

CHALK FACE

BOOKS BY
WALDO FRANK

THE UNWELCOME MAN (1917)
THE ART OF THE VIEUX COLOMBIER (1918)
OUR AMERICA (1919)
THE DARK MOTHER (1920)
RAHAB (1922)
CITY BLOCK (1922)
HOLIDAY (1923)
SALVOS (1924)
CHALK FACE (1924)

CHALK FACE

BY
WALDO FRANK

[Illustration]

BONI AND LIVERIGHT

PUBLISHERS NEW YORK

Copyright, 1924, by
BONI & LIVERIGHT, INC.

Printed in the United States of America

Dear Father:

A weakness we have long shared, and nurtured together: our hankering
after good mystery stories. We have opened many a volume that
promised
luridly--and failed to keep its promise. And whenever we did find a

passable tale, our best pleasure in it was to pass it on to the other. In these exchanges, I have learned that you are more critical than I: so that as ever, in bringing you this book, I do so timidly. If it please you, I shall not need to worry about its other readers.

I can foretell certain of your observations. “Chalk Face” may seem to you at least as much a Parable as a mystery story. But what indeed is the difference between them? What more lurid than the depths of desire, what more mysterious than the hinterlands of conscience? And what event

is so great a mystery as life itself? I believe that every tale should be a mystery tale. I believe that the only stories that are not mystery stories are the shallow stories.... Howsoever, if you find in this book elements of moral and of wonder usually absent from tales of crime, these are ancestral traits which I have straight from you. So, in the impulse making me write my story as in the consequence, you have your share--and you must be indulgent.

W. F.

Seville, February, 1924.

CONTENTS

Part One The Man With the White Head

Part Two The Other Room

Part Three The Challenge

“THEN THE LORD ANSWERED JOB OUT OF THE WHIRLWIND....”

CHALK FACE

_The man who writes the story of his life begins by trying to justify his impulse. But justification masks the true desire; and the sincerest

confessions often start with falsehood. I could invent a reason for these pages, easily and plausibly enough. I could say, being a man of science and having failed in my elected sphere, that with my story I shall make amends: give to the world a document whose revelation may mean far more to it than any alienist's career. This statement would perhaps be truth. My tale will add to that source of knowledge beyond the axioms of rational science from which to-morrow the true science of man may spring. But this statement would not be the truth: it would not express the extent nor the inwardness of my impulse in writing. For I am moved by a will far warmer than any altruism. I write, first of all, for myself._

In setting down a record of my terrible adventure, I hope to escape (for brief and precious hours) from this eternal Twilight. I shall dwell once more in the innocent world of men: in the world where the sun is luminous because the night is black, where life seems good because death seems real. Let me not dwell upon the nature of this Twilight. It is neither darkness nor brightness, neither warmth nor cold. It is penetrant and it is hungry, and it devours the flesh of man that is made of sunnier senses. You who read do not know the blessed marriage of your world. You do not know that sun is sweet to you, because you are sun: that your five senses catching to your mind the rounded beauty of nature and of love bring but fond reflections ... stars, fair women, mountains ... of yourself.

_There is a Truth in which the sun burns up as swiftly as your flesh. All is gone here; and in this thundering silence the march of man that to you seems so bloody, to me has the cadence of a quiet song. Man is born into his mother's arms, and belief cradles him. That breast and that milk are real, for they are part of himself. The day is real and the night, work and reward are real, love is real: pain is real because the need of victory is real. What blessedness! Man is complete in his flesh because no form, no thought comes to his mind that is not portion of his flesh. He loves his flesh in the sun and calls it God: he loves his flesh in a woman and calls it Love. He is all simple and whole: only his words, like in a child's game, break his unitary world. But

where I am, the flesh is not gone: it has become a fragment of a truth vastly beyond it. This is agony, and from this I seek respite._

I want once more to see the sun as you do: to feel the earth solid and absolute beneath my purposeful feet. I want to live again in your commanding passions: loyalty, wonder, anger, worship, love. What joy to be able to say: "This is my friend," "This is my work," "This is my sweetheart," "This is my faith." What common joy for you! Is it not worth what you call pain to have it? Is it not worth what you call death to have life?

For me, pain and joy, love and hate, heaven and earth, life and time and death have dimmed. They are all words of mortal flesh, expressive of flesh's elemental moods. Outside the flesh, they have no meaning. My flesh is broken up but it is not yet gone; so that its word and will still speak to me ... fragmentarily, nostalgic ... of its departed day. I tell my story to bring its wholeness back.

PART ONE

THE MAN WITH THE WHITE HEAD

a

I am John Mark, M.D. I title myself so, even in my dreams: for it is a new title and for long it was dream. I worked hard for it. I do not want you to think that I am dull, so that the winning of that not rare degree was difficult. No: I am above the average in intelligence--but in ambition also. Even as a student I did not aim at becoming a mere doctor. John Mark, M.D., was to have a higher connotation. It was to stand not for the usual empiric healer: but for the leader, for the creator. I am on the way.

I am twenty-eight, and a citizen of New York, where I was born and where my mother was born: my father is of an old family from Vermont. For three years upon a small income inherited from my mother's father, I studied in Vienna, in Zurich, in Paris, in Saint Petersburg. What

there was of theory to learn in my especial field I learned with ease and no great exhilaration. (It was little, after all.) What inspired and nurtured me was the personal contact of half a dozen men, masters whom I had read and revered for years from a humble distance. They received me: they showed interest in my work. They came to look upon me, subtly I felt this, as a potential equal. And I, harvesting the ripe treasure of their science, grew to recognize that their superiority was not one of stuff or spirit, but of years and labor. I found that my own impulse was very close to theirs: my power to abstract phenomenal data equally intense: my capacity to associate my findings, to link them up and to transcend them in intuitional concepts possibly as great. I was no epigone to these masters. They learned that they could speak with me in that shorthand of intimate understanding which is the one articulate language. I was one of them: part of their fuller to-morrow! I came back to my city, glowing.

And almost at once I attained the post I needed at the Institute. The Laboratory was mine: I stood at a delicious dawn of intellectual action: I tasted the ecstasy of the hour in which my will and the world's will, my means and the world's tools seemed one.

My salary scarce paid the rent of a snug two-room flat. But my little income met the rest of my needs. I asked nothing of my father who was rich, and he asked nothing of me. Books were my one extravagance--Gothic tomes and palimpsests where mediæval mystics had imposed their swelling dreams upon the flat clarities of Rome. I knew myself for a sociable and a sensual man. But my work, like an expanding empire, had gradually absorbed the time and energy whereby youth spreads itself. The companionship of a few men, students like myself or masters as I meant to be a master, gave me a deeper satisfaction than the common social fare. And although my desire for woman was great, it was painfully involved with my intelligence and with the difficult measure of my nerves. I was less drawn by the sweet flesh than repelled by the dullness and unchastity of women.

Indeed, for five years I had lived without women altogether--almost without casual intercourse of any kind. From month to month I saw my parents. From hour to hour I dwelt within my work: finding it a realm so various that no mood of my waking and no dream of my sleep were quite outside it. The delights of leisure are those of wandering and surprise and repetition. In my work I had them. Easy love and comradeship bring ecstasy, because in their otherness we lose ourselves, with passion or with service. My work possessed these qualities as well. I was as full in its embrace as any woman in a happy love. And beyond all fulfillment, I had the joy of tempering my desire.

My work was indeed limitless: I looked on my good mood as limitless, also.

b

That mood is behind me in this April dusk, as I walk through the city streets to dine with my parents. Behind me, in the sense of a wide illusion hiding the sun of reality like mist, and by the sun wiped out. I have still my work: I enter still this inexhaustible day of discovery and thought. But I have found a woman whom I love! And in my love for

her, I understand the years of continence and solitude: they were preparation for this love; they were the articulate presentiment that I would love indeed; they were a threshold, in passionate void, for this great filling passion.

I have been repelled by the unchastity of women ... now it is clear! ... because I looked and longed for a woman who was chaste. I refer not to prostitutes. Indeed, a low chastity is at times the one quality they possess. Prostitutes did not repel, they bored me: they are impersonal, domesticated creatures, like certain dogs in whom the individual will has been displaced by the alien will of man. Their one offering ... relaxation ... I had not aged enough to welcome. No: it was women of my own world whom I found unchaste. And now I understand,

thinking of Mildred, by what provisioned measure I had mysteriously judged them.

... The girls toward whom I was drawn by a clear physical desire and whose response, that should have been as limpid, was confused by fear of the Morrow and the Moral. The married women whose lush fields invited pleasaunce, and whose unchastity was still more complex. For in them, the passional was entered and deformed by the possessive; a chaos of morals, poesy and economics weeded their warm beauty. I was attracted, when at all, to sensuous women. And sensuousness that is not sheer becomes a tepid water: weak idealizing, smug and slavish exaltation of the ego muddies it. Such had been my conclusions, measured, though I knew it not, by the revelation that I was awaiting.

Now she is there--fulfilling all my world whose unfulfillment I had sensed, not consciously, but as a larva longs for its own birth. I have loved my work, like a woman, because I knew that there should come a woman worthy of my work. I have been faithful to my work, in faith of this woman who was to come to crown it; who was to come, in spirit and in flesh, to equal its high dream. Unwitting I have labored in a dream: and behold, it is fecund of this fleshed perfection: Mildred chaste as thought, Mildred deep as discovery, Mildred remote and imminent as truth!

I have met her: and although my continence, my solitude and my devotion were a pæan of my prescience, yet she exceeds them as the flaming day the chill night's sleepy vision of the dawn. I have loved her. But on the sacrament of winning her and making her love me, I have not yet entered.

I come this evening to my parents, illumined in my love and in my knowledge that after dinner I shall see her ... whatever happens here, soon I shall be with Mildred: and I come also tense with resolution, dark in a presentiment of its failure. I want this very night to speak to Mildred: I want to propose our marriage. How can I do this with my

pittance of salary and income? I have resolved to ask my parents' help.

"Can't we dine up here?" I say, as I meet them in their drawing-room at the hotel. "I want to speak seriously with you of a serious matter. Downstairs in the dining-room, it would be hard."

I see my mother's face and I know her intuition: "My son is in love." And I understand, by looking at her face, the gloom that has dwelt with my glow upon this undertaking.

My mother is tall. She is going to a theater and she is dressed in a simple gown of jet and lace from which her blonde hair and her strong clear features rise in a beauty that is almost stern. My mother loves me and does not want me to marry. She would buy my dependence on her

with all her fortune, if she knew how. But she does not know how. Her love has become that most sensual and most possessive of all passions: an abstract love, a love that by no living deed, no contact of service, no exchange of will, reaches the world of spirit. She begrudges me no fame, no luxury, no vice. She asks of me no hours and no secrets. Her place in my life, since my life to her is an aura of her own, is secure so long as no one filling it destroys it.

"Of course we can dine here. Clayton, will you ring for the waiter?"

She is silent, incurious, decorous: knowing already and asking of me no question.

How against her will that mothered mine can I be eloquent for her enemy?

My cause is good. I have propounded subtler and more recondite problems. I am twenty-eight. With a power that is rare I have excluded from my life all the warm nurtures of friendship and of love. My needs have not died; it is as if they have in my austere years gone forth from me and gathered to one mastering presence: Mildred. When I saw her so it was with me. Every sense, long denied, called for her: every

need of my body and my soul, as waking from a trance, fused in a single passionate direction: moving toward Mildred, drawing Mildred to me. But my work is not the sort that the world pays for. That is no reason to abandon it. I cannot bring to Mildred a man wrecked of his place in the world. It is John Mark, scientist, who needs her. It is Mildred Fayn, as she lives now in her high artistry of leisure, whom I need. I cannot make of her splendor a cook or a drudge. Nor can I live with her splendor as she must be lived with, outside of my career of pure abstracted thought.

How clear it is! and how awkwardly I speak! this evening at table with my parents. I had despaired before I began. Why did I come? What else was there to do?

Their refusal was as vague as my pleading for what my mind knew as the crucial cause of my life. Even as I spoke, I criticized and marveled at my weakness.--What is the matter with you? You don't lack persuasion, nor power, nor weight of will. For a hundred lesser causes you have done hundredfold better. What is the matter?...

Mother put me off.

"Dear, there's no hurry," she said. "Wait and see. You're at the beginning of your career. Don't you need all your energy for that? If Miss Fayn is truly the woman you should have, she'll wait for you: she'll give up a few fur coats to have you."

Her black eyes blazed. In them I saw:

"If I had you really--you, my boy and my body!--I should be happy, living in a kitchen."

But her mind and her senses were, each, the slave of the other. Her senses did not dare to be happy. In all her life, she had foregone the arduous and heroic way of happiness. So now, she suppressed her avowal.

She knew nothing about it. But for this intimate death, she prepared to take revenge on her son whom she loved, and on her son's loved woman.

My father lighted his cigar, and as usual sagged into the ease of his wife's will.

"I put you through eight years of college," he began. He examined his Corona. He moistened a finger and applied it to a crack in the rich black leaf. "Some day you'll get all we have. If you want some cash--up to five thousand--it's yours. What more have you got the right to ask? If you marry, like every other married man, you got to look out for yourself." He puffed slowly: more rapidly, as a thought at last came to his assistance. "I suppose your mother and I should move to a shoddy flat, so you and Harry Fayn's daughter can live in a swell one? You'll buy our motor, I guess?... Why, when I was your age, my father----"

I did not argue. I did not point out to him the false exaggeration of his picture. I did not show him that at my age his work had been to help his father invest his money so that neither of them should ever need to use their minds: that indeed neither of them had ever used their minds, and that the fair consequence had been ... so far beyond the ugliness of their thoughts ... that I was able wholly, passionately, greatly, to give all my mind, all my life to the white flame of intellectual creation. But even this flame needed its nourishment: was it logical to bring this light to being and then let it die? The gross man is nourished with gross food: the indifferent man with any food at all. My high work called for high fuel. Not for a drudge, not for a harried woman, nor a pretty one, nor for promiscuous pleasures. For Mildred! the essential Mildred! Nothing less. And the proof was that ere I had found the perfection of her love, I had not been nourished at all. Rather than blemish the fine growth of my life, I had lived on myself, until I had found my equal....

Of all this, I said naught. I kissed my mother's accurately rouged cheek: I touched my father's hand, its soft complacency gave me a

savage turn. I went quickly to the door.

My mother stopped me.

“John, I want you to come back. Are you free Saturday? ... in the afternoon? I’ll stay at home. Nothing has been decided. You must not be hasty. I want to see----”

I saw them: so impervious and healthy.--From their stubbornness, my will: from their sheer animal strength, my mental power.... So flashed my thought, but not in irony: a cool constatation.

I said:

“There is nothing for you to see. It doesn’t matter. And everything has been decided.”

... I was in the street. And I had forgotten my words, impetuous, boastful words that seemed to mean nothing at all. For in my consciousness there was the knowledge that nothing had been decided: that my great need of winning Mildred and of having her right was farther from fulfillment than it had ever been.--Better go back, and not be proud: win your mother, said my reason. I knew I would not go back.

c

I had left early, too early to rush precipitate to Mildred. There was time to walk to her, and in the blind congestion of my thoughts the need of walking.

Spring was a haze within the quiet street. The houses were high gray walls of emptiness. Their windows told of no life. Life was a fertile hush dreaming inchoate like a stirless sea against these rocks of houses. I walked as through some elemental birth, æons anterior to men and cities; through sleepy and vast densities scarce sparked with consciousness. A monster too dull to be savage, too close still to the

protoplasmic slime, was this Spring world sprawled upon the stone hills of the city. And as I walked within its palpable mood, my own thoughts clashed like cymbals in a night: their strident clarities were like a wound gashed in its somnolent flesh.

My thoughts stood apart from the city, and from myself, and from each other. I knew that I had come to a crisis in my years. I needed Mildred and I needed my work. To forego my impecunious glory upon the laboratory battlefield meant death. To fail of Mildred seemed to mean death, also. How could I have them both? I had not even wooed her. Her brilliant being stood beyond any touch or any claim of mine. Had she been a woman whom I could bind with sentimental promise or engage with the zest of fighting with me toward a dim future, she had not been Mildred. She was alive, gloriously, luminously alive. Like a flame she spent herself in the day, and she might be gone to-morrow. Even now, I could not tell but there was possibly another's love to fuel her. But even if she could wait, could I? I knew at last the desperate price of my abstaining years. There was stored up in me a might of energy, continent, compressed, and the fire touched it. I was fire--a white totality of active hunger, kindling, devouring in a moment the years' accumulated burden. I needed Mildred; and needed her perfectly; and needed her at once. I could not take her hidden, meanly, without killing my great need ere its fulfillment. All the ways of an inherited culture had this night for me their reason. Beauty and amenity of place, the lovely stuffs wealth has created for its homes and bodies ... I saw them all as acolytes of my essential worship. Mildred stood helpless like a goddess: no man dared take her without the fullest raiment and the richest music, and a fair temple built to flesh her spirit. Such were the exalted symbols of my sense, but my thoughts were shrewd. This perfect child was of the modern world. To snatch her away would be to blemish her. What the world could bring to make an harmonious matrix for her life with me, in no way changing her, was the instant need. Marriage ... a home. All else had been violence rather than fruition: a gesture like that of a crazed man who mars his love in

the impotence of desire.

But what hope was there? Why as I walked through the high Spring-flushed night did I not walk in despair? My mother was the implacable foe of Mildred and in her hand was a weapon she had already with sure instinct wielded. And Mildred herself: what reason had I to believe that she would love me, wed me ... even if the way were clear? We were friends. I had soon won from her the clear note of her laughter. But her laughter surely was no hidden grace that I alone could win.

She herself was the rare thing, and that all life responded to her, that life's common stuff was by her alchemied into her gold. Since she was perfect, why should she receive within herself the transfiguration of love, the translation of marriage? Mildred must have many friends, many loves, for she was virginal not by deprival but as a young birch is white. She was intelligent; her mind had a luminous response to every phase of the world that touched her own. Her intelligence lived inseparate within her senses, within her milk-pale skin. But even so, could I imagine that she would have responded to the mute beginnings of

my glory? What was I in her eyes? A quiet man, young, fair-haired, with deep gray eyes, not tall: evidently gifted, evidently strong; a man who stood at the bottom rung of a mysterious ladder that led to esoteric formulæ about the stuffs and ways of human brains. That much she might

know. Could she, for all her pure intelligence, know how my science was to be a Dionysian dance: an heroic poem in which I marshaled the harmonies of nature, as once did Æschylus with his Prometheus, or the old Jew with his Job? Could she know that? and could I tell her that? _Psychologist_: what a prosy lie the word would give her! Oh, I had faith in myself and faith in Mildred. But how could I hope that she was ready to come to me knowing me her equal, as I knew her my own?

--I should despair, I should despair!

And yet I did not. I walked with bright thoughts through the soft fluxed night, and the defeat with my parents, the uncertainty of what lay beyond, did not make me despair. Indeed my chances of battle did not hold my thoughts. I walked in an exhilarant and scattered mood as if the battle was already won, and I could disband my army!

--Life is good. Why do I think this now? Because of death. We are at war with death. In the conflict, misery and hesitancy die. Joy only lives. Life is good, not because life is good but because we battle death. Blessed is the foe, for he makes us blessed to ourselves. This quiet street is quiet because just beyond is the clatter of Broadway. Lights there jerk in a shallow panic, therefore this strip of sky between the houserows deepens its gray blue. And the man who passes: he is a soft and reticent word of flesh because he is within stone lips of houses, because he moves from clamor.... Mildred: what will I say to her to-night? ... why have I thought of death? I go to Mildred whom my life loves; and I think of death, and I learn that it is the strangeness and the nearness of death which makes life real!

I see a baby boy: he is in the street, he has been struck and badly hurt by a stone. His sister, scarcely larger than himself, leads him across the gutter, screaming, homeward. Toddling howling mite! His tears hold rage, fear, protest, pain--no thought of death, no questioning of life. No, he is wholly alive: life is not good to him, nor does he love it: fatefully and wholly he accepts it. For he thinks not of death. Life may be anger and agony and hunger, but it is everything.--Why then does life seem marvelous to me, save that death must be near? Mildred...? What if she is death and wooing her, life woos its end? and this be the reason why in love life seems so marvelous good? O Mildred, if this is death, let death enfold me. If you are death, hurry me to your flame--nothing beside which life--green hills and creatures swarming in the sun--is a gray sleep. You are not death, my love. You are the golden trumpet calling me to life.

I see other things. Walking toward Mildred, I see the city. Mildred colors the whole strange story: that I am alive, that I am I, now

strange! And being strange, all is real, all is inevitable. The real is mysteriously new! Mildred in everything. She has unfolded and become the world. Yet in this ecstasy of clearness, I cannot even know if she is life--or death!

