked about Johnnie's knowing it. I suppose you had to tell them. Too many people knew—Gloria and Hardy and the elevator men."

"Eleanor . . ."

"What did you tell them?"

"My own daughter, my eldest, my favorite."

"How did he get away?" I persisted. "When I left the study to answer the doorbell, he was almost unconscious. Did he also go by the service elevator or was he hiding on the terrace? I noticed the door . . . I was afraid. . ."

Father sighed. The room seemed still to be shrinking, the walls closing in. The

freesia petals were brown at the edges and shriveled.

"They're going to ask me what happened, Father. What shall I tell them?"

"You know nothing," he said, articulating carefully like a man who has been ill and is just recovering the power of speech. "You left the study. Ed was there with me. You went to the front hall, opened the door, greeted John, stopped to chat, probably to kiss him or let him kiss you. . ."

"I fainted."

"No need to bring that up. They'd ask a lot of fool questions. I told them you'd stopped for a little conversation or love-making, about five minutes, I said. I went out to see what was taking you so long and Ed disappeared. That's what I told them."

In my dream the night had been darker than death. I had tried to call for help, but I had no voice. He had carried me to the edge of the precipice and I had known his intentions, but I could not cry out for help because the man had been my father.

After a little while I said, "You didn't find the manuscript, did you?"

"How do you know?"

"I know." My voice was light, my eyes cold, my smile mocking.

"You, Eleanor . . . You've got it?"

I laughed.

"Where it is?" He waited but I did not answer. He caught hold of my wrists, jerked me toward him. "Eleanor . . . daughter . . ."

I tried to escape, but his hands tightened and they seemed so large, so tense and strong that I felt my bones crack beneath them. I tried again to pull free, but the pressure increased and I was afraid that his hands would break my wrists. Closing my eyes, shutting out the cruel brilliance of his glance, I saw again the jutting rocks, the nightmare road, the precipice.

V

ANSELL AGAIN

IT WAS SATURDAY morning. In the tabloids and Hearst papers Lola Manfred had become headline news. *Greenwich Village Poetess Believed Slain*. That she was old, fat, weary and alcoholic seemed not to matter. No reporter bothered to mention the fact that she had not

written a poem for years. Murder had restored her dignity.

I read about it in a drugstore on Eighth Street and University Place. I drank two cups of coffee and learned that the police were seeking a man believed to have been with Miss Manfred the night of her death. No paper named Edward Everett Munn. I ordered a third cup of coffee, so that I could stay at the counter and read the newspapers.

Eleanor had wanted me out of the way while she talked to her father. I hadn't needed any special lenses nor an improved hearing device to perceive that she was hiding something from me. Before she went to bed she had been nervous and later the nightmare had almost paralyzed her. She thought she had fooled me, but I knew she kept her light on and rattled papers for an hour after she pretended to be asleep.

In the morning I was supposed to have found her the cheerful little woman, a ribbon in her hair and her apron strings tied in a coy bow. That's what she thought. I wondered if she knew she had sugared my eggs.

I made up my mind to play it her way, just to see how far she would carry the ball. The arrival of Noble Barclay saved me from the sweetened eggs. After he had shed his paternal light upon us, there was no need to continue the pretense of appetite. I cleared the table for Eleanor and threw the eggs into the garbage pail.

For twenty minutes I dallied in the drugstore. My intensive study of alarm clocks, stuffed animals and la grippe cures must have convinced the manager that I was opening a rival pharmacy. Finally I bought three packs of cigarettes and started back. As I turned the corner on East Tenth Street, I saw a long black sedan stop in front of the remodeled brick house on whose second floor dwelt Miss Eleanor Barclay, the original Truth Girl.

It was a police car. Riordan got out. "Just the man I want to see," he said, clapping me on the shoulder.

The vestibule was three steps down. On one wall were mail boxes and brass-bordered cards printed with the tenants' names. Riordan gave the cards the once-over, but did not immediately ring Eleanor's bell.

"When you called Barclay last night, did

you know Munn was there?" he asked.

"I didn't call Barclay. I was trying to locate Miss Barclay."

"You weren't sure you'd find her at her father's?"

"No. I called here first, but she wasn't at home. So I took a chance and called her father."

"He says you didn't talk to her."

"I asked for her, but he seemed unwilling to call her to the phone. So I let him have it."

"What do you mean, let him have it?"

"The news that his assistant, his supervising editor, his best friend had committed murder."

"We're not sure of that," Riordan said.

"What the hell!"

"All the evidence we have is some tobacco and a couple of wads of cigarette paper."

"What about the flowers? Did G. Botticelli know Munn? Had he bought her flowers there before?"

"Doesn't prove Munn killed her," Riordan said.

"Have you picked him up yet?"

"He's scrambled."

"No!"

Riordan nodded.

"Doesn't that prove something?" I asked. "He knew you were after him and he skipped. Must have had a guilty conscience."

"Did you know he was at Barclay's when you phoned?"

"Hell," I said. "If I wanted to cover up for the guy, would I have shown you the evidence in the ashtrays? You could spend forty years, Riordan, looking for a man who gets rid of his stubs that way. If I hadn't given you his name, would you have guessed that E. E. Munn, editor of Truth Publications had called on Lola that night?"

"Botticelli might have told us. We might have had a chance to pick up Munn before he was warned," Riordan said.

I was sore. When he sat with me in bars, drank rye at my expense and gave me stories for *Truth and Crime*, Riordan had seemed a friend. I saw now that he was less friend and more cop.

"You haven't answered my question," he said. "When you called Barclay's place, did you know Munn was there?"

"Hell, if I'd known, do you think I'd have phoned? Be yourself, Riordan, I'm the guy who tipped you off to Munn."

"Miss Barclay's your girl friend, isn't she?"

"We're going to be married," I answered.

"Maybe that's why you were so anxious to let her know that the other guy, the ex-boy friend, was mixed up with the Manfred dame?"

"Are you suggesting that I gave you the dope on Munn because I was jealous? Because I wanted him out of the way?"

"Could be."

"Nuts to that."

"When you got to Barclay's place last night, who opened the door?"

"Miss Barclay."

The answer must have checked with Barclay's story. Riordan nodded. "How long did you two stay out in the hall together?"

"Three or four minutes. When she saw me she fainted."

"Fainted? Barclay didn't mention it."

"It's the sort of thing Barclay wouldn't mention. He wouldn't want it to get out that his daughter, brought up by the *Truth and Health* method, could be so frail and human."

RIORDAN grimaced. I could see that he did not believe all my answers. This made me feel as if I were on the spot and had to defend myself. I felt guilty.

"Why do you ask me that? Was Munn supposed to have made his getaway while I was in the hall with Eleanor?"

"That's Barclay's story. Munn was supposed to have been in that room, the loony one that looks like the reception room of an asylum, with Barclay and the girl. You rang the bell. She went to open the door and was gone quite a while, so Barclay went to see why. While he was gone, Munn took a powder. . . ."

"The hell you say!"

"Barclay thinks he slipped down the back way. There's a self-operated service elevator and a corridor in the basement that goes clear to Madison Avenue."

"I know. That's how Eleanor and I left."

"You did, huh? Why?"

I wondered. Barclay had been so urgent and Eleanor so eager that I had

not stopped to ask questions. To Riordan I said, "It was when you came. Eleanor was exhausted and her father thought she'd better rest before she talked to you. He suggested the service elevator."

Riordan pushed the button beside the slot with Eleanor's calling card. A buzzer sounded. The latch of the inner door clicked open. I ran ahead.

Barring Riordan's way, I asked, "Did you mention Warren G. Wilson when you talked to Barclay last night? What did he say?"

Riordan pushed past me and started up the stairs. On the landing above we heard a door open.

Barclay swung out his hand to Riordan, wished him a good morning. "Back again, lad?" he said jovially to me.

There was no sign of Eleanor. The couch had been cleared of sheets and blankets; dishes and cups had been removed from the breakfast table.

"Sit down, Captain. Take his coat, John. I suppose you'd like to see my daughter." It seemed Barclay's home, rather than Eleanor's.

I took a position like a St. Bernard before the bedroom door. Riordan chose a stiff chair and Barclay seated himself comfortably on the couch.

"Any trace of the fugitive?" Barclay asked.

Riordan said, "Why didn't you report the theft of your car, Mr. Barclay?"

Barclay scratched his head. "One of my car's stolen? I didn't know. My chauffeur hasn't reported any theft."

"At three-fifteen this morning a man named James B. Thorpe was picked up in Philadelphia."

"In my car?" Barclay asked.

"Black Chrysler coupe, registered in New York as the property of Noble Barclay."

"I have a black coupe," Barclay said. "Used it yesterday." His fist crashed against the table. "Damn it, I must have left it out again. Yes, I did. I'm afraid," his voice showed remorse, "the keys were in it. I sometimes leave it for the chauffeur to pick up."

"What about this Thorpe?" I asked. "Who was he?"

"Never heard of him," said Barclay.

"He carried a California driver's license.

According to the description in it, this Thorpe was six foot three, weighed around two hundred and twenty. Doesn't weigh that much now. Skinny guy and just about six foot, the report says."

"Why was he picked up?" I said.

"Drunken driving."

"Drunk." Barclay whispered it like a dirty word. Clearing his throat, he asked, "Has he been questioned? Did he confess to stealing my car?"

"Wouldn't talk without his lawyer."

"Oh!" was all that Barclay said.

We all waited.

"Then he said he wanted the best lawyer in Philadelphia. The best, he kept on insisting. Said he was a man of importance, that they'd be surprised if they knew who he really was. He had ten grand in his wallet."

Barclay raised his eyebrows. "Has he talked to his lawyer yet?"

"They'll let us know when anything new turns up." Riordan appeared nonchalant, but he was watching Barclay's reactions out of the corner of his eye.

Eleanor came out of the bedroom. She had changed from her robe to a blue skirt and white sweater. She looked beautiful but unhappy. Dilated pupils made her eyes seem dark.

Her father beckoned but Eleanor would not sit beside him. She went to the far end of the room. "This is Captain Riordan, Eleanor, Captain, my daughter."

Riordan asked her about Lola. He wanted to know how friendly Eleanor and Lola had been, how many personal secrets Lola had confided, and if on the day of her death she had shown signs of despondency.

"Yes, she did," Eleanor answered emphatically. "She'd been all right in the morning, but in the afternoon she was strange. She lost her temper and threw her fur coat on the floor and stayed in the Ladies' Room for a long time. It was either because she'd had too much to drink at lunch or because someone had sent her some roses. Someone she disliked, I imagine."

"Roses," said Riordan. But no more on the subject. "Was that the last you saw of her?"

Eleanor looked up. She had been rubbing her wrists. "Yes, it was. I left about an hour later. I had some shopping to do. I

wanted to buy a new hat." She tossed the phrase, defiantly in my direction.

"What do you know of her relations with Munn?"

"She loathed and despised him."

"Are you sure?"

Eleanor went on massaging her wrists. "Positive."

Riordan turned to Barclay. "That's not what you told me."

"My daughter believed what Miss Manfred wanted her to believe. What the rest of the office believed." Barclay looked wise and secretive. "Miss Manfred told everyone she despised Ed Munn. It was a ruse to keep them from knowing the truth."

Eleanor jumped up. "I don't believe it! I worked with Lola. I saw her every day. I knew her better than anyone in the office."

"You knew exactly what Lola chose to have you know," said Barclay in a voice as smooth as castor oil. "Miss Manfred—though I don't like speaking ill of the dead—was sly. She didn't want anyone in the office, and particularly Eleanor, to learn about her relations with Ed because . . ." Barclay smiled and shook his head, "Eleanor had been engaged to him."

"No one in the office knew." Eleanor returned to the couch. She leaned against the cushions wearily as if, at this hour of the morning, she was already exhausted. "I can't believe Lola'd ever have looked at him. She'd have laughed if Ed had even tried . . ."

"Your voice is getting shrill, child. Remember what I told you this morning," Barclay interrupted.

ELEANOR groped in her belt, found a handkerchief, covered her mouth. She was on the verge of hysterical laughter. Riordan looked to me for help. The switch from the *Truth and Crime* angle to a *Truth and Love* scene disconcerted the detective. But I was no tower of strength. Barclay had once taken me in with that smooth manner. Experience made me wary. On the other hand, there was a certain amount of credibility in his story. Lola had been drunk and wanton; she might also have been sly. When she abused or insulted Munn, or regaled us at the Editors' Table with stories of his stupidity, she might have been laughing secretly at our naivete.

"Did you know about this affair before

Lola died?" I said to Barclay.

"For quite a while," he answered.

"Had Munn confided in you?"

"Don't like to be caught napping, do you, John?" Barclay laughed. To Riordan he commented, "Our young friend is typical of the skeptic who doubts whatever his own eyes have failed to see. What's your opinion, Captain? Do you think I'm fabricating?"

Riordan hesitated. He was, after all, a cop. And Barclay a big shot, a millionaire, author and publisher, owner of property, a boss. Why should Barclay *fabricate*? Had the boss anything to gain by making up a story about a love affair between his assistant and a loose woman?

"What reason would you have to make up the story?" Riordan asked.

Barclay turned his charm full upon Riordan. "I admit," he confessed ingenuously, "that I was deceived. I certainly misjudged Ed Munn."

Riordan fingered his ear. "I'd like to ask Miss Barclay a question. I asked you last night, but I want to hear her answer." This was police subtlety calculated to inform Miss Barclay that her story had better check with her father's or else. "When your father answered John Ansell's call and told you we were after Munn in connection with Miss Manfred's death, what did he do?"

"He denied it."

"Denied what?"

"Killing Lola."

"And we believed him, didn't we, Eleanor?" Without giving her an opportunity to answer, Barclay went on, "That was natural, don't you think, Captain? After all, when you've been associated with a man for years, it's hard to believe he's committed a murder.

Eleanor had started rubbing her wrists again. I tried to catch her eye, but she avoided my glance.

"I'm a man who prides himself on being a judge of human nature," Barclay said. "It just goes to show how your pride can deceive you, and how little one man knows of what's in another's heart."

We took it silently. Eleanor reached across the table for a china cigarette box. She offered it to Riordan and to me.

Riordan shook his head. "I don't indulge."

"Great!" shouted Barclay. "I congratulate you. Look at him, kids. A man of action and achievement, he doesn't think he has to prove his manliness by smoking and drinking. I wish you'd tell these youngsters, Riordan, why you eschew tobacco."

Riordan acknowledged the tribute with a jerk of his head. "I used to smoke two packs regularly every day of my life, but I wanted to see if I could get along without 'em. That was a year ago St. Patrick's Day." He did not mention his capacity for rye whiskey. Neither did I. It would be unbecoming for a host to remind his guest of the cost of entertainment.

"Before we go a step further, Captain, I want you to know something." Barclay moved toward Riordan. He must have counted ten before he spoke. His timing was perfect. We were all on the edge of our seats.

"I like the way you've handled this case. I must confess I'm deeply impressed by your honesty and your straightforward methods, Captain. I wonder if you'd mind if I mentioned it to the Commissioner. I'd like to congratulate him on the efficiency of his staff, particularly a certain officer . . ."

Riordan had turned as pink as a newborn baby. "Just as you like, Mr. Barclay. Glad you feel that way."

"That about finishes it, doesn't it, Captain? If you want us, you know where we can be found." Barclay had picked up Riordan's overcoat.

Riordan stood up, brushed wrinkles from blue serge. "You'll all be asked to appear at the inquest."

"We know that."

RIORDAN smirked. This was his big moment, one he could brag about to his in-laws. "Thanks for everything, Mr. Barclay. It's a privilege to know a man like you." Riordan shook hands with Barclay, nodded at Eleanor and me.

I was burning. Efficiency. Straightforward methods. The same old Barclay guff and Riordan eating it up like a turkey dinner.

"Wait a minute. Haven't you forgotten something," my voice echoed sarcastically Barclay's flattering use of Riordan's title, "Captain?"

"Forgotten something?" Riordan looked around.

"Warren G. Wilson. Remember him? The man who was murdered last May. When I called you last night and told you I suspected Lola hadn't committed suicide, I said there might be a connection between her death and Wilson's. You know now that it wasn't suicide, but what about Wilson? That was your case and I thought it was why you asked to be put on the Manfred investigation. Or am I wrong?"

Eleanor slid forward on the couch. Riordan transferred his hat from his right to his left hand, and shifted his weight. Barclay frowned in my direction. It was a warning.

Undaunted, I plunged into the gale. "When you talked to Mr. Barclay last night, Captain, did you mention Wilson?"

"The lad's tenacious," Barclay said, winking at Riordan. "Once he gets a notion in his head he sticks to it. Some people might call him stubborn, but I admire his tenacity. It's a sign of character."

A sign of character, is it? Okay, Barclay, I'll show you the quantity and quality of character in John Miles Ansell. "Was Mr. Barclay able to tell you anything about Wilson?"

Eleanor coughed. On Valentine's Day Warren G. Wilson had given her a book inscribed to a genteel lady. Until I forced it out of her, she had not mentioned her friendship with a murder victim. I tried to catch her eye, but she was looking down into the china box as if she expected to find a pearl among the cigarettes.

"Mr. Barclay didn't know Wilson," Riordan told me.

"You asked him?"

"Last night." Riordan swung around on his heels and glowered at me. "What gives you the idea that these people knew Wilson?"

"I told you."

"What did you tell me? That you had a hunch Miss Manfred was connected with the Wilson case. You had no proof."

"Look," I said, trying to give him a straight answer while I let Eleanor know that I had not mentioned her name, "I told you I had a hunch Miss Manfred had known Wilson. I told you what happened when I asked her if she'd known him. . ."

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"What happened?" Barclay asked.

"She denied it," Riordan said.

"Denied it!" Barclay shouted.

"Yes, she denied it," I said, "but the way she denied it made me suspect that she was lying. She was too defiant, too emotional. . ."

"Had she been drinking?" asked Barclay.

"Uh-huh."

"Wasn't it characteristic of Miss Manfred to be defiant and emotional, particularly when she'd been drinking?" Again Barclay answered without giving anyone else a chance. "You see, lad, I know the tendencies of alcoholics better than you. My own unfortunate history gives me particular insight into their emotional responses. You say she was defiant in denying she'd known Wilson. Typical. Typical."

A door slammed. Eleanor had gone into the bedroom. I did not know whether she was irritated because I had divulged a family secret or because her father was an oily hypocrite. I did not much care.

Barclay appeared not to have noticed Eleanor's retreat. He was too intent upon his argument. "You see, Captain, the boy's got no proof that Lola knew Wilson. She was drunk, she was defiant, and he wants to make something of it. What's your opinion?"

"I can't see it," Riordan said. "Last night, when he told me about it, I was willing to take a chance. When you want to clean up a case, you'll follow any lead. But now that I've heard everything, Mr. Barclay, I'm inclined to agree with you. It doesn't make sense."

"Okay, it was just a hunch," I said. "But a valuable hunch, wasn't it, Riordan? How about Munn's having been with Lola? Would you have known that without my hunch?"

"Doesn't prove that either of them knew Wilson," Barclay laid his hand consolingly on my shoulder. "I know it'll hurt you to hear me say this, lad, but you never could take that turn-down on the Wilson story. You thought you'd written a masterpiece, and ever since then you've had some cock-eyed notion that I had a personal reason for rejecting it. You. . ."

"Look, Mr. Barclay. . ."

"You've got to learn to take it, son."

You're not perfect; you're only human like the rest of the race. Everyone makes a mistake some time in his life."

"Hell," I said, "I've had stories turned down before. Better stories and by bigger and better magazines than *Truth and Crime*. If you're trying to say that's the reason I think you . . ."

"What other reason could you have? What proof have you that Munn or I—since you insist upon involving me in this fallacious theory—had any connection with Wilson except that we didn't like your story of his death?"

I looked around for something to throw. There was only Eleanor's old china and antique furniture.

"Look, Mr. Barclay, was I or was I not poisoned the night after I started asking questions about the Wilson story?"

"Poisoned?" Barclay did not seem to understand.

"I don't eat shrimps, Mr. Barclay. I'm allergic to shellfish."

"Come now, John." That was the old Barclay, the smoothie, the professional confidant. "You're not going to deny facts. Everyone, Smith of the Grille, the waiters, the doctor, your nurse, they all knew you had ptomaine from eating contaminated seafood. Look up the hospital records—they'll show you. To say you were poisoned is not only absurd, boy; it's dangerous. Shows you to be suffering from a persecution complex."

