



BIT OF TAPESTRY

By Cleve Cartmill

● Of an unimportant seeming man, the Planners, the great Plan—and three old maids who wove tapestries and interfered with all plans that ever were—

Illustrated by Orban

PROLOGUE

"Six are we, and she is one. Yet she lives. Is this the vaunted efficiency of the Predeterminators? Tell me, Monitor."

"Millicent Lake lives, true, but no question of efficiency enters. Nor yet of reform. Your suggestions are not admissible. One phase only of the Plan have you seen brought to completion. A new member's attitude must be retiring."

"But tell me, Monitor. She lives, and Phase Three has failed, which I have also seen. Is this efficiency?"

"I tell you this. We performed our duties, as outlined by the Planners."

"But that human being lives, a symbol of our failure. Now it is too late for success."

"Here is the tapestry, the new Plan of Phase Three."

"To fail again? Tell me, Monitor."

"It shall not. It cannot."

"Ah? With multiple operations, a double suicide, a death timed by human split seconds? It is more complex than the failure. It is more complex than patterns woven by the Fates."

"You dare? You dare?"

"To mention the Three Sisters? Yes, for the Predestinators, for whom we administrate destiny, have failed as badly as they. Plan B is two human centuries behind schedule. As an associate Predestinator, I have the right to suggest a way to success."

"You have no rights. You have orders only to obey. Yet, if the other members have no objections, heard you shall be this once. None? Proceed, newest member."

"Very well. Regard the tapestry. Homer and Martha Curtain become insane and kill themselves. Rumor has it throughout the town that their only son, Webb, has inherited their insanity. He becomes preoccupied and unhappy enough to step in front of a car in the course of his duties as a filling-station attendant and is killed; accidentally, according to human standards. Court Masters, driver of the car, is charged with manslaughter; nonetheless, and must pay his attorney with the contents of his brief case, for he has no money. The brief case, on which the entire success of this substitute Plan for Phase Three depends, goes roundabout through the hands of Lorimer Grach to H. William Karp. One step would suffice, and my suggestion is that Court Masters, who now has the brief case, deliver it directly to H. William Karp."

"Do you imply a criticism of the Planners?"

"I do not, Monitor. My suggestion is respectful. I ask a petition for simplification."

"We have heard the suggestion. We shall now pass on to other matters."

"I demand more consideration, Monitor. The Three Sisters will find a way to defeat us again if we do not strike quickly and directly."

"You have twice sullied this meeting."

"I shall continue to mention the Fates. Did they not prevent the death of Millicent Lake, the success of Phase Three? Are they in control of that human now? Tell me, Monitor."

"They are not. Millicent Lake functions under free will, and shall continue until her actions affect those humans now involved in Phase Three.

In such event, a member of this board will assume human form and provide her with a legacy from a relative."

"And so bring her back into control. True, Monitor, but this Plan is too fallible. Regard the tapestry again. As Millicent Lake escaped our control, so might any represented there. What good to bring them back, when the Plan has failed?"

"It shall not fail again."

"By the stars, how prevent it? The Sisters still have their power, they have contempt for us, they are mad."

"They have power only through personal contact with human beings. This plan is laid far from the previous failure. They know nothing of it."

"They have ways of knowing, Monitor. If Homer and Martha Curtain fail to commit suicide, then we have failed."

"In that event, I shall go to Earth and direct Phase Three to a successful end."

"Remember, the private destinies of all humanity are involved. Remember, Monitor. When you are in human form, you are restricted physically. You may offer only a limited number of jobs, give so many legacies, or any other means of bringing human beings back into control. If you are a man, you may perform only a certain number of tasks in a given length of human time."

"We will not fail. Homer and Martha Curtain shall die. Else the whole purpose of the Predestinators having displaced the Thr...er, the whole purpose of our having brought order into the administration of human destiny is destroyed."

I.

The girl stood in the living-room doorway and looked at the boy who sat and stared out the window at nothing. Her dark eyes were steady and troubled, hands loose at her sides, thumbs stroking her blue skirt at a point halfway between knee and thigh. She was not aware of this abstract, nervous motion.

Then, with a fixed pleasantness, she crossed the room and put a hand on Webb Curtain's blond hair.

"You can come out of your shell now."

His eyes tilted up, his mouth down. "Leave me alone, Kay."

"Life goes on. You know?"

"Why?" he grated.

"Stop it, Webb! You'll make yourself sick. A week of this is enough." She made a move toward pulling him out of his chair. "You've got to get outside. Come on, let's go riding. Or something."

"Where people can look at me?"

"Well, what are you going to do? Ye gods, you act like Camille!"

"I'm going away. Tonight."

"Where?"

"What does it matter?"

She took her hands off his arm, stepped back a pace, and said quietly, "It matters to me."

"Why?"

"So I'll know what kind of clothes to take, Webb."

His slanted mouth formed a slow, sad smile. "Sweet little Kay. It's much better that you forget me."

Her eyelids drooped in quick fury. Then she sighed and wagged her head. "Here we go again, boys," she said. "Look, Webb, quit dramatizing yourself. And quit patronizing me. Where you going, and why?"

"Wherever Fate leads me. I can't stay here after what happened."

Kay Loring made a slow tour of the room, fingering objects without seeing what she touched: a powdery rose drooping on a split stem, a loving cup on the mantel which she and Webb had won in a dancing contest, the faded lace antimacassars on the sofa arms, lace tidies on the big chairs.

She felt that a crisis impended, a crisis in Webb Curtain's life—perhaps in hers. If he ran away from such whispers as existed in the little town, and others which he imagined, what would it do to his courage, his bright gibes? And what would it do to her?

She stood before him again, one hand on her hip, the other loosely clenched at her side. She spoke with quiet and measured contempt, a faint curl at one corner of her generous mouth.

"Maybe it's better you go away. Maybe it's better, Webb. Some place else, maybe, you won't have trouble. And if you do, you can run away again. You can always run away. You're a good runner. You know? And when you run as far as you can, you can cry. Crying ought to come easy to you. You got a good start."

He got to his feet and stared down at her through narrowed lids. "I'm not afraid; see. If I have to stay here awhile to prove it to you, O. K., but I'm not afraid. I'm not running away. People shy away from me, because of what mother and dad did. That's what I want to get away from. I don't like to be reminded of it. But if you think I'm scared, I'll show you."

She grinned. There was a touch of tenderness in it.

"Then I think you're scared, if it'll keep you here."

His jaw line tilted up an inch. "Watch me, then. I'll get a job somewhere. Today. And if anybody wants trouble, they can have it."

"Now *don't* go around with a chip on your shoulder."

"What the devil do you expect me to do, bow from the hips to everyone I meet and say, 'Yes, I'm nuts. Silly, isn't it?'"

"No, but the tougher you get the tougher it'll be for you."

"Don't worry about me. I'll do all right."

When the first housewife looked up from weeding a flowerbed and nodded coldly, Webb's shoulders squared belligerently. He had often stopped to pass the time of day across the picket fence of Mrs. Jenkins, but now that his mother and father were double suicides, she nodded coldly.

The incident was repeated several times as he hurried stiffly along the street green with May trees. By the time he was within a block of the main business district, Webb's eyes were a trifle glassy with fury. His hands were fists in his coat pockets; he wanted to swing on a chin—any chin.

A group of little boys and girls eyed him solemnly from the front lawn of a small cottage. They watched him approach, with the inscrutability of seven-year-olds, their heads swiveled as one as he passed, their fat hands stilled on toys. When he had passed, one called after him:

"Hello, crazy man."

Webb caught his breath and whirled. His blazing eyes stopped their giggles; the set of his shoulders caused them to edge away. Though he didn't move, they felt his concentrated hate and scattered like squealing pigs. Webb stared after them, shrugged, and went on.

In the office of the daily *Sentinel* he was received by a paper-shuffling Pat Cain. Instead of his usual crisp heartiness, the huge editor showed intense interest in a sheaf of copy paper. He shuffled it in his enormous hands, and bent his massive head over local and national news stories.

"Pat," Webb said, "I need a full-time job. Will you put me to work?"

Pat Cain's flinty eyes did not raise from the top sheet on his desk. "Sorry, Curtain. I don't have a vacancy."

"But, Pat! Two weeks ago you said you'd make a place."

"Conditions have changed, Curtain."

Webb Curtain's mouth set in a sullen, drooping arc. "I didn't expect this of you, Cain. The others, yes, but not you. You seemed to have some sense. Conditions have changed, eh? With me, you mean. So you're like the others, hm-m-m?"

Cain's eyes flicked upward. "I'm not going to quarrel with you."

"For three years," Webb sneered, "you have taught me how to write news stories. You've spent time every day during college vacations

drumming honesty and fairness into me. Tell it the way you see it, you say. I thought you were somebody. I thought you were almost God. And now you weasel on me, like the others. You see a taint in me, or pretend to. It's not! Am I to blame for the weakness of my parents? You know damned well I'm not crazy. I don't know where the rumor started that it's congenital in my family, but it's just a rumor. Give me a job, Pat! I've got to have it!"

Cain's eyes softened a fraction, the muscles around his broad mouth loosened. "I'm sorry, Webb. I'm—damned sorry. Try somewhere else."

"That's just dandy."

Webb stamped out into the morning sun. Try somewhere else. Try.

Eagan's Department Store: "Sorry."

Michaelson's Grocery: "Full up."

Eagle Hotel: "Bellhop? Not here."

Raeburn Feed Mill: "Nope."

The Greek's: "Don' needa no dishwash."

The Gem Theater, Hilton's Hardware, K & T Lunch, The Bon Marchè Chocolattery, Runt's Pool Hall, Sherry's Drug & Sundries, Midwest Garage, Ozark Cleaners, National Shirt Factory: "Sorry."

Red Dog Mining Co., Cunningham Photos, Raddington Machinery, Hobe's Smithy: "Sorry."

Webb Curtain to Webb Curtain: "That's the works. So charity begins at home. My fellow citizens, my friends. The subject of this evening's chat is, 'He's a jolly good fellow whom everybody denies.' There's a train whistle. Well. Why say good-by?"

He was at the railroad-station ticket window, money in his hand, order on the tip of his tongue when he was hailed by Larry Owen, who lumbered in like an earnest Great Dane.

"Webb! Wait a minute! What are you doing, Webb?"

Webb turned and grinned into Larry's wide, serious blue eyes. "Doing? Why, I was just going. No place in particular. Why?"

"I been looking all over, Webb. They said you'd be here, so I came hurrying."

"They?"

"Yeah. The Parker sisters. Moved into that big corner house at State and Lexington. Anyway, you want a job and you've got one."

The evening streamliner shuffled to a stop outside, and Webb divided a glance between it and the patient ticket seller behind the wicket.

"On the level?" he asked Larry.

"Sure, Webb. In the filling station right across from the Parker sisters. Let the train go, Webb."

"All right." To the ticket agent: "Let the train go. Come on, Larry. What goes?"

Larry led the way to the roadster parked next to the town's single taxicab operated by Horace Beecham.

"I dropped in for some gas, Webb, and Brad Hunley says he's leaving town and he recommended you a week or so ago for the job. The O. K. came through today from the head office, and Brad says the job is yours, specially after the scummy way you got treated today."

Larry had a flair for fine, hard driving, and they slid along Main Street as a blurred reflection in plate-glass show windows.

"What about these women?" Webb asked.

"The Parker sisters? Well, after Brad told me, I said I'd try to find you, and started to leave. I heard a yell from across the street, and there on the porch was a thin old dame in black satin and white lace, calling me by name. I went over and she says she heard us talking."

"Over that State highway traffic?"

"Yeah, that's what I asked her. But she says there was a lull. All I thought was it must have been one hell of a lull. Anyway, she says you were here, about to scram; so I tore over, and here we are."

"Aren't we, though!"

As Larry slowed to turn into the filling station, Webb wore a helpless, though grateful smile. Funny, he thought, how things happen. He'd been on the crumbling brink of despair, had given up, admitted the situation was too big. Out of a clear sky a job had dropped.

"Hi, Webb."

Brad Hunley stuck out a bronze hand and bared even teeth.

"Thanks a lot, Brad."

"Don't mention it. Can you start to work in the morning?"

"Now, if it's helpful."

"No need. I'm about to shut her down. Come in. I'll show you what you need to know."

While Brad explained the simple mechanical duties of the station attendant, Larry stood by with an amiable and paternal smile. Indulgent. Webb was Larry's idol, and he had served when service had been needed.

"By the way," Brad said in conclusion, "the old ladies who moved in across there today want to open a tourist home. They'll take in acceptable strays, and they want to make a deal with you to do a little baggage smashing. You'll have plenty of time, it'll be a little pocket money, and you can charge their transients a parking fee to use the lot at night. Better run across and see 'em."

"O. K. Thanks again, Brad. Have a good trip. Write to me."

Webb yanked the bell pull of the big gabled house, and a mellow note rang inside. Presently the oak door swung in to reveal a tall, thin

woman in long black satin, white lace collar and cuffs which matched her hair. Old gentility gone neatly to seed, Webb thought. She stared slightly above and to the left of him and said sharply:

"Well, who is it? Can't you see I'm blind?"

"I didn't notice, ma'am. I'm sorry. This is Webb Curtain."

"Oh, yes. Come in, Webb."

He was amazed at the familiarity with which this blind woman walked the dim hallway. She touched the tapestried walls now and then with fingertips, but she edged around a settee, a hall tree, and an ancient-looking chest with all the natural grace of a finishing-school graduate with excellent eyesight.

He was no less amazed at her sisters, and at the parlor which appeared to have been lived in for a lifetime. It seemed almost incredible that such neatness could be achieved in the few hours they had occupied the house.

Every pin seemed in its own place on the sewing table beside an old spinning wheel in the corner. Each tapestry on the wall seemed especially made for the space it occupied, and the wide sweep of pageantry on these pieces imparted an old and solid feeling to the room. Knitting needles and skeins of yarn looked competent in a red and yellow basket. And the marble-topped table against the front wall held an organized litter of twigs, a tiny hourglass, and a miniature crystal ball cupped in the hands of what appeared to be a crystal goddess.

He saw these objects in a slow, sweeping glance. Their neatness, their order, came to him later, for at the moment of entry the other two sisters turned their faces to him. He felt a sense of shock to see that these faces were exact copies of the one who had met him at the door.

"This is my sister Margaret," said his hostess. "She is blind in one eye, but cannot hear at all. When you speak to her, be sure she can see your lips. Otherwise she can't tell what you're saying. The other is my sister Gertrude, who is both blind and deaf. Don't bother to be polite to her, as she can't tell. I'm Emily."

"I won't ever be able to tell you apart," Webb said.

"That's not important," Miss Margaret said. "Well, Emily, my land! Give the boy a chair. Tell him what we want with him."

"Quiet, Margaret. There is time enough. Sit down, Webb. We have a simple business proposition. It won't take long to tell."

Arrangements were simple. For a small weekly sum, Webb would act as porter for whatever guests used the house for overnight stops.

As he went home through the long, soft twilight, Webb's faint smile came out of thoughts of the quaint old women who belonged in Godey's "Lady Book." And Sophie, their maid, whom he

had glimpsed briefly. Sophie was quaint, too, and a little disturbing, because of her skin.

"It has a waxy quality," he told Kay that night.

"Cold cream, probably," Kay suggested as she went over his living room with a dust mop. "Me and Sophie," she said. "Only she gets paid for this sort of thing. Mine is a labor of love."

"She looks like what the cartoons used to label as a slavey," Webb continued. He lit a cigarette and settled back on the sofa. "She'd look unnatural without a mop and a bucket. She's got funny eyes."

Kay pushed a lock of black hair out of her eyes. "For a quick glancer, you pick up a lot of detail."

"You notice things when you're keyed up with trouble."

"Trouble? What trouble have you got now?"

"You watch. These swell people in our thriving community will stop trading with me. I'll be fired, and be right back where I was, without a job. So then I'll go away, which I should have done today."

Kay took his cigarette, dragged on it, and sat beside him. "Calamity Curtain, we call him. Look, my dismal dope, if you forget this thing that happened, other people will. Maybe it's none of my business if you choose to mess up your life, but I feel a certain interest. Snap out of it."

"Oh, I'll play up," he said negligently, "but it won't do any good. I got a hunch things are going to happen to me."

"Destiny's darling!" she said scathingly. "So you're going to be singled out for things to happen to!"

"It isn't that cosmic, maybe, but you didn't see the attitude that I bucked all day. You didn't see the eyes shift away, the heads shake after I left."

"But this job, Webb. It's the best thing could have happened. You'll be in the public eye. People will begin taking you for granted if you're just yourself, and before long the whole thing will be forgotten."

He contemplated this thought. "Maybe you're right. I guess my life took a turn for the better today. Maybe I'm headed up, maybe I'm getting a start. Maybe it'll be simple from now on. Yeah. Maybe."

II.

A nice guy, this Court Masters, Webb thought as he rang up the sale of ten gallons of gas. The only one in two weeks who has been decently friendly. More people like him would make this job bearable, now that the natives have stopped trading here.

He took fifteen cents in change from the cash register, picked up a chamois and a small bottle of windshield cleaner, and turned toward Masters' blue sedan at the pumps. At that moment, a com-

pany tank truck chugged into the lot with an early-morning delivery. Also at that moment, the motor of Masters' car roared to life, rose to a high scream—and held it.

Accelerator stuck, Webb thought as Masters peered at the floor boards and leaned forward.

Webb nodded to the truck driver, who had stopped some fifteen feet in front of Masters, and started to cross the driveway between the two machines. The office telephone rang, and he checked his stride, an automatic reaction.

As the phone bell jangled through the motor's high scream, as Webb stopped a foot in midair, the big sedan leaped forward and flung itself into the tank truck. Webb's heart lurched as he thought how one more step would have put him between the sedan and truck, and how he would now be crushed like the chrome bumper, headlights, and radiator grille.

He ran to the car, switched off the motor, and began to drag Masters out of windshield fragments. The operator of the tank truck, a big young man who climbed out of his cab in a kind of leisurely fury, strolled back and lent a gentle, if contemptuous, hand.

The telephone continued to ring.

"This guy is dead," the truck driver observed when they had laid the rumpled Masters in the sunlit driveway.

Webb glanced at the bleeding face and head, laid his ear against the silk shirt. "No. He's just out."

"That's good. He can pay for my fender, then. You better call an ambulance, though. That face is gonna do a lot of bleedin'."

"O. K. See if you can get that sliver out of his chin."

Webb ran into the station, jerked the receiver off the ringing phone. "Hello?"

"Webb, this is Miss Emily. Has Mr. Masters gone?"

"No, he's still here."

"Will you tell him he left his brief case?"

"All right."

"And will you come over? Margaret has a little present for you."

"Thanks. I'm busy right now. Later."

He called the city ambulance, and rejoined the truck driver. Masters was still unconscious, bleeding about the face and throat, and one of his hands appeared broken.

Webb knelt and pressed his handkerchief against the gash on Masters' jaw, and the truck driver sauntered to the front of the car, inspecting the wreckage.

"What happened?" asked a strange voice.

Webb raised his eyes to Louie, known as an odd-jobs man who was seen occasionally around town, and saw that Louie was the first to arrive. Cars had stopped on the highway, and the occu-

pants of a few were coming in to investigate.

"Hello, Louie. Accident, is all. Nobody killed."

Louie tucked his grass sickle under his stringy arm and looked vacantly down at Court Masters.

"Mighty bad bump over that eye," he said.

"Mighty bad. What was it you wanted me to do, young feller?"

Webb blinked up at the earnest, empty face. "I don't want you to do anything."

"I got a call to come here for a job," Louie said. "What is it?"

"Job? You're mixed up, Louie. There's not a blade of grass on the lot. You can see that. Somebody else called you."

"This was the place," Louie insisted. "Ain't mixed up on that. Guess I know where I was supposed to go."

"Nobody here called you, Louie. Maybe one of the Parker sisters sent for you. Across the street, there."

Louie squinted at the big gabled house, with its prim face, its genteel admission of hard times—a card in the bay window: "TOURISTS ACCEPTED"—and eyed the sleek lawn.

"Parker sisters? Three old maids?"

"That's right."

Louie slouched off toward the tourist home, muttering. He pushed through a sprinkle of on-lookers, crossed the highway warily, and entered the ornamental iron gate.

Webb turned his attention to Court Masters again. The bleeding had almost stopped.

After the ambulance had taken Masters away, and the wrecked sedan had been dollied to the back of the lot, Webb skipped across the street to the Parker residence. He kept an eye on the station for drop-in customers as he waited for an answer to his knock.

The sister who met him was blind, so Webb said, "You wanted me, Miss Emily?"

"I'm Margaret, Webb!" she said tartly. "My land, can't you keep us straight?"

"But you're the one who can see!"

"I am the one who can hear."

"Well, maybe I forgot. You wanted me? I can't stay. I'm on duty."

"Wait here, Webb."

She went smoothly down the hallway and disappeared into the parlor. Through the door which she left open came voices raised in argument. Webb had no conscious desire to eavesdrop, but could not avoid hearing the sharp words of Miss Emily—or Miss Gertrude.

"When we send for you, Louie, you know it's us. Gracious, a body'd think you were abused!"

"Well, somebody sent for me," Louie grumbled, "and—"

"Turn your face this way!" snapped the sister. "You know I have to read your lips."

"I was sayin'," Louie continued loudly, "that somebody told me to go across the street. I'm busy, Miss Emily, I can't go chasin' wild geese. I got lotsa jobs, I have, these days. Go to this place, go to that place, that's all I hear."

"Well, get about your business, then! When we want you, you'll know. Gracious, Louie! Sometimes I think you're downright stupid."

Louie came down the hall, muttering under his breath. He nodded to Webb, clumped down the steps and shuffled away. Webb felt a twinge of sympathy for the old gardener who got his jobs mixed, and wondered where he had known the Parker sisters. They seemed to be on friendly, insulting terms.

Miss Margaret returned with a brief case and a tiny package. "Louie said there was an accident."

"That Mr. Masters," Webb explained. "His foot feed stuck, and he got his car in gear somehow. If you hadn't phoned, I'd 've stepped in front of his car and maybe got killed."

"Will you give him this brief case?"

"Well, he's in the hospital."

"Gracious! Was he hurt bad?"

"Cut up some. He'll live, I guess. I'll keep it for him."

The sister who could see had come into the hall and stood beside Miss Margaret, her good eye twinkling at Webb. He was uncertain as to which she was, and said nothing.

"You need a haircut, Webb."

"Yes'm." He shifted his glance to a low, slim roadster gliding into the station. "I got to go."

"You may open this later." Miss Margaret gave him the package, which he put in his pocket, and the brief case, and Webb hurried to attend to his customer.

Buttermilk eyes. That was Webb's most lasting impression of this neat, middle-aged man who wore his hat at a jaunty tilt on silver-gray hair. He remembered the precise, businesslike attitude, yes. But the eyes were startling, so light they seemed almost without color. They watched Webb without expression as he crossed the highway, and the thin mouth remained a humorless line as Webb spoke pleasantly and inquired the man's needs.

"You are Webb Curtain." It was not a question.

"Why—yes."

"I have a job for you. A better job than this."

"Who are you?"

"At the moment, I am confidential secretary to Mr. Lorimer Grach. I am Mr. Potter. There is a place in Mr. Grach's organization for you."

"I never heard of him."

Mr. Potter almost smiled. "Ah, but the reverse is not true. You are known to him."

Webb set one foot on the running board. "I'd like a better job, all right. What is it?"

"Your duties will be to conduct investigations."

"Of what?"

"You will be told at the proper time."

"This sounds funny to me. What is Grach's organization, and how did he hear of me?"

"He is head of a national investigation agency. He heard of you through my own research."

Webb drew his light brows together. "When and where would I work?"

"As soon as you can get away from this job, you will come to New York for instructions. Here is my card. Wire me collect when you are ready, and a plane ticket will be sent you."

Webb's emotion was one of puzzled elation. He sat in the station chair, neglecting his sweeping, neglecting his bookkeeping, and watched traffic without seeing it. His thoughts were not interrupted by customers; this station was unfortunately situated for through traffic, and local residents had transferred their business elsewhere on the day he went to work.

To shake the dust of this town from his heels, this town where people looked away as he passed, that was a noble thought. But to have a good job at the end of his exit, that was colossal.

His eye fell on the brief case of Court Masters, which he had laid on his desk. This reminded him of Miss Margaret's present, and he unwrapped it.