But I do know how this city is a shell: how life floods beyond it: a cracked shell, the city, so that in little eddies life seeps in.

My vision seeps in, also. I am in a maze of pictures. Mildred has released me from herself to a bewildering freedom.

I can fly where I will, and enter where I want. I see myriad women's arms, suddenly free and fragile like their hair. Women's arms wave, like hair, in a great wind. A wind sweeps my maze of images: I see streaming men and children and women. Each is crouched close to another. They do not see how they, are streaming, streaming. They think of themselves as fixed, all else as moving.

But I am moving. Something in me is fixed, and something in me is moving!...

* * * * *

This is a pleasant room, and I am in it.

What room? Perhaps I am in my house with Mildred, and I am to have a study generous like this one. Am I in my own future, then? Where am I if this is my own book-lined study? Where is Mildred? Let me look sharp and wait. Someone is there....

The room is high and long. Two windows in one wall let in the budding tree-tops of a square. The other walls rise in dark shelves, open with books. Against the black of the wood, the plaster wall is white.

A Tanagra spots it: a Chinese painting: a little rustic jar that seems Etruscan or may be from Peru. Someone is there. Not I. I am not looking, in this torrent maze, on my own future. For the man is not I. He is dark. The lamp, blue Persian with a silk turret-shade clouded like ivory, shadows half his face, a long and from the forehead tapering face, and lights an eye that looks up now from his book. The black hair curls on the forehead in a rounded bang: like one of the saints on the great Porch at Chartres. A noble face: the nose is straight and the mouth warm-lipped and large. Brow and curled hair give saintliness, the nose is resolute and the mouth is subtle. A variance of authority. He rises. He is tall. His eyes become attentive and less thoughtful. A regal man, now at his ease in his home, in the negligee of a moire braided jacket. There is someone else just come into the room. The clear blue of the eyes is questioning. Can this someone else be I? What folly! Yet, if I can see this meditative man, why should he not see me? What a vague mass is the newcomer. I feel, rather than know it for another man. If I look square for this new presence, I shall lose the master of the room.--_Watch the master close!_ The sharp question in his eyes hardens at this other in the room, as at some ominous intruder. Immobile his face: he reaches out a hand. His eyes do not lower to what is in his hand. I feel his hand flex and relax and drop what was in it. Only his eyes are clear, gazing at this other in the room: and yet straight at me, as if they gazed at me! The eyes fill with bitterness, with horror that grows fixed and leaves his eyes.... They die in resignation ... and their horror creeps now over my own flesh. His hands fly above his head: so very empty, so very white and tremulous his hands. A knife in his breast. And all is gone....

* * * * *

... Flowing rivers of faces, of lives saying: "We are steadfast, we are solid," as they stream and faint. Now, the familiar blank before my eyes. The normal street ... I smile at my fancy. I laugh aloud, walking now commonly. I call to my relief my easy rational knowledge.

“No wonder if to-night you suffer from an erratic gush of energy. Hyperæsthesia. Here is Mildred’s house. This confidence ... call it euphoria, for that talk with your parents was a blow, no doubt. Go ahead. A mastering passion is right to admit no doubt. Bad names can’t spoil the splendor of my sureness. Go ahead. Win her. What lies beyond this radiant mist? _Go on._”

I rang the bell and gave my hat and coat to the calming butler.

d

That moment with the butler in the hall was like a strip of arid land parting two seas of my mind. As I went up the stairs, all that had lived in me, walking through the city, went ... went out, and I lived whole in the imminent presence of Mildred. If I had asked myself what I had thought, what I had seen, out there, I could have answered only: Mildred. But even to have asked the question would have been impossible to me, since every question and every answer now was Mildred.

She opened, closed the door. Mildred is in the room, with her hand still on the doorknob and her eyes smiling upon me. Mildred I know and following my eyes I find at last myself, and still find only Mildred.

Let her stay there smiling, her slight shoulders faintly straining back with her arms, and the bare throat pulsant. Let her stay there holding me in her smile. For when she moves, what will become of me? Her chin is up: her face is inclined forward so that her violet eyes lie under the half-shut lids and peer at me. Her chin is a rounded, exquisite apex, and the cheeks trace triangularly subtle to the brow that is her chiefest glory. Mildred’s hair is gold, and is banded high, freeing all her forehead.

Let her stay there smiling, holding me in her smile. With her arms’ strain as they clasp the knob behind them, the shoulders are sheer in the orange gauze of the gown: and the little breasts are high and firm ... very high, and strangely one with the throb of her throat!

Mildred comes forward and gives me both her hands. Her arms are thin, they have no molded beauty. They are like all her body: no sculptured mass of flesh but a mysterious stream of life swift-running, like white fire ever within itself, yet fixed upon some pattern immobile and essenced.

“Well,” comes her laughing voice. “You’re early. And you’re out of breath. If you were late that’d be more excusable. Sit down.”

I sit down, and I stand again.

“Mildred, I’m sorry I am out of breath. But I have breath enough to say what must come first of all this evening ... first of all, all my life. Mildred, I love you.”

Her eyes deepen and grow soft. Her delicate face is a hard fragility about the brooding thought of her eyes. She sits down.

“Come,” she says in a voice that is like her eyes even as before it had been like her face. “Sit down beside me, John. Here.”

She leads me, holding my hand. When I am beside her on the couch her hand lifts from mine as if it had been kissed.

“You mean,” she said, “that you love me really, John? that you want me to live with you, John?”

“I want you to be my wife.”

“Does that mean, you are sure you love only me? That you will never want to live with another woman?”

My eyes gave her my answer: she saw in them, also, my surprise at her questions. She went blithely on.

“Could you love me, John, and also sometimes still love someone else?”

“It might be, Mildred. But in that case I would not now pray as I do, that you may become my wife.”

She looked down at my hand and her little fist beat on it softly.

“How am I to know?”

“Mildred, know what...?”

“If you said to me: ‘Give me a kiss,’ I would kiss you for I feel like that. If you said to me: ‘Come with me for a week,’ I would say yes, for I think that for a week I could be sure that I would feel that way ... and if I did not, why a week comes to a close. But no man asks me that! No man tries to kiss me. They all say: ‘Mildred, I love you. I shall always love you. I want you for my wife.’ That means forever and ever. You are all so sure. How can I be sure?”

“Will you give me a kiss, Mildred?”

She leaned forward and her lips were faintly parted. My mouth touched hers, and my eyes saw within her gown her perfect breasts like porcelain cups, red-tipped.... She was straight again and smiling. I hid my face in my arms, fighting to master the storm that her cold lips had loosed.

“John ... did my kiss hurt you, then?”

“No, Mildred. But I suffer. You are so perfect and so brave: and you feel nothing.”

“That is not so! I liked your kiss.”

“Mildred, beside the anguish and the joy that I feel, you feel nothing.”

She held my hand in her two palms.

“Tell me what to do.”

“Believe in me, Mildred.”

“Why, I do believe in you!”

“Above all else ... above all others.”

“Why? Why must it be only you?”

“Because that is love, Mildred. Because I could not bear it any other way. Because the death of not having you would be as nothing beside the death of sharing you even with another’s thought. Because only in the unity, in the solitary oneness of two souls can love live.”

Mildred shook her head, and her gold curls rang about her ears.

“You talk like someone else. Yes,” she faced me, “someone who loves me, too, and wants me whole and for always and can’t bear any other eyes but his own looking upon me. Someone else whose wishes I’d obey reasonably, John, as I obeyed yours, when you said: ‘Give me a kiss.’” Her eyes were cool and happy despite their problem. “But he doesn’t ask reasonable things. He wants me forever and ever. How can I promise him that? And how can I promise him what I can’t give him at once?”

“Who is he, Mildred?” I forced the words and they came like gray ghosts out of my mouth.

“Oh, you don’t know him. I’ve known him long. And he’s wonderful, too.

Like you are. But different. In every way, different. You don’t,” she smiled, “encroach on each other at all. He’s big and dark, and rather slow. And you are wonderfully quick. He is a poet and smells always of pipe tobacco. His hands are gnarled....”

“He loves you.”

“I think as much as you do, John. His words are strangely like yours, even though he himself is so different. That is important, is it not? He asked me one reasonable thing ... one thing I could do.”

“What was that, Mildred?”

“To come to his rooms.”

“Mildred!”

“He has a lovely place down on Washington Square. I supposed, when he had me there, he’d want to kiss me. But no ... he’s unreasonable, just like you. He frightened me. He left me so alone. I was almost chilly, I assure you. With his pacing up and down: saying ‘I love you. I want you. I love you,’ and not even taking my hand.” She reached for mine. “You see,” she smiled, “he is even less reasonable than you. You at least kissed me.”

I was up from the couch. She had held my hand. I snatched it from her. I began to pace, till the thought came that he had done this. I stopped and faced her. I pulled her up and held her in my arms. I covered her face with kisses. I found her throat in my dazed ecstasy; I pressed my mouth within the gauze of her gown. Her cool hand stopped me, and she held me off.

“No,” she said. “No, I cannot.”

“Why? If you mean what you said. Why?”

Her eyes took on a serious dark question: and I knew how right I was to love her for the splendor of her chastity. For ere she answered me, she was seeking deep within her soul the reason, the quiet reason.

In that true moment when with head bowed she went within herself to give me answer why she had denied me, I knew the greatness of my

love,
and how she was greater than I, and how my sultry passion had been an ugly shred tangential from my love.

“Mildred,” I said in her silence, “you will give your answer. But in your search I can tell you already that you were right; even for my sake, in the light of my own love, you were right to hold me off. You cannot be taken that way. You cannot be stormed. Mating with you must be the peaceful meeting of two equal wills. And it must come to be within a quiet deep and great like itself. There is a passionate stillness more powerful than any tempest. I shall not kiss you again, my love, until you know that kiss for the threshold to our life.”

Her eyes were heavy with thinking. They grew bright.

“Then you agree, even in that, with Philip!”

I nodded. I could not hate him when his name, whoever he was, lived on her lips.

“And now I can tell you why I pushed you off.”

“Why, Mildred?”

She moved her head slowly from side to side; she sat down; she smoothed
her gown downward from her neck.

“I have learned something ... here.” Her hands with a sharp candor, while her eyes met mine, followed the gauze I had ruffled, and cupped her breasts. “I care for you, and I care for Philip. I thought that was enough: that I could blindly let time order ... time and mood ... what each of you wanted of me, and what I wanted to give. It is not so. Time counts terribly! Before I can give myself to either of you, I must know which of you I want to take me first. And then I feel ... I feel, when I have learned who is first, there may be no second!”

“Mildred, you see that I was right? You have learned what I knew when I first saw you. Before I saw you I held myself for you. I denied myself. Not only did I know there could be no one beyond you ... none even before you!”

She was murmuring almost to herself: “It was your mouth on my breast. Your hot mouth marking my flesh, that made me know....”

“You would have hated me, were it not I....”

She shook her head: “Philip might have kissed me. How should I know?”

I smiled. “There is no hurry, dear. Wait. I shall be patient. Wait.”

She hid her face a moment in her hands. And lifting them again, her eyes laughed hard and strong in her fragile face.

“Oh, patience! Bother patience! Why should we wait? Why can’t we know now? I want to know. If Philip were only here, I’d know soon enough. The others don’t count. Really ... how wonderfully simple when there are only two. And you call for patience. Timid! I’ll phone for Philip. Yes, I will. If he’s home, I’ll phone and I’ll go over there: or have him come here quick.... You really should meet him.” Her smile was above malice. “And I’ll know perhaps, just if I look at him.”

She danced toward the door. There was a knock that stopped her. She moved slowly, suddenly transfigured, and turned the knob. A maid stood hesitant.

“Miss Fayn, it’s something urgent, Miss. Your father would like to speak to you just a minute.”

Mildred looked at me. There was a pallor over the bloom of her cheeks. Her eyes still danced, unknowing, within an invading pallor. I was

alone.

* * * * *

A stillness lay within the room that had rung and sung with the dancing laughter of Mildred. Mildred was gone: and someone else is here! Who is here, blighting this room? I stand and feel a horror rise from my loins like a gray cloud ... up, up my sides it crawls: lifting my hair it passes. I forced myself to look over each shoulder: nothing. It is gone. What is it that was here and that I have not seen and that I felt I knew? A foul dark mass in the shrine of Mildred's room. But the horror that scudded through me is away. Thoughts come. Good thoughts. Chasing all others.--Mildred is mine, is mine! And she is wonderful beyond my wonder.

... She opened the door and I shuddered for on her face was the darkness that had been alone with me.

"Oh," came her voice, reed-like and stripped. "Oh, he is dead."

I looked my amazed question: knew I was looking it.

--Your father? Not your father?

"You never saw Philip LaMotte."

"Never."

"You will never see him. Nor I, again."

From within her eyes the shadow came to me and awoke my skin once more
to the familiar horror.

"He is dead."

I was silent.

“They telephoned my father. Papa and he were friends. Philip has been murdered!”

I saw her, saw above all my transcendent need of her like a new radiance within her body. The bewildered cloud upon her face of sorrow was an intruder, a foe.

--You are mine. All else is trampled out in the march of my love.... She would not have it so. She stood there sorrowing. I took her hand, and her touch said: “He is murdered.” It was a film, viscous between us.

But still I could say nothing. I held her hand: I dared not loose it just because it said: “He is murdered.” Why should I be downed by that? Whether it helped or no what did it avail against my mastering need? But the touch of her limp hand spoke, spoke again. My clasp fought vainly, drawing in the foe, in the attempt to shut him out. Mildred withdrew her hand, and left in mine the word of her own:

“Philip is murdered.”

I forced myself to say: “I will leave you, love. I cannot help you now. You will want to be alone.”

She nodded and her eyes avoided mine.

“It is terrible,” she spoke in a voice strangely casual and high. “Who could have murdered Philip? Sweet, gentle Philip. Great Philip. I am all dazed. We spoke of murder in his room, that day.”

“You spoke of murder?”

“Philip said to me: ‘You are the woman for whom man kills. I could kill for you, Mildred.’”

“Dear, even the past is drawn into the dark design of an event that sweeps us. Philip was rich----?”

“I know.” She did not like my reasoning. “I am dazed. I want to go to bed ... and to sleep. Leave me, John.”

Still her eyes kept from my own. She had been glorious in my need of her. Now shattered and distraught with the shadow on her fragrance, she was almost ugly. Her arms were thin as she twisted her hands together and her neck was long; and her eyes drooped heavy down.

--Why is she ugly? I did not love her less. The ugliness I felt was a pain added to the joy of loving her. And then, a dim sense came. It was to grow ever less dim.--She is befouled with a thought! And that thought is my own. She has been fair like a dawn with the dawn of my love and now my thought clouds her.

--Why is she dark? Because this murder will concern me!... So much I knew an instant, and forgot. I left her.

e

I am home. The lamp reveals my study, sharp: a changeling! White curtains in the deep-set latticed windows, shelves of books, the couch right angle to the open hearth, the low gray ceiling ... nothing is moved yet everything is changed. A glow like fever hushes in the shadow, the dull familiar things swell with vibrance into a dimension new like an omen.

I sit down, carefully folding my coat.--No wonder. What a shock! What a night. I huddle in my dressing gown and greet the smoke of my pipe.--No wonder. I take my book.

--Better read.

Above my shoulder, as I sit with the lamp close on the plain pine table is a separate shelf: books on astrology. The book I hold is bound in ivory parchment, cracked: the Gothic type stands bold on the soft

paper.

I begin to read where only yesterday I placed my mark. Yesterday and this page: to-day and this page again. How can such difference meet upon a page? But why so whole a difference? What has happened? Your parents--nothing definitive there. Nothing is lost there, surely. What you anticipated was: what is anticipated, is. Make them understand. There is a way, if not to make them understand, at least to _make_ them.... This sense of an abysmal separateness in your eye trying to link the words upon the page with words an eye of yours saw yesterday, could not be born of what happened with your parents. Philip--what of that? When he was a danger, you did not know of him: now that you know

of him, he is dead. The danger is dead. She did not yet love him. He made claim upon her, my one rival claim: and life has withdrawn it for me. A shock--she will need time--but she will recover! Did this murder shake her whom he loved as much as me who never saw him? Why not be

glad then, if she be not too shaken? Do you want her prostrate? What folly is this in your will? Are the gifts of event less welcome than the gifts of nature? Aren't you glad you have a body and a mind welcome

to Mildred? Don't you accept whatever vantage they give you? Why not accept the vantage of events? How can you help accept? John Mark, will you be morbid, like other men, when the sun and moon of life shine full on you?... Better read.

--If there is something in all this, this strangeness in you: something beside the tumult of your love, and the shock of learning how close to your desire was another hand, hot and touching your own as you reached--if there is something else, you'll see it clearer in the morning. Don't push your clarity. Let it ripen. Dangerously close his hand to your own? It is gone.... He may not be dead? ... a wound? No, he is murdered. And that is forever.

--Mildred is strangely dim. My memory and the note of my taut nerves tell me best at this moment how I love her. I want to see her. I want to have her vividly here. To corroborate what? I want to see again that first time when I saw her....

* * * * *

Evening, a dance. The electric lamps drive a stiff flood of light through the gold-paneled room. No air--this atmosphere is a harsh painted substance. Men and women are brittle or are cloying: their spirit is dark as if no air had ever entered them. The music is a weave of stuffs contorted, writhed, a hypocritical plea for gayety: its sinuous lies move through the hall and through the bodies of the dancers with a false laughter, with a macabre rhythm. Cynic music, substitute in this world for breath; as are the lamps for light.... And the coupled forms jerking slow in its rugose waves.

Then, I see Mildred! I have met her before: casually, more than once. Now, for the first time, there is the grace in me to see her!

She is air, open and coursing: she is sunlight. Her solidity is resilient. She has a body which is a luminous smile, impervious and ruthless.

"What are you doing here?" I ask her. For her antithesis is so exact ... the velvety music, the slow whining bodies ... that she is clear like a poem in a world of inarticulations.

"Let's talk," she says. "It will be good for you to talk. Your mood is so heavy."

"What are you doing here?"

"Where else did you expect to find me?"

"I expected to find you nowhere."

“Then you don’t know who I am.”

“You are Mildred Fayn. I have seen you: and I have heard of you.”

“Well, then? Did you not hear that I dance, that I motor, that I ride?
Did you not hear that I flirt?”

“Whatever I heard and saw has naught to do with you.”

“You look, Doctor Mark, as if you had made a discovery. And you look solemn.”

“I am pleased.”

“You are like a child, perhaps? Most solemn when most pleased?”

“Children have the gift of discovery--and of wonder.”

Suddenly she was serious. She had glanced dazzlingly around me. Now it
was as if she came straight forward.

“I’ll dare be ‘serious’ with you,” she murmured.

She looked full at me: her eyes had a crisp tenderness, like some immortal fruit ever upon the Springlike verge of ripeness. I knew that she understood, although the words perhaps were not within her mind, how laughter is oblique: how seriousness is the full face of joy.

We sat in a little bower cut off from the hall by palms. It became a cool and fluid haven from the hall--from the hall’s synthetic sun. She was quiet. She folded her frail hands in her lap and raised her head. A smile flickered at her mouth like a butterfly at a fruit. She dispelled it.

“It’s hard to sit serious,” she whispered.

“It is so revealing.”

Again, instantly, she understood.

“Yes: we don’t mind being naked when we are in motion. It must be that motion covers us? The dance, the swim. But being still, and being seen....”

“Laughter,” I said, “is a shift we wear like motion.”

There was a pause. I illogically broke it: “You are uncovered, yet you are at ease.”

She laughed: “No! You are wrapping me up in your observations about me.”

“Why do they cover, rather than reveal you?”

“Why? Because they are illusions.”

“Oh!”

“Aren’t they romantic and inaccurate? You see, I am a girl who dances and motors and flirts.” Her smile was indulgent: as if she invited me, knowing how hard it was, to candor.

“How can you expect me to know you so swiftly?”

“Why not--swiftly?” she said.

I was aware of her as if she had been naked. I leaned forward in my chair: she lay back in hers, with an ankle poised upon the other. She knew my awareness, and was unashamed. There was naught sensual in my knowing her. She did not challenge my sense: she challenged my understanding. Her emerald dress gleamed in fluid angles over her hips, around her waist and breast. She was not naked, after all: she was clad in a cool flame aura of which her eyes were the measureless sources.

“I am going to leave you here,” I said at last. “I want to see you again. You will let me see you again?”--Again, again! oh, forever, shouted my heart. “But not again in that lewd place, with its plush music and its sticky light.”

“Where?” she asked. My violence was beyond her. She did not think of the dance as anything but pleasant. And the music was to her the usual dance music.

“In your home.”

“Come, surely,” she agreed. She gave me her hand.