"I didn't eat shrimps. I never do. Look, Riordan, he might have bribed them to say I did; I've suspected that all along, but it's not true. I'm telling you . . ."

Barclay smiled. He was so damn tolerant that I wanted to smack his sleek puss. Against that calm self-confidence my raging sounded like the anger of a three-year-old.

"I was poisoned!"

BARCLAY smiled sadly. From the way he took it, an outsider would think I had only just made up the poisoning story and was trying to uphold my fiction with a display of temper.

"Why didn't you report it?" Riordan asked.

Barclay almost purred.

"I was bribed," I said. "By a raise of seventy-five smackers per week."

"Yeah?" Riordan looked at Barclay for confirmation.

"I wasn't aware, John, that you felt that way about your promotion. At the time your gratitude seemed sincere." Barclay turned the full light of his countenance upon me. His voice dripped sympathy. "What did you have on your conscience, lad, that you couldn't accept a promotion and a raise without explaining it to yourself in that distorted fashion? What secrets are you hiding? What truth about yourself are you afraid to face?"

"For Christ's sake!" I said.

"He probably believes he was poisoned," Barclay told Riordan. He spoke in the voice of a high-priced specialist who has been called in to advise the family doctor. "It's remarkable how easy it is for some people to believe what they *wish to believe*. It proves what I said in my book and what I keep on saying in the magazine: anyone can believe anything if the urge is strong enough. You know what it proves?" His voice dropped. The confidence was directed at Riordan, but he was careful to see that I did not miss a syllable. "It proves that there's something deep in this lad that he can't face. You'll never find a healthy man, a happy man, a strong and confident man who can't dig down into the depths of himself and acknowledge the bitter truth. When a man has to go as far as this young man has gone to show that others are trying to harm him, there's something unhealthy inside. Don't you agree, Captain?"

"You're not kidding," Riordan said solemnly. "In my line I've met plenty of crooks who blame their troubles on the other fellow."

Barclay nodded his approval of this sagacity. "The human mind," he continued, "is the greatest natural phenomenon of all time, the eighth wonder of the world. Science has studied it for centuries, and what has it discovered? No more than I can tell you now in a single sentence. A man can will himself to believe that anything is the truth, and if he believes hard enough, it is the truth."

Riordan pondered and moved toward the cigarette box.

Barclay went on with the lecture. "It's as true in religion as in science. Faith, self-confidence, belief can work miracles.

Have you read my book, Captain?"

"Sorry," muttered Riordan.

"Oh, I don't mind." Barclay was forgiving. "Lot of people haven't read it yet. I'll send you a copy. Read it. You'll find the case of this young man clearly explained, Captain."

"You'll find Mr. Barclay, too. His life story is told in the most intimate detail. Don't skip the Introduction. It's the greatest human document ever written on human despair."

The lid of the cigarette box banged shut. Riordan turned, putting temptation behind him. He held his hat in both hands, revolving it slowly.

"We've come a long way from murder," I said. "A long way from the Wilson case and Lola's death and Munn's escape. Barclay's philosophy is fascinating, don't you think, Captain? Probably you've heard some of the ideas before. Barclay's borrowed a lot from Christian and pagan, from medicine men and scientists, from theosophists, theologians, psychoanalysts, and the crank religions of the twentieth century. It's remarkable what men can believe, particularly when you know how many of them have swallowed Truth-Sharing."

Riordan's hat whirled faster. He was a detective, not an arbiter of philosophies.

Barclay sensed the delicate balance. Winningly, as if he and Riordan were allies of long standing, he said, "Haven't you noticed, Captain, that cynics are all the same? What difference is there between those who scoff at the old religions or those who scorn the revelations of a modern philosophy? Why do they hate themselves and despise the rest of humanity?"

Barclay bent forward, peering first into Riordan's face, then into mine. He looked and spoke as if he were addressing an audience of fifty thousand.

Riordan smirked. I knew what he was thinking. Just what Barclay wanted him to think: that I was a frustrated, envious, bitter, five-foot-five runt who used cynicism and sarcasm as a weapon against the six-footers. It was not a new tactic. Barclay had once done it with a mirror, but this time he put on a better show; he didn't need mirrors. He had me where he wanted, helpless and squirming.

Therefore, ergo and *q. e. d.* I had not been poisoned. I had eaten shrimps.

The phone rang. I welcomed the interruption. Sweat rolled down my face. The act of wiping it off embarrassed me. I hoped the argument was over.

Eleanor hurried out of the bedroom. But Riordan had already answered the phone. It was his reporting information just received from the Philadelphia cops. The man who had stolen Barclay's black coupe had been found dead in his cell. An empty glass vial lay on the floor beside the body. The police had not discovered it when they originally frisked him.

I watched Eleanor. She had not been present when Riordan told Barclay about the theft of the car and the arrest, in Philadelphia, of the drunken driver. The news meant nothing to her until James B. Thorpe's name was mentioned.

Her body stiffened. She stared at her father. "So it wasn't the terrace?" She had barely breath enough for the words.

"Terrace?" Riordan was puzzled.

"I thought he jumped off or had . . ." She caught Barclay staring at her and turned away. "It must have been a dream, but it seemed so real. It couldn't have, could it? There'd have been a body on the street. It seemed . . ."

"Stop chattering," Barclay commanded. To Riordan he said, "He was dead, you say, when they found him."

Riordan nodded.

With a fine monogrammed handkerchief Barclay wiped sweat from his forehead. "Then he didn't say anything? Didn't reveal his identity?"

"Know who he was?"

Barclay's head was bowed. The handkerchief hid the expression on his face. "Poor Ed," he said and blew his nose. "Poor fellow, he must have known the game was up."

THE INQUEST was apathetic. Lola Manfred was declared dead. A few grains of tobacco, several minute balls of crumpled cigarette paper, an unopened box of American beauties might have proved that Edward Everett Munn had been her final visitor, but they did not prove that he had mixed bichloride of mercury with her last whiskey and soda.

Riordan thanked me publicly for my assistance in the Manfred case, but he did not mention Wilson nor my hunch that there was a connection between the two murders. Probably Barclay had won him to the belief that I wanted revenge because my Wilson story had been rejected. In his own way, Riordan was right. Not a shred of evidence linked Lola Manfred's death to the murder of Warren G. Wilson. Time and the taxpayers' money could not be wasted on theories offered by a guy with a chip on his shoulder.

There was a surprise witness. His name was Botticelli. He looked and acted like Chico Marx. Every week his boy had delivered flowers to Miss Lola Manfred. When Botticelli testified, the Coroner and the jury rocked with laughter. In spite of the comedy, the florist's testimony clinched Barclay's theory. With American beauties at eighteen dollars a dozen, it had to be love.

Eleanor testified briefly. She had come in late, walking between her father and his attorney. She wore her black suit and a black sweater and a string of small pearls. She looked severe, like an old-fashioned schoolteacher.

She appeared not to notice that I was in the room. We had not seen each other during the week-end. On Saturday morning, when Barclay and Riordan left, she had asked me to go, too. She was tired, she said. I had telephoned several times, both on Saturday night and Sunday, but she was always too tired to see me.

I was puzzled. This seemed a curious time for her to give me the brush-off. I asked myself a lot of questions, but the answers added up to a bright zero.

Noble Barclay took the oath. Everyone in the courtroom edged forward in his chair. Eleanor's white-gloved hands played with the pearls.

Barclay admitted that he had difficulty in adjusting himself to the idea that his close friend and trusted assistant could commit murder. Although, Barclay added, he had been aware that in having relations with Miss Manfred, Munn had been playing with fire.

"Do you know certainly, Mr. Barclay, that she was Munn's mistress?"

"Does anyone in this room doubt it?" Eleanor's necklace broke. Pearls rolled

on the floor. There was a lot of talk and moving about. Officials, witnesses and attendants got down on their knees.

I kept my seat. So did Eleanor.

Barclay went on with his testimony. He was the only one in the office, he intimated, who had not been fooled by the lovers' ruses. We others, the wise and cynical, had let the wool be pulled over our eyes, had believed that affection was enmity, had been too blind to perceive that bitterness and slander were a disguise for shameful love.

The alleged lovers were dead. Nobody came into the courtroom to deny Barclay's statements. Who would doubt a man of his reputation? His facts were as orderly as the alphabet. And Munn could not now be indicted and tried for murder. The case was closed.

At the end the crowd gathered around Barclay. Men waited in line to shake his hand. Ordinary, decent, law-abiding citizens felt it a privilege to meet the author of *My Life Is Truth*. Everyone was surprised and delighted to find the great man so humble and so sincere.

Down the block was a dirty bar. I chose a booth in the darkest corner. Sitting alone, I ordered two double brandies. Eleanor had gone off with her father and the lawyer in the Barclay limousine.

"Two double brandies?" asked the bartender.

"I'm expecting someone," I said.

He brought the drinks. I had him set one before me, place the other across the table. He guessed that I was not expecting anyone, and as he returned to the bar I noticed that he was looking at my reflection in the mirror.

I raised my glass and drank a toast to Lola Manfred.

This was more appropriate, I thought, than a wreath for her coffin.

The bartender was worried. I signaled and he came back to the booth. "I'm afraid my friend's not coming. Would you like it?" I pointed to the untouched glass. Lola would not have wanted good brandy wasted.

"Don't mind if I do. Though I'd rather've had bourbon."

"Have a bourbon on me, too." I threw five bucks on the table, saluted the bartender and left. He tapped his head,

TEN MINUTES later I walked into the office. It was 4 P.M., and the place should have been humming. Hardly a typewriter clicked. In the private offices, editors and sub-editors gossiped. In the Ladies' and the Gents' Rooms were gathered delegations of writers, readers, typists, office boys, and members of the Board of Religious Co-ordination. No one wanted to work. Too much had happened.

My fellow-workers crowded around as if I were Public Hero Number One. They asked confidentially if it was true that the late E. E. Munn and the late Miss Manfred had been that way about each other. It was ridiculous.

The human mind, as Barclay had informed Captain Riordan, is the greatest natural phenomenon of all time, the eighth wonder of the world. Henry Roe confided that he had always known there was something between Lola and Munn, and Tony Shaw rushed into my office to whisper that he was sure he had once seen them in a hotel in Atlantic City.

Presently Miss Eccles paid me a visit. Her chest heaved, her hands fluttered, her dry painted lips pouted girlishly. "Tell me, Mr. Ansell, aren't you just overwhelmed?"

"Overwhelmed is the word for it, Miss Eccles."

Beside my office door stood Miss Kaufman. Through rimless glasses she glared at Barclay's secretary. "He's busy, Grace. Don't bother him now. If you have any questions regarding business, send us a memo."

Miss Eccles turned her bony, indignant back upon the enemy. "This is business, Mr. Ansell. Tell me, have you seen *him* today?"

"Barclay? Of course. At the inquest."

"Did he say he was coming in?"

"He didn't honor me with his confidences. Nor make a statement to the press."

"Please, Mr. Ansell," lily-white hands were clasped in supplication beneath the sharp chin, "don't be whimsical. You know I have no sense of humor. There are vital questions to be answered. Office policy, you understand. Is Eleanor coming in?"

"She didn't confide in me either."

"But what are we to do about *Truth and Love*? With Miss Manfred passed on

and Eleanor neglecting her responsibilities, how can the magazine ever go to press?"

"Who cares if *Truth and Love* never goes to press?"

Miss Kaufman laughed.

Miss Eccles gave me a stricken look. "I know it's not as important as life and death, Mr. Ansell, but the first rule in this business is that the magazine has to go to press on time."

"Perhaps they'll make you editor."

"Oh! Mr. Ansell! That's very flattering, but I haven't the editorial mind."

"You've been loyal," I said. "So loyal that you ought to be Supervising Editor. Maybe Mr. Barclay'll give you Munn's job. Shall I suggest it?"

"I doubt that I'm worthy," she sighed. But the look in her pale eyes showed that Miss Grace Eccles dwelt in a prophetic dream.

Miss Kaufman's voice disturbed the vision. "Quit bothering him now. He's got work to do."

Miss Eccles gave Miss Kaufman a glance which promised dismissal on the day that Barclay's secretary achieved new power.

When she had left, Miss Kaufman closed the office door, moved toward my desk and said, "It doesn't sound right to me."

"Good for you, Kaufman. It cheers me to discover there's still some honest skepticism left in the world." I kissed her.

"None of that. I'm a respectable married woman. If it hadn't been for that bichloride of mercury, I wouldn't have believed it. But since I read that the ten thousand dollars he had on him was claimed by his sister who runs a beauty shop, I couldn't help putting two and two together."

"You sound like a manuscript that *Truth and Crime* would reject, Miss K. Which two and two and what's the sum?"

"Beauty shop operators use bichloride. They get it in tablet form and dissolve the tablets to use as antiseptics. Why couldn't he have got some bichloride tablets out of his sister's shop?"

"That doesn't tell us why he did it."

"Do you remember," Miss Kaufman asked as she cleaned my glasses with the square of pink cotton, "what Miss Manfred always answered when people asked how she dared say all those fresh things

about Mr. Barclay? She used to say she knew where the body was buried."

"Whose body?"

"I wouldn't know," replied Miss Kaufman.

She gave me back my glasses and marched out of the office.

For the rest of the afternoon she posted herself outside my door and told visitors that I was too busy to be disturbed. I spent an active hour drumming on the wood of my desk. Secured to the wall opposite my desk by four thumb tacks hung a picture cut from a woman's magazine. Miss Kaufman had put it there as a gag. The lettuce was green, the mayonnaise yellow, the shrimps pink . . . can't be sure *until we've got the analysis but I had another case that looked just like it. Bichloride of mercury.* Or had the ambulance doctor never said it? Had my imagination, stimulated by too many crime stories, conceived the whole thing? According to hospital records, to Noble Barclay, to I. G. Smith of the Barclay Building Grille, I had eaten deteriorated shellfish. Can such authority be contradicted? What proof had I, three weeks later, that I had not eaten shrimps?

THE DARKNESS thickened. A gong sounded. Miss Kaufman popped in to ask whether I would need her any more that day. I told her to hurry home to the wallpaper salesman. People passed, laughing and talking, on their way to the elevators. Girls giggled. My fingertips were numb and I quit beating rhythms on my desk.

Hinges creaked as my office door opened. I swung around in my swivel chair. It creaked, too.

"Johnnie, are you still here?" asked Eleanor.

"What do you think?"

"Please don't be sarcastic. I've got to see you."

"You had plenty of opportunity over the week-end. I'd begun to wonder if you weren't avoiding me on purpose."

She came a couple of steps into the office. I switched on the desk lamp. The sudden light struck me between the eyes. I scowled.

"Sit down. Make yourself comfortable," I said.

She took the straight chair designed for new writers who come to ask if the editor would be interested in an unusual story. She was still pale but she had made an effort to liven her appearance with rouge and lipstick. The purplish color made her skin seem frailer.

I remembered the long week-end and grew angry. "What's wrong? Why are you looking so tragic? Everything's turned out all right for you, hasn't it?"

Eleanor raised her hand to her neck, gripped her throat as if she meant to choke herself. Then her hand dropped.

"That was a wonderful performance your old man put on," I said. "I'd have liked to congratulate him, but his admirers didn't give me a chance. Let me congratulate you, though. You did pretty well yourself."

Her underlip trembled. "Johnnie . . ."

"Yeah?"

After a short silence she said, "I'm going away."

"Yeah? Where to?"

"I don't know. Anywhere. I've got to get away from here."

"Why?"

She did not answer. Her hands, still in the white gloves, tightened on her pocket-book. The pupils were so large that her eyes looked black. I remembered then what her father had told me about his first wife, Eleanor's mother. She had been tense, oversensitive, secretive. I thought of the chapter in the Introduction wherein Barclay described his young wife's suicide.

Eleanor sighed. "Don't make fun of me, Johnnie. I need help."

"I'd like to help you, but you make it tough." I wanted to show sympathy, but, at the same time, let her know that I was not going to stand for any more lies or evasions. "The time for kidding's past. Either we've got to be completely honest with each other, or else."

In a muffled voice she said, "I didn't lie to you, Johnnie. I can't remember a single thing I said that wasn't true."

"You know more than you've told me. Maybe you didn't lie deliberately but you've deliberately withheld the truth. Isn't that so?"

She raised her head. Her stricken eyes asked for mercy. I fought off the urge to take her in my arms. Evasion and ap-

peasement would only lead us around the same old circle, back to the point from which we had started. "Perhaps I oughtn't to hold you responsible," I said coldly. "Perhaps you've never learned what honesty is. Your education seems to have been deficient. You've been taught to mold and twist your idea of truth to fit every convenient attitude. Apparently you've never learned that half-truths are worse than lies. There's only one truth, and that's the whole truth, and unless we start with that, we'll never have a chance."

I heard muffled footsteps in the corridor. Someone sneezed. I jumped up, flung open the door. There was no eavesdropper, just a tired accountant who had stayed overtime to balance his books. He wished me a wan good night and trudged toward the elevator.

I closed the office door again. "It's okay. No one's there. You can talk now," I told Eleanor.

Her lips quivered. The effort at frankness made her tense and cautious. I waited. Impatience acted as an irritant and I felt my temper rising. On the stand beside my desk was a Thermos jug of green plastic and a glass exactly like the blue jug and glass from which I had taken a drink flavored with bichloride. The blue color had kept me from seeing that the water was tinted. Had that been considered when the mercury tablets were dropped into my Thermos carafe?

"Look," I shouted, standing above Eleanor and resting my hands on her shoulders, "you say you love me; you've promised to marry me, but you're either too scared or too stubborn to tell me what you know about Wilson's death and Lola's death and Edward Everett Munn. You've always been like that, stubborn and secretive. Maybe I'm a sucker, maybe I'm being used for something I don't understand. But I'm not going to let anyone try to poison me a second time."

"Poison you!" Her lips formed the words, but she did not speak them aloud. She pulled herself free of my hands and looked up at me. There was nothing false about her amazement.

I told the story briefly, but gave her a complete picture of the argument over the Wilson story, the blue-carafe business and the ambulance doctor's first diagnosis. Then I described my interview with Noble

Barclay, his promises and hints, and our conversation about the shrimp cocktail.

After I had finished there was a long pause.

She breathed heavily. Suddenly she said, "If I'd known, I'd have killed him."

"Your father?" I asked. The bitterness was intentional. I wanted to hurt her.

The look she threw at me was a challenge. Her jaw shot forward. Her eyes were narrow and pale in color.

IMPATIENCE burned in me like a fever. "Well, say it!" I shouted. "Don't be afraid. You can tell me. I don't run to the police with information. Say it, Eleanor. I know anyway."

"My father wouldn't commit murder." The sudden dignity shocked me. She was an indignant lady who had been shoved by rude hands during a subway rush.

I sat back so suddenly that my chair almost tipped over. "Then why did he tell me that he suspected you? I thought it was to protect himself."

"Do you think I did it?" Her poise survived. She was still the aggrieved gentlewoman.

"No. I never did believe it."

This what she had been waiting for. The society manner which she had used as a brake on her temper disappeared as completely as the fever and the tension. She leaned over and kissed me on the forehead.

"Now that you've said that, Johnnie, I can tell you that I'm not entirely without blame. In a way I'm responsible for Mr. Wilson's death."

"What are you trying to say?"

"I brought the gun to Father's office. We'd been posing pictures at the Studio, and when I was sent for suddenly, I picked up the gun and carried it with me."

"What was in your mind?"

"I don't know." She looked down at her hands as if she wanted to avoid the question in my glance. "Perhaps it was unconscious. My wish to kill . . ."

"Don't go Freudian on me. You didn't know then, did you, that your father was calling you to talk about your date with Wilson?"

She shook her head. "But I knew it was urgent, that I was to leave my work and

rush up there immediately. I guess I knew I'd be bawled out and that Ed would be there, smirking, waiting like an animal to pounce."

She shuddered and held her arms around herself.

"Did you hate him so much that you carried a gun to a conference?"

"Were you ever afraid of anyone, Johnnie? Not sanely and consciously afraid but terrorized down deep in your bones? I didn't know I had the gun. I thought I was carrying my pocketbook. It seemed just an absent-minded mistake. I didn't even think about it until I heard that Mr. Wilson had been shot with the same kind of gun."

"And you thought your father did it?"

She nodded humbly. "I didn't know what to think. I was frightened dumb. Father had been so illogically angry about Mr. Wilson, it just didn't make sense. Honestly, Johnnie, I didn't know until that night, last Friday, that it was Ed."

"Why did Munn kill Wilson?" I asked.