It was a ring. The setting was a band of exquisitely chased silver, and the stone was a polished half mound. Topaz or amethyst, he thought. Deep in the center of the stone was a phenomenon. A tiny pair of scissors.

Webb smiled with delight at the curious beauty of the ensemble. The scissors appeared to be formed by natural fractures in the stone. That was the only explanation he could accept. Nobody, he thought, genius or magician, could bury a microscopic gold instrument inside solid rock without splitting the rock. And this stone had not been split.

He put it on his finger and went through the motions of running a filling station until closing time. Then he went across the street both to thank Miss Margaret for the ring and to tell the sisters of his plans.

"Whoever takes my place will handle your guests' baggage and cars, I imagine," he said.

Miss Margaret and the sister who was both blind and deaf were in the parlor. The third, who could see, was not in evidence.

"Excuse me, Webb," Miss Margaret said, "while I find Emily."

She went out of the room, and Webb watched the blind and deaf sister weaving a tapestry. He



was fascinated by the lightning, sure play of her fingers, and moved closer to the dim corner where she worked. There he was caught by the design and the feeling in the scene depicted.

"That's life," he said. "It's real."

Miss Gertrude's white head never moved, and her creamy hands extending from lace cuffs continued their rhythmic motion as she finished the last few inches of the border. Webb examined the scene in detail, peering over her shoulder.

In one corner was a red-headed man, spraddled on solid feet, one arm thrust toward the observer. In it was a train, modern and streamlined. There was a moon, a gun, a broom, and a kitchen sink. There was a blonde.

He stared down for some time at the blonde.

She was tall and glamorous, with long legs and violet eyes. She had shoulders smooth and rich as old ivory. Her wise mouth slanted under a thin nose. She was beautiful.

In addition to these characters were a dark man with a hawk face and brilliant teeth, a woman with a naked knife in her hand, a white-bearded bindle stiff, a blue lamb, and a white-handled hairbrush.

Even the hairbrush did not strike a discordant note, did not spoil the living symmetry of the scene and its background of well-muscled hills. Such an unrelated list of things and people should create an air of surrealism, Webb thought. But they belonged. They made a complete and natural whole.

He straightened as Miss Margaret and Miss

Emily came in from the hallway, and returned Miss Emily's smile.

"You're thinking of going away?" she asked.

Webb went into detail on the treatment he had received from the townspeople since the death of his mother and father, his increasing mental misery, his determination to go to some place where he was not known, and the providential, timely offer.

"I'd like to stay," he said. "I grew up here. But I can't take it, I guess. I hear the whispers around town. I can't sleep, thinking about them."

The first comment on his remarks came from Miss Gertrude, and planted a thin chill at the top of Webb's spine.

"Grach will die," she said quietly.

Webb jerked his head at her. She was still at work. He looked at Miss Emily. "I thought you said she couldn't hear."

"She can't. Did she say something?"

"She said this man I'm to work for will die."

Miss Emily nodded her head. "Then he will."

"But how did she know his name?" Webb cried. "I didn't mention it."

Miss Margaret turned her sightless eyes in Webb's direction. "You may take Gertrude's word."

"But it's—" He paused, shrugged. "I better go. Thanks for everything."

He hurried away, and did not notice until he reached home that he was carrying Court Masters' brief case, which he had intended to drop off at the hospital.

III.

His telephone rang as he was washing his dinner dishes. He wiped his hands on the dish towel and went into the living room.

"Is this Webb Curtain?" a male voice asked. "Yes."

"Get out of town, Webb."

Webb frowned at the phone for a long second. "Who is this?"

"Never mind. Just a friend. We're giving you three days to clean up your business and scram."

"Listen, whoever you are. What's up?"

"We don't want you here, Webb. When you chased those kids with a rock in your hand a couple weeks ago, we figured it might be caused by shock. But when you tried to kill that guy in your station today, we decided you're dangerous."

"What the hell are you talking about? What kids?"

"Those kids you chased. We know about it. You were seen and recognized. Then this stranger today. He hadn't done anything to you."

Webb remembered the little boys and girls, and their "Hello, crazy man," and pictured the tales they must have told.

"Who are you?" he snarled into the phone. "If

I find out, so help me God, I'll—"

"Getting violent won't help you," the voice said. "We'll bring out a strait jacket and cool you down. We don't want to toss you in the loony bin, because you might be all right somewhere else. Beat it. That's all we want."

"You go to hell!" Webb flared, and hung up.

As he finished the dishes, reaction set in. He regarded the town with a bleak and bitter mind. He had known these people all of his life. He had regarded them as friends, who would stand by in case of trouble.

"Thank God," he said aloud. "Thank God I can get away."

He enumerated the remaining tasks, before he could wire Mr. Potter for a plane ticket. Pack his belongings, clean out this rented house, ship his baggage by train, say good-by to Larry and Kay.

Kay. He had forgotten that she was a problem. She wouldn't like it.

He snapped off the lights, walked across the street to her house, and they drove in her car to a quiet little hill at the edge of town. She selected a spot as far as possible from the parked cars of other young couples, and listened quietly as he brought events up to date.

"I'm started up," he said, when their cigarettes were twin blobs of red. "I'm on my way. What do you think of it?"

"If you ever have any children, it'll be pretty hard to explain what a brave man their father was."

"That's unfair. The proposition is just that I've got a better job."

"You've got an unfinished job here."

"These people think I'm nuts, Kay. Am I expected to stand by and take it?"

"Will you ever be happy until you show them you're not?"

"Listen, you haven't had them walk across the street to keep from speaking to you. You haven't had kids giggle as you passed. You haven't had them look a hole through you. You haven't had anonymous phone calls."

She crushed her cigarette in the dashboard ash tray, leaned back quietly, folded her hands and eyed the eastern glow where a misshapen moon was rising.

"What good would it do," he went on in a petulant tone, "if I prove to a bunch of dopes that I'm as sane as they, which isn't saying much? What do I care about their opinion? The only important opinion is my own."

She switched on the ignition, started the motor, and headed back.

"Now what's the matter?" he demanded.

"Let's not talk about it, Webb."

"But why? You're acting like a child."

"It's the company I keep."

"Listen to me," he said grimly. "You think I'm running away. Well, I'm just accepting a better position. That's all. That's all, see?"

"Let it go, Webb, let it go."

"You can't do this to me, Kay. You're being narrow-minded. Don't you care anything about my future?"

"All right. I'm being narrow-minded. But let's not argue about it. I want to go to bed. Good night."

She stopped before his house, motor still running, preparatory to turning into her own driveway.

He stepped out, slammed the door, and stamped inside. He flung everything movable into his various luggage, telephoned a telegram to Mr. Potter, and fell sullenly into bed.

He was ready to go. His baggage had been shipped, all except one piece which he would take with him on the afternoon plane from the county seat, twenty miles distant. He sat in the filling-station office, waiting for the truck driver to relieve him, to take over until a new man could be hired.

The telephone rang. Kay.

"Look, Webb," she said. "I was a trifle abrupt last night, but I was in a hurry to get alone. I don't want you to go, Webb. It won't be good for you, and— Well, I just don't want you to go."

"I'll be back, Kay. I'll write to you."

"Don't bother, then!"

The phone was dead. He frowned at it. Webb Curtain was unhappy. He cradled the receiver, and stared at traffic on the highway. Inside him was the feeling that he should remain, defy the town and its shifty eyes, its behind-the-hand whispers. Inside him was the surge to battle.

But in addition was this fear, this cringing away from contemptuous pity. What is a man, he asked himself, except the sum total of public opinion? Here he was regarded as hereditarily tainted with the insanity which drove his mother and father to take their own lives. Regardless of what he felt, *knew* about himself, he was actually insane in this town.

Actually? Note quite. Not as long as Kay, Larry, and the Parker sisters believed in his sanity. But they were human, subject to pressure from mass opinion. If they fell into the same trap as the others, by supplying a fictitious effect for a known cause, then whatever he felt about himself as an individual was not valid as long as it differed from the opinions of others. If everyone else believed him black, or green, or spotted, any conviction of himself to the contrary was simply further evidence of insanity.

He felt that his future happiness depended upon his decision to go away, where he was not known, and work out his own destiny. True, a nucleus

was here, a nucleus around which he might build to recognition of his sanity. But it was not enough, Kay, Larry, and the Parker sisters.

When the truck driver came and took over the station, Webb carried his bag across to the prim tourist home. The sister who met him at the door was blind, so he said:

"It's Webb, Miss Margaret. I've come to say good-by."

"I'm Emily, Webb. Come in. Margaret is here, but Gertrude has gone to New York. Don't bother to speak to Margaret. She can't hear or see you. I'll tell Gertrude good-by for you."

Webb's confusion as he sat in the parlor was overridden by his personal problems, consideration of Kay, and worry over his possible cowardice; he did not, therefore, give more than a passing thought to the sisters who appeared to switch names almost daily. His interpretation at that moment was that they achieved a harmless enjoyment from mystifying their few friends—namely, himself and Louie. Lonely old women who lived mainly in one small room and had contact with stray paying guests were restricted as to pleasure, and if they had fun with their harmless pastime, who could blame them?

Miss Emily touched his hair. "You didn't get the haircut?"

"I forgot. I'm a little upset. I'll have time if I hurry. Larry will pick me up in forty minutes. I guess I should get it cut, if I'm going to be met at the airport by my boss."

"Yes, Webb. You must get your hair cut."

"Well," he said, edging toward the door, "I want to thank you. You've been nice to me. And I wish you luck."

"Thank you, Webb. I'm sure we'll make a go of this."

"By the way," he suggested, "if things get too tough, why don't you offer some of those tapestries for sale? They're wonderful. This one by the fireplace, with the blonde. I know it was made yesterday, but it looks . . . uh, timeless. Like these others. That big one over the mantel. It's like an epoch out of history."

"We don't make them to sell, Webb, but for pleasure."

"Well, then, how about those in the hall? They're different, hard and modern. Would you sell them?"

"Those!" Miss Emily sniffed. "Those are machine-made. I wouldn't even give them away. I don't hold with new-fangled trash! Run along, boy, and see the barber."

"Well, then, I'll see you again."

As on the preceding day, an unexpected comment came from the blind and deaf sister in the corner. She raised her head from a pattern of twigs she was arranging on a little table and said:

"Sooner than you think."

Webb felt again the thin chill on the back of his neck, felt again the urge to hurry away.

"You said she couldn't hear, Miss Emily."

"Nor can she."

"But . . . but— Well, good-by."

He walked down Main Street to the Elite Barber Shop, operated by a voluble man named Thomkins, whose indefatigable voice was stilled when Webb Curtain entered and sat in the chair, whose keen suspicious eyes glittered in the mirror at Webb, whose thin lips compressed in a line.

"Just cut it," Webb said.

Mr. Thomkins went to work with comb and shears, and as he worked, his eyes lost their glitter, his mouth relaxed. After opening his mouth several times as if to make a comment, he presently laid his tools on the glass shelf under the mirror and curled a little smile at Webb.

"Hear you're goin' away."

"Yep."

"Goin' far?"

"Yep."

"Indianapolis, maybe?"

"Maybe."

"Lotsa people will ask about yuh. What'll I tell 'em?"

"Tell 'em to go to the devil."

"Sho', no call to get het up. Nobody bears you a malice."

"Can't you work and talk at the same time? I'm in a hurry."

"Oh, sure."

Mr. Thomkins picked up his tools and went silently back to the task, pursing his lips at intervals. After a few moments of this, he laid his instruments aside again.

"You got a job some'rs else?"

"Yep."

"Good job, maybe?"

"Listen!" Webb grated. "I'm going to New York, because I don't like the way people here tie their shoes. I've got a swell job waiting for me, training seals. Baby seals. I'm going to train them to shed their coats yearly, so we can make all sorts of fur coats without harming the source. You can see how that would shoot fur prices to hell. So I'm going to sell the process for a million dollars, to keep it off the market. Then I'm going to the South Seas and throw native girls at coconuts. That ought to be enough information for you to spread around. And in case you've forgotten, I—want—a—haircut!"

"Oh, sure."

Mr. Thomkins continued, with a reflective gleam in his little eyes. When he had finished, he brushed Webb's hair with a white-handled brush, took fifty cents, and Webb departed at a run for

the corner where he found Larry eying his watch.

"Gosh, Webb, this is cuttin' it close. The plane takes off in twenty-five minutes, and it's twenty miles."

"Barber held me up," Webb said, leaping into the roadster. "Don't spare the horsepower!"

Once again Webb gave himself over to admiration of Larry's mastery of this rakish mass of rubber and steel. His wide blue eyes steady ahead, Larry whipped in and out of traffic at a mile a minute, careening to the point at which threatening screams came from one set of tires or the other, but never too far.irate shouts of other motorists were whipped away by the wind of their passage and by the spreading gap between the roadster and its speed-conquered victims.

Out of the city limits, on a curling road between solid little hills, the speedometer needle clung to eighty. As the smooth ribbon of concrete raced toward them, Webb became aware of a new sound, growing less faint by the second, finally turning into the definite scream of a motorcycle siren.

Larry slowed, came gradually to a stop, and the State traffic cop parked his cycle on the gravel shoulder, a few feet ahead. He was deliberate in his actions. He shut off the motor. He sat quite still for a second. He pulled off one gauntlet, glanced at his fingernails. He pulled off the other. He laid them precisely on one handle bar. He hitched at his gun belt. He got off and faced the roadster. He took a pad of citations from his flannel shirt, a pencil from his shining left boot, wet the pencil briefly with his tongue, and pushed his khaki cap off his swarthy forehead. He copied Larry's license number, one slow figure at a time. He came around to Larry's side, set one foot on the running board, and wreathed his dark hawk face in a gentle smile which bared the whitest teeth Webb had ever seen.

"Going somewhere, boys?" he murmured.

"Give me the ticket, copper!" Larry snapped. "I don't have to listen to your sarcasm."

The officer gave Larry a long glance of gentle pity. "So young, too, to go to jail. What will your mother say, lad?"

"Give—me—the—ticket!"

"O. K., bud. Give me your driver's license!"

The harsh formalities were speedily disposed of, and the cop was on his way once more. Larry looked at his wrist watch, and shook his head.

"Never make it, Webb. What do you want to do?"

"Let's go back, damn it. I can stay at the Parkers tonight. We'll get an earlier start tomorrow. Why do these things happen to me, I wonder?"

Larry made a U turn, and loafed along the back trail. "You can get away all right tomorrow, Webb."

Black satin, white lace, and one good eye.

"I thought you were in New York, Miss Gertrude," Webb said.

"So I was, Webb. Heavens! Can't I come back? Well, don't stand there like a ninny. Come in. You can have the spare room." She called inside: "Sophie! Come here."

For the second time, Webb wondered about Sophie and her exact status in the household. She cleaned. That was obvious, for she always carried a mop and a bucket. She cleaned everything but herself, for her waxlike skin was smudged, as it had been the first time he saw her. She straightened. She kept the house neat, in contrast to her drooping stocking, her twisted apron. She brushed and dusted, everything but her stringy hair.

She now shuffled down the hall, took Webb's bag and led him upstairs to the room with its big double bed, its pink wallpaper, its faint odor of violets. She gave him a fixed but vague stare with her saffron eyes, and slumped out of the room.

Webb sat on the edge of the bed and silently cursed the delays which had caused him to miss the plane. The curious barber, the traffic cop.

A telegram. He must wire Mr. Potter. Unavoidable delay. Arrive tomorrow.

He combed his newly-cut hair before the dresser mirror and wrinkled his nose at the artificial smell of tonic. Kay wouldn't like— He caught the thought, snapped it off. Kay wouldn't know.

He walked to the telegraph office on Main Street. The town was sleepy with sunset. Storekeepers stared vacantly at the torpid street, awaiting the inner drive which would send them home to supper. The janitor lowered the flag which drooped above the brick post office. The ancient telegraph messenger drowsed over a Western magazine; the operator's eyes were closed under a green eyeshade.

Webb sent his wire and stepped out into the fading rose twilight. What of the evening?

Back to his room? To the pool hall, to watch the Kelly game? Not that, for the eyes of even steady loafers would shift away. To the Greek's, for a thick steak and onions and cream gravy? No onions. Not that he would see Kay, but still—

He was halfway through the steak when Pat Cain came in from the offices of the *Sentinel*, and sat at Webb's table. The sprinkle of customers raised interested eyes, and Mike, the counter-man, lifted ropelike eyebrows.

"I've been looking for you," Cain said in his bull voice.

Webb blinked. He continued to blink after the action no longer had anything to do with surprise. "Th-thanks, Pat. Why?"

Cain picked up a menu in his powerful hands, skimmed it with cold eyes. "Same slum, I see." To the waitress, he purred: "Your special, dear.

And dust off the carrots tonight." To Webb, once more full-voiced: "Do you want a job?"

Quietly, hands tense under the table, Webb asked: "Why are you doing this, Pat?"

Cain lowered his voice. "I'm damned sick of the treatment you're getting around here. Tar and feathers, eh? Well, let 'em try it!"

"What are you talking about?"

"A movement began last night, to run you out of town. Seems young Tom Eagan had his eye on that filling-station job you've got. Well, let him have it. You work for me."

"But didn't you know?" Webb sketched the offer of Mr. Potter, and told how he was at the moment supposed to be flying to New York to join the forces of Lorimer Grach.

Cain eyed him steadily. "So you were running out?"

"No, Pat. It's just that—" He halted, fumbling. "I can't tell you here. It's too public."

"Finish your meal. We'll talk in the office."

Webb faltered in his tale of eyes, sneers, and threats, in the editorial office which fronted for the long, low combination composing-pressroom were the click of teletypes and eccentric rumble of the small rotary made orderly bedlam. He faltered because his eye fell on a yellow slip of wire copy, dated New York. He pulled it off the spike at Cain's elbow.

NEW YORK, May 28, 1941 (AP)—Lorimer Grach, head of a national investigating agency, died of a heart attack at LaGuardia Field today, while—

The teletyped letters blurred. Grach had gone to meet the plane in which Webb was scheduled to arrive.

"I'll take the job, Pat. And thanks a hell of a lot."

"Hop over to the hospital, then. Fellow named Masters is yelling about a story of international importance."

"Oh, God!"

"What?"

"I just thought of a piece of baggage I shipped to New York."

IV.

Webb curled his hands around the tubular frame of Court Masters' bed. "I told you," he said tensely, "I just threw everything into my baggage that wasn't nailed down. I'm sorry, and I'll have your brief case back as soon as possible."

"The small-town hick," Masters sneered, "certainly hits a high point in stupidity."

Webb glared at the steady, burning eyes in their frame of bandages, the full, twisted mouth. "If I hadn't acted quickly, you'd be dead now. And your brief case wouldn't be very important."

"Wouldn't it?"

The tone was redolent with inference, and Webb's fingers tightened on the bedstead.

"My editor says you've been saying things about a story of international importance."

"Your editor is like everybody else in this town. Crazy. Except possibly you. You seem to be sane, but unintelligent."

"Thank you," Webb said, and meant it.

"I've been a little tougher than circumstances seem to warrant," Masters said. "Especially since I left the case behind me in the house of those strange old maids. But I've got to have that brief case, and what's in it, by Friday. This is Wednesday. If it isn't here by then, things are going to get unpleasant for you."

Webb laughed shortly, explosively. "Unpleasant!"

"You've got troubles?"

Webb considered the tactical advantage of telling Masters about the situation to undermine his secrecy concerning the contents of his brief case.

"Troubles," he echoed. "Yes. I've got 'em. You see, my mother and dad committed suicide about two weeks ago."

Masters shook his head in honest sympathy.

"They were temporarily insane," Webb continued. "That's a cinch. Well, the rumor started that I was, too. In a way, it seemed providential, because it took my mind off the tragedy. But it didn't blow over. It snowballed, and now the whole town thinks I'm nuts."

"And what do you think?"

"I'm all right!" Webb flared. "I'm no different than I was two weeks ago, before—it happened."

Masters' unbroken hand toyed with the sheet, the lines around his eyes relaxed. "I made a nasty wisecrack a few minutes ago. I don't suppose I meant it, even then—about your unintelligence, I mean. But I probably did mean the crack about your sanity. You seem as well balanced as anyone I've seen here. The nurses, the doctor, they don't appear any different from you. Yet, there must be something. Maybe you have done one thing which started all the rumors. Do you know what it was?"

Webb cast back into his memory, probing, analyzing. "No. Whatever I did seemed natural to me. Yet, as you say, there must be something. Where there's smoke, there's fire."

"That's always true," Masters agreed. "Well,



why don't you figure out what it was, and adjust it. Or leave town."

"If I go away, I'm running from it. I don't like to do that."

"What you need to do then, is something startling, something that will focus attention on you, something that will establish your sanity beyond any doubt."

"What, for instance? I can't think of anything."

Masters was quiet, his heavy brows drawn with thought. After a long silence, he said, "You saved my life, maybe. I'm grateful for that, and I'd like to help you. When my brief case gets back, I'll show you what's in it. We'll be partners on its development. We can make history."

"What is it?" Webb asked as casually as possible. His tone was not very casual, however. He sensed a tremendous sincerity in Masters. He felt that he stood on the brink of important events.

Masters shot a quick, narrowed glance. "I can't tell you, yet. Furthermore, this is off the record. If you give me your word not to reveal anything without my permission, I'll show you. Otherwise, the deal is off."

Webb smiled wryly. His strategy had worked. His admission of difficulties had broken down Masters' secrecy to an even greater extent that he had hoped. But an agreement such as Masters proposed would tie his hands.

"I don't like it, Mr. Masters. I was sent over here to get the story for my paper. I'd like to have it, if it's as important as your attitude implies. But at the same time, if it can help my present situation, you have my word. It's a deal."

They shook hands on it. "They tell me," Masters said, "that I'll be out of here tomorrow. I'll meet the train with you, and you'll see something. Really something."

"I'll wire for my baggage."

On his way back to the *Sentinel* office, Webb passed Sherry's drugstore and the group of young men who met early each evening on the front sidewalk to plan for the night. They watched him approach, natty and alert in fresh clothes, hats far back on their heads, a cigarette dripping from each mouth.

Tom Eagan was there, Tom Eagan who had played tackle to Webb's quarterbacking, who had painted neighboring towns with Webb, who had hunted birds' eggs with Webb as a child. His eyes also twinkled with amused contempt as Webb hurried along the walk.

Webb flicked a glance, did not speak. He was almost past when a remark from Eagan struck a match to his fury.

"Whipped any kids lately, Curtain?"

The group found this funny, and their laughter

continued for a few seconds while Webb faced them with blazing eyes.

"Don't talk like that to the Fur Coat King, Tom," said one of the group. "He's a millionaire."

Laughter bubbled again. Webb clenched his hands, gave each a slow direct look, and turned away. Behind him, Tom Eagan called an ultimatum.

"Get out of town, Webb. We don't want any loonies that go around scaring little girls. You've got two days."

Webb's hands shook as he continued past dark store windows. Part of it was from anger and a sense of injustice, but part of it was pure despair.

Why? That was the unanswerable.

"I am sane," he said aloud. "I *am* sane!"

He had a deep-seated belief in cosmic justice. His creed was based on the accepted, solid foundation of human behavior: live right, and fare well. He was, therefore, baffled by and resentful of the vague and uncomfortable hate which he felt all about him. Not one of his actions since the death of his father and mother had deviated appreciably from his normal behavior pattern, yet each action had been twisted into evidence of insanity. Chasing children. Threatening to kill a stranger. Even his evasion of personal questions by Mr. Thomkins.

Two weeks ago, he reflected, the fantasy he told the curious barber would have been accepted by his friends for what it was, a subtle insult. It would have been a good gag, one to tell over a bottle of beer. Now, while it was probably related over beer, it was no gag.

"They think I wasn't kidding," he told Pat Cain, after reporting failure to get a printable story from Court Masters.

Cain put down a set of proofs he was checking for headline errors. "Go on home, Webb. Your regular duties won't start until tomorrow. It won't seem as important tomorrow, either. Nothing ever does. Show up here around noon. I'll have a couple of assignments for you."

Outside, Webb considered channels of action as he walked the dark street to the Parker residence. Even though the contents of Masters' brief case might offer a solution to his problem, it was yet two days before he could see whatever it might be. Furthermore, he was sworn to a secrecy controlled by Masters, and anything might happen to that. If he was to do anything constructive toward removing the town's suspicion, he should begin.

He needed advice. Whose? Kay's? He knew her answer: stay and show 'em. But he felt that stubbornness alone was not enough. Miss Emily-Margaret-Gertrude's? They were not the type to

invite intimacies, but that might be all the better. They could be objective.