I had many words, and she had none. My words were my ignorance: her wisdom was itself, needing no concepts. In that moment, I learned that also words--like motions--were shifts of incompleteness. I grew ambitious as I had never been before. Long I had willed to be great as men are great. And since I had first seen her on this night I had dared to want her, as man possesses woman. Now I longed more vertiginously far: I longed to be able to achieve the domain beyond words, beyond conscious acts--to exert the wisdom of power, somehow, beyond the articulation of my mind; even as she was wise in the absolute miracle of her thoughtless body. So fragile, so profoundly luminous she was! her eyes, her face, her form the entexture of a petal in which all immensity lay glowing.

--To be a man is misery! Yet to hold her, I must be a man. I understood the wisdom of beauty, its undimensioned power: and how intellect and words are its groveling slaves. I envied this girl, I with my man's mind. I resolved to equal her in her own high domain....

* * * * *

But now I cannot even see her! Though I recount this scene, it sleeps pale in my mind. And if she come at all, it is otherwise than in her revelation of the world beyond our conscious words--it is as I saw her last, diminished and blemished by a thought of my own!

--Is this why my love of her dims? Tides ... the energy that swells my love (do not torment yourself) has ebbed into other harbors, for an hour. Were this not so, life would grow stagnant in my love, and my love grow foul like a hooded and shut pool. You must understand this, always, Mildred (what do you not understand?): how the waters of my life move out from you, and then move in on you replenished with the verdance of their wanderings.....--Better not think of her now, nor of the man murdered, nor of the hard enameled cheek of mother.--Better read....

Like all else in my life, the study in the pseudo-science of astrology is at once joy in my life and design in my work. I strive, as man has always striven, to drown this anguish of being born a man, within the stars. I cannot. For the stars are not greater, truer than my passions; their convolutions do not make my thoughts petty and unrelated; nor are they closer to God than my own searching will. The solace of lies is denied me. All my life has battled against the ease of falsity and sentiment. The solace of the Truth----?

Oh, I am small indeed, small and imperfect: no stronger and no greater than those whirling stars. But if they swing sure (an instant) in balance of the truth, cannot I? Gravitation--it is a phase of will, a phase of fragmentary conscience, making these stars swing true, _one with the other_. Let my thoughts do likewise!

I plunge once more into the symphony of search. We must move (it is the fate of imperfection: that we must seem to move): our hope is to move in unison with all the other parts of God. For the harmonious sum of movements is immobile--is Truth's still image. Work that seeks not respite, that seeks knowledge, is indeed holy: for it binds pitiful man into this symphony.

I think of the design on a man's palm. Is the design of the stars a similar chart recording the destiny of man's brain? Of course, there is rapport here--but of what nature? Man's destiny, the graph of molecule, cell, electron in man's brain, and the congeried stars--are they

related as will, voice, phonographic record (where then is the Will?), or as simultaneous projections of some body that includes us all? This search is my work. I feel with exquisite anguish how the heavens will help me. The vulgar idea of the phonographic record is unreal. The stamp of voice and the record in the wax are not cause and effect: or rather, cause and effect are but relative revelations to our minds of two facts as simultaneous and organic as the two faces of a coin. Even so the correspondence between braincell and star is organic, integral and formal. Braincell and star are related like the chemic stresses of a body. But our point of reference is the mind, and the mind still thinks alas! in scaffold terms of space, of cause and effect, of time. Hence, the sidereal design appears _beyond_ us, and appears always changing. Our limitation paints the human drama. Two infants dropped from one womb meet star-wordings abysmally separate. All--from the plane of the womb to the farthest sidereal sweep--has changed to human consciousness and will, in the instant between the births. The brains of the infants are two: the foci of their minds make of the stars two sentences--and of their lives two solitudes forever....

I stand before these clumsy artefacts of the child-seers ... the astrologers ... and behold the stuff of a great thought! Am I not young, exhilarant, equipped? There is the event, threefold expressed for our three-dimensioned mind: the stars speak the event, human life enacts it, histology and biologic chemistry release it. What a _Rosetta Stone_ for the unsealing, not of the written word of dead Egyptians, but of the living word of God! Thought and its chemic symbols in brain and body, act in human history and its wording in the sidereal cosmos--they are my materials, and they are docile in my hand! I shall create an Axiom in the science of man: his conscious part in God....

* * * * *

But this is not for to-night. The black type of my book is gray. Other signs fill my room.... Mildred and love, fear and hate and horror. Why not read _them_, since they are clamorous near? Are they perhaps as true as the stars? What is _their_ symbol yonder?

Molecules of brain, and flaming suns aflicker like ghosts through emptiness. Are they will-o'-the-wisps misleading me from emptiness which is perhaps the truth?

I am unhappy. My life which I have given to proud search, it seems to-night that I have cast it away on nothing. Emptiness fills my room. _Between and beyond the stars, is there not Emptiness?_ I have not Mildred. Shall I win her? What else is there to win?

Cosmos is a black cavern zero-cold, and the star-worlds flashing their feeble fires are lost. If they and we embody God, is God not also lost? Infinite cold, infinite blind blackness: vagrant mites spitting their star fire into tiny corners. How do I know these flame-specks are my fate? Why not the vaster spaces in between? the spaces empty, the spaces zero-cold? Perhaps the fate of Philip is a sun, burnt out. And my own, the black void that will never burn.... I lay aside my book. Its arrogant hopes seem childish. Are no men born to utter upon earth the Black that gapes between the closest stars?

Yet why think so? That Black is an illusion. Space does not exist: emptiness is but your ignorance. The void between and beyond the stars is the void within your fragmentary knowledge. And through this fact, the void cannot concern you, since only knowledge longs and only knowledge hurts. But were it even so, why fear the void? What is there to fear in emptiness? Fear is not emptiness. Your fear denies your fear.

* * * * *

--O my beloved: this grandiose lack is only lack of you!

How came I to love you? When my young mind moved toward the mysteries of flesh, it was not your flesh made the search sweet. When my young spirit went upon its journey, knowing there was no end, it was not your spirit made the journey sweet. You have come late upon me: yet all my seeking is dead without you, and all my seeking has come full upon you! When I first saw you, my thought was not to kiss your mouth,

but to achieve a knowledge and a power, like your own beauty's wisdom beyond words. What mystery is this?--And what mystery is my despair to-night? Am I not close to Mildred? Could not a fool see in her luminous candor the dawn of love? There was a danger, and that danger is dead! While it lived....

I pace my room: back and forth from the recessed windows to the wall where stands a little table with a vase holding a white lily. And I try to think.

--You must see. You must understand.

Yes, yes. I have gone too far to fall back easefully on ignorance.

--You must probe. You must understand.

Yes, yes. I look at my books.

--Not that.

I think of Mildred.

--Not Mildred....

I stand still: a shudder swarms my skin, draws my throat taut, uprises in my hair....

* * * * *

... the white room larded with books: the face noble and reticent, and the swift births of amaze, of pity, of horror ... indecorous death. Pale hands fluttering up like rebellious dreams--and fallen.

* * * * *

My own hands bar my eyes.... How do I know this is not morbid nonsense?

--What then is sense?

I am not so used to murder that this news, passionately close to my love's life, should not move me.

--I do not blame you, that you are moved.

“_What can I do?_”

I speak these words aloud, and the despair that dwells in them takes shape. Shape of an impulsion. I know already what I am going to do. But I contrive even now to laugh at myself.

--Fine man of science, driven by despair. Illogical, driven man!

I take off my clothes, and though the night is warm, I shiver in my bed.

f

I am asleep and dawn is all about me: dawn within me: I am up from bed and I am putting on my clothes. My face in the mirror wakes me. I am half dressed already, and my mind says: “You must not forget to shave.” I see my face. The mirror is by the window, it stands on a highboy in my bedroom. Dawn is a mingling of stirs: whistle of boat in the river fog, rattle of wagon in the gray cool mists turning and twisting, footbeat solitary on the damp hard pavement--this is dawn coming by the window into my room, to my face. I look at my face, and then my face awakes me.

I put a fresh blade in my razor and shave swiftly. I take off the underwear of yesterday that my hands, while I slept, put on: I bathe cold: I dress fast.

The street is not different from the dawn that drenched my room. Stone is solitary, damp: houses are stifled by the night that they hold, that

is passing. I buy a _Times_ and a _World_ at the corner stand where the dark hunched man with thick glasses and a bristling beard gazes at me with exaggerated eyes. I do not look at the paper, waiting for the car. As I sit in the car, I read quietly what I expected to find. Here is the substance:

It is a simple case. Mr. LaMotte's serving man, Frank Nelson, is implicated and is already in the Tombs. His master gave him the evening off, and clearly the crime could not have been committed without knowledge of this and of the fact that Mr. LaMotte was alone. At about 8.30, a man came to the apartments where Mr. LaMotte has his chambers and told the colored doorboy, Elijah Case, that he had an important note to be delivered in person. Elijah phoned up and Mr. LaMotte responded. Elijah carried the man to the third floor, pointed out the door, heard the messenger knock, saw him enter ... and went down. Little time passed before the elevator signal rang again. Elijah went up, opened the elevator door and the messenger stepped in.... Elijah recalls him clearly. "How do you happen to be so certain?" the police asked him. "I dunno. But I is." He says the man was dressed entirely in black, and that his head was white. "Do you mean white like a _white man_?" "Nossah ... I means white lak ... lak chalk." "Even his hair?" "I don' remember no hair. A white head. Da's all." "Even his eyes?" Elijah shuddered. "Yessah. Dey was white, too."... The police infer that the colored boy, who is simple-minded and imaginative, made up his monster after he had learned the event. In any case, Elijah went back to his little hall office: and shortly after a call came in, by phone, for Mr. LaMotte. No: Mr. LaMotte had no private phone. Instructions were, not to say in any instance whether Mr. LaMotte was at home, to get the name and announce it first. It was Mrs. LaMotte, the deceased's mother. She often called, and although frequently Mr. LaMotte would tell the boy: "Say I am not at home" ... that doubtless was why he used the house phone ... never in the three years Elijah had worked at the apartment had Mr. LaMotte failed to answer his signal, and never had he refused to speak to his mother. Elijah phoned up, now, and received no answer. This satisfied the mother who rang off. But it began to trouble Elijah. Mr. LaMotte

never walked down, and also he never left without giving word to the boy. During all that time, Elijah had not been required to leave his little office in full view of the hall. Finally, Elijah was scared. He phoned again. No answer. He went up, and rang, and pounded on the door. He went down into the Square and found an officer. They broke open the door, for the pass-key was with the janitor who was away.... The murdered man was lying on his back in the library, with a wound in his heart. There was little blood, no weapon, no sign of a struggle. But the weapon must have been a long and slender knife aimed with rare accuracy. Nothing seemed to be missing. The small safe in a recess of a bookcase was shut, no fingerprints were found. If the object was theft, the valuable stolen is unknown and hence its loss is still a mystery. Or else the thief was frightened off ... that happens. A simple case, which leaves the police in confidence of a quick solution....

I noted the address and left my papers on the foul straw seat of the car. A man with a skull-like head, skin yellow and tough and eyes that bulged with a lost tenderness, reached out for them. Leaving, I was aware of the two mournful rows of humans facing each other like lugubrious birds on swinging perches.... I found the number and flashed my police card at a brown boy who took me up: the wonder in his eyes was mingled with proprietary pride at his connection with a headline murder. At the door stood a policeman. I heard myself say, coolly:

“I am Doctor Mark of the Institute.” I did not show my card.

He understood nothing, and was impressed by me. I was beginning to be impressed by myself.

Alone in the hall, I hesitated.--I need still not go in. Someone was in the room, and he would come, and I could talk with him explaining my personal interest in a friend. Why not go in? What was I doing here? I had come like an automaton sprung by the despair of the distant night. Moving, I lost my agony. Even this single stationary moment in the hall brought to my nerves a starting pain as if to stand still were

some unnatural act forced by my will on my body.--Let me go on. The door opened, and a blunt big man scrutinized me with the vacuous stare that doubtless he took for subtlety. I watched myself dispose:

“I am Doctor Mark of the Institute.” I showed him my card, “... and a friend: a family friend.” I did not hesitate. I wore a light top coat, and I took it off.

The man softened and nodded.

“I am Lieutenant Gavegan.” We shook hands. “He’s in there, sir.” He pointed with his thumb in a miracle of reticent grace. There was a pause in which my will must have spoken. For he said, as if in answer:

“I suppose I can leave you alone in there, sir, a few moments. Don’t touch nothing.”

I saw the image of a cigar in his flat mind as he moved toward his friend, the officer at the entrance. I shut the door behind me.

—g—

I knew this room. The regimented books marched high toward the high ceiling: the subtle notes upon the shelves of color and of plastic twisted like flageolets in a bright cadenza down against the stout march of the books. The square room veered roundly, the ceiling vaulted: all was a concave shut and yet wide about this man who lay upon the floor.

I knew the room, and I was not amazed. Casual thoughts....--Mildred was

here: you are the woman for whom men kill, a white-faced man killing with shiny boots ... went through my mind as I leaned down: I was unamazed and cool, lifting the sheet that lay upon the body.

The face did not stop me. I opened the white shirt with its solid bubbles of blood, and my sure hands went to the wound. The blade had

been struck from a point higher than the breast, so that its angle from above was acute. It had passed through the pectoralis major and minor muscles, through the fourth intercostal space, and into the right auricle of the heart. The ascending portion of the aorta had been severed. Death was immediate and clean. No surgeon with a body prostrate under his hand could have cut better. This body now was prostrate before me. Swiftly, my eyes measured it: it was six feet, possibly six feet two.... I folded back the shirt, and now, as if I had been satisfied, I looked at the face of Philip LaMotte.

I studied the face which, not twelve hours since, had come to me in the apocalyptic street. A white pallor overlaid the rich dark pigmentation. The beard stubble had grown: it emphasized the accurate delicacy of the chin and the tender strength of the lips. The nose arched high. The brow was serenely broad: the black curled hair, like a filet, came low and round. The shut eyes made the vision startling: a Saint of the Chartres Porche.

I saw myself crouched over this slain saint whom death had sculpted into marble. My mind remarked with an aloof surprise, how little my observations and my will at work surprised me. Was I discovering, indeed? or was I appraising? Was I probing a crime that for good cause haunted me, or was I reviewing ... reviewing----

I was on my knees crouched over the body of Philip LaMotte. I heard the door. I looked up at the figure of Detective Gavegan. With careful grace, I arose.

“Does the boy Case have a good memory of the man’s size, who brought the message?”

“He says: about medium size.”

“How tall is Case?”

“You saw him. He’s a short darkey.”

“If the man’d been Mr. LaMotte’s size, Case would have known it?”

“Six foot, one and a half? Well, I guess.” Gavegan flattened his eyes once more upon me in a simagre of study.

“I know what you’re thinkin’,” he snickered. “They all likes to play detective. How could so short a man have finished him so fine? Size ain’t strength, Doctor Mark: no more than a big man need lack for wits.” Gavegan’s huge form swelled.

I watched him. The hopelessness of making him respond to my discoveries, still so dark to myself, fought against a pleasant call in me that it would be wrong to hide anything from the law.

“Has that message ... has any letter been found?”

He shook his head wisely. “No: nor there won’t be. The final examination is this morning. That’s why the body ain’t yet been removed. But there won’t be. That letter was mere pretext.”

“This looks a simple case to you?”

“Plain motive. Theft. How do you know what Mr. LaMotte was carryin’ in his pocket just last night? The butler knew. Mebbe a jewel for a girl. Or a bundle of securities. Surely a wad of bills, and he preparin’ for a journey.”

“Oh, he was preparing for a journey?”

Gavegan gave me a gentle look of pity.

“Come over here,” he beckoned with his head. On a small teak-wood desk between the windows, lay a diary pad bound in black levant. It was open to this day. There was one note, scrawled small in pencil:

“_Gr Ct M 10.30_”

I fingered the pad. There were almost no other entries.

“What do you think that means?”

Gavegan loomed. “Grand Central Station. Train at 10.30. And meetin’ there with ... M.”

“Plausible,” I said, and was unsure if I agreed or if I mocked. “I suppose you know already who is ‘M’?”

He eyed me with omniscience. “That we don’t give out, sir. Even to a distinguished friend.”

“But the wound, Gavegan! Have you looked at the wound?”

He was stupid. I prepared to tell my thoughts. Was it because or despite that he was too stupid to receive them?

“The wound might puzzle you, I think, if you had studied more anatomy. The man who dealt it did so from above, for it struck the right auricle of the heart at an angle of less than forty-five degrees! How could a short man do that to a man six feet one and a half? And how could any man murder LaMotte like that, if LaMotte were not literally _baring his breast_: parting his arms, even raising his arms (the muscle wound shows that, besides) in order to receive the blow?”

The image of a victim coöperating with his slayer was too much for the law. The discomfort of my analysis struck Mr. Gavegan as an impertinent invasion. He barred it with laughter. I could see his thought in his mouth and his eye.

“--These scientist cranks.”

I went on: not knowing, again, if my motive was to convince or was bravado in the certainty that my man was beneath convincing.

“Gavegan, have you ever noted the subtle stigmata of the hypnotic trauma?”

Gavegan grumbled.

“I’m afraid, sir, I’ll be havin’ to let you go. The Coroner’s cormin’ again. We always likes to be hospitable to the big doctors at the Institutions, whenever we can help ’em in their studies.” He pulled a huge silver timepiece from his vest, and went to the window, and looked out.

I was immersed so fully, that even now my action did not make my mind break in amaze from the rhythm of events. The big man was at the window

looking out: for he believed he had heard the Coroner’s car, and doubtless this meant that his night’s work was over and he could go to his wife. I moved unhesitant to an open door that led into a little passage. A strip of blue carpet covered the floor. And naked-clear there lay on it a white envelope which I picked up and put into my pocket.

I thanked Gavegan: gave him two cigars, and left.

h

When I reached my rooms, Mrs. Mahon was there with my breakfast tray,
and wondering what could have taken me out so early. Mrs. Mahon was the

Italian widow of an Irish policeman. I sat down to my fruit, and her ample and unsubtle beauty was pleasant to my mood, so that I held her with words. Mrs. Mahon loved to talk with me: but in her sense of my state she was shrewd, and she had never intruded her wide hard rondures and the brash clarities of her mind upon my silence. She stood over me

now, with her bare arms crowding her bosom, and told me of the latest misdeeds of her lover. Mrs. Mahon was beautiful, and to me entirely without charms. Her head was small, the black hair massed low on the blandness of the forehead, and her nose was Roman. Her eyes bore out my

fancy of the moment, that she was not flesh; for in their heavy facets was no expression. The mouth was long and quiet. Its sensuality seemed a deliberate trait, somehow not born of her own flesh but of the will of the artist who had made her. Finally, her body as I could sense it under the loose white fabric of her gown, was an arrangement of obvious feminine forms: high breasts, stomach and hips subdued: and yet to me devoid of the mystery of her sex. She was the body unlit, goodly and functioning: the sacrament of flesh without the spirit. So this day it was cool nourishment to look at Mrs. Mahon, to drink in her clarities, to convince myself that she was not sculpture, quite the opposite: _real_.

The tang of the grapefruit, the earthy pungence of the not too fresh eggs, the bite of the coffee, merged with Mrs. Mahon: and I was happy in a deep forgetfulness. I was sleepy. The thought came:--You have had a bad dream. Your visit to the body may be real: but you can wipe it out like a dream. It need have no consequence in the real world. And that is the trait of the dream, is it not? the one trait that shuts dream out from other planes of life? And I chatted with Mrs. Mahon, and gave her advice.

“His misdeeds,” I said, “save you from ever being bored by him. You should be thankful.”

She smiled: “Oh, I guess he’s a man: and I guess I’m a woman. I suppose

I get him sore, too, sometimes, just because my ways are them of a woman. And yet, if I wasn’t a woman, and if he wasn’t a man----”

“Precisely, Mrs. Mahon. What you’ve just said is philosophical and deep.”

She shook her head at my solemn words which, I judged, tickled her as the prickings of a poignard might titillate an elephant. She went out with my tray, and the thought “Rome” came to me as I watched her perfect carriage: the low spacing of her feet, the swing of her hips, the breadth of her back, and the little head so rightfully proportioned, like a rudder steering the life that dwelt within her body.

--Rome. How far I am from Rome. How sweet Rome would be, with its sure shallow strength.

I lit a pipe. Melancholy and the hint of an old anguish wiped out Mrs. Mahon.--This anguish is what moves me, moves me toward what seems the cause of the anguish. A paradox that is a common law. Look at love: how pain of unfulfillment moves us upon the loved one, and as we come ever closer, ever deeper and more absolute grows the pain of unfulfillment. If I could analyze what this is that has taken me: if I could only know where it began.... But I know that it must first fill out its life ere my mind measure it. What did my poor analysis avail me? How wisely I announced: “Your anguish moves you toward the source of your anguish. You cannot stay still because you must fulfill your own beginning.” And how blindly I moved!