"He thought my father wanted him to. He thought Father had asked me to bring the gun to the office. Believe me, my father didn't know anything about it until afterward. Ed Munn was crazy."

"Crazy like a fox."

"You didn't know him. He was . . ." she paused, groping for words. "He was like a dog that attacks people who seem to threaten his master. Father says it's partly his fault. He'd raised Ed too high, had given him too much power and responsibility for a man of his intelligence."

"A nice theory," I commented.

"He was scared," Eleanor said "Afraid of everyone, of everything. Now that you've told me about being poisoned while you were working on the Wilson story, I'm beginning to understand. Ed probably thought you had something on him. He might even have thought you were working for the police. You came here after the Wilson murder, you know. Don't you see how it is?"

I saw, but my vision was blurred. Physical facts were clear but they had no meaning. So far as simple outward evidence was concerned, the Wilson mystery was solved. But the solution was too simple. The thing I dislike about detective stories is that in the end they tell you who did it and then try to brush you off with some sort of

surface motivation. Even if I believed that seven million dollars had been hidden in the hollow leg of an antique chair or that the Siamese emeralds were worth twelve deaths, I'd want to know more about the things that went on in the murderer's mind when he dipped the arrow into that rare East Indian poison.

"You may be right about Munn's suspicions," I said irritably. "Guilt can drive a man crazy. But suppose I'd died that night, suppose the scrubwoman hadn't arrived in time? An autopsy would have shown the presence of bichloride in my body. There'd have been an investigation around here and somebody might have remembered that I was working on the Wilson story.

"Who'd your father have bribed then? And where does he fit in anyway?"

She turned away. I saw her small, neat, drooping back. The heat had been turned off and the air in the office had dropped to the freezing point.

"I know your father doesn't commit murders," I continued. "He merely condones them. Suppose I'd died that night. Could Noble Barclay have squared that one by suggesting a frustrated love affair?"

She whirled around. My wisecrack had hurt her.

That had been the intention. I was sick and tired of the whole thing.

"Don't look at me like that," I snapped. "I know I hurt you. I meant to. And damn it, I'll go on hurting you until I know where you stand, and whether you're on my side or your father's."

"I came here to ask your help." Eleanor's voice was unsteady. She fumbled with the clasp of her pocketbook. Finally she got it open and took out a manuscript typed on yellow paper, like the first draft paper used in our office.

"What's that?"

Wearily she brushed back the curls which clustered on her forehead. "I want you to read this," she said and gave me the manuscript.

After a moment she raised her hand and pushed back her hair again. It was a desolate gesture.

Suddenly she turned and walked out, leaving me alone in the office with the yellow pages in my hands.

VI

LOLA MANFRED'S STORY

TWENTY-THREE YEARS ago in a poor sanitarium in Arizona a young man lay dying. He was loved by everyone in the place, for his courtesy made duchesses of charwoman, and he treated the seedy orderlies as respectfully as if they were members of exclusive clubs. This generosity was product of a rich imagination. The young invalid allowed fantasy free lodging in his mind, but kept it always in guarded chambers so that there was never any doubts in himself as to the hazy borderline between fiction and reality.

He had enjoyed his thirty years and viewed with unconcealed apprehension the approach of death. An ambitious man, he disliked dying without having achieved fame. His name, peculiarly ill-suited to eminence, was Homer Peck, a name for a comedy character in a bad rube play. His was the American story, woven of the conventional homespun. Its elements, the village childhood, the jerkwater college, the early struggle could have been tailored to fit the biography of millionaire or gangster. He was eighteen when he went to work as a reporter on a Chicago newspaper.

In 1917 he was all on fire to save democracy, but Army doctors discovered that the fever of patriotism was less than his body temperature. They advised a year in bed. After sixteen impatient weeks he was at work again, this time in an advertising agency where his imagination was allowed even freer range than in the offices of a Chicago daily.

In the first year of Prohibition, it was Homer Peck who ascribed to that burgundy-colored mouthwash "the tang of vintage wine." He was the first to write of perfume as "overture to romance" and to prove his theory with solemn statements from such connoisseurs as Norma Talmadge and Theda Bara. It was none other than Peck (this achievement falls spontaneously into the "none-other" class) who discovered that fifty-six per cent of the nation's people were, secretly, C.C.s.

C.C. Magic initials swept the country. Citizens afflicted with halitosis, pyorrhea and b. o. were mortified at sufferings that

contrasted so trivially with agony endured by the C.C.—the Colonic Cripple.

The scientific discovery of the appalling percentage of C.C.s among our citizens was not Peck's major contribution. He found a way to relieve mass suffering. Wrapped around each bottle of Liberta was a slender pamphlet written by Peck and named by him *Handbook of Freedom*. I doubt if any philosophical classic has attained wider popularity, or any political manifesto liberated more miserable slaves.

In the advertising offices of Michigan Avenue, the name of Homer Peck was spoken with reverence. The young genius might have commanded a salary of ten thousand a year. This did not satisfy Peck. When an obscure great-aunt died and left him what is known as a tidy fortune, on which he might have lived a tidy life with all the sunshine and leisure his illness demanded, he went into business for himself.

With Liberta he had offered freedom. In his own new business Peck offered success to the wistful thousands who, like himself, had been weaned on Horatio Alger, Jr., and dreamed each night of limouines and ocean greyhounds. Success, as a commodity, was no harder to merchandise than a cathartic. Peck knew that it was not the mild laxative Liberta which caused the testimonial letters to flow in by the thousands, but his *Handbook of Freedom* which, in spurious scientific language, taught the customer to overcome his fear of constipation. In his new venture Peck would expand the *Handbook* to a correspondence course; five dollars a month for fifteen months, a lesson every two weeks, and instead of freedom from costiveness, freedom from failure.

Peck wrote his course in the first person and in the cozy style which made the student feel that the master was his dearest friend. But who could follow a master named Homer Peck? Thus, in July, 1920, Warren G. Wilson was born, out of two presidential campaigns by a mail-order tycoon. In his lessons, his correspondence and even his collection letters, Wilson showed himself to be, not the fishy-eyed, cold-blooded capitalist, but a bluff, warm teacher who never stinted on the advice he gave his dear students. He was strict about monthly payments only because he wanted

each student to respect the principles of honest business.

In spite of its high-sounding name and frequent allusions to a faculty, the Warren G. Wilson Foundation was a one-man institution. At the height of its life the Foundation employed six people, four of whom were typists, one an office boy, and Peck's devoted nineteen-year-old secretary.

AFTER he had written twenty-two lessons the technicalities of commerce began to bore Homer Peck. He broadened Wilson's interests, told his students that millionaires were often the most miserable of men, and that success meant knowing "how to live." Lessons XXIII to XXX generously included essays on Self-Mastery, Freedom from Inhibition, Ego, the You in You, Fundamental Meaning of Truth, Looking at Yourself Frankly, and Purging the Mind, Heart and Soul.

By the time the thirty lessons were printed and bound in an imitation-leather cover, poor Homer's cheek was worn quite thin from the constant lodging of his tongue. This was the wrong spirit. A proper advertising man is awed by the virtues of the cold cream, the rye bread, the lubricating system he praises. But Peck had neither the piety nor patience to go on believing in the work which had cost so much of his time, his money and his health. Just when the business was about to bring a return of the money invested in printing, plates, overhead and advertising, Homer Peck quit. The office rent was paid, the furniture sold and Warren G. Wilson's glamorous career ended. Peck did not even try to sell the copyright, plates and good will.

His secretary was in love with him. When she was not working on Warren G. Wilson's sales and collection literature, the ardent, slender, dark-haired girl wrote tender quatrains dedicated to H. P. With Peck she drank cocktails out of coffee cups, danced to hot bands in basement night clubs, walked hand in hand on the Lake Shore, reciting Edna St. Vincent Millay, Shakespeare and Blake. The girl offered passionately to become his mistress, but Peck was tubercular. His only kiss was aimed at her right ear on the day he left for Arizona and she, with three hundred dollars of his money in her purse, went

off to pursue the full life in Greenwich Village.

Peck found the Arizona sanitarium a drab place filled with hypochondriacs and sickly illiterates who enjoyed no conversation save the endless recounting of symptoms. He read, "I am interested," he wrote the girl in Greenwich Village, "chiefly in philosophy, religion and its history, psychology and psychoanalysis. I've read all the popular interpretations of the Viennese analysts, but the stuff is too highbrow. What this country needs is a good five-cent philosophy mixed with a liberal dose of old-fashioned mysticism. One cannot overestimate the power of suggestion."

Peck had made no scientific discovery; he was merely learning for himself a set of facts which orthodox medicine had long admitted. Faith cured those pains which, existing only in the mind, caused suffering as intense and symptoms as precise as organic infirmity. Psychoanalysts were exploring the buried causes of such self-induced suffering. But these men, in contrast to the faith-healers, were pedants who had constantly to check and recheck results, who treated a sick ego like fluid in a test tube, and more often than not tortured the patient by bringing to the surface those memories which the sick soul protected with an elaborate structure of pain. Only intellectuals were able to accept such treatment and only the wealthy able to pay for it. Worst of all, the psychoanalysts explained away the miracle, which practice frightened away many of the sorest sufferers.

Homer Peck found the seedy sanitarium a most convenient laboratory. It was not exclusively a resort for consumptives. Any patient was accepted if his relations could pay the monthly fee. Here Peck met women who preferred the invalid's couch to the marriage bed, men who could not endure the competitive struggle in a world in which it was worse than sinful not to acquire wealth. And there were others who indulged in secret, tortured desire for gratifications considered evil by their families and neighbors.

As he studied, Peck became sympathetic to the invalids whom he had at first snubbed. He became as intimate with their prejudices as with their pains, asked questions and received startling answers about

parents, wives, husbands, bosses and sexual partners of one sort and another. All was dutifully recorded in his notebook. Had his intentions been honest, Peck might have made a solid contribution to the study of the contemporary neurotic.

But his education had been in the flamboyant schools of advertising. No less than Warren G. Wilson's dear students, Homer Peck was a victim of the urge-to-a-million. In this spirit he began the writing of his book. "In a way," he wrote to Greenwich Village, "it will combine the virtues of the *Liberta Handbook* with Wilson's dynamics. But it will include this added feature: the sufferer will be taught to cure himself by digging for the roots of his pain. It's the confessional made chummy, but there'll be no catalogue of sins, no prescribed penance. I shall call it *Confession and Suggestion*.

"What name shall I sign to the book? Could anyone follow a Messiah called Homer Peck? Have you any suggestion? The author will have to be a mystery man for it would be fatal to reveal the fact that he has not been able to cure himself."

In December of 1923 the book was finished. The girl in Greenwich Village, the first to read it, could not believe that it was meant to be taken seriously. To humor the invalid she submitted it to three publishers who promptly rejected it, and then gave it for reading to a clever woman literary agent who refused to soil her hands with such trash.

While the girl chewed her fingernails and nibbled pencil stubs, wondering how to break the sad news to Homer, she had a wire from him. It said something of this sort:

Great news stop a miracle has been passed in Arizona stop my method successful stop inform publishers I cannot consider less than fifteen per cent starting royalties stop why no word from you stop will soon be rich my love
Homer

The girl thought he had fallen victim to his imagination, that he had hypnotized himself into believing his poor lungs healed. She was a flabby-hearted creature and could not answer his ecstatic wire with the news that no decent agent or publisher would touch the book. There was a man who wanted to marry her. He was going to Paris. Twelve hours after she had

got the wire she was married, and in another six hours on her way to France.

The next morning her landlady cleaned the room. In the fireplace she found a deposit of black ash. This was all that remained of Homer Peck's bright dream, the book that was to have made him the new Messiah.

IN BELIEVING that a confirmed materialist like Peck could perform a miracle upon his unworthy flesh, the girl had shown herself a poor judge of character. The book designed to bring health to the ailing cost the author much of his own strength. He burned with a steady fever and coughed until his lungs were a filigree of scar tissue.

This did not shatter his faith in his method. His strength was failing, his girl had deserted him, no word of encouragement had come from the New York publishers, but Homer Perk had witnessed a miracle.

To the sanitarium had come a twenty-seven-year-old dipsomaniac who believed the world would be a better place if he were out of it. He was a young man of great charm who, when he had a mind to, could have tempted St. Anthony to sin or wheedled the devil to saintliness. His inebriate wickedness had broken his poor mother's heart, and had plunged his young wife into such desperate gloom that she had ended her life with a bottle of iodine.

His name was Noble Barclay

In 1917, when all able-bodied young men were called to military service, Noble Barclay had been so far advanced along the road to hell that the Army would have none of him. For a while shame shocked him to sobriety. Embarrassed because he was not fighting, Noble explained that he was serving his country in a more important way. To give the lie substance and also to earn the fat money the war factories were then paying, he took a job which, otherwise, he would have considered beneath his dignity, his background and his class. Not the least of his gifts was a talent for believing whatever he heard uttered by his own voice, and it was not long before Barclay became certain that he was making greater sacrifices than the boys in khaki.

This attitude won him a wife. She was a

pretty girl but serious, idealistic and overbred. Her people approved the bridegroom's appearance and name, accepted his explanation of the secret war job and celebrated with a costly wedding. Champagne was served. This was Barclay's undoing. He had been sober for half a year and he thought it would do him less harm to toast the bride than to confess his weakness. There were many toasts and Barclay, after drinking all the elderly kinsmen under the table, almost disgraced himself with a buxom bridesmaid.

They were all relieved on that New Year's Eve when Prohibition became a national law. Barclay saw it as salvation and celebrated at a lemonade party with his wife's people who sacrificed their old port and their Rhine wine for his sake. He managed a year of sobriety, but when he lost his job and could not readily find another, he found solace in the speakeasy. As the liquor became worse the cost became higher. This did not keep him from drinking. Contrarily, he seemed to take perverse pleasure in spending his wife's allowance on bad gin.

During pregnancy Mary Eleanor had been spared her husband's love, but one night in May, when their daughter was three months old, Barclay demanded his rights as a husband. Mary Eleanor's submissiveness had ended. She turned on him like a wildcat. They fought. It was no quarrel, mind you, but a knockdown and drag-out fight which ended with his beating and then taking her. He left her cringing on the floor, laughing hysterically, and it seemed to him that her laughter followed him through the streets to the very door of the saloon.

He was discovered four days later, insensible, in the room of an angry whore, and told that his wife had killed herself. Her family would not let him come to the funeral locked their doors and crossed to the other side when they met him on the street. For the next two years he worked intermittently and drank steadily. It amused him to torment his respectable mother-in-law, to ring her bell at odd hours, bring strumpets to her elegant drawing rooms, and to cause a semi-annual scandal by suing for the custody of his daughter. In September, 1923, he brought himself to the attention of his wife's fam-

ily by being discovered unconscious on the steps of the State Capitol where he had fallen into sodden slumber. When he had recovered from pneumonia, they shipped him off to Arizona.

The doctors who ran this sanitarium were less interested in curing patients than in keeping paying guests. Barclay's recovery was too rapid to prove a good investment; so the doctors supplied a daily dosage of bathtub gin which enabled them, conscientiously, to send his relations a monthly bill for room, board, treatment and extras. Had it not been for Homer Peck, they would have kept Barclay in the sanitarium until his liver rotted.

Noble Barclay was Peck's pet guinea pig. Barclay was desolate, lonely, guilt-ridden and grateful for a kind word. Peck told him about the new method, read him passages from *Confession and Suggestion*. In the dim room with curtains drawn against the desert sun, the quiet so intense that it almost had substance, Barclay lay on Peck's bed, repeating the formula until his great body began to writhe, his lips to twist as he began to pour out the secrets of his tortured soul.

They were pitifully commonplace and sordid, the sort of thing the normal boy writes on a back fence. But Barclay's mother had named him Noble.

When the boy arrived at puberty and joined the fellows in the alley, he listened wretchedly to their boasting. Enormous, gawky, muscular, but shyer than a village maiden, he wished his mother had named him Lust. Until he was eighteen he remained, miserably, a virgin and initiation convinced him that his mother had been correct in calling it beastly. This knowledge did not cool his blood and he became convinced that he was a sort of Jekyll-Hyde alternating between nobility and bestiality. In his first year of college he discovered alcohol.

FOUR COLLEGES expelled Noble Barclay. He left Dartmouth only just ahead of the sheriff who wanted him on a rape charge, which was ironic, since the woman was a well-known prostitute. If the business had not been so tragic, it would have provided material for a hilarious comedy. This great swaggering Don Juan, so handsome that women on the street stared

wistfully after him, was as ignorant of love as a Victorian babe. Believing the act beastly, he behaved like a beast. He had never attended a class in sex hygiene, nor read a book about it; had consistently played hooky from physiology classes and could not look at a skeleton without blushing.

A miracle was in order. Barclay was too convinced of his inherently evil nature to be cured by any simple explanation of the origins of his sins. Peck's method was tailored for his needs. It was the self-centered man's creed, a tidy inexpensive religion that did not bother itself with God.

And it worked. In Barclay's room the bottles of gin accumulated, untouched and undesired. Without alcohol's aid Barclay took into his bed a sensible, lusty nurse who considered it a privilege to assist in the education of the handsome patient.

In his hour of need Peck was comforted by his disciple. One week later Noble Barclay set out for New York with two hundred dollars of Homer Peck's money and the carbon copy of his book.

When he boarded the eastbound train, it was Barclay's purpose to find a publisher, arrange terms that would profit Peck and to spread the good word. In gratitude for his salvation Barclay had offered to act as Peck's representative, and when Homer talked of a percentage, Barclay winced.

Like all new converts Barclay was possessed of the zeal to proselytize. This was spring and the eastbound train carried its quota of semi-invalids, homeward bound after a winter in the sunshine. While gentlemen told dirty stories in the smoker, the observation car was filled with ladies confiding to one another the subtleties of their various ailments.

This was fertile ground for Barclay. He had a way with ladies. Even in the unregenerate days, they had stared after him in the street. Now, healthy and buoyant, tanned by the sun, his waving black hair silver-frosted, he had only to tilt an eyelash and the strongest woman weakened.

So impressed was Mrs. Horatio Beach of Kansas City that she implored the young man to stop over for a few days and help her get rid of sciatica. After considering the matter Barclay decided that a few days' delay would not injure Homer

Peck, whereas the patronage of a wealthy convert might help him. Moreover, the dowager had an impressionable daughter with a name like a summer resort, Rosetta Beach.

THE BEACHES lived in a Norman castle set in a garden in which iron stags and marble goddesses were distributed generously among clipped box and privet hedges. The house was filled with mahogany, walnut, silver, ivory, ebony and teakwood. Standing before an imperial Chinese screen whose panels were embroidered with the symbols of Buddhism, Noble spoke to a select audience of Homer Peck, of the book that was to shake the world, and of his own mistakes, his misery, the suffering of his poor mother, his young wife's death, his relations with women, his drunkenness and degradation, and finally of his regeneration. The frankness with which he spoke of the latter subjects so titillated Mrs. Beach's friends that many begged for private consultation. In all justice let it be recorded that Barclay's intentions were therapeutic rather than aphrodisiac. He could not help it if some of the women seemed "actually to stop breathing."

A few days later Barclay decided that he had dallied long enough in Kansas City. The time had not been wasted, for in putting Peck's theories into practice, Barclay had discovered certain weaknesses. "No wonder the book hasn't been published. It still needs a lot of work," he told Rosetta as, repentantly, she drove him to the station. "I intend to do a little more lecturing, work out a few more experiments before I bring it to a publisher.

"This," he added earnestly, "will be my small way of paying my debt to Homer."

When two years later, Peck's old girlfriend returned, a divorcee, from Paris, she wrote a repentant letter, asking Homer to forgive her weakness in protecting him from the knowledge that no publisher would have his book. The letter was returned. On the envelope in blackest ink was written, "No longer with us."

At that time the book had been out for more than a year and had sold three-quarters of a million copies. Peck had not heard of it because he had made a full retreat from the world. Disappointed by the

girl's desertion, heartbroken when he failed to receive good news from Barclay, he had gone deeper into the desert. The sanitarium doctors had been glad to get rid of this troublesome patient who cured profitably incurable patients. Perhaps their wanton treatment of Peck's mail was the doctor's revenge; or since their place had always been sloppy and inefficient, it might merely have been carelessness that caused "No longer with us" to be written on all envelopes addressed to Homer Peck.

He had moved to New Mexico, lived in a lonely house on the desert and was attended by an Indian servant who was said to be a witch. One day on one of his infrequent visits to Albuquerque, he bought a copy of *The American Mercury*.