The sister who met him at the door said crisply: "You have a visitor. Kay Loring."

Kay showed no expression that Webb could read when he entered the parlor where she sat between the other two sisters on the horsehair sofa. Her eyes were wide and dark; that was all. Her full mouth was quiet, did not lift at the corners. Her slim hands were loosely folded in her lap.

"Well," Webb said, "as you see, it didn't work. I'm back."

"Give me a cigarette," Kay said. When it was lit, "Larry said you were here. I came over to see if I could stop you from leaving tomorrow."

"I've been stopped." He told her about his job.

"Then you will live here," Miss Emily-Margaret-Gertrude—Webb didn't know which—decided. "Sophie!"

Sophie came to the door, fixed vacuous eyes on the sister who could see. "Miss Margaret?"

Miss Margaret made a gesture, little more than the twitch of a long, white finger, and Sophie went away.

"Did you give her an order?" Webb asked.

"I told her to bring tea, and to fix up your room."

"How?"

"Sophie has been with us a long time. She understands us."

"Webb," Kay broke in, "I'm glad about the job."

Webb brought his attention back to her in somewhat dazed fashion, and saw the sister on her right form a tender little smile. The sister on Kay's left was she, apparently, who was blind and deaf.

"We are all glad, Kay," said she who was smiling.

"Thanks, Miss Emily," Kay said, "though how you knew it would happen, I don't know." To Webb: "She told me that I would hear good news when you came home."

"Temporarily, anyway," Webb said grimly. "Some of the boys say they're going to run me out of town. I think it's just idle talk, but I ought to do something about it."

Sophie brought tea things, arranged them on a low table, gave Webb another of her curiously empty stares, and left. He felt again that sensation of something which deviated from the norm, was uncomfortably unable to put a name to it.

Miss Margaret distributed tea and little cakes, then gave Webb a long glance with her good eye. "What do you want to do, Webb?"

"I want to be comfortable," he said. "When I walk along the street, I don't want to feel their

eyes between my shoulder blades, I don't want to see their heads wag."

"What's all this about running you out of town?" Kay asked.

Webb told them enough of what he had heard and experienced. "I don't expect any direct action," he said, "but at the same time it's damned annoying."

Into the silence, Miss Gertrude, who was blind and deaf, dropped a remark: "You don't believe in-yourself."

"I do!" Webb flared. "I—"

"Don't argue with her," Miss Emily interrupted. "She can't hear you."

The effect on Kay was apparently similar to what Webb had felt on two former occasions. She edged away, closer to Miss Emily. She glanced at Miss Gertrude, questioned Webb with her eyebrows, then looked at the floor.

"I think Gertrude put her finger on the trouble," Miss Margaret said. "My land, what do you care about other people? If you were sure of yourself, you wouldn't worry about them."

"I am sure of myself!"

"You can't be. If you were, you'd ignore such things as you say happened tonight. You'd take no notice."

"It's pretty hard not to notice, when you're stopped on the street. And get phone calls."

"I think they've got something there, Webb," Kay said. "Quiet dignity, my boy. Unruffled. That's the way to bring 'em around."

"It doesn't make any difference," he said, "about my attitude. That's not the important thing. You've just accused me of being afraid the town is right. I'm not, I tell you! I'm not. I don't feel a twinge of suspicion about my sanity. Look at the way I conduct myself. I've been going to work, taking care of the job, going home at night. Is that abnormal? I don't let it worry me too much, except for the eyes, the headshaking, the jeers, and the phone calls. But I don't think about them all the time. Sometimes I think of other things. Isn't that natural behavior?"

"Why don't you try ignoring it altogether?" Kay asked.

Webb got to his feet. "All right, all right! I'll do it. Quiet dignity, you want? O. K. Come on, I'll walk home with you."

Miss Gertrude made her final statement for the evening. "There is trouble ahead. There is death."

Her two sisters nodded solemn agreement. Webb felt a slight sneer on his face. One coincidence he could believe. Miss Gertrude had predicted the death of Grach. That had been a specific prophecy. Her "there is death" meant nothing. It was the sort of thing said by bangled, swarthy women in tent shows. Of course there is death. There is always death.

"Let's go," he said to Kay. To Miss Emily, "I'll be right back."

As they walked the empty streets, they were quiet, arm in arm. Webb reflected how pleasant this town was near midnight. The little breeze whispering through maple trees which formed an archway over the street, the quiet dark houses, the fitful gleam of stars through the trees, the far bark of a dog, the distance-strangled cry of a freight train, the peace.

Home. Only a word, home. But, under the right conditions, the word was full of the warm color of living. Under his present circumstances, it was still home, but the color was gone, and the warmth.

"Wonder where they came from?" Kay asked.

"What?" Webb said blankly.

"The Parkers."

"I haven't got around to asking. I can't place their accents. Why do you want to know?"

"Just curious. I guess they're no more eccentric than some others here, but their identical resemblance to each other adds something to their eccentricity. Something—queer."

"It's an act," Webb said. "They probably gave their swains hell when they were young. The poor guys didn't know what they had said to whom, the way they mix up their names every day or so. Probably why they never married. I mean, how could a guy be sure?"

"They told me tonight that something was going to happen to us, Webb."

"What could happen?"

"They didn't tell me. They said maybe it could be sidetracked, but it looked bad. Webb, let's keep things the way they are between us."

"Sure, what can we lose?"

"A lot of things."

"Don't be hysterical. Adopt a quiet dignity, like me."

"Can you maintain it?"

"Stick around and see. Here we are. Good night."

She clung to him for a moment, and he went away puzzled by this new emotional note between them. Kay, whom he had known all his life, was somehow different.

His consideration of the new tone in their relationship was broken by footsteps approaching a lighted intersection. They were feminine steps, hurrying.

Webb and the girl reached the corner at the same time, emerging into the light from behind the high hedge around the big Eagan residence. She was Bessie Hillman, who worked for the Eagans, apparently on her way home from late chores.

She looked at Webb. She stopped, gasped, and seemed to be paralyzed with fear. Her mouth

dropped open, her eyes were wide and white, one hand clutched her throat which worked vainly at a scream.

The scream materialized. "Don't touch me, Webb Curtin! Don't touch me! Help!"

She ran, and her screams shrilled against the quiet. Webb heard windows raise, after she was out of sight. A voice called sleepy questions. The screams died away.

Webb found himself clutching the lamp-post to keep from running after the girl and explaining that he wished her no harm. Mixed with this emotion also was the desire to beat her, to vent his smoldering hatred of the town on her. With a great effort, he pried himself loose and walked quietly to the Parkers', speculating on what story the girl would tell of this midnight encounter.

V.

Quiet dignity.

Walking to work, he felt resentment closing around him, like movable walls of a torture chamber. He wanted to put out his hands, to push back the walls. He wanted to strike back at the town, to junk his role of quiet dignity.

As he emerged from the Parker yard, Tom Eagan called across from the filling station where he now occupied the position Webb had resigned.

"Get out of town tonight, Webb. Remember."

Webb shoved his fists in his pockets, forced himself to leave the command unchallenged, resisted the impulse to rush across the street and batter at Tom Eagan's handsome face. He wanted to give this attitude a chance, this quiet dignity.

One apparent fact made it easier to ignore Eagan: if Bessie Hillman had told any sort of story about their meeting last night, it had not yet circulated in all quarters. Perhaps, he thought, she hadn't mentioned it.

As he proceeded, he became aware that trouble was brewing.

A little boy, seven or so, was so busy taking a wheel off his wagon that he did not see or hear Webb's approach along the sidewalk until Webb was within ten feet. The little boy looked up, yelled, and scuttled into his yard, crying at the top of his lungs.

His mother, a Mrs. Laughlin whom Webb knew slightly, came to the door, gathered her incoherent offspring in the folds of her print apron, and glared at Webb.

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself! Scaring children! It's a good thing Junior's father isn't here. He'd give you what-for, even if you are weak-minded!"

Quiet dignity.

On the corner of Third and Main, a tight group of men eyed Webb as he came toward them. These were not habitual loafers. For the most part,

they worked the night shift at the Red Dog Mine. They were big, husky, with the sallow complexions of men who work underground.

One stepped out of the group and faced Webb, a lean man in flannel skirt, khaki pants, cowhide boots. "Listen, you! What's this about you chasing Bessie Hillman last night?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Webb said.

"Sammy," said Flannel Shirt, and a pimpled youth stepped out of the group, "what about it?"

"He's the one," Sammy said. "Sis says he chased her and tore her dress. He's a goop, dad says."

"Well?" Flannel Shirt asked.

"It isn't true. Why would I chase her?"

"Never mind why! Did you?"

"No."

"You're a liar."

"What good will it do anybody if I fight you?"

"I called you a liar. Are you gonna take it?"

"Yes."

"You dirty, yellow coward."

Webb hooked a right to Flannel Shirt's jaw. The man fell into the gutter, tried to get up, and fell back with glazed eyes and open mouth. Webb faced the others.

"I didn't want to do that. You heard me try to avoid it. I didn't chase any girl. Now lay off me. I'm not looking for trouble. I just want to be let alone."

He walked leisurely away, but felt their hard, expressionless eyes following.

"Hey, Webb!"

Larry Owen whirled smoothly in to the curb, his face amiably round, his round eyes pleasantly blue. "When do we start, Webb?"

Webb got in beside him. "I'm not going. I'm working at the *Sentinel*. I'm headed there now."

Larry pulled out into the street, shifted into high. "Not going? You got to, Webb."

"Why?"

"Haven't you heard? About the citizens' committee?"

"Now what?"

"They're over at Hillmans'. They got a doctor and everything. They're pretty mad. What did you do it for, Webb? Just trying to scare her?"

"I didn't do anything, Larry. She made it up." He told the true story of the incident.

"Well, if you say so," Larry said doubtfully. "But I heard she had bruises all over."

"Let me out. Thanks for the ride."

Quiet dignity.

It was shaken somewhat as he waited for Pat Cain to look up from early wire copy. He felt something like the man who had perfect faith in the proposition that if he ignored the wounded tiger, it would go away presently. The tiger went

away, all right, but the man was dead, even though his faith paid off.

He did not like to draw such a violent parallel to his own situation. He did not want to feel that conditions were serious as yet. He wished to ignore, and by ignoring end the faint but growing clamor.

Pat Cain raised his massive head. "Sit down, Webb." Webb did so, and Cain's heavy features settled into an expression of regret touched with brow-drawn confusion. "Webb, I think I jumped the gun in offering you a job."

"What does that mean, Pat?"

"It means you don't work here any more."

"That's a scummy trick."

"It was a scummy trick you played on the Hillman girl. Doc Barnes called up awhile ago, and I sent Jerry out after the story."

"Listen to me, Pat. Here's what happened." Once more he related the incident, with all possible earnestness, and a little sickness, too, down inside.

"Is that on the level, Webb?"

"I hope to die, Pat."

Cain frowned at nothing, slightly above and to the left of Webb. "According to Doc Barnes, she was scratched up. There were bruises here and there, where no bruises ought to be. There'll be a hue and cry, Webb. There'll be trouble. If I could be sure you're telling the truth, I'd string along. But how can I be sure? You haven't a handy witness, have you?"

"No. I was alone."

"I believe you, then. I don't know why. Hunch, I suppose. You'd better scam for a while, though, till the boys cool off. They're working themselves up at the moment. They'll explode almost any time now."

"Where are the cops?"

"Now listen, Webb. A couple of politically appointed constables aren't going to face a crowd of voters, especially when they believe the voters are right. They've been tipped off, no doubt, and have gone fishing."

"I'm not going. The hell with 'em. I swore I wouldn't run out. If I do, it looks like an admission. I didn't touch the Hillman girl, and I'm not fleeing from something I didn't do."

"That's a noble sentiment, lad, but not very damned smart. Think where you are. You're in a small township in an area that grew up on hobnails and six-shooters. There's no formal discipline in these places. We set up codes, and in-trust officers with their enforcement, but the instant somebody violates a twisted sense of honor peculiar to these parts, vigilantes ride again and the officers go home."

"Let 'em ride. I don't mind running from them, but if I'm innocent, I'm running from myself."

"You talk like a crazy man, Webb."



"Don't say that to me!"

"Why not? It isn't true. You're not crazy."

Webb made a helpless gesture. "All right, all right. Talk any way you please as long as you believe that. Have you a gun I can borrow?"

"No. And I wouldn't loan it to you if I did. A gun would only make people mad, and maybe get you in the pen, or hung. You're going to talk your way out of this, if you get out."

"I'll get out, all right. Things like this just don't happen. There's something screwy, Pat!"

"You're growing up, lad. A realization of the illogic of life is part of the process. But, when you analyze it down, it's pretty much cause and effect. Maybe you don't remember the little things that brought all this about, but they were there, all right. They always are."

"I don't believe it. I didn't do a thing to deserve this hounding I've been getting."

"You must have, Webb, whether you remember or not."

"But I didn't!"

"Sure you did. We're human beings, with a knowledge of right and wrong. We operate by exercise of free will. You did something, all right, that set a chain of events in motion. Everything that happened after that was based on the original action, probably as unimportant as tying your tie crooked."

"All right, I'll grant anything, only let's quit talking. You had a couple of assignments?"

"Not today. I want you away from here. My advice is to hunt a hole."

"I'm staying in the open."

"O. K., but stay somewhere else. It isn't considerate of you to drag your few friends into it, when you're just being stubborn. You know the market on dead heroes these days."

"It's not that serious, Pat. Do you think?"

"Who knows? I've seen lynchings in this country that grew out of a man tipping his hat to the wrong woman. Now beat it. I think this is the calm before the storm."

Webb went out into the noon sun, and eyed the street in both directions. At the far end, a clump of farmers' trucks fringed the feed mill. Desultory pedestrians mottled the sidewalk between. A thin ribbon of traffic moved in sleepy jerks to and from the curve that joined the State highway.

No ferment here. That placid surface hid no seething undercurrents. Webb shrugged away Cain's warnings, and started home. He was hailed from behind, and turned to see Court Masters, one bandage yet across his face, his left arm in a white silk triangle.

"Did you wire for your baggage?"

"Yes. It ought to be here tomorrow."

Masters' eyes twinkled from the bandage. "Good! I had a caller this morning, a Mr. Porter. Somehow, he had heard of what I have in the brief case. He has a client. I think there's a cool million in it."

"Well, I guess that let's me out."

Masters lengthened his stride a little. "Why should it? I told you I'd cut you in. I keep my word."

"But why? I haven't done anything."

"You saved my life, remember. Porter said— By the way, he had the strangest eyes. No color. Looked like—"

"Buttermilk?"

"Good! Exactly. He said—"

"His name is Potter, not Porter."

"So you know him? He is a broker of sorts, and one of his clients is H. William Karp. You know, the man who has more contacts here and abroad than anyone now alive. It seems that Karp will pay any amount for what I have."

"But what is it?"

"It's almost impossible to describe, unless you're talking to someone who knows all about it. Potter seemed to know enough, though I don't understand how. I was sure I am the only person alive who ever heard of it. Well, things leak out."

"By the way, where are you staying, Mr. Masters?"

"Wherever you are. I'm not letting you far away from me until after your baggage arrives."

"Well, I suppose there's a vacant room at the Parkers. I'm living there now. But about this million. I don't deserve any part of it. Don't see why you should offer it. I did what anybody else would do, in dragging you out of the car."

"But you did, my boy, and not somebody else. Besides, you're in trouble, and I want to help. You're sane. I know it. I want to help you prove it. Money is the best proof I know, in a place like this."

Webb Curtain knew nothing of the brewing storm forecast by Pat Cain. He was in his room the rest of the day. He did not feel that he was hiding; it was simply that he did not wish to be a fool and stir up the animals by appearing on the street.

For the most part, he lay on the bed and tried to apply Pat Cain's reasoning to his predicament. Some little act, according to Pat, was responsible. Webb could remember many little acts, but they fit no pattern. They were as unrelated as the figures in the tapestry he had admired, which now hung in his room. He made a note to thank Miss Margaret for her thoughtfulness. He had said he liked it; she had put it in his room.

As he looked at it for the second time, he felt a vague and nameless recognition which vanished under closer inspection. He felt that he had seen one or more of the figures recently, and that they had played a part in the development of the present state of affairs. He was unable to identify them, and went back to his analysis.

He knew nothing, then, of the crowd that milled in and out of the Hillman cottage during the afternoon. He knew nothing of the oft-told tale of Bessie's tragedy, and the embroidering thereof.

He never knew of the drinks that were poured, nor the story of how Webb had brutally and maniacally attacked Flannel Shirt with a club—from behind; nor how the fury grew slowly, for it was not fed by Bessie's infirm father or pimpled brother, who were timid by nature.

It remained for outsiders to pick up the flag of Hillman honor, dust it off, and move in a shouting wave to find Webb Curtain.

He heard them some blocks away, marching down the middle of the street. Children fled before the mob, shouting with excitement and dancing to keep from underfoot. Windows along the way were full of citizens' heads.

They were not armed, but they were determined to follow their leader, young Tom Eagan, to whatever destination he should name. "To hell with Webb Curtain" was the tenor of remarks.

They massed before the Parker residence, and made known their mission.

"Curtain! Come out, before we come in!"

"Come out, you lunatic!"

Webb knew fear as he stood inside the hall, one hand on the doorknob. Fear moistened his palms, tugged at the short hairs on his neck, tied knots in his throat, and plugged his lungs. He did not want to step out on the porch.

But he did, for he heard a step behind him. He did not turn, to see if it was one of the Parker sisters, whom he had not seen, or Court Masters. He stepped out on the porch and looked as steadily as possible at Tom Eagan.

"You're supposed to be at work," Webb said.

"I'd lock up anything to get a girl killer, and baby beater," Tom said, and the crowd approved loudly.

"What do you want?" Webb asked, sweating with the effort to keep his voice steady.

"You!" several cried, and a man stepped into the front ranks, a rope coiled over his arm.

"Are you coming out, or do we come after you?" Tom Eagan asked.

"What are you going to do with that rope?"

"We figure it this way," Eagan answered. "If you're in a crazy house, us taxpayers have to feed you. This way we save money, and you won't attack any more girls. Are you coming?"

"You'll have to come after me," Webb said.

The front wave rolled over the fence and lawn toward Webb. As he turned to run into the house, he saw Court Masters step out on the porch, a double-barreled shotgun in the crook of his good arm.

The mob halted. Masters looked at them. He said nothing, but the shouts died, and men shifted from one foot to another. They wiped at their faces with colored bandannas.

Masters lifted his lip. "Fifty to one, eh? Well, that's a fair measure of your courage. That's how brave you are.

"How come the daylight, though? That isn't like your kind. Liquored up? I can smell it. Even so, guys like you usually sneak up behind a man in the dark. This is something new, this daylight.

"What do you want with this boy? He hasn't hurt you."

"He attacked a girl," one of the men said.

"I don't believe it. But even if it's true, no mob is going to take him. I can't shoot many of you, it's true, but which two will be the first to die? I'm going to get at least two of you, right in the front row. So step up, boys. Volunteer.

Get yourself measured for a halo." He paused. "What? Nobody? Then listen. Get the hell out of here. I count three, I shoot." He raised the gun, cocked both barrels.

During his short words, the mob had begun to thin around the edges. Men walked away. When Masters raised the shotgun, the front wave sucked back, and the rear gave way.

All but a woman. Mrs. Hillman.

She stepped forward, a long butcher knife naked in her hand. Her eyes were flames of blue fury, her face twisted, neck corded.

"You'll never jump nobody else's girl!" she snarled, and hurled the knife at Webb.

He dodged, stumbled against Masters, who twisted in an effort to stay on his feet and swung the gun barrels so that they pointed at Webb's face. Webb felt a blow from the side which pushed him off the porch as one of the shells in the gun exploded. He felt the shock of the explosion, heard shot thud into the porch roof, and fell so that he saw the remainder of the action.

The recoil jerked the shotgun out of Masters' hand, and it fell butt foremost on the bottom step in such a position that the cocked hammer snagged on the step above and fired the remaining shell at the instant Masters' shoulder was in line with the barrel.

Masters fell back on the porch at the feet of Sophie, who appeared to have given Webb the blow which flung him aside and away from the first shot. Even as he rolled to his feet, Webb noted Sophie's unconcern with the situation, her blank look at Masters and at himself. She slouched back into the house as Webb rose and whirled to meet the woman who had flung the knife.

She was gone, as were they all. All, that is, save a small boy who apparently had been trampled to death when the crowd scattered.

All, too, except Louie, sickle under his arm, looking dully down at the boy.

Webb examined Masters first, saw that he needed aid quickly, and ran into the house to find bandages. One of the sisters came out of the parlor as he passed it.

"My land, Webb, what was all that racket?"

Webb gave her a hurried sketch, and she got first-aid materials while he telephoned the hospital for an ambulance. He reflected as he did so that Masters was becoming a regular customer, as the result of accidents. He reflected, too, that this was the second time Masters had nearly killed him—accidentally.

He ran outside again, to examine the boy on the lawn. He felt a cold sense of shock when he saw that Louie was gone, and that he was not in sight in either direction along the street. The shock of Louie's vanishing so suddenly was greater than the discovery that the boy was dead.

"Louie," he said to the sister who had curbed the bleeding of Masters' shoulder, "the gardener. He was here only a minute ago. Did you see where he went?"

"Don't pay him any mind," she snapped. "All he knows is what he's told. My land, Webb, don't worry about Louie. Try to think about yourself. This is only the beginning."

VI.

Miss Emily's good eye followed Webb's pacing before the cold parlor fireplace. Miss Gertrude sat beside her, folded fragile hands creamy against her black satin dress. Miss Margaret played with a bundle of little sticks on the corner table.

"Webb!" Miss Emily exclaimed presently. "You are doing yourself no earthly good. You must relax."

"Gracious, yes," Miss Gertrude added. "If you make yourself sick, we'll have to dose you with castor oil."

Webb turned and faced them, feet widespread, hands locked behind him. "When a bunch of men come after you for something you haven't done, it's not easy to relax. What happens next, is what I'd like to know."

"What happens next will not affect your conduct," Miss Emily said. "You have set yourself on a path. You must stay there."

"But you saw—" He broke off. "Or did you? I didn't see you around when they were here. I saw Sophie. She saved my life, I guess. But I didn't see any of you."

"We were away—on business," Miss Emily explained.

"But I didn't see you go. I didn't see you come back."

"Gracious, there's more than one door in this old house," said Miss Gertrude. "Do we have to go out the front every time we leave?"

"No, ma'am. It's none of my business what you do. But I started to say you can't just ignore something that is going to kill you. If you do, you wind up dead. Maybe they're right; maybe I am nuts. Maybe I did annoy that girl in a fit of insanity, and don't remember. Maybe I'd better go have myself locked up."

"I have no sympathy for anyone who brims over with self-pity," Miss Emily snapped. "All you need is a good physic. That will put you in a better frame of mind."

"And it was indirectly my fault that little Harold Eagan was killed by the mob. What happens on that?"

"The mob didn't kill him. His heart must have just stopped. There wasn't a mark on him."

"I'll be blamed for it, though. You watch."

"Gracious, Webb!" Miss Gertrude broke in. "Why don't you brace up? You know what has

to be done to square yourself with people here. Why don't you do it?"

"Because I'm scared! I don't mind admitting it. I'm no hero. I did what you said, and look at what happened. I've acted as right as I know how, and I'm called a mad killer. I haven't killed anybody, and I'm not mad. Why should people think I am?"

"Go up to bed, Webb. You need rest. Nothing else will happen tonight."

"How can you be sure? As soon as they get over their shame of running from one man with one gun, they'll be madder than ever. I want to be ready for 'em if they come again."

"You said you were scared, and now you're ready to face them. That doesn't follow."

"I'm afraid of being afraid, too. Maybe that's why a lot of people get killed for nothing. If they were smart, and ran, they could live. But if I run, everybody will think I attacked that Hillman girl. I'll even think so, that it happened in a fit of insanity. The only way I can hold on to anything is to stay and face it."

Miss Margaret took her hands away from the sticks which had fallen into an eccentric pattern. "Masters must die," she said.

Miss Gertrude nodded, but Miss Emily was looking at Webb and seemed not to have heard the pronouncement of the blind and deaf sister, whose thin face offered almost angelic contrast to her grim prophecy.

Webb caught his breath. Up to now, each prophecy, uttered by whichever sister not concerned in the conversation of the moment, had been involved in his own affairs. Was this? And how could she know? He looked grimly at Miss Gertrude.