I reached into my pocket and took out the envelope that I had not yet examined, and that Mrs. Mahon had helped me to forget. It was addressed

Philip LaMotte, Esquire

By Bearer

and it was in the straight high script of Mildred Fayn!

It was empty.

I tapped it against my open palm and wondered why I felt that it had any bearing on the case. There was no proof that this was the alleged letter of the fatal messenger. On the contrary, how could I entertain a thought that would implicate Mildred in this horrible affair? What was I trying to find, or to think? I was abhorrent to myself. Doubtless, Mildred had written more than once to a man so close. My reason flayed my miserable thoughts: but did not break them: did not avail against their issuance in deed.

I telephoned to Mildred.

“Yes?” she answered and her frail voice bloomed out of the wire, drenching my sense in a languor of desired peace.

“Mildred,” I said, “doubtless these days you would prefer not to see me.” She did not answer this. “But something possibly important has come up: I feel that I should speak to you.”

She hesitated.

“Meet me at lunch, at Sherry’s ... at one-thirty.”

i

My work took me. I worked well. Doctor Isaac Stein’s warm voice startled me at my shoulder.

“You have a fine power of concentration, Doctor Mark. I’ve been here five minutes watching your immobile absorption.”

I turned and met the gray eyes of the great bio-chemist: of the man whom of all Americans I admired most.

“It is the contrary of concentration. My brain is split in two. And the one part does not trouble the other.”

He nodded and frowned.

“It’s the part of your brain which dwells so voluptuously with those ganglions, that interests me.”

“I stand rebuked, sir.”

“You’ll learn that the other part which you think now so worthily engaged in speculation and in rhapsody, is merely the part not yet in solution--not at the point yet of true condensation. When you’re wholly crystallized, Mark, then you’ll be _whole_.”

“You disapprove of me, Doctor Stein?”

He laughed. “You should know better than that.”

“You have the passion for unity of your race, sir.” I laughed back. “This faith in unity which your science posits is itself the creation of a wild mystic rhapsody.”

“It is the premise of every human thought, of every human act.”

“--That has survived, since it fitted into the unitary scheme. But is there not something arbitrary about that, Professor Stein? Two intense single-minded peoples, the Greeks and the Hebrews, set up a scale of consciousness based on the Unit, and narrow down the multiverse to that. Everything that men did or thought must fit that scale of One, be translated into it: everything that failed was rejected, was unrecorded, hence intellectually was nonexistent. To-day, after three thousand years of this sort of selection, we have quite an array of theory, data, thought, all in the key of One: we have a whole civilization based on One, a whole set of religions tuned in One, to which our senses as well as our minds submit and finally conform. What does that prove beyond the thoroughness of the Greeks and Hebrews? of

their initial will to throw out all contrary evidence, to deny all dimensions beyond it?"

"Could this premise of the Unity have builded up so wholly the structure of science, æsthetic, logic ... the structure of human action, were it but an arbitrary premise that might be replaced by others at least as valid?"

"The strength of the limited, Doctor Stein: the protection of exclusion."

Doctor Stein's eyes sharpened.

"Very well. Then, does not the success of this premise, which you call limiting and protective, prove that it expresses perfectly the human essence? The fact that by means of the premise of unity man is beginning to master life, does that not prove, besides, that man's essence and the essence of being are common terms, permitting a contact after all between the subjective and objective, between the phenomenal and the absolute?"

"You are assuming the success, Doctor Stein! And you are assuming that this thing which man is 'mastering' is life: is something more than the creation of the subjective will which started with the Unit that it finds everywhere and thereby 'masters' ... finding and mastering only and always itself. You are assuming that every day is not compounded of events which transcend the powers of unitary logic and unitary experience even to conceive them. How do we get out of the difficulty? From these parabola shapes that are the events, perhaps, of every day, our minds snatch down the fragmentary intersections that touch the terms of our minds. The rest is ignored. Your 'success' of biology, mathematics, chemistry, physics, æsthetics, mechanics, is simply your own dream, complacently rounded by your unitary will. Unchallenged, for the most part, for the simple reason that long ago man's mind has lopped off whatever might have challenged."

"Well, then, even you will admit that the human will is unitary."

“And what does the will cover? how successful, how potent is the human will? If it were not deeply at variance with Life, would our will make mostly for anguish and for failure? Would it not be a bit more competent than it is? Would history, social and personal, not be a happier story?”

Professor Stein’s eyes were hot.

“Come up some evening, Mark: any evening when I’m in town: we’ll go into this.”

He left me.

—j—

Clasping Mildred’s hand in the pied lobby, I touched a warm, proud sorrow. She was changed ... deepened rather. In her great eyes, a new limpidity: and more than ever the counterpoint of her bright hard body and of her spirit, dark and profoundly still, gave to her a beauty almost beyond my bearing.

I gripped myself. I silenced my clamoring question: “Mildred, Mildred, did you love him, then?” We sat, touching our food, saying no word, until I had mastered myself.

When I was able to speak:

“I went to his place this morning, and they let me in.”

Her eyes rose to mine and dwelt there quietly.

“I saw his face, dead. Even in death it was noble. He must have been a great man, Mildred.”

Her eyes assented, serenely.

I made my eyes see only the loveliness of this girl: but perhaps my mouth trembled with a jealous pain.

“John,” she answered both my eyes and my mouth, “you are suffering too.

You are afraid Philip’s death has given him an advantage over you--a sort of perfection easier to love than your own struggling life. That’s not true, John. Would I lunch with you in this gay place to-day, not twenty-four hours after his death, if I responded in such a foolish way to life? You are very dear to me, John: I know that also.”

I could not speak. So I took from my pocket the envelope and gave it her, in silence.

She examined it, turning it about. Her eyes met mine fully:

“How amazing! How amazing!” she whispered. “Where does this come from?”

“I found it on the floor not far from where he lay. It might have been nearer, or have blown from its place on the desk. For the windows were open. Why is it amazing?”

“Why? Because it is my hand. And because I did not write it.”

“Mildred, for the sake of our reason, be sure of what you say. You must have written more than once to Philip.”

She paused: her teeth bit hard in her lower lip, a tremor of resolve pushed up to her sharp shoulders. Then, in a quiet containment, she answered me.

“I make no mistake, John. I did write, infrequently, to Philip. I never sent him a note by messenger. If I needed to communicate with him quickly, I telephoned, or I wired.”

In her pause, the gilt bustle of the room where we were lunching, the room itself, became a shallow and unreal line upon some darkling density about us. Mildred went on:

“This is a fine version of my hand. But it is not my hand. And there is more superficial evidence than my conviction, that it is not mine. _Did you notice the envelope_, John?”

Her hand on the table with its débris of crystal and porcelain and silver was steady: mine, taking the paper, trembled.

I looked, and my soul blanched: my hands seemed to crumple and collapse about the flimsy paper. I fumbled at the flap. There was the same lining of green tissue, and the name embossed in tiny letters ... _Tissonier_ ... the Paris stationer from whom I had bought my stock! How could I have failed to notice this before? this fine baronial envelope and the tinted tissue lining which I liked because it gave to the sheer white linen an undertone of privacy symbolic of what an envelope should carry.

“It’s my envelope! It’s one of my envelopes!”

I faced Mildred’s eyes: and I was whole again, for in her own there was no withdrawal, no banal suspicion marring their bestowal. She spoke, and lightly:

“Could there be some simple explanation?”

“There must be.”

She smiled: for she knew that my response proved I had understood the caress of her own thoughts. Oh, Mildred, how I loved you at that moment, how unbelievably pure stood your spirit in my mind, and how I quailed to think that these mists of blindness and blood should mar your dwelling in my life and the sweet entrance of my life in yours.

“Let me see,” she was saying while I longed for peace ... peace with my love: “Let’s put our heads together.... It is my writing, forged. It is your envelope, stolen. We can dismiss the possibility of someone else just within our circle having my hand, and having gone to just that _papeterie_ in Paris for his correspondence paper. I suppose your stationery is accessible enough?”

“It stands in an open pigeonhole in the base of my table.”

“John, do you know anyone who knows both me and Philip ... some possible person?”

I had to be equal to her coolness: this was the very wine of my love that she was perpetually in her moods and acts inspiring me to a new height of conduct.

“I can think of no one. Of course, that remark is worthless: there might be such a person without my knowing it. But where would the motive be in stealing my envelope and forging your script upon it? The whole complex act strikes me as stupid: a gratuitous elaboration in no way fitting the simplicity of the murder. Just look, Mildred. A man announces, when he knows Mr. LaMotte to be alone, that he is the bearer of a message. He does not say, from whom. He would not be expected to say: for if the message is confidential, the name of the sender will not be transmitted over the telephone. What comes next? He is in the presence of his victim; if he has a letter at all, its purpose is already fulfilled in the act of handing it over. At that moment must come the blow. I can see a reason in his having forged your hand. Mr. LaMotte’s interest would be greater, opening the note. In his engrossment, the assassin would have an easier field for his work.”

“More than engrossment. Amazement. Philip finds in the envelope no note at all. He finds a word from me in such strange hands ... and no note.”

“That is true. It would be enough to bewilder: to stun. That is important. But why my envelope?”

“Well, it _is_ your envelope?” she smiled again.

“I feel certain of it.”

“There must be a reason. Possibly to attach suspicion to yourself?”

“A clumsy way, Mildred. A clumsy thing to do since I never met the man.

Besides, the envelope lies on the floor of a passage where the police failed even to find it. The murderer would not have bungled there after his perfect blow. The envelope would have been in the victim’s hand if it was to serve as a false clew.”

“You are assuming perfection in the murderer, John. That does not strike me as correct. If he’d been perfect he’d have left no clew at all ... and he was seen, seen clearly. Therefore, he is not perfect. Therefore, illogic might enter in: even contradiction--even absurd elaboration.”

“Yes.” I was thinking of my talk with Doctor Stein. Where had my sudden words sprung from?--Perfection ... illogic ... contradiction: Mildred went on:

“You can’t assume that this act is a perfect single whole, with no excrescence, no alien details.”

I marveled at her.

“A man so perfect as to murder perfectly would not murder at all.”

“Go on.”

“Not murder Philip LaMotte.”

“Go on.”

“The fact that he needed to destroy a person so noble, so great, proves his own imperfection: proves that there was a flaw in him; a flaw of bad thinking, a flaw of impure action. By that flaw you will find him.”

“Mildred, you mean that it is precisely in some act of his which we who are not murderers would reason could not have been committed, that we will find him?”

“That you will find him, John.”

“I?”

“I think you will look for him, John.”

“Not we?”

“I cannot look for him, John. But I feel that you will look for him ... and you are going to find him.”

So quietly she spoke: almost so pleasantly: again I knew how in her perfection there could be room not alone for no fear, even for no emphasis. She had the ruthlessness of purity. And I was caught in it: held now forever in the white fierce light of her exaction. Would I burn in it? or grow luminous? Would I grow luminous first, and burn at last?

So quietly she spoke: “I feel that you will find him.”

And I was quiet, too. I had resolved to tell my whole experience: in the street at the hour of Philip LaMotte’s death, in his room this morning where his wound had told so mysterious a tale. Her way silenced

me. She did not want to enter, in her own person, this dark threshold. Was she commanding me to proceed for her, or was she expressing her impersonal knowledge of what I was going to do? It mattered little. I

knew the event chained me. I knew that she knew what I was going to do.

Perhaps when I saw light I might know also why.

But she was sitting near, and this was real. In her face lay a warm flush: the glamor of her mouth and of her skin and hair was heightened by a dark suffusion from her eyes. Mildred was nearer to maturity. A new reticence held her within herself. There upon her face I saw what I had seen before upon the face of a woman newly loving, or of a woman pregnant: a secret pride darkling her glory from the world and giving to her beauty, whose like I knew not, the magic of apartness.

So full I was of forbidden questioning that I sat silent and watched her. What in her flesh was this dawn-like pregnancy? Was it love? love then for whom? If it was love for me would her new fending off have been against myself? If it was love for Philip--murdered Philip--would it not glow like sunset rather than like dawn?--You are a mystery, too, sitting so graciously apart in this harsh public place with its angular colors and its shallow shapes. Mystery mothers me: I must be born once more from a mysterious womb.

--I cannot even say: Mildred, I love you. You do not dismiss me but you hold me off.... Now she chatted. She was in no way broken. And I saw how great her confidence in me, since she looked with her candid eyes in mine that would have quailed, had hers found falsehood there.

--No, you believe in me. And chatting here so bright within this whirling social dust, you sheathe for me a knowing that is tender!

Mildred gives me her hand on the street steps.

“Good-by, John. I hope I shall soon see you.”...

Behind her the day's Spring fades. The sky is pale blue and the houses faint softly as she goes, taking my hope along. Hope is not dead, but it is in her hands. Do her hands know? Is she too a mere symbol like myself, of this mystery that twirls us? Yesterday I was my center: my

will was a solid thing, impervious and young: a true thing, I, with a true world for my willing. Now I am snatched like an atom upon some cosmic dance. Life is a spiraling and a plunging beyond. And all I see, myself and Mildred clearest, plunges along.

Spring poured its first bold colors down the Avenue. In women's dresses and mouths, in the eyes of men, in the taut caper of horses, in children's laughter, Spring flowed up and down like a warm stream between the thawing houses. I went along. But as I walked, it was as if I went scarce ankle-deep in this shallow human water. My body rose above the house banks and my head moved dark beyond Spring, beyond sun....

k

At last came an hour when I could bear my room no more. Every moment not engaged at the Laboratory I had passed there. Mrs. Mahon brought me food, and barred from me the world of newspapers and visitors and letters. I ate fruit and drank milk and gave up my tobacco. A gray cloth hung upon my book shelves, so that the deep associations of the titles should not distract me. At the Institute, I spoke to no one: I localized my work to its immediate details and stopped at that. The eyes of Doctor Stein, warm as soon as they beheld me, studied me first and then withdrew even from such delicate obtrusion. I was alone with my thoughts ... whatever they were: alone with myself, whoever that might be.

At the end of fourteen days I faced the chaos of my mind. I had succeeded in pushing close my nerves to the home of my desire and they screamed with piercings. I had succeeded in breaking down the barriers between sense and impulse. The swarming congeries of will within me, no longer a mute coil, now in each thrust and writhe touched a quick nerve. This plethora of response that my nerves made to the world was an unwieldy burden. In a scatter of impulse and desire, my personality seemed on the verge of dissolution. Still most deeply imbedded in my

swarming wills was the will to remain John Mark: and was the knowledge,
born of the thwarting pause, that the invasion of my conscious senses into these arcana must cease, if I would not be fragmented and lost.

I was exhausted. I knew that this loosing of the stuffs of my being was an advance: even if the secret lay still beyond. I had made penetrable an approach. Nor did I take too seriously the protest of my self, crying in its impenetrability against my mind's invasion. After all, what prize could I put on merely continuing to be John Mark? I needed knowledge! And if knowledge meant the snuffing out of this ephemeral phase I named John Mark, so be it.

I had been isolate in my room: reading no word: with windows shut against the Spring itself save at night when I slept and the invasion of the street could without harm come to my vagrant mind. But as the mind's texture, worn by the constant siege, grew loose and its conscious and unconscious parts less separate, I found that I had marvelous contacts with the outer world. Along with the chaos in my mind whereby sense touched hidden thought, there came an outer chaos of illumination throwing together outer act with my own inner senses. Following within myself some vein of instinct, I would come upon a house miles off where a group of persons were enwrapped in an action proceeding from a similar desire. It was as if the mental association of the normal man with me had become incarnate. A scent of leather from

my shoe brought me a vision of a horse loping upon a hill and mounted by a cowboy. A sudden flare of anger at my fate revealed two swarthy foreigners in Chatham Square locked in an ugly conflict. Soon I learned that I could direct these vaultings of my sense to the objective world. And then, the world of those I knew and loved came to me. But never deeply! A mere façade it was, of the world outside.

I had no command over the hidden and the intimate deeps. I could not see Mildred's thoughts nor better grasp her spirit. But almost without effort I could know the acts of her body, and her immediate moods.

Mildred was living her usual life: she was reading and dancing and riding, and considering a trip to Europe. I could not see her thoughts of me: and from this I knew that her thoughts of me were deep. The men about her were vague shapes shadowing the envelope of her body, no one of them piercing, no one of them coming close.

I knew that the newspapers had already ceased, if not to talk, at least to shout, about the murder of LaMotte. Nelson the serving man had been released: there was no evidence against him. Dull detectives continued to shadow him and Elijah Case, the hall boy. And when in my mind I followed one of these gross forms, at night, I learned along with the Law that Elijah made mysterious journeys to a downtown office building, at the small hours of dawn--in order to see his mother who scrubbed floors.

I saw my parents at their routine of loafing. Often a month passed without a sign from me; they had no outer cause to worry at my absence, nor did they worry. But now and then I found a little dart studding my mother's breast, the thought of me in my mother: a sharp and painful and infertile moment, not deep at all since I saw it, which she soon overcame.

Once, and often then, I saw the gray eyes of my beloved Doctor Stein--unfleshed and isolate and farther apart than they were in nature--looking down on me. They were tender, almost like a woman's eyes, and a haze of moisture came in them as they strained to focus on a point too far away or too small. He was thinking of me, but what he thought I could not reach....

Pleasanter and more willful journeys my inchoate mind took also to the outer world. On an evening when the rain fell sweet outside and I was shut with my siege, I laid my arid body on a lawn, under a tree, and drank the evening full. I was hungry, and there in my formless consciousness was Sherry's and a rich menu succulently complete in

flavor, color. But these relaxed and personal excursions of my will could not bring Mildred. I could not lunch with her, I could not sit with her beneath a tree. There was no even superficial act possible with my beloved: for her soul's presence, as soon as I was there beside her, dwelt in my depth ... my hidden depth: I could see her, only with others: lunching, or laughing. I could see her strong limbs press the flanks of a horse as she galloped in Long Island. But since I was excluded, these visions hurt and I did not seek them. I confined my trace of my beloved to making sure that she was there, and well.

By deduction I plumbed my way ever deeper, ever closer to the node of myself: and I learned by elimination, what lived most essentially within me. All of Mildred, save her bright surfaces; all of myself in intercourse with Mildred. I was incapable of a shallow act with Mildred--or with my mother. Hidden, also, the mysterious history of Philip's murder. Could this be that my connection with his world was after all a morbid, sentimental, subjective nothing? But I could not see even Mildred's thoughts about Philip! No: my knowledge of his life and death dwelt in the kernel of myself: it was the Secret: it would not give up to my shrewd siege. And therefore all that was enwrapped with it ... all deep and dear ... was also barred from my invading sense.

I struggled, and I failed. Failed utterly. I wore myself out with struggling. But what I saw, down there, was not black darkness. I seemed, rather, to peer into a stormy water. Something is there! But great waves shiver every image from beneath, and when I plunge my eyes into the turmoil, the image goes, because my eyes are whelmed. A looming Presence deep in the node of myself! It is not myself, and yet it is not another. When I draw down to fix it, my mind ... John Mark ... shatters and scatters, and I must rise to air, like a man half drowned.

This way I knew was dissolution. But I could not know if the Presence which I felt and sought was other than the dark womb of Chaos.

* * * * *

Fourteen days.... And now this hour of dusk when I can bear my room no longer. The siege on the Secret may be a failure, or so nearly won that there is no more cause for my stark pressure. I do not know. All I have fought to know is hidden still, though I have broken down many approaches. I must move: and I have no sense if I am going toward my goal or if I am retreating.

But to sit still another hour is impossible. Perhaps I am to die: perhaps I am to admit that I have failed: perhaps I lay my hand at last on a Secret deadlier than death! All these things may be, this alone surely: that I must get out of my room!

l

Spring is a grimace when one's heart is gray.... Men and women coming from work: in eyes and mouths the sprites of Spring peer forth at the white clouds. Washington Square is a well of muddy life, and its trees are young girls dancing at the brink ... dangerously close their tinkling hands to the suck and grime of the depths. Sixth Avenue is a long and hollow passage where flows the bilge of New York. Spring cannot hunch low enough to enter. I choose Sixth Avenue. For when one's heart is gray, Spring is a grimace....

I am almost cheered by this contrast. I am hungry. I turn east once more: in the Brevoort café I order a good dinner. I cannot eat. The mirrors, the hard floor, the so deliberately joyous guests are not Spring, are brittle pasts of Spring, specimens of Spring long dead, preserved in alcohol. Spring hurts, yet it is fecund: it may come nearer to my exiled heart if I am not afraid to be hurt.

I walk back toward Sixth Avenue. My long siege of myself seems to be over and to have left me nothing. I am a little light of head, being so light of stomach, but my mind is taking on its normal compartmental

tightness, its normal limits: its normal weakness: even its normal satisfactions.