Reading it in bed that night he came upon an article by J. S. D. Blankfort called *The Strange Phenomenon of Noble Barclay*.

Early the next morning his ancient Ford rattled to a stop before the bookstore and Peck hurried inside to ask an astonished clerk to order a copy of *My Life Is Truth*. The clerk had merely to stretch out his hand and take from a counter piled high with them a copy of Barclay's book. For the rest of the morning Peck sat in his parked car and read.

Barclay's best-seller was, substantially, Homer Peck's *Confession and Suggestion*. There were a few changes. Peck's apologetic, quasi-scientific, quasi-humorous foreword had been deleted. There was left no word of credit to scientists and faith-healers, and none of Peck's sly humor. The humor had been Peck's greatest error. Who could follow a facetious Messiah? One good laugh and *Confession and Suggestion* would fail at the first belch.

For Peck's foreword, Barclay had substituted that sensational Introduction which told the full story of his youth, his sins, his fall and his regeneration. From the text as well as the foreword all humor had been cut away. The jolly prose had become solemn. But the book had authority. Jerry-built foundations had become solid; the bastard had been legitimized. And Noble Barclay was the father. With the richest, roundest adjectives he acknowledged himself the author of the book, the founder of the school of thought, the benefactor of mankind. Peck's timid, imitative title had

been dropped and the name of his philosophy changed, simply and dramatically, to Truth-Sharing.

All of this Peck had learned from the Blankfort article. That night he wrote Barclay a letter. It was a stupid move, but Peck, like so many clever men, was generous in his estimate of others. He could not believe Barclay had intended to defraud him. Extenuating circumstances were not hard to find. No mail had been forwarded from the sanitarium.

Peck's letter was fair. It acknowledged Barclay's contributions to the book as well as his labor in its exploitation, and suggested a division of profits. Moreover, Peck wished to see his name on the jacket. In spite of that fatal sense of humor, Peck was proud of the book. It was a success and the aching for success still burned in the grown-up Alger boy.

Eight nervous days passed. On the ninth he received a letter on stationery engraved with the name of Noble Barclay. The original letter has been lost, but as Peck remembered, it ran something like this:

My dear Mr. Peck:

In reference to your communication of the 28th ult., let me assure you Mr. Barclay regrets that the press of business, out-of-town lecture engagements, etc., prevent him from replying personally. For your own sake, let the undersigned add that it is fortunate for you that Mr. Barclay is thus engaged. Were he to seek the advice of his counselors in regard to that letter, you would indeed find yourself in an unfortunate position.

Mr. Barclay has, however, forbidden me to make the accusation of fraud or blackmail. He does not wish to apprise Postal authorities of your action, since that would lead inevitably to consequences which it would be better for all concerned to avoid.

*Mr. Barclay does not deny having been acquainted at one time with a person called Homer Peck. Mr. Barclay even remembers that on one of two occasions he discussed with this Mr. Peck the precepts which he later elaborated in his immortal work, *My Life Is Truth*. He might even have asked Mr. Peck's advice in regard to a triviality. Mr. Barclay adds, regretfully, that Mr. Peck's suggestions were usually too facetious to be taken seriously.*

It is my personal opinion that Mr. Bar-

clay has been more than liberal in his attitude toward your claim, and it is my suggestion that, for your own sake, you refrain from further pursuit thereof. In case you are not aware of it, the Post Office Department extracts heavy penalties of those who use the mails to defraud.

Yours very truly,

EDWARD EVERETT MUNN

THERE WAS but one answer possible for a man of Homer's temperament. He knew that Mark Twain would have winked at the plagiarism when he wired: The report of my death has been grossly exaggerated. What do you offer, you pharisee?

The next morning he received a reply signed by Munn: Do not acknowledge your claim. Arriving Monday to discuss situation. Do nothing until then.

The next three days were given to plans for battle. Peck did not hire a lawyer. Truth was on his side and he believed that truth would prevail.

He studied *My Life Is Truth*, recalled conversations with Barclay, made copious notes with which to confront Barclay's representative.

Late on Monday afternoon a stranger knocked at the door of Peck's bungalow. The stranger was a tall man with the high, bony legs of a stork, but he was mean and shifty looking, a stork who leaves babies at the wrong houses. His name, engraved on a calling card, introduced Edward Everett Munn.

"I have come in the interests of Mr. Noble Barclay."

"What's your proposition, Mr. Munn?"

"There's no reason why we should offer a proposition. Your claims are groundless."

"Except that I wrote the book."

"Mr. Barclay is grateful because you listened while he read certain portions of the manuscript aloud, and later discussed the ideas with him. As he has been successful with the book and is an extremely generous man, he would like to have you share in his good fortune. For your small services at the time, Mr. Barclay is willing to pay you what I consider a most generous amount. I, personally, advised against it, but . . ."

"You son-of-a-bitch! I wrote the book and Barclay stole it."

"Careful, Mr. Peck. Blackmail is a penal offense."

Peck paced the screened porch. "Barclay wrote it? Why, Barclay was so sodden drunk he couldn't write his name. Sometimes he couldn't even remember it. Ask him who cured him of the drink habit. Ask him how he discovered why he had to get soused all the time. Ask him who told him about the birds and the bees. . ."

"You'll find it all in the Introduction. Let me refer you to the section entitled Rebirth . . ."

"You mean where he sits out all night in the desert, considering his sins, digging down into the roots of shame, and finally in desperation, whips himself into a frenzy and forces himself to talk about it . . ."

"The greatest document ever written on human despair."

"I was the one who whipped him. I used my knouts, my kurbashes, my rawhide on his spirit until he quivered with unendurable pain. He begged me to quit, but I was inexorable," Peck declaimed as though word and memory were unquestionable proof of his claims.

"He is willing to pay you two thousand five hundred dollars."

Peck's temperature rose. "Trying to bribe me, huh? Twenty-five hundred dollars. Think I'm crazy? I'll drag this through every court in America. . ."

"I've been empowered to offer you a more generous sum," Munn said cautiously, "to keep you from doing yourself injury. Blackmail is a serious offense. The Post Office Department . . ."

Munn paused. The juxtaposition of the words blackmail and Post Office Department had dramatic value. Through the screened wall of his porch, Peck appeared to be studying the coral and aquamarine of the desert sunset, but he saw what Munn intended him to see, the stone walls of Atlanta and Leavenworth.

Because he had nothing better to say he repeated, "I wrote the book."

"Have you any proof, Mr. Peck?"

"I wrote it, do you understand? The idea was mine." Peck's voice trembled and his words were run together.

"Have you a copyright? Or a manuscript which two or more reputable people saw you write?"

"Writing isn't a spectator sport. Mr.

Munn. Although there were people in the sanitarium, if I could find them . . ."

Have you the manuscript?"

"There were nurses, patients, orderlies. I'm sure I could find two people who saw me writing."

"And the manuscript?" Munn's eyebrows rose in polite skepticism. His voice remained level. "I'm sorry, Mr. Peck. If you insist upon making this claim, tangible proof is necessary."

Peck stuck to his guns. The evening chill descended. Peck's temperature climbed and he began to cough.

"Proof," Munn kept saying. "Have you any proof that would be acceptable in a court of law?" He had not studied law but he had memorized the glossary at the back of a book on Business English, and his phrases had a grim, legal sound. "Better settle out of court, Mr. Peck. If you had proof to substantiate your claim, I should offer advice of an opposite nature. But in your position, let me assure you, the wisest course would be to accept Mr. Barclay's offer."

Chills alternated with Peck's fever. Like most consumptives he was of an extremely volatile disposition. Golden elation and black depression alternately possessed him. As the cold shadows fell across the desert, as he shivered and coughed, as the images in his mind grew grimmer and his imagination became peopled with a ruthless lot of Post Office inspectors, judges and jailers, his will weakened and he listened as though Munn were his friend.

"How high will Barclay go if I promise not to pursue my claims?"

"Five thousand. That's maximum, Mr. Peck. Otherwise we shall be obliged to bring this case into court ourselves. Blackmail is not a light offense. And unless you can show adequate proof . . ."

Proof, proof, proof. The reiteration of that word was like the dripping of water that drives the lonely prisoner insane. Peck agreed to settle. "Come around in the morning," he said, thinking of his comfortable bed and warm blankets.

"I'd like to leave tonight. I can get the Limited out of Albuquerque if I get there by eleven." He looked at his watch. "What is there to wait for?"

Outside a Ford waited. The driver was not only a notary public but one of the

Sheriff's deputies. Munn had only to open the screen door and say, "Come in and witness a signature for us, will you?" and there was the law itself, ready to pounce if the word blackmail was spoken aloud. There was a typed document, too. It began, "I Homer Peck . . ." and continued in legal-sounding phrases to state that the claims made in his letter of the 28th ult. were without foundation. Moreover, Homer Peck promised not to pursue said claim inasmuch as he was fully aware of the status of such action.

Peck asked for several changes but Munn was firm. Once he had got the upper hand, the smoothness was gone from his voice and manner. With the deputy sheriff as his ally, he had become a second-class tyrant. And Peck was a sick man. He felt that he had not long to live, and above all, he wanted peace. Munn handed him a gold-banded fountain pen and he signed.

When his visitors had left, he looked at his hands as though they had been soiled by the five crisp thousand-dollar bills.

HOMER PECK did not die. Perhaps it was his own (or Barclay's) system working backwards. Certainly Peck was not the sort of invalid who could be cured by holding the good thought. He could not accept any philosophical or religious attitude which separated man's immortal spirit from his material body; and after much study and observation, he decided that those who were most contemptuous of it were, also, most enamored of their living flesh.

At any rate he began slowly to improve. His will to survive was strengthened by a firm belief that he would some day find proof of Barclay's deceit and be vindicated. Faith prevailed. One day, while looking for something else in an old trunk, he came upon a dusty copy of his forgotten works, the Warren G. Wilson course in Business Dynamics. He glanced over it, amused by the pompous dishonesty. From those dusty sheets a fact emerged and smote him full upon the forehead. He groaned aloud and grew furious at the lameness of his memory. On the night Munn had come to pay his visit and demand proof of Peck's claim, Peck had

forgotten Lessons XXIII to XXX. He had forgotten Self-Mastery, Freedom from Inhibition, Ego, the You in You, Fundamental Meaning of Truth, Looking at Yourself Frankly, and Purging the Mind, Heart and Soul. In Lesson XXV he had suggested confession as tonic to the sick spirit. This entire chapter, word for word, had been included in *Confession and Suggestion*. In other words Barclay had plagiarized a plagiarism. But Peck's plagiarism had been legal; he held the copyright.

This time Peck wrote no letters. Nor did he file suit for plagiarism. During lonely nights in the desert he had enjoyed visions of revenge as lush and tasteless as De Mille spectacles, but he was far too sensible to seek such garish satisfaction. To destroy Barclay would have been as impractical as killing the goose without receiving his share of the golden egg.

At this time Barclay, the publisher, had started to flourish. On every newsstand in the country his new magazines flaunted their crude colors. He had become a public figure; he was interviewed when he returned from European voyages, photographed with Congressmen and comedians on Florida sands, received in the White House by President Hoover. His name was used in cross-word puzzles and its synonym was Truth. Nothing could so effectively destroy Noble Barclay as proof of dishonesty.

For Homer Peck, Lessons XXIII to XXX were the infusion that gave him blood to carry on. No one was more aware than Peck himself of the irony in the fact that Barclay's five thousand dollars, untouched until now, financed the journey designed to unearth additional evidence of fraud. From *Treasure Chest*, which its publishers called *A Book of Testimony by the Followers of Noble Barclay* but which was actually a pamphlet used in mail-order campaigns, Peck learned of Miss Hannah Maierdorf and of the Beaches who, on the eastbound train, had heard Barclay's first lectures. Unfortunately for Peck, Mrs. Beach was dead and Rosetta married to a cotton broker in New Orleans. She was loath to have her name used and consented to give evidence only after Peck promised that the affair would never be mentioned

to newspapermen. She signed an affidavit, telling the circumstances of her meeting with Barclay on the train, of his treatment of her mother, of the cure, and of his subsequent stay at their home. She remembered clearly that Barclay had begun by giving Peck entire credit for his credo, but had later skimmed on his gratitude to such extent that in mockery she had suggested that he take entire credit for himself.

From New Orleans Peck traveled west again, this time to California where he found one of the doctors who had owned the seedy sanitarium. Dr. Fillmore Macrae was not well-disposed toward Peck. He still cherished the old grudge against the patient whose cures had been more effective than his fake palliatives. But cash had always been Dr. Macrae's favorite medicine and a thousand dollars cured his resentment. He, too, signed a deposition.

To Butte, Montana, Peck traced the good-natured nurse who had assisted so practically in Barclay's education. She recalled the adventure with such gusty detail that Peck was obliged to edit her memories. But he was grateful to her descriptions of those tortured sessions in Peck's darkened room, for her indignation at the fraud, her refusal to accept money for her affidavit, and the home-cooked meal she had insisted upon preparing for him.

His final witness was his old sweetheart, the girl who had failed to find a publisher for the original manuscript. She was no longer slim, and her dark hair had been dyed an alarming shade of pink. Peck had found her name signed to a bit of light verse in a popular magazine, had written in care of the magazine and had received, ten days later, a telegram expressing surprise at his being alive.

One evening her doorbell rang. "Homer!" She flung her arms about the neck of the gaunt, sunburned visitor.

He pulled away gently, for he was still zealous in avoiding any contact that might give the tubercle bacilli a new home. "I'm not Homer Peck," he told her. "I'm Warren G. Wilson."

"Have you gone crazy?"

"I've changed my name," he confessed. Knowing the woman would laugh at the tale of his quixotic decision, he told the

story humorously. Homer Peck had signed a letter acknowledging that his claim against Barclay was fraudulent. He had accepted five thousand dollars as the price of silence. But Warren G. Wilson was free to prosecute Barclay; Warren G. Wilson's name had been signed to the paragraphs that Barclay had plagiarized.

THE NEXT MORNING he called at Barclay's office. Strangers were not readily admitted. The alleged creator of Truth-Sharing had to be protected from the gratitude of his followers. But Wilson had planned his entrance. He offered a card bearing the name of Dr. Fillmore Macrae, Macrae Institute of Chiropractic, Los Angeles. Barclay could not have forgotten the doctor who had cared for him solicitously in the old days. Barclay supposed that Dr. Macrae wanted an interview in *Truth and Health* and his Institute of Chiropractic endorsed by the so-called medical board of that magazine.

"Dr. Macrae" was admitted to the private office. Barclay went white when he recognized the visitor.

"My name," the visitor said with dramatic emphasis, "is Warren G. Wilson. You may have heard of my course in Business Dynamics. Chapters Four, Five, Seven and Thirteen of *My Life Is Truth* are identical with my Lessons Twenty-three to Thirty."

Barclay spoke into a box on his desk. As though he had sprung out of the oak paneling of the walls, Edward Everett Munn appeared. He was no longer Barclay's secretary. By virtue of his dirty work he had acquired the titles, Supervising Editor, General Manager and Assistant to Noble Barclay. He was cozily established in a private office and he knew that his job was insured for life.

The drama appealed to Wilson and he spun it out in florid fashion. "You need no longer sympathize with me because I lack proof that my work was stolen and published under another author's name. Gentlemen, I now have such proof that, were I to introduce it in court, I could not only recover millions in damages but I could also ruin your career, wreck the very foundations of your lucrative business and have you sent to the penitentiary, but also make you, the symbol of truth, the very

image of deceit and falsehood," he spied.

"If you've got such good proof," sneered Munn, "why don't you take it to a lawyer instead of coming here with these implausible threats?" Turning to Barclay, he commented, "It's extortion. He's trying to hold you up for more money."

Wilson turned his back on Munn. The snub was tactical. Only Barclay merited Wilson's attention. "I'm no fool, although you've played me for one for a long time now. My evidence could easily wreck you, but it would also destroy your business and lose a lot of money which rightfully belongs to me. After killing the truth it could not easily be resurrected. I propose a settlement."

Munn tried to speak.

Wilson cut him short. "I don't propose to negotiate with anyone but Noble Barclay. This time I'm in a position to make terms. I want a million dollars."

"Don't listen, Barclay. He's trying to bluff you," Munn advised.

Barclay said nothing. He sat as though his ornate desk were a barricade protecting him from the reality of Wilson's attack.

"I consider this most reasonable," Wilson continued. "You've already made several millions out of my idea, and while you might have wasted some of the money on bad investments or magazines that have failed, the fact remains that you made the money and that I have the right to demand my share of your profits. In addition . . ."

"It's all a bluff," Munn interrupted.

Barclay raised his hand for silence. The movement was uncertain, like the first movement of a hand that has recovered life after paralysis.

Wilson saw that Barclay was frightened. "In addition," he said with growing assurance, "I demand my share of the credit. I'm not going to ask you to confess that you stole my idea, Barclay. The price would be too high. All I ask is that you acknowledge your debt to me as your teacher, and state that my instructions were the source of your philosophy. In all further editions of the book, in all advertising and exploitation, I demand credit as founder of the system which has made you famous. That's my proposition. We can discuss the details later."

"Should I call the police?" Munn moved

hopefully toward the telephone.

Barclay made another pained gesture.

For the first time Munn spoke courteously to Wilson. "Would you mind giving Mr. Barclay time to consider your proposition?"

"You gave me no time," Wilson reminded him.

"A million dollars is a lot of money. Even Mr. Barclay isn't rich enough just to write a check."

Barclay nodded weakly. Wilson was reminded of the old days, the mornings of hangover, the look of defeat in Barclay's sick spaniel eyes, the insane mumblings of remorse, the wild vows of abstinence. It was absurd for Wilson to feel pity for a man who had so ruthlessly defrauded him, but Wilson was the victor now and felt that he could afford compassion. He let them know that a suitcase in his hotel room was filled with affidavits and documents which could ruin Barclay, and with characteristic magnanimity, offered to defer action.

HE THOUGHT he was being firm and severe. "Tomorrow morning at eleven promptly, I'll visit you again. If you do not then accede to my terms I'll take the documents to my attorney and have him file suit. This, I know, will prove costly to us all but I may find compensation by selling the story of the fraud to one of your competitors. Several publishers, I am sure, would jump at the privilege of financing my suit." He rose. "Until tomorrow at eleven."

Munn purred like a cat. Barclay looked as if the Governor had signed a last-minute reprieve.

That evening Wilson and his old sweetheart drank prohibition champagne and decided that they would live on the income from Barclay's million in Capri or Mentone or St. Tropez. The woman had married a second time and her husband refused to divorce her, but they did not think this would matter much in Mentone or Capri. Wilson saw a life of luxury and culture, of poetry and champagne, imagined himself and the woman stretched in long chairs on a green terrace that overlooked the Mediterranean.

All in a glow he returned to his hotel room. At the first glance he thought its dis-

order an illusion born of prohibition champagne. Someone had opened the dresser drawers, gone through the closets, examined the desk and rifled his luggage. His documents had been stolen along with his copy of the Wilson course and the affidavits he had so expensively gathered. He called the hotel manager who summoned the house detective. They sent for the police. A thorough investigation was promised, but its first steps revealed nothing. No elevator man, no chambermaid had seen a stranger enter Wilson's room, nor had the desk clerk given out his key.

It was a severe blow. Wilson was short of money. The Depression had cut his income to a sum that would barely keep a cat in tinned mackerel, and most of the five thousand had been used in the search of evidence against Barclay.

The theft of his papers deprived poor Wilson of everything, the million dollars, the Riviera, the dream, the champagne and the poetry.

The next morning, promptly at eleven, a reception clerk announced that Mr. Warren G. Wilson had called to see Mr. Barclay. Swinging his stick and carrying his Stetson as though he were as ready as ever to embark on his voyage to the Riviera, Wilson entered the private office and seated himself in a high-backed chair opposite Barclay's desk.

"Have you considered my proposition?" he inquired.

Barclay cleared his throat and looked obliquely toward Edward Everett Munn who stood with his thumbs thrust into his vest.

"Your claim is fraudulent," Munn asserted. "We know there's nothing to it. What proof can you produce that Barclay stole your idea? Either you withdraw everything you claim or we hand you over to the police."

Barclay smiled. He had recovered with remarkable speed from his paralysis of the previous day. "You seem to be suffering from an obsession, Mr. Wilson. It's true that I once knew a Homer Peck," he uttered the name with delicate sarcasm, "and I don't deny having once or twice discussed my theories with him. But to say that my philosophy was your idea, your creation, is worse than fraudulent; it's just plain crazy. I don't like to prosecute, and so I

advise, you, for your own sake, to forget the whole thing."