"Are you playing games with me?" he demanded.

"What on earth—" Miss Emily began.

"No, Webb," Miss Gertrude interposed. "We are not playing games. Gracious, we're just taking a natural interest in you."

"But these predictions. How can you make them? They scare me, whether they're true or not."

"They're true, all right."

"But how can they be? Nobody can see into the future."

"A true clairvoyant," Miss Emily said, "can visualize the pattern of life. Each thread in the big pattern is tied to an individual. Some of the threads cross all the others, that is, the actions of some individuals affect the entire race. But some of the threads are short. The true clairvoyant, I say, can visualize the pattern, and follow the individual threads. She sees the twists and turns up to the end, and knows what will happen."

"I don't believe it. There's no pattern in this screwy situation I'm in."

"Oh, yes, Webb."

"I still don't believe it. I'm going for a walk. I'm confused. But—" He faltered, thought for a second. "Maybe I better stay off the streets."

"It's perfectly safe—tonight," Miss Emily said.

"Well, I'll take your word once more. We'll see. I need some air."

He walked down Lexington, in the general direction of Kay's. This is really like a dead city, he thought. The houses are dark. I'm all that's alive. Nothing moves, except whispers in the trees, and—

There's nothing in this dark. That isn't a Something by that tree, it's just a shadow. It's just a shadow. It's just a shadow.

That's all. Those aren't footsteps behind me. Because when I look, nothing is there. Nothing. There isn't anything to be there. You can see people, and if you look at where you hear footsteps and see nothing, then nothing is there. Nothing. Nothing.

I'm not afraid.

That *flop—flop—flop*. That's a tree limb. But—there isn't any wind. There must be a wind. I just don't feel it. All the noises are wind sounds. I can see nothing is there. It's the wind. It must be.

Stop this, you damned fool. Why the hell are you running? That wasn't a hand on your neck, it wasn't fingers. It was a— It was a— But it *felt* like fingers.

That's what it felt like.

Where are you going tonight, Webb Curtin? Did I say that? I didn't say anything. Who did? What did?

Where are you going, where?

"Hey, you! Stop! I'll fire!"

The command snapped Webb back to reality, to recognition of the lighted intersection—First and Main. How had he got off Lexington? He quit running.

He watched Andy Ames, big leather-faced constable, holster his gun and amble away from the bank's vacant doorway.

"What's eatin' you?"

Webb's legs went rubbery with reaction. He put his hand against the lamp-post for support, sucked in rasping breaths.

"Just—getting—some exercise."

"You was goin' so fast, I didn't know you. Almost potted you in the leg. Hadn't oughta run like that."

"Yeah, Andy."

Webb was sickened and puzzled by his hysteria. Not for years, since he was a little boy, had he known fear of the dark. This experience

was more vivid, more blood chilling, than any he remembered as a child. Was this evidence of the insanity charged to him by the town?

"I'll walk along with you," Andy said. "Wanta talk to you. Where you going?"

"Nowhere in particular. Loring's, maybe, if Kay's up."

"O. K. Listen, son, lemme give you some advice. Pack up and leave this place. Things are happenin' around here, and you're behind 'em, whether you like it or whether you don't. You're blamed for 'em, and somethin' bad's gonna come off if you don't go away."

"But I live here!"

"Don't give a hoot. You been doin' things no decent young fella oughta. If Bessie Hillman'd press charges for what you done last night, I'd throw you in jail up to your armpits."

"I didn't do anything to her!"

"Well, I admit maybe you didn't. When it come right down to it, she said she wasn't too sure if it was you or just somebody looked like you. But you're the one all the ruckus is roilin' around. You better beat it."

"Listen, Andy. You're a cop, supposed to protect citizens. Well, why don't you? Where were you when they came after me today?"

"I was away on business," Andy said with dignity. "If I'd 'a' been there, things would 'a' been different."

"So now you're going to protect me by running me off?"

"It ain't that, son. If I was sure they was wrong about you, I'd take you into my own house. But I ain't sure. Maybe you are crazy, a little, but not crazy enough to put away. Runnin' the streets at night looks like it. But still, I think everybody would be happier if you scrambled. That's all I got to say, son."

"What if I don't scam?"

"Then I reckon you just gotta take the consequences, and there'll be some."

"You won't give me any help?"

"I got to obey the will of the majority."

"A mob!"

"That's all in the point o' view, son. They ain't a mob in their own eyes. They're just citizens, cleanin' up their community."

"I'll think it over, Andy."

"Do, son."

Webb continued toward Kay's, wondering about his nightmarish experience on the dark street more than this new threat hinted at by Andy Ames. Such experiences shouldn't happen to normal persons. True, in his imaginative childhood he had known of the peopled dark, had been threatened by his parents as most children are threatened. But tonight he had seen Things, ac-

tually seen them. The question was, were they real or inside his own head?

He dropped this trend as he passed the big white house of the Eagan's. A plain black hearse, unlettered though everyone knew it belonged to Gorham's Undertaking Parlors, was a solemn reminder that death had struck here.

The face of the house revealed nothing, but Webb knew that behind the drawn blinds the grief-stricken family gathered in one of the rooms while Pearly Gates Gorham and his assistant performed "the sacred rites of closing the eyes, of composing the limbs, and of preparing for burial the empty vessel of the departed soul"; knew that tomorrow Pearly Gates would rub his hands with fat satisfaction and say to his assistant: "Neatest corpse I ever laid out."

Will I be a customer? Webb asked himself. What will come out of this?

At the Loring house, lights burned, and Webb entered as usual without knocking.

"Hello, everybody," he called.

Kay's father, a plump man of fifty, put his book on a table beside his chair, got to his feet, and looked coldly at Webb. Mrs. Loring made nervous motions with her pretty hands, shot an anxious glance through rimless spectacles at her husband.

"Where's Kay?" Webb asked.

"My daughter is in her room."

"Oh? Well, don't bother to call her. I'll go back."

"Wait!" Mr. Loring called as Webb turned. "You are not a welcome caller here any more, Curtain. I must ask you not to annoy my daughter further."

"Annoy? What are you talking about?"

"I will not discuss the matter, sir. My word is enough, in my own house."

"You mean she doesn't want to see me?"

"I mean she will not see you."

"I'm afraid I'll have to hear it from her, Mr. Loring."

"Must I order you out of the house?"

Webb stared in honest bewilderment at this man who had taken him fishing as a boy, had bought him ice cream at the Bon Marché, had given him toys for Christmas, an air rifle among others.

He turned without a word and went out. He felt a deep pain, his mouth drooped, his steps dragged as he went back to the Parkers. No ties held him now. After the arrival of his baggage tomorrow, and the return of Masters' brief case, he would take the first train.

Whether Kay or her father had gone over to the others was unimportant. No matter whose decision, he had lost contact with the person who believed in him more than all the others. She had always believed in him, he recalled suddenly.

On his way to the *Sentinel* the next morning, Webb had a feeling of invisibility. Such persons as he met looked through him, as if he didn't exist. Motorists, many of whom he had known for years, drove past with their eyes on the road. Even shopkeepers did not look up as he passed, or, if they did it was when Webb's eyes were elsewhere.

He did not detect a single eye noting his passage, and for a moment entertained serious doubts of his existence. Had he died? Were these the spiritual remains of personality? This was worse than being obviously avoided. How dreadfully lonesome is an invisible man, he thought.

Not until he passed the marble-splotched façade of Gorham's Undertaking Parlors did his conviction of living return. For Pearly Gates, just inside his door, seemed highly aware of Webb Curtain.

He looks, Webb thought, like a vulture watching a dying calf. But why did all the others not see me? Or was that part of my imagination, like that horror last night? And why should Gorham look at me like I was a job coming up? Is that imagination, too? Does he look at everybody that way? Well, he'd better take a good look at me. It's his last.

"Good-by," he told Pat Cain. "You don't owe me any money; I haven't done any work. I'm taking your advice. I'm hunting a hole."

"Sorry, Webb."

"Me, too. So long."

At the railroad station, he failed to see his baggage on the long board platform or inside the baggage waiting room.

"New York train in yet?" he asked the agent.

"Nope."

"Overdue, isn't it?"

"Yep."

"I'll wait."

The ticket agent went back to his magazine, and Webb sat on one of the benches designed for hunchbacks. Aside from the intermittent rattle of the telegraph, no sound broke the stillness. No trains passed, no telephones shrilled, no travelers came in.

Webb dozed, woke with a start, and eyed the station clock in amazement. He had slept for nearly three hours. He was a light sleeper, and wondered how the scheduled trains could have passed without waking him. He went back to the wicket.

"Where's my baggage?"

The agent raised his head. "On the streamliner, I reckon."

"You mean they didn't unload it?"

"Ain't come in."

"Why not?"

"Wreck. Six hours late."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Didn't ask me."

"When will it be in?"

"Couple hours, I judge."

Webb went muttering out on the platform, and paced between the red baggage truck and porcelain drinking fountain. Sunset came, and stars peeped out of the twilight. The station lights blazed, streaming in amber shafts through windows and door on the platform.

A mockingbird flung harsh notes from a chimney somewhere across the tracks; the whistle of the Red Dog Mine summoned the night shift; house lights winked on toward town; somewhere down the track a black shadow moved, stopped, disappeared.

Far off in the hills wailed the cry of the streamliner, and tracks before the station presently began to hum. The agent came outside and pulled the rattling truck to the spot where the baggage car should stop. The streamliner slid around the near hill and came in with a hiss of steam and clang of bell.

Passengers turned bored looks from the little station back to their activities: books, magazines, cards, conversation. One passenger alighted.

Webb noticed only that she was blond, tall, and lithe. He was more interested in trunks and suitcases which were flung out of the baggage car and piled with efficient violence on the truck.

The agent pulled the truck away, the conductor high-balled the engineer, the bell clanged, the drivers spun, caught, and the streamliner pulled out.

Webb took Masters' brief case from his trunk, checked his baggage, and hurried away. As he crossed the tracks to a short cut through back ways to the hospital, he remembered the shadow he had seen, for suddenly a series of shadows materialized into solid fists that struck and boots that thudded against his ribs.

He fell face down at the first rain of blows, shielded his face with his hands, his ribs as best he could with his elbows. For a short time he was aware of individual blows and kicks, how this was more or less painful than the last, and shifted to avoid permanent injury. After what might have been a minute or an hour, the night became simply a blur of shock and pain through which he heard as from a great distance: "Let this be a warning, Webb Curtain." Presently, even his fading sensations died.

Dawn was a cloudy glow in the east when he was conscious again, but the sun was an hour high before he had crawled to the station platform and awakened the night man. Aid was summoned, and as he was loaded into the ambulance, he saw a white-bearded tramp walk off the tracks to the spot where he had been attacked and pick up the brief case. He made a weak and incoherent

effort to call attention to this, but the intern put him off with cheerful sympathy.

"Sure it hurts. But we'll fix it up."

VII.

"I've got to go," Webb said to the nurse. "I got to get out of here."

"Now just relax," she soothed. "You'll feel better presently."

"I feel all right now! Listen, there's a fortune at stake. Give me my clothes. You can't keep me here against my will."

"You mustn't get excited. Those ribs need rest. You can't get out of bed before tomorrow."

"I'll go out of here in this nightgown, nurse. Make it easy on yourself. With or without clothes, I'm going out."

He raised himself, wincing with pain, and some of the starch went out of the pretty girl. She shifted worried eyes at the door, set her thermometer tray on the bed table, and took Webb's shoulders in gentle but firm hands.

"You mustn't do this. Please!"

He was too weak to fight. He sank back on the pillow. "Listen," he pleaded. "Honest, this is more important than ribs. I lost something when I was beaten up last night. It's worth a million dollars. I've got to go get it."

The worried expression in her eyes was replaced by sympathy, mixed somewhat with sadness and pity. She put a cool, tender palm on his forehead. "Close your eyes. Relax. Don't worry about an old million. There's plenty more."

Webb flung off her hand with weak savagery. "I'm neither hysterical nor delirious! Ask Court Masters. He's still here, isn't he?"

"Mr. Masters cannot be questioned."

Webb remembered Miss Margaret's "Masters must die."

"What's the matter with him? He's not dead?"

"Oh, no. But his condition is critical. Critical, but not serious. His progress is satisfactory."

"Nurse, I've got to go. I've been here three hours. Maybe that's too long. I don't know. But any more time in here and I'll be too late. This is serious. Honest it is."

"I'm sorry, but doctor's orders—"

"The hell with the doctor! This isn't jail. I'm paying for whatever I get here. You can't hold me unless I'm under arrest. I'll sue this hospital for every nickel it ever hopes to get!"

"You surely won't get any better this way. Wait. I'll ask the doctor."

She rustled out on cat feet, and Webb tried moving his taped torso into experimental positions. Sweat stood out on his forehead, but he knew that with help he could manage. Larry would help. Larry would always help.

The nurse returned, with his clothes. "We wish no responsibility in this matter. You must waive all claim for damages which may result from your action."

"O. K., O. K. Dump 'em on the bed. Take a nickel out of my pants pocket and telephone Larry Owen. You better take several. You might have to make more than one call."

He gave her a series of numbers, which she wrote on the back of a prescription pad, and struggled into his clothes while she was gone. He gave up trying to tie his shoes and fell painfully back on the bed until the nurse came back with fifteen cents in change.

"He's on his way."

"Thanks. Will you tie my shoes?" When this was done, "Now help me out to the front desk, please."

He signed the waiver, and leaned back in the soft chair. He forced a grin. "You're swell," he said.

Two dimples flanked a smart, white line of teeth. "You're not so bad, either. Just foolish."

"I'll spend some of that million in your direction."

"Do."

Larry galloped in, eyes wide with amazed worry, hair wind-twisted. "I hurried," he said, and Webb suppressed a shudder at the picture Larry conjured. "What happened?" To the nurse, he said, "Oh, hello."

"Never mind what happened," Webb said. "I'll tell you later. We got to see a man about a package. Help me out to the car."

After three halting, supported steps, Larry said, "Shucks, this is easier," and picked Webb up, carrying him with arms under knees and shoulders outside.

Webb flung involuntary tears from his eyes, leaned gasping against the seat, motioned weakly ahead, and whispered, "Railroad station."

Larry was still panting from the exertion of carrying Webb when they came to a smooth, fast stop at the depot. Webb caught his first breath that was not stifled by wind pressure.

"Run into the station, ask the agent if he saw a tramp with a white beard, pack on his back, carrying a satchel about three hours ago. If he didn't, ask him where the guy would likely go. See if there have been any trains through."

Larry was back in two minutes. "No trains, no tramp. But there's a jungle out by Turkey Creek. Maybe he went there."

"Let's get going!"

Webb customarily relaxed when Larry was at the wheel, but on this occasion he closed his eyes as Larry hurled the car through scattered traffic. Singing wind told him something of their speed, and an irregular swish—swish—swishswish identified cars which Larry skirted by a paper thick-

ness. When the exhaust was a steady roar, and the wind a constant pressure against his outside ear, Webb opened his eyes on the speedometer needle, pushing ninety-three.

"Don't hit anything, for Heaven's sake," he shouted. "I'm a sick man."

"At this speed, it wouldn't make any difference," Larry cried cheerfully.

A tree-blind crossing outside, the city limits made a *ssst!* in Webb's ears as he caught a glimpse of a State cop kicking the starter on his motorcycle. He thought that for an instant he heard the howl of a siren, but if so the wind snatched it away.

Their headlong rush decreased. Larry did some light and artful braking, ducked to the left between two oncoming cars, and slipped down a narrow dirt road into a clump of trees beside the stream as a siren came out of their wake, howled across the Turkey Creek bridge and faded from earshot.

The hobo jungle was a small flat clearing near the water, with a rude fireplace of blackened stones in its center. An old man lay apparently asleep at the far edge, his white head pillowed on his "bundle." He sat up as the big car purred to a stop, eyed his visitors with sharp, gray eyes, tugged thoughtfully at his white beard with a corded hand.

"You are not officers," he said, when the motor died.

Webb stifled the harsh words on his tongue tip, was abashed by the cultured courtesy of the tone.

"No, sir. I am looking for a brief case. I believe you picked it up near the station early this morning. It's mine, and I'll pay a reward for its return."

The old man got to his feet and came to the car, carefully skirting a thorn bush.

"No reward is necessary, young man. If I had your brief case, I'd gladly return it. However, I discarded it about halfway between here and the depot. I tried to open it, in hopes of finding its owner's name, but it was locked. I slit a seam with my knife, but it seemed to be lined with a flexible steel screen. A sturdy piece of workmanship. I did not wish to add to my load, and threw it into a clump of hawthorn to the right of the tracks as you approach the station from here."

"I'll go get it," Larry said. "You wait here."

He trotted along a path, up the right of way, and disappeared down the tracks. Webb looked at the old man.

He was in khaki, faded but clean with many washings in streams. His manner was calm, and in his gray eyes was an objective, analytical curiosity. His white hair was long and slightly sunburned. His face, as much as was not covered by beard, was a deep wrinkled brown. His hands

were lean and brown, with clean fingernails.

"You're getting along in years, to be barging around the country on freights, aren't you?"

"I am only seventy."

"Most men die by then."

"They are supposed to die. I am not."

"Oh? How come?"

"I don't know the real reason. I only know the fact."

"I don't get it."

The old man moved to a flat rock near the thorn bush, sat down and rolled a brown cigarette.

"I mean this, young man. I wander across the country because that is my destiny. It was part of my destiny when I turned to my class twenty years ago. I looked at that collection of youth and thought how I had spent mine instructing others. 'It has occurred to me,' I told them, 'that life is outside, in the hills, the plains, the forests, the cities. I must live it.' I walked out of that classroom and began to wander. I never went back. That was part of my pattern."

"Do you really believe that we are restricted by a pattern?"

"How can it be otherwise? Why is this man rich, this, poverty-stricken? They are both human beings. Accident of birth or environment? Then why are they not reversed? Why not this man in silk hat and tails, this, in rags? They are never reversed."

"That's because it just happens that way."

"Happens? No. Think of the complex series of circumstances that brought you and me here together at this moment. Blind chance? I think not. Anything we know, which operates blindly, will die. But the world moves forward. We do not retrogress along evolutionary lines, we progress. We have direction. Toward what, I don't know. Directed by whom, I don't know. But the fact is obvious."

"I don't believe it."

"Nor do many. The fact, the truth, however, remains, whether your or my belief is correct. I knew three sisters, old maids, who had a touch of vision. One of them—"

"Was their name Parker?"

"Why, yes. Do you know of them?"

"I live with 'em."

"How odd. I should think they'd have died by now. How is their health?"

"It's hard to tell. All right, I suppose."

"I see. I started to say that one of them explained to me that each life is a thread in a pattern which includes all humanity. Each person, then, moves along the path outlined by the thread. He may struggle, he may acquiesce, but he ends at the appointed place at the appointed hour."

"Yeah, I know. They told me that. But I don't believe it because it gives us no choice. We do

what we want, or we fail, through no fault of our own. Initiative, effort, and all such mean nothing. We might as well obey our impulses."

"You can't obey your impulses if you are not meant to obey them. If you are meant to struggle against them, you will struggle."

"Then why not relax, and let everything ride?"

"You will, if that is your destiny. If not, you will fight circumstances. It doesn't matter what you think or believe. Your thoughts, beliefs, actions, are cast for you."

"I'd hate like hell to believe that, uncle. It makes me somebody's toy. Whose?"

"I don't know, my boy, I don't know. Here comes your friend. He found it, I see."

Larry plunged down the right of way, came puffing along the path, and Webb saw that thorns had left bloody tracks on his hands. He tossed the scratched brief case in the seat, and got behind the wheel.

"Where now?"

"Back to town. Sorry about the hands."

"I'll live." Larry grinned at the old man. "When you throw things, mister, you throw 'em."

Webb adjusted himself carefully in the seat, wincing at each movement, and held himself as motionless as possible while Larry backed out onto the highway.

"There's no hurry, now," Webb said. "We might meet that cop."

Larry grinned. "He's still chasin' us, I bet. He ought to be somewhere in Colorado by now."

"What did you do with that ticket?"

"Turned it over to dad. What happened to you, Webb?"

Webb told him. "I want to take care of this brief case first. Then we'll call on Andy Ames. Somebody is going to catch hell. Andy may not know who beat me up, but I think everybody else in town knew yesterday. They avoided me in a new way. Scared the devil out of me. Go to the hospital, Larry. We'll find out about Court Masters."

Larry spent five minutes inside, came out and mimicked the nurse. "His condition is critical, though not serious. He is unable to receive visitors."

"Now what the hell will I do about this satchel?"

"What's in it, Webb?"

"I don't know. Something damned important, according to Masters. Well, let's find Andy."

The big constable was not too excited.

"What I told you, son. You ought to 've gone."

Webb gripped the arms of the office chair. "So you knew about it, too!"

"Didn't know anything of the kind. I would've stopped it. You name 'em, I'll pinch 'em."

"I didn't get a look at 'em. But this is what

worries me; they said this was only a warning. I can't take another experience like that."

Andy spread his hands on the desk. "Well, what can I do, son? I can't arrest everybody in town. They've all got it in for you. I can't even give you a bodyguard. I got no men. Like I said, you'll be better somewhere else."

"I can't leave, Andy. I've got some business to clean up, and I don't know how soon I can do it."

"Well, I can't offer anything, son."

"All right. I'll protect myself, then. I won't get caught in dark places again, and if anybody wants hard luck, let 'em try something else. They'll get a dose of No. 4 buckshot."

"Don't you go carryin' a gun. I'll throw you in the jug."

"I'll carry it in the open. It won't be concealed."

"Makes no difference. You ain't fit to tote a firearm. People'd scream their lungs out. Tell you what I'll do. You stay outa sight for a while. I'll sashay around and see what I can pick up. If I can find who jumped you, I'll let you know and you can file charges."

"You should do that, anyway. I'm not staying out of sight any longer than these bruises make me. They've got me mad. I may not even leave after I get my business done."

Larry helped Webb into the car again, and drove him home. Sophie admitted them. The sisters were not in evidence. When Webb was in pajamas and in bed, he said:

"Larry, call Kay. Ask her what goes on, and to come see me. Then look around and see if you can find a shotgun. It may be in the room across the hall. Masters had it."

Larry came back presently, but not alone. He was followed into the room by a neat, middle-aged man who wore his hat at a jaunty angle on silver-gray hair, a man with buttermilk eyes.

"This guy came to the door, Webb. Don't seem to be anybody else around, so I let him in. Said it was important."

"Hello, Mr. Potter. You do get around."

The colorless eyes were without expression. "I am happy to see you, Mr. Curtain. Do you live here alone?"

"No. But skip the biography. What do you want?"

"Ah, yes. My business. You have an object, I believe, which belongs to Mr. Court Masters?"

"Did he tell you that?"

"That is beside the point. I—"

"Excuse me a second. Larry, what about Kay?"

"Yeah. I'll tell you later. Want me to wait outside?"

"Stick around. Nothing secret here. Well, Mr. Potter?"



"I have a client who will pay a huge sum for the object, Mr. Curtain."

"You can't expect me to have much faith in your clients. What was his name, Grach? I saw what happened to him, and the job I was offered."

"That was unfortunate. It won't happen again."

"Even if I had this object, I couldn't sell it without Masters' permission."

"I understand that, Mr. Curtain. That can be arranged."

"Not if he's unconscious."

"Mr. Masters will be able to receive visitors tomorrow afternoon. The business can be concluded."

"How do you know?"

"That is also beside the point. My client will arrive during the week, with a certified check."

"I'm curious about something, Mr. Potter. What is this gadget you're so anxious to buy?"

"I? I am not anxious to buy it. It's of no use to me, Mr. Curtain."

"What is it, then?"

As Mr. Potter looked at him with no expression—not a deepening line around the eyes, not a twitch of the humorless lips, not a movement of the relaxed hands—Webb thought: I'm getting used to little chills lately. Women who are blind and deaf make true prophecies, things chase me at night, and an odd man looks into—my soul.

"I don't know what it is," Mr. Potter said.

"Then what's all the fuss about?"

Mr. Potter didn't answer the question. His strange eyes fell on the ring which Miss Margaret had given Webb.

"May I look at your ring?"

Webb spread his hand, and Mr. Potter bent over it. He looked for a long time, turning it this way and that. Webb understood his absorption, for the tiny scissors buried in the heart of the

yellow stone induced queer feelings in the beholder.