--Is the spell over? And have I dreamed that Mildred sent me on a crazy quest? _I could see her to-night!_ And if a ghost of that horror still remained, would we be aware of it, warm in the sweet flesh of our love?--O Mildred, I am weary, and I hunger. Take me. Wrap me away. Make me wholly man by being wholly woman.

I know this pang of will against its own inevitable surge. I have passed a phase. But Mildred is not yet there: nor can I reach her heart save through the heart of myself. I must go on.... The Secret!

Sixth Avenue. Rattle of trains like dry words in a mouth obscene with secrecy. Why do I walk Sixth Avenue again, since I was going to dare the hurt of Spring? I stop, a small sign in a second-story window holding me:

MRS. LANDSDOWNE

... A modest sign ... and a late afternoon at the Institute in Winter. Four of us in our aprons chatting, smoking, the day's work done. The windows are black already with the night, shutting in snugly warmth and fire with us. Ford, whose work is closest to my own, Ford speaks:

"There's one of them, of all I've tested, just one, has authentic power. An inscrutable hag from London. No incense, no scenery, no occult traps. And no sentiment, no gush. That's why she's poor, I suppose. Women pass her up for a picturesque liar. A prophetess who's not a prima donna, wherever she is, is in a wilderness. But she is tremendous. Mrs. Landsdowne, her name."

A dingy vestibule, a double row of plates, brass on chipped plaster, woodwork greasy brown.... As I press sharp on the bell ... the gas light was low in a shade dim with dirt ... I hope there is to be no answer. No answer. I turned to go. The door clicks like a word,

ordering me about. The hall is black reek. I stumble on the stairs.

At the first triangular landing, crimson carpet strip, two doors formed the legs. I passed them to mount still higher. The left door opened and a narrow form stood framed in the gap. I saw a long hand, I saw eyes.

They looked at me and the hand widened the gap of the door. The door shut me in with blackness and with her whom I knew there beside me.

I could feel her move down the corridor. I followed. Her footsteps were like gray in the hall's black hush. I did not hear my own.

A portière parted, we stood in a large room flush with the rails of the "L". Between the brown bare floor and the plaster above that dipped and swelled a bit about the chandelier, the furniture stood sheer: dimensional impacts within the cave-like air. A long table faced the windows. On its either side was a chair upholstered red. In the corner was a piano and on the stool, twirling about to face us, sat a boy. He was thin and white. He arose. Mrs. Landsdowne twined a boney arm about his shoulder.

"This is a son of mine," she broke her silence. The white creature glanced away from her dark thrust ... passed me ... the portières seemed not to part for him but to blot him out in an eclipse.

The chandelier was not lighted. A student's lamp cast a pale flush on the table. A train, crowding of steel and wheel and wood, avalanched past: by it the hollow room with its dense things was lifted into dance, a moment's frenzy that died down, leaving the room a pregnant atmosphere for this sharp woman. She drew down the shades, she took the seat nearer the window; she waved me to face her in the chair across the table.

I saw her: I asked myself if her protracted silence was designed that I might see her, or that she see me.

“John Mark,” she murmured, “John Mark. That is clear. And a zigzag route your coming, strange for a sober and determined man. But you’re not sober. Drunk with thought and with fasting. Down from a street that is east to an open Square. What draws you, drives you ... a cloud on the open Square. Zigzag. West ... north ... east ... north ... west. Wandering. A crucifix of pain rising from that smoke of the open Square. North and south, the tree: west and east your arms. You dangle. Such young flesh! Why did you come here?”

Her arms were folded on her sunken breast. A black silk shawl glossed the sharp shoulders and was caught in an old breast-pin, garnet and enamel. Her throat was bare. And from a face, ashen and chiseled close by all the steels of fate, her eyes now turned on me. Their heaviness made the brow almost a girl’s, made the mouth a gash with blood dry for lips. The hair lay a black coil over the brow: hair and eyes burned in an ashen desert face.

“Why did you come here?” came her voice again.

“You who have found my name must find that, too.”

“Oh, that is a mere ... surface. I have not gone into you, sir. I am not sure that I care to.”

“Mrs. Landsdowne, you must!”

Her eyes began to focus far behind my own, so that their traversing mine took on an imperturbable coldness.

“Why have I come here? Surely it was not chance: this zigzag route.”

“You know there is no chance. I have no name for it: I see your mind tracing a design out of a swarm of myriad living gray things. Strange! They are like cells of our flesh, but they have space about them. They swing like stars! You are the sort who knows ... why have you come here?”

I clasped my hands together. I was very tired. Yet as I looked on this woman life seemed more bearable to me, than it had been for long. My clasped hands cupped my falling head. I was very sleepy, and there were tears in my eyes.

I looked up at last from my sweet indulgence, and a horror in the face of the woman dried my tears.

“Will you speak, Mrs. Landsdowne, will you speak to me?”

She shook her head.

“Coward!” I cried. “Coward!”

Her hands hollowed and passed over her eyes.

“I am not a coward,” she said.

“I want to know.”

“I am not a coward. But I am afraid.”

“Are you afraid of a murderer, Mrs. Landsdowne?”

She smiled. Her eyes resumed their distant focus and she smiled. She shook her head. I leaned forward, then:

“Mrs. Landsdowne,” I whispered, “am I that?”

Her lips stirred: the hand above her brow twitched: she was trying to speak.

“No ... and worse....”

“Mrs. Landsdowne, I must know!”

“You want to know?” And now she was laughing with her blood dark lips:

and her eyes were stiff in amaze.

“What horror is this I have done? How could I?... Have you merely caught my madness?”

... Her stiff eyes on me.

“How could I murder him with my body absent, with my mind innocent?
Are
we both mad, Mrs. Landsdowne? I want to know! God, have I not
crucified
myself to know? What have I done?”

“_What are you doing now?_”

The words were terrible to me. They came low and calm, it was as if her eyes were speaking in their stiff amaze. But her words released a chaos in my flesh. My nerves in panic rushed in myriad ways, so that my flesh seemed a delirium of motion.

“_What are you doing now?_”

I arose. Faintness spread like a death from my heart, and I sank back in my chair.

“What am I doing now?... Will you help me to know? Will you help me to
save me?” I pleaded: my shred of energy forced into voice.

She laid her hands upon the table.

“You will know, John Mark.”

“Tell me, now.”

“I cannot tell you. But I will help you to know.”

“Tell me. Tell me.”

She shook her head: "You will know what you have done. One can know only that which has been done."

"How can you be so ruthless? This godless horror----"

"It is not godless, Doctor Mark."

"I am not godless?"

"Why, no. Of course not, Doctor Mark."

"But it is horror. It is horror even to you...."

"It is not godless. Go home. You will know."

I pressed myself from the chair.

"Tell me one thing then: is it _human_?"

She shook her head.

"How do we know how many things are human?"

A great lust took me then to ravish her of her secret. I leaned over the table and I gripped her arms. I drew her up toward me across the table. I vised her shoulders.

"Tell me! Tell me!"

She shut her eyes, so close now to my own; and her hands fended them.

Her desert face, her talonous hands were very near my eyes. I thought of Mildred: I had grasped her, too--to force what truth from her?--and I had failed. I was motionless in amaze at my cruel thought linking this woman with Mildred, linking my need of her with my love for Mildred.

“Let go,” I heard her mutter. “Do you want to blind me?”

I released her. “You have promised.” And I laid a bill on the table.

“John Mark,” she said. And still her bitter presence mingled in my mind with Mildred.... Mildred! “I cannot break the body of your way to-night with words any more than to-morrow can invade to-day. Each has its place appointed. You will come upon to-morrow waiting your way, and you

will come upon knowledge waiting your way. I am a part of the morrow of your knowing. I cannot break in. You have been with me, John Mark, only as a traveler is with the distant town that his eyes behold from a hill’s height, deep and far on his way within the valley.”

She took my money and placed it in a drawer. I held her hand gently.

“Why is this horror just my life?”

She shook her head, and her free hand touched my brow in a caress.

“There we are all children. That ... the one mystery worth knowing ... none of us may know. Our eyes can study deep in the ways of life. But God’s will ... God’s reasons.... There we are all children.”

m

Sixth avenue. Unwittingly, perhaps to place myself once more in the world? I looked at my watch. 9.03. Only 9.03! I have swept out so far and come back, and my watch says 9.03.

I turn toward home, and my steps hurry me. Why is that? Am I running from the black apocalypse behind, or rushing toward some blacker revelation? I do not know: I am encased in darkness, and that is all that I feel. My power to touch the body of the world, the deeds and ways of my friends, is gone from me. I move through presentiment of birth, as in a womb. So different from life, this dank dark mother of my ignorance. And yet a womb, nourishing me and pressing me toward

the
light.

Houses, sky, the shuttling tissue of men and women past me are the dark wall and dark blood of a womb. I airless and immobile within it, still believe in Birth.

Doctor Stein ... the revered Doctor Stein, whose interest in me at the laboratory has so warmed my heart, is coming down my steps. I am beyond surprise. Within this mothering darkness of my life words and customs and conventions move quite nimbly. So I greet Doctor Stein. I observe how his gentle face is a bit clumsied by his embarrassment:

“I just thought I’d drop in. I knew, though I’d said ‘Come,’ you were not coming to see me.”

“Doctor Stein, I didn’t dare.... I was afraid you’d forgotten that casual invitation.”

“Just so. So _I_ came.”

“Won’t you come back, Doctor Stein?”

He followed me docilely, and took the chair I pointed out for him, sprawling a bit with his legs out, priming his pipe, and his eyes puzzled at the curtains over my book shelves.

“You cover your books, when you need to think deep?” he asked.

“This time I did. I never have before.”

He puffed hard at his pipe, clenching the bowl in his fist. A naïf discomfort faintly fretted his natural ease. His fine mouth moved, his gray thick brows lowered over his eyes, and in his eyes there was a twinkle as if this was a holiday for him, and he a bit rusty at it.

“Oh,” I exclaimed, as the man’s playful candor shone to me not at war but at one with his limpid mind. “Oh, I am so glad, so glad that you cared to drop in!”

“I’ve been getting up courage to come, for a long time.” He puffed.

I felt no guilt as he watched me. Let this spirit which had pierced to the soul of matter and proved its mastery by the act of birth ... let him see me clear, as he saw everything. He was above judging, he was a creator! If I was this horrible enigma from which the mankind in me shrank and for which it had no word, let him see: he who had captured in a formula the passion of gestation, would know, if he saw me clear, some law to hold me, some law to put me back into the warmth of human life. So I faced his eyes with open eyes. And I basked in his intelligence, as in a sun.

Doctor Stein chatted. He had not come to argue, he had come to play. He talked of a new composer, of an Irish comedy, of a farcical talk he had had with the Mayor who had summoned him to serve on some Committee.

By a trick of memory, when he reached the Great Presence, he had forgotten the purpose of the Committee: and he scanned His Honor’s words carefully for a hint, and in vain.... I remarked how boyish was this celebrated man. The slight body was fresh and awkward: the hair uprose in a flourish that was youth: the eyes were young: the hands were feminine and young. His mind was like a mellow wine within him, that with age had grown closer to the sun and the fields. Doctor Stein was not only young, he was naïf: he was confident and blooming with his faith. Was this indefeasible verdance a large part of his greatness?... Doctor Stein wafted a great puff of smoke into the room and laughed:

“I got so mixed up, what with the Mayor’s allusions and assumptions and

bad metaphors, that I began to defend myself by mystifying nonsense. You should have heard me. I rolled out great sentences signifying nothing. I made some wild statement and proved it by half a dozen mutually contradictory points. And His Honor nodded solemnly, and agreed. So I went on, more daring, wilder. Once or twice he shook his ponderous head--the weight is chiefly in the chin and jawl--as if subtly to dissent. It was rich! As I left, he thrust out his hand as if it had been a bankroll. I took it humbly. He said: 'It's a great honor to me, Doctor, to coöperate with one of our great American Minds,

and to find that we are so fundamentally in accord!' The Professor waved his hands in delight. 'And you will argue against Democracy, I suppose, you young pedant. What else but Democracy could put such a man in a place of power? And what better man for the place could we hope to find? Surely, such clownish genius is better for the world than all the efficient solemnity of Germany and England. I tell you: the American politician is as great a creation as Rabelais or Aristophanes ever dreamed of. Don't you dare contradict me. America has the comic genius.'"

At last he paused, and I could see his mind go out of the window.

"That rain must stop," he said. "Too heavy to go on."

I knew then that it had begun to rain immediately after my return. It was a ponderous downpour, pressure upon stone of a sheeting element almost as solid. Outside the rain was a world of thought I did not choose to enter: here in my room was a snug apartness, and I held to it and to the rain as the cover over us. I held to the Doctor as to a charm saving our sanctuary. He chatted on, again, and I forgot all else.

He arose, he emptied his pipe of its ashes and placed it away.

"It's over," he said.

Yes: the rain has ceased. And I know the dreaded Threshold which it has barred from me. Doctor Stein is going away, and the rain has passed, and soon I shall be _within_. My shoulders shuddered as if already a swart world clapped them.... Doctor Stein placed his hands upon them, and looked at me in silence.

“Son,” he said, after the pause--and I could hear my memory of the rain, so deep did I fear this quiet. “Son, what’s the matter?”

My face broke. I yearned to bury it in his hands: I managed to smile.

“I don’t know ... yet.”

“I like you, Mark. I believe in you. I wish I could help.”

My gratitude was in my eyes. But something else was there, so that I dared not show my gratitude.

“It is mysterious to me,” I smiled. “I seem to have lost my unity.”

“You are in trouble ... and you talk metaphysics.”

“Oh, if my trouble were some fact!”

The cry of my voice impressed him. I went on:

“You are so intact, so _one_; how can you heal me? You cannot touch my pain. Even my own mind cannot touch it. My mind, too, like all the words I can speak, is in the world of one: and the horror is, that part of my soul seems to have left that world.”

“But you have your mind, John: draw yourself back into the sanity of its control.”

“Oh, if I could----”

“The other way is dissolution.”

“Dissolution of a lie, perhaps.”

“Dissolution of your personality, of your integrity.”

“Man’s unity perhaps is nothing, and the laws and logic of it: if he is but a fragment.”

“I can’t follow you, John. I have never seen broken this unity of matter. I come always nearer to it, the more I see.”

“What could your mind and your eyes behold beyond themselves? What fragment, feeling over its own domain, could judge itself other than the whole?”

“Sick,” he whispered to himself. And in silence, he watched me. The room was gray: the light of the lamp came horizontal to his eyes that watched me. We were still. I felt the silence that the rain had left.

Then something within his eyes that had searched mine, quailed. A subtle tremor went through all his body, as if in fear it yearned to be away. He was in anguish of an impalpable instinct, shuddering him off, and that shamed him. He held his ground. But his eyes were veiled with a wistful helplessness.

--Why don’t you go? I thought. I knew he stayed because he would not give in to the shudder that shamed him: and because he wanted to understand that shudder.

He held out his hand. I took it, cold and removed. All his body was cold. Only his eyes were warm, and in them I saw a look kin to what I had seen in the eyes of Mrs. Landsdowne. Doctor Stein and she ... how could their eyes have kinship?--They have seen one thing! Two words as different as themselves are different. But they have seen one thing!

“Will you tell me,” said my eyes, “before you go, what you have seen?”

But he had no word for it. A gray muteness spread upon his face, from which his eyes stared out.

“John Mark,” he stammered, “your will, John Mark--_what is it touching_?”

I looked at him in my helplessness.

--Can not you see my helplessness?

He answered my silence. He mastered himself and took my hand once more.

He held it close. He was at ease and strong.

“I respect you,” he whispered. And he went away.

n

I shut the door and stood at the open window. Blackness. No spot of light, no twinge of movement marred the black of the world. I was tense with an expectancy. The black of the world was torture but I faced it. I knew the next step would bring me full within it: the blackness would speak. The night....

The bell of my telephone. There it was! A piercing channel to my ears, whereby the night would speak.

I took up the receiver. “Yes,” I said.

“Hold the wire.... Long distance.”

Faint buzzing, piercings of sound poured with the night into my ear.

“Hello.” “Yes.” “Doctor John Mark?” “Yes.” “Is this Doctor John Mark?”

“Yes.”

“Please hold the wire, sir. Huntington, Long Island ... wishes to speak to Doctor Mark.”

“This is Huntington Hospital.”

“This is Doctor Mark.” I spoke to the night. “What is it?”

“This is Dr. John Mark?” A pause.

“Doctor, there has been an accident. An automobile accident. Your parents----”

“Are they at the hospital?”

“Yes, doctor.”

“Are they----”

“Better come out, sir,” said the night. I rang off.

* * * * *

... _What are you doing now?_ Mrs. Lansdowne’s voice.

... _Your will, what is it touching?_ The horror of Doctor Stein.

* * * * *

A train was pulling out. I caught it. I had no sense other than this full immersion in the night. And in consummation. And all of it still a Threshold.... A taxi rushed me to the hospital. A tall interne with gentle eyes came to me.

“Are you Doctor Mark?”

I nodded.--I am this night! What monstrous irony is this, calling me by a name that brings to gentle eyes commiseration and respect?

“We did what we could.”

“Both of them?” I spoke low, fearing an echo in the empty hall.

He bowed his head and shut his lips against the anatomical details that urged them.

“And Fergus, the chauffeur?”

“He is not in danger. He was thrown free through the windshield. Contusions. Lacerations. A simple fracture in shoulder and arm. _They_ were pinned in. Windows shut. It was raining hard. Do you ... do you ... want to see them?”

I shook my head. I saw them clear enough.

“First,” I said, “let me see Fergus.”

The boy lay in his high bed, bandaged: his bruised face gleaming with a spiritual torture that was almost like thirst in its need of being quenched.

He did not wait for the door to shut. He shouted:

“It was no accident! It was foul play, I tell you! Murder!”

I pressed him back on his pillow. He struggled. So I let him half rise, knowing his need for spiritual quenchment more dangerous than his wounds.

“It must have been done at the garage. The six nuts of the left front wheel. Kill me this instant, if it ain’t the truth. While I was havin’ supper. Foul play it was. They left the bolts in. Devilish. As soon as I speeded up, on the curve, after the tracks.... It was someone hellish. Kill me if it wasn’t. Oh--kill me at any rate.” He plunged his face in the pillows. He moaned. Then his pain sobered him.

I wanted to soothe him with my hand. I could not touch him.

“Be quiet, Fergus. I am sure you are right. No one is blaming you. Be quiet, I say.”

A fleshly gray-haired man, his smooth, round face a daze of terror, waited at the door. He owned the garage where my parents' car had stayed while they dined with friends, while Fergus supped, while the rain fell. The man was named Dukes. He drove me silent to the place of the deaths.

The open road was washed fresh with the rain. Clouds still hung black, and the air blasted like wet words, clean and ominous, against the drought of my face. We crossed railroad tracks, and stopped.

“That last bump done it, sir,” said Mr. Dukes. “Shook the bolts out. The nuts was gone already.”

The car was ditched rubbish against a telegraph post, a shut and mangled wreck. Fifty yards beyond, also in the ditch, we found intact the tire and rim of the left wheel, where they had rolled together.

We returned to the garage. Death was there in the open mouths of the men, in their blanched eyes, in the heavy hanging shadows.

“I’m an honest man, sir,” said Mr. Dukes to me. “If this here was murder and has to do with any o’ mine, I’ll see this here place which is all I has in the world a heap of ashes before I’ll spare myself.”

“What motive,” said I, “could any of your men have had in such a thing?”

“None,” growled Dukes. The men’s murmur wreathed about me, an assent that was ready to rage into flame at the kindle of any doubt of mine.

“Any boys about? Mischief-makers? Rowdies?”

“None.”

“Any strangers?”

A man came forward: a lean, cave-jawed fellow with the eyes of a starved poet.

“There was that stranger that come askin’ fer work.”

He spoke not to me, but to Dukes. The men wreathed closer to him. They felt that his words were a healing truth. They were one, sustaining him in what he was ready to say.

“‘Bout 8.30 it was or 9.00. While that car was here.”

The man was eloquent: quietly sure of himself, as if the assent of his fellows transfigured his words.

“He come to the floor and he says: ‘Lookin’ fer a mechanic?’ The car was the last in, and was goin’ out first. It was right there, next that oil-tank. I says: ‘No chance’. ‘Well,’ says he, ‘won’t you go and ask the boss? Won’t cost you nothin’.’ I looks at him. ‘No chance,’ I says, an’ then, sudden, surprisin’ myself, I gives in: I says: ‘But if you wants, why--I’ll go.’ So I leaves him.”

“Alone?”

His eyes burst at me. Then he remembered who I was. Pity controlled his eyes.