Barclay's earnestness astonished Wilson. That a man could appear so artlessly honest while flagrantly lying seemed so incredible that Wilson stammered and sputtered as if he were the liar. The knowledge of right did not uphold Wilson. Emotion robbed him of self-assurance.

"Will you leave now, Mr. Wilson?" asked Munn in a voice greasy with triumph. "Mr. Barclay is a busy man; he has more important . . ."

Wilson rose. Inwardly he quivered. "Very well, gentlemen, if that's the way you feel." In the voice of Caspar Milquetoast he added, "I shall have my attorneys file suit at once."

"I thought you were going to bring it to the attention of certain publishers. You seemed so sure yesterday that they would finance your suit," gloated Munn.

Wilson stood silent for a moment, leaning upon his stick. It took all of his strength to carry out the bluff. "I'm afraid, Mr. Munn, that there will be quite enough notoriety without seeking sensational publicity. Last night I had the opportunity of giving my story to reporters, but I withheld it. Certain valuable papers were stolen from my room." He paused, noting the glance that traveled between Barclay and Munn. His courage quickened. "I prefer to handle the matter in the conventional way, through my attorneys. Incidentally, you gentlemen have either had faulty legal advice or . . ."

"We have the best lawyers in New York," Munn boasted.

"Perhaps you neglected to acquaint them with all the facts. Surely they must know that, merely by writing to the Register of Copyrights in Washington, any citizen of the United States can institute a search into the status of a copyright. The cost is one dollar."

"What good would that do?" asked Munn, licking dry lips.

"I don't believe it would be difficult for said citizen to obtain copies of those passages of the Wilson course which, as I informed you yesterday, are identical with Mr. Barclay's writing."

"Wait, Homer," Barclay commanded as Wilson strolled toward the door. "Perhaps we'd better talk this over."

"What is there to discuss?" queried Wilson, nonchalantly flourishing his stick.

Barclay was taking no chance. "Even though I think you're bluffing, I don't like the idea of a lawsuit. We may not seek publicity, but we're sure to get it. And since my career and my reputation are founded on a belief in truth, it won't do me any good to be involved in such a suit, even though I'd be sure to win it."

Munn was dissatisfied. He mumbled something at Barclay who frowned and snapped, "Sit down, Ed. Let me handle this."

Wilson sat down, too. "What's your proposition, Noble?"

"I'm not ungrateful for the help you once gave me," Barclay began. "While it isn't as important a part of my book as you seem to believe, I'd like to reward you for the assistance. Do the right thing by you, Homer. Maybe even better than the right thing." He leaned back in his chair, working earnestly at the role of philanthropist.

Wilson saw that Barclay was genuinely alarmed, and the knowledge gave him the effrontery to bargain. They settled for twelve hundred dollars a month. It was a lot of money, particularly at that time, but only a splinter off the bulk of Barclay's income.

AS TIME went on, Wilson succeeded in raising his monthly income to two thousand dollars. It was not that he needed the money so much as that he enjoyed the game of extortion.

There was always great mystery surrounding the payments. Each month Wilson was obliged to meet Munn in a crowded hotel lobby, railroad station or department store, where the two should not be conspicuous. Munn never came to Wilson's rooms.

Wilson acquired expensive tastes, patronized the best tailors, enjoyed rare wines and became a collector of first editions. These did not satisfy him. The game of extortion began to bore him and he found easy living poor ointment against the itch of frustration. He envied Barclay's fame, resented the rosy glow of righteousness that surrounded the publisher of the *Truth* Magazines. With masochistic energy Wilson tormented himself by reading Barclay's sensational love and crime stories.

"Every month he gets worse. I'd like to expose him," Wilson frothed.

"Yeah? And what'd you do if people stopped buying his magazines? Where'd your pleasant two grand a month come from?" his old friend asked.

During the depression she had become a literary whore, selling her talent and experience to the various publishers of cheap love magazines. It was inevitable that she should wind up in Barclay's office. She stayed there, Wilson often said, to torment him. He had offered a number of times to share his ill-gotten income, but the woman refused. This was not because she scorned his method of getting a living, but from a perverted sense of independence. They had once tried living together, but she had become a slut and Wilson a fussy old maid, and all that remained of their love was a skeleton's shadow. They quarreled furiously, let months pass in sulky loneliness. Invariably one or the other suggested forgiveness, reunion was celebrated, they drank too many toasts and quarreled again.

At one such feast Wilson announced, "I've decided at last. I'm going to write a book about Barclay. I've got to tell the whole story. As long as I keep silent, I'm as bad as he is."

"Isn't this attack of conscience striking you rather late in life, Homer?"

"All the more reason for my wanting to expiate my sins."

"You've made your gutter and you'll have to lie in it."

"I'm going to publish all the evidence, prove all the facts. In my chapter on the theft, I'll have the Wilson course printed on the left-hand pages, Barclay's *Truth* on the right."

"Think of your carcass, dear. And your plush-lined, *foiegras* consuming gizzard. Think of that poor frayed lacework that used to be your lungs. How long could you survive in a real gutter?"

"You can help me," Wilson said. "I want to find out about Barclay's private life, about his home, his wife, his children. . ."

"You know what your trouble is, Homer?" She would never use the new name. "You lie in bed too late in the morning. Idling there, contemplating your navel, you fall victim to morality. If you'd leap out of bed, do fifty nip-ups, drink a tall

glass of hot water and the juice of two lemons, you'd never worry about such things. Consider Barclay; he doesn't smoke Coronas or drink *Liebfraumilch*."

"I'm serious, damn you."

"What is it you want to know, Homer? About those adorable twins, presented by Gloria, the Perfect Mother. Perhaps you'd like to learn the truth about the second marriage. . . ."

"I know all about that."

"Who told you?"

"Janet."

"Oh! Where'd you meet the second Mrs. Barclay?"

"I made it my business. She's quite willing to help me with the book. The period just after he started lecturing on Truth-Sharing and then got her father to back him in publishing the book is Janet's. She hasn't forgotten a detail."

"Janet, I take it, nurses an asp in her bosom. Did Noble ever confess to her, in the dark reaches of the night that he'd swiped his credo?"

Wilson shook his head. He had asked this question of Janet and she had assured him that Barclay had always acted as if Truth-Sharing had come as divine inspiration.

"Janet's furnishing me with material on the transition period, Messiah-to-publisher in one easy jump. She's got all the dope on the early days of the magazines, but I need information on his present life, not only what I glean from his magazines, but what it's actually like. Truth in a Fifth Avenue duplex. Do you know the present Mrs. B.?"

"Gloria? She'd be as helpful as a *Truth and Beauty* editorial."

"How about the daughter?"

"A lovable kid," the woman said. "Completely bewildered because the world isn't what Father told her. She's like a child brought up in orthodoxy and beginning to wonder whether she'll commit herself to eternal hellfire by daring to question it."

"She's the one for me then. I want you to arrange a meeting."

"You're cooking your goose, my dear man, and I'm not going to add to the seasoning."

Wilson paid no attention to the woman's protests. He knew what he wanted. "You must arrange a meeting, but don't intro-

duce us. I want the girl to trust me. . . ."

"How you flatter me, Homer. Eleanor's downright fond of me. I've been a radiant influence since she's come into the office. Just at present I'm trying to help her decide to own up to Father that she's revolted by the creature he's chosen for a son-in-law. She's touchingly respectful of my opinions."

"Just the same she must know you're anti-Barclay. I want my friendship with her to be unsmirched by the enemy hand."

"You needn't think I'll help you."

"I have an idea. You take her to dinner some night, not here, we're too well known. Have you ever gone to Jean Pierre's? I eat there sometimes; the food is remarkably good. You take her there and in the midst of dinner, remember some engagement and excuse yourself. . . ."

"What a loathsome idea! I'll do no such thing."

A WEEK LATER she took Eleanor to dine at Jean Pierre's, saw but did not recognize Wilson at the next table, remembered erratically that she had forgotten the young admirer who, even now, waited hungrily in the lobby of the Lafayette, asked Eleanor to forgive her and dashed off.

The next morning in the office Eleanor confessed to the woman that she had let herself be picked up by a middle-aged man of the world. Throughout the winter the girl continued to dine with Wilson, to visit his apartment, listen to his records, look at his books and pictures, and, in the office, to boast of her friendship with this cultured and unusual man.

The woman, petulant because she imagined Wilson in love with the young girl, drank too much and accused him of seducing Barclay's daughter. Wilson lost his temper and reminded her that drunkenness and promiscuity did not enhance her charms. They parted enemies and saw each other only once again.

They met on Fifth Avenue in front of the Public Library. The woman said, "It's ages since we've seen each other. What the hell are you sulking about?"

"Why should you want to see me? As long as there's a young fool and a bottle of cognac to amuse you, what need have you for my company?"

"It's so delightful seeing you, Homer. You say the sweetest things. How's young love?"

"Don't be an idiot." He tucked his arm under the woman's. "You know I'll always love you, you alley-cat. Come along and have dinner with me."

"I have a date."

"Leave him waiting in the lobby of the Lafayette. I'm in a sentimental mood."

They dined in the Oak Room of the Plaza and Wilson talked about his book. He expected to have it finished within a month. "I want to thank you for arranging that meeting with Eleanor." He spoke cautiously, aware that the girl's name might cause a torrent of jealousy.

"Has she been useful?"

"Wonderful. She's grateful to have someone like me, disinterested, with no preconceived Barclayan prejudices, to talk to."

"You're really a rat, Homer, taking advantage of her girlish confidences. She doesn't know about the book, does she?"

"Only that I'm writing one. But I haven't told her what it's about. I told her the title, but that can't mean anything to her."

"Oh," said the woman, affronted. "You've never told me the title."

"I haven't seen you since I decided on it. *The Autobiography of Homer Peck*. How do you like it?"

Later, while they were drinking coffee, the woman said, "I wish you hadn't told her about the book."

"Why?"

"She might talk about it. Remember what happened to your papers that other time."

"Nonsense. There's nothing to worry about. As soon as the book's finished I'm going to put a copy in a safe-deposit vault. Did I tell you I'd finally persuaded Mrs. Armistead to make another deposition?"

"Who? Oh, Rosetta Beach, the summer-resort girl who first called it Truth-Sharing. So she's agreed to reveal her scarlet past? Probably old enough now to enjoy talking about it."

"The book'll be a sensation. In a way I'm pleased that those first documents were stolen. This will be a mature work, not written in the white heat of anger, but upon calm reflection. . . ."

"With fewer cliches' I hope. And what do you propose to live on when the monthly income ceases?"

"The book will make money."

"Not that much."

"What do I care? It's more important for me to get the truth told at last. I've saved a little and there are my books; they're worth quite a nice little sum. I'll have enough to last me . . ." He paused, and with a brief shrug, "I haven't long, you know."

He said it coolly as a man might say that he expected rain by morning. The woman was moved. She had been inconstant, but she had never been fonder of another man. Because she could not let him see her distress, she laughed a little. "Before you throw away your lovely income, will you buy me a double Courvoisier?"

"I'll buy you a bottle."

THAT was the last gift and the last time she saw him. When, on the following Sunday night she heard that Warren G. Wilson had died as the result of a shot in the back, she drank the rest of her good brandy. When that was gone she drank an inferior kind, and when she had finished that she drank bad whiskey. To have gone to the police and told what she knew of Wilson and his plans for exposing Barclay was too great an ordeal. Her courage was of a low order and her stomach weak. She had no real evidence, only the history of a man's life and the knowledge of an old secret. The police would have asked questions and the woman, in answering, would have been obliged to review the ugly past and look full upon the spectacle of her failure.

Frequently at night a specter visited her bedroom. It was not the shade of Homer Peck, but the seedy ghost of the woman's integrity. More than once she vowed on the empty bottle to tell what she knew of Wilson's life and the causes of his death. By day the ghosts faded, alcohol diluted her courage, the woman clung desperately to the livelihood she loathed. She became petty and childlike in hinting of dangerous knowledge.

At first skeptical, the murderer grew more and more nervous. Of late he has attempted appeasement, flattered the woman, sent roses and come to pay court at her

home. It has begun to look as if he wanted people to suspect an affair between Lola Manfred and Edward Everett Munn.

FROM ELEANOR TO JOHN

DEAREST:

How does it feel to be a grass-widower? Are you eating lonely dinners in the kitchenette, thinking wistfully of the little woman, or are you doing the town, like the rest of the Hollywood husbands, with one of those glamorous blondes? At the risk of becoming a repulsively possessive wife, darling, I entreat you to scrounge all possible dinner invitations from happily married friends, or work at night or read good books. Cold baths, exercise and a bland diet are also said to be helpful.

As for me, I started missing you before I kissed you goodbye, and since then I've been breathing in a vacuum. There are one hundred and forty million people in this nation, but when you're not around, the continent seems uninhabited. Aside from that, it was a comfortable trip and you were probably right in insisting that I come and face it.

Well, Johnnie, I've faced it. I saw Father today. If my typing is uneven, it's not the machine. My hands still don't work right and when I hold out my arms, my fingers wave like Old Glory in a spanking wind. All that I regret is that I decided to save money by staying here instead of taking a room at a cheap hotel. A drawer in a filing case would be preferable. Visiting here is like spending a holiday in a state penitentiary.

Not that luxury is lacking. I have the nursery suite, the twins and the nurse having been sent by Gloria to the country place. It makes me feel rather like the princess in the tower, for the place is guarded by everything but bloodhounds. Father is alleged to be off on some secret mission of national importance, for it would not be appropriate to suggest that a man of his energy would merely retire. And to hint of the true conditions would be the basest heresy.

Grace Eccles took me upstairs to my rooms. As soon as we were safe behind the locked door, she began a whispering campaign directed against Gloria. "Her lack of

faith, Eleanor, is shocking. She employs doctors, conventional medical men who haven't the slightest concept of the true cause of your poor father's desperate situation."

"When a person's ill, it's quite natural to call in medical men. Besides," I reminded her, "the cause of Father's stroke is quite obvious. Even though he quit drinking long ago."

Grace interrupted with a sigh. "*Et tu, Brute*. His own daughter. No wonder Caesar has fallen."

"What's your diagnosis, Grace?"

Her hands traced a pattern in the air. "Far, far beyond the comprehension of those medical artisans who look for causes of physical maladjustment in the body."

This was so reminiscent that I almost laughed aloud. "I suppose you believe he could be cured by digging out secrets, cleansing the festering sores, applying the sharp, clean antiseptic of Truth."

"If only he could." She sighed again. "That's the tragedy and the irony. To think of him, the prophet of Truth-Sharing held prisoner by some guilty secret. What could it be, Eleanor? How could a man who has led an irreproachable life, who has never faltered at confessing his sins, how could he have cause for self-reproach or guilt? Sometimes, Eleanor, I'm tempted to rebel at Fate. It's all so unfair."

There was a knock at the door. I opened it and Gloria's cool lips were pressed against my cheek. Her words of welcome were honeyed calculation. "Your father's resting. As soon as he wakes, he'll want to see you. But come along, dear, I want you to meet someone." She led me by the hand along the corridor to the sitting room.

A man rose and bowed, like an old-fashioned courtier, from the waist. I gave him only half an eye, for I was fascinated by a piece of furniture which had been brought into the room. There, displayed boldly in my father's house, stood a cellarette, its open doors displaying an assortment of bottles and glasses. As I recovered from the shock of this strange sight, I realized that my hand was being pressed in a warm, moist palm.

"So this is the daughter," he said with an accent so faint that I could not determine its origin. "No wonder your dear Papa was so

eager to have me meet you. But you did not tell me, Gloria, that she was beautiful."

"A drink?" asked Gloria, nodding toward the cellarette. As though I had demanded explanation, she added hastily, "We have it here for General Podolsky. He does so much of his work here now. Your father likes to keep in touch. Intensive brain work demands moderate stimulation."

I laughed. Podolsky's narrow red-brown eyes measured me coldly. There was a long silence. Presently he got up and started pacing the floor, head bent, brow wrinkled, hairy hands clasped behind his back. The whole thing was a show, every effect predetermined. With his back to me, he asked about you, Johnnie. He said that he had heard you were one of the most brilliant young men Father had ever hired, a natural-born editor. I agreed enthusiastically with all the flattery and was about to add that you have character as well as intelligence when Podolsky whirled around, faced me and suggested that you and I come back to work for Barclay Publications.

"I am speaking for your father, and I know it is his dearest wish that you and your husband join our staff again."

Whether this magnanimity toward us black sheep was ever actually suggested by Father, or whether Podolsky was following the general pattern of Barclay bribery, I could not be sure. But I suspected at once that he knew more than he hinted of Father's secrets.

NATURALLY I turned down his offer. But Podolsky is not easily rejected. He wondered whether I ought not to consult you before making a decision, described the changes in the organization, offered salaries that made my head whirl, mentioned interesting work, the chance to travel and the opportunity to influence public opinion.

I listened patiently, but always gave the same answer.

"You're a stubborn little girl," he said. "Does your husband allow you to make decisions in this high-handed way?"

"My husband and I don't allow each other to do anything. We consider each other capable of making decisions. Moreover," I said proudly, "my husband ex-

pects to sign a contract with a major picture studio." I kept my fingers crossed while I lied, Johnnie. I had to show off before this upstart.

"Isn't that lovely?" cooed Gloria.

Podolsky raised his eyebrows. And Grace Eccles came in to tell me that Father was awake and waiting for me to come down to him.

On the staircase she put her arm around me and said, "You must gird yourself, dear. It'll be hard at first. The fallen eagle."

At every step my knees grew weaker and the blood in my veins became more watery. As we entered Father's study I remembered the last awful evening there, with Father and Ed arguing about the gun that killed Mr. Wilson. The French doors were open now, the sun gilding the white plaster hands that grasped black plush drapes. In that bright light the room had lost its incongruity and horror.

Father was waiting on the terrace. I did not immediately look at him, but at the white iron furniture, the geranium red awning and cushions, and at the new iron fence. When I last saw the terrace, there had been only a low coping.

I ran toward him, put my arms around him and kissed him. He began to tremble and I was afraid that he would fall. My weight was not enough to brace him and I staggered back. Suddenly, from nowhere, a male nurse appeared and helped him into his chair. I saw then that my father was crying.

With his left hand he indicated that I was to sit near him and I pulled up one of the red-cushioned chairs and sat there with my hand in his. I talked quickly and breathlessly with no pauses between sentences and ideas. I told him about us, our little apartment, our work, our hopes, about the climate, the canyons and the seashore. After a time I became exhausted and could only wait for his silence. The pressure of his left hand grew heavy. His mouth contorted. He cannot speak at all; he can only utter curious, aborted sounds so deformed that one can barely recognize their kinship with human speech.

"May we interrupt this happy reunion?" Podolsky's voice cut like acid through the fatty unction of his words. "Feels good, doesn't it, Barclay, to talk to one's child

again? Doesn't Eleanor look lovely?" he asked with jaunty familiarity.

Father uttered a curious protesting animal sound. I followed the direction of his troubled eyes. Podolsky carried a highball. He set the glass on the low coping below the iron rail and stretched his thick legs on the cushions of a chaise-longue.

Gloria crossed the terrace. She walked with conscious affirmation of her womanly charms, wriggled her hips under the flowing pajamas and thrust out her breasts. The wind played with her chiffons. As she passed his chair, Father extended his good hand. Gloria avoided it and moved toward the rail.

Father was watching Gloria. She turned from the rail to catch a message from Podolsky. It was all very subtle, no more than the twitch of an eyelid, but the flavor of conspiracy was mingled with the scent of Gloria's cosmetics. I thought of secrets whispered in dark bedrooms, and wondered if Father had ever indulged in indiscreet Truth-Sharing with his beloved wife, and if Gloria, finding the burden of secrecy too great, had whispered, too.

"I hope you understand, Eleanor, that this visit is to be guarded with utmost secrecy. It would be disillusioning to his millions of followers if they were to discover that Noble Barclay is unable to heal himself through the practice of his theories." Podolsky laughed and gestured with the hand that held his empty glass. Then he ordered Gloria to fetch him another highball.

She obeyed at once, floating across the terrace in her flying chiffons, offering temptation to the General, avoiding her husband's outstretched hand. Poor Father's face had become bloodless; his lips were pale mauve and the lids closed over his anguished eyes. He sighed, and the sound of it, the only recognizable human sound he had been able to utter, was so painful that I could stand no more of it. I rushed across the terrace, tore blindly through the study and up the stairs.