"Where did you get this?" Mr. Potter asked.

"It was a gift, from a friend."

"I—see." Mr. Potter straightened. "Very interesting, very, very interesting." He paused. "I'll see you later."

He turned and walked out of the room.

VIII.

After a short silence following the departure of Mr. Potter, Larry sat heavily on the bed and turned puzzled eyes to Webb. "What is all this?"

Webb grimaced at the shaking caused by Larry's abrupt move. "Don't rock the boat, for Heaven's sake!"

Larry jumped up, apologetic, and the bed shook again.

"Will you light somewhere?" Webb groaned.

"Gosh, I'm sorry, Webb. I didn't think." Larry pulled a chair near the bed. "Where does it hurt the most?"

"Everywhere. Listen, Larry. Run downstairs and get that brief case we left in the hall. We'll try to see what goes."

"You're going to open it?"

"I'm going to try."

While Larry was gone, Webb relaxed as much as possible against the pillows and closed his eyes. He had some thinking to do.

Mr. Potter, the Parker sisters, and Court Masters. Pat Cain, Tom Eagan, and Larry Owen. The train wreck, which delayed his baggage and caused him to be beaten. Bessie Hillman. Andy Ames.

He had tried to get away from this town where he was almost a pariah. Circumstances seemed to have conspired to prevent him. He had tried to stay, then, and face down the ridicule, the slight contempt. And circumstances seemed to force him out. His second attempt had brought about the present condition, and now the illness of Court Masters, Webb's possession of the brief case, the arrival of a buyer next week—circumstances again.

What, he asked himself, will I do? It seems a simple thing to catch a train—for anybody else. But when I try, things happen. A girl screams in the dark, a cop stops me, a train wreck—What about that? I must check on it. Pat Cain will have the story.

Is there a pattern? he asked. No. Can't be. People have their ups and downs. Nobody runs on an even keel, unless that old tramp who is an ex-professor. Same theory as the Parker sisters. Puppets.

The Parker sisters. Three eccentric old maids who play name games. And where do they go? Where were they when the mob came after me?

Where are they now? Their going somewhere is something like the picture of the blind man carrying the cripple. They must make an odd procession.

A warning, somebody said last night when they were booting me. Does that mean that if I don't get out of line again—at least, according to their notion—nothing will happen? I can stay? I'd like to. Kay.

Kay. Don't think of Kay. What's taking Larry so long? He can drive me over to see Masters tomorrow.

Maybe I am loopy. Would a sane man have thoughts like these? Be chased down a dark street? Please, God, don't let that happen again. And how did poor Bessie get bruised?

Webb broke off his thoughts as Larry hurried in, white-faced, carrying the brief case.

"Webb! I saw something. You know that maid?"

"Sophie? What about her, except that she seems a trifle cracked?"

"The parlor door was open, Webb. As I passed to get this case, I noticed she was standing in a corner by the fireplace. Well, that was all right. But as I went on down the hall to the chest where we'd put this, it started worrying me. Something was wrong with the way she looked."

"I noticed that the first time I saw her."

"But this was different. So I went back and stood in the door for a long time. Webb, she didn't move a muscle. It was like somebody had put her there, like you put a broom in a corner."

"Did you investigate?"

"Me?" Larry said. "Me?"

"Well, relax. She's probably resting, in her peculiar fashion. Let's see the satchel."

It was of heavy leather, with an efficient-looking lock. One corner was slit, and Webb could see the fine mesh of a metal screen. He poked this with his finger, then looked at Larry.

"This is a portable safe."

"Maybe we can pick the lock."

"We can try. What is it the cops and crooks always use, a hairpin?"

"Don't look at me! I don't use 'em!"

"Well, find something."

Webb peered at the lock, turned the case this way and that, tried to bring all his reading knowledge of locks to mind. Larry opened dresser drawers, grunted with satisfaction, and brought out a rusty hairpin.

They worked on the lock. They bent the hairpin in various shapes until their fingers bled. They twisted, turned, shook, and cursed.

"Crime doesn't pay," Webb said at last, licking at his fingers. "Turn on the lights."

He dropped the brief case beside the bed, and Larry punched the light switch.

"I better go home, Webb. You want anything else?"

"No. Oh, I forgot. Did you call Kay?"

"You're not gonna like this, Webb. She had to give her old man her word not to see you till he said O. K. But a cousin of hers came to visit last night, and is coming over here in the morning with a message. After she told me that, she started to cry, and hung up."

Webb looked at his hands on the bed cover. He didn't see them; he only looked.

"Will you take me over to the hospital tomorrow afternoon?" he asked after a long silence.

"Yeah. So long, Webb. If you need me between now and then, call me."

"Thanks."

Don't think about it, Webb told himself fiercely. Let it ride. Sit back, see what happens.

He stared at the tapestry. He didn't see it, either. At some time during his staring, however, he noted that the border was incomplete. It covered two sides only, the right side and the bottom, as if the tapestry were designed as the lower right-hand corner section of a larger piece. He stared some more, unseeing, until the calm approaching footsteps of one of the sisters broke into his miserable reverie.

"Come in," he called to a brisk knock, and the sister who knocked gave him a look of sympathy mixed with exasperation.

"My land, Webb! Can't you keep out of trouble? Do you hurt much?"

"Nothing serious, Miss Emily."

"I'm Margaret, Webb. What have you done for yourself?"

"Rushed around all day."

"Well, you need some liniment and hot soup. You stay right still till I get everything. I never saw such a boy for trouble. You've got to feel well for your visitor."

Webb blinked. "How did you know I have a visitor coming tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow? I'm talking about tonight. Mr. Cain telephoned. He's coming out shortly."

She bustled out, returned with lotion which she applied to his bruises with brisk hands and which sent a restful glow along his nerves. As she finished, Sophie entered with a steaming tray. She set this on Webb's knees, gave him her customary blank look, and went out. Webb ate while Miss Margaret watched him with an expression which he interpreted as fondly maternal. He felt a twinge of sympathy for these old maids, childless and kind.

"You're nice to me," Webb said.

"We have to be—now," she replied cryptically.

"What does that mean?"

"You're like one of the family, now. We've got to fight for you. But we'll win—I hope."

"Thank you, Miss Margaret. If ever I can do

anything for you—"

"You can't, Webb. Nobody can."

"But why?"

"Oh, never mind, Webb. We're lonely, that's all. Once there were jobs we could do. But they said we weren't efficient, and now we have to do what we can find. But let's don't talk about it. Are you finished? Mr. Cain should be here any minute."

Any room seemed to shrink when Pat Cain came into it. He towered over Webb's bed and his flinty eyes had a slight twinkle.

"Well, my lad. It seems you had a work-out."

"Sit down, Pat. Thanks for coming."

"It isn't a casual visit, Webb. I've done an editorial, based on what a queer little man named Potter told me. I want you to check it for accuracy."

"Mr. Potter is a queer little man. He seems to have a lot of information, too."

"Listen to this."

Cain stood, read from typed sheets in his bull voice that almost rattled the windows.

"Gentlemen:

"A fine, careless word, that. Gentlemen.

"The laws of the land govern what a man may say in print. He cannot, with impunity, call another a skunk, a rat, a horse-faced idiot, or any similar descriptive terms. He may be sued in the courts.

"This does not imply that I would call the members of our local mob by any such name if I could. No, gentlemen:

"You will notice that the title of this piece is 'Unfinished Business.' Not mine. Yours. You have a few loose ends to clear up.

"You have killed a little boy, by your extra-legal action as a mob. The Eagan child died because you chose to interpret and administrate the law according to your lights.

"You have beaten and nearly killed a young man. You exercised care and caution, by attacking him at night and in force. That action, I assume, was covered by your constitutional right to the pursuit of happiness.

"Are you stopping there?"

"How about that little lady who lives alone at the end of Elm Street? She is twisted with arthritis, and the door of her cottage is never locked because she cannot move well enough to admit her many visitors. Do you ignore her?"

"Another suitable victim for your peculiar talents is Blind Ben. Would it not be an easy task to wrest his fiddle from him, smash it over his head, and kick him unconscious in the alley behind Hobe's Smithy, where he sleeps?"

"Is he to escape?"

"No more than four of you would be needed for that job, providing Ben had had a hard day.

"Your principal item of unfinished business, of course, is Webb Curtain. He is still alive.

"Through no fault of yours, of course. No. You have tried, twice. But he is alive, and, therefore, an item.

"A newspaper should be a clearing house for community sentiment, in addition to its more conventional functions. Very well, the *Sentinel's* columns are open to expressions of opinion as to how Webb Curtain should best be dealt with.

"It is sheer idiocy, of course, to put him in an institution for the insane—if he is insane—and cost the taxpayers hard-earned money. That is out of the question for this town. We can use that money for better projects: the Fireman's Ball, receptions for out-of-town politicians, new blinds for the city hall, a new coat of paint for our one traffic signal.

"Needless expense is out. We must economize.

"For the aid and guidance of those who will take advantage of space offered here, let us consider a few facts.

"Webb's mother and father were probably insane, at least temporarily. Normal persons do not wish to take their own lives.

"At the time of their death, a rumor began to circulate. 'Webb Curtain is crazy, Webb Curtain is crazy,' was the whisper through the town. Whisper? Yes—then.

"Not now. He acted with humility, he wanted to go away, he met an hysterical girl on the street. The whisper grew, and grew, and culminated in the roar of a mob which scattered like rabbits and killed a little child.

"Let's assume that he's crazy, a dangerous maniac. Should we be ashamed, then, to rid our community of such an influence? Does the man who kills a mad dog sneak up on it in the dark? Does the man who stamps on a poisonous insect wait for nightfall to cloak his identity?

"No. Then for the sake of our self-respect, let's come out in the open, if Webb Curtain is crazy. Let's stone him to death on the city hall steps, since we must economize. Stones are free. Let's have the members of the fireman's band, whose salaries we pay, provide appropriate music.

"Who is the sane man who will throw the first stone? Let him step forward.

"On the other hand, assume that the rumor concerning Webb Curtain is baseless. What to do? Save our self-respect, by all means. Justify our actions up to now, for it is one of the characteristics of citizens in towns like this that they can never admit they were wrong.

"Here is a solution. Let the whole town plead temporary insanity. It's nothing unusual, in this section of the country. It's even fashionable—after the event: lynching, persecution, whatever. Let's establish the new trend—before the event. Let us say that everything went red, we don't

remember, we weren't ourselves.

"But let's deal with the problem like men in daylight, not cowards in the dark."

Pat Cain folded the sheets and grinned at Webb.

"I've been wanting a peg to hang those remarks on for a long time."

Webb looked away. He felt gratitude, but it was tempered with an apprehension of results which might grow out of the printing of Cain's words.

"Are you sure they won't take that stoning as a good suggestion? Or find a peg to hang me on?"

Cain snorted. "They'll crawl in their holes. They'll be afraid to move at night. Put yourself in their place. Would a public discussion of your nocturnal activities inspire you to increase them, act more flagrantly?"

"Maybe not. Pat, I appreciate this, honest I do. I could cry, even. But don't you think you're playing God just a little?"

"Not at all, Webb. I'm trying to right a public wrong."

"But look, Pat. I've never thought this out clearly, but it seems to me that an editor must necessarily develop a tendency to tell the public what it wants, rather than report what it says. Your editorial is maybe a red rag to the local bulls."

Cain pursed his lips, walked once across the room, and sat in the bedside chair. "Could be, could be. Would you rather I wouldn't print it? Its only purpose is to smooth out your situation."

"I don't know. If it'll help, I'm for it, naturally. But—"

"Tell me about your beating. My informant, Potter, didn't know any details, nor did the hospital."

Webb told him, and Cain glowered at the floor.

"That settles it. I'll elaborate my remarks a little on that beating. It isn't you, primarily, Webb. It's this thing we've been trying to stamp out of America for a couple of centuries. Mob action. There's a smell to a mob, literally and figuratively."

"I hope you know what you're doing, Pat."

"So do I. If you want your job back, Webb, it's there for you, at least till this condition is cleared up." He grinned. "Then, if you're inefficient, I'll fire you. In the meantime, you're helpful to my reputation as a crusading country editor, and worth just a salary to show up every day."

"Thanks. Before you go, Pat, what about that train wreck yesterday? If it hadn't happened, I'd have been gone in the afternoon."

"Just one of those mysterious things that happen to trains. Ran off the track. Nobody hurt. Well, I've got to get this piece into type. Drop

in when you can, and read your morning paper tomorrow."

Kay's cousin was named Millicent Lake, and when she walked into the parlor the following morning, Webb felt a click of recognition, and a click of—something else.

The recognition focused: she was the tall, lithe blonde he had seen get off the train. The something else became a lift inside his chest and a tingling of his fingertips.

Not only was she beautiful with violet eyes and a skin like fresh cream. There was a swing to her, a rhythm—the subtle beat of vital beauty.

He started to rise when Sophie ushered her in, but she waved him down and came to him on long swinging legs to shake his hand.

"Don't get up," she said. "I'm no lady. I'm Millicent Lake, who is Kay's cousin, and if you call me Millie I'll maul you. And how are you?"

"Out of breath," Webb said. "Who wouldn't be? Sit down."

"Thank you, sir. Are your bruises bothering?"

"I can walk, which I couldn't yesterday."

"Good! I have messages. My little cousin was somewhat incoherent, but my translation of the gist is that she still loves you and life is awful. She used up scads of words to say that, including a biased biography of you, but there it is in a neat package."

Webb frowned at the floor, then smiled at Millicent Lake, who sat, not sprawled, in the big chair.

"She doesn't have to take that from her father, does she? She's of age."

"Ah, but she does. She raised her family incorrectly. She feels a false sense of obligation."

The telephone rang, and Webb went into the hall to answer it. The hospital.

"Mr. Masters is asking for you," said a feminine voice. "He is much improved. If convenient, will you come?"

Webb explained the situation to Millicent.

"I'm at loose ends," she said, "and I have Kay's car. I'll drive you."

Webb climbed the stairs for the brief case and a light coat, and when they were in the familiar little coupé, Millicent continued.

"I started a line about families. Once I'm on that, just try and stop me."

"You mentioned a false sense of obligation?"

"Yes. If Kay dared live openly as she likes, her mother would go into a decline, and her father would bite his own nose with righteous rage. It's Kay's fault. If she had made it clear years ago that she was an individual, they would have recognized it in time. It's too late now. The habit's too deep. She's an adjunct to apron strings and . . . and . . . what? Bootstraps? Not good. Look."

She waved a hand at Sunday churchgoers. They

moved in family groups, in a sedate parade, men in sober dark suits and white collars, women in self-conscious finery, girls in delicate prints, boys sullen in ties.

"Once a week they purge themselves of the cheating, lying, backbiting they indulge the rest of the time. They define decency in terms of their own actions and beliefs they have acquired, and if their children do not conform to those actions and beliefs they are indecent. Too many, God help them, grow up believing in the sanctity of parenthood and pass the same narrow codes on to their children, regardless of changing times and manners."

She broke off and flashed a brilliant smile at Webb. "I didn't mean to make a speech, but you wanted to know why Kay allowed her father to browbeat her. Kay, my young friend, needs a great deal of education. I hope she is still young enough to absorb it. Now. What are we going to do about us?"

"Us?"

"Yes. Here we are, thrown together by freak circumstance. We're young, and obviously attracted to each other. Before anything starts between us, let's decide where we want it to go."

"Now? This is a little fast for me. Besides, I've got to go to the hospital. Three blocks ahead, two to the left."

She pulled away from the curb and drove at a fast, efficient clip. She had none of Larry's flair, but she was competent.

"Why," she asked, "do males shy away from frankness? They go around demanding it, and when it's tossed in their lap, they stand up."

"Listen, Miss Lake, you move a little too quick for me. I have to think about things. There's Kay, for instance."

"Naturally, Mr. Curtain, she's a factor. All I suggested was a discussion. Is this your hospital? Pretty, in a deadly sort of way. I'll wait for you here."

Webb was somewhat dazed as he approached the front steps of the blocky, white building. His daze was further increased as he saw Louie emerge toward him.

"Go here, go there," Louie was muttering, "that's all I— Hello, young feller. Seen you before, didn't I? Well, I'll see you again."

"I hope so, Louie."

At the reception desk, he made known his errand to the pretty attendant.

"Oh, dear!" she said. "Mr. Masters suffered a sudden relapse. I'm so sorry. He's—dead."

IX.

Court Masters is dead, is dead, is dead.

This was the theme in counterpoint to Webb's thoughts as he looked into the round blue eyes

of the receptionist. His thoughts touched on Miss Margaret's earlier prophecy: "Masters must die." They skirted the brief case and ethical conduct. They dipped at Mr. Potter. They circled Louie, once. Millicent.

"I'm—sorry—too," he said.

"Are you a relative?"

"No. A friend."

"We are anxious to contact a relative who will be responsible for the body."

"The least I can do," Webb said, "is handle the funeral expense. I'll turn the matter over to Mr. Gorham."

Pearly Gates Gorham, he thought, as he went out to the coupé. Pearly Gates Gorham—Corpses Laid Out Neat.

"You look like a ghost," Millicent observed.

Webb looked at her, and cursed himself. Cursed himself for the tingle at his fingertips, the lift inside his chest. This can't happen, he assured himself silently, it just can't. I'm faced with an important situation, and when I look at this blonde it isn't important any more.

"Why don't you go away?" he said resentfully.

She gave him a steady violet glance, said quietly: "We need a little talk. But what now? What's the matter with you?"

He told her the bare fact of Court Masters' death, directed her to the mortuary. He made his arrangements with Gorham, put a deposit into fat, white hands, and felt suddenly at loose ends. He needed to talk.

He halted as he emerged from the undertaking parlor. A man was talking to Millicent. Mr. Potter. She was signing a paper. Webb waited until the business, whatever it was, was completed, saw Mr. Potter walk away without touching his hat, and got into the car. He shot a suspicious glance at the shelf behind the seat, where he had put the brief case, relaxed somewhat when he found it unmoved.

Millicent wagged her head and made a whistling sound. "The strangest things happen to me. That little man has been trying to find me. He represents the legal firm of my Uncle Henry, who up and died without heirs. I am now with legacy."

"Congratulations," Webb said. "That little man represents more people."

"Oh? Since that makes no sense to me, I can only ask what do we do now?"

"If we're smart, we'll run from each other. That's the way I feel, anyway."

She stared down the street of blank store fronts where nothing stirred but a tiny wind devil, which whirled from one curb to the other and collapsed.

"From what I've heard of you," she murmured, "you seem to be running from something most of the time—with an almost supernatural lack of suc-

cess. Why fight with the back of your neck? Why not face things?"

"Every time I face one, another springs up behind me. Like you, for instance. Why don't you go away!"

"What I like about us," she said, twisting a smile, "is our tender love scenes. I suppose this does complicate matters for you, and I'm sorry. But let's consider the complications. Aside from Kay, what bothers you?"

Webb began to relate some of his difficulties, in the bright sunlight on Main Street, and as he talked he saw Pat Cain come to work. The big editor unlocked the *Sentinel* doors and disappeared inside. As if this were a signal, Main Street began to awaken.

A small knot of men gathered in the second block before Runt's Pool Hall. They were a half dozen, mostly miners from the Red Dog night shift, including Flannel Shirt, and a couple of Tom Eagan's cronies. Now and then a broken word or phrase rode the light breeze to the coupé where Webb talked.

One part of his mind formed the tale he spun; the other analyzed the movements of the group which moved from Runt's to the *Sentinel*, where they held another conference on the sidewalk. This was so low-voiced that not a murmur reached Webb, despite the fact that they were only a few doors away.

"I wonder what that means," he said to Millicent.

It was answered by the men themselves. With one concerted motion, they faced the newspaper's doors, and Flannel Shirt shouted:

"Cain! Come out here!"

Webb reached for the door handle, but Millicent laid a polished hand on his wrist.

"Wait! See what they want."

"I think I know."

"But you may be wrong. Wait and see."

Pat Cain loomed in the doorway, and Webb leaned outside the coupé to catch his words.

"Well, citizens, what can the *Sentinel* do for you?"

"We've had about enough from you, Cain," Flannel Shirt growled. "You've called every man in this town a rat, a skunk, and a horse-faced idiot."

"That's a broad interpretation," Cain said. "But what about it?"

"This is what about it. Print a public apology, or take the consequences."

"Go to hell," Pat Cain said.

Webb was half out of the coupé when the first blow was struck, and with Millicent's "Be careful, you dope!" in his ears, he hobbled as rapidly as his bruises would permit toward the fight which now had two men on the ground and four swing-

ing, avoiding Cain's hamlike fists.

Webb flung himself at Flannel Shirt, and the crunch of his fist against sallow flesh brought a yell of pleasure to his lips. The tide of battle shifted, rolled briefly over him in a bare-fisted wave, and he was down.

As he shifted away from kicking feet, Webb caught glimpses of hurried action along the street. A few men boiled out of Runt's, and around corners came other men in sober dark suits. These met in seething knots, and shouts, grunts, curses, scrambled the Sabbath calm.

A pair of hands jerked Webb to his feet, and he gave Larry a nod of dazed recognition.

"Who do I hit, Webb?" Larry shouted.

"Anybody!" Webb cried, and swung on the nearest jaw.

It came to Webb later in coherent analysis, the emotion of the street. While he battered at twisted faces, was battered by random hands, he caught the sense of it only. Blind fury.

Fury is sometimes clean and white, cleansing, burning away the dross of a situation, he thought later. But this had a smell, and a sense impact from which he cringed. It rose from the large group before the *Sentinel* offices, from smaller clumps that writhed in the street, from men who fought singly.

This was the smell, the feel of a mob, and it was unclean.

Two revolver shots rang out, and a heavy voice cried: "Stop it, you damned fools! I'll plug you!"

Not instantly, but quickly none the less, the command brought quiet, and big Andy Ames stood on spread feet in the center of the street, hard-faced, a gun in each hand. He stood, Webb noted in some confusion, beside Kay's coupé, which Millicent had halted, with running motor, in the midst of the furor.

Andy motioned with his guns. "Line up, all of you!"

Those who were conscious stepped around and over a few who lay quietly, and gathered in a group near the spot where Pat Cain's fists had laid out seven or eight. They returned Andy's glare, some sullenly, some in foot-twisting shame.

"You're all under arrest," Andy Ames grated. "You'll appear at the next session of the court for hearing. I know you, so don't think you can get out of it. You're grown men, by damn, and fightin' like kids in the street."

"You're not pinching me!" cried a voice.

"Nor me!"

"Run along, Andy!"

"Shut up!" Andy roared. "I deputize you, Pat Cain, and you, Webb Curtain, to maintain order. Place any man under arrest that shoots off his face."

"I hope that loony tries to arrest me," Flannel Shirt snarled.

"Shut up!" Andy repeated. "Listen. I got a word or two. That girl that come after me told me how the thing started, and I've read Pat's editorial. This is a civilized town, by damn, and there won't be any more riots and disturbin' the peace, or I'll have soldiers in here. All of you go home, quiet, and when you cool off, have a meetin' if you got things to get off your chest. Whatever happens, it's gonna be done legal, an' decent, or I start scatterin' lead. Now bring these guys in the street to, and take 'em home if they ain't hurt too bad, or to Doc Barnes. But clear the street."

They dispersed according to their nature, swaggering, straggling, slinking, some with heads up, some with eyes on the ground, and Pat, Webb, Larry, and Andy were alone on the sidewalk.

"What happened?" Larry asked.

"Erin go bragh," Pat Cain puffed.

Webb felt himself for new hurts, and found several. He shot a look at Millicent, who had drawn up to the curb, and smiled at her expression of concern.

Beside him, Larry said, "Gosh! She's pretty."

"Wanta talk to you people," Andy said.

Webb questioned Millicent with his eyebrows.

"I'll wait," she said, and he followed the trio into Cain's office, where the newspaperman rubbed his knuckles while Andy Ames took a stand in the doorway.

"It's my job to keep peace here," Andy said. "I've asked Webb to leave town for the good of ever'body, but it looks to me like that wouldn't help now. It would, maybe, a few days ago, but this ruction has lined up people on two sides. I heard what was gonna take place in a couple churches this morning. Preachers gonna give their congregations hell for sayin' Webb is crazy, with no more to go on than they got. So the men come out about the time this brawl started, and they picked their side."

"What happened, anyway?" Larry asked, and Webb waved him to silence.