“I couldn’t tell, mister. Jesus!--how could I tell? The man looked all right. What we got to fear, usual, ’cept somethin’ lyin’ loose gets swiped? I wasn’t gone a minute.”

I felt sorry for him. I nodded.

“I come back. An’ he was standin’ there. His hat in his hand. A funny guy, he seemed then: like no mechanic. Sort o’ seemed I hadn’t seen him before. I tells him: ‘Nothin’ doin’.’ I wasn’t gone a minute. He nods. Puts on his hat. Lights out.”

“What did he look like?”

The man writhed in the effort of search and of articulation.

“He was funny lookin’. Didn’t look like no mechanic. I dunno. The light ain’t much, you see, on the floor. He was dressed dark-like ... and ... I dunno ... seems sort o’ like his head, it was white.”

o

I am in my room. My watch says 1.30.

The smoke of Doctor Stein’s pipe lingers like the fume of a spent flame that was the life of sun and stars and earth. All of my room is the echo of a song. It is outside me, but my senses wistfully can touch it. I touch my body, taking off my clothes. My body has the flavor to my senses, not of the real but of the reminiscent.

I lie in bed. The white sheets fold about me like a dream. I switch off the lamp: blackness moves dense upon me and within me: and the light that is gone dwells in my memory like a light of fancy.

I shut my eyes. This twisted horror, life ... Philip murdered and my parents murdered, Mildred grimacing their death with her fairness, they with their horror swarming upon Mildred.... I cannot meet it with my mind. I am sunk in this twisted terror. Naught is outside me for my mind to meet, save the voice that came from the worn throat of Mrs. Landsdowne:

“What are you doing?... But you must go on.... When to-morrow takes its place beyond to-day, you will know. And I will help you know.”

A flowing water, the promise of her words. I plunge in it. I lie in it, I sleep....

PART TWO

THE OTHER ROOM

a

The house stands on the height of a mountain. I am aware of the mountain more than of the house. The room in which I am, in which we are, has a door that opens on a narrow hall: and at the hall's end there is another room. That is the whole of the house. Along the room's length there are three French windows giving upon a roofless porch: and the slope of the mountain starts down from the porch.

Our room is lighted by a single lamp that burns on the end wall away from the wall with the door. (I feel that the hall is dark and that the other room is dark and that the mountain is dark, and that the night holding the world is dark save for our lighted room.) The walls of our room are unpainted pine, the rafters break and cast into wild shapes the shadow of the lamp. The long wall opposite the windows is broken by no window, the lamp's shadows do not fall there, its wood is white. All about is the night, for the house stands on the very mountain crest. Night has invaded even the hall, even the other room. And all about is silence. The mountain sinks in silence beyond our senses. And our senses like prisoned birds live in this shut room where alone there is not blackness and silence.

We are I and Mildred, lovely in a gown of green that shimmers on her body like an emerald molten by the white flame of her flesh. We are I and Mildred and Mildred's father, and both my parents, and Philip LaMotte and Doctor Isaac Stein. We are seven: brightly at ease and talking in this silent night upon a mountain top so high that the air about us moves not toward earth but the spaces; so high that these silences are bathed in a celestial prescience free from the marring noises of men. And straight from our room with its solitary lamp

weaving deep shadows in the ceiling's softness, the slope bears down dense into a depth too vast for the penetration even of our thoughts.

Mildred is touching a guitar, and she sings:

“As ye came from holy land
Of Walsinghame,
Met you not with my true love
By the way as you came?

How should I know your true love
That have met many a one
As I came from the holy land,
That have come, that have gone?

She is neither white nor brown,
But as the heavens fair;
There is none hath her form divine
In the earth or the air.

I have loved her all my youth,
But now am old as you see:
Love likes not the falling fruit,
Nor the withered tree.

Know that love is a careless child,
And forgets the promise past:
He is blind, he is deaf when he list,
And in faith never fast.

His desire is a dureless content,
And a trustless joy;
He is won with a world of despair,
And is lost with a toy....”

Singing her mediæval tune, she is one with it, and one with the silver strings that leap from her songful fingers.

I watch Mildred, and Philip LaMotte by my side watches her: Philip LaMotte and I watch each other watching Mildred sing. We three are closest to the other room. At the room's end away from us, beneath the lamp, sit my parents chatting with Doctor Stein. Close to the central window Mildred's father plays a game of solitaire.

Doctor Stein sits low in an easy chair with his hands clasped on his knees and listens smiling to the comfortable converse of my mother. My father leans back: he is enjoying his cigar, and his attention is equal between the heavy rings of smoke that he blows high, and the pleasant words of his wife. Mr. Fayn touches a pensive finger to his brow between each upturn of a card. He is very serious, and unmindful of the talk and of the music.

Mildred sings and ceases: her smile wreathes a balance between us. She sings again. Doctor Stein's eyes twinkle at the complacency of my mother's words. My father's eyes glaze a bit as if the warm lull of the room rocked him toward sleep. Mr. Fayn mixes his cards noiselessly, and lays them out in silence: his feet tap in a toy excitement as the game goes on.

We are at peace and warm: Mildred like a green fountain, sends verdure and dance quietly down the room. Philip and I, knowing each other, quaff her loveliness. We have enough: we are tortured by no passion. From her fingers, from her throat, love jets a cool source into our lives. And beyond our eager youth sits the maturity of the others: ironic in Doctor Stein, complacent in my mother, dully sensual in my father, childishly earnest in Mr. Fayn.

Mother sends a word, from time to time:

"Mildred, that is a pretty tune. What is it?..." and waits for no answer, remembering some nothing to tell the Doctor. Father frowns, turned desultorily in our direction: but a thick puff of smoke clouds out the frown and he is once more at ease in his flat nirvana.

Mildred sings:

“The winds all silent are,
And Phœbus in his chair
Ensafroning sea and air
Makes vanish every star:
Night like a drunkard reels
Beyond the hills to shun his flaming wheels:
The fields with flowers are deck’d in every hue,
The clouds with orient gold spangle their blue;
Here is a pleasant place--
And nothing wanting is, save She, alas!”

“But here the place is better than your song’s. For She is here.”

Mildred laughs at my words.

“What has this place to do with the song? That is dawn. This is night.”

“Perhaps the dawn is coming,” Philip says.

“It is less rare than she. And she is already here.”

“Yes,” he goes on. “Dawn must come where She is.”

“Dawn,” I say, “will be wonderful up here.”

“It will be perpendicular.... Shot up like a flaming arrow from below.”

“And we will watch it fly up toward us, till it kindles the house!”
Mildred claps her hands, letting her guitar lie in her lap.

“But,” Philip says, “what will become of the night?”

“The night is the black deep wine in which we have drunk.”

“Day will drink of it, and drink it up, and be drunk.” Mildred laughs at Philip.

“Day will dance,” says Philip, “on the mountain top.”

“Mildred,” I turn to her, “you ought to know. For you are like the day standing upon the tip of the night, and peering down on us.”

“Oh, you two, with your fanciful prose! I have to take refuge in music ... matter-of-fact music.”

She touches her guitar.

“Philip,” I say, “don’t you think we can catch the dawn soon up here?”

He is silent, not knowing.

“John, don’t be foolish,” comes my mother’s voice. “How do you expect to see the dawn at midnight?”

“But the mountain is so high.”

“What difference does that make? Eh, Doctor Stein, what do you think of the foolish ideas of my boy?”

“If you went high enough,” smiles Doctor Stein, “above the earth, you could catch dawn at sunset.”

My mother tosses her head, tossing the discomfort of the thought away.

Mildred’s laughter peals: “Oh, I shan’t be satisfied till I’ve seen that.”

“We are high up,” ponders Philip.

“I have won!” shouts Mr. Fayn. “Come, look. It’s all clear. Look!”

“But we believe you, Fayn.” My father languidly blows a ring toward the rafters.

“And even if we aren’t so high,” says Mildred, “perhaps we are high enough to catch the dawn at midnight.”

“We are very high,” says Philip.

“Well,” cries Mildred, “why does no one look? It’s midnight now. Instead of arguing, instead of theorizing, why does not someone look?”

She tosses her head up and down.

“Oh, you’re all too comfortable, here, to budge,” she taunts.

“And you, what about you?” says my mother savagely, while she lights a cigarette.

Mildred turns toward me. I arise from my chair.

“I will look for you, Mildred.”

All of them are seated: all of them are laughing at my words, for even as I hear them, my voice is solemn. What nonsense is this? I accept as real and right this comfortable group of laughing persons, dear to me, who mock from the bright assurance of their world matriced in black, my gesture as I rise to seek the dawn at midnight.

“Look at him,” cries mother. “He’s really going to look. Doctor Stein, what _will_ we do with my boy?”

My father sneers in his kindest way, and Mildred’s laughter like a precious stone says nothing to me. But I am up from my chair.... And I am near the window.

“Will you know,” says Philip, “how to look for it?”

I do not answer.

Mr. Fayn starts another game.

"I'm foolish," he announces seriously. "You never win twice in one sitting."

"There's a good law," says Doctor Stein, "to break."

Mr. Fayn shakes his head.

Mildred's interest pierces me. Philip sits heavy at her side, a little closer since I left my chair.

Before me is the night.--Well, why not look? Behind me, the real, the light: my dear ones. As I move across the floor, my eyes, ere they have looked, are heavy and are strained.

"There is nothing to see."

The words have come ere my eyes truly saw if there was nothing to see. It is as if my will spoke the words ... lying words?... My mother nods, content. Mildred bends toward Philip. Father smokes and Mr. Fayn taps his foot on the floor.

"Will you know," the low warm voice of Philip, "how to look for the dawn at midnight?"

"You have told us," Mildred thrums her guitar. "It will rise perpendicular like a flaming arrow."

"From where?"

"From the deep."

"From the deep below the mountain."

"If I see," said I, "any signs in the blackness, any stirring in the night, will that not be the dawn?"

And as I spoke I knew that I was speaking to help my eyes from having to look. They held back from the night as if my body had shrunk from

plunging with them down into a cold black sea.

“It might be another house, if all you saw was a light.”

“No, mother,” I spoke nervously, eager to answer every word that came lest the silence behind me push my eyes indeed into the blackness.

“There is no other house.”

“There is one house on the mountain top,” said Mildred.

“No house could live upon the mountain side,” said Philip.

“Oh, what futile conversation,” mocked my mother. “Really, Doctor Stein, is this all your fault?”

“No house could live,” said Philip, “on the mountain side. And no man could hold to it.”

“He would fall back ere he had risen a single step.”

Doctor Stein soothed my mother: “Do not blame me, Mrs. Mark. And do not

blame me, either, if someone asks next how we came here ... high up on the impassable mountain.”

Mother smiled and patted his fine hand: as much as to say “No, that foolish you are not, dear Doctor. That foolish none of us is.”

And then, as they all smiled at the Doctor’s jest, there came from all the room what I most dreaded: silence. No more words to pull me back: but silence pressing against the base of my brain, as I stood near the window.

I breathed at ease, for it was really darkness. I began to exult. I prepared my words as if to fling at them in answer to a hostile challenge.

“See--there is no sign of dawn at midnight.”

The words were not uttered.... I forgot the cozy room in which I stood. I saw the night. And there was something there by which to see it!

The black of the sky was limpid: a well of blackness, a blackness that received my sight passively, and my sight sank in it and was lost. This sky had no cloud, and yet no moon or star. It was a black thing enfolding me. But the slope of the mountain was a harder blackness: dense and wilful the mountain side struck down athwart the mellow blackness of the sky. My eyes went immensely far, until the vast stroke of the mountain faded, became moltenly one with the warm night of the sky that folded all about.

Deep down where the mountain melted into space and solid and fluid merged into a blindness, I saw a spot of light. I was silent: and as I held my breath, the spot of light moved up.

I spoke:

“Something is down there ... and it is bright ... and it is moving up.”

But there was no answer in the room. My words seemed naked, almost ashamed: so strange they sounded in the place I held between the room and the night.

I turned around: they had not heard my words. They had forgotten me. They had forgotten their own impulse, their own words which sent me on this errand. Even Mildred. She thrummed her guitar and her emerald body swayed, and her face, its opalescent smile, beamed upon Philip, whose eyes she held in hers. My mother was conversing low with Doctor Stein and my father had taken a chair beside Mr. Fayn: they were intent together over the cards.

“Something is down there ... bright ... and it moves up.”

My words, first naked, now seemed disembodied.

--They cannot hear my words! Once more I faced the window and the night.

The little light, as it grew larger, changed from a bright glow to a vague gray. It became less like flame, more like some substance through whose translucent stuff a flame ran fragilely. And as it moved up the dense mountain slope, it seemed to limn with its march the vastness of this world upon whose summit stood the house: and at whose depth lay the sky.

The words behind me in the room, the tap of a foot on the floor, and Mildred's hands merging with the silver strings of her guitar, lay in my ears now evanescent. The thing that was a light, yet grayly swelling, moved up the slope of the mountain. The room with its words and its music and its laughter became a tinkle of gilt beside this gorgeous silence. And in the silence moved the light thing up.

I see it clear.

"Something was down there ... and is moving up ... something convolved
and gray. Some Thing...."

Now they heard me. And in the stillness of their mouths I heard their bodies rise, and move across the floor, take place beside me. I saw on either side of me their eyes, peering with mine into the silent night.

The gray light Thing was flowing up the mountain. It had a simple motion up the slope, simple and straight. Within itself it had another motion, intricate and convolved. In its gray translucence, forms swarmed and writhed upon themselves: contorted, funneling, in permutation. But they were held to a unity of interaction, making them simply one in their approach, like the bewildered parts of some body disarrayed by magic, that writhed and twisted to fall back into measure.

The Thing was a penetrant glow within the night, tracing the night of the slope, tracing the night of the sky. The writhing parts of the Thing writhed closer, moved more sluggish, densened, grew white: a white form merged from the chaotic whirl. The Thing was almost abreast

us. It was solid. It was the form, translucent and still with a vaporous glow about it, of a youth.

He moves up toward us. The amorphous maze from which he has condensed

is now an aura. He moves up from the right, he crosses the front vision of our eyes. He is very near, bearing leftward toward the house, yet slantwise so that he will not touch our room.

A youth, straight, rhythmic, with his profile sharp and his mouth a shadow in the white of his face, and his eye an impalpable fire. His hair is a tangle of shadows like the last embers in a hearth. Now he is white, dazzlingly crystalline, across the black of the night, across the gaze of our eyes!

He passes bearing toward the left. He disappears.

Mildred speaks:

“He has gone into the other room.”

And all of us, not knowing how we know, know she speaks the truth.

We turn about and see each other, and rejoice seeing ourselves so palpable in the warm, shut room.

“He is in the other room.”

“The hall is long, and the door is shut that leads into the other room.”

My mother moves to the door. As she puts her hand on the key she shudders. It is a terrible thing for me to see the lovely and proud

flesh of my mother broken in a shudder. But she turns the key. She moves, as if blown by a wind, back to among us.

“Now it is locked,” she says.

We are solid and warm in the room that is locked.... Mildred is looking at me; I feel her eyes, and do not want to meet them.

I am afraid to meet them.--Mildred, what now is in your eyes as in your voice that sent me to spy on the night?

Sudden, from the silence, they all speak ... all save Mildred and me.

“Well, we have locked the door,” my mother says.

“What have we seen?” says father. “I have heard no one say what we have seen. We have seen nothing.”

“Let’s get back,” says Mr. Fayn, “to our game.”

“These phenomena,” warns Doctor Stein, “are beyond our grasp. Doubtless

because they are the mere reflections of perfectly clear phenomena. We try to grasp the reflections, and of course we fail.”

They are cool and calm, and determined.

“Well--whatever--we have locked the door.”

Philip is passionate. He has forgotten all else. He is alone with his love.

“Mildred,” I hear him call. I turn, and I meet Mildred’s eyes at last. Philip’s hands clasp her wrists that are tender like the stems of a long flower. Her face is close to his, her body is close to his: but her eyes touch mine.

“Mildred, my love--Mildred!” murmurs Philip. Her wrists lie in his hands and her face is near his lips. But her eyes are steadfast on me.

“In the other room?” I ask, as if corroborating.

Her eyes do not move. I nod. And I say:

“I am going to the other room, to see.”

Philip’s hands do not stir in their tender clasp. But my mother, who was once more seated, jumps to her feet.

“No!”

“Why?” ... The others merely turn and look.

“What folly!”

“And what for?”

Mildred’s eyes are on my eyes. I am happy. Her eyes do not know that Philip’s hands are on her hands. I want only her eyes. Her face is white in its gold maze of curls.

I pass her. I turn the key of the door back in the lock. I face about with my hand upon the doorknob.

--Why do they let me go so easily?

For they have not protested more. Their will is shallow: quickly they are at the end of their will. Mother’s thoughts steal back to her easy chair and to her cigarette and to her badinage with Doctor Stein. Father has pulled two huge cigars from his case which he claps shut: he offers one to Mr. Fayn who takes it. In Philip’s eyes, there is a growing gayety of promise as he looks at the milkwarm skin of Mildred.

The hurt of their shallow will moves me to lightness. It is as if, in asserting for myself the inconsequence of what I am to do, their

negative permission will become less cold and cruel.

“I’ll not be long,” I say: my voice sounds high. “I’ll be back ... never fear ... I’ll be back.”

Mildred’s eyes for the first time leave mine as if my words released them. She looks at Philip. She is very close to him, and her face upturns to his. Her little breasts alert in the green sheer of her gown are very close to Philip. Her smile flowers near him. She whispers, and they turn away from me....

I open the door. The light from the room tongues into the dark distance and is lost. I look back. Mother and Doctor Stein are chatting, she takes his cigarette and lights her own from it. Father beside Mr. Fayn suggests a play of the cards. Mildred and Philip are side by side: her guitar lies at her feet.

--They have forgotten me?

I shut the door. I am in the black hall.

* * * * *

There is a blacker dark than that of the starless night, there is a blacker dark than that of the mountain. It is the black of this hall. Those were a dark outside that my sense invaded. This is a dark that is invading me, that will fill me, choke me, if I stay in it long. It will drive out from the frail shell of my mind any light.

Black hall, you must be gone through! I press a finger underneath my brow, against the lashes of my eye: I cannot see it. This dark is immobile, so I must move. No gray tinges it, no stir of light. It is packed density. It fights against my knowledge that it is but a hall ... a hall to be passed through, a hall at whose other end as at the end I have entered, is a door.

My will saves me from the sense that this invading black is infinite. I make my hands fumble along the walls: their path is a white tracing that all my body joyously obeys. I fumble at a door. It opens out. And the compressed immensity of the hall blows me into a room, blows the door shut....

There is one window, and the black of the night pours in, gray. I face this window at the room's far end, and my eyes drink its grayness with an uncanny thirst. This room seems but a bellying out of the hall. At either side of me, blank walls. The room is long, for that single window is far away, or it is very small.

At my side I grow aware of vibrance in the dark: a vibrance near my shoulder, and as tall as I. I force my head to turn. My eyes see nothing. They rush back to the small window whose gray they have drunk so greedily. The window is gone! Was it a window, then, whose light I have drunk with my eyes? They turn again. Fear hurries with pricking feet over my flesh. I want to go back. The blackness of the hall would be balm now to my eyes. For there is pillared vibrancy beside me. Fright turns my flesh into myriad scurrying feet. I turn to bolt. The lock in the door snaps shut.

--I am alone: I am locked into this room with that which locked me in.

The vibrance at my shoulder falls. And my eyes descry a gradual human form picked from the blackness. It is a subtle growing, as if individual atoms of the dark were heightened there, grew gray, grew luminous, and made a man.

He is looking at me, as the gray of his form whitens. He is smiling at me. He moves in the direction of the door, and I turn with him to hold him in my eyes. He stands between myself and the door he has locked.

His smile holds me. He is all grown, now. I can see him. He is about as tall from the ground as I. He is entirely white. Yet he has features. He has hair, he has hands gently clasped before him. I do not know what

power, colorless and faint, sharpens his body to my sense. But even his smile is traced upon me, and his eyes that seem to move with a slow swinging up and down from my brow to my feet.

And still he stands between me and the door.

My fear is gone: it is all burned away in the will to pass him, to pass the hall, to be back in the lighted room. But even fearless, how can I go when he stands between me and the door he has locked?

“Let me pass!”

I have spoken, as my mind blanched at the thought of a word. My voice is throaty and real. His body grows a little dim at the words, and tremors: he has heard. The tremor steadies back into white.

His hand is beckoning me forward. His smile grows more intense, works now in my mind like a cold acid. But all my fear is gone. I step forward. He has not moved. I touch him.

What happens is an instantaneous act, and has no mark upon my sense. It

is I who am next to the door: it is he, stands beyond, his white form gray and subtly undulous.

I am all act. I have passed through the bolted door. I lance the hall like a light. I am once more in the lighted room.