Has the nightmare stayed with me because I lost my courage at the inquest, Johnnie? But I didn't actually lie that day. I answered the questions that were asked and it wasn't my fault that these questions never came within guessing distance of the truth. What else could I have

done, Johnnie? He was my father. That, more than any fears for the Barclay name and fortune, kept me silent. It was, I suppose, the old habit of loyalty, the habit that had been bred into my bones. You must remember how I cried in your arms when you hurried to my house after reading Lola's story, and how I begged you to wait a while before doing anything with the knowledge inherited from my dead friends.

You told me then that I'd be tormented until I had gained revenge or saw justice done. But I find neither revenge nor justice in the cruel irony of my father's suffering. He has been hurt enough, it seems to me, and I don't want to wound him more. His glory, his name and position are still his pride, Johnnie. When I woke up after the nightmare, my room was hot and I opened the window. It looks out on the terrace. There sat my father, motionless in his chair, and beside him, her head bent in happy servitude, the faithful Eccles.

What are we to do, darling? Must we tell? Is revenge necessary? Will justice be done if we destroy the little that is left to this broken man? The murders are forgotten now, the murderer dead. Can't we let this one truth stay buried?

Please write to me immediately. I'll do whatever you say. I trust you more than anyone in the world and I need you desperately. And I hope that some day I can do something big enough to show my gratitude for all that you've done for me.

With all my love,

Eleanor.

I X

FROM JOHN TO ELEANOR

MY SWEET:

You're in a bad way, aren't you?

Your nightmare comes back, I think, because you still feel guilty about our lack of action after the discovery of the Manfred manuscript. This is not wholly your guilt, darling. I've procrastinated, too, refused to push you into a situation which would cause you to suffer. This is a weakness in me. I love you and I want to save you from pain and turmoil. I still can't forget the way you looked that night you came to my office with the manuscript. Your father certainly succeeded in scar-

ing me when he told about your mother's suicide and hinted that you had inherited her instability. That was a ruse for scaring me off the Wilson story, and while it never worked out the way he planned, it helped to keep his secret.

This sounds as if I had little faith in you, but I couldn't help worrying about the series of shocks and disillusionments that hit you all in one week-end. It was bad enough for you to learn of Lola's death and to discover that your ex-fiance had killed her, but the worst blow was the discovery that your father was a fraud.

Do you know Podolsky's history? Your E. E. Munn was a piker by comparison. Munn lost his head and committed a couple of puny murders. There are worse crimes. This may sound like heresy, but after a war and the perfection of the atomic bomb, individual murder loses its criminal dignity.

Last December at a conference, I reminded your father that Podolsky's political lies had been exposed by the New York newspapers. It was common knowledge that he had been the best pal of a big Nazi agent and that he made a good living by creating political myths and disseminating international falsehood. As the usurper in your father's domestic life Podolsky is not nearly so formidable as the occupant of his office.

We ask little, Eleanor, but we do want our chance to live honestly. The nightmare has to be exorcised or we shall be sacrificed to the old and evil, to the dishonest and the dying. We daren't go on cherishing fables for the sake of the paralyzed and moribund, nor for the protection of oily stooges and cuckolded conspirators. It is for our own kind, the young and healthy, that we have to speak out.

Think about this when you sit with your father on the terrace or when you see him, helpless and impotent, mocked by his wife, humiliated by the usurper. And when you open your window and look down upon that touching sight, Noble Barclay finding solace in his faithful follower and in the philosophy which he probably believes he created, remember that the creed cannot cure him.

Have you the courage, Eleanor?



"Voodoo—obscene horror," Dorran muttered.

THE DEVIL-DOLL MURDERS

By JOHN N. POLITO

Were those murders the last bloody frenzy of some weird death-rite? Ancient voodoo in a plushy new setting? Or were they just a thug's fiendish whim?

DORRAN, driver 27 for Parkview Cabs, braked to a quick stop under a street light. He turned quickly to Deputy Inspector Cochran in the back seat.

"Let me see that last photo again, Gerry. I think I missed something."

Cochran, with a puzzled frown, held out a small print. Dorran took a flashlight from the floor and studied the picture intently.

"Damn. I *thought* I'd missed something. Here." His lean hand shaking, he handed the photo to Cochran. "Look at the girl's neck closely."

Cochran studied the photo of a child's doll, dressed in the black and white of a maid. He looked at Dorran, eyes alarmed, mouth slack.

"Why—" He paused and horror grew

in his eyes. "The head is twisted and there's a piece of string—" The last word barely left his mouth as he plunged from the cab and ran up the street.

Dorran kicked the cab in gear and followed, pulling in to the curb as Cochran rushed through the dim doorway of a small shop. The Deputy Inspector grabbed a phone hanging on the wall and talked briefly.

He hung up slowly and walked slack-shouldered out to the cab.

"Brother! I thought sure as hell I'd muffed that one. Everything's okay at the Kirstens. The maid had the day off and went down to Kentucky to visit her family."

Dorran nodded, the tension easing from his lean, brown face.

"Okay for now. When will she return?"

"Don't know. Tomorrow, I guess. Why?"

Dorran answered thoughtfully. "These photos have been mailed to Kirsten about three days apart—a week elapses between the first warning and the attack. That doesn't leave much time. Can we look around at the Kirstens?"

The blue and white cab slid away from the curb with a low staccato growl.

Deputy Inspector Cochran settled back as Dorran wheeled the cab swiftly and deftly through the neon glare and juke-box racket of Cincinnati's upper Vine Street.

The face of his driver and good friend, Nicholas Dorran, was revealed in fitful splashes of blue-white light as the cab lurched and rocked under the ancient arc lights. It was a slender, lean face, brown and serious. The clear brow and ascetic lines were those of a thinker, but the sharp dark eyes and thin incisive mouth belonged to a man of swift and unerring action.

Cochran was blond, blue-eyed and rather heavy set, though a young man. His deliberate movements, as he removed a set of photos from his breast pocket, set the keynote of his character.

His heavy, blunt hands sorted them and his honest blue eyes burned angrily as he re-examined them in the fitful light that splashed in through the windows of the moving cab.

"Voodoo—obscene horror—" Dorran's words echoed in his mind as he shuffled the five prints. Two photos showed a black toy dog, the first standing upright, the second with the dog on its side. Now the dog was dead, cruelly clubbed.

The next two photos showed a doll, its face wearing an incongruous air of age, the hair stringy and matted. The first upright, the second flat on its face. The cook, a pleasant, motherly person, had been found with her head battered in the rear of the Kirsten residence.

As Cochran fingered the fifth photo he silently prayed that the old gray-haired woman would live to name her attacker. He had one of his men at her bedside at General Hospital. But all he could do was wait.

He looked again at the photo which had prompted the frantic phone call a doll in a maid's uniform, a doll with a twisted neck,

He shrugged his broad shoulders angrily. At home among thieves, racketeers and strong-arm experts, he was the first to confess his inadequacy before the tortuous crimes of twisted minds. He studied gratefully the dark, slender figure of the cab driver, deftly swinging the heavy cab through the maze of hill-top streets.

He remembered another hurried ride in Dorran's cab. Then out of the peculiar comfort of impersonality vested in cab drivers, Cochran had asked an odd question. The moment the words left his mouth he realized how strange it must sound to the cabbie.

"Driver," he had asked. "Do you think a hypnotized person would commit murder?"

"If he was a murderer before he was hypnotized, yes. If not, never in a hundred years." The driver had answered as casually as though giving the time of day. The solution of the Indian Hill murders had hinged on that question; many times since then, Cochran had called for help from the odd mind of Nicholas Dorran.

As though conscious of his friend's thoughts, Dorran turned his head and called back.

"Seems like old times, Gerry."

"Yep. Thought this would be up your alley, after the Indian Hill case—"

The sentence was cut short as the blue and white cab pulled off Erie Avenue into Bolton Place. Dorran's eyes flickered briefly at the large, well-kept homes. Money, he thought. Plenty of money. The fetid smells of the basin were missing here. The cool air was heavy with the odors of evergreens and verdant lawns.

THE CAB stopped before an oak-beamed, white-washed brick house set well back from the street. Its bulk in the gloom suggested many spacious rooms. Yellow light splashed the windows, revealed the soft tones of tasteful design through the open French windows.

As the two men stepped from the cab, one slender, dark, nervously alert, the other square-built, deliberate, they halted on the sidewalk.

"I'll leave my cap in the cab here. This jacket won't attract much attention."

Dorran flicked a narrow dark hand against the black whipcord jacket. Cochran

nodded his blond head. "If these people are as upset as I would be, you could wear a kimono."

As they walked up to the house a shrill voice called from the French windows. "Hey, here, come in this way, no one to answer the door."

As they entered the living room Dorran appraised the taste of the furnishings. Long couches faced each other from opposite sides of the room, their upholstery blue and silver-banded linen. Gleaming tables held lamps of marble and chromium with pale blue shades. A rose-grey broadloom rug covered most of the floor with deep luxury.

A lounge chair whose backrest seemed to sink into the floor occupied one corner of the room next to a white carved fireplace. A round-faced, balding, bulbous man looked up from the deep chair, small eyes glittering behind heavy-lensed glasses. He managed to rise to his feet at the second attempt. He extended one small pudgy hand to Cochran while his tiny eyes peered at Dorran. "Anything new, officer? This one of your men? This whole thing is terrible, don't know what to expect next."

His voice piped insistently.

"What did you find out about the last picture? There must be some way to trace this madman. Don't know what to expect—"

Cochran cut him off. "This is Mr. Dorran, he's a special, one of our men. Mr. Kirsten, Nick."

Dorran touched and rapidly dropped Kirsten's hand and seated himself on a low couch. Kirsten rolled back to the cavernous chair.

"I know this is trying for you, Mr. Kirsten, but we'd like to go over the last couple of weeks with you again."

Cochran looked anxiously at the cabbie.

"Can't see what there is to go over. Lost my dog, damn fine dog. Cook got injured, now my maid is threatened, don't know what to expect next."

Dorran walked over to Kirsten.

"Somewhere along the line there must be a point where we can see the outline of this episode, Mr. Kirsten. These things are like jig-saw puzzles. If you stare too hard at the pieces you'll never see the pattern. Now, how many members in your household?"

The bulbous man removed the heavy glasses, rubbed peevishly at the folds of grey skin under his eyes.

"My wife, Arlene. Ought to be down here. Carrie, our maid. And Gordon, the cook. Good cook too. Carrie tries to do it now, don't know a thing. Terrible."

Dorran continued: "What is your business, Mr. Kirsten?"

"Broker, stocks and bonds. No listed stuff, though, all cash and carry over-the-counter. Good business if those fellows up in Washington would leave us alone."

"Yes. Any enemies?"

For a moment the suet-like face hung motionless in the soft light, lips slack, eyes almost buried in their puffy folds. He snapped a beady glare at Dorran.

"Hah, enemies! Lots of 'em, lots of 'em. But only business. They'd cut my throat in a deal, but no mumbo-jumbo, just money, just money."

Dorran paced up and down, returning to Kirsten.

"Tell me about the death of your dog, Mr. Kirsten."

The fat little man leaned forward, eyes studying the rose-grey rug. He rolled his tiny eyes up at Dorran.

"We let Skippy out as usual before bedtime. After a few minutes I called to him. He didn't turn up, probably out visiting, so I whistled. Stubborn dog, always had his own way. I waited a couple minutes, gave up."

Cochran shook his head sadly. Anybody who would harm a dog, a cocker at that—

Dorran kept his eyes on Kirsten. "What happened after that?"

"What happened, why, someone killed him, of course. The idea, I told you people about that—"

"No sir, I mean was there anything more until you found the dog's body?"

"Nothing. Nothing. What do you expect?"

Dorran spoke very softly. "You heard nothing during the night, no barking?"

"No. Course not. Skippy was always a friendly dog, wouldn't bark at anyone."

Dorran turned at a word from Cochran. Kirsten struggled to his feet, piping shrilly. "Come in, dear, come in, some men from the police. You know Officer Cochran, this is Mr. Dorran, special or something, don't know just what that is—"

DORRAN breathed in sharply, the long lines of his brown face sharpening in the soft light. Arlene Kirsten seemed a pale, dusky tipped flower, faintly splashed with gold, as she moved in faint hesitation at the edge of the room.

She advanced and as Dorran held out a polite hand his dark eyes flickered along the slim, piquant figure. Arlene Kirsten wore a bolero of plain white sharkskin with high rounded neck, her arms and midriff bare. A pale green dragon stretched pointed claws across the smooth curve of the bodice, and a bronze chain girdled her hips above the smooth lines of the sharkskin slacks.

Her level grey-green eyes inventoried each item of Dorran's person as she seated herself in a blue and silver chair. Dark brown hair, upswept, caught faint fire from the white lamp at her elbow.

Dorran thought of the silvery notes of a Hindu flute and smiled at the contrast to the bassoon-like movements of Kirsten.

"What sort of a madman are we dealing with, Mr. Dorran?"

The flute sang again in Dorran's ears. He frowned.

"Mrs. Kirsten, there is something puzzling about all of this. It's like a picture just out of focus, but I can't seem to make it sharper. Can you think of any reason why you or Mr. Kirsten should be threatened through your dog, your cook, and your maid?"

"I have no enemies." She smiled faintly. "Certainly no one who would want to injure Albert—or Gordon or Carrie. It must be some sort of crank."

Dorran turned to Cochran. "Suppose we look at the back of the house, Gerry?"

Cochran turned to Kirsten. "You don't mind, sir?"

"No, go right ahead, right ahead. Nothing to see. Excuse me if I stay here."

Arlene rose from her chair, slender and poised, and walked toward the two men. "If I may?"

The three walked from the living room and turned down a short corridor from which opened the dining room and kitchen. A glass-paned door at the end of the hall led to the rear of the house.

Outside the mist was beginning to form on the damp grass, lending an eerie touch to the scene. The lawn extended level to the

garage fifty feet away, then rose sharply for a hundred feet. The lawn extended for twenty feet beyond either side of the house and was bordered by evergreens that rose fifteen feet in height. Tall poplars held their stately columns high above the evergreens, leaves chattering softly against the cold sparkle of the stars.

Dorran noted that the yard could easily be entered from the hillside, and that the trees and shrubs on either side kept stray eyes from the Kirsten domain.

Arlene Kirsten moved soundlessly near him.

"Mr. Dorran, I wouldn't like to worry Albert, but I'm afraid. There's more than the work of a crank here, Mr. Dorran."

He glanced down at her, warmth and a biting perfume rising heavily in the quiet air. As she breathed the sharp claws of the dragon on the white bolero seemed to contract slowly. He shook his head.

"I'm sure of that, Mrs. Kirsten. We'll do everything we can."

Arlene Kirsten looked up, held his eyes for a long moment.

"I'm certain you will, Mr. Dorran. I'm counting on that."

Her pale, blue-veined hand touched his sleeve, the ruby nails sliding along the ribbed cloth.

Returning to the living room Cochran faced Kirsten, worry pleating his brow.

"Mr. Kirsten, we'll keep checking against the photos and their mailing places. Would you like me to leave a man here, just in case?"

Kirsten tugged himself to his feet.

"Nonsense. Nonsense. This maniac might harm a dog or servant, wouldn't dare touch one of us. Besides, somebody always around, never alone here. Thanks, let me know what you find."

He held out his hand in dismissal.

Dorran left Cochran at a downtown cab stand with his promise of a complete report on Kirsten next day.

Dorran's apartment on Glenview Place was one of fifty in the same red brick tenement. Few exteriors, however, so belied the comfort and convenience contained within. A low studio bed occupied one wall. Two leather easy chairs, deep and comfort-worn, and a library table, completed the furnishings.

Books lined the walls in shelves and

cases and overflowed to the ruby-carpeted floor. Nicholas Dorrان was No. 27 on Vine Street and Peebles Corner and the other dusky avenues of the cabbie's night life, but on Glenview Place another kind of past was strongly in evidence. Gerry Cochran was perhaps the only man in Cincinnati who knew Dorrان as this other man, student, spectator of the human farce, one-time money chaser. Cochran also knew the peculiar boredom that had led Dorrان from finance to the humble but exciting life of a hackie.

BUSINESS looked dull the next day as Dorrان wheeled his hack out of the garage and pointed its blunt snout at downtown Cincinnati. Failing to make a pickup along Vine Street, he swung left around Fountain Square and pulled into line at the cab stand in front of the Ultree Theatre. He nodded to a Yellow driver, insulted a Checker driver amiably, and settled down to read.

Black magic, black magic—something about this whole set-up held a false note.

He thought of the lyric quality of Arlene Kirsten's beauty, the heavy, sluggish pouncing of her husband. He could hear each ponderous booming note keeping time to Kirsten's bassoon-like movements. Yet there was no playful, buffoonish tune. Underneath was a brooding darkness.

Cochran's clear voice roused him, and he turned to his blond friend with welcome in his eyes.

"How now, sleuth?"

Cochran smiled with his mouth, his blue eyes sober.

"Don't know, Nick. Nothing new out at the Kirsten's, but this thing isn't finished. The old lady, the cook, died this morning at General Hospital. It's murder now."

Somber fire burnt in Dorrان's eyes.

"Murder. I don't suppose she regained consciousness?" At Cochran's negative gesture he continued. "Murder is probably the ugliest word in our language. It sounds ugly. Even in other languages, words that have that sound have ugly and troubled meanings. *Merde. Morde.* If it would only stop there. But the pattern is incomplete."

Dorrان eyed Cochran sharply. "What has Headquarters found out?"

Cochran pushed his tan felt hat back on his blond head.

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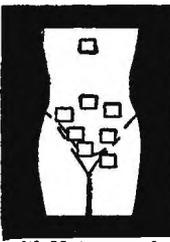
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"Not much. Kirsten's business is in fair shape, it seems. We checked quietly around among other brokers on Fourth Street and nothing stirred. Talked to Kirsten's partner, nothing there. He seemed okay, but I had the feeling that he wasn't too friendly to us. We've checked the regular photographers in town, but none of them recognized the photos. Sent photostats to Washington, but it will be days until they come back unless something like this is already in their files."

"How about your habituals?"

"We rounded them up as usual. Not a thing on any of them to place them in the neighborhood. Trouble with those guys, you never can do anything with them unless it's so red hot they haven't had time to get away.

Besides they run to crimes that involve younger people, usually."

Dorran smiled at Cochran's hesitancy to speak plainly about the lunatics who mumble and stare along the dark streets of every large city.

Good old Gerry. He hated evil as much as anyone, but like many of his type he hated thinking about it, too.

"Gerry, Arlene Kirsten is part of that menage I don't get. I can't imagine two people who are more unlikely."

"I know what you mean, but there's nothing in that angle. Kirsten's got a lot of life insurance. Double indemnity too. But his partner has the same sort of policy and so does his wife. So that cancels out."

"How much, Gerry?"

"Oh—forty thousand altogether, or thereabouts."

"How about the background of the cook and the maid?"

"What you'd expect in a mess like this. If I hadn't seen that old lady myself, I'd swear she never existed from the connections we've been able to make. And except for her dad down on that farm in Kentucky, the same goes for the maid. Couldn't even find a boy friend up here."

"That partner of Kirsten's interests me. What does he look like?"

"About thirty-six, medium height, crew-cut dark hair. Good dresser, expensive clothes. Nothing there, boy. I don't believe he's ever been in Kirsten's home.

Dorran smiled, a puckish look on his thin face. "I'm still curious."

THE FOLLOWING DAY, Saturday, Dorran still hadn't arranged the pieces of the puzzle. On the outer edge of consciousness an idea persisted, but fled whenever he approached. As he cruised the downtown streets he was attracted to a pert red-haired girl stepping lithely along Sixth Street. He swung his cab to the curb and yelled to her. She turned with a half-indignant, half-expectant expression, then walked over to the cab.

"Why, if it isn't good old No. 27!"

"Darling, I just couldn't pass you up, what with spring in the air—"

The red-head leaned on the front door of the cab and laughed, a squarish, derisive hoot.

"You cabbie's are all alike. Besides it's summer, though I doubt if you pass up anything, any time. What's on your mind, Nick?"

"Get in and I'll buy you a ride around the block. I need help."

Once more jerking along in the traffic, Dorran turned to the red-head.

"You're still with Crowell and Company, aren't you, Marie?"

"Yep, still trying to become the smartest girl in the stock and bond racket."

"Know anything about a fellow by the name of Kirsten?"

"Oh sure. He and a guy named Knight are partners."

"Know anything else about them?"