"What we got to do," Andy went on, "is get the town back together. It's split, and you know how them things can build. First thing you know, a killin'll throw the business into out an' out war. We gotta prevent that, an' I think it's up to Webb, since the whole ruckus started over him."

"But what can I do?" Webb asked wearily. "I've tried everything I've been told. So I'm banged up again. There's no future in it."

"Well, maybe they'll hold a meetin' in the town hall, maybe not. But if they do, you better come an' talk to 'em. It's a kind of hard thing to handle, all right, 'cause they're not so much worried

right now about you bein' nuts. They're just mad and confused, an' they'll stay that way till somebody straightens 'em out. It don't make sense. First they looked at you with pity, and felt sorry for you in a nice kind of way. Now they hate you, an' you done nothin'. I dunno what you oughta say. Do you, Pat?"

Cain scratched his head. "I'm not even sure he should appear at a meeting, if there is one. Maybe he ought to be represented by somebody else."

"Well, you and him better figure out somethin', 'cause I don't like the way things look. A lot of guys got their heads cracked this morning, and they know who cracked 'em. They'll get back in any way they can at the one who hurt 'em. That'll just cause trouble, an' more trouble. I don't wanta hafta ask for troops in here. Martial law is a nasty thing for people's self-respect. But remember, you're under arrest, so don't leave town. And if this thing ain't worked out by the time court convenes again, you'll hafta appear."

Andy nodded and went away. Webb, Pat Cain, and Larry sat in silence for some time.

"I guess I might as well go back to work for you, Pat. I've got to stay here, anyway. What do you want me to do now?"

"Go to bed," Cain said. "You're so stiff you can hardly get your breath. Come in tomorrow, if you feel all right. Maybe I'll have something worked out."

"Can I hitch a ride, Webb?" Larry asked as he took Webb's arm. "I left my car home. Is that girl Kay's cousin?"

"That's right."

"Gosh! She's pretty."

Webb made the introductions, and they dropped Larry at the big green house on Elm Street. Larry had not taken his eyes off Millicent during the silent ride, and he continued to look at her as he stepped out of the car.

"Could I—well," he faltered. "I'd like to—"

"Certainly, Larry," she said kindly. "Pick me up about eight, say?"

"Thanks."

Webb looked back as they turned the next corner. Larry hadn't moved.

"Conquest," he said. "Listen, there's one thing we can get straight."

"Which way now?" she broke in.

"Go out in the country. To your left. I want to talk to you about Larry."

When they were in the open, on the white winding road, they were silent as the little hills flowed backward on either side. At the side road approaching the Turkey Creek bridge, Millicent cut off into the trees near the spot where the old tramp had been. She cut the motor, took a pack-

age of cigarettes from her purse, lit two, and stuck one between Webb's lips.

"Well? About Larry?"

"He's a swell egg, see? Don't hurt him."

"I don't intend to."

"You could, though, without intending. I've never seen him nose-dive like this before. After he met you, he even forgot to ask what the fight was about. He's fine, so don't let anything start unless you intend to do something about it."

"I promise. Word of honor. Anything else about Larry?"

"I guess not, except that he's always there when you need him. He's no ball of genius, but he's honest and loyal, which is more than I can say of some other people."

"Including us?"

"Including us."

They were quiet, and the gurgle of the stream reached them, forming a musical foundation for the fluttering of little birds in the trees and underbrush, and the occasional hum of tires on the highway behind. They smoked, and Webb clenched his free hand.

Millicent presently extinguished her cigarette in the dash tray, twisted toward Webb and tucked silken legs under her blue skirt.

"I have the queerest feeling about us, my young friend. I'm no visionary, and I don't believe in queer feelings. But I feel that we were never meant to meet."

"It was a swell idea, then," Webb said.

"But now that we have met, we have a problem. I felt that fire between us when I walked into the room this— Good heavens, it was only this morning. How time crawls. We've known each other a couple of hours, and I was just now wondering why we'd never kissed."

"We don't dare, for one thing."

"No, I suppose not. But we do have the problem. What are we going to do about it?"

"Nothing!" Webb exclaimed. "Absodamn-lutely nothing. I've got troubles enough. Look, I wish you'd go away. Honest I do. Sure, I love you, I guess, and all the rest of it, but I'm scared. There's too much between us. It's like putting a match to a box of powder. Our emotion isn't sound, there's no base, no pattern of experience."

"Somehow," she mused, "I don't think I can go away. Financially, yes. I'll get my inheritance in a week, the little man said. But something is keeping me here, just as it threw us together. A few more experiences like this, and I'll be a pushover for the what-is-written-shall-be brethren."

They were quiet once more, and below the murmur of the afternoon Webb could hear his heart, beating a trifle faster than normal.

Kay, he thought. Kay.

"Will you take me home?" he asked. "I'm full

of aches and pains besides these which we cause each other."

She backed onto the highway, which was beginning to fill with Sunday traffic, and presently stopped before the prim tourist home.

"We haven't settled much, have we, my young friend?"

"We haven't settled anything, except that you're going to be nice to Larry. Nice or nothing."

"I won't forget. When will we see each other?"

He looked into her violet eyes, and away. "As I said before, if we were smart—"

"All right, don't be grim and feverish. I've a feeling we won't be able to stay apart. Can I be of assistance in getting you inside the house?"

"That's sweet of you, but I can manage. Will you tell Kay . . . uh—"

He halted, blankly. How could this girl carry that kind of message to Kay.

"I know what to tell Kay," she said. "You still love her, and life is awful. *Au 'voir.*"

After he had been helped into bed by Miss Margaret, Webb stared at the ceiling, empty of thought or emotion. Not until nearly dark did he remember, with a lurch of his heart, that he had left the brief case in the car. He was much too tired to go downstairs to the telephone. Anyway, as she had said, there was the feeling that they wouldn't be able to stay apart.

X.

The sisters convened in his room shortly after dark, and Webb suffered a nostalgic reminder of his own family group in the living room before the double suicide. Miss Margaret and Miss Emily busy with needles were like his own mother knitting under a corner lamp, and Miss Gertrude playing with the bundle of sticks on the low table they had brought was like his father at a crossword puzzle.

You never know, he thought, till they're gone. You never know.

On those occasions when he had gathered with his family at night, he had for the most part been impatient to get away. He had kept one ear cocked for the telephone, the other for somebody in a car to take him to Al's Lakeside Tavern for a dance or a drink of the rotgut Al bootlegged to local minors at fifteen cents a shot.

Yes, he had been impatient, and had stayed inside only when necessary. Tonight, however, he was grateful for the presence of these women who had practically adopted him. He ran a leisurely, friendly glance over each, identical with her sisters in lanky body, thin kindly face, white hair, creamy hands, black satin and lace.

They're all right, these Parker gals, he thought. They're O. K.

"Where did you live before you came here?" he asked.

Miss Emily laid aside her needles, turned blind eyes and a warm smile to him.

"Not anywhere, really, Webb. We move around quite a bit."

"My land, yes," Miss Margaret said, her eye on Miss Emily's lips. "Sometimes I think we're part flea."

"I ran into a friend of yours yesterday. Lord, was it only yesterday? Anyway, he said he knew you. He's a tramp, who was a college professor once."

"I think I remember him," Miss Emily said, and added something to Miss Margaret which sounded to Webb like Phase Two. "An intelligent human being, that," she said to Webb.

"Well, I thought he was a little screwy on this fate business. I'd hate to feel that whatever I did was because Somebody, or Something, had planned it that way. He repeated almost the same words one of you used the other night, about threads in a pattern. No, thanks, not for me."

"Why not, if the final goal was worth while?" Miss Emily asked.

"Well, all right," Webb conceded, "but if it's true, my beef is that we don't *know* it. If I'm taking orders, I want to know what the orders are."

Miss Gertrude raised her head from the pattern of sticks she had arranged. "The moon is full," she said.

Webb puzzled over the remark, made no sense from it. "There just can't be any order in things," he continued. "Too many events take place because of factors which never had any connection. Like me, and Kay's cousin. She walked into the parlor downstairs this morning, and the world is different."

"My land, Webb!" Miss Margaret exclaimed. "What difference if things are planned or not? They happen to you, and that's all life is. It doesn't do any good at all to sit around and try to figure it out. If Somebody or Something, as you call it, is running things, you won't know what's coming unless you've got a contact. And if things are all accident, you can't possibly know. Stop your complaining, or I'll make you take some castor oil. Do you good, anyway."

Webb grinned at her, and stopped the remark he had ready as the doorbell rang downstairs. Presently heavy feet pounded up the stairs, and Larry was admitted by Miss Emily. Webb made the introductions, and questioned Larry with his eyebrows.

"I got the girls downstairs, Webb. We're going out to Al's and dance. Kay says you got to come."

"Larry, I'm honestly falling apart. I'd like to,

but I don't think I'd better."

Miss Gertrude again raised her head. "Go," she said. "The moon is full."

"My land, yes, Webb! You don't have to dance. You can sit and watch. Don't be a stick-in-the-mud. Get along with you. We'll go out so you can dress."

As Larry helped him with his clothes, Webb thought of Kay and Millicent on the same party with him. "This will be a cozy evening," he said.

"Gosh, yes! Say, that Millicent is swell. I wish I could think of something to talk to her about."

"She does well enough for both of you."

When Webb was in the rumble seat with Kay, and they had effected an uncomfortable reunion,

Millicent turned as they traveled out of town at a leisurely pace, for Larry, and handed Webb the brief case.

"You forgot this."

"Thanks." Webb stuffed it down by his feet.

"What's that?" Kay asked. "I've never seen it before."

Webb gave her a brief sketch, and headlights of oncoming cars showed her narrowed dark eyes, her fine brows drawn to form two vertical wrinkles above the bridge of her nose.

"And you forgot it?" she asked.

"Things were rather hectic today."

"They must have been," she murmured. "Millicent was whirling when she got back after ever so long. What do you think of my cousin?"

"She's all right. But look, let's talk about you. How much longer does the cloistered-nun act continue?"

"It isn't that, Webb. I agreed to stay away from you. I'm not being forced."

"And why did you agree?"

"Well, daddy said we ought to be sure about you, and the way you— Well, about that Bessie Hillman—"

"Do you believe that?"

"No, not really, but daddy said it *might* be true, and it would be a good idea to know."

"And did you get permission for tonight? What are you doing, analyzing, preparing a report for father?"

"No, Webb. I broke my word, and if they find out about it, they'll be unhappy. So will I."

"I don't mean to beef, Kay. Everything has piled up on me at once. I have to hang on to myself to keep from going—"

He broke off, shied away from the word. Kay maintained a tense silence, also, and as they passed between moonlighted hills there was only the purr of the motor, the whip of wind, and Millicent's murmur in the front seat.

As Al's Lakeside Tavern came into view, Kay broke the quiet between them. "Another reason I'm here, Webb. Remember I told you the Parker sisters said something bad was going to happen to us, but maybe it could be sidetracked? Well, let's sidetrack it."

He took her hand, pressed. "Let's."

A handful of customers rattled around Al's tavern like shot in a tin cup. Al himself seemed not to worry about the fact that this place which had been designed to accommodate two hundred had never seen more than fifty customers at one time.

He gave these kids the run of the place. They danced to a juke box on the vast floor under dusty crêpe-paper decorations. They drew their own beer or mixed a drink, when Al took a nap



in the cubbyhole office. But they paid, and he lived.

He came from behind the long bar to the table to which Webb had hobbled between Larry and Kay. He widened his black eyes in a brief flash of admiration for Millicent's earthy beauty, and twinkled at Webb.

"Run into a door?" he asked.

"Termites," Millicent explained.

Al bowed with mirth, black hair falling across his forehead, hands resting on the bulge of his aproned stomach.

"That's a drink on the house, kids. What'll it be?"

"Beer."

Larry led Millicent onto the dance floor among a scattering of high-school boys and girls from the town, many of whom were starry with drink, and all of whom were flushed with the incredible exertion inspired by the music of Shaw, Goodman, Nichols, Andrews soeurs, et al. Kay watched Larry and Millicent flow smoothly into a ballroom rhythm, then turned to Webb.

"Well?" Her full mouth tipped up at the corners.

"Here we are again."

"What do you think of Millicent, Webb?"

"I told you I thought she was all right. Want me to put it in writing?"

"Don't snap at me."

"Sorry. I'm a sick man. What do you want me to think of her?"

"It isn't that. I don't believe you're telling me the truth when you just say she's all right."

She broke off while Al set beer on the checkered oilcloth, chuckled "Termites" and threaded a path through couples agitated by "Blue Footed Duck."

"Every time you looked at each other tonight," she went on, raising her voice above a white-hot trumpet, "I could feel a spark. It was sort of bright, and fierce."

Webb raised his glass, sipped the beer. "What's all this leading up to?"

"To this. You and I haven't got that kind of spark. We grew up together. So if you and she both want that, I'll— Well, step out of the picture."

"Don't be stupid. I don't want any part of her. Nor she of me. I said she was all right. That's what I meant, and no more."

Kay smiled suddenly, with lights deep in her dark eyes. "O. K. Here we are again."

They touched glasses, heard the clink as the music cut on a staccato chord. Larry and Millicent came back to the table, and Larry helped her into a chair.

"What a rat race," Millicent said. "When I was the age of those kids, three or four years ago, they called me Malted Milk Millie. Well, they

hold their liquor like little ladies and gentlemen. Bless you, children, I drink to you."

A girl in red, white, and blue socks put a nickel in the juke box, and couples surged from tables to the floor again. Millicent turned to Larry.

"Dance with Kay. Webb can't. He's doing well to sit up."

As Larry and Kay moved onto the floor, Horace Beecham, the town's cabby, came through the front door and watched the musical gyrations from one end of the bar.

"I've been thinking about us," Millicent said. "I have things to say."

Webb looked into her eyes, purple under the amber lights, and waited.

"Let's go outside," she suggested.

"Why?"

"Oh, the moon is full, and we'll be, too, if we sit around swilling beer all night. There's a lake, too, no?"

"More of a pond."

"I can talk better under those conditions."

"I don't know," Webb demurred. "Kay is—" He shrugged. "Oh, well. Come on. You'll have to help me on the sharp curves."

Webb tried to catch Kay's eye, but she and Larry were in the midst of intricacies they had learned together in school, and he piloted Millicent to a long veranda which faced the narrow body of still water that gave the tavern its adjective. Moonlight was motionless on the water, rippling on the slender fronds of cattails which feathered the bank. He and Millicent sat on a low stone bench and lit cigarettes. They puffed in silence, and when the music stopped inside heard the night chorus of pond frogs.

"It isn't easy to put this into words," Millicent began. "About a year ago, something happened to me. I was very nearly killed by a man who had an apartment next to mine in New York. He was a screwball, and I mean screwball, inventor. But in his fumbling fashion, I suppose he was a genius. His name was Murray George. I'll never forget it."

Music broke out again inside, and she waited for the fortissimo introduction to give way to a solo chorus.

"He thought he was in love with me," she continued. "I guess that's what he thought. I can't think of anything else to explain his action. He had never spoken more than three words to me until one evening he banged on my door in a perfect fever of excitement. I lifted an eyebrow at him, and he babbled something about the greatest discovery of all time, and would have me in to see it. I went.

"You should have seen that apartment. A rat's nest would get a seal of approval in comparison. Never mind about that. He led me through debris

to a drawing desk, where sheet after sheet of paper held the most incredibly neat drawings of something that was 'way over my head.

"I can give you the world," he said. "I lay it at your pretty feet."

"That was laying it on, because my feet are too wide to be pretty. He went on to explain, in incomprehensible terms, how this invention would change the world if properly exploited. And he knew a man, he said, who could raise any amount on it. So when, he wanted to know, do we begin?

"Am I boring you?"

"Not yet," Webb replied.

"I'm almost finished. I looked at his drawings again, pretending to be interested but really thinking how many jumps it was to the door, and I said, 'Very pretty, but is it art?'

"The man went mad. At my tone, I guess, which wasn't what a feverish lover-from-afar would like from his lady. But it wasn't much of a step from his normal state to madness, anyway. He snatched up some kind of knife with a curved blade and lunged at me.

"The point of the knife hit the center of a locket which a sweet old lady had given me a few days before. It was heavy, with a tree root worked on it in gold, and a place inside for a picture. She came into the office where I was a receptionist, said she liked my looks, and gave me a present.

"Well, if it hadn't been in the way, I'd have been a spitted chicken, because the force of the blow knocked me halfway to the door. When I hit the halfway mark, I was a cinch. Did I run! So did he. I zipped out of the apartment house, as I was going too fast to make a right-angled turn into my own apartment, and he came howling through the streets after me until some kind-hearted gentleman tripped him and kicked his face in. I heard later they put him away in a pixilated penthouse. Are you beginning to wonder—"

"Just what this is all about?" Webb finished. "Yes, a little. Tell it your own way, though."

"At that point in my short and colorless career, the something I mentioned happened. I was at loose ends. It was a queer, empty feeling. I felt I didn't belong. The faces were strange, the noises too loud, the sun too bright, the wind too cold. I pulled out of it to a certain extent, and reached a normal condition of bewilderment."

"I know what you mean. I've had it for several weeks."

"Well. Today, everything was all right. I thought it was you. Maybe it is. I don't know. I do know that I'm all right again, or nearly so. I can cope again. So this is good-by, my young friend."

The music stopped, and Webb looked at her. The moon had moved so that a portion of it showed under the veranda roof. It made rippled silver of her hair, contrasted black and cream shadows on her face. Webb shut his hands, hard.

"I don't know what to say, except—maybe it's better. Maybe."

"It is, it is. Kay is sweet, and you can be comfortable with her. But not us. We'd never be comfortable. This fire. We feel it now. It would consume us. Pleasant, I grant you. Smart, I won't say."

Webb covered his face with his hands, shut his eyes hard in an attempt to get a mental focus.

"This is new to me," he said. "This feeling. I didn't know there was such a thing. It scares me."

She stood, tensely. "Let's go in. If we stay here any longer, you will kiss me, and then we'll never say good-by. Come on!"

Larry was alone at their table, moody, ag-grieved.

"Gosh, where've you been?"

"Out," Millicent said. "Where's Kay?"

"She's gone home. Horace Beecham drove her in. She said something funny about stepping out of a picture. She said you'd know what she meant, Webb."

Webb slanted a wry smile. "I never saw so much nobility. The place is knee-deep in renunciation."

"Oh?" Millicent said. "So that's what happened?"

"Yeah. Lightning struck twice tonight."

"What are you talking about?" Larry demanded.

"Life, my young friend. Which is always a mistake. Let's talk about another glass of beer. Then you will take us to our respective homes, no?"

Larry made motions to Al. "Say, Webb. Right after Kay left, a guy came in looking for you. A little old guy, with funny eyes. I guess I was kind of short with him. I didn't know where you were, and didn't want to look. But he said he'd wait for you at home."

Webb suddenly saw his way clear. "I'm leaving town tomorrow," he said. "For good."

"But you're under arrest," Larry protested.

"I'm still leaving."

XI.

As Larry's taillight disappeared down the street, Webb approached the slight figure pacing the sidewalk near the ornamental iron gate. Webb carried the brief case in his left hand, steadied himself on the fence with his right.

"You wanted to see me, Mr. Potter?"

Mr. Potter watched Webb approach the last ten feet. "You have the object, I see. Yes, Mr. Cur-

tain, I wished to inform you that my client, H. William Karp, will arrive tomorrow evening, and I wished to make certain that you were ready to negotiate."

"I have a change of plans in mind. I'm getting out of this place tomorrow. Why can't I meet your Mr. Karp at whatever spot you choose, and complete the deal on my way?"

After a short silence, "Which way are you going?"

"Away, is all. Direction doesn't matter. Which way is he coming?"

"From the west."

"Then I'll go to California. Couldn't you arrange a meeting by telegram?"

"I can. I shall. The rendezvous will be the railroad-station waiting room in the county seat at noon tomorrow."

"How will I know Karp?"

"It isn't necessary that you recognize him. You will be carrying the object, and you will be limping yet tomorrow."

"Sounds O. K. He'll have identification?"

"He will have the check."

"Which is good enough for anybody. Good night."

In his room, Webb packed his single bag and tried to push a troubling memory out of his mind. But despite his efforts to concentrate on other pictures, thoughts, impressions, he returned mentally to moonlight and silver, black and cream shadows on Millicent's face.

He sat on the edge of his bed, fully dressed, and shook his head. Still the picture remained.

His consciousness was a battleground, he knew. And on the big issue he was flying the flag of surrender. It was easier to run. Opposing factions in the town would get together once he was gone, despite Andy Ames' gloomy predictions. His and Kay's situation seemed complicated beyond possible return to normal. This new emotional entanglement was impossible to manage. It was easier to run.

But still the picture remained, the picture on Al's veranda.

One part of him said: run, complete the deal, live your own life, forget this mess; another part: but what about Millicent?

He groaned half aloud as he got to his feet and went downstairs to the telephone. The voice that answered his ring was feminine, with no overtones of sleepiness.

"Millicent, I guess I can't take it. I want to see you before I leave. Can you come over in the morning?"

"Yes. Good night."

No good-bys, he thought, as he tossed in his bed later. They always complicate matters. Besides, Andy would pinch me.

He had not seen the sisters when he moved out

on the porch the next morning to wait for Millicent. They were around; he had heard them moving. But he had made no effort to find them. No good-bys.

Millicent arrived in Kay's coupé, and Webb joined her at the curb, carrying his bag and brief case.

"I am going to be flung into the street," she said. "What a night! That girl can have hysterics over more territory than anybody I ever saw. You're a louse, Mr. Curtain. I'm a louse. There is nothing wrong with Kay that a couple of years of growing up won't cure. And you're running away from her, and I'm helping you."

"If you're in so bad with the Loring's," he said, "how come the car?"

"I stole it. I figured your aches and pains could use a little transportation. Why did you want to see me?"

"I want you to go with me."

"Oh?"

He got into the seat, stowed his baggage on the shelf.

"Drive away from here. Out toward Al's. I'm heading that way."

"I'll have to buy a toothbrush."

"You can buy one studded with rubies if you like."

He gave her a short history of the brief case since it had crossed his life, and told her of the deal he expected to complete at noon.

"We can go anywhere, live anywhere, in any style."

"We're a couple of fools, my young friend."

"Now what?"

"Human beings can't live constantly at the high pitch of excitement we feel together. I'll deliver you, but I'm not going with you."

"You've got to. You can't help yourself."

"Ah, but I can—I hope. Listen to me. I want to grow old at a normal rate. I want to be a nice, gray-haired old lady with an airplane of her own, and maybe a couple of grandchildren. So good-by."

"But with all the money I'm to get, we can make some kind of adjustment."

"No. I couldn't leave today, anyway. I haven't received my legacy yet."

"You can wire a forwarding address. We can leave Kay's car in the county seat, and buy one of our own and whatever else you need. Mr. Karp is paying a whole mil—"

"Karp, did you say?" Millicent broke in. "Is that his name?"

"Yeah. H. William Karp. Why?"

The coupé slowed, came to a stop on the crest of a small rise. Millicent turned off the ignition, set the brake, and gave Webb a steady glance.

"What's in that brief case?"

"I don't know," he said. "I told you—"

"So help me," she said grimly, "though I love you, I'll strangle you before you'll deliver anything to that man. I'm a strong, healthy girl, and in your condition you're no match for me."

"What's all this?"

"I know of him. I saw him once. I feel as sure that as I am alive and in love, nothing that man will pay heaps of money for will do you or me any good. Or anybody else we ever heard of. The deal is off."

"You can't dictate to me."

"I not only can—I do. Make your choice. You may be throttled, and so break my heart, or back to town, and I take charge of the brief case."

Webb had no answer. He simply stared.

"My dear," she said softly, "I'm serious. I was never more serious. I sound silly, I know. But I have a compulsion. I cringe when I think of you dealing with him. I swear that you shan't."

Webb continued to stare. She was all softness, with a shadowy smile, little lights in her eyes, yet the feel of her unwavering purpose came through.

"This is crazy," he said. "It makes less sense than anything else. You haven't given a single reason."

"I know. My reasons are vague and hard to state. I only know that Karp is dangerous. During that aimless period I told you about last night, I ran into him by accident, heard a few things also, by accident. He has diplomatic connections which, to say the least, are unhealthy. If I weren't a natural conservative, I would say slimy. Well?"

"You're being melodramatic."

"That's one of my faults, an unshakable will to melodrama. Except this is on the level."

"I'll go back, if you're going to make such an issue. But I won't give you the brief case."

"I'll take it."

"But what would you do with it?"