* * * * *

My loved ones have grown close since I left them, smiling and saying that I would return. They are not aware that I am back. Mildred and Philip murmur side by side. My father has drawn a chair to the card-table and is playing with Mr. Fayn. In the far corner sit my mother and Doctor Stein, smiling, chatting. I stand at the door and watch them. All six faces are within my eyes obliquely, and they do not see me.

Now instantly, these various faces turn: see me: become one in a shrivel of horror.

I stand still. Their variance has rotted all away. They are one.... Mildred and mother and the others ... in a rigid gaze at me, in a cold terror rising from their sight.

“Well, it is I: only I.” Their faces do not move, they have not heard me.

But their stark death, making them one, moves. They rise to their feet. Mildred and Philip, faces fixed on me, retreat: Mr. Fayn and my father move aside. They huddle together in a single group. Six various bodies crowded close and one, in a shrivel of horror.

I go forward. My hands are forward and I am near to them. They do not stir. With my hand I touch the cheek of Mildred. With my hand I touch the hand of my mother. My hands go forward as through an impalpable light! I sweep with maddened arms about their bodies: my arms, unhindered, draw in on themselves. They stand stark huddled, their eyes fixed upon mine: and my arms thresh through space!

Fear is full gathered in my throat. I shriek. I shriek, and thresh with unresisted arms....

b

I awoke crying out.... Very warm, close-bundled, I cry as with the toothless hollow mouth of a babe. I cry and yet there is no sound. I stop. I am more awake. My opening eyes perceive a world that whirls in mazing colors and threatens to break in. This delirious dance subsides. I am quiet in my bed and the dark air lies quiet all about me. I know my body, I know my sheets and covers, I know my room, my open window:

the city, purple and encaverned pours through the window into my room. The room all this time has slumbered quietly while I left it, and have come back to it. Swift fears start still from my muscles and my nerves,

like discovered stowaways of that journey whence I am back in my room.

And then I knew my Dream, and my mind was stripped of space and time as
I tried to face it.

--There is revelation in the Dream! Of that I was convinced. Let me explore its strangely shifting realm. But my mind could not enter. There, stript for action, it pounded at the gate, and it could not enter. I am inside the revealing realm of my Dream. But what good is that, since my mind cannot enter?

I lie in this agony of confusion, holding within my hand the key to the mystery that has distraught my world: and surely my eyes are good, yet when I strain to see, they veer, they tangent off. I cannot see what I hold!

From this turmoil there must be release. My body is moving. I do not know how long I have lain in bed, breaking in vain at the gate of my Dream. Not very long, for the night is still there murmuring like a hollow sea outside and sending in breakers at my open window. There have been no other thoughts, no fancies at all. The Dream is palpable and I within it, and my mind that must rejoin me, knocking, beating. That is all.

Then, sudden I am moving! I am getting up, and calmly with the certainty of custom I put on my clothes: I shut the house door: I am in the street.

Faint vestige of dawn. In sparse gray filaments dawn threads through the night: a gradual loom of light that will thicken, that will converge, that will become a texture.... On the street, at the door as I step out, is a man.

He is waiting for me. He is clad in black, he stands in the black shadow of the house: all that emerges of him is his head which is round

and white.

All of his head is white: it has a plastic and smooth pallor like the form of certain larvæ: it is a color inhuman and yet deeply fertile. He sees me and nods his head and I feel the black-clad body stir in the gloom of my house. I make no sign: I begin to walk. At my rear I feel him walk apace with me. He is behind and quiet, but he is leading me by an invisible pressure which he holds upon the nape of my neck, the cortex of my brain.

* * * * *

The city has that flaccid impenetrance which comes before dawn. The rush of a car, the pelt of horses' hoofs, the stride of a man, the flutter of a woman, quiver like darts against the night and fall away. Night is this impenetrable hide about the city.... We are outside the city. A ferry-boat plethorically heaves us across the River. I stand at the forward rail, and the white head man, lost in a shadow of drays and draymen and slowly stamping horses, holds still his palpable pressure on my brain.

--What if I turn about?

I look at the little waves ... the night is windless ... thridding and skipping about the hull of the boat. Their cool tips carry dawn, between the night of the sky and the night of the black waters.

--What if I leap in?

Will the waves hold me? They will part, treacherous and careless, and let me sink at once to the night they dance against. I know in an acceptance weary like age, that I can not leap into the River, and that I cannot turn about. I feel: this guiding pressure upon the cortex of my brain, if it were in my eyes, that it might blind me.

... We are walking in a field. This field is very clear to me, as if its rugose stretch and its barren saliences had already picked their

measure in my brain. The coarse grass is dry and gray like autumn, on this sultry April night. As my feet press through, the grass rustles. The earth breaks into warty mounds, grass tufted, and falls to sudden hollows slakish with caked mud. I walk, and though I have not seen his form save for that moment at the door of my house, I know the white head man following at my rear, and leading, keeping pace with my feet so that the sound of his steps is lost in mine.

The field is wide and long: no light of habitation flecks its sallow gloom. But the rathe filaments of dawn swirl in its air with more abundance: a gray flush lies close to its black furrows, catches in the grass and brings to it a tremorous stir as if it was a mouth feebly in voice. I walk. The field is wide and long. The field's horizons lip darkly down, making this murmurous silence of the field a shut dank thing, and I and the white head man imprisoned in it.

He still prodding me on, prodding upon the quick of my brain: he who is behind and who is silent....

The ground looms a little ahead. And as it rises, the dead grass ceases underneath my feet. My feet tread sterile clay: they strike on it hard as if the clay were frozen, and yet the air of the field is wet and sultry.... My feet stop.

I am at the top of the little loom of the ground. Straight before me an empty shadow. The ground cuts precipitous at my feet. It wreathes about into a semicircle. Below me in the black lies a slakish gleam: a sort of slime within the night: far below. And beyond that, above this bottom of the circling pit yet lower than the crest where I stand, the field goes on over a clutter of broken rocks and stone.

I have stopped short at the edge of a limekiln! My feet have held firm!

There is rage in me.

“So this is where you led me? to my death? to this ridiculous death? I, after Philip LaMotte, after my mother and my father! My death was to

be

at once more secret and more horrible. No trace of me was to remain. Well: come and push me in. It'll take more than the pressure of your eyes."

My feet hold firm. The pressure on my cortex fades with my rage, I step back a little and dig a heel into the clay. Then I turn about.

The man is closer than I knew: a little below, for I am at the top of the field's rise.

I stare at him and my rage makes a thrust from my eyes down to his beetling form. I challenge him, silent. He is clearer now. I can make out in the dawn the smooth black cloth of his coat tight on his muscular body. I can see well the blind and larval rondure of his face.

My rage thrusts at him.

He rises from the ground.... "So this is how you dealt your tall man's blow at Philip LaMotte?" ... and like a bird of prey he planes low up toward me, over my head. I whirl about and facing the kiln I see him slowly plane into its slime.

His face remains free and his face is turned toward me.

The silence is a texture of half-uttered words: thick, the humid air and the shut field and the kiln make for a silence bulging into sound.

The white head is motionless above the kiln. What I hear is his word. But the night speaks it, the night's silence is the word of this man.

"Come down. The white one whom you met in the other room ... he is here. Come down. Join him. For it is he you seek, if you are in earnest in your seeking. Come down. You can't quite see him: your eyes are too gross. I am all of him that you can see. But he's here. Come down: and join him. Do not touch him again. What good is there in touching? Come down and join the white one who is you, in the other room.... Here, if

you will but come, you and he are one. And I will be released. For I live in the edge, the jagged, cutting edge of the difference between you. And I am weary with your biddings, I have done them well, I am weary. Come down. And I will be released.”

My eyes go down into the kiln below my feet, to meet the eyes of the man. My knees hurt with a sudden strain. It grows. With the tendons and muscles of my body I am resisting the pull of the man inside the kiln.

There he floats, immersed save his head: and his smooth face shining at me ... pulling, pulling.

The grip of my will upon my muscles weakens. I hunch a little looking down from the height. The man is smiling at me now. It is as if he reads this hunch of my body down toward him as the first step of my defeat. He smiles. The strain of my legs shoots upward to my back. Pain. The round head in the kiln beckons in a horrid caricature of bidding. I am growing weak. Anguish. My knees are bent. My neck is forward and my arms thrust out. Torture racks my body: my muscles are corrupted. They press and shriek to tumble in the kiln. My will and my mind fight naked on the other side ... stripped of strength, stripped of body ... to defend me against the pull of the man within the kiln.

I am at the end. All of my body urges down and forward. The muscles of my back no longer hurt: they are numb, they are sheer urgency to leap. Pain lives now only in my forehead: my body is dead as if already it had joined the man in the slime of death. But my brow holds back. It is a flame of resistance: it is molten pain, knowing that it must fight, knowing it must be shrewd to cheat my body of its enamoured death.

My body is about to plunge within the kiln. My body is a single clamor to be done. The smile of the white head is a bland broad smile. The head thrusts back, beckoning, ghastly at ease.

My body is about to plunge into the kiln. My mind is very shrewd at this threshold of death. Beyond the kiln, the field goes on upon a lower plane, over the clutter of broken rocks and stone. In an ecstatic

moment, as my legs flex to leap, my will possesses them.

I leap. My body in that instant is the essence of my will. I leap high.
I leap far. Not the kiln, the rocks beyond the kiln are in my eyes....

I have leaped over the kiln. My body crumples on the rocks. I embrace their harshness with caressing hands: my lips tear, grateful, on their sharpness. This fierce pain in my ankle, twisted as it struck, is sweet to me.

I lift myself, and turn. The kiln is behind me: and there is no one in it.

PART THREE

THE CHALLENGE

a

Morning and Spring pour into my room.--My room ... my bed ... my self. I have slept in my bed as usual, this is Spring. Bright resilient Spring, you're a red-cheeked girl laughing into my room! Mysterious Spring, for you are real! Marvel of that: this volute swelling bloom within my window. How wide do you go? How deep?...--At the ruddy heart of Spring a spot gray and harsh. I lie in bed and grow aware of myself as a canker in the morning.--Can we both be real? This carnival of light does not destroy the canker: all gayety sets off a gray moment that is I. Which then is the real I must dwell in, since I know that I am not this Spring?...

--Why am I this gray thing, lying in the Spring?

--What is the matter with me? Where have I been?

--Morning ... _John Mark_. Does the name construct a world? Oh, there's

a larval world of dream that no sun has scattered. But what is a world of dream against May's wooing? Spring pearls over larval worlds of dream with its iridescent dance. Yes, there is that darkling realm: let the sun then spill it over ... limekilns and autumnal grass and murder, murdered by the Spring. But they come in! Which now is the dream, which the real? Spring, can't you reach the canker?... It protrudes, it invades. Murder ... _John Mark_!

Under the hall door there will be the daily paper. What balm do I seek of that, wanting it now for my eyes? I lie in bed, I seek a balm of denial.

--In the paper you will learn what is real and what is dreamed. Go for your daily paper and watch the dark dream die. It will say "Clear and warm to-day," and your window says it. Spring there, sitting on your window-sill, says what your paper will say. So Spring is real. _What else will it say?_

I draw my legs from the covers. Pain. _Then that is true?_ My hand in a search that makes its moving to my ankle a deep rent of some sleep in my mind, touches the swollen flesh of a larval truth.

--That ankle and its pain: the limekiln and the man with the white head: my parents: Philip: Mildred! The low house on the mountain? The other room? How should I know what is true? Perhaps there is no falsity at all. If all is true, will horror go away? Spring tides into my room, _my ankle scorched against the limekiln slant_. I am John Mark, _Philip LaMotte is dead_. I love you, Mildred, _read what the paper says about the death of your parents_.... How many things can there be true at once?

An instant I have lain quiet in my bed. Three volute worlds spin from a spot of my mind in threefold spaces, touching one another only at myself. One world has a surface of shimmering sunny waves. One world is an opaque clot colored like blood. One world is pale, a white

transparency, and at its heart little filaments ultra-violet, fixed,
while the misty surface spins.

The instant is gone. Painfully with my swollen ankle, I make a way from
the bed to where, under the door of the living room, I see the tip of
the paper. I knew then how I had marched that night through the bleak
field, away from the limekiln which lived in it like a sultry evil eye:
how I had reached a suburb where the houses stood soiled between the
night and the day, and how a cab had taken me home.

The black letters spoke to me:

MR. AND MRS. CLAYTON MARK
DIE IN STRANGE MOTOR MISHAP

L. I. Garage Man Held

Well-Known Society Leaders Crushed to Death
as Front Wheel Flies Off

Only Son is Dr. John Mark of Institute

Well, John Mark, here is fact, whatever truth lie under.

Mother and father are dead. You'll no more see them. They are bodies
arrogantly aloof from your erectness, from the touch of your longing.
The white head man who said: "I am your slave" ... that's a fact, too
... doomed the car that slew your mother and your father. You possess
half a million ... a fact! ... and you love Mildred, you can marry
Mildred. Is that the truth? Philip LaMotte is dead. The white head man
who said: "I am your slave," rose ... you saw how he rises ... rose

above Philip LaMotte and with your surgeon's science struck him dead. Philip LaMotte dead, your mother and your father dead: --I can marry Mildred?

... "A little truth. For God's sake, now, a little truth to season all these facts. Else they'll stink in your flesh, John Mark: they'll rot your soul, John Mark. A little truth."

How strange that I lie bearably in bed! Pleasantly. That ankle is a blessing. No fracture. I diagnose a strain and a bruise. A fortnight's rest will doctor it as well as any doctor. A fortnight's meditation will doctor my mind and my soul. For they are sore in need of healing. --Truth, to ease the chaos of these maddening facts: truth that is harmony like this which holds my body, all of its stress and thrust, to the balance of health!

* * * * *

But first there is the funeral to go to.

The ankle's an excuse to free you of that. No: be borne in your royal litter, wounded but heir to half a million dollars: borne to the laying away of your slain parents. That is a privilege too rarely human to be missed by you. Such a son, such loving parents: and the muffled friends, looking with veiled envy at your devotion.

b

The day of the funeral was a bright laughter. Sun sent its golden peals across the sky that warmed and opened like a wanton girl. The stones of the city as we passed were a half liquid substance, laved and entered and absorbed by the May morning. Asphalt, men and women drab-clothed

walking, the strew of wagons and the loom of houses ... all was a texture of imprisoned light. I felt how all this various matter was a whirl, crystallized and bound, of luminous electrons: how all of it was one with the sun's steep pour and with the sudden jet of my own mind

merging with it.

The cemetery was a smile of lawn in which the monuments stood like polished teeth. All of the countryside was a response in laughter to the frolicsome couple of the sun and sky.

We stood beside the Minister. The marble vault opened its bronze grille and as the coffins slid into their place, a Christian word nodded the act to gayety. Were not the coffins polished? Was not the vault a little elegant smile echoing the brash laughter of the skies? And the solemnity of the group who with bared heads watched the bodies of my parents slide away, was it not thrust across the wanton mood of the morning like a comic strip? Eyes dwelt a moment upon me and read there the conventional bereavement. A subtle counterpoint stirred underneath the elemental laughter. All of us seemed little whirls of dust modeled by a momentary wind: pompously we were acting our droll scene for the gods whose straighter moods shone in the sun and the earth, and who used us for their more intricate and secret humors.

I have lost my mother and my father. How, here, in this laughing farce of Spring, can I dwell with my sorrow? Here all of us are dwarfed too cruelly. Almost, I expected as we walked away, to see the Minister fling off his mask and motley, to see the mourners caper in relief as at a curtain's drop: see all of us and the dead bodies of my parents, too, and their so polished coffins, take on the ease of supers when the show is done: pocket their pay and pass....

From the east, a cloud, swollen and purple, voyages upon the sun. The earth shudders as the sun is shut out, and like a festooned ship upon a mournful sea it founders. Moving toward home, I move in a dark element, and it has swallowed all the laughing world. This lawn is a breast of decomposing flesh. The stones of the city are death substantiate, feeding upon the drab-clothed men and women who weave within and without in wistful struggle to escape. Upon my window-sill where

Spring

sat and pelted me with flowers, an empty breath breathes emptiness....
The true stuff of space in which our cosmos flickers like a fly in a
night of storm?

* * * * *

I am on my couch.

--Oh, there must be a truth to salvage me from chaos. Life is a
whirlwind? Let the Lord which is Truth speak to me then from His
whirlwind.

C

Three weeks I lie on my couch and am alone. Three weeks of travail and
unceasing night. And at the three weeks' end, an infant birth of truth
so frail and so nostalgic of its womb that it scarce wills to breathe,
and every hour I must nurse it forward lest it lapse back into the
sweet Abyss.

The travail has its own life. When it is done, there is the babe of a
truth. And yet how are they joined, this deep volumnear anguish and
this green sprout rising after? My travail is an earth: and from its
dark and secret brood springs a light shoot of knowing....

I am in labor of my vision. I lie locked in a distress spherical,
moveless. My room moves through time, time filters into it, so I can
mark the days. But time does not live in this passionate whirling
Sphere that is the immobile body of my meditation. Or if time, not
thrice seven days but all the years of my life and all the ages of my
roots ere I lived. All the pain of my years and their joys were this
great coil about me: were the bedded soil of my distress. And all my
loves and dreams lived in it like the solved minerals in earth. But
this spheric stuff about me is not my love nor my hate, not memory nor
dream, not pain nor joy: is all of these and mysteriously more....

* * * * *

I am a child in my mother's arms, and I am grown and from my lips
harsh words berate this passionate woman who is my mother and who
has

withdrawn from life, finding it in her pride too painful to be borne.

I am a boy striding with awkward steps beside the magnificence of my
father, and at school facing alone a crisis where he has failed to
follow ... too selfish, too dry to share in my emotion. Thoughts in
serried troops invest my mind, and I live and sleep in a clamor of
science, philosophy and dream. Fragments of verse tinkle in the stream
of studious hours: bones of dissected bodies and sprays of Spring float
together down my youthful way. I am a lover, bringing to the bed of
my beloved nose-gays of books and notes. Words rise like birds from
the margin of my mind, and blacken the sky and scream and sink again,
suddenly become the stones of an exploded city crashing to the ground.
Here is a bower redolent of dusk: my hands clasp the waist of a girl
and touch her breast. And in the limpid shadow of the trees, there is
a grave and I must enter it, and study bones: and count the countless
cells that a girl's breast has moved to ecstasy within me. I sit with
a story book in the old house and watch my father rustle the evening
paper while my mother plays languorous music at the piano. My own
hand

risers menacing from my little body: grows: grows immense: crushes
father and mother: shatters the walls of our house. I walk upon a field
that glitters underneath a scarlet sky. Sudden my beloved parents and
the field and all the things of earth, and all the things that live,
lift into sound!

The Universe was music! Pulsant, polyphonous and vast, it slept like
the western plain, it rose like the mountains, it tided like the sea,
it sang like the stars. My heart was music. Life swelled in myriad
atoms, and every one a separate song, and all one voice, rounding,
embodying me....

But once more there is time and I am moving within it. Once more there is this shut, expanding phase which men call life, and I am bounded by it.

* * * * *

Some fatal signal of my will has challenged Truth to let me glimpse it, to let me _use_ it: and we are joined forever. If I am to live, I must destroy this sin of using Truth for my own life: I must make my life into a facet of the Truth. Men have done that. (But far more men have died.) Oh, let me make my human life this glory! In its shallow close, the air will gleam with a transcendent fire: all these broken surfaces of being which men call bodies, things, will throb with the divinity of wholeness. The common deed of spheres beyond man's flat domain is Miracle. And it must enter now into my life. Or else I must pass out.

* * * * *

I lie upon my couch and am lifted to the topmost peak of a mountain solitude. In vaporous essence, all the events of my mind and of my heart rise from their recondite valleys and are a cloud about me.

Solitude: at last I see your eyes. Deep and inscrutable and without color they look at me and draw my marrow. Solitude, you are terrible because you are so full of my own being. No other thing is there to impede this flow of all my thoughts and all my passions into your ghoulish void. Solitude, you are a horror because you are my self. And this ... my self ... the air that I must breathe: and this ... my self ... the flesh that I must eat.

Why has this been my fate? Have I not loved my mother and my father? How differed my childhood from another's? Turmoil there is always, moments of pain, flashes of anger, little understreams of injury and resentment. I was ambitious. Even as a child, I felt that I must prevail upon the world. And I was scarce a boy, when I knew my instrument, and moved forth to fashion it; knowing that I must create it, ere I could wield it. _To prevail by the truth._ Was that a sin?

Who taught that that was sin? You are at fault, if that is sin ... all you masters! You Greeks and Hebrews, you noblemen of the mind whose past words are the body of our world. Why did you mislead me, if it is sin for a young boy to say: "I will to live to learn, as a man may, the truth." ... But perhaps you also, even as now I ... found at the end of your passage, Hell. Perhaps too late. Perhaps the gate of agony had clamped you in, before you could send back to us a warning.