"Nothing unusual. They seem an average sort of house. Do a lot in municipal and railroad bonds. Why?"

"You could help me a lot if you could dig up, quietly of course, any special dope on how well they're doing and how they get along together."

"Pal, for you it's a pleasure. After that scrap you dug me out of on Vine Street, I owe you something."

"Forget that. Every cab driver does the same thing for indiscreet young girls a dozen times a week."

"I like that! Indiscreet? Why, I never saw the guy before in my life."

Dorran laughed.

"That's what I mean. Now how about it?"

"Sure thing, Nick. It'll have to wait until Monday, though. And you want it quiet?"

"Yes. Official information on that sort

of thing is no good. I know how clannish and quiet those boys on Fourth Street can be."

"Okay, dark eyes. Drop me here and I'll look for you on the Ultree stand Monday afternoon."

Monday rolled along its grey length with no change. Dorrان haunted the Ultree Theatre stand without catching sight of Marie.

Tuesday Cochran hailed him on the street and passed along the information that nothing more had happened at the Kirsten home and the police detail had been withdrawn.

Tuesday afternoon Dorrان shoved the blue and white cab by the Ultree stand, a last hope lingering in his eyes. A splash of crimson in the passing crowd attracted him and he quickly swung into the curb. Marie came over frowning.

"Gosh, Nick, I'm sorry about yesterday, but I got tied up at the last minute."

"That's all right, Marie. Any news?"

"I don't know. Just odds and ends. It seems that Kirsten and Knight don't get along too well. Another thing, Kirsten does all the buying for them and there's some talk that he might be in a little heavy in these bankrupt railroad bonds. That's all I could get. All the houses in town trade with them, so their position must be okay." She sighed. "Not much, is it?"

"Yes, it's something to go on. But I'd like to know what bonds he bought and where."

"I thought of that. Knight's got a stenographer I know pretty well. I'll have lunch with her tomorrow or the next day and see what I can dig for you."

"Thanks, Marie. I really appreciate that."

"Okay, pal. You know us redheads."

Marie failed on her Wednesday appointment. Cochran had a few preliminary reports from Washington. Nothing in their files. Anna Louise Gordon, fifty-six, white, cook, unclaimed, was buried with no pomp by the City. A black cocker spaniel, dead of the same black power, had been buried with equal pomp two weeks before.

On Thursday Dorrان swung his cab into place on the Ultree stand about three o'clock. It was raining and business was good, but he avoided pick-

7—Detective Book—Spring

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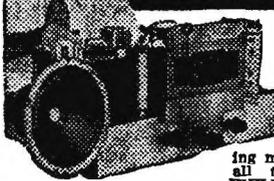


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ups by claiming time after time that he "had a trip." He turned pages dully in one of William Seabrook's tales of black magic, hardly reading as visions of Kirsten hovered in his mind's eye, and Arlene Kirsten, and Knight, the dapper partner.

A chipper voice broke in on his thoughts and Marie slammed into the rear seat of the cab. She brushed rain out of her eyes.

"I wouldn't do this for any man I know, except you, Nick. Good lord, what a day."

"Lousy. What's new?" Dorran had difficulty keeping the note of concern quiet in his voice.

"Well, your pals have certainly got themselves something." Marie went on in an excited voice for several minutes, broken from time to time by Dorran's quick, staccato questions.

She finished and Dorran stared at the pages of the book still open on his lap. Suddenly he looked up, every line of his face tense, aware, horror peering out from behind his eyes.

"Good lord, I've been stupid. I get it now—and this is Thursday!"

He reached to the dash and had the motor racing in a moment. He turned brusquely to Marie.

"Get this straight. Call Headquarters as quick as you can, get Gerald Cochran in Homicide and have him meet me at the Kirsten house as fast as he can get there. And don't forget that call to Louisville."

Marie looked at him with a frightened glance, then hastily climbed out of the cab. "Okay Nick. Cochran at Kirstens, and Louisville."

Her voice blended with the hissing exhaust as Dorran shot the cab away from the curb, racing for Hyde Park. He twisted and swung the heavy body of the cab along the rain-swept streets, out to the Parkway along the river front.

Thursday, he thought, the maid's day off. The little dolls and the sudden physical blows ending life and remembrance.

As he pulled the swaying cab into Erie Avenue and twisted and spun on the slick pavement, the grey sky seemed to sink lower and lower. As he approached Bolton Place a siren moaned close behind him. He saw the black slot of the street ahead of him and tensed for the slewing turn just as a heavy black sedan rocketed past and swung ahead of him into the street.

The two cars slid to a stop in front of the Kirsten house. Cochran and two uniformed men raced for the door as Dorran leaped from the cab.

The living room was gray and dead in the gloom. Dorran followed voices downstairs to the basement where faint yellow light splashed several figures. Cochran waved a limp hand vaguely.

"Too late, Nick."

Arlene Kirsten lay on her back, her hip touching a wooden post from which a length of severed rope swayed. A dark line girdled her soft throat. Under the rounded chin two green-black smudges half obscured the deadly red line. Her smooth lips were swollen and purplish under the gay red of lipstick, and two vaguely outlined patches of rouge stood out against the suffused flesh of her dead face.

Dorran's eyes hurried away from the still form. He remembered the stinging fragrance of her perfume, the green dragon rampant against the whiteness of her bodice. No more outstretched claws—he shook his head angrily. Cochran was talking.

"What time did you discover her, Mr. Kirsten?"

Kirsten's face seemed huge and distorted in the dim light of the basement. His lips were gray and a tiny bubble gleamed in one corner of his slack mouth. His lips fluttered as he breathed.

"I just came from the office. Just a few minutes ago. Called Arlene. Looked around upstairs. Noticed the basement door open." His lips moved soundlessly for a moment.

A tall thin man carrying a leather bag pushed his way through the men and knelt at the side of Arlene Kirsten. Her husband glanced at the Medical Examiner, looked up at Cochran.

"Couldn't we go upstairs, Officer, I feel—"

Cochran nodded and preceded the group upstairs. Dorran hung behind and looked over the basement with sharp, pain-stung eyes.

A wicker basket was overturned near the foot of the stairs. Twisted bits of silk and colored cotton slowly uncurled on the grey cement floor. He nudged the damp pieces with the toe of his shoe. Suddenly he stooped, pawing the clothing and looking at each piece carefully. He replaced the damp clothing in the basket, and mounted

the stairs, anger washing the pain and sorrow from his dark eyes.

A policeman was following the thread of Kirsten's piercing voice with a pencil as Dorran walked into the living room.

"—must have come in the back door from the yard and waited in the basement. When she came downstairs with the basket of washing he must have thought she was the maid—"

Kirsten was submerged in the deep chair Dorran had seen the first night he walked into the house. His small pouched eyes peered at the rug in front of him, twitching back and forth like caged mice.

Cochran joined Dorran near the door. They exchanged a few quiet words as Kirsten's eyes followed them, watching the moving, almost soundless lips. They returned to Kirsten's end of the room and seated themselves, one to each side of him. Dorran began talking to Cochran in a thin, biting voice.

"The doll photos were the important clue all along. Not because of the black, jungle death they promised—in spite of it. That's what confused me until today. When I placed them in their proper relationship to the other events the whole cold-blooded plan was clear.

"The cocker met his death through them. No motive. Next the housekeeper was warned and then killed. No motive. We were expected to believe that some dark and devious mind was back of these deaths. Jungle magic. Voodoo. I believed it, too. Especially when the maid was threatened next. It was consistent. Someone was hitting at this household, but not at its two most important members, Mr. and Mrs. Kirsten. Neither was ever threatened.

"Today, according to the prophecy of the dolls, the maid was to be murdered. But accidentally, only accidentally, the killer mistook Mrs. Kirsten for the maid and killed her.

"HERE is apparently what happened. The murderer secreted himself in the basement to await a suitable opportunity. His victim gave him that opportunity when she came to the basement to hang up the clothing. He attacked her at the foot of the stairs, knocking the clothes basket out of her hands. After strangling

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look for the bulls-eye

her he hanged her by the neck to the post which supported the clothes line, thus fulfilling the prophecy of the photo, the doll with the twisted neck.

"There was something wrong about those dolls all along. Something I should have known but only realized today. I was reading an account of jungle magic when it hit me suddenly. In every case of killing by use of these images, the victim is never physically molested. He dies, certainly, and often in great agony. But there is never a mark on the body. It's the suggestion planted by the dolls that kills. In the jungle the suggestion is carried by word of mouth. A friend tells the victim that he is being bewitched.

"This being the modern time it is, our murderer planted his suggestion by mailing a photo to his victim. But our murderer was not very well informed about black magic. He killed his victims by physical violence. Which removed the death doll from its function as a method, to its actual function, which was to divert our attention.

"Once we realize that the dolls were intended to deceive us, we can move then to the reason for the deception. Remember, there was no motive discovered for the death of the cook, nor for the threat against the maid. Since our attention was diverted, from what was it being diverted? Obviously the real victim, for whose death a motive *did* exist.

"Once we assume that Arlene was the intended victim and the cook's death merely a cold-blooded device to divert attention, we have a better field for attention. The firm of Kirsten and Knight is in bad shape. Today I received information that points to real trouble, trouble which has been brewing for six months at least.

"A year ago Kirsten bought heavily into some railroad bonds. Knight did not approve the purchase, but Kirsten completed it in another city before his partner could intervene. Six months ago this railroad reorganized and the bonds owned by Kirsten and Knight were left out in the cold, practically worthless. About this time Knight paid up the premium on his and his partner's insurance, policies for \$40,000 with the usual provision for accidental death. At the same time Knight paid the premium for a third policy—one on Arlene Kirsten, the same kind, same amount. So when she

was killed by *accident* today, mistaken for her maid, double indemnity made her death worth \$80,000."

A thin line of moisture glistened in the corner of Kirsten's mouth as Dorrان's voice continued more slowly now, deliberately.

"Knight drew these checks for two reasons: one, he no longer trusted his partner enough to let him draw the firm's checks; two, Kirsten was out of town when those premiums came due—in Louisville."

Dorrان turned to Cochran. "I had a call placed this afternoon, a rush demand upon the chief of police of another city. With luck we should have a reply soon. But I don't need it now. I've got enough to satisfy me, although you may need it in court."

He stood up then and walked over to Kirsten. Every taut line of his slim figure accented the anger gleaming in his eyes.

"I'll tell you what actually happened this afternoon, Kirsten. You came home about your usual time. You went to the basement, probably within minutes of your arrival, and called to your wife. Not suspecting you for a moment, she answered and came down those narrow stairs to you and to her death.

"You strangled her and then tied her up to that post so your photo prophecy would be correct. Then you set the stage very carefully. You went upstairs and unlocked the door to the back yard. After that you went to your wife's room and gathered up several pieces of her clothing. You soaked it thoroughly and then rung each piece out separately so that would look all right. Then you dumped the wet clothing into the wicker basket, returned to the basement, and dropped the basket at the foot of the stairs. Clever.

"You had to give your wife a good reason for being there. Nowhere else in the house is it logical to suppose that the mysterious killer would mistake your wife for the maid, his theoretical victim. But you weren't thorough enough, Kirsten. When you bought those bonds you were only half right, so you lost the investment. When you planned the doll trick, you were only half right, so you lost the protection of the diversion they were suppose to create.

"When you placed the clothing in that basket you were only half right. You placed

colored things in the same basket with white, a thing no woman would ever do. Every white piece in the basket was stained from the colored things among which they were mixed.

"Being half right again, you lost your \$80,000—and your life."

Dorran turned from the voiceless grey man, huddling in his chair.

"Get him out of here, Gerry. Get him out before I forget I'm a cabbie and try to take him apart with my hands."

A phone rang as Kirsten left the blue and silver living room between two uniformed men.

Cochran answered it, talked rapidly for a few minutes, and then returned to Dorran who was sitting staring morosely at the silver rug.

"Louisville, Nick. You were right. They rounded up a photographer who made some peculiar pictures for a little fat man about six months ago. Said he wanted them for a new game he was inventing. We'll send photostats and pictures of Kirsten down there and no doubt we'll get the identification."

Dorran looked up sourly.

"New game, huh? Guess the jerk didn't realize it was the oldest game in the world—and he didn't invent the smallest part of it."

"Yeah."

Then the two men walked out of the house: one fair, blond, forthright; the other slim and dark, nervously alert. They halted a moment in the fog, their figures dim against the two cars at the curb. They shook hands for a long moment. Then the slim man turned and slipped into the blue and white cab.

He swung away from the curb and pointed the cab's blunt nose back to Vine Street and the garish lights and the long nights that prowled with quiet feet up and down the seven twisted hills of the restless city.

He knew that in the teeming flux of the city he would again meet Cochran and again there would be the age-old problems of human evil confronting them. He sighed, stretched a little in his seat, and shifted into second. Damned interesting job, he thought—cab-driving!

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MURDER AFTER DARK

By J. G. WILSON

He raised the man up and threw him into George's face.



They shut little red-haired Linda's lovely mouth lest it prattle too much of the town's filthy rackets. But ex-dick Carson smiled coldly over her stiffening corpse. At last they had dealt him in . . .

CARSON SAT BACK IN THE wine-colored upholstered chair and smoked another cigarette, listening to the sounds the city made in the dark hush of early morning. He smoked thoughtfully, dropping the ashes on the apartment's thick green rug, looking at the gold birds of paradise on the wall paper but not seeing them.

Carson was big; his shoulders and torso loomed like the bulk of a bull. His arms were long, but his thick, short legs failed by inches to balance the rest of him. Carson finished the cigarette, stubbed it on the arm of the chair. He stared at it thoughtfully between fingers strong as cables, then put it in the pocket of his

gray suit coat. Carson listened to the night sounds a little longer, then got up and went into the other room and looked at the dead girl again.

She was lying on the floor, without many clothes on, her bright red hair a tangled mass of red gold against the same kind of green colored rug that covered the rest of the floors in the apartment.

She had one cheek against the rug, and the blood had seeped through her hair to cover the cheek that tilted up, so that it was impossible to tell what she looked like. Carson looked down at her with gray-blue eyes that didn't blink, and with a broad massive face that might have been carved out of wood. It was a face with

an olive tinge and strong regular features.

Carson slowly toured the apartment again, his walk almost a waddle due to his enormous body and massive legs. He had looked through all the bureau drawers, the desk, everywhere. He paused in front of the wall safe, exposed now with the gray drape pulled back and hung over the back of a chair. He slowly went back to where the dead girl lay.

There were no pockets in what she had on, but he felt under the body anyway. His fingers encountered something, and he slowly pulled out a black corde bag that had been lying under her stomach. He opened the bag, poked amongst the contents with a big finger, then went into the kitchen and emptied the bag on the steel-topped table.

He found it then. A small piece of paper, stuck in an address book, with three numbers written on it. He scraped the things back into the bag, left it on the table and went back to the safe. He used his handkerchief over his fingers and had to try twice, left to 30, twice around to 65 and left again to 10. Then the short handle clicked as he pulled down on it, and the small heavy door sagged open.

He pulled out three envelopes, looked at two briefly and tossed them back inside the safe. The third was a brown manila envelope. He studied the contents of this carefully, then put the envelope in his inside pocket, closed and locked the safe and pulled the gray drape back in place.

Carson went back to the dead girl again. He raised one chill hand and looked at it with eyes as cold as glacial ice. The carmine fingernails were broken and torn, and caught under the nails were bits of skin and small flecks of blood.

Carson straightened, looked down at the dead girl and went to the doorway between the rooms. He paused there and looked back again. "So long, Linda."

In the modernistic lobby Carson brought the night clerk blinking sleepily to the black imitation onyx desk that curved like a blunt prow in front of his compartment.

The night clerk was young, very blond, with a soft blond moustache and blond

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hair parted on the side. He wore a dark blue suit with roll pressed lapels and a hand-painted tie. He would shave about once in four days, Carson judged.

"Who, beside the people who live here, has been up since midnight?" Carson asked, in his husky-soft voice.

The clerk's blue eyes were unfriendly. He put clean soft hands on the imitation onyx and shook his head. "Nobody," he said flatly. "No visitors since I came on."

Calmly, without passion, Carson reached out with a long arm and fastened fingers in the dark blue coat. Without seeming effort, he raised the clerk's feet off the floor and pulled him up and partly over the desk. Sudden stark terror shone in the blond man's eyes.

"Think 'hard," Carson said huskily.

He let his other hand drop over the blond man's shoulder. His fingers dug under the shoulder blade, and he could feel the blond man shudder as pain shocked his nervous system. The blond man gasped and threw his head back, teeth clamped and eyes closed. A thin drool of saliva appeared on one corner of his pain-taut mouth.

Carson let him go, and the man in the blue suit, shaken, wiped at his damp face with a trembling hand.

"Who went up?" Carson said.

"Nobody, that's the truth," the blond man said fervently. "Nobody went up."

His lips were tremulous, and his blue eyes pleaded piteously.

"Except me, you mean?" Carson said. "I went up, you know. About half an hour ago."

"Yes, that is what I mean. Nobody except you."

Carson left the blond man shaking behind the black onyx desk, wiping at his face with a handkerchief. He went through the glass doors of the new modern apartment building into the cool night air.

Carson slowly climbed the creaking stairs. Peeling wallpaper covered the wall, and the railing was a shiny dirt-black from innumerable hands.

He turned right at the first landing. The dim hall had the mustiness of years, mottled walls and a high ceiling where two weak bulbs feebly burned.

Carson's feet made little sounds on the strip of carpeting that had worn smooth.

He stopped squarely in front of a door and with a big hand reached down and slowly turned the porcelain knob. The door was locked. The door shook in its frame as he rattled the knob. There was a quick furtive sound inside the room, then quiet.

Carson shook the door again, and the floor trembled this time as the door banged in its frame. Footsteps approached the door, and metal grated as the key was turned from inside. His shoulders almost touching the sides of the opening, Carson walked through the doorway into the room. A naked bulb glowed against the fly-specked ceiling to show a room of miserable disorder.

Carson gazed coldly at the lank, medium sized man who had opened the door. The lank man's sparse hair was dry and uncombed on his head, and his long face was thin and sunken almost to the point of emaciation. He tried to meet Carson's gaze behind big horn rimmed glasses. His soiled shirt was buttoned at the neck, but there was no tie. He had on a gray suit coat and matching pants that had lost all traces of press.

Carson closed the door, turned the key in the lock, then pulled it out and put it in his pocket, all with slow deliberate movements. He glanced briefly at the cheap gray cardboard suitcase, full of clothes, open on the unmade bed. He looked with distaste at the almost empty bottle of bourbon and dirty shot glass on the bureau. A cracked glass pitcher with about two inches of muddy water, and an ashtray overflowing with cold butts, was back of the bottle.

"Getting ready to pull out, Doc?" he asked in a voice that was husky-soft.

The lank man's sunken face showed fear, and his large dark eyes glowed like those of a defenseless animal at bay. He shot a glance at the liquor on the bureau, and let it slide to include the suitcase.

"Yeah, I was going on a little trip," he admitted helplessly.

"At this hour in the morning?" The big man rocked gently on his heels, and his smooth, impassive face showed little of what was inside him. "Why, Doc? Tell me why."

Doc's pale lips parted, but no sound came out. With trembling fingers he

fished out a crumpled pack of cigarettes and stuck one in his mouth. He used two matches to light it.

Carson repeated his question. "Why, Doc?"

Doc's lips spurted smoke. "For God's sake, Carson!" he pleaded.

"It's because Linda's dead, isn't it?"

The lank man's cheeks went in to make deep hollows as he sucked on his cigarette. "In a way, yeah."

"What do you mean, in a way?"

"Just that somebody called me up a little while ago on the phone downstairs and told me she had been killed," Doc said. "I thought I had better get out of town."

Carson took a quick step and fastened a big hand on Doc's skinny wrist. His twist sent Doc writhing down into a sitting position on the bed and brought sweat to his forehead, and the fear bloomed brighter in his eyes.

"Tell me the truth, Doc," Carson said through big clenched teeth. "The truth."

"It is the truth, Carson, so help me!" Doc squealed.

Carson relaxed the pressure a little.

"Ask the landlady downstairs if I didn't have a call a little while ago," Doc challenged.

Carson let go of Doc's wrist. The lank man stepped on his cigarette, got up from the bed and with shaking hands poured the shot glass full to the brim with amber whiskey. He spilled some of it out as he raised the glass to his lips, wetting his fingers. He poured the liquor down with a quick movement of his head, and tilted the bottle over the glass again. When he had gulped down the second shot, he wiped his lips with the back of his hand.