"I shall decide that for myself. I'm sorry, my young friend, if I've damped our glow. But as I told you, I can't help it. I have no right to run your life to any extent, yet here I am at the wheel. Anyway, I don't think the glow is damped. This is quite aside from our personal feelings."

After leaving his bag in his room, Webb walked to the business section. He had declined Millicent's offer to chauffeur and wait for him. Part of his refusal came from a desire for exercise. Another part grew out of bewilderment, resentment, and helpless rage.

He felt that her attitude was empty of logic, but knew that she was capable of physical violence to gain her point. The dividing line between his fierce emotion and hate was thin, and

as she drove away with a casual wave, he teetered on the line.

He shrank from physical contact with her; that was part of his fear. He also shrank from accepting dictation from her, because of their acute struggle for domination. He was sullen as he walked to town with a slight limp.

A shock of pleasant surprise jerked his head as he passed Michaelson's grocery and the genial Irishman called:

"Hello, lad. How are you?"

"Wh-why, fine, th-thank you," Webb stammered at the round red face by the cash register. "How are you?"

"First rate, lad."

What gives? Webb asked himself as he continued. Am I over my social leprosy?

As he passed Cunningham Photos, Raddington Machinery, and Gorham's Undertaking, his spirits were further lightened by hails, nods, smiles from the proprietors, customers, and an occasional passer-by. All of his troubles, the past events, his present complications, seemed to pale in importance.

This was all I wanted, he thought. Just to be accepted. Just to be a part of things. If you're one of the boys, you feel like working things out. It's only when you're outside the fringe that you don't care.

Even the slightly contemptuous stare from Flannel Shirt through the window of Runt's failed to dim his sudden happiness. You had an enemy or two anywhere.

"Hey, Curtain!"

The hail was from behind. It was not friendly. Webb turned, saw young Tom Eagan come out of Runt's, grim purpose on his handsome features.

"I haven't had time to get around to you," Eagan said.

"How come you're not working?" Webb asked.

"I got fired. I think that was on account of you, too. I'm gonna settle a few things with you. Come back in the alley."

"There's nothing to settle, Tom."

"The hell not! My kid brother got killed on account of you, you beat up our kitchen maid, and I'm out of a job. Come back in the alley."

"I'll take it here, whatever it is."

Two or three stragglers came out of the pool hall and stood within a few feet, watching without expression. These were joined by Pearly Gates Gorham, whose fat face, though serious, still wore a frozen, professional smile.

"I don't like to get in jail," Eagan said, "but it'll be worth it. Put up your hands."

Webb stood motionless. "I'm not going to fight you, Tom. It wouldn't settle anything. I'm sorry about your brother, but it wasn't my fault, whatever you say. If you're going to do anything, get it over with. I just don't care any more."

Eagan's advancing steps were halted by Gorham's fleshy hand. "One moment, please," he said courteously.

"Leave me alone, Pearly," Eagan said levelly.

"Thomas," Gorham murmured, "you must not touch that boy. I am not a violent man, for I deal with the end result of violence, and it has made me cautious. But I swear that if you lay a hand on Webb Curtain, you will regret it. Exceedingly. In the first place, he is a physical wreck, as the result of two beatings, in which I suspect you had more than a casual hand. Even if he were in excellent condition, however, with no drawn look about the eyes, with no bruises which I know must exist, you would not touch him. This city has seen enough of senseless injustice."

After a short pause, "Well, I don't fight cripples," Eagan muttered. "But he'll get well, and we'll see. I'm telling you, Pearly, and all the other long-hairs in this town—we don't want Webb Curtain here. There's enough of us to make him leave, and enough of us to take care of anybody that don't like it. So watch yourself."

He turned, marched back into Runt's. Gorham smiled at Webb. "The only time people act logically," he said, "is after they are in my professional care. By the way, your friend Masters—do you want a public ceremony? You may see the remains when you like. A beautiful piece of work. He seems only to sleep, as perhaps he does."

"Do it as privately as possible," Webb said. "I'll be in sometime today. Thanks for your help."

"A pleasure."

Webb dropped into a chair in Pat Cain's office and waited while Cain listened to what seemed to be a long monologue. Finally, Cain said, "O. K., Andy," and hung up the receiver. He looked at Webb.

"Well, that's that. The meeting is on. Tomorrow. We've got to figure out something for you to say."

"Why, I got the impression things are all right again," Webb said.

He related his experiences of the morning, including the brush with Tom Eagan. Cain nodded, but waved at a stack of mail.

"I invited opinions in that editorial. I got 'em. For the most part, they admit that you personally got a dirty deal. But they also contend that whatever has happened, you're at the bottom of it. They don't like the alleged attack on Bessie Hillman. They don't like the street fight. They don't like the Eagan boy's death. They feel generally that it ought to be threshed out in the open, and gentlemen will check their firearms before entering the meeting."

"I still don't see how it can settle anything.

No charges have been brought against me. How can I offer a defense? How can you prove sanity by talking?"

Cain drummed his desk thoughtfully, squinted his eyes at the wall.

"I have a notion, Webb. If you take this line everybody will go home happy."

"I don't believe you, but what is it?"

"You plead temporary insanity, brought on by the shock of your parents' death. The thing that sticks in their craw more than anything else is the attack on the Hillman girl. Your attitude on that is that something snapped inside your head, and you couldn't help it."

"But I didn't touch her! I remember perfectly. I had a few doubts, the next day or so, but I know now. I won't admit to that."

"Who cares whether you actually did or not? That isn't the point. She wasn't really hurt. She was just scared. Nobody will prosecute you for it, and you can smooth it out with only a few words."

"I won't do it."

"Well, what do you suggest?"

"I don't know. I can't see any point to the meeting."

"Andy Ames has it figured rather soundly. They aren't concerned with the question of your sanity. The mob action on two occasions has scared the solid citizens. They don't like it, and they'll take action if the cause isn't removed. Most of them feel that you're the actual cause, in some remote fashion. They're confused, afraid, and a little angry. The big hellos you received this morning were from a small minority. If you'll look through my mail, you'll see that the majority still feel standoffish."

"All the same, I don't go around chasing women."

"Look at it this way, Webb. You can arouse their sympathy by pleading acute shock from your parents' action. Most of them are parents themselves, and it makes 'em feel good when anyone shows parental influence. It makes 'em a little smug, thinking that parents really have a place in the scheme of things. It won't hurt you any, and it'll smooth out the rough spots in your present condition. Once you swing their sympathy to you, a few words to the effect that you're sorry and you won't do it again will sell 'em. Then get a little tough, and pretend you think you were treated unjustly, and you'll have 'em crying down their shirt fronts. Maybe somebody will even nominate you for mayor."

"Pat, I've told you how I feel about it. I will not confess to something I never did. If I do that, they'll remember, and regard me with suspicion. Every girl I'd meet on the street would fidget, at least."

"What will you do, then? Just get up there and stammer?"

Webb considered the problem. What could he say, except that he was unhappy, mixed up, and physically injured. Protestations of sanity were always taken as evidence to the contrary. Injured innocence would only get a laugh.

"All right," he conceded. "I guess it's the best way. I don't like it, and I won't plead insanity of any kind. It's going to be shock, and grief, which God knows is true enough. Let's hope it doesn't start a riot when I say I slugged Bessie at midnight."

"I'll be there," Cain said quietly, "and a few others."

When Webb left the *Sentinel* for home, he indulged in a piece of self-analysis which further confused him. As Cain had pointed out, confession of merely frightening a girl would do him no harm, especially since he had a strong emotional peg to hang it on.

Why, then, did he shy away from the admission?

Was he afraid that he had suffered a temporary aberration? Had those vague doubts on the day following the event been subconscious truths? Censored by his will to forget, but truths? Truths which would substantiate the town's opinion of him?

He tried to get an honest answer from his mind, and failed. It would answer yes, it would answer no, it would answer maybe, and in each answer was the disturbing quality of dishonesty.

He remembered clinging to the lamp-post while Bessie fled into the dark, screaming. But the event had seemed so trivial, compared to other pressing problems at the time that his memories of what might have taken place were blurred.

He gave it up, unhappily, as he neared the Parker residence and saw Mr. Potter approaching along the sidewalk. Webb waited by the gate.

Mr. Potter showed no emotion. "You failed to keep the rendezvous, Mr. Curtain."

"I got sidetracked," Webb said. "I started, but I didn't arrive."

"I—see. Mr. Karp will be here late this afternoon. Will you set a meeting place?"

"Well—the fact is, Mr. Potter, I don't have the brief case."

"Where is it?"

Webb considered. Millicent had said she would use her own judgment. "I don't know," he said honestly.

"I—see."

Mr. Potter turned and went down the street. Webb entered the yard, and threw another glance in the direction in which Mr. Potter had gone.

He was not in sight, and as Webb went into the house, he reflected that Mr. Potter hadn't

seemed to be moving fast enough to have disappeared so suddenly.

XII.

When he went into the prim, neat parlor, Webb caught a glimpse of Sophie through the half-open door leading off the hall opposite the parlor. He remembered Larry's white-faced confusion, and felt a twinge of the same emotion.

Only for a fraction of an instant did he feel the emotion, nor did he stop to investigate. He entered the parlor with the thought that Sophie possibly rested in that strange posture, and that nobody had really stood her in a corner for future use.

The sisters greeted him, and he sank gratefully on the sofa, where he watched their fingers busy on needlework, and the idle motions of the blind and deaf sister turning and returning the tiny hourglass on the marble-topped table.

He skimmed the tapestried walls again, and felt once more the wide historic sweep of their kaleidoscopic design. Details he had never noticed impressed him briefly: a light in a church tower, a blond husky throwing a hammer at a giant, a deserted ship under full sail, a slight man who stared from an island at the sea.

His eyes became fixed and unseeing as he considered how the line of his life had twisted and turned since these old maids had entered it. A short time, true, but he felt as though he had known them forever. Yet there was no warmth, really, in their association. Miss Emily-Margaret-Gertrude had given him no affection, and he was not sure they had any to give. But they had treated him with a sharp kindness, and he was grateful without quite understanding the depth of his gratitude.

"Could I ask for some advice?" he said suddenly.

The sister who was blind stilled her flying fingers and raised her face; at her motion, the second sister gave Webb an attentive look.

"I'm in a mess, and I don't quite know what to do."

He told them about Kay, and Millicent, and went into detail on his feeling of confusion in the matter. He described his childhood, told how Kay was nearly always within reach, and he told of the flame between him and Millicent. He related incidents in which Larry figured strongly, and expressed his deep feeling of friendship for the boy who had always been a sort of man Friday to him. He told of the recent parental ban which separated him and Kay, of the surreptitious meeting, and of its consequences. He confessed to his and Millicent's attempted flight from this bewilderment, and its frustration, although he did not name the cause.

When he had done, the sisters were silent for a few moments. Presently, she who could see said, "I am afraid, Webb, that the problem is out of our province. I'm sorry."

"What do you mean, province?"

"My land, Webb!" snapped the blind sister, "you can't expect three old maids to give you advice about love! Whoever heard of such a thing?"

Webb grinned. "They usually have more advice than anybody else."

"Well, we're honest!"

The third sister laid aside the hourglass. "It's finished," she said.

Webb smiled tolerantly. They had had him going, once, by the way the blind and deaf sister would drop prophetic remarks into a discussion. This was the second, hand-running, that seemed to have no meaning connected with the present. The others, he concluded, had been coincidence. He felt a certain relief, and realized that their contention that the pattern is set beforehand had been causing him some subconscious trouble.

"Well," he said in a lighter tone, "I'll work it out somehow. That question seems to be giving me more trouble than the others. One thing I've done. I've reached the point where I'm not very worried about what other people think. I'm about as sure as anybody can be that I'm sane, and it doesn't worry me a lot that I'm confessing to a lie in public tomorrow. At least I think it's a lie, though sometimes I wonder. At any rate, you're partly responsible for my regeneration, and I want you to know I appreciate it."

"We did what was necessary," replied the sister who could see.

"Another thing, Miss Emily"—Webb hazarded the name, and when he was not corrected felt pleased—"if I was a little off my base back when they said I was, I'm not now. I'm not the same person I was then, so it doesn't bother me any more. I just now realized it. I was worrying myself sick over whether or not I was nuts, when the important question is whether I *am*. The answer to that is no, and I feel all right again."

The telephone rang, and Webb went into the hall.

"Webb," said Larry's agitated voice, "I want to see you right away. It's important."

"Well, come on over."

"Right away, Webb. And thanks."

Webb blinked at the thanks, and went up to his room. Larry arrived immediately, a Larry with troubled eyes and aimless hands that dropped Webb's brief case in the wastebasket.

"Where did you get that?" Webb barked.

"Huh? Oh, that. Millicent told me to give it to you. Said you forgot it again."

"You saw her?"

"Yeah, until a few minutes ago when she had

to go to the bank to sign for some money somebody left her. She gave me the brief case then, and said to tell you she'd see you later. That's— Well, I want to talk to you, Webb."

"Well, get on with it. Don't stand there with your chin hanging over. What's the matter?"

"It's about Millicent, Webb. You— Gosh, you got Kay, Webb. You don't need—"

"Two? No. One's enough. You can have her, best wishes from me."

"But she don't talk about anything but you, Webb. And she's coming to see you this afternoon."

"All right, Larry. I'll break it off."

"If you don't want to, Webb, just say so."

Webb stared, curled his lips. "If any more people get noble, I'll cry. Now beat it. I'll call you later."

"I'll be at home, Webb."

Millicent came later. Miss Emily showed her in, gave the pair a disapproving look, and pointedly left the door open when she left them alone.

Webb felt a subtle difference in her. Whereas before she had a sense of high adventure in her stride, she now walked like ordinary mortals, with her feet on the ground. Whereas before her violet eyes had deep, exciting lights, they merely glowed, now.

She was still beautiful. Oh, yes. But it was a still beauty. No more turbulence.

He was not afraid of this Millicent. He only thought she was wonderful. No more than that.

She gave him a smile. "I had the queerest shock when your landlady let me in. I thought I'd seen her before. I guess not, though. Could a lady sit down?"

"Do. Why did you send back the brief case?"

She sat and smoothed her green silk print over sleek knees. She lit a cigarette, tossed the match in the wastebasket, and frowned thoughtfully.

"I don't know. It seemed awfully important this morning. Now it isn't important any more. Nothing is, very."

"Not even—us?"

"There's a strange thing, my young friend. The fire's gone out. The coals have died. So here we are, two strangers who were once in love."

She flicked ashes in the general direction of the basket and looked at him wide-eyed, calm, impersonal. Webb sat on the edge of the bed and returned her look in kind.

"Stealing a phrase from you," he said, "what I like about us is our constancy."

She smiled. It had a touch of sadness. "You know, I'm suddenly not having fun. Most people don't habitually, but now and then you find a rare soul who has fun no matter what. I was like that—yesterday, this morning. Now I'm not." She rose. "Well, good-by, good luck, it was wonderful. I'd like you to kiss me, briefly."

He did so. She pulled away, smiled. "I'll try to sneak Kay out to see you. What are you going to do about her?"

"Whatever she likes. Are you going to do anything about Larry?"

"I'm going to stay around awhile, to see if I can make something of him. If I can't, I'll wander off somewhere. As long as I'm young and beautiful, I can pick and choose. I'll try to beat the deadline."

Webb listened to her heels go down the stairs, out the door, and out of his heart. A strange sadness came over him. It seemed unfair that a person could change like that. That the wild and vibrant beauty should become placid made the world a duller, cheaper place. A place of business and existence, not adventure and living.

Clods, he thought. Normally, we're just that. Up until a few weeks ago, nothing had ever happened to me, nothing to fret about. I've thought these weeks were tough, but there's been an exhilaration I've never known before. Millicent put a top on it, and now that things are close to being straightened, now what?

He picked up the brief case, decided to meet the five-o'clock train, and telephoned Larry. On the way to the station, he set Larry's mind at rest on Millicent, and even the exhaust seemed to purr with a new happiness. Larry whooped once and pushed his foot to the floor board. The roadster leaped ahead, and a swift chain of events were set in motion.

An old model coupé had been in the act of passing, and when the roadster speeded, the two cars hung abreast on the two-lane street long enough for an oncoming truck to meet the coupé head-on.

Larry pulled off the road, slid to a stop, and he and Webb ran back to the wreck. The driver of the coupé hung brokenly over the remains of the steering wheel, and Webb eased him back against the cushions. He recognized the man as Flannel Shirt, evidently on his way to work.

The truck, which was still operable, was pulled off the road by the dazed driver, and a few cars began to gather.

Flannel Shirt opened his eyes, seemed to recognize Webb. He sneered, cursed under his bubbling breath. Then his eyes shifted over Webb's shoulder, widened with stark terror, and he died.

Webb turned to see Louie at his side, looking stupidly at the dead man. "Got to come sometime," he said, and walked away.

Webb thought it strange that Louie never seemed to cut any grass with his sickle. This thought was pushed out of his mind by the arrival of the ambulance, which somebody had called, and the routine of reports to a State traffic officer.

After the formalities were over, he and Larry continued the remaining two blocks to the station at a sober rate.

"I feel kind of responsible for that, Webb."

"He didn't honk his horn," Webb pointed out.

"Yeah, but if I hadn't acted like a kid, he'd have got around me all right. I didn't know he was there till the crash."

"I never saw a man die before," Webb said. "I hope I don't again. It's . . . I don't know. Something turned over inside me. It's still turning. Let's don't talk about it any more. Only watch it after this, will you? Death isn't pretty."

"Yeah."

They hadn't long to wait for the limited to come out of the hills with a faint slanting plume of smoke, a clanging bell, and brakes commanding silence. It paused briefly, one passenger alighted, and the limited was on her way.

The passenger was a tall, lean man with a face like a dark bird of prey, and an appearance of immaculate poise. He glanced around negligently, took in the roadster with a keen dark glance, and walked briskly toward Horace Beecham's cab.

Webb stepped out. "Are you Mr. Karp?"

The man halted, looked Webb over carefully. "Yes. You're Curtain?"

"That's right. Sorry I failed to meet you today."

Karp shook hands, a hard, swift clasp. "Quite all right. Do you have the brief case?"

Webb hesitated. Some of the feeling Millicent had tried to instill now came through from this man. A sense of ruthlessness. A sense of brilliant deadliness.

"I . . . suppose we talk about it here on the platform."

Karp lifted an eyebrow and followed Webb to the deserted end of the station platform, out of earshot.

"What's in the brief case?" Webb asked.

Karp smiled. "That is hardly the point. It is for sale, I understand. I am ready to purchase it."

"But I feel a little uneasy about it. What are you going to do with it?"

"What are you going to do with the money?" Karp countered.

"Nothing that will hurt anybody else. Can you say the same?"

"Oh, yes," Karp answered smoothly, "I can say the same, happily."

"We're just beating around the bush," Webb exclaimed. "Here it is, flat. I won't sell it till I know what I'm selling. Take it or leave it."

Karp paced a couple of steps to and fro, stopped and looked slightly down at Webb with eyes that now had a faint surface glaze.

"I feel competent to advise you, young man, because it is obvious that you have had few contacts with the world of business. It is equally obvious that I have had many. My advice is, give me the brief case."

"Sure," Webb scoffed, "you're the big-shot financier, you're the man of the world, and I'm the country bumpkin. But I'm the one that's got the gadget. I name the terms."

Karp pursed his thin lips, looked down his dark beak. "I was not patronizing you," he said in reasonable tones. "I never underestimate. Yes, you are a country bumpkin, but you are a man of intelligence. I flatter myself that I am, also. Two

own means. Good day. Is there a decent hotel in town?"

"Ask the cab driver. He gets a cut for such information."

Webb got into the roadster, and said, "Let's go somewhere for a drink, then get some food."

"I don't want to eat, Webb. I keep seeing that man die."

"Yeah," Webb mused soberly. "I came down here all set to make a lot of money, and I thought of him. I knocked him down once, and I'm sorry. He was doing what he thought was right. But anyway, when I thought of him, I suddenly wanted to know some answers. I wonder if what-



gentlemen of intelligence should be able to arrive at an amicable solution, or compromise."

"What's in the brief case?"

"Don't be quite so single-minded for a moment, my friend. Let me point out to you some of the advantages of riches, as rich you shall be with the amount I will pay. Have you been to Rio?"

Webb mixed a grin and a sneer. "But I was in St. Louis for a week end once."

"Ah, you like your home town. I don't blame you. It has a rustic beauty, and—"

"Yeah, it's no end quaint. We're wasting time. What's in the brief case?"

"You're right," Karp said, and dropped his veneer. "We are wasting time. I shall employ my

ever is in that brief case is going to kill people."

"Why don't we just open it?"

"Well, if I decide to sell it anyway, I've got a hunch I couldn't get anything for it if it was tampered with. I may decide to sell. Let's go out to Al's."

They had a couple of shots of Al's private stuff, chewed some cloves, and drove to Kay's.

"You go in after 'em," Webb ordered. "I'll stay out of sight."

Larry returned presently with Millicent.

"Sorry," Millicent said. "No can do. Pop put up the bars until after tomorrow. What is this meeting scheduled? Are you on trial?"

"I'd forgotten it. I've got to make a speech.

On trial? Seems so, with Kay's father. How does she feel about it?"

"She's gnawing at the bars."

"That's the damndest thing. I won't be any different after the meeting."

"In the public eye you may. There's something to be said for her parents' attitude. Public opinion is important."

Webb looked at her open-mouthed. "Is that you?"

XIII.

Kay was in the audience, and Millicent. Kay caught Webb's eye, winked, pointed a finger at her own head and moved it in short circles. Webb grinned.

Millicent looked at him with a quizzical little smile. The new Millicent, who had changed after receiving her legacy unexpectedly early. Webb's grin died.

Webb estimated the audience at one thousand. Businessmen and their wives, employees of stores, shops, and the shirt factory, which had declared a half holiday. They sat forward in their seats in a light perspiration of expectancy and turned their eyes on Webb.

Webb returned their stares, not calmly but with a trace of defiance, for he felt that twisted logic had placed him here on the platform. In the low rumble of their conversation he read an uneasiness, a confused anger that had only to focus to become dangerous.

He flipped a glance toward the stage wings. Out there Larry waited. "You never can tell what might happen," Webb had told him. "Be ready to take me away in a hurry." He shifted the brief case beside his chair so that he could grab it on the fly. He had brought it, because he had no idea of the means Karp might employ to acquire it, and he felt that it was as safe in his possession as anywhere.

The audience murmur hushed as big Andy Ames strode onto the platform and laid a brown hand on the speaker's pedestal. Andy's commanding personality was strengthened by two six-guns which were not completely hidden by his black coat, and when he raised a palm for silence he got it.

"This is gonna be orderly," Andy said quietly. "I got deputies here and there in the audience, with the mind and means to enforce order. Anybody that wants to start a ruckus can leave now. We'll wait till they get out, and no questions asked."

He paused. Heads craned in the audience. A ripple of giggles fluttered through the section where the shirt-factory girls were concentrated. Nobody left the hall, and Andy stopped the beginning murmur again with his palm.

"I don't rightly know," Andy continued, "just

what we're tryin' to find out. Near as I can figure from talkin' to people, it's not so much if Webb Curtain is crazy but if he's a dangerous element in the town. Nobody's brought any legal charges against him, and so far as I know he ain't done anything criminal. Yet one mob made an open attempt on his life, and a bunch of hoodlums nearly killed him the other night. On top of that, a little boy was killed because a mob wanted blood, and some of the men in this town blacked eyes and tore clothes in the street last Sunday noon. That's got to stop!"

This statement had a rafter-shaking strength, and the huge constable paused before continuing in a quieter vein.

"I think you're here with an honest hope that we'll be able to settle the difference that has split the town wide open. You know what that can do to a community. It's funny, but even a little thing that ain't important can start an argument that can grow into a war. Seems to me that's what happened here. Didn't make much difference to anybody if Webb Curtain was a little cracked. Most anybody would be, after what happened in his family. But the argument started, and pretty soon the feelin's of the town was fixed on what came out of the argument, and not the original question.

"Now I don't know exactly what we should do. Pat Cain has got some ideas on the subject, and I think we oughta listen to him. I know a bunch of you is sore at him on account of his editorial, but I think he wrote it in an honest effort to clean up a mess, to make you think. Come on up, Pat, and tell us what you think."

As the massive editor came from a seat in the front row, Andy repeated his first admonition. "Remember, you people, this is gonna be orderly."

Pat Cain took Andy's place at the pedestal, and smiled at the crowd.