The world that I have lost was sweet. Fondly I believed in it, devoutly I was attached to my belief. The world is not well lost. But it is lost indeed. How can I doubt that? I have slain and buried more than my father and my mother. My friends, how can I meet them? And my work: and the glow that came from work with colleagues and with masters and that was great part of my delight in work! And all my hopes ... the memory of comrades and of loves that was so good a promise of loves I might yet win....

No more may I walk down the casual street and watch with open eyes the open faces of my brothers. No more may I let my sense move close, sure in its right, to the woman who calls it forth. No more may I be one of a group at table, accepting easefully their acceptance.

O warm packed common of the life of man! the pleasant word with the waiter taking my order; the humid confidence of the charwoman who cleans my rooms; the nod to the policeman at the corner; the gossip with the newsman, a dark fellow with eyes great in dark glasses; the community with crowds that I won of my daily paper ... thrilling with clerk and laborer at the latest scandal, shouting at the portentous choice in the election of Tweedledee over his rival Tweedledum; the massed brotherhood at the Polo Grounds, cheering the Giants, booing the

Pirates ... the intricate unsung sacrament of moving in a family of men! All of us eat, all of us know what hunger is and love, and sleep,

and sleeplessness. All of us have mouths that give forth words, have ears that receive them. Do we not walk in ecstasy so vast none can give thought to it? None, save me, who am barred. Not you, prisoner at Sing Sing. You have comrades. Though they thrust you in solitary, a whole world knows of you, either to pity or to blame ... and both are ways of human intercourse. Not you, dead body rotting in the earth, for you rot with your brothers, you rot with all mankind. I am alone. And there is no fellow to myself in all the anguished and warm spaces of men! Oh, I could sing a pæan to the life of the slave-galleys, since there are fellow-oarsmen, since there is a master. I envy the soldier driven to his death. What warmth in the fellow fate of his brothers, in the intense caress of the enemy who slays him. Yes, the victim falling from a blow knows the passionate caress of his assailant. And the babe unborn presses its blind hands against a womb that loves it....

Common street of the hospitable city. If it be cold, what one of you who walk cannot say "It is cold" and have response? If you hunger, cannot you take your place in the immemorial army of famine and despair, side by side with all the others who know you, who accept you, who salute your right to share in the common want? Oh, if I could undo any tragic search for the Truth that has slain me, that has made me lone as no star in the crowded heavens ... how I would sing your riches, manifold Life: Life, in whom men and women move, signaling one another, touching bodies, sharing pain and laughter! Oh, fool to seek the solitary Truth, when Ignorance is crowded and is warm.

I am alone. Has hope, the latest straggler, that remains even when anguish has departed, whispering: "Peace ... you will die." ... has hope gone, too?

The faces of mankind are stranger to me. And the city where I live is a cold memory that has forgotten how to greet me. And my work that loved me is a lie too small to hold me. Has hope gone, too?

--You are a sufferer who can say to no one: "I suffer." You are a sinner and there is no name for your sin. You are too lone to confess: too lone even to be despised.... _But the word hope must still be there, since you recall it?_

God stands so far away: the truth, that God is All and that no life can die, is not a neighbor. Truth sweeps away the nearness of good things. For the things good unto the life of man are they on the bright surface where man crawls: it is the brightness of his need that makes them shine. Blesséd, blesséd man! Fool, when you seek the truth that lies in darkness. Sage when you stone your sages, when you crucify your Christs.

God is too far, and too vast.

But the word hope is there!

Hope ... Mildred ... there?

* * * * *

So came the thought of Mildred, and grew, thriving on hope, hope on her, until the two were one and at last were all. The world were well lost indeed, if Mildred still could be my world. If, knowing what I was, what I had done, how tragically I had been moved to equal her own ruthless, wordless wisdom--if she accepted me, I could accept the truth and master it, and bring it down to our own livable world. What sin was mine, if Mildred still was mine? What loss if all my loss had purchased her? I was no sickly repentant to bewail that my will had forged from the Whirlwind weapons to make its way. I was not weeping because Philip LaMotte lay dead, and my idle parents. No: I wept because my act had slain my world and left me all alone: I wept because of the falsity, the ugliness, the sterility of what my will had done. But if it had won Mildred, if it brought to my life the beauty of Mildred, then indeed my will was mastered by a greater and was good.

Mildred and hope throve on each other so, and grew in my mind: and my body healed. I thought toward the day when she would come at my call and we would consummate a marriage whose like earth had not known.

--What waits on that day? I said at last. Is there not a telephone in your room? And though I have used it little these three weeks, have I not a voice?...

Her voice answered mine. And said that she would come.

“_This afternoon._”

d

I walked to the door, I opened for her. In the day's low light, I looked at her. Mildred! the lovely body of my hope. A sharp pang cut across my eyes: I would not question it. I looked at her, moved all my power to know upon her standing there within my room, so free and so near.

The weeks had worn her. Her golden hair strained back from the transparent, faintly throbbing temples. The brow was higher, more pale, with this new way she caught her hair back, almost brusquely, from it. Her body seemed lighter: it was a sheath ever more frail and quick to the fluid of her soul. She stood at ease, and yet a subtle drooping of the shoulders, the clasp of the tapered fingers on her breast, marked a fine tracing of the time upon her. She was intact, but a rain of circumstance had worn her.

* * * * *

“Mildred,” I said.

She sat down, and watched me. The pang across my eyes was sharper still. She arose again: took off her cape and sitting folded her hands in her lap.

“Mildred----”

What was the cause of this pang? Was she a disappointment to my eyes, that what they saw hurt knife-like? Oh, she is perfect fair. And yet I know, even before I have begun to speak, what is this knowledge pressing and cutting my eyes, which all her fairness, all my words unspoken shall not prevail against.

“Mildred--Mildred.”

I felt the need of touching her, as if to prove that she was there. I came to her and I knelt at her side, and I took her hand ... she let me take her hand ... and I pressed its palm against my brow. The pang is sharp, inside: her hand cannot reach it.

I arose. And my words came as earnestly for me, as for herself.

“Mildred, you know that I love you.”

“Yes, John,” was her whisper.

“You are all my life. When I saw you last, this was true and I knew it for true: and I said this to you. But, Mildred, I could not dream then how true it was, how true it was going to be.”

Her eyes at once were darker and more bright, filling with her sympathy. She was thinking of my parents.

“Not alone that,” I said. “Not alone that. Least of all that, dear Mildred. Everything is gone. I have left the world. I have irrevocably lost it. For a long time unknown to myself, I was preparing this. Even when last you saw me, and the time before ... that last time at your house, when Philip died ... I was, unknown to my feeble consciousness, slaying the world. And I am all alone. And it is all well lost. Not that I did not love it. But look, my darling, all of it I love, and all in it I love, has become you!”

She accepted this as no new thing ... no new wonder.

“You had become all in life that my life needed. And the rest was a husk ... to be cut ruthlessly out.”

She withdrew her hand from mine. She clasped her hands in her lap and looked at me in a gesture of peace so far from my troubled state, that my eyes hurt, spanning the abyss between us.

“All of this ... you must listen carefully, for you must understand. That is my single hope: that you will understand: and all that I am saying is the truth, weighed as a man of science weighs, beloved ... all of this was taking place in me not from the moment when I knew you, but long before. What the world promised seemed good. Faith, passion, beauty, joy, the comradeship of perfect understanding, love in peace and in its strife ... all this ... the dangers faced with more bitterness than hope, the hours when anger cleanses, the quiet ways through woods, the ceremonials of the sea, day ... night ... the secret dwelling within the body of the beloved as in the heart of heaven: all this the world had to give, and all this I cherished and believed in. But of all this, the world as I knew it was unworthy. Every jot of it was a crass imperfection ironically giving birth to a dream. Men and women were but maimed bits of themselves. Passion and vision were shreds torn and drooping, not banners across the sky.

“So I withdrew from the world, Mildred, the world’s splendor. That was before you came. How wonderfully, though I did not know, it was for your coming!”

I could not read her smile. And yet it moved me, making me defensive not for me: for her.

“I did not create for myself the image of a woman, and when I met you like a romantic confound that image with my eye’s. No, my withdrawal from the world of the world’s splendor was more terrible than that. For it was absolute. It was designless, and ruthless. It was, because

it had to be. The world could not hold my desire of the world. Let the world therefore go!" ...

"Dear," I drew closer to her, "how could I have dreamed that there would be a morrow ... the morning when I knew you ... by whose light all that had gone, all that had been dreamed, was darkness?"

What I had now to say no words of mine seemed great enough to bring. I was kneeling at her side. Again I took her hand ... again she let me.

"Did I know deeply always that I would know you? And the long years of vigil, of abstinence, were they my need, a wiser than the knowledge of my mind, to prepare my house for you? I cannot say. I know too well what infinite ways we go beyond the shallow tracings of our mind, to doubt that this might be. And yet, Mildred, the morning of my finding you was bright only as could be morning to a man who had dwelt in perpetual Night, and who knew not there was such a thing as sun. Can you picture him amazed, seeing the unknown sun? seeing the crystal radiance of dew, seeing a sky that is not black and the young clouds about his head: seeing last of all his lamp that had been his sun, fade to a blot against the wide magnificence of morning."

I bent my head and pressed her hands against my brow once more. So, with eyes shut, I kneeled while the day dimmed, and heard the steadfast lifting of her breath, and felt her there, and knew not what I felt: so sweet, so near, so unbearably far she was.

"Mildred," I whispered, "what would this man do, enamored of his morning, his first morning ... what would he do, if there was danger that the morning go, ere he had more than glimpsed it?"

I raised my eyes slowly. She was looking at me. Her eyes did not stir, meeting mine. It was as if they had begun to see a thing within me, and were rapt in that deep focus.

“Mildred,” I whispered, “all this that I know and that I tell you now, I have known only since last I saw you. My mind strove, you know how purely, to make great my will. It worked better, O terribly better than I knew. For at the end, my will became so masterful that it ceased to consult my mind. How long it had been this masterful monstrous thing, I cannot say. But when there was danger that the dawning sun go or be clouded: then it worked. And only after what anguish of search, did I learn what it had done!”

She looked with her deep still gaze within me. Upon her eyes a faint glaze gleamed and it was hard, this surface of her eyes, hard and defensive: not like her eyes at all. I talked as if to pierce this glaze, as if to melt it.

“Perhaps from the beginning my will worked and made a fool of my mind

... a slave and a fool. Perhaps it was preparing from the first day, for you. Do you think that could be? And all my labors in science seeking the truth, all the chaste rigors of my life ... do you think perhaps these were blind ways for the working of my will ... plotting for you, wanting to possess you?

“For when I saw you, I wanted to possess you. And since I saw so deep, that was a sin. The shallow man may dare to possess. But your body was not enough for me: nor your mind, nor your love. Oh, I wanted them!

But

I beheld in you what no man can possess. Your mysterious power--the wisdom of your beauty which is so great that it has no words, that it disdains your mind. I wanted to possess that, above all. By equaling it--I with my plodding mind of words and concepts! I became mad in love

of your beauty: I wanted to possess, by equaling your beauty.

“Mildred, I must tell you everything. There is a brutal strain in my will. And when the end that it would win is brutal, it does not tell my mind. For my mind is not brutal.

“Mildred, there were obstacles in the way of my will to my life’s final need; obstacles to you. For you must be mine perfectly. Even my mind agreed in that, and suffered.”

Her hand was motionless in mine. It was like a sleeping thing.

“I killed Philip LaMotte, who was in the way of my will.”

Her eyes seemed to be drawing forward from their distant focus to my mouth, as if what they had seen before within was now articulate there.

“My will killed the man whom my eyes had never seen, whose name I did not know, nor whose existence until you told me he was dead. My mind knows that, now.”

I could not bear her hand, this dead thing in my own. I could not let it go.

“There was another obstacle to our perfect marriage. I was poor, Mildred ... and my work was the sort men praise, the sort that nourishes men, but that they do not pay for. I went to see my parents, on that same fatal night when I was with you, and when my will was slaying my one rival. I told my parents of you: I begged them to give me money, so that I might ask you to become my wife. They refused. Mother, because she loved me selfishly and did not wish me to marry. Father because he loved only his ease.

“... I slew my parents.”

Then I could let loose her hand.

With her other hand she clasped the hand I had held. She felt it: she shuddered. She let it drop to her side.

“My will did away with my parents. I am their heir. I am rich.”

Again she clasped the hand which I had clasped.

“There was a deeper reason for my deeds--a better reason. My will, in these ruthless acts, proved itself equal to the power of your beauty: equal to the power in you which had called forth my love. These were sacrifices to you, Mildred: to the Goddess within you! Sacrifices to prove your lover as terrible, as ineffable, as strong as was my love, and as was the power in you that made me love you.”

Mildred arose. Her hands quavered up to her brow.

“John ... are you mad!”

I smiled, and feared to smile lest the smile be horrible to her. Her hands clasped her brow. Then suddenly she let them fall. Her face hardened an instant, a glaze of resolution around its tender bloom. She sat down.

“John, can you explain what you have said?”

She seemed wholly woman. Could it be that my words diminished her?
What

I had to say was unreal and strange, now she seemed wholly human.

But I told her my story. And as I spoke, slowly, with care, I bled with agony. For this was fire I was pouring all about the flower of my love. How would she emerge? Transfigured to be my mate, wedded by fire to fire? Or ash?

So I went on, and told my story....

“Whence does he come, this larval man whom my will summoned, whom my will endowed with all the cunning of my learned brain, to slay, perfectly, surely? Is he gone forever? In that moment at the limekiln, when my intelligence had challenged my will’s deed and we stood locked

in conflict ... the larval creature of my will, and my self of the light ... did I do him away? I think he is gone forever. He could live only when my mind slept: and now it is awake. That is why he strove to murder me. To drag me by the dark roots of us both into the boil of the limekiln. And he failed. Had he not been desperate, surely he would not have tried to kill his master by whose darkness he lived. My mind won in that electric moment! My mind leaped with my body, to the other side. He will lurk no more, murder no more. For my soul knows him.... But he has seared my soul.”

Her hands did not cease from moving while I spoke. Now, in my silence, they moved. They clasped in anguish on her breast. They went to her brow. They tremored at her side. They were like flowers tremulous in a flame. She sat, swaying gently, like an aged woman.

I was silent. Her head turned, and she saw me. The glaze in her eyes grew as what she knew was measured with her sight. Her body was rigid.

Her pain was freezing her. She swayed no more. And her hands were lifeless.

I knelt before her. But I did not dare to touch her. I put forth my hands, but they remained suspended. For I did not dare to touch her.

“Mildred,” I said, “save me.”

She watched my hands, as if she wondered what these suppliant palms were going to do.

“There is power in me, Mildred. And power, if it is happy, is divine. Do you now know how I have needed you? Have I not won you? Save me!”

She watched my hands. They covered my face an instant. I stood up. And
I stood over her.

“Mildred, I have been ruthless. Yes. More ruthless than my mind would ever have conceived. Is that a weakness in me? I loved my parents. They were the only human beings in my life. I was ruthless, because I was in love with Beauty. I have used truth ... as it was revealed to me, vastly beyond our miserable sphere ... I have used truth, because I was in love with Beauty.”

Her face was blanched as if some fire had seared it. Her eyes were like stones. Her beauty was a mask.

I feared what I saw in her, for it was the worst of myself.

“We must go on, now, Mildred. We dare not stop. You and I together with truth at our command, to create Beauty. To make Beauty live.... Mildred, will you save me?”

Still she did not speak. She watched me from her place below me as I stood. But she watched my eyes. And her eyes were limpid again, and warm; their glaze had melted.

“I have learned that Truth is cold. It is a cold that burns: terribly and relentless. Truth cares not for man, and man in love with it is like a moth who would possess the sun. Oh, have I learned too late! Man cannot live with Truth. And yet he loves it. So by a miracle, he turns it into Beauty. And he dwells with Beauty. Save me! Save me!”

Her face broke, and her hands covered it. She wept.

“My love, my love,” I said, “do you not understand? I want to be a man. And I have glimpsed the terrible face of truth. That is the curse of my will. Love, I want to be a man again ... to live ... to live in your love ... to live in Beauty. Save me!”

She wept silently. Little waves of anguish welled with her breast, rose to her neck and her arms.

She wept long. I knelt beside her. She knew me there. I did not touch her, but she knew me there. Would her weeping cease, and would her hands come to mine?

She lifted her head. She did not look at me. She rose. I, kneeling, waited. Then, her eyes came down.

I knew that I had lost her.

I understood the pang across my eyes when first she came into the room: I knew that I had known that she was lost.

She stood there before me kneeling: her skirt touched my face. She was turned toward the door, and her eyes were upon me. They were far away.

I drank her beauty like an immortal wine within a cup of death.

... O sweet beyond song is woman at her Spring! You are life, you are the wrung essence of all life. For you I have made myself an ashen path through the splendor of gardens. For you I have denied my soul all their flung radiance. That I might drink you perfectly. And I am all athirst. My ashen way has dried my mouth, and opened my desire. I am all thirst for you. And I have lost you?

--Mildred, will you see this longing in my mouth, and go?

--Mildred, will you see this death in my eyes, and go?...

--You have gone already. And I am alone.

* * * * *

_I have told my story. And, reader, though it has no moral, and though it may have brought you more bewilderment than joy, it has served its primary purpose. It has enabled me once more to live among you. Take the most anguished page, the blackest with my despair; it has been joy for me to write that page, for in the writing I relived it. And where

I am, even the darkest human hour in memory is bright. If I suffered, it was because I still could strive: if I despaired it was because I still knew hope. Such are the jewels of man's world. For man's world is a playground whither the drab cosmic angels come for holiday. Strife, pain, suspense, anguish of heart and flesh, sacrifice and crime ... these are the raiments of Love. These are the joyous motley of the angels when they make feast on earth._

... I see an evening earlier in my life. I had just returned from my exhilarant years in Europe. It was June, and I was staying with a friend who lived with his wife in the Berkshire Hills of New England. They had been called to a nearby town: I declined their invitation to go along with them. I supped alone in their house. There was cheese redolent of meadows and manure; there was honey that smelt of clover; there were vegetables lightly cooked so that the resilient air of April and of May still lingered in their green.

I sat on the porch alone, smoking my pipe, and watched the sun fall through the scattered hedge of fir trees and dogwood, copper-beech and locust. The air was alive with the acacia scent and with the song of birds. Their voices swarmed the leafage: oriole and grackle, virio, thrush and thrasher. Impudent red-breasts marched across the green: a catbird with its stridence set in tune the melodious symphony of the sweeter birds.

The evening was alive. From the cropped grass of the lawn, the trees rose sheer: the trunks were columns of the earth; the branches, whelmed by leaf and shadow, made a firmament beneath the sky. I sat and was happy in this singing dusk. The shadows and the dying sun, the pied shrill chatter of the birds, came to me as a single happiness, ripe for my mood.

And then, in a flash, the veil had lifted, and I saw.

_This lovely scene that soothed my weariness and made me happy, bringing to my lips soft sentimental phrases, was a shambles! In a

spruce that bowered from my porch, I watched a brown thrasher wheel and screech about a branch in which an owl, ensconced, brooded over its young. The little bird was delirious with fear. It threshed its wings and screamed: it pecked at the robber owl and flew away. It wheeled, screamed up its courage, shot in and pecked again. Robins were devouring worms. A handsome woodpecker massacred wood-slugs on the boll of a beech. No single creature in that gentle dusk, but was engaged in bitter desperate war. And I sat, idle, burning my tobacco, slaying the mosquito that dared to buzz within the reach of my majesty.... All the world was murdering or murdered. Was it less fair for that?_

My time was to come. And I, like these humbler creatures of the lawn, knew my hours of crisis, knew the heartbreak of desire, the black shrouds of failure. Was my time less fair for that?

O reader, if you must glean a moral from my story, let it be this! I lean back over the Precipice of Time, and greedily relive those hours which you call hours of anguish: relive those days of failure, since they were living days. Was it not then that my heart beat highest, that passion coursed most free, that I was most alive?

Out of the ash that you call history, rises the eternal flame of Love. Warm yourselves there, my brothers and my sisters. For the time will come when you will watch Love's distant gleam, desperate and nostalgic like a winter moth which beats on the frosted window trying to get in where the light burns, which beats and beats until it falls emaciate in the snow....

THE END

1923-1924

TRANSCRIBER'S NOTES:

Italicized text is surrounded by underscores: italics.

Obvious typographical errors have been corrected.

Inconsistencies in hyphenation have been standardized.

Archaic or variant spelling has been retained.

New original cover art included with this eBook is granted to the public domain.