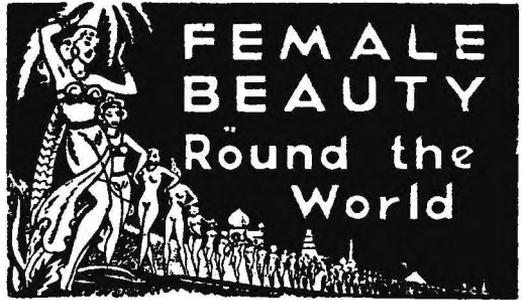
Carson said, "Now take off your coat."

The lank man blinked. "My coat?" He looked at Carson's gray blue eyes and with thin fingers unbuttoned two buttons and slowly pulled his coat off and laid it on the bed. He eyed Carson questioningly.

"Your shirt," Carson said.

The lank man's hands were poised hesitantly, and Carson reached out then and with one long pull popped buttons and ripped the shirt down the front.

Trembling, Doc pulled the torn shirt off. He wore no undershirt, and his thin



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chest, crawling with a few black hairs, gleamed a muddy white. Carson looked briefly, then said:

"Turn around."

The lank man turned around, and Carson said, "Okay."

"What was the meaning of all that?"

"Just curious about something," Carson said.

Carson watched the lank man put the torn shirt back on. Only one button remained and it gapped in the front. Carson sat down on the bed and laced his hands loosely together between his knees.

"You know why I came to you first, don't you, Doc?" he said.

Doc's eyes flickered behind his horn rimmed glasses. "I guess I do," he said.

"Linda knew something about you. One word from her and you would find yourself doing time. Isn't that right?"

Doc nodded grudgingly. "Yeah, she had it on me, all right."

"But still it was her giving you money once in a while, when you didn't have enough for your bottle. Doing little things for you and stuff like that. It was as though it was the other way around, and you were blackmailing her. Why was that, Doc? I've often wondered about that, and she never told me."

"I'll bet she didn't!" Doc sneered. He sat down on the straight-backed chair by the bed. "This will come as a shock to you, maybe, but Linda and I were cousins. . . . Yeah, me a no good rummy, a bum, and little Linda with the pretty red hair and nice apartment and all those fancy clothes. That's why she took care of me, and never went to the cops with her story."

Carson's gray-blue eyes had shown surprise, but they quickly returned to their veiled calm. "Nonetheless, your motive is still good in my book, Doc. People are being bumped off every day for knowing too much, and Linda knew too much about you. How do I know? Maybe she changed her mind and thought she'd let the state buy your liquor for awhile."

"Uh, uh." Doc shook his head firmly, and pulled another cigarette from his crumpled pack. His fingers still shook when he lighted it, but Carson didn't press the issue any harder, and Doc, studying him through the smoke, relaxed a little. Finally he said:

"Why keep on being a sucker for her, Carson? You were a sucker for her alive, why be one for her dead? Let the police handle it. You'll only stick your neck out, wait and see."

"Sucker, Doc?" Carson said gently.

"Sure, sucker!" Doc crowed. "All the time you were going with her, she was stepping out with other guys. Especially Phil Daly, Mr. Big, with his two Cadillacs and winter home in Florida. You know that. And how were you thrown off the force after ten years in the detective bureau. A lieutenant, at that! Well, how did they get rid of you?"

A smoldering spark was kindled deep in Carson's eyes.

"Yeah, well, how was it?" Doc insisted.

"I was put in a neat little frame. A school kid upstairs in a roadhouse outside of town. There was somebody there to take pictures, and the kid had the fear of God in her and stuck to her story."

"Yeah, and who was it got you out to that place that night?" Doc jeered. "It was Linda! She engineered the whole thing. One word from her would have straightened out the mess, but she let them crucify you. . . . And you still in love with her. Bah!"

"I was getting pretty close to the guy who runs this town behind his construction company front," Carson said, almost dreamily. "Numbers, vice, gambling, everything, the whole works. Had the stuff down on paper. It would have blasted this town wide open. That's why they got me."

"That guy is Phil Daly, and Linda did it for him," Doc said.

Carson nodded and got up. He reached down and calmly jerked Doc to his feet by a handful of the torn shirt. He clamped his fingers on Doc's wrist and squeezed and twisted a little. Fear sprang anew in Doc's eyes, and a little moan slobbered out through his lips.

"Doc, it figures, that's why I'm letting you go for now and traveling on," Carson said huskily. "Linda's killer might call you and tell you Linda was dead, figuring your rum soaked brain might cook up a pipe dream and make you panic. If you left town, that coupled with your association with Linda would point the finger at you." Carson let his grip loosen just a

little, then slowly he tightened it until he squeezed another moan through Doc's pain-wracked mouth. "Doc, you're going to stay right here, understand? You're not going to leave town. Have you got that straight?"

He held Doc's arm bent tautly until the lank man gasped, "Sure, sure. I got you!"

As Carson left, Doc was slopping whiskey into the shot glass again.

The morning sun was making the buildings cast long shadows. Carson turned into a narrow street that was all in shadow. He went into an old building that had double doors set flush with the sidewalk.

The building was a gymnasium. It smelled of sweat, and two boxing rings were set up in the center of the main area, and distributed around were parallel bars, ropes dangling from the ceiling.

Carson walked across the wooden floor, hearing for the rear of the place. He went through a door and could hear a pounding noise. He went through another room, stepping around a set of weights strewn over a mat. He went into a corridor.

Two handball courts were set off the corridor. Carson listened for a moment, then chose the one to the left. He pulled out the little brass handle and turned. Stooping, he stepped through the heavy little door set flush with the wall.

He closed the door from the inside. A tall goodlooking man in shorts and gym shoes stared at him with dark questioning eyes. He had a nice build, not too much hair on his thighs and legs, and the sweat rolled cleanly on his lean torso. His partner, a huge man with little hair and a sloping forehead, wearing dirty gray sweat pants and shirt, glanced back and forth from the tall man to Carson.

The tall man's face darkened. It was a face just touched by gauntness and highlighted by a brush moustache. His hair was black and thick, barely touched here and there with gray. He squeezed a small hard rubber ball in a gloved hand.

"I thought you would be having your morning workout about now, Daly," Carson said huskily. He glanced around the handball court, painted white, slashed with hundreds of long black rubber marks.

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Long slits of windows at the top blew cool air.

"What do you want?" Phil Daly repeated.

"I want to ask you where you were last night from midnight on," Carson said huskily.

"That happens to be none of your business," Daly said coldly.

"I'm making it my business," Carson said.

He rocked on his heels and coolly eyed Daly, and flicked a glance at the big man in the sweat suit.

"How about getting out and letting us finish our game, Carson?" Daly said.

"Not until you've told me about last night."

"I haven't anything to tell you about last night, Carson," Daly said in the same cold-hard tone.

The big man growled, "Get out, Carson."

Carson ignored him. "What about last night, Daly?"

Daly's face twisted up. "Get out of here, Carson!" he snapped. "I haven't got the time to play around with you."

Carson took a step toward Daly. The tall man dropped the hard rubber ball. "Take him, George," he yelled.

The big man in the sweat suit balled up a huge fist in his leather handball glove and reached out and laid the other gloved hand against Carson's chest.

"Better get out while you're still healthy," he said.

Carson hit him. It was a short choppy blow, but it dumped the man, George, back on his haunches with a grunt. Carson turned to Daly and grabbed an arm. The tall man twisted and squirmed like an eel. His sweating arm slipped a little in Carson's grip, but Carson let his fingers sink deeper in the lithe flesh.

"I'll beat it out of you, Daly, so help me," he warned, and brought Daly up on his toes, straining, with a twist.

But then George was back on his feet. He was built like an ape and had proportionate strength. He hit Carson twice on the side of the head, then bowled into him with a hard shoulder. Daly tore loose then and danced excitedly around the two men twisting and fighting silently on the floor.

Carson was underneath for a few seconds, then, straining, he flipped the big man over. He hit him twice on the face, making the big man's head jerk like a puppet's on a string.

The man in the sweat suit tried to encircle him with an arm, but Carson clamped both hands around it and bent it back over his knee. He felt muscles come alive under his fingers, writhe, then stretch tight as cables, as he tightened his hold.

The big man panted a curse and arched his back. He clawed with his free hand and the stink of sweat emanated from him. His arched back wasn't enough to relieve the pressure, and Carson put more weight against the arm. The big man whimpered.

Then Carson felt Daly hit him on the nape of the neck with the edge of his hand. The hand was sheathed in the leather of a handball glove, and the blow made Carson's head suddenly swim and his eyes go out of focus. Daly hit him again and he felt George tear loose. And then he was flat on the floor, the smell of dust and resin strong in his mouth and nose.

Dimly, he knew he was being kicked. He never flickered completely out. Even when George brought him up to a sitting position and hit with a sledge hammer fist. After a while it seemed the blows stopped and he was left alone.

Gradually, his head cleared. He got up. Daly and his man, George, were gone. Carson went into the shower room. It was empty, and he turned on one of the showers, and, standing to one side, cupped his hands under it and washed the blood off his face.

He looked at himself in a mirror, then left the gym. A thin, sad faced man, a cold cigar in his mouth, stepped aside at the door and gazed curiously at him, but said nothing.

Carson got a two dollar hotel room and sat down in the room for a long time smoking and thinking. He took off his coat and laid on the bed and slept a little. About noon he went out and bought a late morning paper. Linda's death hadn't been reported in the early editions; it was in the later one.

At two, Carson went down into the small lobby and handed the clerk the manila envelope. It had his name written

on it. "Put this in your safe," he said.

The slummy neighborhood where Doc roomed paid Carson little heed as he went into the rooming house. He heard heels clatter frantically on the stairs and stood to one side in the dimness at the foot of the stairs and let a thin, nicely dressed scared-faced girl, with a long blond hair flying under a little red hat, go by and out to the street.

The heels kept up their frantic clatter on the pavement and then slowed down to a fast walk.

Carson climbed the stairs and saw that the door of Doc's room was open a little. He walked quickly down the corridor and pushed the door open. Doc lay moaning on the floor, a cut in his scalp, a little blood oozing.

Carson picked the lank man up and laid him on the bed. Doc opened his eyes and looked blearily up at Carson. He put a hand gingerly to the wet place on his head.

"Did Edie Ferris just come from here?" Carson asked.

Doc wet his lips and croaked, "Yeah."

Carson pointed at Doc's head. "Did she do that?"

Doc said, "Yeah," again. "She had a sap in her bag. Imagine her, having one of those things in her bag."

Carson drew up a chair and sat down. "Tell me one thing first, Doc. Who was it called you up last night and told you Linda was dead?"

Doc looked at Carson, but made no reply.

"Come on, Doc," Carson said softly. "You know who it was. Tell me."

Carson reached out and laid his hand gently on Doc's arm. The lank man trembled.

"It was Edie," Doc said simply.

"You knew that last night. Why didn't you tell me?"

"I haven't anything against Edie," Doc said. "She's a nice kid. A lot better than Linda. I didn't want to get her into any trouble. . . . Why didn't you ask who it was called?"

"I slipped up there," Carson admitted. "I didn't think you knew."

"It was Edie, all right. I knew her voice. She called Linda, Lyn, and not many do that. Only her best friends, and

Linda didn't have very many of them."

Doc sat up and reached for the bottle on the bureau. Carson waited until the lank man had taken three swallows from the bottle. He pointed to Doc's head again.

"Now what about that?" he said.

Doc replied, "Well, Edie came up a while ago to talk about Linda, and wanted to know why I hadn't taken off, left town. One thing led to another, and I told her I knew it was she called me last night. She got mad then and denied it, and we got into a regular argument. Then she pulled a little black sap out of her bag and hit me on the head."

IT WAS a neat little bungalow, fairly new, with a brick walk and carefully tended lawn. A swell weeded flower bed bordered the property, and small evergreens dotted the grass and flanked the brick steps around the door.

The blond girl opened the door for Carson, stepped back with widening eyes. She wore a white apron over her red dress, and a red ribbon caught the sweep of her shining blond hair. Her well formed legs were too thin, even in nylons and supported by high heeled shoes.

"Hello, Carson," Edie Ferris said calmly. "Come on in. I had just started to get supper ready."

Carson walked in, and the blonde closed the door. She stood with her back to the door, looking at Carson, her palms pressed against a panel of the door. Her red dress had a high collar and was buttoned up close to her neck.

"Unbutton your dress," Carson said.

The blond girl put a hand to her throat, but her thin fingers didn't twist at the buttons. Carson reached out, pushed a finger under the red collar and yanked. The dress ripped open to show long scratches on the thin girl's chest above a pink brassiere.

Carson dropped his hand to close on a thin wrist.

"Ow, you're hurting, Carson!" the blond girl complained.

Her face had paled, and her blue eyes were round as saucers staring at Carson's face.

Carson squeezed harder, twisting a little. "You killed Linda last night, Edie!" he accused huskily.

Edie Ferris sucked her breath in through pale, thinned out lips. "You don't have to be . . . so . . . dramatic about it, though. . . . Let go," she gasped.

Carson dropped her arm, and she stepped back, rubbing the red and blue wrist, blinking her eyes against the tears of pain that had formed.

"I can't stand rough stuff, turns my stomach," she said.

"Tell me about Linda."

"You still loved that . . . tramp, didn't you?" the blond girl said. "After all she did to you!"

"What happened, Edie?" Carson said.

Edie Ferris's blue eyes flashed, almost defiantly. "Well, you're going to get it out of me one way or another, so I might as well tell you. I don't care, either. She didn't get much more than what she deserved. My husband was cheating on me—with Linda. She was my best friend, too. I got the blackjack my husband had in his shirt drawer and put it in my bag and went to see her last night. I was going to beat her face until nobody would want to look at her. Well, she laughed at me, at first, like the snotty little tramp she was, and I brought out the blackjack. She scratched me then, and I hit her. She hit her head in falling on a heavy brass doorstep, and I guess that killed her."

"How did you get up to her apartment without the blond kid in the lobby spotting you?"

"He wasn't behind the desk when I walked in. After I knew Linda was dead, I called down and asked him to come up to an apartment on the top floor. I used the stairs and walked down and out."

Carson studied the thin blond girl from under lowered lids. Finally he sighed.

"You know, I was going to break the neck of the guy who had killed Linda. With these." He held up his two hands. "I guess this calls for a change of plans. Well, the cops will be around pretty soon, Edie. As soon as they go to work on Doc, it will be all over."

The blond girl seemed to shrink, and her thin face became bleak. "I know it," she said in a low voice. "I'm going to stay here and wait for them. I'll tell my husband when he comes home, and I guess that's all I can do."

"Yes, I guess it is, Edie," Carson said huskily.

It was dusk when Carson reached the center of town again. He head for the hotel. He didn't see the long black Cadillac tailing him, and turned his steps into a narrow one way street. The black Caddy shot ahead, pulled up alongside him against the curb.

Daly was at the wheel, grinning a little, and his man, George, and a thin man in a light blue suit got out and crowded Carson on the sidewalk.

"Get in the car," George said.

His hand was bunched up in his pocket. The man in the blue suit had a similar bunch in his pocket. Carson could see the outline of the muzzle on the blue cloth. He got in the long black car.

Daly sent the car purring away from the curb in a smooth surge of power. He drove down the one way street a little way, turned into a boulevard and drove rapidly west. When they reached the outskirts of the city, the suburban district, Daly began to talk.

"Carson, Linda never trusted anybody," he said over his shoulder. "She stole some of the evidence you had collected against me. She got it out of my briefcase one night, and had it in her apartment somewhere. Just in case I ever tried to hang a fast one on her, I guess. You knew she had that stuff, Carson. That's what we're after now."

"I didn't kill Linda," Carson said. "It was her girl friend, Edie Ferris."

Daly was thoughtful. "That might be, Carson, but you always suspected she had that stuff. I know that, and I think you took it from her apartment early this morning."

Carson was silent.

"The police think somebody opened her safe," Daly went on. "No fingerprints on it. If Linda had opened it last, her prints would be there. And this morning when you busted up my game of handball, you knew Linda was dead, and it wasn't in the papers until almost noon. So say you didn't kill her. I still think you got an envelope out of the safe."

Carson stared straight ahead.

"Funny thing, I never knew she had a safe in her apartment," Daly added.

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Daly turned left into a rutted road that lead into marshy ground. Grass and reeds grew almost as high as the car. Here and there a rotting street sign told where a street was to have been. Daly stopped the car in front of a row of forlorn houses with caved in roofs and gaping windows.

"Stylewood Manor, went out in the crash of twenty-nine. Nice place, eh, Carson?" Daly smiled pleasantly, and slowly his smile faded, sinking into the shaven flesh of his cheeks. "Now, let's get down to business. I brought you out here to find out where that envelope is. I'll get it one way or another. I'll have George and his playmate beat it out of you, and you'll tell me in a screaming voice, with your face cut to ribbons, or else you'll tell me now, quietly."

Carson sighed and leaned further back against the cushions.

"If you've got it on you hand it over and stay healthy," Daly rasped.

Carson stared coldly at Daly.

"Take him out," Daly jerked out angrily.

George pushed his gun against Carson, and Carson got slowly out of the car. The man in the blue suit was behind him. George pulled a blackjack from his hip pocket and slapped it against his palm.

Carson flicked a glance at the man in the blue suit. He had a sap in his hand too. Carson took a deliberate step back. He whirled, then, catching the man behind him by the arm, he forced the arm up and back in a tight hammer lock. He spun again and put the helpless, blue suited man between himself and George.

Pushing on the arm, the blue suited man yelling, Carson backed up until the side of the car was at his back. He gave a sudden surge of power, and there was a dry snap, and the man in the blue suit screamed his agony. He raised the man up, kicking like something impaled on a spear, and threw him into George's face.

George floundered, and Carson turned on Daly. He slapped at the gun Daly was trying to bring up. The gun spun away, and Carson knocked Daly down with a short blow. He sprang, whirled and kicked back, and felt his heel crunch against Daly's head, just as George closed with him.

"It's just you and me now," Carson said in the big man's ear.

The big man was powerful, but not powerful enough. Carson worked his hands under the big man, got his fingers under the last rib and tore upward. The big man screamed and flailed loose. Carson was on him instantly, shoving piston-like punches out. The big man's face was cut, began to bleed.

He staggered drunkenly, swung blindly. Carson measured him and brought a brutal punch up from his knees that shook the ground.

He stood, waiting.

The big man tottered like a tree that has felt the last blow of the ax, and slowly toppled to the ground.

Carson collected the guns and paused near Daly, who was blinking his eyes. "I have got that envelope, Daly," he said. "And I'm taking it to the District Attorney tonight. That and some other testimony I can bring up will reinstate me on the force and will break you. My advice to you is to get out of town—fast."

Carson threw the guns on the front seat, got in the car and backed around. He stopped alongside Daly again. "Just as I told you, Edie Ferris killed Linda. I guess she'll get three or four years. Don't you wish you were lucky and had only a four year rap to worry about?"

Carson threw the car in gear and drove out the rutted road to the highway and turned toward the city. He wished he were lucky and could forget Linda's bright red hair.

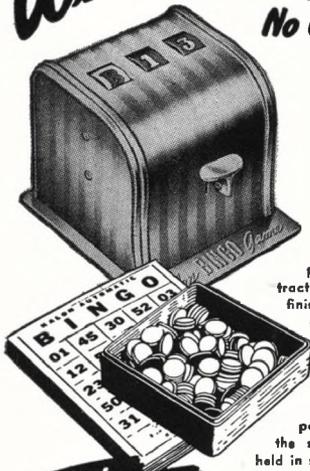


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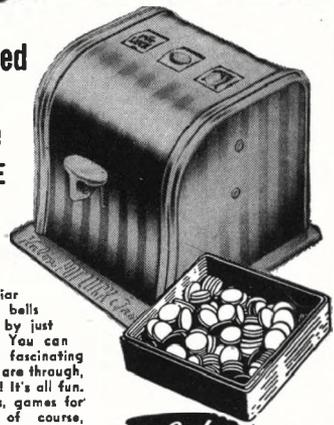
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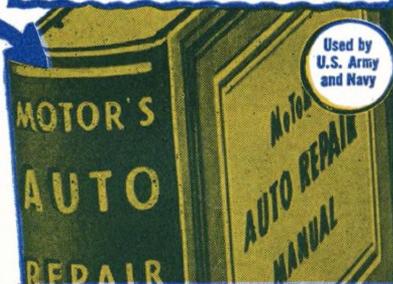
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