"I'd like to make you understand, if I can, that all of us have been caught up in a whirlwind of emotion that seems to have no logical explanation," he said earnestly. "Our present situation, to my mind, follows the pattern of war making. A mild difference of opinion, say, grows up between two factions, nations, ideologies—what not. The acts growing out of that difference assume an importance which soon overshadows the basic argument and it is lost from sight in gun smoke. While we haven't progressed that far, the seeds have been planted. Our problem is to kill the growth.

"However, I don't feel that merely by stating the problem, and pointing out its forgotten and unimportant foundation that we can eliminate the feeling that exists. We must set our minds at rest on Webb Curtain. We must decide on our attitude and our future treatment. Personally, I believe that he has never been anything but

normal. But he has a few words to say, and you can decide for yourselves. Here he is."

No applause. Webb noted that. He had been introduced from stages before, and invariably nodded to the automatic spatter of hands. He walked up to the pedestal, brief case in hand, with a sardonic smile tilting his mouth.

From the corner of his eye, he also noted a motion in the wings to his left. H. William Karp was there, beckoning to Andy Ames, and Webb heard Andy's steps move in his direction. He faced the audience, pushed Karp out of his mind for the time being.

"I feel this way," he began. "Something happened to me right after mother and dad . . . well, after. It seemed to me that I had no choice in what I did. Events took place before I did anything about them, events that made me act. And by the time I had taken care of the first, another had already come about which pushed me on to some other act.

"Now in almost every case, somebody put the wrong interpretation on what I did. Whatever it was, it was taken as evidence that I was cuckoo.

"Maybe I was. I'm not now.

"The shock of my parents' death threw me into a spin. Things happened so fast for a while that I couldn't quite keep track. While I was thinking of the last crisis, I was invariably facing a new one.

"On the night I ran into— No, I don't mean that. On the night I met Bessie, I was really in a spin. I had been ordered to leave town. I started away, because I had a job waiting for me in New York. But I got delayed by this and that, and found that the man I was to work for had died of a heart attack.

"Well, Pat Cain gave me a job, but I was ordered out again by Tom Eagan and a few of his crowd. Now look, I'm human. To have people you've known all your life tell you you're not wanted is bad enough. But to have that come on top of a shock such as I had is a trifle unsettling.

"Maybe I did attack Bessie. I don't think so, but maybe I did. She said later that she wasn't positive. She told Andy that. She wouldn't press charges. But let's say I did. Just for the sake of argument.

"As I get it, she wasn't hurt, really. Still, if I did slap Bessie around, I'm sorry. I apologize to her, and to you, and anybody else that wants an apology. It won't happen again, because I'm all right now. I'm back to normal."

Even as he said this, Webb wondered if it was completely true, and caught his breath as the statement seemed to hurl someone in the audience to her feet with a cry.

"No!" she shouted. "No!"

It was Bessie Hillman, standing tensely near the back row, hands at her throat.

"Tommy Eagan done it," she cried. "When I was finishin' up the late dishes. Come into the kitchen and started makin' passes. I left the dishes in the sink and run. He yelled after me I'd lose my job if I said anything. So I put it on Webb, 'cause I had to explain the bruises I knew I got. I bruise easy."

There was a sheepish silence.

Webb felt that each man in the audience who had taken part in any action which had centered around him was now thinking what a fool he and his fellows had been.

Then a mutter began to grow.

"Where is he?" somebody cried.

"Tom Eagan! Stand up!"

Andy banged on the pedestal with his fist.

"Quiet!" he roared, and the mutter subsided.

"Tom ain't here, I guess," Andy observed, sweeping the hall with a glance, "and if he was, nobody's gonna do anything. You got any more to say, Bessie?"

"No," she replied, "'cept I don't want the job any longer. They got money, but I got my pride!"

Bessie sat down to crackling applause, and a plump man stood and raised his hand. Kay's father. His round face was agleam.

"I wish to make the first apology, Webb. I'm sorry. I think all of us," he said, taking in the crowd, "should stand as a gesture of apology."

The crowd surged to its feet, and loosed a cheer as from one great throat. Andy waited until it began to die, and waved them back into their seats. Webb sat down again. The face of the audience held relief now, relief that matched the lightness in Webb's chest.

"I guess that's that," Andy said. "We ain't concerned with Tom Eagan here. I don't want you to leave, though. While we're all together, there's a man wants to say a few words about somethin' he's gonna do for the town. Some of you have heard of H. William Karp. Here he is, anyway."

Karp moved to the center of the stage like, Webb thought, a dark bird of prey in circling flight—lazily, gracefully, yet with poise, ready to strike. He was greeted with good-humored applause. The crowd was relaxed. It gave him wide-eyed expectancy; here was a man who was going to do something for the town. Benefits were in the offing, and the people were ready to listen.

"I am happy to see," Karp said, "that you are the type of citizens who have made this country great. You are reasonable, you are forgiving. I don't know why this meeting was held, but the difference in your feeling now and that which you had a few minutes ago is refreshing. I should like to express the happiness I feel in

your reaction here. I wish to give this little city a real boost."

The crowd liked his easy familiarity.

"I am willing to set up a fund," Karp continued, "to be used as you see fit—for a slight favor."

A few skeptical smiles rippled the face of the crowd. There is always a catch, the smiles said.

"This young man," Karp said, and waved a hand at Webb, "has a brief case to which he may or may not have any right. I assumed in my first efforts to purchase it that he had the right to sell, and I was willing to pay up to a million dollars in cash for it."

This statement brought no reaction from the audience, in these days when terms like millions and billions have no concrete meaning. As if sensing this, Karp elaborated.

"Whatever amount we should have agreed upon, it was to be large enough to keep him in luxury all of his life—limousines, servants, world trips."

The crowd leaned forward; they knew of such luxuries.

"At the final moment of purchase, he refused to sell at any price," Karp said.

Eyes shifted to Webb, eyes that seemed to picture yachts, eyes that tried to fathom reasons for Webb's refusal. Webb looked at Karp, and felt again the revulsion which Millicent had tried to tell. Without specific reasoning, he knew that he would not turn the brief case over to Karp while still ignorant of its contents. A hunch only, but a compulsion that was overwhelming.

"As I said," Karp went on, "he may or may not have any right to the brief case and its contents. I will tell you now that those contents are of no value to anybody but myself. You know how a man will spend years and a great deal of money to find an art object, a painting, an antique? That is my position. I have been tracing this brief case for some time. Frankly, I want it. I am willing to pay for it. And I believe that it is yours, and not this young man's, to sell."

The crowd caught a bewildered breath. There was no excitement in it—yet. They didn't understand—yet.

"I find that its original owner— No, that's not correct. I find that the man who owned it before it came into Webb Curtain's hands, died owing a hospital bill to the city. Court Masters had no money. He had only this brief case, the contents of which are worth a fortune—to me, and to me only. It is my contention, therefore, that regardless of what arrangements he had made with Curtain, that his effects became the property of this city when he died a debtor."

Webb got to his feet. "That's not true, and don't let this guy talk you into anything!"

"Wait, Webb," Andy said. "You'll get a chance."

Karp nodded his thanks to Andy, and faced the audience again. "I shall gladly pay the city what I should have paid Curtain. The money could be used to build an additional wing on the hospital, providing work for several hundred men, or to build a playground, or both, or for any other project you desire. No doubt the young man wants to defend his position in this matter. But please remember one fact. Court Masters owes this city money, and he is dead. The only possibility of collecting it is to confiscate the brief case, for the wrecked car he left will not bring enough as junk to pay."

Karp stepped courteously aside for Webb. There was no applause; they were interested in what Webb had to say. They were not polite any longer.

"Listen," Webb said. "I've got more right to this gadget than anybody else, because I was Masters' partner. I've got nothing to show for it; you'll have to take my word. And I'm not going to turn it over to this man until I know what's inside."

"Why not?" a voice yelled.

Webb hesitated. What answer could he give? Hunch? An unreasonable attitude on his part would probably shift sentiment again; make him actually a lunatic in their eyes. Anybody that turned down a fortune without strong reasons was crazy; this was axiomatic. Yet what reason could he give?

"I don't know," he said, "except that this guy gives me a queer feeling. There's something wrong about him. He gives me the willies."

"He looks all right to me," a voice cried from the audience.

The crowd took it up. "He's O. K." "You are crazy!"

"He's not all right!" Webb shouted. "He's all wrong. And he's got no right to this, whatever it is."

"Open it up!" somebody shouted. "Let's see what's in her."

This notion caught instant approval, and shouts, cheers, and applause beat against the walls. Andy stepped forward and restored quiet.

"That seems like a sensible notion," he said.

"One moment," Karp interrupted. "The contents are my secret, and if they become public are no longer of any value to me. I can't dispute your right to open the case, but I can and will refuse to give you a nickel, then."

"You see?" Webb cried. "There's something phony about it. Why is it so damned important?"

"I can give you a general answer," Karp said to the crowd. "I remember the story of an old candy maker. He had a formula for a certain type of confection, and that formula was inside his

head. He made his own mixture in guarded private, and when he died the formula went with him. It would have been valueless if the secret had become known to anyone. That is the situation here."

"Just a minute, everybody," Andy Ames interjected. "All this jabberin'. Seems to me the only question is, who belongs to it, Webb or the town? If it's the town, can we make a deal? All five of the city councilmen are here, and I guess they could hold a meetin' in the office. Where's a lawyer? Oh, Judge Hammond. You got any ideas on who owns this thing?"

There was a touch of majesty in the man whose white crown of hair rose from the center section. He was sharply erect, for all of his sixty years, and the deliberate motion with which he buttoned the top of his black coat bespoke one who was accustomed to being heard at his leisure.

He spoke slowly, each word separate and distinct. "It is said to be a rule of common law that without the word 'heirs' a fee simple cannot pass by deed, and that this rule is so absolute and unyielding, that no matter how clearly the intention of the grantor to convey a fee may be stated in the deed, such intention can be of no avail without that word. *Cole v. Lake County*, 54 N. H. 242."

"Will you break that down a little, judge?" Andy asked.

"I refer to the rule of common law that when a man dies his property passes to his heirs, when so specified in a will. If such a document is in existence, and Mr. Curtain is named specifically as an heir to the object under dispute, he has a prior right."

"You got one, Webb?"

"No," Webb said. "Our agreement was verbal."

"What about that, judge?"

"It is well settled," Judge Hammond said, "both under our and the English statutes, that when a man dies intestate, his personal property does not, like his real estate, descend to his next of kin or heir-at-law. It remains in abeyance until administration is granted upon his estate. No title vests in his heirs until his estate has been administered upon, and then they take the surplus remaining after payment of the debts of the intestate, and expenses of administration, each in his proportion, under the statute of distribution. *Douglass, Cullen v. O'Hara*, 4 Michigan 132."

"Me," Andy said, as Judge Hammond reseated himself and unbuttoned his black coat, "I believe in short cuts. It looks like you got no title, Webb, but you got possession. Now it would take legal action to get it away from you, but we could get it. I aim to save the expense of a trial and take it. Give it here, Webb. We'll decide whether to sell it to Mr. Karp or not."

"Good heavens!" Webb burst out. "Isn't there any justice? I swear that Court Masters named me as a partner in this deal. You can't just take it away from me!"

"I have another point of information," Karp said, and the crowd turned its eyes to him.

Webb began to edge toward the wings. He moved a short step at a time.

"Court Masters himself had no right to the brief case," Karp said. "He stole it from the— shall we say, inventor of its contents. I have suddenly remembered meeting a young lady who lived next door to the inventor, and from her rather garbled description of what the inventor showed her one night, I gathered the true nature of the invention. But when I arrived to negotiate with him for its purchase, I found him long gone. However, I was able to trace through an investigating agency the identity of the man who came in and took the plans of the invention. Therefore, I feel that I have a double right to buy the brief case and put a million dollars in your city treasury, for I was ready to buy it from Murray George, the inventor himself."

Webb broke into a run. The name, Murray George, and its association with the story Millicent had told, was the final factor in his determination that Karp should not have the brief case.

At his first move, shouts went up.

"Stop him!" "Grab the loony!" "Don't let him get away!"

"Larry!" Webb shouted, plunging toward the wings, "let's go!"

The building janitor, a red-headed man with a blond mustache, materialized in Webb's path and blocked his escape. The janitor stood on wide-spraddled feet and thrust a hand in Webb's face, a straight-arming motion that sent Webb sprawling.

He rolled and twisted to his feet, swung the brief case like a club, and the janitor gave way. The delay, however, brought pursuit in reaching distance. Hands tore at his coat, and he slipped out of it. Other hands grabbed at him in the semidarkness of the wings, and he was clouted a dozen times before he broke free and into the alley.

Larry's motor was racing. Webb leaped on the running board and the roadster screamed into motion. Webb clung with frantic fingers for a few feet, then slipped inside.

They were around the corner, into the street, and away before pursuit had organized.

"What took you so long?" Larry yelled. "I was ready for half a minute."

"Never mind! I was held up."

"Where to, Webb?"

Webb considered. He had no plan. He was mentally chaotic. "Just go," he said, "but go like hell for a while. I'll think about what to do."

They were on the State highway, and as they swung in a fast turn out of the city, Webb looked back. A car had come into the street they were leaving. Whether or not it held pursuers he couldn't tell.

The speedometer needle climbed steadily, seventy-five, eighty, eighty-eight, ninety-two. They crossed the Turkey Creek bridge and were in a section of small farms sloping up from the highway to the right. On the left, pasture land was some fifteen feet below the built-up surface of the highway.

Webb set his eyes on the road which moved toward them at smooth, curving speed, and wondered what next. What could he do? He felt that he had destroyed all possibility of being accepted again by the townspeople. Hereafter he would be remembered as the guy who turned down a million dollars.

He saw a solution. If Larry could get him safely away, he would open the brief case, with a can opener if necessary. If its contents were worth a fortune to Karp, surely he could find a use for them.

"Take the county-seat fork," he directed, and Larry nodded.

The nod froze, and Larry was suddenly standing on his brakes. Webb jerked his eyes ahead, chilled with horror as a little girl ran out of a farmyard onto the highway after a lamb which frolicked ahead of her.

Larry's tires screamed, and the roadster swerved out of control toward the abrupt drop on their left.

"Jump!" Larry cried.

Their speed had decreased considerably, but remaining momentum tumbled Webb some thirty feet along the concrete, onto the sandy shoulder, and left him on the brink of the low bluff as the roadster crashed in a field of clover and burst into flame.

He paid no attention to his bleeding hands, his raw shoulders, his skinned face. He got to his feet, poised for the leap, but froze when Larry yelled.

"What you doing, Webb?"

Webb almost fainted with relief as Larry scrambled up to the roadway.

"I thought you were still in the car."

"Me?" Larry said. "Not me. Damn that fool kid."

"What happened?" asked a childish voice.

She had the lamb in her arms now, a lamb frightened by the commotion, and struggling for liberty. A reminiscent shock hit Webb when he saw that the lamb's wool, instead of being white as the little girl's curls, was blue as her eyes.

Somewhere before, at some unremembered time, he had seen a blue lamb.

"Hello," Webb said. "Run back in the yard. You might get hurt here. That's a funny-looking lamb."

"I put too much bluing in its baff water," she said. "Ain't you going to put out the fire?"

"Run along," Webb said curtly. To Larry: "Sorry."

Larry eyed the car. "The gas tank. Beat it! It'll explode!"

He plunged into motion, and Webb followed for a step or two. Sight of the brief case at the edge of the road stopped him. With one swift motion he caught it up, whirled, and flung it into the flames of Larry's roadster. He turned again and ran into the farmyard as the gas tank exploded.

The momentary hush was almost tangible. Then chickens squawked behind the house, a woman's voice exclaimed, a dog barked. But during the instant of silence, he had heard the faint approaching roar of an automobile traveling at high speed.

Crowded with men, it rounded the nearest curve and began to slow.

Webb looked at white tongues of flame licking above the highway lip. The brief case was now destroyed beyond salvage.

"Why did I do that?" he asked aloud.

XIV.

"But why, Webb?" Kay wailed. "They've got a right to know. Tell 'em."

Webb gave the group in the farmyard a baffled stare. They were sullen: Andy Ames, Michaelson, Joe Rafferty, Pat Cain. They wanted to know why, too.

"I don't know!" Webb burst out. "Didn't you ever do something, and then wonder why, afterward?"

"I don't know of anything we can do about it," Andy Ames said, "except not like it. The hospital can sue you for Masters' bill, I guess, and if he's got any heirs, they might cause you some trouble. One thing, you sure wrecked everything you'd done to get back in good favor."

Andy turned away, and the others. Pat Cain shook his head sadly as he followed them into Andy's car. Webb, Larry, and Kay were alone in the yard. The farmer, his wife, the little girl, and the lamb eyed the trio with stiff curiosity from the porch.

"Can we hitch a ride?" Webb asked Kay.

"Come on."

They drove back in silence, dropped Larry at home, and Kay and Webb faced each other.

"This time I'm really leaving," he said.

"I'm going with you, Webb."

"Thank you, Kay. You don't have to, and if you're afraid of me, I'd rather you didn't."

"The only thing that worried me was whether

you chased that girl through the streets. I could understand you running after Millicent, maybe, but Bessie. She isn't even pretty."

Webb tried a grin, and thought it came out pretty well, considering. "Take me home, will you? I'll grab my bag. When can you leave?"

"Soon as I'm packed. Where we going?"

"I don't know."

When she stopped before the Parker residence, Webb blinked at the house. Its windows were blank, like the eyes of the two blind sisters. It had an unlivid-in look. His bag sat on the porch, and he ran inside the yard, Kay's heels tapping after.

The house was empty. As they had come unannounced, the Parker sisters had departed. The rooms were empty, the walls now bare of their tapestries.

"What the hell?" Webb murmured.

"Seems they'd have said good-by, anyway, doesn't it?"

"It's dopey. Well, maybe they'll write. How did they get away so quick? When I left here, the house was full of furniture. It's only been a few hours."

He led the way out, puzzled. As he picked up his bag, he saw the folded heavy cloth strapped to its side.

"Hello," he said. "What's this?"

He unfolded the tapestry they had hung in his room for a time, and a chill scurried down his spine as the objects woven into its design bit into his memory.

"Why!" Kay gasped. "There's Millicent, and that man Karp!"

"I wouldn't say definitely," Webb demurred. "There's a resemblance, all right. But what got me is the blue lamb. And— This is weird."

He checked off the items. The red-headed man, the janitor who had straight-armed him. The streamlined train. Well, it could be the train that had been wrecked. The moon.

Moon? Yes, black and cream shadows, silver-plated hair on Al's veranda.

The gun. The shotgun with which Masters had bluffed the crowd?

The broom. Broom? He didn't remember a broom.

The woman with a naked knife. She had flung it at him with a curse when the mob was scattering from Masters' command.

The white-bearded bindle stiff of Turkey Creek. Pattern, he had said. Where was the pattern here? These objects had been connected with Webb's life, but they were only symbols of the circles in which he had been running for weeks. A pattern had form. This was only a mixture.

The hairbrush baffled him until he remembered Mr. Thomkins, the loquacious barber.

But the broom? Somebody slipped up there. Unless— He thought suddenly of Sophie, and the thin chill of memory touched the short hairs on his neck again. Sophie's function in the household had been that of a broom. She cleaned. And she had pushed him out of the way of the shotgun.

Maybe that was the pattern. Maybe each of these objects had saved his life. But no. The train wreck had almost got him killed, as had the blue lamb. No, these were just objects on a cloth.

"Had me spooked for a minute," he said to Kay.

"What does it mean?"

"Nothing. I thought it might for a minute, but everybody has seen things like these. Almost every man has had a blonde in his life, I imagine, and a moon, and all the others. That blue lamb had me going, but it's only coincidence."

He broke off, folded the tapestry, and smiled at Kay. "I feel swell, honey. We're going to have fun."

She returned his smile, touched his cheek with her fingertips. Then she shifted her eyes toward approaching footsteps.

"Hello, Mr. Potter," Webb said.

"Mr. Curtain," Potter said as he came up the walk, "I see you are leaving, and I wish to direct you to a job." He gave Webb the card of a Chicago department store. "If you will call there, they will put you to work."

"That's swell!" Kay exclaimed.

"But why?" Webb asked. "I shouldn't think you'd want anything to do with me after I messed up the deal with Karp."

"On the contrary," Potter replied. "I see by the glow in this young lady that you have reached a new beginning. I am interested always in new beginnings. Good-by."

Webb followed Potter with a puzzled glance, puzzled because of the unexpected offer, and because of a new sensation which cloaked him with lassitude, resignation, and a touch of despair. The verve he had felt a moment before was gone.

Kay broke into his thoughts. "That tapestry will look well on our apartment wall, Webb. Will we get married here, or there?"

"Anywhere," Webb said absently.

"What's the matter? You were happy just now."

Webb picked up his bag, and saw as he did so that the ring Miss Margaret had given him was gone. He felt a little sick, and wondered where he had lost it. Then he grinned at Kay, as cheerfully as possible.

"Nothing's the matter. Let's go."

THE END.

OCCUPATION: DEMIGOD

By Nelson S. Bond

⊙ Draft board registrars have a pretty monotonous job—ordinarily. Now and then they may turn up an unusual specimen, though, like—

Illustrated by Edd Cartier

Well, the old gentleman in the star-spangled topper was getting ready to draw capsules out of a fish bowl, which made some seventeen million annoyed Yankees between the ages of twenty-one and thirty-five eligible to spit in Herr Hitler's eye, so since I'd served two semesters in the Federal Writers' College, it won me a berth on the registration board. So I went, and it was just like I thought it would be.

First thing in the morning, the jernt was jammed to the rafters with "gotta-get-to-work" boys, but the crowd let up about eleven o'clock, and by two in the afternoon we were almost lonesome. I don't know how it was in your big towns; I'm just telling you how it was where I evade my taxes.

Anyhow, things were pretty dull until some sterling genius remembered that every true American cherishes the inherent right to lose two things: his life in battle, and his shirt at poker. After that, time whizzed by to the cheerful clack of chips, and whenever a late registrant straggled in, the holder of the high spade had to go snare his J. Hancock.

So, of course, everything happens to me. I had to be showing the ebony ace when this johnny marched in. I moaned and flipped over the matching one-spotter in the hole, and I got lots of sympathy—like hell! And naturally I wasn't the nation's Sweetest Dispositioned Registrar as I waved the new signer-upper to a seat and grabbed a form.

"Park it!" I said, and punched the inkwell with the spray gun our post-office department laughingly calls a pen. "O. K.," I said. "Your name, please?"

He was a big jasper. Big and broad and blond, with china-blue eyes so placid they almost soothed you. At first I figured him for one of those "strong-back, weak-mind" lads—bovinely stupid and complacent. Then I looked again, and wasn't so sure.

It wasn't that at all. The quietude of those pale,

washed-blue orbs was not born of a low I. Q. rating; his ease was that of confidence, of self-assurance, of a sort of—of *knowingness*. For a strange, strained moment I felt tiny and unimportant as I sat there facing him; I felt somehow humble in his presence. Then I thought, "Hey, wait a minute! What makes here?" And I said again, "Your name, please?"

He carried one of those bulgy leather cases used by musicians and gangsters to conceal their lethal weapons. He set this on the desk between us, handling it carefully, gingerly. His voice was deep and rumbly and pleasant.

"Ayres!" he said. "T. Marshall Ayres."

"Don't be formal with Uncle Sam," I told him. "The front handle?"

"Theritas," he said sheepishly. "My friends call me Teddy."

Well, it takes all kinds to make a world. You'd be surprised how many Marmadukes and Algerons are living under aliases of Butch and Spike. I made him spell it for me, and it looked as silly as it sounded. Then I said, "Very well, Mr. Ayres. Now your address?"

He fidgeted, and for a moment there was uncertainty in his preternaturally calm eyes. "I . . . I don't exactly know how to answer that," he said slowly. "I . . . that is—"

"It's very simple," I told him. "Where do you hang your toothbrush? That's home, be it ever so humble. You *do* have a toothbrush?"

"Oh, yes. But what I mean is—I'm not living anywhere just now. I've just left one place, and I'm on my way to another—"

He seemed to want to explain, but I was thinking of those wired aces and cut him short.

"Skip it," I said. I wrote in "transient" and went on to the next question. "Give the name of someone who will always know where you are."

"Amaltheia," he answered promptly.

"Amaltheia *who*?"

"Just Amaltheia," he said.

"Your wife?"